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## The fine lives of the Pink Panther

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Composer Henry Mancini.

Photo: AP

**Reviving *The Pink Panther* without Peter Sellers involves risk, but to do so without Oscar-winning songwriter Henry Mancini's tune would be unthinkable, writes Jon Burlingame.**

When Sony Pictures and MGM release their prequel to the Blake Edwards classic *The Pink Panther*, Steve Martin will stand in for Peter Sellers as the perennially bumbling French Inspector Clouseau. But Henry Mancini - who died in 1994, after scoring the original and six sequels - will still be very much present, thanks to a new composer's fresh take on the slinky theme that is all but inseparable from the title.

Mancini's *Pink Panther* tune won three Grammys, was a top-10 hit on Billboard's adult contemporary chart after the first film's release in 1964, and - together with *Peter Gunn* and *Moon River* - became one of his most popular melodies. For Christophe Beck, who is scoring the new film, the challenge has been how to honour Mancini's music while adapting it for audiences more accustomed to hip-hop grooves than to its jazzy lounge sound.

"We surprised ourselves with how we were able to present the theme in some really unexpected ways, both comedically and dramatically," says Beck, who worked with director Shawn Levy on the picture's musical concept. The Mancini theme, he says, is not only reprised in its original arrangement over the animated title sequence but also reappears in various guises, including techno form.

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Beck, 36, wrote the music for Levy's three previous films, including *Cheaper by the Dozen*, and won an Emmy for scoring the cult television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In tackling *The Pink Panther*, the pair had to find ways of preserving the past without being overwhelmed by it.

"Shawn always wanted people to feel nostalgia when the animated sequence started," says Beck. "He was so intent on recapturing the old magic that at first he wanted to use the original '60s recording."

The composer talked him out of that idea, suggesting instead a re-recording of Mancini's arrangement but using today's sound technology. He also hired Plas Johnson, the tenor saxophone player for whom Mancini wrote the critical solo part.

Of the original sessions, Johnson, now 73, says: "Hank had a talent for picking the right musicians for the mood he was trying to present. He wanted a blues player. He liked the way I played it. I don't think we did more than two takes."

Mancini was the first American film composer to become a household name. His music for *Peter Gunn* brought attention to TV scoring for the first time; Oscars for *Moon River* (pictured, left), the score for *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and the song *Days of Wine and Roses* made him the hottest movie songwriter of the early '60s.

Mancini had a special love for *The Pink Panther*, says his daughter, singer Monica Mancini. "I don't think he ever tired of it," she says. "He thought it one of the best demonstrations of the marriage of music and film. You cannot disassociate the cat from the music.

"That one song, in particular, expressed his personality more than anything else he ever wrote. He had this very odd sense of humour. He was really kind of goofy."

The composer did not actually write *The Pink Panther* theme for the impish feline depicted in the credit sequence. As he related in his 1989 memoir, *Did They Mention the Music?*, it was originally the stealthy motif for the jewel thief played by David Niven. Only after watching the title animation did he realise that his sneaking-around music was just right, and Niven's underscore also became that of the title character.

Helping to further popularise the tune was a series of seven-minute cartoons spun off from the original feature, which played in theatres and on TV, all sporting the Mancini theme. When Edwards resurrected the Panther with *The Return of the Pink Panther* in 1975 (*A Shot in the Dark* in 1964 featured Clouseau but not the cat or his theme), Mancini returned with a fresh take on his famous melody. He kept updating the music through the half-dozen sequels.

Artists from every genre have recorded *The Pink Panther* theme: jazz (Quincy Jones), symphonic (Erich Kunzel), rock (the Ventures), electronica (DJ Zinc), reggae (Bloodfire Posse), even rap (the Ying Yang Twins, on an album to be released soon).

"Dad would have loved the idea that young rappers have embraced his music," Mancini says.

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