

THE JEAN ROOK INTERVIEW



PICTURE BY MICHAEL McKEOWN

The Avengers' music man Laurie Johnson, in his wide, open garden

The maestro of music you can't remember

LAST NIGHT, bugles sang in my blood at the theme music from "The New Avengers."

That bit where Steed, Gambit and Purdey rear up and turn into glamorous lions.

So gripping is this un-whistle-able tune which you can't stop drumming in your ears, that I rang for an interview with the man who wrote it.

He's Laurie Johnson, and he's about as easy to find as the lost chord. Partly because he lets blue moons go by without speaking to newspapers, and partly because he's acutely claustrophobic.

His fear of being closed in is so great, that you feel if you stood too close to him in his 26-roomed open-plan mansion, you would drive him up his flocked velvet walls.

"It's a terrible nuisance, but you learn to live with it," he said. "The worst part is never being able to travel abroad, and not being able to go to a

theatre to hear your own music."

On Harry Secombe's opening night of "The Four Musketeers"—music by Laurie Johnson—Mr Johnson stood outside for three hours, waiting for the verdict of the audience he daren't join.

Claustrophobia apart, Mr Johnson's life is sweet music to anybody's ears. He

is very rich, married to a beautiful redhead, has a daughter, owns a fabled home in which Anne Boleyn slept, and, since his hair is as white as his moustache is black, is striking to look at. He reminds you of a piano.

Most musicians play their fingers to the bone to write some memorable, monumental song or symphony. Mr Johnson, who's written both—"though I'm no Beethoven or Beatie"—will be remembered for the music we forget. Or rather, don't really hear.

INVOLVED

He has written the scores for 40-odd movies and TV films—"The Avengers," "Dr Strangelove," "Tiger Bay," "It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet"—but doesn't get scratchy when you can't hum a line of his masterpieces.

"The best film music should never be noticed," he said. "It must be totally involved with the plot, and mustn't stand out from it

in that it establishes the mood of the series. "But even then there's not much of it, and what there is you can't whistle," said Mr Johnson, who wrote the Avengers theme, in his head, travelling back from Elstree.

He's been hearing "Funny noises in my head" since his cot. "When I was a kid, I used to sit still, listening to what was going on inside me. Later on, I started wondering if this disease I'd got could be a chance to earn me some money."

Just how much money, he established when he, Brian Clemens, and Albert Fennell formed "Avengers Enterprises Ltd" and hit exactly the right note, along with the jackpot and a world-selling series.

FREEWAY

But, if audiences don't consciously hear Johnson's music they'd be startled by the way he plucks and twangs their subconscious.

"Film music is a vital link between the audience and the celluloid," he said. "One of the best examples is the opening music from Hitchcock's 'Psycho'—I didn't write it—the bit where this blonde's driving through belting rain along a freeway.

If she drove in silence, it wouldn't mean a thing. She could be going shopping, or to meet her lover or visit her maiden aunt. Only the music tells you she's driving to her certain death.

"It doesn't have to be obvious—the old, scary, 'boom, boom, boom, boom BOOOOOOOOM' bit. It can be very subtle, so long as it manipulates the audience."

But you don't have them in the Albert Hall, strung up to concert pitch, with their eyes and ears only for you, the conductor



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"The best film music should never be noticed," he said. "It must be totally involved with the plot, and mustn't stand out from it or sidetrack you.

"If you're watching somebody being murdered, you don't want the man who wrote the music to make noises like 'Hey, listen to this bit—I wrote that.'

"It would be as annoying as the tailor who made the strangler's suit suddenly popping up, on screen, yelling, 'hey, look at the cut of that sleeve.' Film music's purely a cosmetic to the action. If you notice it for its own sake, it fails."

The snatchy, catchy, incomplete title music to "The New Avengers" goes one or two notes further,

in that it establishes the mood of the series. "But even then there's not much of it, and what there is you can't whistle," said Mr Johnson, who wrote the Avengers theme, in his head, travelling back from Elstree.

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But you don't have them in the Albert Hall, strung up to concert pitch, with their eyes and ears only for you, the conductor. Does this great backscreen boy ever get an urge to stand up front, and wave and thump around his talent?

"No," he said. "But I'm very excited if the audience comes out of one of my movies saying, 'wow—that was SOME film!' And if they've a vague idea that the music had a lot to do with it. But they shouldn't be quite sure what."

And as Mr Johnson, who could have retired a decade ago on his film royalties alone, points out, there are rich compensations.

Even for an unsung Mozart.