

7-4-2017

## Sounds of Fear and Wonder: Music in Cult TV

Paul Kauppila

San Jose State University, paul.kauppila@sjsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/lib\\_pub](https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/lib_pub)



Part of the [Music Commons](#), and the [Television Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Paul Kauppila. "Sounds of Fear and Wonder: Music in Cult TV" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (2017): 753-754. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2017.1345455>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Library at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).

## **Sounds of Fear and Wonder: Music in Cult TV**

Janet K. Halfyard, 2016

New York: I.B. Tauris

pp. xi + 215, illus., figures and tables, acknowledgements, notes, works cited, TV and filmography, index (no price given)

Janet K. Halfyard's *Sounds of Fear and Wonder* examines the way music is used in what the author refers to as "cult TV." The term is used to describe television shows that share certain characteristics, particularly a dedicated fan base that invests considerable time in analysis and discussion of the show, whether online or in person. Cult TV shows can sometimes inspire re-imaginings such as fan fiction. The author sees cult TV not as a description of a certain type of program but rather a certain type of audience. Cult TV shows generally aim to reshape television conventions through the use of innovative visual and, the author argues, musical techniques.

Halfyard compares the way music was used in early cult TV with its use in more current programs. Some of the shows she analyzes include *Star Trek*, *Twin Peaks*, *Northern Exposure*, and the *X-Files*. She devotes an entire chapter to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which the author argues "marks the beginning of a flourishing of composed television music in 1997 [8]." In other chapters, she looks at music in vampire-themed and supernatural television programming. Finally, she brings her topic into the current decade by examining the use of music and sound in *Hannibal*.

The author chooses to exclude most science-fiction cult TV, such as *Babylon 5*, *Firefly*, *Doctor Who*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Lost*, since a substantial amount of literature already exists concerning the use of music in those programs. She notes that just three shows - *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* - constitute a major portion of the existing literature on the use of music in television programming.

The author discusses not just the use of music in cult TV but also sound design generally and uses her chosen programs to demonstrate how much more complex and sophisticated television sound design has become over the last twenty years, particularly when compared to prior decades.

Halfyard contrasts the use of music in television with the way it is used in film, highlighting crucial differences. She also notes the impact of technology, especially synthesizers and samplers. The use of synthesizers in particular seems to be less common today than it was in the 1980s. She hypothesizes that this could be related to vastly improved television sound quality compared to previous decades, and also to the "dated" quality of the sounds produced by synthesizers manufactured in that era.

In a later chapter of the book, Halfyard makes a distinction between cult TV, which encompasses science fiction, fantasy, and horror, and “quality TV,” which aims to create a sense of realism. She notes that quality TV programs such as *The West Wing* tend to use much less music overall than cult TV.

The author is a musicologist and relates a classroom experience to demonstrate the power of music to evoke emotions. She showed her class the same film clip three times, using different background music each time. When she asked the students what they thought was happening in the scene, they tended to give radically different answers depending on what music was used. Even more interestingly, the different interpretations provided by her students tended to remain remarkably consistent across different class sections.

The book features a handful of black and white photographs and an extensive selection of figures and tables, many of which utilize musical notation. There are also several pages of notes, an extensive Works Cited list, a list of television programs and films discussed in the book, and an index. This work is part of the Investigating Cult TV series edited by Stacey Abbott and other titles in the series are listed just before the contents page.

Though the book is written in an approachable style, some of the musicological information is highly technical. Students and faculty at colleges and universities with well-developed film, television, animation, or musicology programs will find this book of great interest, as will independent scholars of television.

PAUL KAUPPILA  
*San Jose State University*  
2017, Paul Kauppila  
Paul.kauppila@sjsu.edu