

MUSICINTERVIEWS

JOHN SWIHART

On Writing the Loser's Anthem

BY GEOFFREY ALTROCCHI

IF YOU EVER WATCH THE OPENING SCENE OF John Carpenter's *Halloween* with the sound off, all you see is a camera slowly moving up a set of stairs. It means nothing. But when you cue that now famous and haunting track, it all comes into place.

It's the honest opinion of this author that the music makes the movie. John Swihart, composer extraordinaire, whose brilliant licks are featured in the recently released Michael Cera vehicle, *Youth in Revolt*, couldn't disagree more.

"It takes a big group of people, there are so many people from beginning to end [making a movie] . . . I'm just the guy that comes on at the end," Swihart says.

Youth in Revolt follows a loser on the exterior who has some winning qualities on the inside, and who strives to win the love of a beautiful, young woman. Swihart's contribution to that movie alone, most notably the "Nick and Sheeni Make Love" and "Keys" tracks, hint at deeper beauty and redeeming qualities hidden within the protagonist.

This same "loser with a heart of gold" motif reminds me of one of my favorite film protagonists, another closet winner – *Napoleon Dynamite*. This social reject eventually wins hearts and minds with his creativity, heart and passion.

Interestingly enough, it is in this 2004 movie that we

heard some of Swihart's breakout hits. *Youth in Revolt* and *Napoleon Dynamite* are two, among more than 40, movies Swihart has scored. He has also put a big dent in composing for television. He recently recorded with a full orchestra for the 100th episode of "How I Met Your Mother."

Swihart's musical journey started in Boston. A former jazz enthusiast and metal head, he attended the renowned Berklee College of Music, where he studied production and engineering, which, Swihart says, was the closest he could get to popular music at the time. After he graduated from Berklee, he found himself working on industrial videos and commercials in a post-production studio.

"I was the audio dude, and I'd be in there, just writing away," he says.

Even though he's always been a huge movie fan, Swihart says that for a while he didn't know exactly what direction he was going to go with his talents. It was at this post-production studio though, where he met some film students from Emerson College, and he began writing music for their

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films. That's where he seemed to find a niche for himself. While these days composing is a full-time job for Swihart, in his early years he worked for free.

"The money will come," he assures, "you just have to write."

As in other creative fields, Swihart says there is no set path for the film composer and that more often than not

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John Swihart is no loser.

you go where the work is. So naturally, to find patterns or overriding themes in the movies that he's worked on might be a stretch. While he has scored several quirky comedies, he has done music for a couple of brooding dramas as well.

He just finished working on a movie titled *The Perfect Host* with David Hyde Pierce, which he describes as a darker thriller. Thrillers can be especially different, he explains, because they have a lot more layers or tracks than some of the comedies that he has scored.

On paper Swihart is very much a journeyman, proficient in several areas and genres. If, as Swihart humbly insists, the music doesn't make the movie, it certainly provides the best layer to a cake – the icing. And as I listen to my favorite Swihart tracks from *Napoleon Dynamite*, or as I ingest the simple melodies from *Youth In Revolt*, I can't help but feel that in addition to all his other accomplishments, some of Swihart's music provides an elegant soundtrack and mini-anthems to the misunderstood with an inner beauty just waiting to burst out into the world.

LIVESHOWREVIEWS

The Tender Box

Jan. 7 @ Viper Room

On the seventh day of the Viper Room's "Ten Days of 2010" celebration, the Tender Box took the stage to a near-packed house on a very energetic Thursday night.



The Tender Box's set was short but sweet.

Dressed in mostly all black, these East Los Angeles natives tore through their signature dancey/epic balladry sound that has landed them on a European tour with the Goo Goo Dolls and unofficially ranked them Canada's answer to the band Phoenix, when it comes to car commercials. (The Tender Box song "Mister Sister" was featured in a 2007 Chevrolet television commercial in Canada, leading the band to a Canadian Fontana/Universal Music contract due to the overwhelming response to the song's placement.)

Throughout their short set, the Tender Box blew through tracks from their debt full-length, *The Score*, and their most recent release, *E.P. 1*.

The band opened with the upbeat "Beautiful Sin" and without hesitation, busted right into "Incomplete Design," only allowing enough time for singer-guitarist Joey Medina to quickly shout the title before the song took off. "Incomplete Design" – an epic breakup song – captured the audience with its subtle atmospheric verse that exploded into a fist-pumping chorus that jarred the room through its hollow floors. This Tender Box original is a song that could ultimately give Coldplay a run for their money.

The most satisfying song of the night, "Mister Sister," from its very beginning immediately sent the small room into a bouncy, chest-thumping dance party. The song ended in a wailing, noise-induced outro laced with sweat and plenty of guitar-god moves that made a perfect ending to an energetic set.

The Tender Box "army" was unquestionably satisfied with this short but sweet set. The rest of the audience, well, they wanted more, too.

Paper Zoo, also on the bill, enchanted the room with its unique blend of '70s pop nostalgia.

—Joshua Chilton

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Check out a streaming mp3 of their song "Shadow in the Spotlight" on Amoeba.com!

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