

Moonlighting's Music Man



Photo credit: Jim Hagopian



Our **EXCLUSIVE**
interview with
Alf Clausen

By Diana Maiocco

As the music composer for *Moonlighting*, Alf Clausen scored many classic episodes, including *The Dream Sequence Always Rings Twice* and *Atomic Shakespeare*, both of which earned him Emmy® nominations. He also created the memorable themes for *Moonlighting*'s main characters, the beautiful piano melody for Maddie first heard in *Every Daughter's Father is a Virgin* and the melancholy harmonica tunes for David. He shared with me the challenges scoring for *Moonlighting* and his adventurous collaborative relationship with the series creator, Glenn Caron.

DM: I understand that you started working on *Moonlighting* through Lee Holdridge, who co-wrote the show's theme with Al Jarreau. Now, how did that come about?

AC: I had been working with Lee for a number of years before this all happened. I was working with Lee as an orchestrator and Lee is a very interesting individual in that, if he has someone that he's working with whose talent he really believes in at that particular time in his life, he goes out of his way to find new employment opportunities for that person. He was doing a lot of feature work, and also liked to write television themes. And so he would go out and try to get a job booking a new television show, and hopefully writing the theme for it and maybe scoring one or two episodes. Then he would turn the show over to the person that he had been working with to give this person a break. And that's

what happened on *Moonlighting*. We had actually tried this on, I guess, maybe two or three different episodes of some limited series before *Moonlighting* came up. Then Lee called me one day and said, "I have this opportunity to score this pilot over at ABC, and I would like you to orchestrate the pilot for me, and do that with the intention of meeting the Executive Producer. And if things go well, and if the show gets picked up, I probably will do an episode or two, then I would like to turn it over to you if the Executive Producer likes you and likes your work." So I orchestrated the pilot for him and it was the two-hour pilot, which was just sensational, and ABC just loved the show. If I remember correctly since it was some time ago, I think they picked it up for five episodes.

DM: Right.

AC: We did those five episodes and aired them in the spring, if I remember correctly, and the feedback was very, very good, so ABC picked it up for a series, and Lee had introduced me to Glenn Caron during the scoring of the pilot. And one thing led to another. Glenn liked the work that I ended up doing for him and so he hired me as a co-composer of the series to begin with. He was going to split it with someone else, and by the time we got maybe four episodes into it, he decided that he wanted to keep me full time.

DM: So you were on all of them then? You started from the beginning?

AC: Yeah. There were only two that I didn't score, and those were the two and the four that we ended up splitting at the very beginning. But I scored everything else. I scored, I think it was sixty-three out of sixty-five.

DM: Right. Now *Moonlighting* has a very distinctive musical tone to it. Do you remember your early discussions with Glenn about the feel he wanted for the show's music?

AC: Well, I think Lee kind of set the tone in the beginning, and I was part of the creative team there. The early days discussions for the week-to-week musical tone of the series really went on more with Lee and Glenn. What I found interesting was that the more Glenn and I got to know each other, the more he began to believe in my own creative abilities and the more chances he would start to take. He would throw challenges at me saying, "You know, I had this brainstorm. I would like to score one episode with a solo tenor

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saxophone." Because he had just seen the movie *'Round Midnight* featuring Dexter Gordon, and he said, "What do you think about that? Do you think we could score an episode just using just one tenor sax?" And I said, "Sure, let's go for it." So I hired one of the great tenor players out here. His name is Don Menza, who was a "graduate" of the Buddy Rich Band (among others), and Don played the score with one tenor saxophone on that show. It was that kind of give and take with Glenn all the way through the series and because of that, I don't know if we could really say if there was a specific musical tone that prevailed throughout other than it was orchestral music.

DM: And in regards to the saxophone tenor, do you remember which episode that was? Was it for a particular episode?

AC: Let me see if I can remember the name of it. But, boy, now you're digging. *Big Man on Mulberry Street*.

DM: That was the episode when David was in New York.

AC: Yeah. The one with Sandahl Bergman doing the dance number.

DM: That's right. Actually, that was one of the questions I was going to ask you because there was a terrific saxophone extension to the show's theme in *Big Man on Mulberry Street*.

AC: Right.

DM: Now, can you tell us the over-all process from start to finish on how you score for an episode and how long would it usually take?

AC: *Moonlighting* was very unusual in that the turn-around was extremely short, or shall I say, wrought with terror because of that. Normally, if one were to score an hour show in the television industry, a composer might get anywhere from a week to ten days to turn it around. In the case of *Moonlighting*, Glenn and I and the music editors would get together in a "music spotting" session and decide which spots in the show would contain music (hence the name "music spotting.") We would do that maybe on a Tuesday afternoon or maybe a Wednesday morning and score the show Friday night. And with it being an hour drama show, and I had about a thirty-five piece orchestra at that point, it was incredibly challenging to try to meet that deadline episode after episode.

DM: When I interviewed Artie Mandelberg, he said that there were times when Glenn would come to you

and he had nothing to show you. And he would ask you to score a scene that he would describe to you.

AC: Yeah. We would laugh about that a lot, and Glenn's favorite phrase was "Ah, give me two pounds of this. Give me one pound of that. Give me three pounds of this."

DM: (Laughing)

AC: (Laughing) Like he was shopping at a musical market. And he would basically describe to me what the content of the scene was and ask me to give him a certain amount of musical material in various lengths and various moods that could accompany the scene. And then the music editors from Segue Music would go to work after the scene was shot and cut, and they would make everything fit from there.

DM: In addition to Glenn, did you also work with Jay Daniel? Who else did you work with, or was it pretty much with Glenn?

AC: Yeah. I worked with Jay Daniel and with Artie. I worked with Artie a lot. But my creative direction was always given to me by Glenn. Glenn was very hands-on with the music and always was willing to take time to music spot every episode with me. And I was very thankful for that because Glenn has tremendous creative instincts, and I think that if it wouldn't have been for Glenn's direction, we may not have ended up being quite as adventurous with the music.

DM: Right. He was adventurous in every area on the show.

AC: That's right.

DM: And how about with Bruce and Cybill? Did they ever contribute any ideas or did you have any interaction with them when it came to the music?

AC: No. I had very little interaction with them. They had nothing to do with the underscore whatsoever. The only real interaction I had with either one of them was when I would write a song or arrange a song for them here and there. There were a couple of songs that I did for the black and white episode featuring Cybill on vocals (*The Dream Sequence Always Rings Twice*), *Blue Moon* and *I Told You I Love You, Now Get Out*. And so I ended up pre-recording the tracks for those songs and then Cybill came in after the pre-record session and over-dubbed her vocals, so I worked with her there. And then I did one with Bruce on *Good Lovin'* (*Atomic Shakespeare*). We did it the same way there. I pre-recorded the tracks first, and then Bruce came in and we over-dubbed his vocals. But I didn't have very much interaction with either one of them.

DM: In regards to *Good Lovin'*, did he use his band for that?

AC: No, no. That was my band.

DM: Oh, The Alf Clausen band!

AC: Yep.

DM: Now, in terms of creating musical themes, each character had a theme like Maddie's theme, which was the piano.

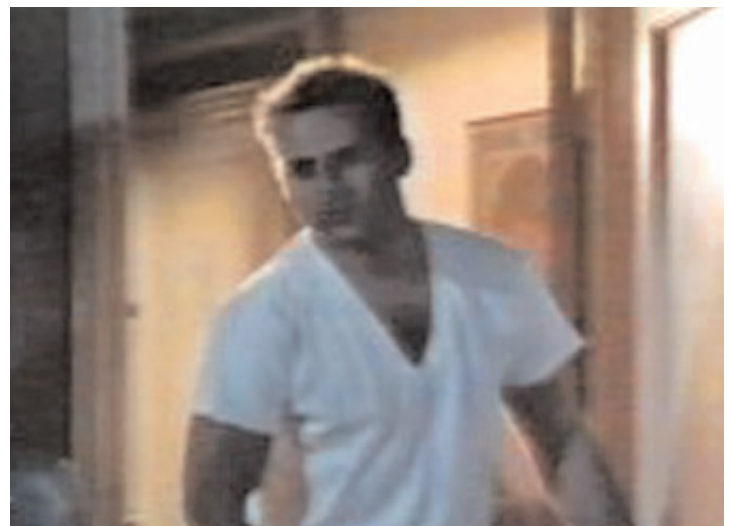
AC: Right.

DM: That we first heard in *Every Daughter's Father is a Virgin*. And then there was David's theme, which was the harmonica.

AC: Right.

DM: How did you come up with Maddie's theme? Is this something that you discussed with Glenn?

Did the sax get you in the mood? David thought as he watched Maddie smile at him before entering her hotel room in *Big Man on Mulberry Street*.



AC: It was more specific than that. It was pretty interesting. We basically just had one episode where he wanted me to come up with a theme that was contemplative, and had a certain amount of beauty to it and a certain amount of calm center to it, because it would be used for whenever Maddie was thinking about life situations, and love, and all of those kinds of emotions, so I composed that theme just for one specific episode. But Glenn fell in love with it and so it ended up becoming the theme that we ended up using all the way through the series whenever Maddie was in that particular frame of mind.

DM: Too bad that one didn't make it on the sound track album. Was there any reason for that?

AC: When the discussions were being held about doing the sound track, everybody seemed to be more interested in putting together a compilation of songs. They felt that that was going to make the most ripple in the market. That happened to be a time in our industry when that habit of putting together sound tracks and songs had really just kind of started, and was becoming more and more popular as the years went by. But I think it was simply that nobody really wanted to do a score album. They were more interested in doing a song album they thought would do better in retail sales. I've tried for a number of years to get someone interested in doing a *Moonlighting* soundtrack album. I haven't given up yet because I have so much material from that series. I could easily put

out a double album and it would be very, very interesting for the fans.

DM: Oh, yeah? Have you talked to Glenn about it?

AC: No. I haven't talked with him lately about it.

DM: Oh, because that could be something you may want to discuss with him. I mean, our goal is a reunion motion picture, so if the movie goes into production, you could use your scores.

AC: Sure. It's interesting, you know, after I talked with you the last time, a few days went by I guess, and I did call Glenn and I had a long talk with him. We finally connected and we had some really nice chats and memory encounters. It was fun.

DM: Was he surprised?

AC: Well, yeah. I think he was. He thought I was calling for a specific reason, you know? And I said, "No, I'm just calling to chat because we haven't talked for awhile." We just had a really, really nice visit.

DM: Okay. I'm curious, did you tell him that you spoke to me and that I was going to interview you?

AC: Yeah, I did, and he said,

"Great!"

DM: He knows I've been making the rounds and that we're talking to a lot of people.

AC: Right.

DM: Which is great. I mean, they all love him, too, so why not talk about the show?

AC: Yeah. That's what he told me. He said you had spoken with a number of people that I have gotten to know fairly well through years. You know, like Ron Osborn and his buddy Jeff Reno. And Artie and some of the directors, too.

DM: Yes, we got to speak to Will Mackenzie, Peter Werner, and Allan Arkush. So now getting back to David's theme, when you used a harmonica, I assume it was borrowed from real life because Bruce knows how to play the harmonica.

AC: Right.



You know, your theme is as beautiful as you are. David thought as he gazed into Maddie's eyes in *Every Daughter's Father is a Virgin*.

DM: So what was the description for David's theme?

AC: Well, you know, that again it was so long ago now that I can't remember the contents of the discussion anymore other than Glenn was looking for a theme like that for a particular episode. And we landed on it and Glenn liked it so much that we re-used it a number of times.

DM: Did Bruce ever play the harmonica in that?

AC: No. That was either played by one of the crack harmonica players out here, Tommy Morgan, who's one of the busiest harmonica players in the world and is appearing on all sorts of movie sound tracks, or another harmonica player by the name of Ron Kalina.

DM: Now, I'm going to ask you about certain episodes. One was *Knowing Her*, which guest starred Dana Delany. When we interviewed Debra Frank, she said she had a conversation with you about this. When the camera was on *Cybill*, she had her theme playing and Dana had her theme. Then as the camera went back and forth between them, the theme would alternate. Do you recall anything about composing that?

AC: I do remember that. I remember the discussion, and I remember how I came up with it, and I especially remember, if my memory serves me correctly, the last scene when David was being pulled both

ways. I wrote this piece of underscore music that brought both of their themes back within the same piece of music and kind of played both of those themes off against David, just the pull was going one to another. And not many people noticed that or made any reference to it until much later after the series had come and gone and had been reviewed a few times, and some people had finally said to me, "Boy, we really remember that scene and how unbelievably effective it was of having both of those themes fight each other for David's attention."

DM: That was a memorable episode, and the music, on a subconscious level, really does bring out what the characters are feeling.

AC: Oh, absolutely. Many times it's like the frosting on the cake.

DM: Yes. Now for *Atomic Shakespeare*, did you do a lot of research on the type of instruments that were used back then?

AC: Yeah, I did. And, of course, when I say I did a lot of research, we have to go back to our discussion a few moments ago when we talked about looking at the episode on Tuesday and scoring on Friday. Well, obviously, there isn't a heck of a lot of time to do a lot of research and still get all the music written. But I do remember doing as much research as the time would allow to try to get the general tenor

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of the musical flavor accurate for the time. That was so much fun. I still remember the scene where Bruce is strolling through the courtyard and there's this small group up on stage playing *Close To You* and as he walks by he says, "I loveth a band that playeth the oldies."

DM: It's a great episode.

AC: Yeah.

DM: In *Here's Living With You, Kid*, which was the *Casablanca* parody, do you recall the elaborate version of *Chopsticks* that you substituted for *As Time Goes By*?

AC: Oh, yeah. (Laughing) Yeah. I had forgotten about that. Right.