Music
Michael Carlos

(The "Miss Tuna" contest features the tune for Waltzing Matilda - lyrics A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson, music The Craigilee March as interpreted by Christina Macpherson, wiki here - played on recorders)

Composer Michael Carlos began a working relationship with South Australian Film Corporation producers when he worked with Patrick Flynn on the arranging and musical direction of the score for Sunday Too Far Away. After Storm Boy, he would do another adaptation of a Colin Thiele novel, Blue Fin, as well as the SAFC financed biopic of swimmer Dawn Fraser, Dawn!

He would go on to do other feature films such as Long Weekend and The Odd Angry Shot. He had been associate music director on Harry M. Miller's first production of Jesus Christ Superstar, and came to Australia from Japan in 1967 to form the rock group Tully.

(Below: Michael Carlos at the time of Blue Fin)

Carlos was interviewed about his work on Blue Fin in the Jan-Feb 1979 edition of Cinema Papers:

When Matt Carroll first spoke to me about scoring Blue Fin I asked him whether it was going to be a follow up to Storm Boy, in which case I would have considered using the same theme music, or similar instrumentation. He said that they did not intend promoting it as a sequel, but at that time Greg Rowe had not been firmly cast. I guess it was the decision to use Greg again that made it a sort of Storm Boy II.

Once I saw a rough cut it was obvious that we were making a very different sort of film, but I still couldn't see exactly how they intended treating the father/son situation - i.e. whether it would be milked for pathos - or whether they would just make an action-adventure out of it. The film ended up an action-adventure, but at that stage I didn't know and couldn't, therefore, decide how to approach the music.

If you start composing, or even seriously "blocking out", a film before you see an absolute fine cut, a difference of 2-3 seconds in the length of a key shot can easily disrupt your entire concept by a chain reaction or alterations to the music. Editors may also transpose two scenes at the last minute and completely alter the emphasis of the film. Consequently I don't believe you should start at the beginning and write music scene by scene; you have to write it all in one big package, since a score is, in fact, one piece of
music, not a collection of tunes …

The environment in Blue Fin isn't unique; it is the universal man/sea theme. For that, it wouldn't matter if I was sailing around Streaky Bay or a mile off Pitt Water …

Once I saw something approaching a fine cut on Blue Fin I realised that the music was going to be from Snook's point of view; that was how I needed to write it.

I felt that the music had to be something that a young audience could relate to. So I imposed the restriction on myself of writing in what were essentially rock forms. But I couldn't relate the film to a rock band, with its electric guitars and drums, so I went back to thinking about the elements of the film - the earth and wind and sea. Finally, I decided to use a rhythm section of four acoustic guitarists, with a fairly substantial orchestra laid over the top to provide the dynamics and colour …

Because the release date, and therefore the mix date, was fixed, Carlos claimed that he and his arranger Frank Esler-Smith crammed six weeks work into three.

Carlos had previously worked with director Carl Schultz on Run From the Morning. He was looking forward to working with him again, but suddenly there was this about face. I found it very strange at first, because it had taken me years to separate successfully the different functions and attitudes of a director and producer. Now, I had to reverse the roles …

Carlos notes that after Carl Schultz left the project, John Morris, who was then in charge of features at the SAFC "was virtually my director", and he wrote the score by interacting with Morris and with editor Rod Adamson. Carlos found this difficult because Morris was a thousand miles away from his studio.

But I had good communication with John, and after the mix he told me that I had done exactly what he had asked for, and more. That is my greatest reward, because if the person I am artistically responsible to likes the music, then to me the job is well done.

It was director Bruce Beresford, who replaced Schultz to do some pick-ups and restructure the film to keep German star Hardy Kruger in his bunk, who first proposed a theme for the film.

…every film needs a strong theme, but those that are truly memorable are usually so because they can be sung, or because people remember the feeling. I think part of the psychology, and what I set out to do on Blue Fin, is to place the theme within the range of the human voice. That way people are capable of humming the melody without having to jump octaves or switch keys …

… There is also a kind of sub theme, which is a fantasy on a guitar figure that appears in the main theme. I just developed that feel.

The score was the only feature film in which Carlos used no electronic instruments, except for an effect he generated for the water spout scene.

The total budget for the score was $12,000, with copying fees - which had increased by 300 per cent - consuming more than $1,000. Musicians then cost $55 a call, and the recording studio about $85 an hour.

The Cinema Papers interview also looks at Carlos' views on stereo optical tracks, Dolby v
DBX, his interest in synthesizer sounds - get a real instrument if you want the sound of an oboe, use a synth to open up a fantasy world of sound - and his use of the Qasar Dual Processor Micro Computer and Fairlight software to handle click related mathematics and gymnastics (beats, click temp, offsets and matching to frame) - all well worth reading if you happen to be a musicologist or film music buff interested in the rapidly increasing awareness of the way things could be done producing underscore for images.