

On starting by accident and learning on the run



Music supervisor Lynn Fainchtein on how her work as a DJ and creative director led to a career in film, the push and pull involved in getting just the right piece of music for a project, and why her job involves much more than simply picking out cool songs.

May 31, 2019 -

As told to Miriam Garcia, 2557 words.

Tags: Film, Music, Process, Beginnings, Collaboration, Multi-tasking, Business.

Do you have a morning routine before getting to work that allows you to start your day without feeling overwhelmed?

I have a very active morning before breakfast. Recently I've been working with production companies in Turkey, Jordan, Europe, and Brazil, so when I wake up I already have a lot of email. I check the ones that are really important or urgent because maybe I need to send files, credits, or things like that. So I start the day by working immediately on those things. After that, I exercise, feed my dogs, look at Twitter and the newspaper and then I have breakfast. I'm one of those people who arrives at the office a little bit late. I arrive around 11:00am but I start working at 7:30am.

What kind of work led to you do to music supervision? Was this something that you planned, or was this an unexpected path?

It was totally unexpected. I was working at MTV and I was a DJ for two radio stations in Mexico. I did that for almost 10 years. Then I moved to Miami to be the Director of MTV Latin America. At some point, MTV's creative direction turned to something different, and I decided that I wanted to do something else. I moved back to Mexico City and it was a coincidence that a friend of mine opened a movie studio called Alta Vista Films. I started working in the studio.

I didn't have any idea of what I was doing. I didn't know anything about contracts or procedures. The people who I started working with didn't have any idea either. In Mexico, it was not a customary thing to have songs in films or commercials. There was no original television programming then because Televisa and TV Azteca were a monopoly, so there were no outside productions. Television is just recently booming in Mexico thanks to Netflix. So basically, the work was in films. I started totally by accident and I learned on the run.

I imagine that you have a big music library. How do you organize it? Do you create playlists?

I have tons of playlists and I organize them by genre. My life, family, and dogs are the most important thing. But after that I treasure my hard drive, it is where I have all the playlist with all the music arranged. There are many playlists that contain songs that I know who controls the rights to them. I also have another hard drive with digital versions of my personal collection of CDs and vinyl, which is half of my house.

Are you super organized in the way you work?

I listen to songs and I immediately assign them a code, a color, and a playlist. I categorize the songs by colors that tell me if a song is good or *really* good. I don't keep the bad songs. I don't need the bad. The good thing about the digital files is that you don't need the whole album, or you don't have to keep all the albums of an artist. When you buy the CDs and vinyls you have to keep them all.

Do you have a specific software that helps you to categorize and keep things in order?

No, just folders, folders, and more folders.

How do you name your playlists? Do you have, for example, a playlist called "songs for a dark scene" or "songs for tension?"

Yeah, for example, I just did two seasons of a show called *Dark*. Playlists can be used for all the emotions, tones, actions, and moods. Playlists can be also be a reference to a song that I need to replace. If I need to replace a James Brown song, I have songs that are similar to those.

How do you discover new music? Is it mainly through working, or do you also put aside some time to explore?

I have two different things, one is a folder that I keep on my hard drive with music that I receive for work-related projects. Then in Spotify, I have a playlist called "to listen to" with music that I choose from the world or that I get from people outside of work. This is the playlist where I will add the new songs that I'm interested in exploring.

How much of your time is devoted to discovering and listening to new music, and how much is dealing with the song rights and all the legal process?

I would say 70% of the time is about dealing with legal issues and 30% is devoted to listening to music.

Are you able to experience music and films without thinking about the soundtrack or the score, or do you always think stuff like, "This song does not fit?"

It depends. Sometimes the movies are so good that I don't care. Sometimes there are important scenes where music becomes relevant so I notice it.

I'm sure that you are not always able to get the rights for a specific song. Do you find this frustrating, or are you able to let this go?

Usually and most of the time, I move to something else because there's always another song option, always. Sometimes I get frustrated because it becomes a more personal issue, where it is about somebody sitting in a chair and not giving you the song. That's when it becomes frustrating, when somebody uses their power to put pressure on, or when they think it is about them when it isn't.

I don't feel like I'm treated like that outside of Mexico, which is interesting. In Mexico you're treated like that by a couple of companies, but it's changing as people are getting replaced and as they are more willing to be friendly. Some people who are in the decision-making chairs of the publishing companies say no because they are not willing to work within the budget, and the difference is so little that I'm sure that if the artist found out they'd be pissed. It's only because people at the publishing companies don't want to lower their fees for \$1000 or \$500. That's when I get frustrated, when we negotiate for six months, when the director and the producer really want a song, and these people sitting at the publishing companies say no for a difference of \$1000, and then I have no option but to change the song. Right now, out of 10 situations, I get frustrated with half.

Each film has its own narrative and environment. What is your process to decide what's the best music for each

project? Do you have to talk to the director first?

It depends. The best thing to do is to read the script, talk to the director, and decide whether we should place a song or if a score is needed. If that doesn't happen, then I jump in when they start editing. The director sends me the scenes and I send song options back from different genres. Each movie is a different case.

Have you ever experienced a situation where the director and you do not agree on something? How have you overcome those obstacles?

By choosing or by offering better music. I usually get to a project because there is sympathy for it, or because I care about the people and producers working on the project. So if they really want a song, I'm going to help them to get it. My goal is always to show good options for the project.

What are the most important things that you take into consideration when you start a new project? What do you look for in your collaborators?

I read the script and see who I'm going to be working with. I also care about working with challenging projects and that the people involved are open to hearing music and that the music is important to them.

You were the music supervisor for Netflix's *Luis Miguel: La Serie*. That must have been a huge project, because he's such an icon and he means so much to a lot of people. How was the process of working with this project?

I did some research, as I do with most of the projects, to be accurate to the period since it's a biopic or a period piece. And yes, I'm a fan of Luis Miguel! After three mezcals we all dance to his music and we all sing his songs. I think it was an endearing project because it went really well, not only in the production part, but also in the storytelling part. I like those projects where the storytelling and the production respect our intelligence.

The film *Roma* was kind of a secret project. Additionally, it was so personal for the director Alfonso Cuarón because the film recreated the memory of his family and Mexico City, where he grew up. Also, you worked on this film for more than three years. How was the experience of working on a big project that was also a secret?

There is secrecy with all the projects. I respect the secrecy of anything before it gets released. It basically was a huge project because I worked on the music supervision, I also did the research for stock footage and did the clearance for songs. It was very endearing because the film kind of described my family situation as well. Everything that I researched for was also part of my memories. It's maybe the most personal project for me in that sense, because it really tells a story of something that is very close to me.

You mentioned that you like to work with a script, but for *Roma* there was no script. Was this challenging?

Totally, because I had to keep Alfonso's memories in mind every time we met in order to build a scene and have a narrative line of what was going to happen in the film.

Last year was so huge because both *Luis Miguel* and *Roma* were released. I'm sure you manage a lot of different projects at the same time. How do you avoid burning out or feeling exhausted?

I stop working every time I start feeling tired. I don't do the extra hour. If I feel tired at 7:30pm, I won't work until 8:30pm. That's the worst, that last push that you have when you start feeling tired, that's just the worse.

Platforms like Netflix often drop an entire season at once. Does this change the speed of your projects?

Totally, I'm working three times more than I used to because of the shows. In March I delivered shows for Germany, Denmark, Jordan, Turkey, and Colombia. Every episode has at least two, three, or four songs. It's not

like a movie that has only twelve songs. For shows, each season has around 30 or 40 songs, and each song has at least two deals because of its publishing and recording rights. If it's 40 songs, then it's 80 deals. Sometimes there are two publishers so the amount has tripled. Last year I did 722 licenses. Imagine, I cleared 722 songs.

You remember the exact number, so that means something.

I won't forget the number. Never. It is a lot. I'm not so sure how many companies can say, outside of the US, they cleared 722 songs.

I imagine that so many artists and bands contact you to see if you can place their music in any of your projects. If you're a musician and you want your music to be placed, what is the best strategy to approach you?

To send me an email, usually. I read all my emails and look at all the links. Don't tell me about your life. Don't say stuff like, "Hey, I just came back from vacation and it went really well, I went with my family who I love very much," I will delete that email immediately. I read the emails that have something to show. The email must be creative. And don't send me things that I need to download, don't send me things that have a password. It's as with everybody and everything. It's about how you present yourself, that will open the doors. Don't ask for a meeting where the only thing you are going to say is, "Hey, listen to my record." Just send me a short email describing what type of music it is and I will listen to it because I respect the work. Also, don't send me 40 songs, send me 10 songs.

What advice would you give to somebody who wants to start a career as a music supervisor?

You need to have a lot of willingness to understand that the job is 30% fun and 70% a nightmare.

Did you just call it 70% a nightmare?

Yeah, the clearing of the deals has become so enormous—that part is a nightmare. I choose a song, it works so great for the project, and then what a nightmare it is to clear it. I also recommend having contacts with companies that control the songs on both sides so it's easier to clear them. I also recommend working with companies that are open to clear songs easily and that are willing to meet the deadlines and willing to work with budgets. To the record labels and publishers, I strongly recommend to stop feeling superior because you might have a great catalog—but there's always another song, and there's always another company that has another song. That's a recommendation more for the companies.

For people who want to work as music supervisors, they need to know about the music industry. It doesn't help for you to start thinking that you want to do this because you love music. No. You have to know about music that is different—it doesn't help that you know a lot about indie rock and that you think that what makes you special is that you know the cool bands that nobody knows. That doesn't help. You need contacts and you need to know about the industry in order to know what to suggest.

For the kind of work that you do, what are the most valuable resources?

People. If I find somebody who is willing to collaborate I'll go to the end with them. I work constantly with some companies because I know it's going to be easy. I know that they're going to be open to the budget.

Do you ever get anxious or experience creative blocks?

No, but sometimes I don't find the right song, so I need to go to sleep and find the song the next day. But I have so much music, that if I need inspiration, I just push play and there's always a song waiting for me.

What kind of music puts you in a good mood when you are feeling overwhelmed?

Cumbia, soul, and disco always help.

Lynn Fainchtein Recommends:

Books
Travel
Swimming
Snorkeling
Reading

Lynn Fainchtein's projects include:

Film: *Roma Gloria Bell The Revenant Birdman Precious*

TV: *Dark Luis Miguel La Casa de Las Flores*

Playlists: Roma Scores Cumbia Protest songs

Name

Lynn Fainchtein

Vocation

Music supervisor, Music producer

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