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Ben Mink is movie music king

Vancouver's best kept musical secret knows the score better than just about anyone

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We're interrupting musician-composer Ben Mink in the middle of the busiest six weeks of his year, but he doesn't seem to mind as he comes to the door of a house tucked into a leafy corner of Vancouver.

"It's nice to talk to people," says Mink, perhaps best known as the longtime collaborator with

cowgirl-turned-torch-singer k.d. lang.

Mink has been working long hours of late in his home studio, composing and recording the musical score for the Irish-Canadian feature *Fifty Dead Men Walking*. It's mostly solitary work, with long-distance input from globe-trotting Canadian director Kari Skogland, who this day is somewhere overseas. Mink scans scenes on his computer, calculating where the music has to go, and picks up violin, acoustic or electric guitar as needed.

Skogland, who spent several days with Mink last month, provides her continuing input via e-mail and QuickTime files.

"They don't want the music to be too Irish, not too deedle-y-deedle-y, but there's definitely a subversive Irish theme to it," says Mink, who is essentially the soundtrack's one-man band. "There's a lot of sound collage and layering, there's certain militaristic themes. There's electric guitar that's kind of shredded."

Skogland's contribution included writing new lyrics for a traditional song to use in the film.

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"That really helped a lot," says Mink, who is on an amicable break from another partnership, his 20 years playing and writing with the now L.A.-based lang.

Married with two preteen children, and himself a youthful 57, Mink says he's enjoying not being a touring musician anymore.

"You don't really have to leave home — when you become a family guy, that's a big plus," he says. "You may be working 24/7 on a soundtrack but the kids can pop in and say 'Dad, look at my bunny.'"

His eclectic musical tastes make him an ideal fit for soundtrack work, with a past that includes playing blues as a Toronto teen (an early band opened for the newly formed Led Zeppelin at a small Toronto club), stints as session player and concert sideman to Anne Murray, Ian Tyson and Murray McLaughlin, and a few years in the early 1980s as part of the prog-rock trio FM.

Rush bassist-singer Geddy Lee is "Uncle Geddy" to Mink's kids. More recently, Mink helped a young musician friend when she was stuck on her playful little song. Feist joined Mink for a day of strumming at his place and "1234" became a global hit.

With lang, Mink scored the 1993 comedy *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* for director Gus Van Sant. Starring Keanu Reeves and Uma Thurman, the movie tanked and Mink has mixed feelings about that.

"You really begin to understand that film work is definitely art by committee," he says. "Many chefs in the kitchen. A lot of the chefs have nothing to do with making food, but they bought the food."

"In the end Gus had another vision. You put a lot of heart and soul into these things and it's kind of disrespectful."

A happier experience for Mink was working with fellow Vancouver composer Shaun Tozer on the 2005 Canadian cable TV series *Terminal City*. The feeling was mutual for that show's producer-writer Angus Fraser.

"Ben is one of Vancouver's best-kept secrets," says Fraser over the phone from Toronto, where he's pitching a CBC pilot that he hopes to get Mink to score as well. "He's far better known in Europe and L.A."

Fraser recalls an intense episode of the cancer-themed dark comedy, for which Mink recorded a loose "When the Saints Go Marching In."

"He had this old guitar which I think he got somewhere in Mississippi, a really unique sound. He brought a friend over, they drank copious amounts of scotch and they mumbled the song, it was incredible."

Much of the calculations that once went into the timing of soundtrack work is now done by computers, but Mink says there's definitely a left-brain, right-brain element to his work. The timing and mapping comes first, the movie's emotional peaks are tracked, but after that, sometimes it's a matter of looking at the screen and just playing.

"I can sit here at the computer and it drives me nuts sometimes, just

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looking for files, when really what you want to do is just pick up the instrument and play," he says. "Quite often the best results are nothing but that — you can sit there noodling around looking for the perfect sound when really it's in your hands. A lifetime of ingrained habits and responses are going to ring truer than a lot of the drum loops that come up."

Fifty Dead Men Walking stars Ben Kingsley and Jim Sturgess in the true story of a young Belfast man recruited by British authorities to spy on the IRA in the 1980s. The producer are aiming for the fall festival season, which gives Mink less than two weeks to finish his job.

"It's really fast — that's why I'm jamming now."

Which means that talking is over for now, and he's heading back to his studio.

Vancouver Province

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anonymous

7:14 PM on October 24, 2010

Ben's work throught his career is simply amazing. He is very underrated.

Score: 0






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anonymous

8:50 PM on September 19, 2010

Ben Mink is one of the most underrated musicians and producers in Canada. He's definately a diamond in the rough.

Score: 0






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anonymous

2:26 PM on June 16, 2010

I think that Ben Mink is one of the most inovative and inspiring artist that I have heard in many years. I watchd 50 dead men walking and really enjoyed the ending track of the movie. I would like to buy the cd with all the tunes that are on 50 dead men walking espially the song that ends the movie. If you can help me with the title of the cd, I would really appreciate it. I looked for it at HMV and Sunrise and no one at these places have ever heard of Ben Mink. What a tradgety. A musician of his calibre should be recognized any where in Canada. Keep up the good work Ben, you have another fan. Tank you. Joseph. abster@cogeco.ca.

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