

James Bond's Enduring Sound:

An Analysis of Its Role in the Franchise's Success

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Known for their compelling narrative, charismatic and captivating protagonists, cunningly calculated villains, fast-paced storylines, and action-packed adventures, the James Bond films have come a long way since their debut in 1962 with the release of their first installment, *Dr. No* (1962). The franchise's enduring appeal has garnered over \$7 billion worldwide over six decades of its cinematic box office.¹ Over the years, seven actors have picked up the mantle of James Bond, and 25 canon films were made — from Sean Connery to Daniel Craig; each actor has brought their unique style and vision, attracting millions of fans worldwide. Throughout the decades, there have been many shifts in the public taste in espionage films and trends; however, the Bond Franchise has continued to capture its audiences' imaginations and sustain its popularity over its long cinematic life. While the longevity of the franchise can be attributed to a multitude of factors, one key component has been its iconic, unique, and consistent Bond sound that has evolved over time and is now deeply ingrained in pop culture. This essay will examine the various musical characteristics that have contributed to the musical style of James Bond films — now referred to as the Bond Sound — and enabled the franchise to endure through the decades.

The Bond franchise's prestigious visuals and sound design originated from its first movie, *Dr. No* (1962). From here on, a template used for all the subsequent Bond films has been designed.² Anyone in the theaters watching this sequence will be reminded of Bond's return. Each film starts with a dramatic opening sequence featuring abstract visuals and the title song. The first Gunbarrel scene appeared in *Dr. No* (1962). The Gunbarrel scenes, which are iconic in James Bond movies, typically begin with the lights dimming followed by a "blast of trumpets."³ This signals the start of the thematic fanfare that welcomes Commander Bond onto the screen from the perspective of a gun barrel. It is here that John Barry's famous "James Bond theme" first appeared. Being the franchise's first movie, *Dr. No* did not have a featured vocalist for the title song but rather just featured John Barry's raw, jazzy, and fanfare-like Bond theme, which was more than appropriate for such an iconic sound. John Barry's "James Bond Theme" has four essential elements: a suspenseful walking bass motif, usage of Brass instruments in conjunction with strings, integration of Vic Flick's electric guitar ostinato, and the signature "Bond Chord,"⁴ which ends the song.

John Barry's Bond theme starts out with brass instruments imitating a walking bass. The brass instruments and the double bass share the walking passage, trading note for note. It does so in a chromatic fashion, moving between notes of B, C, C#, and B in a linear quarter-note fashion. This creates a signature suspenseful motif in the key of E minor⁵ that has always been prevalent in Bond films. The motif originated from the composer Monty Norman, but it was John Barry who arranged the theme into a suitable tune infusing both Jazz and Rock elements for a dangerous spy.⁶ What is unique about this walking bass motif is that it creates a sense of

¹ Sarah Whitten, "James Bond Is One of the Highest Grossing Film Franchises in History. Here's How the 007s Stack Up." (CNBC, 2021)

² Whitfield, B.Lynn, Becker, Weiner, In *James Bond in World and Popular Culture: The Films Are Not Enough*, (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 88.

³ Moniot Drew, "James Bond and America in the Sixties: An Investigation of the Formula Film in Popular Culture." (University of Illinois Press, 1976), 25.

⁴ Anna G. Piotrowska, "About Twin Song Festivals in Eastern and Western Europe: Intervision and Eurovision," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 47, no.1 (2016): 125.

⁵ Adrian Daub, and Charles Kronengold, *The James Bond Songs: Pop Anthems of Late Capitalism*, (Oxford University Press, 2015), 15.

⁶ Jon Burlingame, *The Music of James Bond*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

“longing, irresolution, instability, tension, psychological intensity, not to mention sexual desire”⁷ that was key to Bond’s motives and suave character.

The powerful brass instruments are the second important element in the Bond theme. John Barry chose to implement “[big] strong brass chords, sustained strings to retain the tension, and percussion”⁸ with a more practical intention rather than a creative one. This is because it is hard for the sound of a purely orchestral score to penetrate the sound effects used during car chase or fist fight scenes that are usually featured in Bond films. The only way for an orchestral arrangement to “cut through”⁹ was to use loud Brass in conjunction with the strings. The usage of loud brass instruments cemented the “Golden Age” feel of the Bond films. Whenever the screaming brass intro enters the soundscape, people watching the movie will know that James Bond has returned.

The third important element used for the Bond theme is the integration of the twangy, “vicious, [and] distorted” electric guitar-based ostinato played by Vic Flick.¹⁰ A few measures after the walking bass motif of the Bond theme, Vic Flick’s guitar makes entrance playing a series of notes that use E natural as a pivot pitch. It moves to F sharp, back to E and then to G natural. This guitar ostinato (in G minor) could be seen in the original musical sketch that Monty Norman drafted for the “James Bond Theme” in Figure 1. The electric guitar, which has a rock ‘n’ roll quality associated with it, helped to introduce other qualities of Bond’s character. According to David Arnold, a composer responsible for five of the later Bond films, the combination of the loud brass orchestra and the electric guitar embodied the character of Bond in that it introduced a “cocky, swaggering, confident, dark and dangerous”¹¹ character. This unique blend of electrical, classical, and jazzy orchestration not only added dimensions to the character of Bond, but created this instantly recognizable, edgy, and unique sound of James Bond films.



A portion of the original lead sheet for “Bad Sign, Good Sign,” which was the basis for the “James Bond Theme” (courtesy Monty Norman)

Figure 1. The original musical manuscript for Monty Norman’s composition “Bad Sign, Good Sign,” adapted here from Jon Burlingame’s book *The Music of James Bond*.¹²

⁷ Adrian Daub.

⁸ Jon Burlingame, 2.

⁹ Jon Burlingame.

¹⁰ Jon Burlingame.

¹¹ Jon Burlingame.

¹² Jon Burlingame, 13.

An element of mystery is essential to a satisfying conclusion of any spy-themed story or song. Thus, it would be inappropriate if the “James Bond Theme” ended without a shade of mystery. In the original score of *Dr. No*, where Monty Norman was assigned credit (see fig. 2), a mysterious sounding chord was used as a signature sign off to the Bond theme. Although this was not the chord heard in the original John Barry’s arrangement recording, it serves as a good visual interpretation. The following analysis will be based on what is heard in John Barry’s arrangement instead. The “Spy Chord” or known as the “Bond Chord”¹³ is composed of a bottom minor and top major chord. The bottom half of the chord is the E minor chord (it contains the notes E, B, G). The top half of the chord is of general nature a B major chord that contains the notes B, D# and F#. This chord is commonly known in jazz as E minor/major 9. This chord gives off a mysterious and ominous feel due to that it is both resolved and unresolved. In classical music, the ending chord of a piece of music is used to signify resolution and stoppage. And the chord used should almost always be its tonic chord of the key. In this case, the tonic chord should be a plain E minor triad (with notes E, G, B). However, in the James Bond theme, the accidentals of D# and F# added by John Barry or Monty Norman functions to create a deceptive feeling. This similar chordal structure could also be heard in *The Pink Panther* (1963), which was a semi-related series of comedic-mystery films. It seems something about the E minor/major 9 chords just embodied the element of mystery. The masterful harmony manipulation of John Barry or Monty Norman, used in the Bond films, creates a powerful impact on the audience, leaving them mesmerized and curious about the fate of James Bond.



Figure 2. The ending of the "The James Bond Theme" featuring the "Bond Chord." This snapshot of the score is adapted here from Monty Norman's¹⁴

These unique musical aspects John Barry uses in the “James Bond Theme” fuel its character. Not only that, John Barry, as David Arnold describes, ““was one of the few people that created a genre of film music.””¹⁵ He ““single-handedly, created the spy genre””¹⁶ with his unique mix of bebop swing, rock ‘n’ roll, jazz, and slight influence of classical music.¹⁷ The actor who played the first James Bond, Sean Connery, has once even said ““[that] theme gives

¹³ Anna G. Piotrowska, “About Twin Song Festivals in Eastern and Western Europe: Intervision and Eurovision,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 47, no.1 (2016): 125.

¹⁴ Monty Norman, *The James Bond Theme* (United Artists Music LTD, 1962).

¹⁵ Jon Burlingame, 2.

¹⁶ Jon Burlingame.

¹⁷ Jon Burlingame, 2.

the audience a direct connection to Bond,”¹⁸ and acknowledges that “[it’s] an instant recognition.”¹⁹

Moreover, Bond films are also known for their iconic title songs that are unique to the story of James Bond and immensely popular among the public. These songs serve as the background for the dynamic and artistic visual sequences that follow the iconic gun barrel opening scene. Additionally, as song-tie-ins, they frequently appear during the film's end credit scenes. As for the Bond songs chosen over the years, the most classic, elegant, and quintessentially the most “Bond sounding” songs are the following: “Goldfinger,” “Thunderball,” and “You Only Live Twice.”²⁰ In later films starring other Bond actors Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, and Pierce Brosnan, the title songs “Live and Let Die,” “Nobody Does It Better,” “A View to a Kill,” and “Die Another Day” have also become popular hits among “cinema-goers and record buyers.”²¹ Matt Monro, Shirley Bassey, Tom Jones, Nancy Sinatra, Carly Simon, and even Louis Armstrong are only few of the popular artists that have a left mark on the Bond films as featured vocalists. In later years, the Bond franchise continued its tradition of featuring renowned artists in its title songs, with more modern-day popular performers like Madonna, Sheryl Crow, and Sheena Easton contributing their musical talents to the series. More recently, Billie Eilish’s rendition of the Bond title song “No Time to Die” orchestrated by Hans Zimmer and produced by Finneas O’Connell and Stephen Lipson was debuted at No. 16 on “Billboard Hot 100”. It is the highest-charting Bond song since Adele’s “Skyfall” from *Skyfall* (2012).²² This shows that Bond's musical production is adaptable and capable of changing to become more relevant in new eras.

Over the decades, the Bond film title songs have evolved to feature a diverse range of styles and musical genres, but one constant element is their homage to the original James Bond theme, which has become a hallmark of the franchise. Shirley Bassey's rendition of "Goldfinger," arranged by John Barry, remains one of the most iconic Bond songs of all time, perfectly capturing the essence of the Bond sound. “Goldfinger” would go on to find great “commercial success as a popular song and as a soundtrack album”²³ in 1964, charting all the way up to number 8 in America Billboard music.²⁴

The "Goldfinger" title song is distinguished by its use of growling and muted trumpets, along with aggressive and heavy legato strings, perfectly complementing Shirley Bassey's majestic and "expensive sounding" voice. The intro of the song also makes use of an acoustic guitar strumming in the background adding to its ominous texture and giving the song an ambiguous instrumental feeling. The chordal structures employed in "Goldfinger" are particularly noteworthy for their exotic sound, incorporating unconventional chords such as G# minors and F# minors, which are rarely used in easy listening and pop music genres. This unique chord progression adds to the song's distinctive and unforgettable character. As one of John Barry’s friend, a fellow English composer, Leslie Bricusse, who wrote the lyrics for the aforementioned song, mentions that the John Barry used “chord structures that nobody ever

¹⁸ Jon Burlingame, 3.

¹⁹ Jon Burlingame.

²⁰ Jon Burlingame, 4.

²¹ Jon Burlingame.

²² Rania Aniftos, “Remember Billie Eilish’s ‘Bond’ Theme? The ‘No Time to Die’ Music Video (Finally) Has a Release Date,” (Billboard, 2020).

²³ Jon Burlingame, 9.

²⁴ Jon Burlingame.

used.”²⁵ To introduce music devices such as “Mickey-Mousing,” John Barry also thought of an innovative way to create a “metallic feel” to remind listeners that it is the shiny-golden-bricks that the Bond villain sought.²⁶ He did this by using the sound of finger cymbals²⁷ which can be heard in the beginning brass section of the title song in conjunction with the trombones and horns.

In addition to its exceptional musical arrangement, the lyrics of "Goldfinger" also play a vital role in telling the story of the film's antagonist, the wealthy international gold dealer Auric Goldfinger. The song warns the audience of Goldfinger's cunning plotting and guilty pleasures, offering a sneak peek into the plot of the movie and was an effective device used for building excitement and anticipation.

The tremendous success of "Goldfinger" title song and the entire movie soundtrack is owed to the outstanding synergy between Shirley Bassey's powerful vocals and John Barry's meticulous orchestration, which perfectly embodied the essence of the Bond sound. With *Goldfinger* (1964), Barry and Bassey effectively established a template for how future Bond themes should sound, creating a blueprint that would be followed for years to come.²⁸ Additionally, it is also worth mentioning that Shirley Bassey went on to become the only vocalist to perform in three James Bond Title songs: “‘Goldfinger,’ ‘Diamonds Are Forever’ (1971) and ‘Moonraker’ (1979).”²⁹ The collaboration between Bassey and Barry set the standard for excellence in Bond music, which continues captivate audiences to this day.

To demonstrate how the music of James Bond can evolve and remain pertinent in new eras and locations while still retaining the signature Bond Sound, the upcoming paragraphs will chronologically delve into various representative sequels of each era that exemplify changes in the franchise's title and theme songs.

For instance, in Sean Connery's final canon Bond film, *You Only Live Twice* (1967), the plot is set in East Asia, mainly featuring Japan. To create a pronounced Oriental feel, John Barry employed the opening and closing sound of a gong that is featured throughout its Title song “You Only Live Twice.”³⁰ with a cue at 0:6:23 in the movie. Additionally, one of the national stringed instruments of Japan, the Koto was featured throughout the movie to give respect to the locations of which the scenes took place. A marimba “beating out a vaguely Eastern rhythm”³¹ could also be heard in the title song to add additional eastern flavours to the movie.

In 1967 and 1968, the emergence of the Moog synthesizer and its unique strange sound—created using oscillators, keyboards, modulators, and filters — became increasingly popular among rock musicians.³² To address this sudden and popular rise of synth music, John Barry decided to fit the Moog synthesizer in his James Bond main theme used for *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969) starring the new bond actor, George Lazenby. This could be heard with greater quality in the “On Her Majesty's Secret Service (Expanded Edition)” album's second track “This Never Happened To The Other Fella” starting from 9 seconds in. The synthesizer

²⁵ Jon Burlingame, 39.

²⁶ Jon Burlingame, 44.

²⁷ Jon Burlingame.

²⁸ Adrian Daub, and Charles Kronengold, *The James Bond Songs: Pop Anthems of Late Capitalism*, (Oxford University Press, 2015), 58.

²⁹ Meenasarani linde Murugan, “‘Unlike Men, The Diamonds Linger’: Bassey and Bond Beyond the Theme Song,” (Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

³⁰ Jon Burlingame, 74.

³¹ Jon Burlingame.

³² Jon Burlingame, 84.

was cleverly utilized as a doubled instrument, adding a new dimension to the electric guitar-based ostinato played by Vic Flick in the original “James Bond Theme.” This innovative use of synthesizer technology helped to give the iconic theme a fresh spin, bringing it up to date with the then-current popular music.

As the Bond franchise approaches the mid 1970s, the new Bond actor, Roger Moore was introduced in the film *Live And Let Die* (1973). To properly reintroduce a new Bond, the Beatle’s producer, George Martin was chosen to produce the music that would better fit the taste of the movie-viewers then.³³ Additionally, one of the Beatle’s members, Paul McCartney was asked to write the title song “Live and Let Die.” Up to that point, none of the James Bond films have ever reflected something like a more “modern rock sensibility.”³⁴ Paul McCartney’s title song was a contradiction to the norm (of Bond music) as it featured a full rock band and a brass section, giving it a different energy and edge. With the help of Paul McCartney’s rock influenced theme and George Martin’s masterful production capabilities, “Live And Let Die” became the most high charting Bond song up until then, hitting at No.2 at the Hot 100 Chart.³⁵ Not only that, the score that was created by George Martin also enhanced the “James Bond Theme” in a new era by using shrill piccolos. It created a “fresh touch”³⁶ that not only livened up theme itself, but also help to reflect the urban settings of Harlem and the fast-paced action scenes in the movie (cue at 0:21:0 in the movie).

For *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), the new composer Marvin Hamlisch applied a more contemporary sound to the “James Bond Theme.” He included the “then-trendy synthesizers and a pop rhythm section,”³⁷ and drew inspiration from the Bee Gee’s Disco tracks.³⁸ The raw energy of the Bee Gees and the pop influenced rhythm applied by Hamlisch could be prominently heard film at 0:5:55. It is then followed by a full 20 seconds of silence filled with only the sound of wind.³⁹ Then the original “James Bond Theme” returns with the screaming-brass as a respective nod to John Barry’s version of the theme. The next huge makeover of the Bond title song came in the 2000s with the ultra-famous singer and song writer, Madonna, for Pierce Brosnan’s last James Bond film *Die Another Day* (2002).

The choice to have Madonna to write and perform the title song was clear: Madonna was a “chart-topping singer-songwriter”⁴⁰ for more than two decades. She was an icon of the MTV generation and a five-time Grammy winner who has recently received an award for her song in a spy film, *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999).⁴¹ The overall score for the film can be described as a “techno-attack.” Madonna was not the only one who created a techno style title track, David Arnold, the composer who scored five of the Bond films, also made use of a lot more musical technology, electronics, and even “high-tech manipulation of traditionally recorded orchestral tracks.”⁴² This is to match the overall characteristics of the exciting new spy gadgets featured in the film. But even then, one could still hear John Barry’s “James Bond Theme” walking bass motif buried in that techno madness. After the movie was released, Madonna’s title

³³ Jon Burlingame, 104.

³⁴ Jon Burlingame, 108.

³⁵ Fred Sahai, “Paul McCartney’s 40 Biggest Hot 100 Hits,” (Billboard, 2022).

³⁶ Jon Burlingame, 109.

³⁷ Jon Burlingame, 127.

³⁸ Jon Burlingame, 129.

³⁹ Jon Burlingame.

⁴⁰ Jon Burlingame, 227.

⁴¹ Jon Burlingame.

⁴² Jon Burlingame, 230.

song was regarded as the ““worst Bond tune of all time””⁴³ as dismissed by Sir Elton John. However, part of the film’s success is still attributed to her presence in the film.⁴⁴ She was not only a theme composer and performer, but also a brief actress who made appearance in the film as Verity⁴⁵, a fencing coach to the villain. This resulted in more media coverage of the music and naturally helped the song “Die Another Day” become a chart-topping song in 2002, placing at number 41 on Billboard’s Hot 100.⁴⁶

The recent James Bond movies with Daniel Craig have a unique sound that embodies the style of the 2010s and 2020s. The title tracks of *Skyfall* (2012) and *No Time To Die* (2021) were performed by pop singers Adele and Billie Eilish, respectively. Rather than following the techno trend of the 2000s Bond films, both vocalists infused their own pop styles with the same motifs that John Barry used in his original "James Bond Theme," adding a Bond-like flavor to their songs. Additionally, the two composers responsible for the respective films, Thomas Newman and Hans Zimmer, brought back the "Golden Age" Bond sound in their scores for the movies, using the screaming brass, walking bass motif, and electronic guitar ostinato. Even more surprisingly, both Adele and Billie Eilish's title songs also featured the classic "Bond Chord" sign-off that has been a signature of the Bond theme since Dr. No in 1962. Both Bond title songs went off to become top charted songs in their year.

In conclusion, the Bond sound has proven to be a critical and defining aspect of the James Bond franchise, contributing to its longevity and iconic status in popular culture. Despite various makeovers and updates, the roots of the Bond sound can be traced back to John Barry's original "James Bond Theme." Through the years, composers such as George Martin, Marvin Hamlisch, David Arnold, and Bill Conti have continued to incorporate elements of Barry's style while also adding their own unique twists. More recently, Hans Zimmer and Thomas Newman's scores for *No Time To Die* and *Skyfall* respectively have revived the signature "Bond chord" and walking bass motif, showcasing the enduring appeal of Barry's original sound. Ultimately, it is the consistency, adaptability, and musical genius of the Bond sound that has kept it alive and cemented its place in pop culture, making it an integral part of the James Bond franchise for generations to come.

⁴³ Jon Burlingame, 234.

⁴⁴ Jon Burlingame, 233.

⁴⁵ Whitfield, B.Lynn, Jack Becker, and Robert G. Weiner, 425.

⁴⁶ Jon Burlingame, 234.

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