



STEPHEN ARNOLD

---

America's most heard,  
least known composer

Dallas Hotel Magazine  
Summer 2012

WRITTEN BY *dave muscari*



Nothing gets lodged in our minds quite like music. Catchy, snappy or quirky, memorable music can motivate behavior and change attitudes. Whether it is the famous NBC chimes, the idiosyncratic “talking bass” lines in the theme from the television show “Seinfeld,” or the dramatic 4-note progression signaling consumers that Intel software is inside their computer, musical signatures can speak volumes about a program or a product in an astonishingly short period of time. This inventive combination of music, sound effects and tones is known as “sonic branding.” It can instantly communicate a specific sensation or uniqueness, forming a special connection with the listener while triggering sophisticated emotional and even physical responses.

The idea may seem simple enough, however the process is incredibly complex. The man behind the concept is Dallas native Stephen Arnold. Ironically, he may be the most heard, least known composer in America these days. Arnold’s compositions are heard in over 100-plus million American homes each day. But don’t let the laid-back demeanor, blue jeans, long hair and Birkenstock sandals fool you. Arnold is a savvy student of the game, and a shrewd businessman. Since opening his doors in 1993, he has composed music for some of the world’s most-recognized media and consumer brands. In fact, he is widely regarded as the leading producer of original music for the broadcasting industry. As a pioneer and early evangelist on the importance of sonic branding, the 60-year old Arnold leads a creative team that has been honored with of a multitude of the industry’s top prizes including national, regional and local recognitions for their award-winning scores.

Working with broadcast networks, cable channels, local television stations, advertising agencies and motion picture studios, as well as with emerging broadband channels, mobile content providers and video game producers, Arnold boasts an impressive roster of clients. “Let me think about that...over the past few years we have worked on pieces for CNN, ABC News, CBS, The Weather Channel, The National Geographic Channel, FOX, HBO, Time-Warner, The Nashville Network, The Golf Channel and ESPN,” said Arnold, who produces most of his music in a sprawling studio located in a rustic area just north of Dallas in tiny Fairview. “In the past, we also work with a variety of commercial clients such as McDonald’s, Honda, Pizza

Hut, Hershey and Kodak,” said Arnold. “We have also worked with a number of international brands including Kuwait TV, India TV, TRK Ukraine, GSP Romania, Info TV (Slovenia), and Azteca TV in Mexico,” said Arnold. “It is always fascinating to learn about these cultures,” he added. “Ironically, many are intent of weaving Western elements into their musical scores” said Arnold, specifically referring to China Cable TV, Mexico’s Multimedios and National Broadcasting Services of Thailand.

Whitney Arnold has watched the business grow over the years, and flex its muscles internationally. Stephen Arnold’s oldest son recently returned to Texas after living in London for several years to join the family business. “Growing

up, music was always around me,” said the younger Arnold. “My first memory is of my father playing The Beatles’ ‘Nowhere Man’ and changing the lyrics to ‘Whitney Man.’ I remember it was a shock to find out that everyone didn’t had a recording studio.” He has seen the changes first hand, and knows how forward thinking technology has impacted the music and the way in which customers receive it. “The way we deliver our products to our clients and communicate with our writers nowadays is incredible when you think about,” said Arnold. “A writer in Los Angeles can send tracks to a vocal session in Nashville via cloud technology, we can mix and master it here in Texas and have it up for delivery to a client in China, all in the same day. It really is amazing.”



(Left)  
Gentleman  
rancher:  
clowning  
around for a  
promotional  
shot outside  
his McKinney,  
Texas recording  
studio located  
just north of  
Dallas.  
**CREDIT:**  
Nancy Koop



A vintage acoustic guitar  
from Arnold’s collection  
photographed with a  
policeman and firefighter  
standing near Ground  
Zero in New York City..  
**CREDIT:** Chris Pirenia

**NAME THAT TUNE:** Stephen Arnold’s compositions populate the television landscape. They are featured on some of the most-watched programming on everything from local newscasts and cable channels to network prime time shows.





Much of Arnold’s success stems from his core belief that an unmistakably clear, concise, and memorable sonic brand is key in making a product, television network or brand break through the clutter. “If you think about it, in 1980 there were maybe a handful of viewing options available serving 80 million American television households,” said Arnold. In those years most major metropolitan areas boasted an ABC, NBC, CBS and a PBS affiliate, or possibly an independent television station. “Today, we’ve ballooned to 116 million television U.S. households with the average of over 180 viewing options per family,” said Arnold. “So while the number of homes using television had grown by a comparatively modest 30%, viewing options exploded by something like 3000%.” Add to that the never-ending number of choices via the Internet, the onslaught of mobile television headed our way and the extreme amount of other communication, information and entertainment options pouring in daily, it is pretty easy to understand his point.

Arnold believes an aural signature elicits deep psychological responses from listeners because music and sound effects make

up the one component that can consistently communicate brand in seconds across all media platforms. “Sonic branding is to television theme music, what Pavlov’s dog was to modern psychology,” said Arnold. “Brands delivered sonically can reach a place in the human mind that visual elements simply cannot. Think about it this way: no ones ever sings title graphics, or whistles the animation,” he laughed. “And I have yet to hear anyone hum the words the announcer reads. A quality sonic brand is worth its weight in gold, maybe more,” said Arnold.

Born in Indiana, Arnold moved to the Dallas area with his family in the sixties. He grew up in the Park Cities area of town, playing in garage bands with the ultimate dream of becoming a successful rock musician and songwriter. Dallas was a hot bed of up and coming guitarists, singers and songwriters. Players such as future rock icon Steve Miller and blue-eyed soul legend Boz Scaggs had already blazed profound music trails at the St. Mark’s School by the time Arnold was enrolled. He chased a similar dream to Los Angeles in the late 1970 playing in a variety of bands, struggling to make a living on the circuit. “The

mid seventies was a good time for a lot of struggling, up and coming musicians like me,” said Arnold. “Record labels were always looking for new talent and willing to take risks.” The music that Arnold heard while in Los Angeles inspired him to write songs. “Those gigs were crucial because everyone wanted to hear original music, and you never knew who would walk in and listen,” he said. “Lots of the open mic nights I played were on the same stages that the singer-songwriters that inspired me also played on. To be a part of that scene was like a transcendent state of consciousness.”

Weary of the road and one-off gigs, Arnold eventually landed back in Dallas, set up shop and wrote his first television jingle. In time he built The Stephen Arnold Group (SAM), a collection of writers, musicians and engineers dedicated to creating music for broadcasters. These days he calls over 200 local television stations his “bread and butter” client base. His company has created more than 25 different custom theme packages with catchy names such as “Building a Better Texas,” “Global Village,” “Outlaw News” and “The Rock.” SAM has also developed a deep series of libraries for station news

broadcasts and local programming. Additionally, CBS, MTV, Turner Broadcasting, Discovery and Discovery Latin America, National Geographic Channel, Associated Press, NASCAR, A&E, Animal Planet and more, all use his music library known as The Vault. SAM music tracks are also routinely used in prime time programs such as “Cold Case,” “Grey’s Anatomy” and “CSI.”

Over the years, Arnold has expanded beyond just music for news. He even got into the video business a few years ago supplying games such as Zoey 101 and Naked Brothers Band with music, sound design and effects. Last year he took a new turn and wrote his first book, “The Story of Six Strings” (Brown Books Publishing Group). He calls it “one part promotion, another part autobiographical fun.” An avid collector of rare and unusual guitars, the book features some of his vast collection photographed in scenic locales across the U.S. In fact, Arnold says he still has the first guitar he ever owned, a 1959 Silvertone acoustic purchased right out of the Sears Catalog for \$14.99. It was a gift from his parents when he was only 7, and he used it to write his first song, a one-note wonder

appropriately titled, “Mama Won’t Let Me Play My Guitar No More.” Arnold laughs and says, “The rest is history.”

“People write books for a million different reasons I suppose,” said Arnold. “In my case I just wanted to tell some of the interesting stories that have accumulated over years. I used the instruments to embellish it, to help make it more visual.” His collection is vast and includes a number of rare guitars. Among the instruments featured is a spectacular 1840 parlor guitar handmade by French luthier Nicholas Henry; a 1928 Gibson Banjolin (a mandolin with a banjo body) and J-160E (think John Lennon’s acoustic guitar featured in The Beatles’ motion picture classic “Help”); a 1941 Epiphone Century; and a 1936 Gretsch model 30 archtop. Plus, he has a series of contemporary classics autographed by the likes of Rock and Roll Hall of Famers Roger McGuinn and BB King, as well as rockers Paul Stanley of Kiss and ZZ Top’s Billy Gibbons.

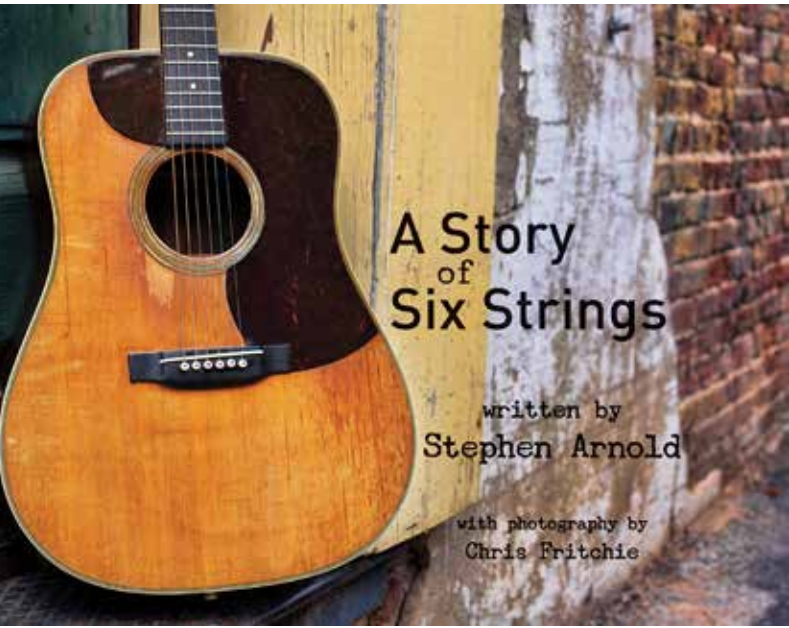
Reviews among his peers have been good. For example, Steve Miller said, “If you like guitars, you’re going to love this book. Stephen Arnold’s guitar collection shines through Chris Fritchie’s beautiful photography. The combination of cool guitars, brilliant photography, and funny stories makes this one of the best guitar books I’ve seen.” Arnold composed theme music for “Dan Rather Reports” on HDNet. Rather also read the book and offered his thoughts: “This is a beautiful book,” said the former “CBS Evening News” anchor, “for its photographs, the words that take us on a magical journey, and the deep emotions it evokes. Like a good guitar in the hands of a talented guitarist, it creates tunes and melodies for the mind. It plucks our heartstrings and revives memories of our life and times. You don’t have to know music to appreciate this terrific book.”

Today Arnold splits his time between studios in Texas and Santa Fe. “Travel is a necessary evil, however we use some pretty sophisticated connectivity to our advantage,” said Whitney Arnold. “Just a few weeks ago, Stephen produced a vocal session here in Texas from the studio in Santa Fe. Our entire staff was able to watch and listen to the session from any of our production suites, anywhere in the country.”

Arnold routinely works 60-70 hour weeks, and travels incessantly but shows no sign of slowing down. He recently formed a charitable foundation called 99 Guitars focused on providing instruments to underserved children. “Volunteer musicians will mentor through weekly lessons, and maybe help change a life through the power of music in the process,” he said.

“When we started discussing my joining SAM about a year ago,” said Whitney Arnold, a musician and recording professional in his own right, “it was an opportunity I just couldn’t pass up. I feel fortunate to be a part of such a successful company that my father literally built from the ground up.”

As for the future, to the elder Arnold it feels very much like the past in many respects. “I have distinct memories about the first time I dragged my finger across the strings of a guitar. I immediately discovered a passion to create something fresh and new,” he says. “That desire has never waned, and still drives me to this day. I hope it always will.”



(Left) Working on a New Orleans Saints promo for client WVUE-TV at The Music Shed Recording Studios with former Dirty Dozen Brass Band trombone player Big Sam Williams of Big Sam’s Funky Nation. **CREDIT:** Andrew Block

(Above) Stephen Arnold’s book



(Right) Arnold has composed tracks for CNN for years. Current programming on the worldwide cable news network that feature his sonic signatures includes “Erin Burnett OutFront,” “Showbiz Tonight” and “Issues with Jane Valez-Mitchell.” **CREDIT:** Chris Fritchie