

## Getting the Audience Musically Connected:

# ROGER BELLON

## Remembers Composing the *Falcon Crest* Score

### Interview by

**THOMAS J. PUCHER** (*German FALCON CREST Fan Club*)

Victoria LaFortune put me in contact with Roger Bellon, who composed and orchestrated the score for seven episodes of *Falcon Crest* between 1985 and 1987 (seasons 4 through 6).



Roger, who started to work on *Falcon Crest* in his early 30's, is probably best remembered for a few highly emotional cues in some very specific scenes of the series, such as his very intense score in the segment when Maggie (Susan Sullivan) slowly regains her memory after suffering from amnesia in *Sharps & Flats* (episode 104 <5.06>); the music contains some rather shrill elements, but at the same time has a very subliminal and almost scary quality.

Other examples for such emotionally driven cues are from *Captive Hearts* (episode 126 <5.28>): The flashback of Jordan's (Morgan Fairchild) memories of her childhood, holding a knife — a cue with an incredibly threatening undertone — and a few segments when Maggie is held captive at Jeff Wainwright's (Edward Albert) cabin, finally escapes and Chase (Robert Foxworth) is shot in the slow motion cliffhanger of



that episode.

After a few short messages, Roger and I scheduled a phone conversation for April 29, 2011.

A recent publicity photo of Roger.



### Getting to Work on *Falcon Crest*

Victoria had told me she hired Roger in 1985 to score an episode and that she was very impressed with his talent, which got him the assignment for the other episodes.

“How did you like working on the show?” I started.

“I liked it a lot. It was among the first things I did when I first moved to L.A. So it was sort of my beginning, and I thought it was a great experience and a great training ground. You know, I met a lot of good people. Victoria LaFortune was the associate producer back then and sort of responsible for hiring me,” Roger answered in impeccable American English without any French accent — something I would not have expected as he was born and raised in France.

“Have you known Victoria for a long time before you joined the show?”

“No, I didn’t. I had moved to L.A. from France and I just started hanging out at the studios. That’s where I met her, hanging out at the recording sessions of *Falcon Crest*. Eventually after a year or more, she gave me an opportunity so that’s sort of how I met her by just going to the studios where they were recording it. We became friends, and — you know — my career just kept on going from there, but she, in fact, did give me my first real break in television.”

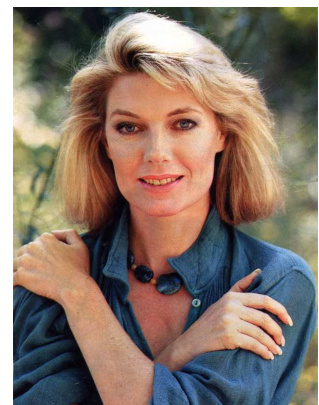
“Did you know the series before you joined it?”

“No, I didn’t. The only thing I knew was *Dallas*, which was part of the *Lorimar* shows — *Dallas*, *Knots Landing* and *Falcon Crest*. I had watched *Dallas* in France before moving here to L.A. and so I found out about the other two.” Roger explained that it was at one of *Lorimar’s* recording sessions where he actually heard the real *Dallas* theme for the first time as the dubbed French version of the show also changed the theme — it was replaced by a song. He went on: “At that time, as I remember, *Falcon Crest* and *Knots Landing* were not as popular throughout the world as *Dallas*. I discovered the shows here. And subsequently it is very interesting when I bought my first house... one of the stars of *Falcon Crest* lived next door to me.”

At first, he did not remember her name, but described her as “the blonde woman, who played the wife of the guy who owned the vineyard.”

When I realized that he was talking about Susan, he confirmed: “Yes! I lived next door to Susan Sullivan for about five years.”

We both thought that this was a very funny coincidence.



Roger Bellon used to be Susan Sullivan’s neighbor during their *Falcon Crest* time.



Now Roger came to speak about his first episode: "The first show I ever did starred the non-cast member Anne Archer," he referred to the special guest star. "I actually met Anne Archer for the first time about two months ago, and I told her that my first thing ever done... was her," he referred to the fact that she was in the first *Falcon Crest* scene he wrote music for.

Anne Archer (here with David Selby)  
played Cass Wilder in seasons 4 and 5.

"Was it difficult for you in a way to start composing for an established show?" I wanted to know.

"It wasn't really hard composing — it was just the system that they had. At that time in TV, it was much different than it is now. I mean it was like night and day. Most shows back then had multiple composers; shows today usually only have one. So you shared the load and you had time [back then]... With the shows a couple of weeks away, you could think about it, and we had a really good support team around, you know — from the production of the show to all the musicians and everything. So that's why it wasn't really hard. I guess it was just adapting to the style because they did demand a certain style. Writing for those shows, you had to stick to... you might call it a bible or sound established. You had to stay within that style of writing."

### The Stylistic Guide for *Falcon*

Roger's mentioning the particular music style was the key element for my next question:

"What were the characteristics of these guidelines the producers set?"

"It's hard to describe. First of all, you know, Bill Conti had established the theme and the orchestration." Roger pointed out that it is very difficult to find the right words to explain the particular style, but that, as a musician, you would hear the characteristics when you listened to the score of past episodes — as opposed to other productions, such as *Miami Vice*, for instance.

He thought about how to describe the guidelines for a moment. "I wouldn't say it was a formula," he began, "but you were kind of in a formula. Within that formula, you had complete leeway so you could do whatever you want, but you had to be within this sort of traditional way of approaching this stuff. For example, when you went to commercials, you had what was called an 'act-out'. It had a certain sound, and you had to always do that sound so it had to be this big buildup to the act-out. There was rarely anything else. The same back in from the commercial... it was a certain sound. And when you cut to — you know... I don't know — the winery as a wide shot, it was a certain sound." The composer said it was not written on a piece of paper what to do exactly, but that it was expected from him he would study previous episodes so he would get an impression of the stylistic elements frequently used for identification purposes.

Another part of the process to work with familiar sounds was the use of established character themes: "You weren't obliged, but if you could work a theme in here and there... If the other composers had composed a theme for a character that they [the producers] liked, then you would be given the theme, and if you could work it in — fine! Nobody pressured you to do anything, but if you go scoring and one of the characters had their theme, then you would try and use it."

I mentioned that I had realized that this was the case with *Melissa & Cole*, the theme composed by Shirley Walker, which was also used by Roger and amalgamated into a longer cue in *Devil's Harvest* (episode 93 <4.25>). Another example was Mark Snow's *Maggie's Theme*, which Roger co-used in *Missed Connections* (episode 140 <6.13>) and which was also co-used by Jesse Frederick and Bennett Salvay, a team of composers.

"And the teasers all had to have a certain sound," Roger added and described that they had to be "some version of the theme in a way" or at least contain certain elements of the theme — "that rhythmical...", Roger began humming the very characteristic mid-portion of the main theme. Such elements for the recaps and sneak previews were definitely typical for the traditional years before synthesized music came along.

"That's very interesting," I commented, "and the producers obviously liked your first teaser for episode 93 very well as they used parts of that score for the sneak previews of all the episodes in the shortened, syndicated version of season 5."

Roger was surprised to hear that and thought it was funny that this particular piece was obviously so popular with *Lorimar*: "That's kind of interesting because I had just met my wife and I was writing it and was a bit nervous... and a couple of nights before I had to deliver it to the copyist, the power went out. I ended up sitting on the floor, surrounded by candles while scoring. She said: 'What are you doing?' I said: 'I'm writing the score.' She said: 'How do you know what it sounds like?' And I said: 'I can hear it in my head! That's what I do.' She was... like... flabbergasted to see somebody lying on the floor with a music paper and a pencil, writing the score," Roger burst out in laughter and pointed out that he was worried in the beginning whether it would really work that way without having listened to his cue before actually playing it. But everything turned out to be fine when he got to the scoring stage.

"It had a different sound than *Knots Landing* and a different sound than *Dallas*," Roger came back to the stylistic components of the music. "I think the *Falcon Crest* sound was a little more traditionally orchestral whereas *Knots Landing* had a couple of more saxophones, and *Dallas* was a little different than that. Even though they were all roughly similar, each one of them was slightly different. So that's kind of what it is... We had a limited orchestration, I think we had between 19 and 23 instruments only, which most of the shows did, but maybe *Dallas* had a little bit bigger sound, and maybe *Knots Landing* had a little bit smaller sound."

## Changes in the Score

From the different stylistic elements in the classic *Lorimar* prime time dramas, we now came to general changes in the music of all shows around the 1986-87 season.

"In my final year, they [*Lorimar*] kept me and hired a different composer," Roger referred to season 6 when Mark Snow was the main score composer. He continued: "And [they] got rid of the orchestra! That's when the whole electronic synthesizer thing started. To me, it was kind of odd because when they changed it, I actually thought they wanted electronic music score — that's what I did. But they didn't. They wanted the same old craft, they just wanted it on the synthesizer. That was kind of an interesting twist. And it was sort of the beginning of Hollywood going down because, at that point, they wouldn't hire musicians anymore. So all the shows that all had musicians... they all went out of work because of the electronic thing."

That brought us to the fact how the composer's working conditions were affected in general around that time.

"As a matter of fact, in my first show that I ever did, it was sort of the old way they [the studios] did it, meaning when I got to the scoring stage, they had a big screen and it was all done in sort of a big way. That was very much... sort of a traditional Hollywood way of scoring. Then in my second show, they got rid of the big screen, and I was looking at a tiny little video monitor," Roger laughed, underlining how much more difficult it was concentrating on the specific segment the composer was supposed to score. "The whole thing just started going downhill in the last two seasons [I was on]." He explained that he did not mean that it deteriorated in its storylines, "but downhill in terms of the way they approached the music."

From there, he came to speak about the changes in the musical approach on TV series in general.

"You can actually see the way Hollywood — in terms of the music — really started changing." The composer did not only refer to prime time dramas, but all shows. "It was kind of... like 1986-87 or '87-88... something like that... where Hollywood started to change because of the technology in editing, in film and music and all that. Also, if you look back at that time, all the networks were still broadcasting in mono until... I think... the 6<sup>th</sup> year of *Falcon Crest* or something. And then finally, the networks started broadcasting in stereo, but the music was recorded in mono still back then! So you really saw very clearly the change to what would become in those couple of years. But nobody knew it at that time," he alluded to the fact that nobody was aware of the future developments in the movie and TV industry.

Roger came back to *Falcon Crest*: "Looking back, it put a lot of people out of work," he commented about the change. "I don't know what reason — in the end — the producers had for changing from an orchestral sound to a synthesizer sound because they didn't really want a synthesizer sound. They just wanted the orchestral sound produced on the synthesizer... And it wasn't that the budget went down. It was the same amount of money."

We discussed the fact that the series went back to the orchestral music for season 8 when yet another producing staff took over, but that that kind of music was quite different from the earlier orchestral sound, and we realized that the different eras in the show's reign — Earl Hamner leaving at the end of season 6, then Jeff Freilich and Joanne Brough taking over for seasons 6 and 7, Michael Filerman being the head of the executive producers in season 8 and finally Jerry Thorpe overseeing season 9 — all resulted in different music styles. The different regimes kind of filtered down into various aspects of the show itself — not only the writing and the cinematography, but also the score.

"CBS, at that time, attracted sort of an older demographic," Roger began to explain that the people in charge probably started tinkering with stylistic elements of the show in order to attract a younger audience. "You know, that's how I took it. And I remember talking to the creator of *Falcon Crest*, [Earl Hamner]. I talked to him once somewhere at a party, and he didn't like sort of tinkering with it that way, but I don't know how much power he had."

Having discussed that issue with Earl many times, I have known for years that his influence diminished after he had left the producing staff in 1986. Earl's deal to stay on as a consultant during season 6 was more in name than in fact — much to his own dismay.

"You can never predict with certainty that something is good or bad. But on the creative side, if you look at it for a little while," Roger began to summarize, "if the people like to watch your show, they are used to a certain emotional connection with the show. Now when you start tinkering with the emotional connection, which is the music, it changes the dynamic of the show — and the people who watch that show either stay connected or disconnect." He explained that this is what happens on any popular show, even nowadays; when you start tinkering with it after a while, the base that you built in the beginning by using an emotional connection through the music will be lost. "Sometimes it works, but most of the times, it doesn't," he summed up his experiences with such an approach.

"You know, that show — to me," he came back to *Falcon Crest* again, "was that very rich traditional sound. I went on to do other things. I didn't really follow the show after that. But for me, it was crucial because... those type of shows really taught a lot of composers the craft of scoring. Composers nowadays don't have that because — except for a few shows — there are no live orchestras on TV anymore. So I would say 99 % of the composers coming into film and TV do not have that same amount of time to develop their craft from week to week. It is all now electronic, and the writing style is not as interesting as it was before because when we were doing those shows, there was no electronic really. It was a discovery so that is why the texture was so interesting. Today, there is no discovery," Roger pointed out that the music cues are usually played on a keyboard and the result is just exactly the same what you played during composing as there is no more live orchestra. "So personally, I think it's not a question of good or bad, I just don't think that it's quite as interesting today as a lot of the scores from that period, even in feature films. But it was good for me. It was a lot of fun and a real pleasure going every week to conduct the score and dealing with the infrastructure that *Lorimar* had at that time. They had a real music department, which you don't really have anymore [nowadays]. And the music supervisor they had — I mean I was under two of them — would actually come down to the stage and make sure that you're conducting it. You know what I tell younger composers: That I worked on those shows; that

you were fired unless you could actually compose, orchestrate and conduct — and they made sure by coming to the stage that you were actually conducting. People look at you like you are crazy, you know,” Roger pointed out that today’s generation has hardly any imagination of the artistic demands of that era. “But in fact, that was the norm back then. You know, all the composers who worked on all of those shows were, in fact, very talented real composers, who could compose, orchestrate, conduct... And today, you don’t know who does what, you have no idea because nobody does anything. You know it’s all essentially based in electronics. So that I find to be a very interesting side of it.”

He also explained that today’s music on TV shows sound so generic because it is not performed by a live orchestra anymore and “because of electronics, every single composer uses the same sound library. Every one of us uses the exact same nonsense. So I don’t hear what show it is... Everything sounds the same.”

### Working with the Producing Staff

“So as you mentioned, the music supervisors, who were the people you worked with the most? Was it Victoria, or were there many others?” I asked.

Roger did not remember working very much with music editor Joanie Diener Rowland. “I think she put the notes together, and I got the notes, and that was about it,” he said about Joanie. “How it went... it was you were called on a certain day to a spotting session, and you would go to the lot wherever they were doing it and sit and spot the show with Victoria and probably another producer,” he explained how they would view the current episode together and decide where to include background music. “It was generally sort of pre-decided by them,” Roger added about the usual segments where they wanted to add cues although he was free to make comments and suggestions. “And you went home and wrote your thing and you had a scoring day... Victoria was the one, who was really in charge of those things, and you had the music supervisor, who was either David Franco when I started — and then it changed to Dick Berres,” he referred to the new supervisor taking over in early 1986. “I know David would be at all the scoring sessions, and Dick wasn’t necessarily at all the scoring sessions.”

### The Scoring Sessions

We shortly discussed where Roger orchestrated and recorded his episodes.

He confirmed that the sessions for his early episodes were at *Evergreen Recording Studios* in Burbank. “When *Evergreen* was either closing or being sold, we switched to ‘CBS Radford’,” he referred to the scoring stage at what used to be *CBS - MTM Studios* on Radford Avenue in Studio City (nowadays *CBS Studio Center*), where the series was filmed between seasons 4 and 9. “Which was good, but it was almost — in my opinion — too large of a studio because it was a really big scoring stage, and they would stick you somewhere in the back and you felt you were almost lost in the world. But it was fine.” Roger explained that, with the music engineers and the contractors giving him the necessary players for the orchestra, it was a nice working atmosphere and led to a good



performance. "So that whole logistic support was very nicely done. You really didn't have to worry about anything."

A recent photo of Roger conducting the *London Symphony Orchestra* at the famous *Abbey Road Studios* in London.

### Specific Scores

"Is there a particular piece of music you have very specific memories of?" I wanted to know.

"The one that got me in trouble, which was the first electronic score!" Roger said about the music for *Missed Connections* (episode 140 <6.13>). "Again — because I thought when they said 'electronic', they actually meant electronic, and so what I did was this very strange sort of electronic score, which I thought was very well." He laughed because it was not really what the producers wanted. The composer explained that he realized only later that they did not really want an electronic sound. However, the interesting thing about it was that this kind of score helped Roger into other areas — other projects. "At that time, scoring something electronic was quite new in the field of television. Then you had *Miami Vice* and stuff like that, but most of all other television shows were very traditional sounding. So... that — to me — was the most interesting score," he summed up his experience with the electronic cues.

"Another episode that was rather untypical in terms of music was *Sharps & Flats* (episode 104 <5.06>)," I introduced my next question, "when Apollonia recorded *Red Light Romeo* and *Fire in My Eyes* at some San Francisco music recording studio — actually *Evergreen Studios* in Burbank, the facilities you used as the place to score and orchestrate your music cues at that time. Did you, as that episode's composer, have anything to do with the creation of these songs, which were never released on any of Apollonia's albums, but obviously specifically written for *Falcon Crest*?"

Roger said that he did not have anything to do with those songs: "They are probably her songs produced by Prince." The only score in context with Apollonia Roger recalled was a segment where he used an electronic drum machine, which worked well.



Another scene Roger underlined with very scary undertones: Jeff Wainwright's daydream about Maggie in *Hidden Meanings* (episode 120 <5.22>).



## Other Projects

"I did a show for six years, called *Highlander*. I was the only composer. I did 120 shows," Roger said about a production where he was in full control of the music. The soundtrack was released on CD.

The composer is pretty busy nowadays, too. One of the features he just finished is *The City of Gardens*. Another recent project is *Their Eyes Were Dry*. Roger also spoke about *Iron Cross*: "Roy Scheider's last movie before he died." So he is more into feature films at this time.

Before that, Roger did a lot of *Hallmark* television movies.

When we finished the interview, I thanked Roger for all the insight he gave me. He was very pleasant to talk to.

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