

Filmmaking

# 5 Women Behind Your Favorite On-Screen Musical Moments

Jonathan Vilardi / 6 Min Read



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We often talk about how film composers and music supervisors are the unsung heroes in the world of movies and TV shows and, as such, try to shine a much-deserved spotlight on them whenever possible. While it's rare enough to find someone who can readily list people in these roles whose names don't rhyme with "Shmanz Simmer", it's rarer still to see some of the incredibly talented women fitting sound to picture getting the full recognition they deserve.

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The [composers and music](#) supervisors we're going to talk about today aren't just closing the gender gap in the entertainment industry; they're doing work that's elevating the craft of matching sound to picture and, quite frankly, they're kicking ass in the process. Without further ado, here are 5 of the women behind some of your favorite on-screen musical moments.

## Lesley Barber

Hailing from Toronto, Canada, Lesley Barber doesn't have any shortages in the talent department. A conductor, producer, multi-instrumentalist, and composer, Lesley first got her start by creating scores for the alternative theatre scene in her native Toronto. Since making her first foray into film composition with Patricia Rozema's 1995 drama *When Night is Falling*, Lesley has scored a slew of award-winning and nominated films such as *You Can Count on Me*, *Late Night* and, our personal favorite, *Manchester by the Sea*.

With a style that's somehow minimalistic and lush all at once, she does an incredible job of blending the seemingly disparate influences she's cited, which include both Haydn and Radiohead. Lesley was also the first female composer to be featured on The Hollywood Reporter's "Composer Round Table", appearing alongside Hans Zimmer (not to be confused with the aforementioned Shmanz Simmer) and Justin Hurwitz.

## Susan Jacobs

While composers are usually the first ones that come to mind when you think [about music and film/TV](#), music supervisors deserve much more love than they get. Originally a veterinary technician in Woodstock, New York, Susan Jacobs has served as music supervisor for such smash hit movies and TV shows as *Little Miss Sunshine*, *American Hustle*, and HBO's *Sharp Objects*. Billboard even dubbed her a "synch savant", which we certainly wish we thought of and perhaps even trademarked.

Susan's challenge as a music supervisor is twofold, tasked both with selecting the right music to fit a director's vision and securing the license for said music. A great example of her prowess both artistically and as a businesswoman is the five Led Zeppelin tracks she secured the rights to for *Sharp Objects* (the band is historically quite stingy with licensing their music). "Who else are you going to put on with that range of power and emotions?" Susan said in regard to the choice. "It's edgy, it's [rock](#). [The series' main character] has been through shit."

That kind of visceral, emotion-first thinking is an amazing lesson for anyone looking for the right music for their own work. And, if you can't afford Zeppelin, there's always Jambox!

## Morgan Kibby

A lot of our artist partners here at Jambox aren't purely film composers; they're producers, bands, and musicians who have branched out into the world of synch. Morgan Kibby's awesome story is similar, and you may have even heard of her band M83, or be familiar with the lyrics she wrote for a tune called "Midnight City". To step away from a full time gig as a member of one of the biggest electronic acts of the 21st century seems kind of unfathomable, but Morgan's shift to film composition hasn't just been incredibly successful, it's been more artistically fulfilling. In an interview, she said, "[Composing] is actually such a deeper experience for me personally, in my music making, because it's using my intellect in a way that it wasn't getting used as an artist and a songwriter."

In addition to scoring films and documentaries like *Bang Gang* and *A Touch of Sugar*, Morgan's work can be heard in a myriad of hit shows across Netflix, Hulu, and Prime Video. She was also selected as a Sundance Composer Lab fellow in 2016.

## Alexandra Patsavas

Truly a titan in the music supervision industry, Chicago-born Alexandra Patsavas hasn't just fostered some of TV's most iconic musical moments, she's blown up bands' careers with her perfectly-suited sonic selections. Today, it's hard to imagine songs like Snow Patrol's "Chasing Cars" and The Fray's "How to Save a Life" ever being under the radar but, before Alexandra used them to tear-jerkingly drive home some of *Grey's Anatomy*'s most impactful moments, that's exactly what they were.

As entrepreneurial as she is artistic, Alexandra founded her own music supervision company — Chop Shop Music Supervision — in 1998, and the rest is pretty much history. It feels like almost any major film or TV show you can name from the past 20 odd years have had their music supervision handled by Alexandra and her team: the *Twilight* series, *Mad Men*, *The Hunger Games*, *Riverdale*... the list goes on, and on, and on. In 2020, Netflix named [Alexandra their head of music](#) for all original series, where she joined director of music for film Amy Dunning.

## Tamar-Kali

Last but certainly not least on our list is a [woman with music](#) woven deep in her DNA. Growing up in Brooklyn, she was exposed to everything from [jazz](#), to funk, to [rock](#), thanks to her father's extensive LP collection; and, since he was a bandleader at the time, she gained some on-the-job experience sitting in as a singer. As both a singer-songwriter and an accomplished vocalist supporting the likes of *OutKast*, Tamar-Kali has a catalogue of awesomely gritty and impactful music.

Since expanding into film composition, she's worked closely with director Dee Rees, most notably on her 2017 feature *Mudbound*. The score sees a fairly big departure from Tamar-Kali's rock-heavy music as a solo artist, but shows an incredible range with its heavy use of soulful strings that combine her eclectic [musical background](#) with a grander orchestral feel. She's also composed the scores for such films as *Come Sunday*, *The Lie*, *Shirley*, and *The Assistant*, often choosing to work on projects that address important social themes. By shaking up what it can really mean to be a film composer with her unique approach and vibrant artistic background, Tamar-Kali is deftly carving a new path all her own within the worlds of music and film.

We hope this list helps you discover some great musical minds to check out and enjoy, or at least gives you a few "oh, wow" moments by putting a face to one of your favorite on-screen musical moments. There's still a lot of work to be done when it comes to facilitating more much-needed diversity within the entertainment industry, but it's women like these and many more who are paving the way toward a landscape where great talent is equally represented regardless of the gender, race, or sexuality of the person possessing it.



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