

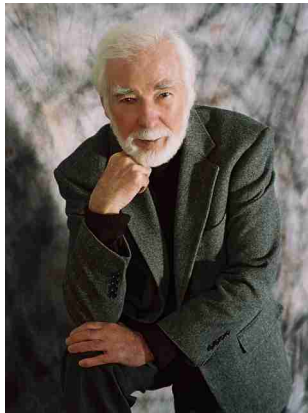


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“Interview with John Scott – Part II”

Questions by Sergio Gorjón & Asier G. Senarriaga
Interview performed by Sergio Gorjón.



With a career spanning over several decades, **John Scott** has proven to be a one-of-a-kind composer whose unparalleled commitment to his true passion, music, has left us countless cherished memories. Last summer **John Scott** took a break from the preparations of his forthcoming film music concert with the Hollywood Symphony Orchestra in order to speak with us lengthily about his past, present and future life in films.

Join us with the second and last part of our interview with **John Scott**, or read the first part: John Scott, from the beginning of his career to the 80's.

BSOSpirit (BS): In the 90's, you worked in a number of pictures with two singular attributes: smaller budgets and limited release worldwide. This was also a period where the use of temp tracks did basically become a *de facto* standard in the industry. What do you think of this practice? Does it help the composer or does it rather curb his creativity?

John Scott (JS): I have nothing against temp tracks for the purpose of seeing how music can motivate a film. A lot of producers and distributors and even directors cannot imagine fully how the film will work without seeing what music might, or might not do for a film. However, I abhor the practice of causing the composer to slavishly copy a temp track. I have been extremely lucky not to have had to follow this course. Perhaps my biggest stroke of luck was working with **Jacques Cousteau** who encouraged me to search for an original approach to each of his films. I gained so much confidence because of the confidence he had in me!

My luck has generally allowed me to be creative in scoring music for films. I honestly don't know if I could cope with the situation as it has now become. Nowadays the music supervisor has a bigger credit than the composer and what does he contribute?

He has the ear of the producer and director and persuades them that he knows what is best for their film, and they believe him. He is generally engaged before the composer and, if he doesn't engage the composer or recommend him, he certainly briefs him. The composer should be allowed to be the creative artist. He should receive his brief from the artistic director who, in turn, should trust his composer. The best score is always going to be an original score. Not a copy of someone else's music, however good. The problem is that an original score has to become known to the producer and director before they can realize it is good. It is always difficult to appreciate an original score on first hearing.



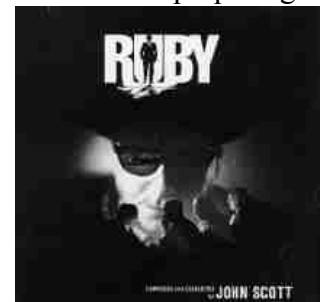
BS: **Becoming Colette** (1991) recounts the story of Ms. **Gabrielle Colette**, the woman who was called to become the first female to be awarded the medal of the French Legion d'Honneur. Her troubled life and relationship to her husband **Henry Gauthier-Villars** just seemed to provide the type of tough-provoking material deserving a score by **John Scott**. Is this why you called your participation in the picture a labour of love?

JS: I do not remember calling my participation in this film a labour of love. It is true that if I like a project I will work on it. The fee is secondary, and in some cases, where the fee might be very small, one might say that I work for love rather than money. As it is, music is my true love. It always has been, and films have given me the chance to become better at the thing that I love.

I am a Franco-file. I have always enjoyed spending time in France. I have made good friends both socially and in my profession, so when I was called upon to provide a score for a real French subject I was thrilled. I put on my French hat and really enjoyed myself. It also gave me a chance to go a different way in my music.

BS: **Ruby** (1992) touches upon the controversial character of **Jack Ruby**, a Dallas nightclub owner who murdered **Lee Harvey Oswald** while authorities were preparing to transfer him from police headquarters to a nearby jail. It's mainly a jazz-oriented score with a good number of sax and trumpet solos, all of which strongly contributes to giving a remarkable noir-ish feel to it. If we recall correctly, in order for you to get the job there was this very unusual request that you were asked to send a demo video and its corresponding underscore so as to demonstrate how well could it work.

What can you tell us about this?



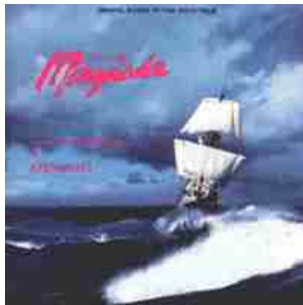
JS: Without wishing to be evasive, I honestly do not remember having to send a demo video and its corresponding underscore. At that time, a friend had put together a video of clips for various films for me to send to prospective clients. This is not unusual. I can remember when I first made contact with **Carol Faith** who was **Jerry Goldsmith's**

agent at the time. She was preparing a demo to send to a client on behalf of **Jerry Goldsmith**. I remarked to her that I was amazed that one needed a demo to hear the quality of **Goldsmith's** work.

I have since learned that most people who engage composers do not really know what composers do, and how they differ from each other. In fact, the only time they listen to music is when they have to! It is a sad fact that if you walk into a producer's office you will often find a pile of demo material from various composers. They are seldom listened to and in the end the composer is engaged because he knows someone, or someone with influence knows him, or because he scored the last successful film that they saw.

BS: You had barely a month to write the music before the start of the scoring sessions by mid January. How did you cope with the tight schedule? Did you re-use any musical ideas you had previously written for other purposes?

JS: Short writing schedules are very much part of a film composers life. He has to be able to work fast. I am used to it. I do not use material which has been composed for another project. It does not work for me. I do remember working with a limited budget and a limited time frame. I also distinctly remember that I enjoyed myself, after the fact.



BS: **Shogun Mayeda** (1992) gave you the opportunity to write an epic action adventure set against 17th Century Japan. Besides the rousing orchestrations, typical of the swashbuckling genre, the score does also take advantage of the variety of locations (the film does partly take place in Spain and in Morocco) to introduce a few ethnic elements. The case of Spain a straightforward example. The funny thing is that you somehow decided go along the lines of the musical style used in some of the Hollywood epics of the 30s and 40s.

Why did you choose to do so?

JS: The film was stylized and, in a sense, called for the swashbuckling approach of the old swashbuckling films. I find this genre to be very entertaining. Also, so much of this film was "*tongue in cheek*"; it could not be taken seriously. I had a great deal of fun on this film and loved having to deal with the different aspects. As you say, the Japanese ceremonial, the seascapes, the Moorish elements, the romance.



BS: Though seemingly a standard family-friendly movie, **Far From Home: The Adventures of Yellow Dog** (1995) is actually a more down-to-earth type of film. The harshness of some situations boy and dog have to go through is perfectly captured by your music: a clear example of how

much better a movie can be if presented with a first-class underscore. What was it that caught your attention about this project?

JS: This film brought me a great deal of frustration, a great deal of sadness and, in the end a great deal of satisfaction. I was invited to Vancouver to meet **Philip Borsos** who was directing the film **Yellow Dog** in the wilds of British Columbia. We had a very good first meeting and cemented a good working relationship. He explained that the film he was making was a survival film. He also informed me that the Twentieth Century Fox executives were trying to persuade him to make a Disney kind of family fun film. This was the last thing he wanted, so he needed to make sure that I understood what he was trying to achieve. He asked me to come back to Vancouver in two months time—he would have finished his principal filming and would be able to show me footage and discuss further.

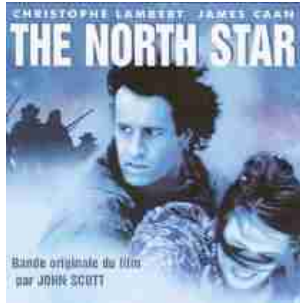
The next time I arrived in Vancouver I was installed in my hotel and **Philip** failed to meet me. Two days later we still had not met and I had received no explanation. However, I was finally informed that **Philip** had been taken ill with flu and had ended up in hospital. It turned out to be worse than that and I returned to London with the knowledge that **Philip** had leukemia and was very ill.

A month later he was much better and I visited him again. He had lost his bushy crop of hair and did not seem too bad. He was waiting for a bone marrow transplant. However, the Fox executives had decided that they did not like **Philip's** film and instructed the editor to re-cut it. They also briefed me as to how they wanted an amusing score, not dark and threatening.

A week before we were due to record the music in Seattle where it would have been very convenient for **Philip Borsos** to attend, the Fox executives cancelled the recording sessions and informed me that they had to reconsider the structure of the film. I was very upset for **Philip** and for myself. I returned to London, not expecting to hear from them again.

However, six weeks later they contacted me and presented me with a new version of the film. It was not **Philip's** version. I had just over three weeks to compose and record the score in London. I did my best to provide the score that **Philip Borsos** and I had planned and all through the recording I had fights with the executive producer. He was saying things like: *“I know the boy's father has drowned and he has very little chance of surviving, but could you not make it happy and light-hearted”*.

When the boy is reduced to eating worms in order to survive they wanted me to write funny music for the worms! I am not joking. This is a fact! Needless to say, they did not get their funny worm music. As soon as the score had been recorded I sent a copy of the recording to **Philip**. He phoned me from Vancouver to say he was thrilled and very happy with the music. He died a few days later.



BS: *The North Star* (1996) is another good example of a little known film that features an astonishing musical score by **John Scott**. The picture is set during the Alaskan gold rush and focuses on the story of a corrupt and reckless leader of the American Miner's Association who, in his infinite eagerness, doesn't care about violating the most sacred cave of the Indians. Despite a number of action-driven cues, it's rather the emotional coordinates of the story as well as values such as heroism that seem to permeate strongly throughout your music. We heard that a visit you paid to the set was the source of inspiration for those themes. Is that right? Were these two narrative elements what attracted you the most to accept this assignment?

JS: I have always been fascinated by stories about Nome, Alaska during the period of the gold rush; in fact I have a friend who is the daughter of **Jesse Lasky** (partner of **Cecil B. de Mille**). **Jesse Lasky** actually went to Nome in search of gold. Any story about the gold rush and this area in particular intrigues me, and this was one of those stories.

I was invited to Oslo during the time that the film was being shot and my visit was a great inspirational help in composing the score. After that, **Christopher Lambert** visited me in London and listened and discussed thematic material. This was also very helpful. The film was dubbed in Paris and, in my view, that did not go too well.

One of the producers could not understand why music should be big and bold if there was nothing big and bold on the screen. There was no convincing this producer that music underpinned the emotion of the story. Music was unwisely dropped in the wrong places for the wrong reasons. All a composer can do is his or her best, after that the executive producers take over and quite often weaken their film through lack of knowledge.

BS: Of particular interest to us is the closing theme of the album: a new rendition to **Hudson's** theme where tribal percussion does provide an additional layer of strength. This is quite an example as to why your production has so often been put along the lines of that stemming from such fine composers like **Jerry Goldsmith** and **John Williams**. How do you feel about these comparisons? Do you think that there are so many parallels between your career and that of the mentioned composers?

JS: I always regarded **Jerry Goldsmith** as one of the absolute top film composers. Later **John Williams** with films like **Jaws**, **Close Encounters**, and **Star Wars** also rose to the top of his profession. I maintain that one has to have the right film to write a great score.

To be compared with people like **John Williams** and **Jerry Goldsmith** is a wonderful compliment and it fills me with pride that I might be compared with these people. Of

course, our careers are totally different. **John Williams** and **Jerry Goldsmith** started in the Hollywood studio system and carried out their apprenticeship with TV series as well as arranging other people's music. I used to think of **John Williams** more as an arranger when he was working on films like **Fiddler on the Roof**. Even with **Poseidon Adventure** someone else composed the main theme. Didn't he also score **Jesus Christ Superstar**?

I started my composing career well after they were both established. I used to listen to **Jerry's** scores for films like **Sand Pebbles**, **Planet of the Apes** and **Patton** and think they were so far ahead of my musical thinking. I was a jazz musician hearing them in the cinema. In my wildest dreams I never dreamt I would get the chance to compose music for films. Finally I did get my chance, but I knew I had a lot to learn. Now a few years have passed and I feel that I have closed the gap. But one the thing I know for sure is that I still have so much more to learn.



BS: The liner notes to the western adventure **Walking Thunder** (1997) quite accurately describe the dual approach your score takes depending on whether mankind or nature are being typified. Melody and harmony depict the balance in nature whilst dissonances tend to reflect men's impact on the former. In addition you recount touring through Utah and visiting Native Americans as a strong inspiration for your music. Given that you also dedicated a beautiful piece called **Death of Indian Nations** to this community we were wondering about your particular bond to the former.

JS: You are talking about a certain mysticism which I have experienced a few times in my life. I always carry a notebook in which I sketch down musical ideas when I have certain experiences which can be notated musically. Of course these are very private thoughts and will not convey the same feelings to different people. What one sees as beautiful another will see as ugly. It's a matter of perception.

When I was with the Indians in Utah I experienced intense feelings of a rarefied nature, not only from the people but from the surroundings. When I was in India I experienced a mysticism of a very different kind. When I was in the Amazon forest it was different again. This is one of the reasons why I am compelled to compose music; music has that very same quality of mysticism as far as I am concerned. It cannot happen all the time with film music because the music is serving a very definite cause and that is why I have to compose outside of films.

I love symphonic music. I love intimate chamber music. My second string quartet **Southwestern Landscapes** was composed because of my experiences with the Indians. I know that this has less appeal to film music fans, but it is very necessary for me, and has been instrumental in my development as a composer. However one of my great musical thrills was the result of a documentary film. This documentary film was the inspiration for my **Belem Symphony**.

BS: *The Scarlet Tunic* (1997), along with *The North Star*, is indeed often quoted by fans as one of the most rewarding soundtracks you produced in the 90's. Broadly speaking it's a sweeping romantic score with a poignant sadness to it plus some militaristic elements. Interestingly, ill fated love, troubled lives and strangled families became a hallmark in many of the projects you worked in during this period. Were you specifically looking for pictures with unfolding tragedies? Don't you ever miss writing a score for a comedy?



JS: I have composed for comedies from time to time. **Peter Sasdy** directed a film called *Ending Up*. It was great fun and I enjoyed it very much. Another comedy was *Rocket to the Moon*. Before that I did a film called *Doctor in Clover*. I think that comedy is difficult. It can be satisfying but it is hard work.



I think I derive more satisfaction from drama. I still have a real weakness for the horror genre although nowadays there is seldom the budget for an orchestra. I am not really drawn to composing synth scores; I was doing that before it became so popular. Now it is overdone and partly, because there is not the budget to do orchestral scores. It's more a business than an art!



Yes, ill-fated love and troubled lives and high drama are extremely satisfying and provide emotional canvasses which I find most rewarding.



BS: *Mill on the Floss* (1997) is a hidden gem for many fans. It's a smaller, intimate score that should positively deserve a wider audience. Though still in print we are very much certain it will soon become a hard to find item, as is the case with many JOS releases. Have you ever thought of releasing your music on-line as some other labels have already announced?

JS: *Mill on the Floss* is amongst my favourite film scores. I regard it as one of my "English" scores together with *Scarlet Tunic* and *Shooting Party*. Each of these films was adapted from English novels and they gave me a great deal of satisfaction.



I do not know if JOS can consider releasing on-line. I do not know the hazards, and we

only have a modest set up. Also there is a problem with Bootlegging and we have suffered very badly through Bootleggers.

BS: The last decade drew to its close, musically speaking, with **Shergar** (1999), a stable boy-and-horse tale that was loosely based on an actual IRA's 1983 horensapping of a Derby winner. Despite some beautifully melodic cues in the second half of the score, the first section is quite dark, atmospheric and even violent. How do you tackle the challenge of putting the audience into a rather sombre mood, so to speak?

JS: This is an example of dissonant dirty music which I enjoy writing. In films one can do this and it is quite acceptable. The opening of **Shergar** portrays ruthless paramilitaries who will stop at nothing to achieve their aims. It is a terrifying sequence. Can you imagine the mind of a man who doesn't think twice about shooting dogs and then is quite prepared to shoot a man and a woman who have been woken up from sleep to find a gun in their face? You don't write uplifting music for such a sequence.

I enjoyed the experience of working on this film. **Dennis Lewiston**, who wrote and directed the film, confided to me that he used to listen to **Vaughan Williams's Oboe Concerto** while he was writing the script. He suggested that this might be a starting point for the music. And indeed it was. By the way, I have Celtic blood. My mother was Irish and the Irish element in the music flows in my veins.



BS: On a wholly different arena, your collaboration with **Jacques-Yves Cousteau** certainly marked another milestone in your career. Actually, the output you produced for the series is so huge and stylistically so rich that it's very hard for us to just pick one. Indeed, this is an episode in your life that we feel should deserve a whole interview of its own! Now, and we know this is perhaps a compromising question, is there an album of the many JOS produced for these documentaries that you are particularly fond of?

JS: Now I'm going to get big headed! It was indeed a rewarding experience working with **Jacques Cousteau** and I would be pleased to do an interview devoted to this unique experience.

Among my favourite **Cousteau** scores might be **Cape Horn** and **Warm Blooded Sea**, but we will be issuing more **Cousteau** scores in the near future. Amongst these will be the last score I composed for the last film that **Cousteau** completed and which I composed as a debt of gratitude to this great man.



BS: Among the many scores you wrote, **Parc Oceanique** seems to have a very distinctive character. The use of haunting vocals in the last cue, the repeated recourse to a religious-flavoured organ and even the inclusion of a song

(something not so common in your soundtracks) makes us think that there was something special about the development of this particular score. Is there any anecdote that you could share with us in this respect?



JS: **Parc Oceanique Cousteau** was the name given to the theme park which Jacques Cousteau conceived together with his son Jean-Michele in the centre of Paris. The project was a disaster and is better not talked about, but the music was commissioned by Jean-Michele with whom I worked very closely.

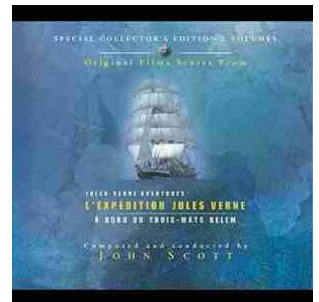
I visited the park regularly while it was under construction, and I composed the music with great expectations. This was also part of the reason that I started the JOS record label. There was to be a gift shop with hundreds of visitors daily. There were so many promises of great things, big exhibition areas, unique experiences simulated at the bottom of the ocean. In the end the whole venture was a failure. But at least they had the courage to attempt it.

The first piece of music was for the Blue Whale. A life size model was suspended in a vast area and one could enter the whale through the mouth and explore its organs with a heart which was beating and a fetus of a baby whale. The music was designed to be played non-stop in this area.

Then there was the kelp forest. It could have been a wonderful experience and I felt that the cathedral organ was an impressive part of the sound for some of the exhibition. There was a great deal of discussion about the way music would be projected from concealed loudspeakers and how music in one area would take over from music in another area. It was to be an "*Aural Concerto*" with many continuous movements. This was a difficult undertaking, far harder than composing a film score.

It is a shame that **Parc Oceanique Cousteau** came to nothing in the end. I sincerely hope that the legend that was "**Jacques Cousteau**" will be remembered for the great vision and dedication of this wonderful man.

BS: Your contribution to **L'Expédition Jules Verne** (2003) confirmed once again your reputed status as auteur of naturalist documentaries. This "*marvelously moving epic symphony*", if you allow us to use the same term you coined for this experience, makes us think of how much music might be related for you to values such as humanism, tolerance and peaceful co-existence between man and nature. Do you share this view?

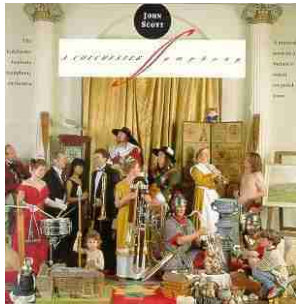


JS: I'm not sure if I have answered this in an earlier question. My association with **Jules Verne Aventure** came about because of my work with **Jacques Cousteau**. For

me it has been a fruitful and inspiring association. All these values which you talk about are exactly what attracted me to collaborate with **JVA**.

Jean-Christophe Jauffré is the president and he is a true film music fan. For me the concerts have been a true labour of love. There has been a tremendous amount of work from everyone in the team and no financial reward apart from satisfaction.

L'Expédition Jules Verne was one the high points of our association and will always remain a high point; which brings me to another point: throughout my life I seem to have been drawn towards the sea. I have been lucky to have sailed a lot with friends. I am not a good sailor, but I am a willing crewmember. I am in awe of the sea. I am inspired by the sea. I am happy to be at sea. I was sublimely happy to be aboard the *Belem*. It will always be a blissful memory. Perhaps you can hear this in the symphony?



BS: Besides your career as film music composer, you've also ventured into the classical arena a few times (**The Colchester Symphony**, **The Belem Symphony**, etc.) From the point of view of a mere listener, one gets the impression that this is an opportunity for you to clearly explore aspects of music composition a film or documentary may hardly offer. Would you say writing a classical symphony is much more challenging than doing so for, say, motion pictures? Is it more rewarding for you on a professional level?



JS: The answer is that it is a different kind of reward. It is much harder to compose music for its own sake. With film you have a definite mission to supply the music you feel will enhance the film. It dictates to you, to a certain extent, the route you must take. With concert music you are on your own. It is very scary because you have a responsibility to an audience which is going to accept or reject what you offer. My firm belief is that one only likes what one knows. When you hear concert music for the first time you have no point of reference. If you have an open mind, so much the better. But all audiences wait for the parts that they love with great expectation.

With concert music, particularly contemporary music it is hard to get performances and it is therefore hard for an audience to get to know the music. Also, contemporary concert music in general has got a bad name, that of being "*Intellectual*".

I listen to all kinds of music, it's my life. But I hear a lot of new music which I have no desire to hear for a second time. Why? Because it's needlessly clever, because it has to be intellectualized about, because it lacks melody, because it is self-indulgent. All these qualities, or lack of qualities, are what I strive to avoid. For me music must be

emotional, it has to have melody, even though it might be a strange and unusual melody.

The other difficulty I have is that I am known as a film composer and that means I should not attempt to write concert music. There is a great deal of snobbery in the field of concert music. **Malcolm Arnold** was a fine film composer. He wrote **Bridge over the River Kwai** and many others. He has written numerous symphonies and chamber music and has always been snubbed by the critics, because he has written film music.

BS: Your recent appointment as artistic director of the newly formed HSO has been a big success. Last May's concert was greeted by an enthusiastic crowd of 800 and we have heard there are already many projects in the pipeline, like a concert arrangement of **Alex North's** classic score to **Cheyenne Autumn**. What other ideas are coming up? Do you think that these new responsibilities will keep you away from scoring for films?



JS: I am hopeful that I will be able to realize some of my dreams of presenting worthy music which has either been featured in, or has been composed for films. My vision is to present obscure historic film scores important to the development of film music as well as film scores which have proved themselves to be high artistic achievements.



I also wish to encourage composers to adapt film scores into concert works, so that this music will become part of the symphonic repertoire. On the first concert I presented **Vaughan William's** music composed for the film **Scott of the Antarctic**, which was later adapted into his seventh symphony. I also presented a new **Antony and Cleopatra** which incorporated music from my film score and featured three narrators. The concert was a great success.

The next concert will be in October and I wish to perform **Prokofiev's Ivan the Terrible** together with music by **Rosza, Gold, Don Davis**, and others. But there are already pressures to incorporate new music from the latest Hollywood Blockbusters whether the music is good or bad.

The other problem is that a lot of the fans are disappointed if the music varies in any way from the performance in the film. I want the music to be a genuine performance rather than a slavish copy of the original. I want music from films to be heard as concert pieces in the best possible light.

On the other hand, I do not intend giving up music composition in any way. If I am offered a film that interests me, and I am allowed to be creative I will be happy to accept the commission. The trouble is that things are not good for film composers at the moment. I hope things will change for the better. In the meantime I will continue to compose my own concert music.

BS: Just to finish this interview, which we hope has not been running too long for you, we would simply like to ask you a few additional questions of a more generic nature. Are you aware that your name was long time attached to **Basic Instinct: Risk Addiction** (2006)? Any idea as to why? Would you have been interested in scoring this film?

JS: The **Basic Instinct** rumour was very embarrassing for me. The name of the editor on the film was **John Scott**. I have never met him, but that was his name. This is the reason for the confusion.

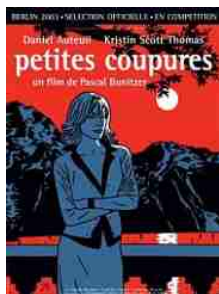
Not knowing how the film was destined to turn out, I might have liked to work on it. By all accounts it might not have been a happy experience. The film did not turn out well, and when that happens, who is the first person to be blamed? The composer!

I have seen the composer blamed so many times for a bad film. The score gets replaced and it makes no difference to a bad film. But it can be demoralizing for a composer. I love the quote from **Bernard Herrmann** when he was asked if music could make a bad film good. His answer: *"You can dress up the corpse, but you can't make it live."*

BS: Is there a particular director whom you may wish to work with? Is there any picture of those currently being filmed that you would like to write a score for? Has there ever been any?

JS: There have been many films that I would have liked to work on. Any epic or science fiction, or mystery. I would have loved to have worked with **Steven Spielberg**, but he has **John Williams**.

Out of all the directors I worked with I have particularly fond memories of working



with **Ted Kotcheff**. He has been working continuously on a TV series called Law and Order and spends most of his time in New York. Then, if **Norman Warren** was doing exactly what he wanted, we might be working together right now.

Everything is dependent on the way the wind blows, and nobody knows what is around the corner. I recently worked on a French film written and directed by **Pascal Bonitzer**. That was such a pleasant experience. **Pascal** and I could work well together, but he only wants to do projects which are fulfilling. I feel the same way.



BS: Mr. **Scott**, thank you very much for the interest you've shown in our interview. It has been very enlightening. Good-bye.

JS: Well, thanks, too. Bye, bye.

On behalf of **BSOSpirit** we'd also like to express our gratitude to Mr. **Otto Vavrin II** for his valuable assistance in preparing and arranging this interview.