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## Sound Libraries: The Fast Food of the Music Industry

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A few nights ago when Frank Valentino was watching television, he heard one of his big hits — 5146B3. A big hit, but not quite as big as 6025B. That one really had a melody you could take to the bank.

Frank and his brother Thomas are the owners of Valentino Music & Sound Effects. Tributaries of the recording industry, Valentino and other so-called music libraries supply songs in the public domain and specially composed generic tunes of varying beat, length and stripe (collegiate, tragic, agitated, pathetic, pastoral, symphonic, dramatic, etc.) to corporate communications departments, industrial firms, educational institutions, ad agencies, television and radio stations and film companies.

The Valentino library supplied all the music in the original version of "The Blob" and some of the music in "King of Comedy" and "One Trick Pony." It also furnished themes for television programs such as "The Galloping Gourmet," "The Sportsman's Friend" and "Outdoors with Liberty Mutual."

"A lot of companies today are doing audio-visual work and they're producing just as well as the big producers in Hollywood," says Thomas Valentino, president of the 56-year-old company (its corporate clients include IBM, Hewlett Packard and Sears Roebuck). "But they don't have the resources to do original music."

"Then you have the individual recording studios around the country that don't have access to original music libraries." So does the local car dealer who wants a nice piece of music for his commercial and the local morning show or weather report in need of a catchy theme.

Music Libraries operate like conventional libraries, though obviously without a library's stern insistence on silence. "You'd go into a library and get a book on the West or on comedy or on the French," says Thomas Valentino. "You

consult the catalog on a sound library to get Western music or get some comedy music or French or Russian music."

Music libraries also operate like McDonald's or Burger King. "This is the fast food industry of music," says Thomas Valentino unapologetically. "You can get it quick, you can get it good and you can get it inexpensively."

And unlike McDonald's, Valentino provides variety. The library offers six versions of "Yankee Doodle Dandy," six versions of "Happy Birthday," three versions of "Sweet Betsy From Pike," three of "The 12 Days of Christmas," four of "Shenandoah" and 56 national anthems all on quarter-inch tape, CD or LP. Like all of Valentino's songs, these come without lyrics, which enhances their adaptability to the customer's needs.

But according to Frank Valentino, the company's vice president, the bread and butter of the business is not the public domain music; as a matter of fact, less than 10% of Valentino's 4,000 tune library is devoted to PD and traditional recordings. "What brings in the business is the original music," he says. "The bulk of our business is industrial. How many times do you think Sears is going to use 'Yankee Doodle' or a Sousa March? We keep the public-domain stuff for the few times someone comes in and says 'Your got the Marine Corps Hymn?'" Valentino's got it.

More than selections from Sousa or the 1700s, Sears and other companies need music for sales training videos, films featuring the CEO, and promotional slide shows. And because companies frequently produce several films a week, they can quickly exhaust even the most commodious music library.

Consequently, Valentino is always producing new pieces (right now, the library is pretty weak in the big band sound, admit the owners, as often as possible by different composers. "Otherwise the whole library would sound the same," says Frank Valentino, who declines to specify what the com-

pany pays for each new addition. The Valentinos are looking for good music, a piece of music that tells a story, but not, absolutely not, for music calling undue attention to itself. "Unfortunately," says Frank Valentino, "some of the composers we deal with have the impression that they're going to write a commercial hit. That's foreground music. What we do here is background music."

Occasionally, however, a Valentino song does hit the charts. Such was the case with "A Fifth of Beethoven," which was released during the disco craze and found its way into the hit movie "Saturday Night Fever" and became a gold record. "That was a case of a piece of music being more valuable outside the library than inside," says Thomas Valentino.

It can be an aggravating business, this marketing of background music. Too often, customers only want something that sounds just like music they've heard before. "Like" is a work heard frequently around Valentino. "They'll say 'Give me something like 'Hill Street Blues' ' or 'Give me something like 'Jaws' ' or 'Give me something like 'Dragnet' ' or Give me something like 'miami Vice,' ' says Frank Valentino. In some cases, customers actually insist on the exact theme from "Miami Vice," "which of course they can't have," he says.

There are the confused customers, those who swear they only want classical; they walk out with contemporary. Then there are the very confused customers who don't know what they want at all, who'll know it when they hear it. Frequently, such people will tax the resources of the library and the patience of the Valentino brothers, then walk out with the very first piece that was played for them in one of the two listening rooms. "By the time they're three hours down they forget they ever heard it before but of course we haven't forgotten," says Thomas Valentino. "And they say 'Oh, I like that. I like that.'"

The toughest customer? "it's the guy who comes in with three or four people from the ad

agency or the production company," says Frank Valentino. "Because out of three or four people, there's always one who is going to throw the monkey wrench into things. There will always be one guy who wants to hear something else, who doesn't like the song everyone else likes."

One of the hard realities of the business is that music, like fashion, has a predictable life span. Remember disco? The Valentinos remember. "Now I can give disco away," says Frank Valentino.

It's also a subjective business. "You can only present music to customers," says Frank Valentino, who considers a song a hit if its used 50 times over a two month period. "Because no matter what I say or do, no matter what the price, if you don't like what you heard you are not going to buy it."

By now, the Valentinos can predict what's going to move and what's going to lie around deader than disco. "It's not so much that we know what will well but we sure know what won't sell," says Thomas Valentino, whose doubts currently center on New Age music. "I don't think it has legs."

He puts an album on the turntable, " 'Rapid Transit.' This one does will for us," he says, beginning to free-associate: "Big city comes alive. Everyone rushing around for coffee. Grand Central Station. Steam coming up from the grates. Full orchestration.

" 'Blackout': This has a suspenseful feel to it. The thugs are walking down the street looking for trouble. The policeman is looking down the street and sees the door to the jewelry store open. . ."

Meanwhile, Frank Valentino is listening to a composer's audition tape of "light contemporary" music. "I don't hear a melody and I like to hear a melody," he says. "This is not doing anything for me. It's too innocuous but maybe innocuous is good. I don't know. What do you think?

"Listen to me," he says hitting the fast forward button. "I sound just like one of our customers."