

# The Spring in Springfield: Alf Clausen's Music for Songs and 'Mini-Musicals' on *The Simpsons*

Durrell Bowman – Music on Small Screens; Ottawa, ON; July 11, 2013

## Media Studies Context:

1. Television itself is *The Simpsons*' "central defining element of culture." [It is?!]  
- David L. G. Arnold, "Use a Pen, Sideshow Bob": *The Simpsons* and the Threat of High Culture,"  
in *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, John Alberti, editor  
(Detroit: Wayne State U. Press, 2004), 21.
2. "For sheer density and frequency of jokes, nothing on *The Simpsons* receives as much parody  
and ridicule as the sitcom and its surrounding apparatus." [Really?!]  
- Jonathan Gray, *Watching with 'The Simpsons': Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (NY: Routledge, 2006), 57.

## Music Studies Context:

1. Music is more densely-referenced and parodied on *The Simpsons* than television or the sitcom.
2. It includes nearly a thousand references to existing music (quotations, parodies, re-performances, etc.),  
a large array of musical guests, numerous original songs, and thousands of instrumental cues.
3. Things to consider: genres, styles, tone colours, melodic contours, textures, rhythms, tempos, lyrics

## Critical Theory Context:

1. Mikhail Bakhtin: every cultural utterance needs to come into dialogue with another such utterance
2. Michel Foucault: discontinuity and temporal dispersions take place within complex fields of discourse
3. Julia Kristeva and Linda Hutcheon: intertextuality, parody, and postmodernism useful for interpretation
4. Peter Swirski: "no-brow" – Richard A. Peterson: "cultural omnivores"
5. no cultural form is seen as being either "good" or "bad" – a breaking down of "cultural hierarchy"

## Entry-Point of Danny Elfman's Theme Song (1989):

1. evokes the themes of 1960s' primetime adult cartoons (esp., *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones*)
2. mildly-eccentric rhythms, quirky intervals (e.g., tritones), and flighty/angular melodic content
3. but also similar to his own "adult cartoon" rock music with Oingo Boingo (e.g., "Nasty Habits," 1981)

## Alf Clausen (the composer & conductor for the music of more than 500 episodes, 1990-2013):

1. jazz background, *Donny & Marie* (music variety), *Moonlighting*, *ALF* (!), film orchestrator, big-band
2. *The Simpsons*: theme variations, orchestral/chamber/electronic music, songs/mini-musicals, etc.
3. Two Primetime Emmys for Songs: 1996-97, plus various additional nominations; movie snub



## “The Spring in Springfield”

(from “Bart after Dark,” Nov. 24, 1996; lyrics by Ken Keeler, music by Alf Clausen; Song Emmy)

- Homer punishes Bart by making him work at the place where he caused some damage.
- It turns out to be the town’s burlesque house: the Maison Derriere.
- Marge convinces the town to shut down the club, and an angry mob assembles.
- Homer initiates the song to support the Maison and get everyone back on side with it.
- It’s a foregrounded piece of music that suddenly appears out of nowhere.
- It stylistically references the rambunctious Jazz Age of the 1920s in its Dixieland/Traditional Jazz.
- The song strengthens the narrative & character depictions.



**Intro** (Homer): You could close down Moe’s or the Kwik-E-Mart, and nobody would care,  
But the heart and soul of Springfield’s in our Maison Derriere.

**Verse 1a** (Belle): We’re the sauce on your steak. We’re the cheese in your cake. We put the spring in Springfield.

**Verse 1b** (Maison): We’re the lace on the nightgown, the point after touchdown. Yes, we put the spring in Springfield.

**Bridge 1a** (Belle): We’re that little extra spice that makes existence extra nice, a giddy little thrill at a reasonable price.

**Bridge 1b** (Rev. Lovejoy): Our only major quarrel’s with your total lack of morals.

**Bridge 1c** (Maison): Our skimpy costumes ain’t so bad; they seem to entertain your dad.

**Verse 2a** (Maison): The gin in your martini, the clams on your linguini. Yes, we keep the [antenna boing] in Springfield.

**Bridge 2a** (Trio/Quimbys): We remember our first visit. The service was exquisite.  
Why, Joseph, I had no idea. Come on, now, you were working here.

**Bridge 2b** (Old-Timers): Without it we’d have had no fun since March of 1961.

**Bridge 2c** (Bart/Bullies): To shut them down now would be twisted. We just heard this place existed.

**Verse 3a** (Maison/Apu): We’re the highlights in your hairdo, the extra arms on Vishnu.

**Verse 3b/extension** (Cast): So don’t take the [Krusty-brand Jack-in-the-Box boing] ... we won’t take the [slide whistle] ...  
Yes, let’s keep the [crash of trash-can lids] in Springfield!

Gender Context: “Not pictured: Mrs. Eisenhower.” A.k.a. “Not pictured: Marge and Lisa Simpson.”

Other Music: 37 instances of music throughout the episode: TV themes, source, background, titles, etc.

Second Song Emmy for “You’re Checkin’ In” (from “The City of New York vs. Homer Simpson,” 1997):  
parodies recent musical theatre addressing contemporary socio-cultural issues (esp. drugs and celebrity)

Emmy nominations for the musical direction of the episode parodies of:

*Mary Poppins* (“Simpsoncalifragilisticexpiala(Annoyed Grunt)cious,” 1997) and *Evita* (“The President Wore Pearls,” 2003)

Cartoon Wars: *South Park*: esp. 1999 movie, also parodies Broadway-derived and Disney film musicals  
*Family Guy*: random, extended cutaways; e.g. Conway Twitty in “The Juice is Loose,” 2009  
*The Simpsons*: intertextuality/discourse – “as and when” engagement with music