

# CULTURED

## Contributors



Penny Slinger

### Artist

Penny Slinger has been exploring the connection between eroticism, mysticism, feminism and art for over 50 years. Here, she offered an exclusive collage to accompany our piece on music in pornography. "As a young artist I incorporated provocative images in my work, and deliberately placed myself in magazines of this genre to show that there was a consciousness at work behind the body being exhibited. Coming back to look at films that were seminal in my experience was inspiring, especially revisiting the women who helped to shift our perception of pornography."

THE ANONYMOUS  
MYSTERIOUS UNIVERSE OF  
**LEIKELI47**





# Soundtracks

The sonics of today's porn tend to be an afterthought, if they are considered at all.

This wasn't always the case, with scores to some of the 20th century's most popular erotic films finding mainstream success and pioneering new genres of electronic music. Esra Soraya Padgett traces the history of porn soundtracks from the birth of cinema through the Pornhub present.

# to ecstasy

ORIGINAL ARTWORK BY PENNY SLINGER EXCLUSIVELY FOR CULTURED



The idea of a soundtrack to pornography seems woefully out of place in the Pornhub era. This is because, as consumers, our relation to pornography is shaped by today's marketplace of porn, a "free market" if ever there was one, where the influx of pornographic images is so rapid, and the access so unlimited, that the notion of settling on a single film long enough to absorb its musicality is practically irrelevant. We are not strolling through a department store with the aim of finding the perfect commodity. Instead, the object of pornographic consumption is the very action of perusal. We are window shoppers in perpetuum. It's true, this perusal is not without its sonics: a car alarm ringing faintly behind the moans of two unknown performers; a dog barking from the apartment complex courtyard; a football game muffled in the background, outside the camera's angle, but not out of earshot. These sounds tell us the sex is real: they bring authenticity to the genre of "amateur" pornography. But what were the sounds of pornography before amateur won the day? When porn was "adult cinema" and the product was one most consumers spent more than 30 seconds viewing, how was ecstasy imagined in and through its musical accompaniment?

Though erotic films have been part and parcel of the cinematic industry from its inception (even Eadweard Muybridge's 1880s test footage featured men and women in the nude), the sounds of erotic films were stifled by the totalizing Hays Code—the set of industry guidelines that censored motion pictures from 1930–68. As mainstream movies developed from the silent era into the early days of Hollywood film, pornographic works were so heavily censored that they remained silent throughout this period. In the 1960s, however, the Hays Code fell out of use, and with the emergence of the sexual revolution, pornography crept into wider public view. Adult movie houses opened, and the experience of the cinema required sound: a group of men silently watching intercourse couldn't sell—films needed dialogue, and most importantly a score.

In 1968, the year the Hays Code was officially rescinded, a few films aroused particular attention in the way of musicality. *Sweden: Heaven and Hell*, with music by Piero Umiliani, and the *Inga* series, scored by Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson of ABBA, are both striking examples of mainstream musical success. Before founding ABBA, Andersson and Ulvaeus released two of the songs they had written for the *Inga* films: "Inga Theme" and "She's My Kind of Girl." But despite the lascivious imagery with which these songs were paired, the lyrics are more reminiscent of what ABBA would become. Ulvaeus and Andersson sing: "And when we go for a walk in the park/ Then she holds me and squeezes my hand/ We'll go on walking for hours and talking/ About all the things that we plan." What emerged from *Sweden: Heaven and Hell* was an even more striking cultural juxtaposition: from a Scandinavian fantasy of a lesbian nightclub, Umiliani composed the kitschy and kid-friendly, "Mah Nà Mah Nà," later made famous by *The Muppet Show*. As pornography entered into the mainstream, these soundtracks demonstrated the possibilities of cross-over success for the composers of adult film. The films presaged what was to follow, as the 1970s ushered in the Golden Age of Porn.

As the adult industry found new commercial success, increases in production value meant a new attention to musical scores. The most famous films of this era all have notable soundtracks. The crew for *Behind the Green Door* (1972) included a full music and sound department, with a soundtrack composed by Daniel Le Blanc. The film contains almost no dialogue—Marilyn Chambers, the star, has zero lines—and the directors, strip club financiers the Mitchell Brothers, are said to have intentionally put the soundtrack high in the mix. This was a commercial tactic: rather than stir up the crowds with the sounds of sex, the Mitchells thought the soft piano, acoustic guitar, and psychedelic electronics emanating from the theater would intrigue passers-by into seeing a film they might otherwise shy away from.

The soundtrack to *Deep Throat* (1972) also found mainstream appeal; inaugurating what would be called "porno funk"—where the sounds of lounge

met so perfectly with the sleaze of smut that it seemed that funk couldn't be heard any other way. But the artists behind *Deep Throat*'s tunes would remain unknown because the film and all its paraphernalia (including the original musical recordings) were seized by the FBI on claims of obscenity. Anonymous and yet infamous, the artists behind *Deep Throat* set the stage for years to come; porno funk—the genre invoked by the onomatopoeic "boom chicka vow wow"—would become a staple in porno films of the 1970s. A standout in this genre is the soundtrack to the 1974 film *Lialeh*—often cited as the first African-American porn film—about an aspirational soul singer moonlighting as a stripper to support herself. The soundtrack is composed by funk legend Bernard "Pretty" Purdie (a session drummer for The Beatles), who is featured singing the title track in the opening scene, leading the band in *Lialeh*'s club.

But the creative innovations of Golden Age era soundtracks did not end with "porno funk." The endless demand for pornography created an increasing site for musical experimentation, ranging from the avant-garde to early disco and synthpop. Electronic music pioneers of this era often composed porno scores to support themselves. Most notably, Klaus Schulze composed the soundtrack to Lasse Braun's *Body Love* as his seventh full-length album in 1977; and Patrick Cowley, a lesser-known composer, wrote the scores to several early gay porn films including *School Daze* (1980), *Muscle Up* (1980) and *Afternooners* (1982). Cowley constructed the scores with a mix of analog synthesizers and his own self-made instruments, and though he is credited as a major influence for bands like New Order and the Pet Shop Boys, his early death to AIDS in 1982 cut short his creative output, making the porn soundtracks a significant portion of his oeuvre. Pornography's entanglement in musical development was not exclusive to the Euro-American context either. In Japan, "pink" film starlets, including Reiko, Tani Naomi, Kuwabara Yukiko and Taguchi Kumi created their own musical genre, "Iroke Kayōkyoku" (often called "pink blues") mixing the styles of Enka, the songstress-led sentimental ballads that became popular in post-war Japan, with uncensored erotics: lusty breaths, shrieks of pleasure, and sensual whispered lyrics.

Not all soundtracks of this era were original, however: many porn soundtracks simply stole music from elsewhere, knowing that the piracy would likely go unrecognized. *Her Name was Lisa* (1979), features a note-for-note reproduction of Kraftwerk's "The Robots." The scores of Ennio Morricone were ample and borrowed from again and again. Sometimes the borrowing would inspire new music of merit: Nico Fidenco's score to *Black Emanuelle* (1975), an Italian sexploitation film shot in Kenya, is as much derivative of Morricone as it is worthy of contemporary listeners. In lieu of sonic paraphrasing, many films simply used music without a copyright—including classical music often humorously juxtaposed with the film's sordid content. *The Opening of Misty Eethoven* (1976), an X-rated retelling of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* deemed the "crown jewel" of the Golden Age of porn, includes just such a musical borrowing: the William Tell Overture plays over an opening shot of misty attending the ballet. But the idea that porn of this time could "steal" from another industry is in stark contrast to what would become porn's future; these were the days when pornography did the pirating, perhaps karmically portending both the era of VHS bootlegs as well as the age of internet piracy in which the big-budget productions of the 1970s would eventually surrender.

It's difficult to imagine musical scores to pornography ever returning to what they were at this time. Yet the conversation between sonics and porn did not end with the Golden Age, nor is it entirely quieted now. Perhaps music is what we need to release us from the acts of pornographic perusal we are locked in today. If so, it would be worth asking: to what sounds of ecstasy might we hover over longer? How could pleasure be composed to reverberate in us today?



