

# To Kill A Mockingbird: Music

## TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD: SEEING THE FILM THROUGH THE LENS OF MEDIA LITERACY

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“one function of film music is to reveal our emotions as the audience ...film scores are thus important in representing community (via martial or nationalistic music, for example) in both film and audience. The important point here is that as spectators we are drawn to identify not with the film characters themselves but with their emotions, which are signalled pre-eminently by music which can offer us emotional experience directly. Music is central to the the way in which the pleasure of cinema is simultaneously individualised and shared.”<sup>1</sup>

The composer of the music for “To Kill A Mockingbird” was Elmer Bernstein, pictured below. His opening credit sequence work “stands as one of the best main titles, visually and musically.”<sup>1</sup> The score was recognized recently (Nov/Dec.’03) as one of the 101 Best Movies You’ve Ever Heard by FILM COMMENT magazine:

“Bernstein’s gentle evocation of small town Southern living seen through the eyes of a child uses a small orchestra of strings and horns, featuring solos for piano, flute, accordion, and celeste. He clearly borrows a Coplandesque tone but makes it speak personally for him, capturing the family nostalgia in close, warm harmonies and using the low piano and brass for some of the more unseemly creatures that occasionally burst out of the backwoods. What makes this score important is that it was used to fill an essential gap in the

film as a whole: music was the one element that really took the children's point of view. Bernstein's opening piano solo sets us in a child's world, his up-tempo music represents them at play, the spooky piano waltz "fingers all their fears," as he has said, and in the end, his benedictory cadence for the full orchestra acts like a blessing on them. The script explains how these people acted during that summer of racial prejudice and neighborhood mysteries—only Bernstein reveals how they felt." 2

"Composer Elmer Bernstein has said that music 'can express what [the story's characters] are not willing to express, or are unable to express. For that very reason, the music can supply an emotional rail, so to speak, for the film.' In creating the opening music cue for To Kill A Mockingbird, he found that 'what was going on here were a series of real-world adult problems seen through the eyes of children. That led me to the basic sound of the score: the piano being played one note at a time. Music box-type sounds, bells, harps, single-note flutes were all things that suggested a child's world.'"

3  
The original soundtrack cover is displayed below. Here is an excerpt from it: " (the score) underscores important points or heightens tense moments

without ever intruding upon the flow of the story. The range of action with which Composer Bernstein had to work was wide. It included the scoring of a children's game and the welling of terror surrounding a night reconnoiter of the forbidding house where Boo Radley lived. There is music to underline the nobility of Atticus Finch in his dealings with children and in his efforts to save the unjustly accused Negro Tom Robinson...."

To learn more about Bernstein and his career as a motion picture composer,

go to his website: <http://www.elmerbernstein.com/>

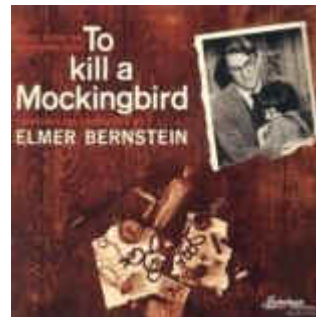
Additional info on his career can be found [here](#).

Elmer Bernstein  
(1922-2004)



NY Times [obituary](#)  
Guardian [obituary](#)  
ASCAP [obituary](#)

Cover image of Soundtrack LP



Music plays a large role in the film. Students should be aware not only when and how music is used, but also what impact music has on the viewer.

" It will be interesting for film students at some point to run the film without the music and to realize that how, in certain films, music is designed into the very texture of the film." (Alan Pakula, Producer, TKAM ) 4

Presented here is a portion of a review of the soundtrack:  
"(composer) Elmer Bernstein's score for the 1962 Robert Mulligan movie has long been regarded as one of the classic film scores of the early sixties, .....the main titles opening piano solo, subsequently taken over by strings and woodwinds, was long imitated. .... His score conjures up a distant childhood world, in the thirties deep

South, not an easy task, but Bernstein was always up to such challenges and his music is fine, lasting and durable.”<sup>5</sup>

On writing the opening piece, Bernstein said “One approaches it in terms of ‘what would address itself to children?’ What would children play on a piano, given a chance? What do children do, when they go to the piano? What children do, very often is, they’ll play one note at a time. (plays keys indiscriminately) That’s what children do, and it led to this idea: (plays the opening main theme on the piano)”<sup>6</sup> “Music-box-type sounds, bells, harps, single-note flutes were all things that suggested a child’s world.” <sup>7</sup>

### **An Interview with Elmer Bernstein**

“I couldn’t figure out what the film was about in a way that was an open door to walk through. Certain things were obvious – it was about racism, the Depression, the South. But the minute you say it’s about the South you get tied up with geography. Do you want banjos and the blues? I didn’t want to get involved in geography.

The question becomes what to get involved in, how to get into these issues. But then I realised that the film was about these issues but seen through the eyes of children. That was the clue. Once I got that, that led to the tentative one finger piano thing that children do when they are trying to pick out a tune. It gave me the bells and musical box effects and harps.” <sup>8</sup>

### **Listening to THE SOUNDTRACK on the Internet**

Listen to selections from the film soundtrack here:

<http://www.jefflangonline.com/peck/home/index.htm>

Click on SOUNDS in the left hand column

Then click on the first link under To Kill a Mockingbird SCORE

Selections to choose from include:

1	Main Title	(3:19)	8	Lynch Mob	(3:03)
2	Remember Mama	(1:07)	9	Guilty Verdict	(3:09)
3	Atticus Accepts The Case / Roll In The Tire	(2:05)	10	Ewell Regret It	(2:10)
4	Creepy Caper / Peek-A-Boo	(4:09)	11	Footsteps in the Dark	(2:07)
5	Ewell's Hatred	(3:30)	12	Assault In The Shadows	(2:25)
6	Jem's Discovery	(3:46)	13	Boo Who?	(2:59)
7	Tree Treasure	(4:22)	14	End Title	(3:25)

For a good explanation of many of the selections above, go [here](#).

**TEACHING SUGGESTION:**

Play the opening sequence in To Kill A Mockingbird: **DVD Chapter One 00:00**

a) but turn the picture to BLACK, leaving only the volume: (asking students to use only their sense of hearing) Ask students to talk about the selection of music and how it might be interpreted as “childlike.”

b) play the opening title sequence with the SOUND OFF, asking students to speculate on what kind of music might fit the scene.

Tale of Boo Radley/Music

**DVD Chapter Four 08:52**

Students quickly learn about the mysterious next door neighbor in this scene.

The music heard is dramatically different from the opening credits.

Can students explain how? Have students compare the music heard

here to the opening selection.

### **Recommended Links**

Film Score magazine [www.filmscoremonthly.com](http://www.filmscoremonthly.com)

Film                      Music                      Bibliography

[www.filmsound.org/filmmusic/filmmusic-books.htm](http://www.filmsound.org/filmmusic/filmmusic-books.htm)

Introduction                      to                      Film                      Sound

[www.filmsound.org/marshall/index.htm](http://www.filmsound.org/marshall/index.htm)

Bernstein, actors from 1962 film regale L.B. crowd

[http://www.elmerbernstein.com/news/mockingbird\\_lb.html](http://www.elmerbernstein.com/news/mockingbird_lb.html)

### **Recommended Text**

The Score: Interviews With Film Composers

[http://www.silmanjamespress.com/book\\_description/score.html](http://www.silmanjamespress.com/book_description/score.html)