

Are the reasons for using licensed songs within a contemporary

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



The relationship between film and popular music has been a very successful one for over a hundred years: From musical accompaniment in silent films to short film clips of musical performances to the Hollywood musical and finally to the importance of popular music on TV and in films from the 50s, Hollywood has always taken advantage of music to sell films and films on the contrary became a useful tool for selling music.

Thus the idea of using popular music rather than newly composed scores for the big screen probably even came from the silent film era where musicians often played popular tunes to the picture to satisfy the audience's demand¹. Later in the 1930s, at the time of the Hollywood musical, the use of popular music on screen started to be the real " box-office attraction" ², tempting more people to go and see the films and probably also to buy the music used in the film.

The idea of releasing a soundtrack to accompany the film, however, only came up in the 1950s with the immense impact of Billy Haley's 'Rock Around The Clock' in 'The Blackboard Jungle' (1955) on young people on both sides of the Atlantic. Not only was this and similar other films attracting large numbers of people into the cinemas, the sale of the soundtrack albums also brought in a lot of money and helped cover production costs.

Since then, the existence of soundtrack albums has become increasingly important as both a " tool of film promotion and as an aesthetic and cultural phenomenon in its own right" ³. The film companies' goal was to use popular music as a marketing tool for their films and at the same time create another source of income from it. So in the years to come the release of a soundtrack

album almost became routine, giving the public an opportunity to enjoy the music used in the film over and over again and whenever they please.

The specific use of popular tunes, however, became very important from the 1980s onwards when film companies were looking for "additional exposure for the movie" 4 and a soundtrack compiled of popular music seemed to be able to guaranteed this: with the arrival of MTV in 1981 popular music did not only get radio airplay, the new music channel acted as something like a platform for mini-advertisements, short musical films, for both the film and of course the artist.

This in return led to an increase in box office takings, artist record sales and soundtrack sales. An example of this kind of cross-media promotion is Mike Myers's 'Wayne's World' (1992): Not only was the soundtrack album to the film a best seller, it also made people interested in the rock band 'Queen' again, leading to constant airplay of the single 'Bohemian Rhapsody' as well as an overall increase in the band's record sales - and all this over 15 years after the single's initial release and a year after Freddy Mercury's death.

Similarly, the film 'Bodyguard' was a box-office success itself but also made Whitney Huston a star, while the Bee Gees gained from 'Saturday Nigh Fever' and vice versa. While back in the 1980s the popular music soundtracks were mainly aimed at a young audience, this has changed since the 90s, and nowadays it is difficult to find a film without a soundtrack accompanying it, since this is now part of the "overall merchandising

package surrounding film releases" 5 together with clothing, bedding, stationary, toys, games, etc.

Even films which use no, or only very limited amounts of music have a soundtrack so they won't lose out on this extra bit of income, which is simply made up of music 'inspired by the motion picture' - an obvious example for this being the 'Blair Witch Project' which includes no music at all. But as Kay Dickinson notes, " the soundtrack album continues to be the most common and vital form of film music exploitation" 6.

But this does not make clear whether the use of popular music in film has a particularly commercial use, after all, the soundtracks to 'The Lord of the Rings' trilogy as well as both 'Harry Potter' movies currently out have also sold very well even though they mainly consist of composed score. So whether there is a strong commercial factor involved when directors choose to incorporate popular music in their feature films or whether the music is merely used to add atmosphere or define space and time will be examined in the following paragraphs.

Two of the films used for this purpose are quite obviously aimed at a younger audience, not only because they are set in an American High School situation, but also because they seem to present a certain lifestyle to the viewer, the American youth culture. The third film, in contrast appears to use popular music in a different way which draws the viewers attention to the actual happenings on screen rather than to the music itself.

There seems to have been an explosion in the popularity of the modern teen-movie, as there are literally countless of them, and they all share the same characteristics: they are either set at an American High School or they picturing the lives of what seem to be the typical American High School kids. The plots are pretty much interchangeable and so is the soundtrack, which is always made up of songs that are in the charts and also 'cool' with the young people in the film and in front of the screen.

The reason film makers choose to use this kind of music in their films is obvious: the film is supposed to appeal to " a younger fashion-conscious audience" ⁷ and above all, the music gives the film so-called " street credibility" ⁸ which appeals to the teen viewers, who essentially are the target audience for this kind of movie. To a non-teenage viewer this particular use of popular music in film may seem " mindless" and maybe even irritating because the music is so prominent and even distracting.

In this case the music can draw unnecessary attention to itself so that whatever is happening on screen becomes less important⁹. To a mainly teenage audience, however, it " often plays a vital role in both self-definition and micro-cultural stratification" ¹⁰. They, unlike others, will probably be able to identify with the music as well as the actions on screen and above all, they might already have a certain association with the music because they will have heard it on the radio or on TV before and will not feel distracted by it. But the industry is not only interested to please their audience.

Behind this film maker's strategy lies a commercial industry which is strongly interested in bringing more cultural products to its audiences than just a moving picture¹¹. A soundtrack album can function as a simple compilation of songs that even people who haven't seen the film might buy just because they like the assortment of songs and artists they find on it. This could well be the situation with soundtrack albums to films like 'American Pie', 'Road Trip', '10 Things I Hate About You', 'Van Wilder - Party Liaison', 'Scary Movie' etc.

The list goes on. These films fall in the category labelled "hip" ¹² with teenagers. They are contemporary. And they use contemporary music, which, however, can also present a problem in the long run. These films will almost certainly only be 'hip' for as long as the accompanying music is 'hip' too. This might explain why there are so many films available in this particular genre. The way the music works in films like this is not so difficult to understand and one or two out of the vast selection of teen-movies should provide efficient examples.

The trailer to 'American Pie 2' for example, was already underscored by 'Every Time I Look At You' by American pop-punks Blink 182, so it wouldn't be surprising to see many fans of the band go and see the film merely because of this fact. But not only fans may be drawn to the trailer and essentially the film, the music presents a certain kind of freedom which feels good and is also reflected in the acting on screen. There is no closer connection between film and music, however, because the lyrics quite simply do not reflect anything that's being shown.

In the trailer the song only underlines the summary of the film, and in the film itself it only appears twice but very briefly in order to not distract the viewer from the actions too much. But again, there is no close connection; any song could have been used here to provide the same effect. The second appearance of a popular song in the film goes almost unnoticed what with the volume being kept very low to draw the attention to the dialogue.

When the action takes off a little later on with the five friends going on holiday together, another two chart hits accompany the sequence. As with the title song the volume is kept in the foreground and the song creates continuity throughout the fast edited sequence. This is probably what Kay Dickinson describes as " MTV aesthetic" 13. The stylistic element of music videos is that the picture is edited to the tempo of the popular song, giving each shot a duration of around a minimum of three seconds.

He states that using this technique in a feature film can almost manipulate the audience, which he shows using 'William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet' as his example: even though young people could have been deterred by the medieval story and language of the film, the use of popular music in the soundtrack made up for this potential problem. Not that there would be a problem in understanding the plot or language in films like 'American Pie', but the fast editing and the popular music soundtrack may have something to do with the appeal of these films and consequently the sale of the accompanying soundtrack.

As suggested before, the relation between film and soundtrack is a fairly loose one since the music is merely used to convey a general feeling to the viewer. It directs their emotions and tells them what to "feel about a character, a place, a situation" 14. Furthermore identities are reinforced, while music can also evoke a specific mood, remind us of a certain era or season and even a location. Popular love songs in the film 'Van Wilder' for example tell us about what the character is feeling and thinking, what mood he is in, while the dance music used in a different scene defines the location and situation.

But what is more important, the music used in both 'American Pie 2' and 'Van Wilder' is current. It defines that these are films made in the 90s using music from the 90s: films that will probably only be 'cool' around the time of their release and music that will probably only sell simultaneously. "Meaning and Significance in popular music vary considerably with geography and, especially, with time. Popular music by definition is of the moment" 15 and it is most likely that in a few years time this music will seem dated and not so 'hip' anymore.

Hence, the use of popular music in teen-movies is bound to be for commercial reasons only in order to generate enough profit over a short period which is the short life span of the film. There do, however, seem to be other reasons for using popular music in feature films as well. A good example for this being films like 'Casino', 'Goodfellas', 'Gangs Of New York', and so on. While big newcomer names can be found on the 'American Pie 2' soundtrack, the soundtrack album to Martin Scorsese's 'Goodfellas' features

more romantic, innocent and idealistic pop sound of the 50s and 60s, the time during which the film is set.

Thus the music creates a feel for time and place again and also gives the picture an ironic innocence. Chilled-out Jazz tunes are not necessarily the obvious choice for a Mafia movie all about intrigues, false friendships and killings, but in this case it works perfectly. The music does not really provide clues as to what the viewer should think of characters and situations, quite on the contrary, it tells the viewer that everything is ok even if it's not. But, interestingly, this is the same impressions the characters give each other. They even kill their opponents with a smile on their face and without warning.

The music therefore implies " the right audience attitude toward the film and toward their own feelings about the film" 16. The music is " broadly and consciously part of the film narrative" 17, however, it doesn't tell the story it evokes it. In films like this, the use of popular music replaces the role of the composed score, which had previously been used to sustain the narrative. A commissioned score would, in this case, only be able to recreate the atmosphere of the 50s and 60s, but it would not be able to convey it as perfectly as original popular music of the time can.

The other difference to the use of popular music in films like 'American Pie' for example is that in 'Goodfellas' the music is almost always kept in the background, it does not disturb dialogues, but it nevertheless influences the viewer unconsciously. It seems like there are two different reasons for using

popular music in films: one is the replacement of newly composed scores which can sometimes seem a lot less authentic than popular music of a specific period or place.

The other reason, and probably the most common reason in modern films, is the commercial potential of the use of popular music. Essentially, current popular songs are regarded as "road tested" 18, they are known to the majority of the viewers due to previous radio and TV exposure and most people might also already have a certain association with these songs because of the repeated airplay. Commissioned scores on the other hand are always something completely new to the filmgoer's ears, something that they haven't had a chance to establish feelings towards prior to seeing the film.

Even though this will not necessarily affect the popularity of the film in a negative way, as the box office hit 'The Lord Of The Rings' shows, but films like that are normally chosen because of their story, not their music as I am tempted to argue for teen movies. Here the music quite obviously creates the opportunity to make quick short term returns on the production costs which makes up for the almost guaranteed short term success of the picture.

Sum 41's 'Fat Lip' in 'American Pie 2' for example may bring a certain touch of 'coolness' and attitude to the movie while also underlining the character's thoughts and feelings, but as soon as the band has gone out of fashion - which doesn't take very long as popular music styles frequently change due to the often changing consumer tastes - the song may adapt a different,

even an old attitude that's gone out of fashion a while ago. The use of this kind of music seems to be nothing but a matter of marketing, an attempt to get the right audience to go and see the right film.

The bands themselves also gain from this blockbuster exposure. The use of popular tunes in films not only promotes the sale of the accompanying soundtrack album, it also boosts sales of the band in question which can be particularly useful if this band is a newcomer that's being pushed at the target audience at the same time. Not only would they gain national exposure, but in the case of the American teen movie this is also very broad international promotion.

Furthermore, the film also receives what seems to be free three-minute promotion in many cases where the artist uses film clips in their video to the songs used in the film. Fans of the band who see the video being played on music television but haven't seen the film yet might be inclined to book their cinema tickets because their favourite band is featured in a film that looks 'pretty cool' in the video. As seen in the example of 'Goodfellas', however, music does not only serve a commercial interest.

It would be quite interesting to be able to compare soundtrack sales figures of both the 'American Pie 2' album and the 'Goodfellas' one to see if the latter one managed to sell a similar amount of copies to the teen movie music, but even without the evidence this is doubtful. The music is not very dominant in the film, and it doesn't need to be. It is not used to emphasise a

youth culture or a kind of 'hip' lifestyle, it functions to set the mood and ironic character of the film.

Popular music in this case is more powerful, more authentic, than the commissioned score, but it essentially takes on a very similar role, one that is not primarily used to sell the film. So in conclusion it can be said that even though there are two distinct functions of popular music in film, the subtle use of it has no or only very little commercialism in it, while the more prominent use in teen movies serves the main purpose of marketing and cross-media promotion: " The crucial element driving the desire to associate rock and pop songs with film releases is the search for mutual profits. " 19