

COVER STORY

Themes tuned out

Know the words? Signature songs are now passe, reports **Bruce Elder**.

Blame it on hyperactive viewers and modern technology. The television theme song, the soundtrack to the lives of so many blissful couch potatoes, seems to be in decline. Once it was a full-blown pop song. Now – think only of *Seinfeld* – it is little more than a few notes sampled from a slap bass.

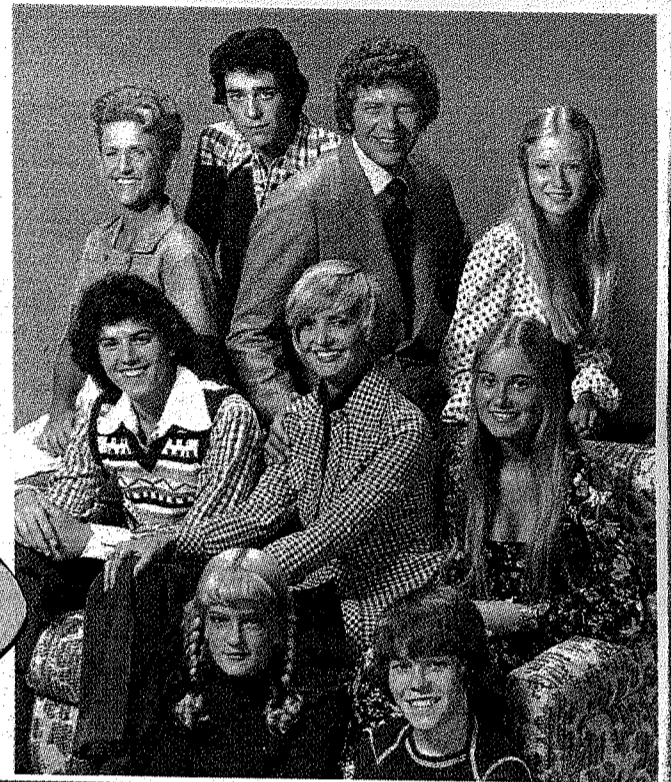
There was a time, many would say a glorious time, when TV theme songs were so long Mum would have time to finish the washing up, Dad could get himself a beer, the kids could finish their game of backyard cricket and they could all sit right down... well, actually, it was "sit right back", wasn't it?

Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale/A tale of a fateful trip/That started from this tropic port/Aboard this tiny ship./The mate was a mighty sailing man/The skipper brave and sure/Five passengers set sail that day/For a three-hour tour/a three-hour tour.

And on it went for 96 seconds. The entire story of how the seven characters ended up on *Gilligan's Island*. It was an indelible, unforgettable audio artefact to be added to the soundtrack of everyone's life. Think also of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *The Flintstones*, *Mister Ed* and *The Brady Bunch*. The entire show summed up in a catchy song.

So what happened? John Holmes, executive producer of *Home and Away*, is in no doubt themes are in decline. "In terms of [Channel Seven's] new dramas, we don't actually have theme music," he says. "That's been a casualty of the accelerated flow which is the abolition of opening credits and having our closing credits condensed to such an extent that they are put on the screen at the same time as we are promoting the next episode.

"We don't have theme music running under the promo and if you don't have an opening tune and credits there's no



Unforgettable... (clockwise from above left) *The Flintstones*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Below: *Gilligan's Island*.

need to go out and commission a musician to write a theme."

Is it really because viewers will simply flick between one channel and another if given a chance?

"The short answer is, yes," Holmes says. He points out that there has been a cultural change. Families simply do not come together to watch television in the same way they did decades ago.

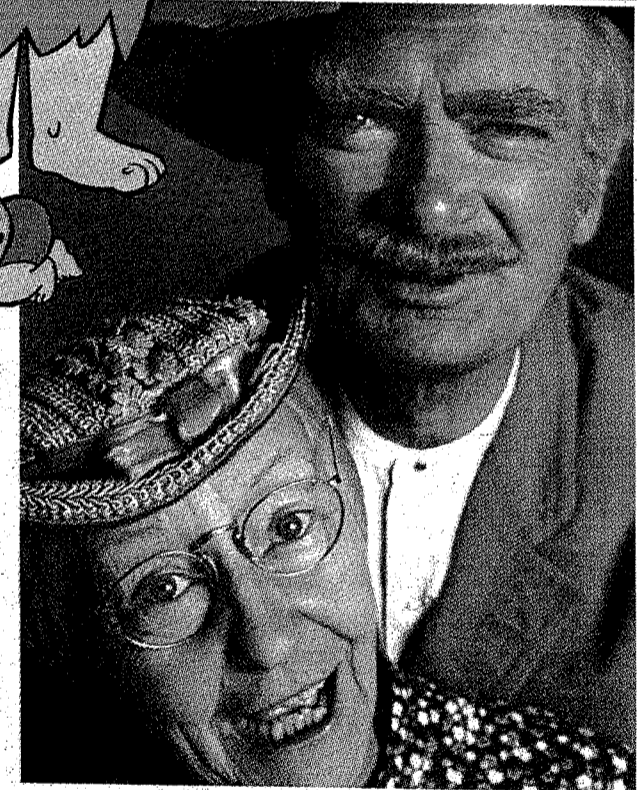
Holmes recalls choosing theme music in the early 1980s when he was working on *Neighbours*. "In those days, you would actually go out and ask for submissions for a theme. I remember with the *Neighbours* theme we sat down and listened to about 10 different cassettes. I remember being totally confused but going out of the meeting... whistling the Tony Hatch theme and thinking, 'That's the one.'"

Has there really been such a decline, though? Every regular viewer knows the theme for *The Simpsons* and the Rembrandts' hit that was the theme for *Friends*. There are still plenty of programs being introduced by inspired, hook-laden pieces of music.

Art Phillips, an Emmy Award-winning composer recently responsible for the music to ABC's *Outback House* and Nine's *Missing Persons Unit*, is not convinced theme music has reached a dead end. "There are some really good Australian themes on TV at the moment. Some really well-crafted, great stuff," he argues. "One of the most interesting themes that I have heard for years is the theme to Andrew Denton's *Enough Rope*. It is a really cool, quirky, memorable, left of centre, catchy piece of music."

Phillips concedes theme music has changed (he worked on *The Love Boat* with the musician who wrote the *Seinfeld* theme) and, interestingly, he argues that the early great TV themes were a synthesis of pop and jazz.

"What makes a really great theme for a TV show? Over the years the formula has changed. When you look back into the 1960s, all those great themes – like



'There's a quirkiness about all those themes. They had the ability to call the viewer to the TV.'

Art Phillips, composer

Bewitched, *My Three Sons*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Get Smart*, *The Flintstones* – were characterised by a number of things. They were all so memorable. Once the audience heard them a couple of times, they remembered them. Interestingly, most of that stuff from the 1960s was very jazz-influenced. The theme to *I Dream of Jeannie* is swing. *The Flintstones* is pure big band. There's a wonderful horn line in *Get Smart*. There's something memorable about them. There are hooks all over the place. There's a quirkiness about all those themes. They had the ability to call the viewer to the TV."

A growing trend is to use an existing composition. The most notable example is the *CSI* franchise, which uses songs by the Who (*Who Are You* on *CSI*, *Won't Get Fooled Again* on *CSI: Miami* and *Baba O'Riley* on *CSI: NY*). Perhaps the most interesting example is the use of the British group Alabama 3's song *Woke Up this Morning* as the theme for *The Sopranos*. In that case the group, which had formed in 1989 and enjoyed only cult success for more than a decade, suddenly became hugely popular. It was a reminder that the combination of an interesting song and an important series can be hugely beneficial to a group or solo performer.

Phillips believes this trend is driven more by the record industry than the

television industry. "I think it has been one of the major pushes of the record companies. If you take shows like *Grey's Anatomy* – that has launched a lot of new singers who would never have been as famous as quickly as they have without that show. *House* and *The Sopranos* are other examples. There's so much material out there. The networks are going through the process of music clearances and paying some pretty big fees to use those songs. They would be paying a yearly synchronisation fee. It could be anywhere up to \$100,000." He adds, rather ruefully: "It would be cheaper to go to a composer."

Is there a greatest-ever theme song? Well, as a brilliant send-up of the genre nothing quite matches the theme to *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, which first appeared on US television in 1986.

This is the theme to Garry's Show/The theme to Garry's show/Garry called me up and asked if I would write his theme song/I'm almost halfway finished/How do you like it so far?/How do you like the theme to Garry's Show?/This is the theme to Garry's Show/The opening theme to Garry's Show/This is the music that you hear as you watch the credits/We're almost to the part of where I start to whistle/Then we'll watch It's Garry Shandling's Show.

After that, how could anyone take a theme song seriously?

