



TV & ENTERTAINMENT

Full marks for accurate scores

By Andrew Urban

MUSIC for yoghurt, music for flowers, music for Mexican tortillas, music for Nissan cars — and now for flying vets: Art Phillips is a composer-on-call for TV commercials and corporate videos, feature films and TV shows, the latest of which is *The Flying Vet* (ABC).

It is Art Phillips's evocative composition and sensitive guitar playing that provides the musical backdrop for this new ABC documentary series, in which the Australian landscape is a star. He plays all the instruments on the entire soundtrack, which is now out on CD from the ABC and EMI Music.

"The inspiration was the breathtaking images of the landscape itself," he says. "The sensitivity of the shots lent themselves to a simple, sometimes even sparse, score, but deep in meaning. It's the first time as a composer I could do something 100 per cent me."

The work is primarily guitars and mandolins, banjos and a few "Clapton-like electric licks", with a few orchestral elements. In the six years he has been an Australian resident, the only clients who wanted the full orchestral work were the yoghurt and tortilla sellers — the advertisers and the corporate clients. Like the orchestral piece written to accompany the Art Gallery of NSW's pitch for benefactors. It accompanies an eight-minute video tour of the gallery, which makes suggestions for sponsorship, being played to invited guests every week.

Los Angeles-born Phillips has written background music for TV series such as *Neighbours* (1988-92) and *The Love Boat* and for information videos, like the one played at our airports, *Travel Into the Future*.

His most exciting work often comes from the least expected sources: for instance, Phillips did some of his more satisfying composing for an eight-minute video for Pacific Waste Management. There were shots of bad old waste dumps, new environmentally friendly landfills and the green halos of recycling plants.

"They wanted something modern but percussive for an overview of the Australian operations for their American executives. I used African percussion instruments, keyboards and acoustic as well as electric guitar. I think it's refreshing, light,



Tuned In: Art Phillips in his studio ... "the majority of my work now is writing music to screen"

with orchestral textures. It would work as a concert piece on its own. It makes sense in a musical context, even without the images."

For a State Bank ad that featured outback Australia, Phillips used a 30-piece orchestra to overdub previously recorded synthesised material. The ad won a Penguin Award in 1989.

"The budgets are healthier," he says of corporate videos, "and if you take it on a minute by minute basis, it's probably 200 per cent better than feature films."

Films, though, are challenging in their own way — and rewarding. Phillips is proud of his work on the three films of producer Phil Avalon, the latest, *Signal One*, starring Mark "Jacko" Jackson of Energiser batteries fame and US-born Sydney resident Christopher Alkins.

A miniature monument of a mounted bullet stands in his studio from executive producer Neal Gechtman; a token of appreciation for the music score. (The film is being released

in the US as *Bullet Down Under*.)

"Art is a talented, unique and creative musician who has put his own stamp, his own sound, on each of the films," adds Avalon. (Phillips's score for *Sher Mountain Killings Mystery* was nominated for Best Original Score in the 1990 AFI Awards.)

THE majority of my work now is writing music to screen," says Phillips, his American accent softened by years of mixing with Sydneysiders. "The common thread is that the music has to carry the emotion on the screen in the direction the director wants it."

"So it's swaying the audience's emotion. The thing about scoring to image for me is it's the best way to express my inner emotions — as opposed to being a player or an orchestrator." Phillips was a player for many years, touring as musical director, conductor, session guitarist and orchestrator with artists as varied as Demis Roussos, Barry Manilow, Ricky May and Doro-

thy Previn. He has also lectured for the Australian Film Institute and the Film Radio and TV School, as well as in America, and won several awards, including two Emmys for his work on *Santa Barbara*, the US soap for which he was writing music even from his new home in Australia, until 1989.

Mozart would never recognise Phillips's studio as that of a composer. Sure, it has a couple of keyboards and three guitars stand drunkenly at ease, but it is the towers of computer gear that dominate its skyline. The heart of his system is a Macintosh 2X, the computer that runs his Performer software, "which is a digital sequencing package", he explains unnecessarily. (We all KNOW what a digital sequencer is, Art! We just don't boast about it.)

Keyboards and samplers (which take real sounds of instruments and turn them into synthetic sounds for use by the computer) are linked to the mixing desk and a U-matic tape system, which in turn is linked to the Performer which can lock

the image on the screen — for accurate scoring. Highly disciplined, Phillips works an 8am till 5pm day, then backs up for sessions in the evening, sometimes until midnight. The studio is separate from his house, so his family are spared the noise — not that they would complain.

Nor do they call it noise. His wife, Anne, is used to it anyway, having worked in concert promotions for Australian entrepreneur Kevin Jacobsen — which is how they met, during a Demis Roussos tour promoted by Jacobsen, on which Phillips was musical director.

They now have two daughters and a friendly black dog. Phillips believes technology offers a composer the luxury of hearing back his work "and then layering on top of it. Before technology, we had to imagine what we wrote. Now, with sampling equipment, we can use actual oboes and violins and things in our compositions and get the best of both worlds."

The Flying Vet, ABC at 8pm, Thursdays.