

Composing

When it comes to movie soundtracks, Irish musicians really know the score, says PAVEL BARTER



For every film made, there are a thousand fruitless pitches. For every Hollywood celebrity there is an army of underpaid waiters. But nothing hurts more in Los Angeles than an unreturned phone call. Irish composer Claran Hope learned this in 2001, having wangled his way into the offices of Disney's soundtrack division. The meeting was abetted by a friend,

but the Disney executives were unimpressed. While they praised his music, ability to orchestrate and compose, they believed he was inexperienced.

"They told me it takes a long time to get to the level of working with Disney," says Hope. "After that meeting I would call regularly but nobody got back to me so I ended up doing my own thing."

Hope had embarked on a career

in cinematic composition, a notoriously difficult path where frustration often outweighs fulfillment. Nevertheless, Ireland has a history of producing reputable soundtrack artists: from Sean O Riada (George Morrison's *Mise Eire*, and Stanley Kubrick used some of his music in *Barry Lyndon*) and Bill Whelan (*Some Mother's Son*), to contemporary composers such as Steve Lynch (*Secret Language*) and the musicians who lend compositions to shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *Ugly Betty*.

If success breeds success, then Belfast-born DJ David Holmes has done wonders for the reputation of Irish film scores. In 1998 he was gigging in LA when Danny DeVito's production office called, asking if he would like to score a movie with George Clooney. His reaction? "I said, 'Of course!' A few hours later they were showing me parts of the film and asking for my opinion," he says.

Few composers are as left-field as Holmes. The youngest in a family of 10, he grew up absorbing the musical tastes of his siblings, crafting a private soundscape through bands such as the Kinks, Supertramp, Simon and Garfunkel and the spit-spattered roughage of punk. "I was completely obsessed by music, but from a fan's sensibility," he says. "A lot of musicians and composers study one instrument. Through my career I have only studied music I loved."

From the age of 15, Holmes was DJing in Belfast clubs — the birth of electronic music and sampling provided him with a platform to produce music without any formal training. "The first track I ever recorded in the studio came from experimenting in clubs, spinning the Ennio Morricone theme from *Once Upon a Time in America* into instrumental tracks, adding

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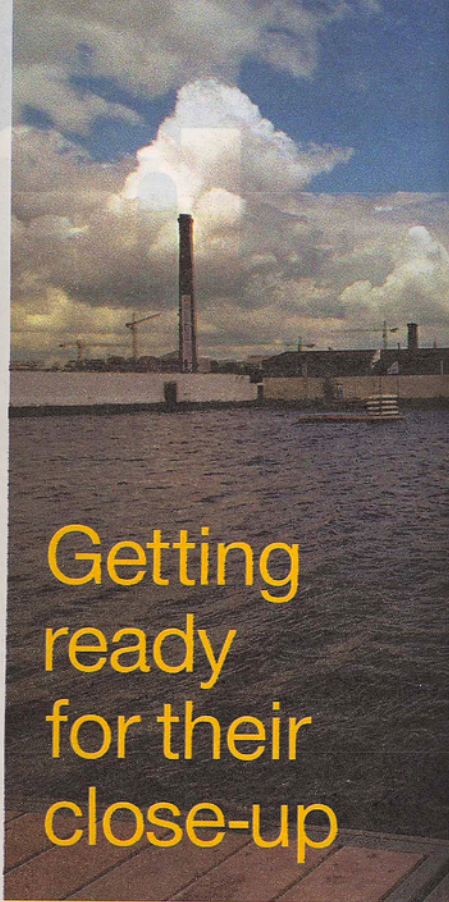
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Getting ready for their close-up

church bells and helicopter sounds. I had no idea I was being cinematic. It was only when the song was released that people said it should be in a film."

Ciaran Hope came to film scoring via more traditional routes. Raised in Dunboyne, Co Meath, he played clarinet from a young age. While studying for a doctorate in engineering at Trinity College, Dublin, he spent his summers in Prague under the tutelage of Czech composer Ladislav Kubik. "My friends told me my music was cinematic and I should work in movies," he says. "But the classical snob in me was thinking: 'I'm never going to touch that.'"

On a whim he opted to take a

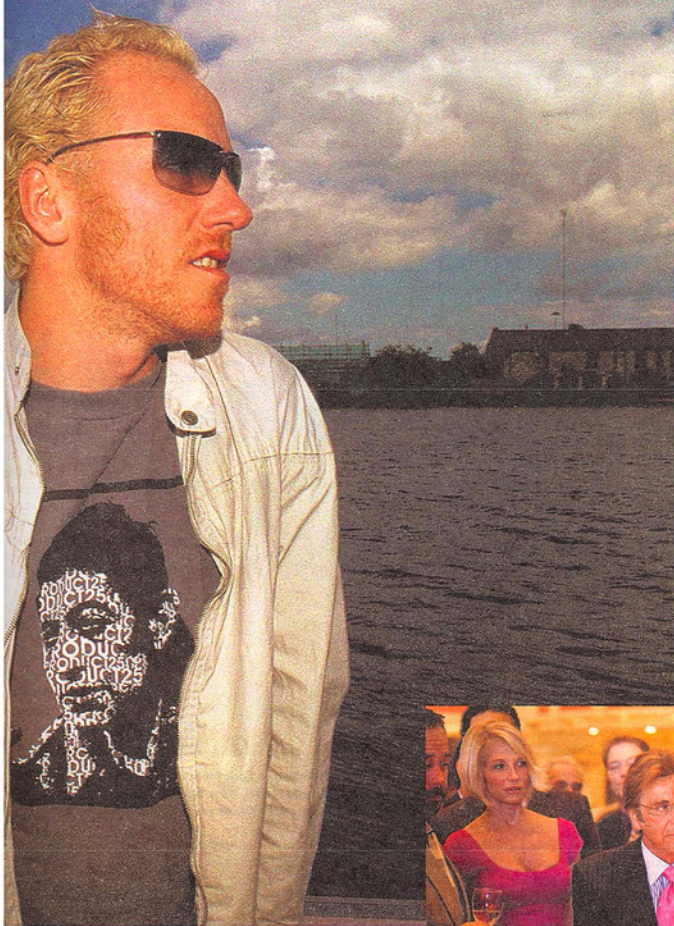
year-long film scoring course at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He won a Fulbright scholarship and left Ireland in the autumn of 1998. Long before he had completed the course, his talent was in demand. UCLA lecturer Jerry Grant, composer behind 1980s' TV hits such as *Quantum Leap*, asked Hope for help orchestrating a concerto. Christine Luethje, the music editor of *Moulin Rouge!*, then asked the Irish musician to lend a hand on another project. When another lecturer asked Hope to help orchestrate Michael Mann's *The Insider*, a soundtrack that subsequently received a Golden Globe nomination, the Meath man began seri-

ously to consider his prospects.

"I came to California cold and I never thought I would be staying," he says. Hope emerged from UCLA deciding to pursue a career in film scoring and, despite Disney's cold shoulder, he has since ingratiated himself into California's indie film-making scene.

To date his career has been a series of baby steps — from creating musical snippets (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) to mixing soundtracks (*Virginia's Run*) and composing entire scores (*Grace*). Each job has carried the composer a little further up the ladder. He attributes his success to date to graft rather than any stroke of luck. "The way David Holmes and





Carrying the tunes: main pic, David Holmes, who scored Ocean's 13, below; far left, Hollywood riser Ciaran Hope

the Arts Council to work in New York under the tutelage of composer Steven Scott Smalley (Batman, Mission Impossible) and the Irish Music Rights Organisation is facilitating a film-scoring workshop this month. Earlier this year, Hope did his bit for indigenous composition, leading a team of Irish musicians, including classical violinist Cora Venus Lunny and composer Tim Boland (Stomp the Yard), for the soundtrack of the romantic comedy Screw Cupid.

Hope wonders if it is perhaps time to set his sights high once again. "I am on the verge of re-call-

Steven Soderbergh ended up working together, that kind of thing happens to some, but not to me."

Luck has certainly worked in Holmes's favour. Lynda La Plante, creator of television shows such as Prime Suspect, was so impressed with the cinematic quality of his debut album, 1995's This Film's Crap Let's Slash the Seats, that she hired him.

"Lynda gave me my first break working with pictures and wanted me to re-edit the music on the album for a pilot she was doing for ITV," he says.

"I got to understand the process without having to jump into the deep end."

It was Holmes's next album,

Let's Get Killed (1997), however, that brought him to the attention of Hollywood's aristocracy.

"Rather than sampling, I took to the streets of New York armed with a Dat machine and some LSD. I dragged myself through the streets of the lower east side and the Bronx, recording people I bumped into."

Holmes has since scored for films such as Buffalo Soldiers (2001) and Analyze That (2002), but his closest cinematic collaborator is Soderbergh, for whom he has provided four soundtracks, including the remake of Ocean's Eleven and its two sequels.

He remains unfazed even



though his work brings him into close contact with A-listers such as Clooney and Brad Pitt. Neither has he chosen to dedicate his life to Hollywood: he lives in Belfast, continues to work as a DJ and is currently collaborating with a British producer on a forthcoming feature.

Irish organisations and funding bodies appear keen to nurture talented Irish composers in the mould of Holmes and Hope. Louise Heaney (A King's Tradition) was recently awarded a bursary by

ing Disney because my career has progressed," he says. "It has taken a while, but I have grown to the stage where I feel secure in my work. People can tell me they like it or dislike it but I don't care, because I'm comfortable with it. At this point I can stand up and say: 'Bring me whatever sized project you want and I will not buckle under the pressure.'"

David Holmes appears at Belfast's Conway Mill tonight, as part of the Feile 07 festival