

“Marvelous Marvin”
Interview with Marvin Hamlisch
by Tim Greiving

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Marvelous Marvin

Legendary music man Marvin Hamlisch returns to the movies with *The Informant!*

By Tim Greiving



With an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, Tony, Golden Globe and Pulitzer Prize on his mantel, Marvin Hamlisch has nothing to prove to anyone. No one can fault the 65-year-old composer of *The Sting* and *The Way We Were* for stepping away from the scoring stage in 1996 to a “quieter” life of conducting pops concerts for symphony orchestras across the country.

But when Stephen Soderbergh called Hamlisch recently to request an original score for the quirky Matt Damon caper *The Informant!*, Hamlisch dusted off his film score pencils and wrote an infectious, instantly classic symphonic score.

Tim Greiving: I love your new score. I’ve been playing it nonstop. And I’m not exaggerating; I laughed out loud listening to it without seeing the film, and I don’t think I’ve ever done that before. Welcome back to the movies!

Marvin Hamlisch: Yeah! It’s been a while.

TG: Why don’t you catch me up on what you’ve been doing the past, oh, 20 years or so.

MH: Well, I haven’t done a score for 10 years—so it’s not that bad. I’ve been doing a lot of conducting and concerts with different symphony orchestras. And I still continue to try to write a Broadway show. That’s what I’ve been doing in my life. And out of the blue I get this phone call from Stephen Soderbergh, and he sits me down and tells me about this film. He also tells me that when they were doing the film, he used as the temporary music the music from [Woody Allen’s] *Bananas* that I had done years and years and years ago. So that’s why my name came up to him. He just said to me that he wanted me to try and do a score in which I had the same kind of energy that I had with *Bananas*. And so it is a fun score; it’s a funny film.

What’s interesting about it, I think, is that it was not the easiest thing to get the key into it. It’s about a guy who, first of all, is a bipolar person. What finally happened was, after about two weeks it dawned on me that if I was going to do this film correctly I would have to do the music from the point of view of the guy. Now if you’re bipolar and you think everything is okay one day, that makes you the good guy and it makes the FBI the bad guy—and everything gets topsy turvy. That’s one of the reasons it’s funny. Because as [much] as you might enjoy it outside of the film, it’s really funny when you see it with the film.

TG: I have no doubt. So have you purposefully withheld from scoring over the last 10 years?

MH: Well, put it this way. I live on the East coast. I don't know if it's been deliberate. But there is a thing where what you're trying to do, if you do a film score, is you hopefully get a good film to begin with. And it's been a while since I've been offered a really good film. And this time around I really got the one that I thought, "Wow, this is great."

TG: It seems like a perfect match for you, and also a really quality assignment.

MH: Exactly. That's true.

TG: It's interesting because the way that this all came about was them using an older score of yours as a temp track, and then realizing that they could just use you for an original score. This happened recently with David Shire, where on *Zodiac* they had thought, "A '70s David Shire score would be perfect for this.' And they realized, 'Well, why don't we just ask David Shire to write a '70s David Shire score?'" That's what this reminded me of.

MH: Right, right. Exactly. Same thing.

TG: It's wonderful that people who have been around for a while are providing such fresh music to kind of break the staleness of what's happening right now. It's sort of ironic.

MH: What's interesting also is that in this film, doing a kind of funny score for me was a lot of fun. It just took a while to figure out what we were going to do. I said to someone the other day: If you see a film like *The Way We Were*, well you know, whether it's me or Michel Legrand or Henry Mancini or anybody, you know it's going to be a lot of strings, and there's going to be a lot of very schmaltzy stuff. And eventually what makes the deal—what separates the men from the boys—will be the actual song. Because to score it you kind of know where you're going. But in this film, in terms of music, it almost reminds me a little bit more of what I did with *The Sting*; which is, you're taking music and you're almost making it another character in the film. And it takes on its own life, you know?



On the Set: Steven Soderbergh and Matt Damon.

TG: Soderbergh specifically requested that you bring the same kind of energy you had in the *Bananas* score. Did he give you free rein outside of that to go any direction you chose?

MH: No, what happened was we had a wonderful meeting and we went through the film in a spotting session. And what I do is I try and take really good notes about what the director's talking about. I wrote everything down. Then he left me alone for quite a while, until I called him and said, "I want to show you some stuff." I didn't show him every cue, so to speak, but I showed him enough to know I was on the right track. And then when we recorded, I made sure that he was there for the whole recording—so that if there was anything he didn't like or whatever, we could change it on the spot.

TG: And I take it he was pleased.

MH: Very. We had a good time. He's a lovely man. And I must say that one of the joys of working on this film was meeting Matt Damon and his wife, who are two of the loveliest people around.

TG: Did you have to adapt your method of scoring for this film? I mean, has the industry changed significantly since you were on a main scoring assignment like this?

MH: I don't know. It may have; it may not have. I mean, there were no major electronics or anything like that; there's a couple of times where we used electronic instruments, but very little. This is intended to be a little on the old-fashioned side, so it wasn't where I had to do some outlandish, wild tricks or anything like that. The real thing about this film and the music is not so much the music itself but the choices—the choices of a kazoo or a harmonica—and looking for these interesting combinations of sound. It starts out with this film noir thing, that you think you're going to see a black-and-white film with James Mason. The next cue you're having this jaunty little melody with two flutes and a piccolo. And those were the things that I'm really most proud of, of these choices that we made. The orchestration is really part of the score.

TG: And these shifts in orchestration or genre—they reflect the bipolar nature of the character?

MH: Right, you got it. It's where I would say his head is at....That's what I was trying to do.

TG: I guess it's serendipitous, then, that it makes for such an enjoyable listening experience on its own. It doesn't feel disjointed or anything.

MH: No, I mean it is thematic. There is the happy theme and the FBI theme and the whatever theme. And one of the things that I had most fun on doing the CD, which is not in the movie—the CD we wanted to make sure was at least 37-38 minutes. And we didn't re-record the music, we had to take the music from the film and edit it to a CD. I really didn't have enough for a full CD, so I added the section where I'm playing the piano of the song "Trust Me." And I had a ball playing it. I love the song, by the way. I think the Bergmans came up with a great lyric for it. And Steve Tyrell did a great job.

TG: Oh that song was a throwback, and it's great!

MH: Yeah, yeah. It's, "Hello Sinatra, where are ya?"

TG: You've seen some different trends. What are your thoughts on the current state of film music?

MH: Well, I'll tell you the thing that I notice the most, that I think may be a good thing. I'm not sure. When I was growing up, and even when I was in it, there seemed to be five or six composers that basically, on a daily basis, you would read about doing a film. You know, you'd always see Henry Mancini, John Williams, [Hamlisch searches for Jerry Goldsmith's name]...Jerry Goldsmith. These guys were doing everything. Nowadays I open up the New York Times on a Sunday and read who did the music—there are 25 new people. Almost every other picture is done by somebody who is brand new. So in a way maybe that's good, because at least it's opening up the field to a lot of people. The only thing that's worrisome about that is that sometimes I find that in the desire to make sure that the CD is a hit, music is written in a way to try to put in as many rock tunes—or whatever you want to call them, hip hop, whatever things—and that's always, to me, a hard pill to swallow.

TG: Do you listen to much current film music at all?

MH: No, I don't.

TG: That's probably okay.

MH: No I haven't. But it's hard for me because I'm a person who grew up really in love with the idea of a good melody. I mean, I heard "Moon River" and I just thought, "Oh my God, this is unbelievable." And everything I write, even when I'm doing these ditties like in this film, they all basically have a melody. There is a melody you can hook onto. And sometimes I kind of miss that in movies. I miss the element of a real, honest-to-god melody. And to a degree sometimes some of the music these days is just more sound effects than it is melody. But I think truthfully—as you know, there have been some great scores over the years, come hell or high water. It almost doesn't matter what the trend is. Some scores just land above anything else. To me, Cinema Paradiso still stays one of those melodies that you can't get enough of. So it depends. But I was just happy to get the opportunity to do this, and I hope I get an opportunity to do another one. I enjoyed the process.



TG: In your incredibly varied life, wearing lots of different hats, what has been one of your favorite ventures or experiences?

MH: Well let me tell you, actually, there is something always wonderful about writing music. There's something great about doing something and then looking at it the next day and going, "Oh wow, this is really good," or whatever. But it's interesting; I was thinking about what you just asked me just the other day. Because when you're asked, "Which of these do you like more? Do you like writing for the movies, or the show, or the charts?" I think what I have to really say is that, while you're writing one thing—you know when you're writing a show—it feels great. Then at a certain point you go, "Gee, I wish I could do something else." And I guess what I like most is that I move around. If I were really a person that only did one type of music—or one type of milieu of music—I'm not sure I would enjoy that. Because there comes a boredom factor that enters all this. You can get into a rut by doing the same thing over and over. So to me there is something very joyous when I'm proud of my career—that I could go from A Chorus Line, to conducting for Barbra Streisand, to doing this Stephen Soderbergh film, to conducting the Seattle Symphony tonight. There's something about that that's very pleasurable, and you tend therefore not to get into a total rut. That moving around, or as I always say to people, "It's like having a four-lane highway which is all going into a tunnel of one lane. The lane you are always going into will be music—but you can come at it from four different ways." That's what gives me, I think, the most joy. 'Cause I can move around, but I don't have to be pigeonholed into just one thing.

TG: Yeah, well you certainly haven't been pigeonholed.

MH: No. I mean, I'm proud of the fact that music of *A Chorus Line* and the music of *They're Playing Our Song* are so totally different. I don't think most people would know that the same guy wrote those scores. They're just totally different. That's what I like about [The Informant!] too; it's a totally different approach of the normal way to score a film. Because normally you're very much in tune and on a similar wavelength as what's going on. In this you'll find that there's a lot of dichotomy going on. He's going one way; we're going another way [laughing]. That's what makes it delicious.

TG: Delicious. That's the word I used to describe your score to somebody else.

MH: Well thank you.

TG: I always describe music in food terms, though.

MH: Ah, well food is my favorite thing in life. Let's face it.

TG: I wanted to ask about your involvement with the symphony orchestras.

MH: I'm the pops conductor for six symphonies.

TG: You're presently the conductor for all six?

MH: Right.

TG: So their pops programs are spread out throughout the season, is that right?

MH: Correct. Most symphonies have six or seven pops programs per year. Of those seven I usually do three. So it means that in each of these cities, for three to four weeks I will appear and do a show for them. Now sometimes I can repeat the same show from one city to another. In some cities I can't repeat them, and I come up with something else. For instance, we are doing here, believe it or not, *Sha Na Na*, the group from the '50s. We're doing an entire evening of '50s, and the whole orchestra's dressed in '50s garb; I'm wearing a leather jacket. We're having a ball. Yesterday I was in auditions for a show that we're doing later on next year, which is *The Music Man*. But we're gonna actually recreate some of the dialogue and stuff, so we're auditioning people to act in it. We have a lot of shows all over the place, and you kind of go from one orchestra to another. It's just a question of being very systematic about what you're doing, so that you don't get crazed totally.

TG: You must travel a ton.

MH: As I said to someone, I have enough mileage to go back and forth to anywhere a million times. I could go to Pluto tomorrow.

TG: You should!

MH: Yeah, I know. It would be nice. I'd take economy—what the hell.

TG: In all your dealings with symphony orchestras, do you ever experience animosity toward film music or pops music from the "orchestrati"?

MH: I've been doing this long enough to understand the problem, and therefore it doesn't really happen with me—but I know what it is. You've got to understand that when an orchestra, a really good orchestra, plays music—the classical repertoire—basically they've played these pieces thousands of times. And the only thing that's different that night is who the conductor is, and what he might bring to it. But the notes are all perfect; the music is perfectly legible; everything's fine. So when I do shows, normally, I make sure the music is as clean as it can be; been thoroughly copied. Any wild, crazy notes on the side have been taken out. Because a lot of the people who come to symphony orchestras, who are guest artists, have just played Las Vegas, let's say. And now they come with the same music, and that music can look awful. That music to a symphony player can be craziness. The people who play in bands, they can deal with it. But symphony musicians—you have to show them that you care about them and that you have respect for them. One way you do that is to make sure that the music is pristine.

So a lot of times popular music has gotten a bad rap, like you say, by certain players who see that music and go, “Well I’m not touching this; I don’t need this.” And they’re right. I mean, they’re correct, they’re right; I agree with them. So what I make sure is that the music that we’re gonna play, at any concert that I do, will have gotten to me at least three to four weeks before so I can hand it to a copyist and make sure that it is really in great shape, that it has really been written out beautifully. Then you find that the orchestra has no problem—no problem being there; actually happy to play it. But you’ve got to show them the respect, because it’s not respectful to bring the music that has crazy stuff all around it.

TG: So you’re saying it’s not actually the quality of the music itself, but the way it’s presented that they look down on?

MH: Right. I don’t think it’s the quality of the music at all. I’ve never seen that.

TG: You haven’t encountered a general animosity or condescension from classical music professionals?

MH: No. Listen, I’ve done two concerts of pops music with the New York Philharmonic. And let me tell you why they’d be happy. One: They fill the hall, right? That helps. And two, when we’ve done two concerts for the New York Phil, all the money went to them—meaning that these were like pension concerts for them. So if they’re filling the hall and they’re doing well for it, why would they be upset? It doesn’t make sense. It’s not the music. It really isn’t. It’s just to make sure that the music is legible and musical.

TG: That’s encouraging.

MH: That is encouraging. What’s not encouraging is the fact that the arts these days are in financial ruin, practically. And I only worry about how many orchestras are going to be left standing after this year.

TG: I was going to ask you if orchestral concert music is dying. Is it the economy that’s hurting it, or is there a general move away from interest in it?

MH: I think, to a degree, part of it’s the economy; and part of it is you got to know what to program. I mean, I can only tell you I’ve been with the Pittsburgh Symphony for years, and our ticket sales have gone up every year. But you have to know what your audience wants, and you have to be able to give it to them. But you are right; there is a general problem, because a lot of young kids hardly ever have heard orchestral music. Where are they gonna hear it? Where are they supposed to hear this stuff? I worry that in 20 years you’re going to go into a school, you’re going to say “Gershwin,” and they’re gonna say, “What’s that?” That’s a scary thought.

So the only thing I can do is do what I do—which is, I usually am doing shows that feature the American songbook, and I always encourage people to come with their children. For instance, we have a sock hop going on after the show here tomorrow, and I’m asking people to dress up like the ’50s, and we’ve got a deejay and the whole thing. So there’s a lot of little gimmicks here and there to make it as fun as you can.

TG: Would you say that the solution is to keep up with the trends in what you play, or to expose people to older things so that they’ll know what’s out there?

MH: I think you have to expose them, I really do. Because this stuff is great—it’s not a question of whether it’s good or bad; we know it’s great. We just have to reignite the flame. That’s what really needs to be done.

—FSMO