

**Jazz in 1960s British New Wave Cinema: An Interview with Sir John Dankworth**

**Frank Griffith**

**Journal of British Cinema and Television, Volume 3, Issue 2, Nov 2006.**

Sir John Dankworth, the eminent English composer, conductor, bandleader and jazz musician has written in many genres, including composing over 20 film scores. Of these, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), *The Criminal* (1960), *The Servant* (1963) and *Darling* (1965) in particular, played a major role in bringing about a new sound in British film during the 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

The first major jazz-influenced score was penned in 1955 by Elmer Bernstein, for Otto Preminger's *The Man With the Golden Arm*. To the composer himself, the kind of music needed was obvious. As he put it:

There is something very American and contemporary about all the characters and their problems. I wanted an element that could speak readily of hysteria and despair, an element that would localise these emotions to our country, to a large city if possible. Ergo – jazz (quoted in Prendergast 1977: 109).

Also worthy of note is Johnny Mandel's score for Robert Wise's *I Want to Live!* (1958) which featured Gerry Mulligan, Pete Jolly, Bob Envoldsen and other fine LA jazz players. The distinct feature of that score was that it actually used improvisation and the jazz was linked into the movie. It was a dark story, based on the actual case of a woman framed for murder, and helped to establish the frequent association of jazz with crime and the urban.

It was not surprising, then, that at the end of the 1950s, when a new wave of contemporary urban realism hit Britain, directors there too looked for modern sounds to match the mood and drama of their films. And what better music to underscore this reality than jazz, with its cachet as the music of the oppressed? When directors sought someone who could fulfil their need for this new music, John Dankworth, already Britain's leading modern jazzman, was playing the right music at the right time. Indeed, throughout the 1950s, his group, the Johnny Dankworth Seven, which included vocalist Cleo Laine, had been paving the way for modern jazz in Britain.

**FG (Frank Griffith)** Who were you influenced by when you first started composing film music?

**JD (Sir John Dankworth)** Funnily enough, before then I didn't really rate film music and I didn't really listen carefully enough to it or study it closely enough to know of anything I would like, anything I would say that I approved of very much.

**FG** You said in an interview in *Jazzwise* magazine in 2004 that at the end of the 1950s movie producers were looking for something new, for different sounds for films, and that jazz just happened to be around.

**JD** Yes, I think that Elmer Bernstein's score for *The Man with the Golden Arm* worked so well that almost every movie director or producer was looking in that direction to see whether something similar would suit their film equally well. I guess that's probably why Losey and Reisz approached me. I was at that time the sort of

number one. I mean, if a non-jazz person was thinking of jazz in this country, probably my name would have come up in their minds before anybody else's. The Humphrey Lyttletons and Chris Barber were of the other sort of jazz [trad], but they were definitely not looking for that. They were looking for something more contemporary.<sup>2</sup>

**FG** Your first two scores involved a fair amount of improvisation, which I think is a real sign of a jazz piece. Many jazz film scores did not use improvisation, including some of your later ones.

**JD** Well, it does have its problems because a director wants each take of the music to be virtually identical, and that's difficult when something is improvised. Or maybe it doesn't quite synchronise, so you go back and do it again but paced slightly differently. Or the director might say 'could we have that little rising note?' or 'I did like that instrument that came on there. Can we have a bit more of that?' But if you're improvising, you've got little or no control over those things. However, for chases, and for music where you religiously record and hope that every note is right and examine it carefully before you okay it, when you finally hear it mixed with sound effects and dialogue it's sometimes turned down so low you can barely hear it!

John Dankworth's first film score was for *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959), although he and his band had played on two previous films: *The Whole Truth* (1958), with Mischa Spolianski's music, and *Sapphire* (1959), with Philip Green's.

**FG** In 1959 Karel Reisz invited you to compose the score for his documentary *We Are The Lambeth Boys* and the following year you scored his groundbreaking film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Could you describe how you originally met up with Karel Reisz, and how you started composing for films in the first place?

**JD** Well, I can't remember exactly how he contacted me. When he first approached me I knew his name but I had no idea of what he was like. I always imagined movie directors in those days to be sort of cigar smoking Americans, well groomed and dressed in Rodeo Drive stuff. Only much more formal in those days, I guess. So when I went to meet him in an Italian restaurant in Soho I was all dressed up with a collar and tie, whereas I usually wore something much more casual; and he usually, apparently, dressed up with a collar and tie but had dressed down quite casually. So there was me looking formal and him looking casual, instead of the other way around, and we got on together. In fact, we had quite a long friendship.

Karel obviously was a person who wanted to create new styles, rather than follow existing styles. He'd made a documentary, and someone had written a score which he didn't like it and which he rejected. I don't know what he did after that, how he replaced it. But he played this film, or part of it, to show me the sort of music that he didn't like. It wasn't at all bad, but it was traditional in that it used the sort of effects and sort of music you would expect. It wasn't trashy in any way, but he just made it very clear: 'That's what I don't want', he said, 'I just want you to sit in front of this film and think of something' But he certainly wasn't a particular jazz fan. He may simply have heard my records and liked what he heard.

Up to that time I'd had no interest in doing music for movies at all. Rather the contrary. I thought it was a compromise, in the same way that I also felt to some

extent that opera and ballet were a compromise, in that something was distracting the audience when they should be listening to the music. So I wasn't very keen, but he persuaded me to see the film, which was called *We Are The Lambeth Boys*. I watched it on a clattery old Moviola which made more noise than an aircraft taking off, so it disturbed your train of thought till you got used to it. Anyway, I looked at it and, all of a sudden, something happened in my head, and I started hearing music which I could never have imagined myself doing before. The scene was so descriptive and the way it was shot, and the way the story was being told, was so sympathetic to these rather sad kids, who were never actually enjoying themselves even at work. But something hit me, and just made me feel that I could write something that was different. So I did, and I was very pleased with it.

Karel was right at the beginning of his career then. I remember that we recorded the whole soundtrack in one session at the National Film Theatre on the South Bank. I can distinctly remember Karel going to his car and getting out the microphones, and bringing them in. It was all done on a shoestring even though Ford sponsored it and you would have thought that they had plenty of money.

**FG** Karel Reisz has described your music for *We Are the Lambeth Boys* as having a 'joyful astringency'. In your book *Jazz in Revolution* you state that you felt that your best collaboration with Reisz was in the documentary, and that *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* didn't quite recapture the same magic of the marriage between the music and the movie. I gather that Reisz wanted to feature an accordion in the score, and that you weren't very keen. However, you integrated it very effectively into a jazz group and the accordion works well as a musical protagonist, expressing both the

sentiments of the main character and all that goes on around him in a wide spectrum of moods.

**JD** I don't know why Karel specified it. However, he did, so we had to have it. I would have never chosen an accordion, but I didn't have that sort of breadth of imagination. I was a bit too much of a blinkered jazzer, who wouldn't use an accordion if I didn't think it was the best possible instrument to use there. I'd have probably used a Miles Davis-style muted trumpet, a tin mute, or something like that, which wouldn't have quite done the trick like the accordion did. It became the theme instrument at various moments in the film and helped in that way to point up certain aspects of the plot. I still don't know *why* it works, but I've got to admit that it does work in a way in the context in which it's used. Incidentally, although Karel wasn't a jazz fan, Albert Finney, then an unknown actor, really loved jazz, and often used to come to gigs before we did this film.

1960 saw Dankworth's first collaboration with Joseph Losey, on the prison drama *The Criminal*. The soundtrack features Dankworth's song 'Thieving Boy', sung by Cleo Laine with lyrics by the screenplay writer Alun Owen. Throughout the film this song, with its forlorn lyrics, serves as an highly effective and atmospheric accompaniment to the story. Two years later, Dankworth and Losey worked together on *The Servant*, their greatest collaboration. Writing in *Jazzwise* Selwyn Harris (2004) describes Dankworth's score as playing a key part in

conspiring in the film's dark emotional undercurrents. Pungent homophonic chamber-like wind textures and insinuating jazz harmonies cut to smoky sax

lines suggesting nuances of character and mood while discreetly hinting at the underlying tension.

**FG** In *The Servant* you used a device similar to that of the accordion in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, except here you have a very interesting juxtaposition of string quartet and saxophone quartet. They're almost like two sides of the same coin. They played the same theme, that four-note theme that you introduced in the opening sequence when you see Barrett (Dirk Bogarde) walking over to the house of his employer Tony (James Fox) to introduce himself and start his first day of work. You have the theme playing which is initially brought in by string quartet, and then you reintroduce the theme again with the saxophone quartet.

**JD** Yes, it changes on the interior of the house. I wasn't happy with the way the leader of the saxophone quartet played. He was very highly regarded, but somehow, though, the way he played it didn't sound like what I wanted. So, I then re-recorded it with the Michael Krein Saxophone Quartet, and then I got just what I wanted out of it. I didn't want it to be too sweet, but I didn't want it to sound too sort of po-faced either.

The song 'All Gone' in *The Servant* fulfils a similar role to the song in *The Criminal*, and is also sung by Cleo Laine. Harold Pinter wrote the lyrics. In *Cleo and John* Dankworth states:

The idea was that the same song should change imperceptibly to spell out the degeneration of the situation. The first time the song was played, it was quite straightforward, then it crept in to the minor key, then it came with

interjections from tenor sax and in the last case it was done in almost an atonal way with Cleo singing right through what was in those days a cacophonous background (quoted in Collier 1976: 108).

**FG** Pinter's lyrics have to do with the movie, but and the words could easily have been changed and the song transferred to the popular canon as a jazz ballad.

**JD** I asked Harold whether he would consider rewriting the lyric in a way that it could be performed separately from the film. As you say, the lyrics directly relate to the film and the tawdry things that happen in it. He said: 'No. For what reason?'. I said: 'Just so it might get more performances and you might be a more famous lyricist than you are at the moment', or something trivial like that. He never came up with anything, but there again I can't imagine what lyrics a Nobel Literature Prize winner would come up with!

Despite the successes of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Criminal* it wasn't until after *The Servant* that Dankworth's film scoring talents were widely sought after. His next collaboration was in 1965 with director John Schlesinger, for *Darling*. In his memoir, Dankworth (1998: 155) wrote: 'Schlesinger was a keen music lover and was anxious that the score had a different feel from fashionable movie scores which merely reflected current tastes in popular music

**JD** What happened was that he entrusted me with the score, as a director does in the first place, but obviously tried to explain the sort of effect he was trying to get for any particular scene. One of the most important bits of music was when Julie Christie gets

upset and runs through the set discarding her clothes and ends up sobbing on the bed. The camera followed her all the way through, and that's where I had Kenny Wheeler on the session. I particularly wanted him to be featured on this. However, I guess I probably overwrote myself, or got a bit 'Gil Evans-ed' up, or whatever. Anyway I thought worked out quite well. I'm not sure if John was there when I actually recorded it, but when he heard it, I could see he wasn't happy with it. I realised then that I'd somehow overwritten it, which you should be very careful about if you're a film composer, as it's a bit show-offy to do that. Some of the best film music shouldn't be heard or noticed at all, it should just be part of the experience. Anyway I realised he wasn't happy, so I said: 'Well John, I'm getting the sort of texture that you want now, but can you just tell me a little more about it?' So we looked at it on the Moviola and when he started trying to explaining to me what he wanted, I said: 'John, why don't you just sort of moan, or say syllables, or something, just to give me an idea where you feel things should happen'. So he made various sounds as we watched, and I did get from him the idea that the music had to be very thin, sad and isolated and that the great layers of sound that I'd given it, a sort of organ type accompaniment, were not what he'd wanted, and weren't going to work either, so we redid it all again. Kenny Wheeler did the repeat, but instead of using the flugelhorn, he used a tin mute trumpet, and it got thinned down until it ended up being almost inaudible at the end, just a single instrument. So that was a case where a director who was very interested in music, but not musically literate, was able by sounds and noises to give me a road map of what he actually wanted to hear, and so we both ended up with the same sort of product, and with me converting into musical terms what he had in his mind.

In *Cleo and John*, Dankworth describes Schlesinger's desire for a wide palette of musical sounds:

*Darling* (1965) was the most varied score I have ever written and it was an immensely rewarding experience. The difficult part of the score was not only in the recording but also in the conception. Director John Schlesinger thought of the actual *sound* he wanted often by playing records for me at his home, with the result that almost every section of music had a different combination. One was a choir, one a pop group, one a banjo player, one a solo singer, one a symphony orchestra and another an organ. I also had to transpose some sections to other instruments to change the sound for Schlesinger, and I was glad of my experience as a jazz musician when making last-minute alterations (quoted in Collier 1976: 109).

**FG** You mentioned in your memoirs that Reisz would have liked to have written the scores himself, whereas Losey trusted you for the several movies you did with him

**JD** Well, I think that might have been a little unkind to Karel. I think it was just that he felt that with his knowledge of music he could explain to me better what he wanted than if he expressed it in abstract terms like 'exciting' or 'dreamy' or whatever. He had little wisps of music that he knew in his head, so he would suggest a Debussy-like thing, a Wagnerian fanfare or a bit of Bach, and all that. Which, of course, was only his way of trying to explain, it didn't mean a series of pastiches of all these composers by any means. Losey, on the other hand, was someone who picked people for their ability, and unless he felt very strongly that they were on the wrong track, he would just let them get on with it. He respected their specialised skills and powers of

discernment, and only on one occasion did I see him step in. I remember with James Fox in *The Servant* that at one point Losey felt that on the earlier takes his voice was too highly pitched and should have been a bit more in the lower register. So Fox had to redo all those passages.

Dankworth emphasises this point further in *Cleo and John*:

Directors like Losey, who gave me a completely free hand never even wanted to know, in most cases, what instrument I was using. I find that I respond to that treatment much better. Probably part of the trouble with Karel's films is that they both happened at a time when I was very busy - the *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* score was done at the same time as *The Criminal* - I was dashing from one to the other. I'd never done a film score before in my life and I was given two in the same month (quoted in Collier 1976: 72).

Elsewhere in the same book he also makes an interesting point about scoring *Accident* (1967):

I discussed the instrumentation [with Losey] for a long time. It's sometimes the only way you can communicate ... you can't really discuss music with a non-musical person without playing examples which I'm terrible at, so one discusses instrumentation. Somehow, I came up with the idea of two harps, and he agreed to that - I don't know why - and I wasn't sure that I could pull it off, but in fact it worked quite well (quoted in *ibid*: 108).

In fact, the music was actually commented upon by the film's reviewer in *New Society*, who noted that:

John Dankworth's harp theme represents the peace of the environment in the college library as well as in the meadows and on the river. Against the heavenly

harps his throating saxophone tells us of the anguished feelings of the characters in that peaceful environment (quoted in *ibid*: 109).

**FG** I read that you turned down the score to *Blow Up* (1966). You said that you weren't keen initially because it was not the sort of film you would normally do, or were not comfortable with in some way.

**JD** It's not quite true to say that I turned it down. I was phoned and asked if I was interested in doing it, and I said I wasn't; anyway they might not have chosen me even if I'd gone to the interview. At that time I was doing a lot of film scoring and I think they really would have liked to have used me if I'd wanted to do it. So, I never really got into the subject matter or whether it was a suitable film for me at all. I just felt that I was doing a few too many films at that time and that I'd better turn down something and make life a bit easier.

**FG** Yes you've said that after *The Servant*, the offers started coming in. Once *The Servant* established you as a film composer, did that enable you to exercise more creative freedom as a composer, as someone who could do your own thing within the context of the movie?

**JD** I think that if you are approached, rather than you approaching them, then you must have some sort of standing in their eyes, so you do get a certain amount of freedom in any movie, but any film composer has to remember that he is one of a team. You've got to do what's best for the team rather than display your own music at

the expense of everything else in the film. But obviously, if they want to cut out a piece of music because they think that the scene doesn't need it, or to cut out a whole scene that's got a bit of music that you love, you can't exercise any control over that.

**FG-** You have said that jazz composers work well in the film context because of their versatility and their ability to make last-minute adjustments. Do you think that's maybe one of the reasons why so many jazz composers flourished in writing for films in Hollywood and London during the 1960s?

**JD-** Well maybe. It could be the fact that when you are hired to do a film as a jazz composer, you inevitably come to certain portions of the film where jazz just won't do; maybe it's just source music - you see a violin and cello and piano playing in a café, and you have to adapt. There's always something there that isn't jazz, and that's a very good learning process for jazz composers who were a bit more tunnel-visioned when they started. In the same way you very quickly find that the technical requirements of writing for films are to work to a stopwatch. People make that out to be some sort of mystique that only a few chosen people can ever understand, but, of course, we all know it's as easy as hell, isn't it? Particularly in jazz, if you select a metronome speed and you've got cues of say 12.8 seconds and you fit it at 120 beats per minute, so you know that every bar line and so on. People say: 'I wonder how you ever get those things together', and you pretend that's it very difficult because you don't want too many jazz composers coming in and being competitors.

**FG** Are there any current plans to do any more film scores?

**JD** At the moment, no. I've not been considered for anything since *Gangster No 1* [Dankworth's most recent score of 2001]

**FG** If you were invited to score again, are there any particular directors or film figures that you would like to work with?

**JD** Well, I can't say that there are, really, because I don't really want to do any more, unless they came out with a very strong case and said that they wouldn't go ahead without me, or flattered me enough to make me feel that the music was going to play a very big part in the film, and said that they wanted me ahead of anybody else. Other than that, I must admit that I cast my mind back to the pleasures of doing it but also the headaches that are often caused by internal politics, where people involved in a film are manoeuvring and countering each other. I felt I couldn't go through all that again. I much prefer to be in as total control as possible of music, and there are lots of ways of doing that without having to go into the movies.

**FG** If you look back at the scores that you've done, do you have a particular favourite, one that really stands out?

**JD** I think that the one that hangs together the best is *The Servant*. I thought it did the best service to the film and worked very well with it. But I'm also quite proud of in isolation, so to speak.

**FG-** It has been said that since the 1970s many movie scores have been bitten by *The Graduate* bug, which is to say that they consist of popular songs specifically written

for the movie or that they use existing popular songs. Thus movie scores gradually started incorporating more popular music as opposed to original music.

**JD-** That's right, and it still applies a lot today when you see a list in the credits as long as your arm of 25 other pieces of music. That's the one thing that displeased me about the way film music was going. Maybe the reason why I like *The Servant* is because I don't think that there's one example of that in the film. I had to write whatever had to be the music for the film. I think that what it amounts to is that you get rather offended when they want to use a record of someone else. You think, no doubt unreasonably, that you might be able to do something that would work better.

## Notes

1. The other British feature films which Dankworth scored are: *Return from the Ashes* (1965), *Sands of the Kalahari* (1965), *Scruggs* (1965), *Morgan: A Suitable Case for Treatment* (1966), *Modesty Blaise* (1966), *The Idol* (1966), *Accident* (1967), *The Last Safari* (1967), *Fathom* (1967), *Boom* (songs only) (1968), *Salt and Pepper* (1968), *The Other People* (1968), *The Magus* (1968), *The Last Grenade* (1970), *The Engagement* (1970), *Perfect Friday* (1970), *10 Rillington Place* (1971), *Kiss Kiss (Bang Bang)* (2000), *Gangster No. 1* (2000). His British television work includes scores for *The Voodoo Factor* (ATV 1959), *Survival* – various episodes (Anglia 1961 till?), *The Avengers* – various episodes (ATV 1961-4), *Monitor* – 'What the Dickens' episode (BBC 1963), *Tomorrow's World* (1967-81), *From a Bird's Eye View* (ATV 1971), *The World of Survival* – various episodes (Anglia 1971-7), *Ooh La*

*La!* (BBC 1973), *Telford's Change* (BBC 1979), *Mitch* (LWT 1984), *No Strings* (Yorkshire 1989), *Money for Nothing* (BBC 1993).

2. *Look Back in Anger* (1959) had jazz in the background, but it was by Chris Barber, and the music was largely unrelated to the movie. The protest and rebellion in the trumpet may have been a metaphor for the anger that the Richard Burton character felt, but it was not convincingly intertwined with the drama itself. Curiously enough, Barber also features in the youth club in *We Are the Lambeth Boys*.

## References

Collier, Graham (1976), *Cleo and John*, London: Quartet Books.

Dankworth, John (1998), *Jazz in Revolution*, London: Constable.

Harris, Selwyn (2004), *Jazzwise*, [pages?](#)

Prendergast, Roy (1977), *Film Music- A Neglected Art*, New York: W.W. Norton.