



Amaia Ibarra-Bigalondo¹

MUSIC, SAMPLING AND MUSICAL INTERTEXTUALITY IN QUENTIN TARANTINO'S *DJANGO UNCHAINED**

Quentin Tarantino: widely awarded, internationally acclaimed director, actor, producer and creator of some of the most influential popular movies of the Hollywood scene. Undoubtedly, Tarantino has become one of the most respected, applauded-and despised-directors in the last decades, both by critics and the general public, and some of his movies will forever be regarded as breakthroughs in the history of cinema. According to critics, the Tarantino style consists of the blending of different genres, the representation of violence in an aestheticized way, non-chronological storylines, and the centrality of music in his films (Barnes & Hearn 6; Rennet 391; Ramírez Berg 6). Most of the movies he has directed, beginning with *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and continuing through *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Jackie Brown* (1997), *Kill Bill 1 and 2* (2003/2004), *Death Proof* (2007), and *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) to his latest, *Django Unchained* (2012), feature these characteristics and have helped develop and shape the influence of Tarantino in the worldwide cinematographic scene. This blending of styles, genres, violence, witty dialogues and music has also shaped the impression of Tarantino as a “director as DJ, [...] because this cut-and-paste, mix-and-match directorial style is similar to that of a music DJ, who borrows sounds from older songs and combines them to create a new song through a process called ‘sampling’” (Rennet 391). This reference to “sampling,” or mixing different elements to create a pastiche, is, in my view, an excellent and extremely useful avenue to approach Tarantino’s way of mixing and using his wide autodidactic knowledge of cinema. We can here recall his famous statement, “People ask me if I went to film school and I tell them: ‘No, I went to films’” (Wild 127). In this article I use the concept of “sampling” or, blending of different sources, to focus on Tarantino’s use of music in his movies, specifically in *Django Unchained*, and on the notion of the director as DJ. Just as DJs bring their music cases to the stage, Tarantino opens his aural and visual case and shares his personal musical and cinematic history with the audience, as well as his interpretation of it as an introduction to his cinematic world. For this purpose, I will group the musical pieces of the movie into those he borrows from other Spaghetti Westerns, “new” songs created for the movie and finally, a piece which is a clear example of “sampling” and intertextuality, or, of the Tarantino style.

Since the emergence of cinema, films and music and/or musical accompaniment have marched together. The first silent movies were almost always backed up with the sound of a piano or an orchestra that helped reinforce the nature of the scenes, the personalities of the characters, or the transitions between narrative parts. Moreover, music had a more practical function, which was to minimize the sound of the projector on the one hand, and, on the other, to help overcome the inherent human fear for darkness and silence (Reay 6). After several processes and moments of evolution in the relationship of cinema and music, we could well state that today, the relationship between these two arts is unbreakable, and the relevance of music (or of its absence) is intrinsic to the cinematic art. The function of music within a movie is manifold, but in many critics’ eyes, music enhances emotion. Michael Chion, for instance, talks of empathic music (1993, 19)² of music as a signifier of emotion and affirms that music in classic cinema may totally contribute to the signification of a scene or of a certain point of view/ gaze (Chion 1997, 125). In this same line, film critic Claudia Gorbman states that music in cinema should respect seven principles to be effective: invisibility, inaudibility, signifier of emotion, narrative cueing, continuity, unity, and the freedom of not using some of these for other purposes of effectiveness (Reay 33). This last principle of the violability of the previous ones is, in my view, the one Tarantino employs most effectively, as his usage of music does not respond to the principle of inaudibility, for

¹ Amaia Ibarra-Bigalondo (amaia.ibarraran@ehu.eus) is a lecturer at the University of the Basque Country where she teaches contemporary North-American ethnic literatures and cultures. Her research has always been focused on the study of Chicano Literature, art and culture, and she has published several articles and co-edited books in this field. Her current research deals with the study of other forms of popular artistic and cultural expression produced by the Chicano and other non-mainstream North-American communities.

² Spanish version of the original French text. Hereafter, the proposed English translations will be my own.



his main purpose when choosing a certain theme is for it to be perfectly heard, and most of the times, recognized, and most of all, to create a physical, emotional and even ideological reaction upon the audience. His utilization of music for emotional purposes is obvious, as he employs it as a code of recognition which not only creates a very particular effect upon the viewer at a very particular moment, but, while using pre-existing tunes, puts in motion a whole set of intertextual signifiers which more deeply affect the audience. In this sense, Tarantino follows the idea that “la música cinematográfica es una forma de mensaje emocional altamente codificado. Sus notas y cadencias parecen apelar a algo que tenemos 'cableado' en nuestro interior, desencadenando la respuesta emocional correcta en el momento apropiado” (Lack 225)³. This is opposed to some critics' notion that “la música no está concebida para que se oiga conscientemente (...) está pensada como un acompañamiento (de acciones, de diálogos) cuya presencia no se debe advertir” (Chion 1997, 125)⁴. On the contrary, Tarantino's applies the “What's wrong with this picture?” music effect (Ciment and Niogret 21).

His soundtracks become bestsellers, and are almost always constructed by a very conscious (or perhaps instinctive) choice of preexisting music (at least until the release of *Django Unchained*, for which he commissioned some new scores). In his movies, music has a “pivotal role in setting the mood of a scene, verbalizing the thoughts of the characters, and paying homage to specific genres of film, but also strongly influences the emotions and perceptions of the audience” (Romanov i). In his own words, this is the system he uses when thinking about and choosing the music of his movies:

A good majority of them I come up with beforehand. More or less the way my method works is you have got to find the opening credit sequence first. That starts it off from me. I find the personality of the piece through the music that is going to be in it. If there is going to be no modern music in the movie, then that becomes the personality of the piece, but if there is, it is the rhythm that I want the movie to play at; it is the rhythm of the film. Once I know I want to do something, then it is a simple matter of me diving into my record collection and finding the songs that give me the rhythm of my movie. "I find the personality of the piece through the music that is going to be in it. (*The Guardian Interviews*)

Among his most famous movie music moments, the often-discussed scene in *Reservoir Dogs* when Mr. Blonde chops off a cop's ear, (which introduced Tarantino and his style to the public) can give us a foray into his method. The utter frivolity of Mr. Blonde dancing and singing to “Stuck in the Middle with You” by Stealers Wheel, intercut with the cop's terrified stare as he observes his torturer enjoy the music and relish the situation, provides the scene with an emotional brutality that remains in the minds of the audience. In sum, the choice of a particular song or kind of music serves Tarantino to “flesh-out characters, and emphasize particular generic or narrative themes” (Reay 41). He says:

When you take the right songs and put them in a sequence in a movie right, it's about as cinematic a thing as you can do. (...) It really works in this visceral, emotional, cinematic way that's special. And when you do it right, the effect is you can never really hear that song again without thinking about that image from the movie (Barnes & Hearn 138)

The director's words prove the importance he gives to music in his movies, an importance that is easily observed in his most recent work, *Django Unchained* (2013). Tarantino's latest movie, which won an Oscar for best original screenplay and is widely considered Tarantino's best piece, is “a production that's wildly

³ Proposed translation into English (my own): Film music is a form of highly codified emotional message. Its notes and rhythms seem to appeal to something we possess, “wired” within ourselves, which triggers the correct emotional response at the appropriate time.

⁴ Proposed translation into English (my own): Music is not intended to be heard consciously (...) It is thought of as an accompaniment (of actions, dialogues) whose presence should not be noticed.



extravagant, ferociously violent, ludicrously lurid and outrageously entertaining, yet also, remarkably, very much about the pernicious lunacy of racism and, yes, slavery's singular horrors" (Morgenstern).

Set in the American Southwest in the year 1858, *Django Unchained* recounts the story of Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz), a bounty hunter of German origin, and Django (Jamie Foxx), a black slave who becomes his companion after being freed by the doctor. They start a physical and metaphorical journey together through the Southwest in search of Django's wife Broomhilda (Kerry Washington), enslaved in Candyland, Mississippi, by Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio), the personification of slavery and racism. For many, the movie is a strong denunciation of slavery and the mistreatment of blacks during the years of slavery, but for others, it is just one more example of Tarantino's excessive movies. This is the case for The Playlist critic Rodrigo Pérez, who affirms,

It's not particularly funny or moving and it's terribly self-indulgent. Flamboyance and cartoonishness rule, there's hardly a moment of genuine emotion, and most overtures in that direction are superficial. As a picture ostensibly about love, revenge and the ugliness of slavery, *Django Unchained* has almost zero subtext and is a largely soulless bloodbath, in which the history of pain and retribution is coupled carelessly with a cool soundtrack and some verbose dialogue.

Regardless of his negative criticism on the movie, the critic highlights its music, the focus of this paper. Most of the director's previous movies were set in contemporary urban settings, and the situations portrayed in them were fictional accounts of diverse and typically extreme characters who were, nonetheless, recognizable for a contemporary audience. Following the change in Tarantino's artistic direction set by *Inglorious Basterds*, in which he drastically altered the construction of his characters and spatial and time settings, *Django Unchained* is set in a fictionalized historical past and has strong political connotations. *Django Unchained* is set in the middle of the 19th century, right before the Civil War, and directly tackles issues that are often implicitly present in Tarantino's movies, such as racial and power relationships.

The sociopolitical and historical context of the movie is slavery. The main characters are slaves and slavers. The setting is the great American landscape: the Western desert first, followed by the mountain ranges and the plantations in the South. Interestingly, unlike in many other Western movies, the West is not the end of the route, but it becomes the starting point of a journey of literal and metaphorical discovery for both characters. Their physical movement has an eastbound direction. This reverse move coincides with the new understanding of "the movement West" proposed by contemporary revisionist Western historians such as James Clifford (1997) and Neil Campbell (2008): they depict it as a multidirectional, multiethnic, rhizomatic one, rather than a north-east-westward one only. Lastly, the genre of the movie, which stands out very clearly from other Tarantino works, is the Spaghetti Western (even though many critics have stated that *Inglorious Basterds* already included some characteristics of this genre). For critic Quim Casas, quoted by Parra and Oblitas,

No es de extrañar que un género tan ecléctico le interese a un autor cómo, Tarantino siempre interesado en la cinefilia más militante hacia todo aquello cercano a explotación y subproducto. Tarantino ama el cine, y conoce el cine clásico pero le interesa una reformulación postmoderna del mismo a través de unos subgéneros que lo distorsionan y lo transforman convirtiéndolo en un juguete de consumo, en una suerte de imaginería pop que en cierto modo lo "bastardiza" igualando el cine de John Ford con el Spaghetti Western, y citando en sus películas de igual forma a obras admitidas por la cinefilia más ortodoxa con subproductos de Black-explotation, artes marciales, pinku-eiga, explotations de coches, explotations de motos, sexplotations de vampiras, y todo lo que se le cruce por delante. (4)⁵

⁵ Proposed translation into English (my own): It is no wonder that such an eclectic genre is interesting for an author such as Tarantino, who is always attracted by the crazy-about-exploitation-and-subproduct kind of cinephilia. Tarantino loves cinema, and he knows classic cinema, but he is interested in its postmodern reformulation through certain subgenres that distort and transform it, turning it into a consumer toy in a sort



In order to achieve an emotional reaction from spectators towards the horrors of slavery, he employs music in a complex way. In what follows, I will select several moments that highlight the Tarantino style and go a long way towards explaining the impact of music in *Django*. For this purpose, I chose to organize them into two groups: on the one hand, the pieces of music he adopts and adapts from the Spaghetti Western genre, and, on the other, the ones he created or commissioned for this particular movie. This is a novelty in Tarantino's way of working, as the use of pre-existing music is one of the main features that characterizes this director. Finally, I chose a piece that is a mix of two pre-existing songs blended by Tarantino himself to create a new one, as a proof of the notion of "sampling" which describes the author's understanding of cinema in general, and film music in particular.

Django Unchained is Tarantino's tribute to the Spaghetti Western genre. The movie pays homage to Sergio Corbucci's *Django* (1966), whose trailer referred to as "a new, ruthless, violent film" starring Franco Nero (who also appears briefly in Tarantino's movie). The tone, characters, and underlying plot in both movies are, of course, different, but there are also many references in Tarantino's movie to the original *Django*. Both characters are seeking revenge for a lost love, and there are references to racial relationships (among Anglos and Mexicans in the original movie). However, one of the most obvious and direct references to the first *Django* is the choice of the same opening theme song that Corbucci used for his movie. According to Tarantino, catchy opening credit sequences are a must in Spaghetti Westerns, and so he chose to emulate Corbucci's (Lewis).

Django Unchained opens with a barren, Western landscape, upon which the credits are inscribed (in the same color and style as Corbucci's). A group of chained slaves enters the screen from below; we see their slashed backs. We can see they are being "transported." The camera frames Django's face, and we recognize Jamie Foxx as the protagonist, walking almost in time with the rhythm of the song. The focus of the camera then moves towards the landscape, which is also central in the scene, as it reinforces the harshness of the situation. The inferred extreme heat, the exhaustion of the slaves, their inhumane situation, and in sum, the brutality of slavery is all supported visually by the physical harshness of the terrain. Moreover, the seeming displacement of the slaves (traditionally connected to the Southern plantations) strengthens the feeling of suffering, uprootedness, and pain they are undergoing. This is all enveloped by the music's tone and rhythm, and Rocky Robert's voice: catchy, attractive, and suggestively Western. The lyrics of the song themselves foreshadow the idea that this will be a Western about slavery where freedom and love will be themes:

Django, have you always been alone?/ Django, have you never loved again?/Love will live on, oh oh oh.../Life must go on, oh oh oh.../For you cannot spend your life regretting./ Django, you must face another day./ Django, now your love has gone away./Once you loved her, whoa-oh.../Now you've lost her, whoa-oh-oh-oh.../But you've lost her for-ever, Django./When there are clouds in the skies, and they are grey./You may be sad but remember that love will pass away./After the showers is the sun./Will be shining.../ Once you loved her, whoa-oh.../Now you've lost her, whoa-oh-oh-oh.../But you've lost her for-ever, Django./When there are clouds in the skies, and they are grey./You may be sad but remember that love will pass away./Oh Django!/After the showers is the sun. Will be shining.../Django!/Oh oh oh Django!/You must go on./Oh oh oh Django...

The music, together with the images and the title of the movie presage what will happen later on. Regardless of the harshness of the situation that is presented, and the roughness of the landscape, the viewer automatically infers that the story of Django will be one of overcoming hardships and unchaining his body and soul. Moreover, the lyrics of the song give us hints of a love story that will develop through the storyline.

of pop imagery, which in a way it "bastardizes" it, equaling a John Ford movie with the Spaghetti Western, and quoting, in his movies, both, works supported by the more orthodox cinephilia and products of Black-exploitation, martial arts, pinku-eiga, car exploitations, motorbike exploitations, vampire sexploitations, or anything that comes to his mind.



The director's choice of the opening song has a twofold effect. First, as already stated, it mimics Corbucci's *Django*, thus, paying tribute to the director in particular and the Spaghetti Western genre in general. Moreover, it responds to Tarantino's system of choosing his music to create an emotional reaction in the audience. In this regard, Barry Nicholson of NME Blogs describes the song as "a song which nevertheless feels as though it was written with nothing but this moment in mind. It's an iconic meeting of music and moving image that only Quentin Tarantino could have engineered. You'll probably want to stand up and applaud; you'll certainly want to put the song on your iPod and walk the streets for a while afterwards, feeling like a total badass."

Other Spaghetti Western themes Tarantino uses are Luis Bacalov's "His Name is King," from *His Name was King* (1971), which he conceived as Dr. King's theme song, Ennio Morricone's "Sister Sara's Theme," from *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970), which becomes Broomhilda's theme song, "The Braying Mule," from the same movie, "Un Monumento," by Morricone, which was used in *The Hellbenders* (1967), and "Trinity," by Franco Micalizzi, which became an extremely famous tune after *They Call Me Trinity* (1970) with Bud Spencer, and which Tarantino uses almost at the end of the movie, in his words, "in a very iconic way to describe Django in his triumphant victory." In this same vein, I would like to highlight the moment that Tarantino describes as one of his "favorite movie music moments in the film (...) a slightly redone empowering symphony which becomes the first truly heroic moment" in the movie (Stephens). The song is called "La Corsa" and it is also by Luis Bacalov, from the original *Django* movie. In Tarantino's film, Django approaches John Brittle (M.C. Gainey) - once his and Broomhilda's owner - who is about to slash a slave girl for having broken some eggs, and the new, reborn Django makes his first kill, in a move that starts his personal revenge against all those who keep blacks enslaved and in particular, those who slashed and mistreated his beloved, Broomhilda (Hildi). The scene comes after another one where Django remembers Hildi being hit and marked and him begging for clemency, as the song "Freedom" plays, performed by Anthony Hamilton and Elyana Boynton.

Coming back to the scene where he kills the Brittle brothers, we could affirm that it not only becomes a heroic moment, but it turns into the first sign of Django's need of revenge and of his forthcoming use of violence, which will increase as the narrative develops. This use of violence reaches its climax in a classic Tarantino scene where he slaughters almost everyone in Candyland. The slaying of the brothers is violent and brutal, and very Spaghetti Western-like, which proves the total and natural merging of the way the director conceives his movies and the way Spaghetti Westerns were conceived themselves. For Parra and Oblitas,

Uno de los elementos más perturbadores del Spaghetti-western, en nítida contraposición al moralismo de los clásicos, es su ausencia de escrúpulos. La violencia en el Spaghetti-western es, pura y simplemente exhibida en todo su esplendor, porque la violencia es inherente al ser humano. El héroe es violento por necesidad en contraposición a la violencia caprichosa del villano (Navarro, 2009). Este uso de la violencia y la falta de escrúpulos está muy presente en la película de Tarantino. (3)⁶

The violence, the music, the contraposition between the two Brittles' faces, the amazement of the slaves, Django's expression of hatred, and the slow motion with which he approaches the slash, together with the clumsiness of Little Roger (Brittle) when he is facing his own inevitable death, give the scene and the character a sense of heroism. This pivotal scene alters the content and pace of the movie, as well as Django's identity and fate, drastically. The music, a classical orchestral piece, sounds heroic and triumphant from the beginning. Its first part accompanies the moment where Django kills the first of the Brittle brothers

⁶ One of the most disturbing elements of Spaghetti-western, in sharp contrast to the moralism of the classics, is its lack of scruples. Violence in the western Spaghetti- is, purely and simply displayed in all its glory, because violence is inherent to human beings. The hero is violent by necessity, as opposed to the capricious violence of the villain (Navarro, 2009), This use of violence and lack of scruples is very present in Tarantino's movie. (3)



and is as much a part of the scene as the visual moment itself. In a second beat in the scene, when Django turns to the other Brittle brother, the volume of the music is turned down slightly to allow the lashings he is giving the slaver to be heard, as well as the man's screams for help and mercy. Regardless of the violence and brutality of the scene, the nature of the music imbues it with a triumphant, celebratory, positive quality, with which the viewer soon identifies, creating an empathic relationship between him/herself and the protagonist. The music primes the audience to accept and justify the forthcoming violent acts.

In the next group of songs I propose for this commentary on the music of *Django Unchained*, which includes the music that Tarantino created for this particular movie, I would like to highlight "Ancora qui." It was written by famed Western movie music composer Ennio Morricone and sung by his (Morricone's) favorite contemporary Italian singer, Elisa Toffoli. The piece is a sweet, comforting and relaxing one, and stands out in my view as the only "feminine" moment in the movie, a relatively unusual proposition in Tarantino's *oeuvre* in general. The song accompanies the almost choreographed movements of Candie's household servants as they set the table for the welcome dinner Candie is preparing for his guests, as well as the welcome present he has prepared for Dr. Schultz (Hildi's sexual favors). The security of the domestic space and the apparent tranquility of the domestic slaves' lives are thus contrasted with the roughness of "life outside," or even "life inside" for other slaves: the previous scene was a brutal fight-to-the-death between two *mandingos* (black males "bred" to fight and kill each other) for their owners' enjoyment and profit in another room in the house. The extreme contrast highlights the relaxing and comforting tone of the domestic scene, which is reinforced by the sweetness of Elisa Toffoli's voice, the use of the Italian language, and Morricone's sweet melody.

Ancora qui/ancora tu/ ora però io so chi sei/ chi sempre sarai e quando mi vedrai/ ricorderai/ancora qui/ ancora tu/ e spero mi perdonerai/ tu con gli stessi occhi/ sembri ritornare/ a chiedermi di me/ di come si sta/ e qui dall'altra part come va/l'erba verde, l'aria calda/ sui miei piedi e sopra i fiori/ si alza un vento tra i colori /sembri quasi tu/ anche il cielo cambia nome/ così bianco quel cotone/ ch'è veloce, che si muove/ perso in mezzo al blu/ un qualcosa in te/ è quel che tornerà/ com'era già/ancora qui /ancora tu/ e quel che è stato è stato ormai/ e con gli stessi occhi/ sembri ritornare/ a chiedermi di me/ di come si sta/ e in questo strano mondo/ come va/ritornerai/e ritornerò/ricorderai/ ricorderò/ ritornerai/ ritornerai.

As we can see from the lyrics, the song seems to be an echo of the opening song, "Django," where the protagonist is encouraged to go on and believe the sun will always shine after the storm. "Still here, still you (...) You will come back." The references to the green grass, the cotton, and the open air directly relate to Django's visions of Hildi as he approaches Candyland and foresees what is going to occur next in the movie: the inevitable liberation of both Django and Broomhilda. The song's presentation of a cotton plantation as a pleasurable, natural place, full of breezes, colors, and flowers contrasts radically with the pain that slaves experience working on the plantation. The song stands out from the rest for its language, sweetness, relaxing tone, and femininity. It highlights the supposedly "comfortable, safe" existence within the walls of the plantation house, and contrasts in tone with the rest of the songs up to that scene. Once again, the conscious choice of this song, with its particular characteristics, creates an emotional effect on the viewers, who feel comforted after the cruel and ruthless moments they just witnessed, thus helping them forget about their uneasiness and discomfort at the preceding violence.

As another example of the "new music" in the movie, Tarantino chose to ask a friend, well-known rapper RZA, to write an "Ode to Django" using bits of dialogue, not only from the movie itself, but from other Spaghetti Westerns for the closing credits. The lyrics of the song, thus, represent a summary of the screenplay. Additionally, it is interesting to highlight the secondary title of the song ("the D is silent"), which becomes a motto throughout the movie. The scene where he spells his name to the character played by Franco Nero becomes a fun reference to his corresponding character in Corbucci's film. Nero responding "I know" (that the D is silent) is a humorous gag that pays homage to the genre and the actor himself, who seems to be acquainted with the existence of another Django. On the other hand, Django's vindication of his name when killing *mandingo* fight trainer Billy Crash (Walton Goggins) is also a proof of Tarantino's



denunciation of slavery and the dehumanization of blacks. The song that says “I have got a name” at the beginning of the movie, when Django becomes “someone” with the help of Schultz, corroborates this need to establish a free, self-chosen personal identity that slavers denied men like Django.

To close this overview of some of the key songs in *Django Unchained*, I would like to mention a theme, which I think, represents perfectly Tarantino’s conception of cinema, music and, in sum, any artistic production, and embodies fully the idea of “sampling.” This is the case of the song “Unchained,” which Tarantino created as a mash up between an old song by James Brown, “The Payback,” and a song by his dead friend and renowned rapper Tupac, “Untouchable.” The song merges voices, styles, and periods, and understandings of music, racial relationships, and blackness. This merging, together with the fact that he places it in a Western about slavery with white and black lead characters, and uses the song in one of the bloodiest, most quintessentially Tarantinian scenes, gives this song a unique quality that highlights Tarantino’s embrace of popular culture and popular language. Or as Erik Tóth says:

This is a particularly self-conscious form of intertextuality: it credits its audience with the necessary experience to make sense of the author’s allusions and offers them the pleasure of recognition. And this pleasure of recognition is what might make Tarantino’s movies so popular and allow them to become cult movies. (11-12)

This theme, thus, encompasses Tarantino’s style and system of remixing old material to produce something new. The movie itself is representative of this device, as it starts from an evocation of a 60’s Spaghetti Western and then moves on to a setting distinct from the traditional one in this genre: the US Antebellum South. Moreover, Tarantino places his work in the historical context of the era of slavery. To make things more complex, he presents a black man as the main character and a white European as a sidekick. This mélange, as Tóth explains, is full of allusions for the audience, reinforced by a very deliberate choice of both old and new music. The soundtrack often becomes almost a supporting character in each of the scenes for what it recalls and evokes through its tone, rhythm, sonority and/or lyrics. *Django Unchained* is a new Western made out of old and new texts, an example of stimulating intertextuality and the epitome of Tarantino’s cinematic and musical world.

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- La Corsa*. Luis Bacalov.
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- Sister Sarah's Theme*. Ennio Morricone.
- Stuck in the Middle With You*. Stealers Wheel.
- The Brying Mule*. Ennio Morricone.
- The Payback*. James Brown.
- The Untouchable*. 2PAC.
- Trinity*. Franco Micalizzi.
- Un Monumento*. Ennio Morricone.



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