

An Easy 3000 Miles Graceland Hits Home for Composer Clinton

by Bruce Shutan

George S. Clinton felt right at home scoring 3000 Miles to Graceland, an edgy action-thriller/dark romantic comedy that opened in theaters February 23. Not only did the Tennessee native personally relate to a project whose heart and soul is rooted in the memory of Elvis Aaron Presley, he also appreciated working closely with a director who has directing, producing and writing credits on more than 225 music videos, concerts, commercials and short films

3000 Miles to Graceland is the brainchild of Demian Lichtenstein, who made his feature film debut in 1997 with the independent Lowball. Lichtenstein has directed music videos for Sting and Eric Clapton, Grandmaster Caz, Shabba Ranks, Queen Latifah, Cypress Hill and Gloria Estefan. "Demian is very savvy musically, and his taste runs the gamut of all the videos he's directed," Clinton says.

While Clinton says directors with a musical background tend to believe every scene should be anchored by a unique piece of music, he praised Lichtenstein for "relinquishing that tendency and realizing there's a cohesive element to thematic things reappearing in the course of the film. He's very open and was one of the most trusting directors I worked with in terms of letting me do what it is I do."

From Nashville to Memphis

Clinton began his career as a songwriter, arranger and session musician in Nashville. He has scored numerous films, including Cheech and Chong classics, the two Austin Powers comedies, sexy thriller Wild Things and wrestling picture Ready to Rumble. In addition, Clinton has written several concert works and collaborated on three musicals.

With his most recent film credit, Clinton comes full circle - harking back to a Tennessee childhood filled with memories of The King. Posing as Elvis impersonators during an international Elvis convention, Kurt Russell and Kevin Costner portray ex-cons who - along with their three partners in crime - rob the Riviera Casino clad in rhinestone-studded jumpsuits and armed with guitar cases full of weapons and ammunition. It doesn't take long before dissension among the five thieves escalates into betrayal, greed and chaos.

The film co-stars Courteney Cox, Christian Slater, Kevin Pollak, David Arquette, Jon Lovitz, Howie Long, Thomas Haden Church and Bokeem Woodbine. Ironically,

Russell landed his first acting role at the age of 10 in the Elvis movie *It Happened at the World's Fair*. In 1979 he portrayed The King himself in an ABC-TV movie of the week directed by John Carpenter.

Ghost of Elvis

Clinton particularly enjoyed the juxtaposition of Vegas showgirl choreography with an exploding gas station in the Nevada desert and shots of bucolic mountain scenery in the Pacific Northwest. But it was the Elvis factor that fueled his appreciation for the film. "The ghost of Elvis Presley permeates the twisted mind of the Kevin Costner character, Murphy, who believes himself to be one of the illegitimate children of Elvis," he explains.

"One of the fun things for me to do was find that aspect of rockabilly music. I used a lot of harmonica in a very surreal, abstract way, as if the ghost of Elvis was haunting this score."

Drawing on *The King* for inspiration, Clinton imagined that Murphy had an Elvis cell in his brain whose DNA would scream out in pain. The harmonica, which he found symbolic of Murphy's pathology, "was sort of the manifestation of that aspect of his nature."

The score is bolstered by source material that includes Elvis' version of "My Way" by Paul Anka, who appears in the film as a mob boss lamenting the temporary transformation of the Vegas strip "from Rat Pack to Fat Pack" - compliments of the Elvis convention. The song, which captures The King at the nadir of his career, serves as an appropriate backdrop toward the end of a scene in which Murphy tries shooting his way out of a warehouse. Surrounded by law enforcement officers, "Murphy realizes there's no way out," Clinton observes, "then looks in the mirror and asks Elvis, 'Do you recognize me now because I recognize you?' At that point the song appears like a ghostly echo, but then it takes over and becomes much louder. We only do the first verse of the song before we get to the final shootout, but I think it's very effective."

Clinton tried to contain the score within a sparse musical expression rather than pursue an orchestral approach. His challenge was to infuse the score with the same dramatic moments that unfold within the context of the film. "I didn't want to use an orchestra because I didn't think it had anything to do with essential elements of the

film," he says. "So I basically used a rhythm section, harmonica and samples. When I first saw this film the orchestral music used as a temp dub seemed out of place to me."

Intense but Playful

Recalling the film's playfulness, Clinton thinks back to a scene where Murphy, preparing to launder money stolen from the casino, pretends to be the owner of an antique shop. "He takes a sex quiz in a magazine asking if he ever masturbates and has had rough sex with a man," Clinton says, "and at that point the harmonica simply plays three notes that are lighter-hearted than it has ever been in the score."

There also were instances when he tried to be subtle by complementing the love scenes between Kurt Russell and Courteney Cox in a way that wasn't syrupy. In addition, funky up-tempo music was used to underscore the presence of the boy who portrayed Cox's resourceful son.

Comparisons to his work on the Austin Powers franchise are inescapable. "My challenge with the Austin Powers movies was to be true to the genre but original at the same time, as well as not to send up Austin or Dr. Evil - to play it straight," Clinton explains. "With Graceland there was no genre that I was striving to be true to, although I was using elements of the sort of rockabilly ghost of Elvis and fit the score within a contained vernacular of the source music. I tried to make it hip, cool and fun - not just light and silly."

A Family Resemblance?

3000 Miles to Graceland is the kind of film whose source material very easily could have included the music of funk icon George Clinton, founder of Parliament-Funkadelic. Had that been the case, it would have been the first time the two Clintons crossed musical paths. "I've never met him or worked with him," says George S. Clinton, "although from time to time we have to make sure our royalty statements don't include each other's work." He looks forward to one day meeting him and even working with him. "I certainly respect how he took funk and R&B music to a whole new level."

He recalls how the occasional case of mistaken identity that has marked his entire career nearly cost him a future with the woman he ended up marrying. "On one of the first nights we spent together there was a knock at the door at 4 a.m. and it was a U.S. marshal serving me a summons for alimony payments," he chuckles. "It took a lot of explaining to my then not-yet-wife that I didn't have an ex-wife somewhere suing me for alimony."

Next up for Clinton is an anthology series for Fox television along the lines of The Twilight Zone that's called Night Vision. The show, which will air in the fall, features two half-hour stories per episode and is hosted by musician Henry Rollins. In addition, April marks the release of a feature film Clinton completed called Speaking of Sex - a comedy starring Bill Murray, Katherine O'Hara, James Spader and Lara Flynn Boyle.

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