

RANDY NEWMAN

**"I always wrote slightly
off-the-wall things."**

By Bud Scoppa

"I really thought maybe I'd have to die first," Randy Newman told *Rolling Stone* upon learning he'd made it into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame twenty years after becoming eligible for induction. "I didn't think it would happen if it didn't happen, you know, a little earlier. But this is great. I'm really glad it happened when I was still around to see it."

All things being equal, Newman wasn't exactly a slam-dunk to make the cut. The L.A. native (he grew up in the Pacific Palisades) was never part of any scene or movement. He didn't hang out with Joni in Laurel Canyon or Neil in Topanga. He didn't rub elbows with Jackson Browne and the Eagles at the Troubadour bar. On top of that, his best-known songs were cut by other, more high-profile acts – and he's more comfortable with an orchestra than a guitar.

"Really, for the medium, I picked an odd sort of style," he admitted. "To do that [first] album with [an] orchestra, as if I was on another planet, as if I'd never heard the Rolling Stones."

Like Rodney Dangerfield, Randy can't get no respect. He was zero for fifteen in Oscar nominations before winning the Best Song award for "If I Didn't Have You," from *Monsters Inc.*, in 2002. "It moved me more than I'd thought it would, because the orchestra stood up," he later told a journalist. "The people I'd always *wanted* to respect me, it was clear that they did. Or maybe it was just because I hired them."

Randy is not one to blow his own horn. "I have no particular discipline on my own," he claimed. "I got pushed into everything I did." That would include writing songs, performing them ("I thought I'd regret it ten or fifteen years from now if I didn't," he said), and



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: **Young Randy practicing in 1954;** with Lenny Waronker, 1966.



“Songwriting is a really difficult process – bends you out of shape. I don’t particularly enjoy any part of it, but I keep doing it anyway.”

“That stuff was formative for me,” Newman recalled. “I heard it and I loved it – and that was it. It was all there pretty quick: Carole King knew the chords and used them; that’s why her stuff was so good. I never had a hero – maybe my Uncle Alfred – but she was someone I emulated when I was a kid, trying to write like that. But I couldn’t do it.”

The third person to shepherd Randy toward his destiny was his lifelong friend and eventual producer, Lenny Waronker, a showbiz kid whose father, Si, ran Liberty Records. “Lenny was [two years] older than me, and he was *interested*,” said Randy. “He suggested I write songs, and he would take me to see Lou Adler when I was 16 or 17. We’d go to New York; we met Leiber and Stoller very early on. He knew people and would talk to ‘em. I didn’t know anybody, and I didn’t have that kind of drive. Lenny was my ambition. He provided it for years.”

The way Newman sees it, Waronker was responsible for his entire career. It was Lenny who got Randy a gig as a writer at Metric Music, Liberty’s publishing arm. “I always wrote slightly off-the-wall things,” he said. “But I did write a couple that had hooks that Gene Pitney had hits with in England. And my publisher, Aaron Schroeder, was so happy. But then I stopped; it didn’t interest me, really.”

What did interest Newman was creating characters and putting words in their mouths. His epiphany occurred while he was writing what would become “Simon Smith and the

eventually getting into the family business of composing for film (“because of economics,” he explained). And yet, these reluctantly initiated undertakings have yielded more than their share of sustained bursts of inspiration, collectively comprising an altogether brilliant body of work.

The first person to yank young Randy out of his professed chronic lethargy was his uncle, legendary film composer Alfred Newman, who initiated the kid into the workings of the orchestra on the 20th Century Fox soundstage. The second was the family housekeeper, who tuned the household radio to L.A.’s rhythm & blues and gospel stations, giving Randy a taste of Big Joe Turner, Big Jay McShann, and other lightning rods on the flip side of a soon-to-be-transformed Top Forty, whose *Your Hit Parade* of bland fruits were sampled by many a mid-century suburban family – including the Newmans – every Saturday night. That initial immersion led the teenage Randy to fall in love with Ray Charles, Fats Domino, and the witty, gritty records being turned out by the songwriting/producing team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.







Newman in Amsterdam, 1975

“I never thought my stuff was hard for people to understand.”

Amazing Dancing Bear,” in 1965. Letting his imagination run wild, he transformed a conventional pop song into a fanciful character sketch. “It started as a song for Frank Sinatra Jr.,” he explains. “It had a girl’s name – ‘Cathy, Cathy, Cathy, *dah-dah-dah*’ – and I just couldn’t stand it. So I just thought of ‘bear,’ looking for a rhyme for that, ‘wear,’ ‘stare,’ and continued – *really* continued, till now. So I completely disappeared.” Translation: From that moment onward, his voice became those of the characters he created.

But why did he decide to become an artist? “At first I was shocked by how far away the final versions were from what I had envisioned when I was writing the songs, and it got to the point where I couldn’t stand to hear myself complaining all the time,” he explained to journalist Terry Staunton in 2008.

He had offers from Warner Bros. and A&M based on his song demos for Metric. Early on, he hadn’t even sung his demos himself, ceding that task to P.J. Proby and Jackie DeShannon. He hadn’t played on a bunch of them, either, because Leon Russell was also around. “So I was like as backward as you could be,” he says. “I was gonna sign with A&M because they offered me \$10,000, and Lenny” – by then, an A&R man at Warners – “was really pissed off. So I got Warners to offer me at least that and I signed with them.”

He was a less than natural performer, as I noted after watching him do a solo show at the Bitter End in 1971: “On stage, Randy hunches over his piano, touches the keys, and his face suddenly changes. His normally cherubic cheeks look as if they’re being pulled downward by the force of 3 G’s, and his eyelids follow suit. He forces his voice through the

narrowed slit of his mouth, vibrating his taut lips; this unconscious technique gives him a toothless, rubbery sound.” As he told me, he found performing “scary, a little, but not as scary as writing.”

Between 1968 and 1983, he recorded seven studio albums full of character-driven, satirical songs: his self-titled debut; the consecutive masterworks *12 Songs* (1970), *Sail Away* (1972), and *Good Old Boys* (1974); the “breakout” album *Little Criminals* (1977), containing his lone hit single, the widely misunderstood study of intolerance, “Short People”; *Born Again* (1979), graced by a cover portrait of the artist in Kiss makeup; and 1983’s *Trouble in Paradise*, which yielded the similarly misconstrued “I Love L.A.”

For the most part, his songs during the Warner Bros. phase were obliquely confronting mixtures of puns, pathos, and skewed takes on the clichés of the melodramatic pop music of an earlier era. Some, like “Yellow Man,” “Political Science,” and “Rednecks,” make it relatively easy on the listener by imposing a clear point of view – their narrators are bigoted simpletons. Other songs, like the melodically beautiful but lyrically hackneyed “I’ll Be Home,” are more psychologically complex, demanding that the listener decide how to take overused phrases like “Remember, baby/You can always count on me.” Do you laugh at the narrator’s self-delusion, or do you let yourself be affected by his desire to be true, no matter how futile? “Love Story” begins as just that, but gradually moves past young love, through “settling down” to family life, and finally to an old people’s home, where “We’ll play checkers all day /Till we pass away.” *Whoa*.

Newman’s best songs ponder the human comedy in an even-handed, compassionate way, even when their subjects are deeply flawed. While talking to Barney Hoskyns in 2003 about the twisted love ballad “Marie,” from *Good Old Boys*, Newman said of its narrator, “Yeah, he means what he’s saying. He does love her. But he can’t say it unless he’s drunk. It’s more interesting to me when it’s something like that, I gotta admit. There’s just more going on. There is all that extra stuff you know about the guy . . . Sometimes I’ll take a little tiny thing, like the guy who loves ELO on ‘The Story of a Rock and Roll Band’ [from *Born Again*] but gets it all wrong.”

“I never thought my stuff was that hard for people to understand,” Randy told me. “The thing is, it requires you to listen, and not come in halfway or be eatin’ a potato chip.”

In the thirty ensuing years, he’s made three albums of newly written songs – *Land of Dreams* (1988), *Bad Love* (1999), and *Harps and Angels* (2008). Aside from the ambitious 1995 musical *Faust*, and solo reworkings of his material in *Songbook Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*, Newman has focused on film work, including *Ragtime*, *The Natural*, *Parenthood*, *Avalon*, the *Toy Story* series, *A Bug’s Life*, and *Monsters Inc.*



Live in 1992

When I first met Newman in 1971, he said of songwriting, “It’s a really difficult process – bends you out of shape. I don’t particularly enjoy any part of it, but I keep doing it anyway. I’ve always done it, but I never actually *liked* it. I don’t know what compels me to do it, except when I like what I’ve done, it makes it all worthwhile. But it’s never been recreational. The whole thing makes me nervous.”

More than four decades later, his attitude hasn’t changed. “The last song I wrote, the election song [‘I’m Dreaming,’ whose ironic refrain goes, ‘I’m dreaming of a white president’], took me a long time, because it was hard to not claim doing it. It was really kinda delicate. God knows if I didn’t tromp things here and there. That one was hard. But [songwriting] never got easier, no.”

As self-denigrating as he tends to be about himself and his work, the author of this canon doesn’t dispute its overall quality. “I looked back when I did those *Songbook* records, and they’re good,” he said of his albums. “I stayed good. I mean, even *Born Again*, as odd as it is, is good. A small subject, the stuff I did. But, y’know, the songs on *Harps and Angels* and *Bad Love* are as good as anything I’ve ever done. The best of them are as good as the songs on *Sail Away*, way back. I would never have imagined things as odd as the stuff I’ve written would’ve lasted for forty years. It just wasn’t the norm for songs like that to go so far.”

Waronker crystallized it in his essay for the 1996 box set, *Guilty*. “Randy Newman has been an enormous influence on a generation of singer-songwriters,” he wrote. “I think it’s because so many of his songs have taken on a life of their own. I’m convinced that in years to come, his work will be considered as much a part of Americana as that of Stephen Foster, George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, and Irving Berlin. In my opinion, there is no better songwriter than Randy Newman.”

But this inductee isn’t resting on his laurels. As this was written, he was facing another deadline, writing the music for

Selected Discography



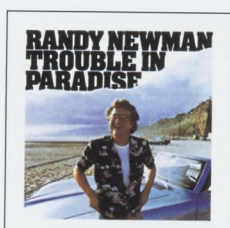
Randy Newman
Reprise, 1968



Born Again
Warner Bros., 1979



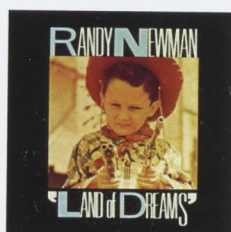
12 Songs
Reprise, 1970



Trouble in Paradise
Warner Bros., 1983



Sail Away
Reprise, 1972



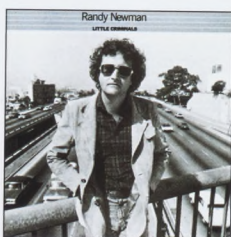
Land of Dreams
Reprise, 1988



Good Old Boys
Reprise, 1974



Bad Love
DreamWorks, 1999



Little Criminals
Warner Bros., 1977



Harps and Angels
Nonesuch, 2008

Monsters University (“Sequel; very amusing,” he noted), and another project looms on the horizon. “The record company called and said they want an album in 2014 – which, if I’m alive, I’ll give it to ‘em.” He paused for a beat, then added, “I don’t know how much longer I can do this.”

But with that, Randy Newman got back to work. 🎸

BLOOD ON THE (SOUND) TRACKS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ROCK MUSIC
IN THE MOVIES

By Roy Trakin

These days, rock music dominates movie soundtracks, but that wasn't always the case. Back in 1955, when Bill Haley and His Comets' "Rock Around the Clock" was used over the title credits for Richard Brooks' *Blackboard Jungle*, a film that depicted a "bleak and disturbing" view of juvenile gang activity in the New York City public school system, it caused an outcry. The combination of the raucous song and the movie's subject matter sparked controversy. No less than Clare Booth Luce, America's ambassador to Italy at the time and wife of *Life* publisher Henry Luce, condemned the movie as "degenerate" and insisted it be pulled as an entry in that year's Venice Film Festival. All the media attention helped make Haley's "fox trot" (that's how it's referred to on the initial Decca release) the first rock & roll single to climb to Number One on the charts.

It wouldn't be the last time veteran Hollywood producers like Sam Katzman saw the profit potential in combining edgy, youth-oriented subjects with rock music for success at the box office and record sales. The B movie mogul realized that if kids would shell out the bucks to see a film with a single rock song on the soundtrack, they would certainly pay for one that featured the actual performers. The revelation led to fifties rocksploitation flicks like *Rock Around the Clock*, *Don't Knock the Rock*, and *Go, Johnny, Go* — the latter two starring DJ Alan Freed, hosting performances by Frankie Lymon, Eddie Cochran, Ritchie Valens, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard.

British fans line up to see an early rock & roll movie, *Rock Around the Clock*, featuring Bill Haley and His Comets, the Platters, and others, Manchester, England, 1956.



Three films that brought rock into the movies

Upping the ante, writer-director Frank Tashlin's gloriously cartoonish Technicolor musical, *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), was the first movie to build its plot around a rock & roll theme. The light-hearted satire of the early rock business featured busty Jayne Mansfield as an aspiring pop singer and girlfriend of a gangster (Edmund O'Brien). When the gangster enlists an agent to turn her into a star, the agent discovers she can't sing. But what she can do is emit a "piercing scream" – the perfect accompaniment to "Rock Around the Rock Pile," a song the gangster wrote while in prison for income-tax evasion. That flimsy plot serves as an excuse for a whole series of remarkable musical numbers – by such Rock and Roll Hall of Famers as Little Richard (the title track), Gene Vincent ("Be-Bop-a-Lula"), Eddie Cochran ("Twenty Flight Rock"), Fats Domino ("Blue Monday"), and the Platters ("You'll Never, Never Know"). The film turned out to be a major influence on a pair of young Liverpool lads named John Lennon and Paul McCartney, the latter playing "Twenty Flight Rock" the way Cochran did in the movie, earning his future partner's instant admiration.

No account of rock music's influence on movies would be complete without mentioning Elvis Presley, who, before descending into post-military service self-parody, showed his natural charisma in movies like the Civil War melodrama *Love Me Tender* and *Jailhouse Rock* (whose choreographed title set-piece may be the first-ever music video), both named after songs that soon became chart-topping hits.

The sixties ushered in more authentic movies, combining documentary-like realism with rock music in new and innovative ways, including D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*, his cinema verité account of Bob Dylan's 1965 U.K. tour, and Richard Lester's groundbreaking *A Hard Day's Night*, which turned the lovable mop-tops into a droll, quick-witted rock & roll version of the Marx Brothers. Other rock

Elvis Presley gyrates in *Jailhouse Rock*, 1957.





Quincy Jones in the studio, 1969; and various soundtracks composed by Jones.



docs followed in quick succession, the most notable being Pennebaker's *Monterey Pop*, the Maysles' *Gimme Shelter* (about the Stones' ill-fated Altamont concert), Andrew Loog Oldham's recently rereleased *Charlie Is My Darling*, and Michael Wadleigh's box-office hit, *Woodstock*.

It wasn't just rock-oriented movies that boasted impressive soundtracks and hit albums. With the countercultural revolution in full swing, maverick directors like Clive Donner (*What's New Pussycat?*), Roger Corman (*The Wild Angels*), Mike Nichols (*The Graduate*), John Schlesinger (*Midnight Cowboy*), Michelangelo Antonioni (*Blow-Up* and *Zabriskie Point*), and Dennis Hopper (*Easy Rider*) increasingly turned to rock & roll to tell their contemporary stories. Simon and Garfunkel's winsome harmonies helped pinpoint the melancholy of an indecisive Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, and Harry Nilsson's version of Fred Neil's "Everybody's Talkin'" set the plaintive mood for the same actor's turn as Ratso Rizzo, the down-on-his-luck hustler pal of Jon Voight's Joe Buck, in the Oscar-winning *Midnight Cowboy*.

The seventies boasted a whole new era of movie music, including the blaxploitation flicks of Melvin Van Peebles (*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*), Gordon Parks (*Shaft*), and son Gordon Parks Jr. (*Super Fly*), the latter two featuring Isaac Hayes (who received an Oscar for Best Original Song for *Shaft*) and Curtis Mayfield (whose hit soundtrack actually out-grossed the film). Soul stars like James Brown, Edwin Starr, and Millie Jackson performed the title songs to movies like *Slaughter's Big Rip-Off*, *Black Caesar*, *Hell Up in Harlem*, and *Cleopatra Jones*.

Quincy Jones, a recipient of this year's Ahmet Ertegun Award, helped set the pace for black action movies, with jazz-oriented scores for *Come Back Charleston Blue* and *Cool Breeze* – a remake of the classic caper melodrama *The Asphalt Jungle*. Jones and songwriting partner Bob Russell had previously become the first African-Americans to be nominated for a Best Original Song Oscar for "The Eyes of Love," composed for the 1968 movie *Banning*. That same year, Q also received a nomination for Best Original Score for *In Cold Blood*. In all, Jones composed thirty-three major motion picture scores, starting with Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker*, and including *The Slender Thread*; *Walk, Don't Run*; *In the Heat of the Night*; *The Italian Job*; *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*; *The Lost Man*; *Take the Money and Run*; *Cactus Flower*; *The Color Purple*; and the *Austin Powers* series.

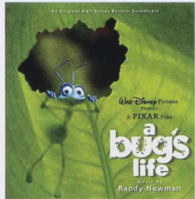


Donna Summer sings in *Thank God It's Friday*, 1978.



Throughout the 1970s, pop, rock, and disco began to play major roles in telling film stories – most notably the use of fifties rock in George Lucas' *American Graffiti*, the era-appropriate protest music in Hal Ashby's Vietnam saga, *Coming Home*, and Francis Ford Coppola's stunning use of the Doors' "The End" in his own war movie, *Apocalypse Now*. Arguably, the standard for movie-music synchronicity can be found in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), whose Bee Gees-laced soundtrack sent disco hurtling into the stratosphere. The Grammy Award-winning Album of the Year has gone on to sell forty million copies worldwide, making it eighth on the list of all-time bestsellers. Yet another of this year's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees, Donna Summer, performed "The Last Dance" in *Thank God It's Friday* (1978), one of several mostly unsuccessful attempts to duplicate the *Saturday Night Fever* formula. Summer also contributed "On the Radio," the title theme to *Foxes* (1980), featuring a young Jodie Foster and a Giorgio Moroder score; Summer's "Love to Love You Baby" was included in the 1977 film *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*.

With the arrival of MTV in the 1980s, along with the quick-cutting style of the music video, rock's absorption into the cinematic language was complete. Filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, John Hughes, Robert Zemeckis, and Cameron Crowe made contemporary music a seamless and integral part of their narratives. Some of the highlights include Tom Cruise dancing in his underwear to Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll" in *Risky Business*; John Cusack holding up his boom box beneath Ione Skye's window to serenade her



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Anita Pallenberg and Mick Jagger in *Performance*, 1970; various soundtracks composed by Randy Newman; Newman (second from left) receives his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, with Buzz and Woody from *Toy Story* and Pixar's John Lasseter, 2010.

with Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes"; Judd Nelson throwing a triumphant fist in the air while the Simple Minds' "Don't You Forget About Me" rings out in *The Breakfast Club*; and 2013 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee Ann Wilson and Mike Reno joining forces on *Footloose*'s "Almost Paradise."

Steve Jobs' Pixar Animation Studios released its very first feature, *Toy Story*, in 1995, but insisted to distributor Disney that it not be a musical. Instead, director John Lasseter tapped veteran songwriter and another of this year's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees, Randy Newman, to compose the score, which included two versions of "You've Got a Friend in Me" (one a duet with Lyle Lovett), as well as two other songs: "Strange Things" and "I Will Go Sailing No More." Newman, who comes from a famed family of film composers that includes his uncles Alfred, Lionel, and Emil (his cousins Thomas and David and nephew Joey are motion picture composers as well), launched a second, very lucrative career doing music for Pixar movies. In addition to *Toy Story*, Newman has scored six Pixar films, including *A Bug's Life*; *Toy Story 2* and 3; *Monsters, Inc.*; and *Cars*, earning Oscar nominations for all six, and winning a pair of Best Original Song honors for *Monsters, Inc.* ("If I Didn't Have You") and *Toy Story 3* ("We Belong Together").

Newman's own film work dates back to 1970, when his song "Gone Dead Train" was included in Donald Cammell's 1970 Mick Jagger vehicle, *Performance*, one of the earliest rock movies. He composed the scores for the Norman Lear/Robert Downey Sr. satire *Cold Turkey* in 1971, as well as *Ragtime* in 1981, for which he was nominated for two Academy Awards. He also penned three songs – as well as cowriting the screenplay – for *Three Amigos* (1986) with Steve Martin and Lorne Michaels, providing the voice for the singing bush. Other notable Newman scores include *The Natural*,



Parenthood, *Major League*, *Avalon*, *The Paper*, *Pleasantville*, *Meet the Parents*, *Seabiscuit*, *Leatherheads*, and *The Princess and the Frog*. In all, Randy Newman has been nominated for twenty Oscars, fifteen of them coming before his first win.

With numerous film directors and composers who grew up during rock's heyday in the 1960s and 1970s emerging over the past two decades, movies have reflected that musical influence even more. *Rolling Stone* journalist-turned-director Cameron Crowe, in particular, reflects that sensibility, in movies like his elegiac homage, *Almost Famous*, with its classic tour bus sing-along to Elton John's "Tiny Dancer." Crowe's ex-wife, Heart's Nancy Wilson – a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee this year – composed the score to several Crowe movies, including *Almost Famous*, for which she also wrote and produced its original songs; *Vanilla Sky*; and *Elizabethtown*.

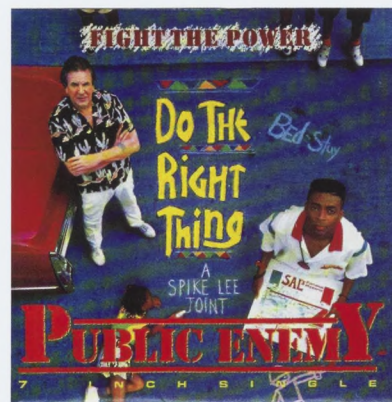
Starting in the mid-eighties, hip-hop began to infiltrate film soundtracks, as well, including *Wild Style*, *Beat Street*, *Tougher Than Leather*, and Spike Lee's groundbreaking 1989 movie, *Do the Right Thing*. Lee memorably used "Fight the Power," by Public Enemy, another 2013 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee, to underscore the film's theme of urban racial upheaval. Among other hip-hop artists, Wu-Tang Clan's RZA has composed scores for movies including Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* and a Japanese anime called *Afro Samurai* that starred Samuel L. Jackson. As part of Achozen, his group with Shavo Odadjian of System of a Down, RZA contributed music to the motion picture *Babylon A.D.*

Almost six decades after "Rock Around the Clock" matched a new sound to movie images in *Blackboard Jungle*, rock music is practically de rigueur on film soundtracks today. The best recent example is *Not Fade Away*, *The Sopranos* creator David Chase's elegy to classic sixties rock, and a loving tribute to the music's role in forging a youth movement during that seminal era. Set against the backdrop of a reconstructed Wallich's Music City at the corner of Sunset and Vine, Chase's film posits the question of whether nuclear power will eventually defeat the promise of rock & roll. (Of course, among today's audiences for *Not Fade Away*, there's a whole new generation brought up on sounds like electronic dance music who look at rock & roll as previous ones viewed big band swing and jazz.)

During a discussion that followed the screening, a young fan asked Chase what he wanted members of his generation – one that has "witnessed the demise of rock as a dominant cultural force" – to take away from his film. Chase seemed stunned by the question, unable to come up with a suitable answer. What was once shocking has become nostalgia, but those celluloid images retain their primal power. When Little Richard wails, "The girl can't help it," as Jayne Mansfield bounces down the street, causing milk bottles to overflow in her wake, you know, thanks to movie music, rock & roll will never die. 🎸



Public Enemy with Spike Lee, and the film soundtrack that helped put them on the map.



Various Cameron Crowe films that feature music by Nancy Wilson of Heart.