

A Look at the Music Behind Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

By Dave Bossert



(Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* British movie poster.)

Pumpkin spice has reappeared everywhere I look as the waning days of summer are upon us. Soon trees will start turn color, which has already started in some of the northern locales. It won't be long before leaves begin to drop and the evenings start to become cool. The Halloween decorations are out already and that can only mean one thing, *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* will make its annual run at the El Capitan Theater\* in Hollywood. *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is based on the 1823 poem entitled *A Visit from St. Nicholas* that first published anonymously, four years later it was attributed to Clement Clarke Moore

and it is most commonly known as *The Night Before Christmas*. It was one of the first times that St. Nickolas was written about in a way that allowed the reader to visualize ‘Santa Claus.’ It is not the first time that a Disney film was based on this poem.

In December of 1933, The Walt Disney Studios released its own version of the poem in the fortieth animated Silly Symphony cartoon, *The Night Before Christmas*. It was a standard rendition of the poem done in a spoken word-like singing style set to music. The actor/singer Donald Novis (1906-1966) was cast for the narrator and he sings part of the Clement Clark Moore poem as a ballad. It was a style of singing that was popular in the 1930s, with one of the more notable singers of the era being tenor Bill Kenny of the group The Ink Spots. This was also an inspiration for the music and songs written by Danny Elfman for Burton’s version of the poem, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

Burton’s version of *A Night Before Christmas* by Clement Clarke Moore, centers on Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King of Halloween Town, who inadvertently stumbles into an entryway and discovers Christmas Town. Completely taken by the joyfulness and decorations, Jack becomes obsessed with creating his own version of the holiday for Halloween Town. Although his intentions are good, he runs amuck by being misperceived as scary—a judging the book by its cover situation.

Burton’s career took off after Disney fired him in 1984. He went on to direct *Pee Wee’s Big Adventure* (1985), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Batman* (1989) and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). With the meteoric rise of his directing career Burton reached out to Disney about doing something with his Nightmare poem. In 1991, with the backing of Disney, Burton began working on the project with his original three-page poem, some story sketches, and drawings of the characters.

Tim partnered with friend and frequent collaborator composer Danny Elfman. "Tim and I were totally in sync on this project from the start," Elfman says. "It was basically a very organic process where he would tell me a bit of the story and then go away while I'd write a song. He would then come back and I'd play it for him and ask 'What happens next?' I just started telling the story in songs as we went along. It's about as smooth as anything I've worked on. The process was kind of crazy and insane and fun all at the same time."

Together they approached the film as an operetta in which the songs were integral to telling the story. Elfman used the spoken word style in some of the songs written for the film. It was a natural process for them both and when most of the songs were completed, Burton asked Caroline Thompson to write the screenplay. Burton admits that; "We worked in a weird way, where there was the outline and the songs and then we worked on the script."

Having worked with Burton on five previous films prior to *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Elfman found this collaboration to be even easier than the rest. "He starts telling a story; I start hearing music. It usually ends up being about that simple;" Elfman said. Burton would talk about how he felt emotionally about the movie or a character and describe how the character feels—is he very tortured or should the audience feel sorry for him. They would discuss the vibe of the characters. "With this film, we talked about each little bit and I was hearing the songs before he was even out the door," Elfman said.



(Photo of Tim Burton's original drawing of Jack Skellington as Santa Claus)

Stylistically, both Burton and Elfman had no preconceived ideas of what the music should sound like except that they wanted it to have a timeless quality. Elfman did indicate that the only thing that he had in my mind starting out on the project was not wanting it to sound like a Broadway-based musical. "There wasn't any one style that I had in mind. I was just thinking of the character and having fun with it. Writing songs for Jack was particularly fun because he's such an enthusiastic and schizophrenic kind of guy. He goes from extreme highs to the lowest of lows. There's this great range I got to express," Elfman recalled. He wanted it musically to feel like it could be from any era. Much of the music has a theatrical underpinning that is rooted in the operetta style, which was used in writing the songs and music. An operetta

is simply a short form opera that is lighter in theme and generally has spoken dialogue or, as previously mention, spoken word style to the songs.

“‘Sally's Song’ is very simple and sweet with a kind of a Kurt Weill quality and ‘The Scheming Song’ could have been out of ‘The Wizard of Oz,’” said Elfman. Weill was an early twentieth century composer best known for his *The Threepenny Opera*. His music resonated with contemporary performers including Tom Waits, Todd Rundgren, David Bowie, Lou Reed, and Sting who have all done their own interpretations of Weill’s music.

But one song, the ‘Oogie Boogie’ number, did have influence in a specific style. It was inspired by the music in the early Max Fleischer cartoons, particularly the one that featured the legendary jazz singer Cab Calloway singing one of his most famous songs ‘Minnie the Moocher.’ The Fleischer Studios released a Betty Boop cartoon in 1932 of the same name. Elfman and Burton both confess a fondness for that type of cartoon music. “That was a big part of my childhood, and with the Mystic Knights, it's what we used to perform. My first performing was doing Cab Calloway,” Elfman said. They decided to incorporate that type of sound into *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

The filmmakers relied on Elfman’s song to help define the Oogie Boogie character as the “ultimate Halloween nightmare.” Oogie Boogie was not a character that was in the original poem that Burton wrote. Oogie Boogie and Dr. Finkelstein are the two characters that were added during the development of the film. In talking about the character, Elfman recalled, “In Oogie Boogie's sense, I wanted to feel there was a heftiness, that I didn't have in my voice.”

In all, Elfman wrote the lyrics and composed the music for ten songs that form the core through-line of the story. Each song advances the story while expressing and showcasing the



personalities of the characters. Burton's original 1982 poem set the frame work for the story and also the lyrical inspiration for Elfman to write the songs. He even used some lines from the poem in the songs that he wrote adding a visceral connection to Burton's vision.

The opening song 'This Is Halloween' does what an opening song should do—it sets the tone of the film and presents the story accompanied by the visuals of the environment and characters. The song lyrics help to paint a secession of images associated with Halloween: "*everyone scream; everyone hail to the Pumpkin King; and snakes and spiders in my hair.*" By the end of the song the audience is firmly planted in Halloween Town.



(Jack Skellington puppet setup during film production. Photo by Mike Belzer)

Following this introduction to the world of *Nightmare*, the protagonist Jack Skellington sings 'Jack's Lament' that sets him up as the main character. Sung by Danny Elfman himself, the

song expresses Jack’s exasperation and frustration with his life. He sings about his hopes and dreams wishing that he could give up his Pumpkin King crown.

The song ‘What’s This?’ showcases a major plot point in which Jack discovers Christmas Town. This upbeat song shows the enthusiasm Jack feels for the “sights and sounds” of this newfound land. Jack marvels at “children throwing snowballs instead of heads” and thinks that maybe his dream has come true as he soaks in this new holiday environment and its traditions. Jack returns home and sings the ‘Town Hall Song’ that describes what he stumbled on— “The whole thing starts with a box; A box?” and “If you please, just a box with bright-colored paper; And the whole thing's topped with a bow.” He’s enthralled by Christmas Town and its practices and wants to make a “new and improved” version of the holiday with the help from the residents of Halloween Town.



(The author with Danny Elfman during an interview at his studio in 2017. Photo by Dave Bossert)

After he tries to explain the concept of Christmas to the towns people, Jack retreats to his tower to study Christmas himself. While pouring over multiple books on the holiday, making notes, and figuring out equations on a blackboard, a crowd begins to gather down below. This is all happening to the song 'Jack's Obsession' sung by Jack lamenting his frustration and feelings— "Christmastime is buzzing my skull.; Will it let me be? I cannot tell"—until he finally gets it and yells, eureka! All the time, Jack is examining toys and trying to decipher what the recipe is for Christmas merriment.

Once he thinks he understands Christmas, Jack solicits the help of the townspeople in recreating the "new and improved" Christmas holiday. Jack asks Dr. Finklestein to create a sleigh and reindeer while enlisting Lock, Shock, and Barrel into kidnapping "Sandy Claws." The trio of "Oogie Boogie's boys" are more than enthusiastic to help while singing 'The Scheming Song.' Unfortunately, the trio's first attempt results in the kidnapping of the Easter Bunny and Jack sends them off again to do it right this time.

Meanwhile, Sally is attempting to convince Jack that his plan may not be well thought-out and she is concerned. Jack is excited about his whole plan and the rest of the townsfolk are busy at the Halloween factory making their version of toys while singing 'Making Christmas.' The song is performed by Elfman, the singing voice of Jack, and all the citizens of Halloween Town.

Lock, Shock, and Barrel show up at Jack's door, this time with Santa in their sack. Jack informs Santa that he will be delivering the presents this year and tells the trio to treat Santa nicely. They take Santa off to Oogie Boogie's spooky hideout. Although not in the original



Burton poem, Oogie Boogie was created as the antagonist for the film—a figure made out of a potato-sack, which is filled with bugs, spiders, snakes, and other horrible creatures.



(Oogie Boogie production puppet.)

At his nightmarish lair, Oogie Boogie terrorizes Santa Claus by tying him to a roulette wheel surrounded by skeletons and various torture appliances. As mentioned previously, this character is defined in the film by the 'Oogie Boogie's Song (You're Joking).' Actor and cabaret singer Ken Paige was cast as Oogie Boogie. "I didn't write it for Ken Page, but when I heard Ken's voice, I said, that's what I'm writing this for."

The Oogie Boogie song was the one to be changed from what Elfman originally wrote. “I was never happy about, but, you know. It was one of those decisions,” Elfman said. The change was made because the filmmakers felt the song was too long and wanted to move the story along. It was also disappointing for animator Eric Leighton who animated a longer scene that, although entertaining, ultimately was edited down.

Sally tries to stop Jack by creating a thick fog making it impossible for him to take off with his reindeer and sleigh. That is until his trusty ghost dog Zero shows up and using his illuminated pumpkin nose, he guides Jack and his sleigh. Walking away Sally, crestfallen, sings her ‘Sally’s Song’ performed by Katherine O’Hara. The song is sung with such feeling it is hard to believe that O’Hara was insecure about doing the singing. “She was insecure going in because, at that point,” Elfman said, “she never really done that kind of thing, but I knew she could do it and I thought she did it perfectly.” In the recording studio, O’Hara didn’t need much prompting. “I was really just there more to give her confidence... to try to really push her. I mean, she intuitively knew what it would be. She just had to find a little confidence just to do it and let it be natural, and then I knew, once she did it perfectly...”

Once Jack is airborne, flying through the sky on his sleigh, what he thinks is fireworks going off celebrating his “new and improved” Christmas are actually bombs and missiles being lobbed at him for his misguided attempt at hijacking the holiday. Eventually, Jack is shot down. He realizes through the song ‘*Poor Jack*’ that, even though he tried his best, it didn’t work out the way he planned but trying made him feel like his “old bony self again.” An important lesson of the film—don’t try to be something you’re not, it’s okay to be yourself. That’s a perfect message during the holiday season!

Elfman admitted that *'Poor Jack'* was the hardest song because in the context of the story, Jack Skellington goes from the depths of his despair to the height of his re-enthusiasm. It was a difficult thing to pull off but Elfman did it. "It was a challenge," Elfman said, "But, it's one of my favorites to perform."

Surviving being shot down in his sleigh, Jack makes it to Oogie's hideout saving Santa and Sally from imminent death. Jack battles Oogie Boogie and in an epic scene of stop motion animation, completely unravels him until his innards spill and scatter. Santa is saved and takes off just in time to save Christmas, while Jack and Sally sit together in the cemetery for the consummate happy ending—a cute and ghoulish happy ending.

The score Elfman wrote for the film "was a giant jigsaw puzzle." Each piece of the score was either coming out of or going into a song. The score quotes the songs which are themes or leitmotifs for most of the main characters. The only theme that doesn't relate to a song is the Mayor's theme. "Pretty much everything comes out of a song. So, it starts with something that comes out of where we just were, and then it's gonna play the same, but then the next song starts in 30 seconds. So, I already have to pre-announce a melody that we're going into so it doesn't drop in out of the blue," Elfman explained.

At that time, Burton was in production on *Batman Returns* and turned to Henry Selick, who had created a series of stop motion animated intros for MTV and a number of Pillsbury Doughboy commercials, to direct *The Nightmare Before Christmas* film. Selick is a great artist in his own right and a very collaborative partner known for pushing the boundaries of stop motion animation. "There's an inherent charm as well as a certain reality to stop-motion that you can't get with any other form of filmmaking," Selick says. "We use real materials, real cloth and real

puppets bathed in real light. The effect is a bit like opening a pop-up book or finding a great illustration in a storybook that feels like you can reach in and touch it or fall right into it. Good stop-motion animation with the right elements—lighting, camera moves, characters, etc.— can evoke the same powerful feelings as live-action and can be more effective than traditional cel or computer animation. With *Nightmare* this technique allowed us to be more extreme in the look and design of our characters than live-action ever could.”

Stylistically the film is pure Tim Burton, which along with his other films, has made his name part of the Hollywood lexicon—saying something is *Burton-esque* to denote a dark yet whimsical quality, a weird fancifulness that blends cute and ghoulishness together in a fun way. Visual Consultant Rick Heinrichs and Art Director Deane Taylor did a masterful job of translating Burton’s early sketches and designs into the magical macabre world populated by Jack and Sally and a host of other delightful and ghastly original characters.

When released in 1993, the film did okay at the box office. It was released under the Touchstone film banner by Disney because they thought it might be too dark for the Disney animation core audience. It has since been changed to the Disney release label. The film has continued to grow in popularity year over year and has spawned a myriad of merchandise, the annual Nightmare overlay at the Haunted Mansion attraction at Disneyland and even live concerts.

The live concerts came about as an offshoot of *Danny Elfman’s Music from the films of Tim Burton*, which contained pieces from all their movies together. At the world premiere of the concert at the Royal Albert Hall in London, Danny Elfman sang live as Jack Skellington for the first time ever. “Oh, it was pure terror,” Elfman recalled.

They took the concert to Japan and afterwards the suggestion was made to do all of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* live in concert. The concert was test marketed in Japan first and did very well according to show producer and creative director Richard Kraft; “and so Danny said why don’t we bring this to America.” The show sold out instantly and they added a second, which also sold out. It has proved to be an unforgettable live performance. Show producer Laura Engel added; “*The Nightmare Before Christmas* is iconic... it transcended from a cult classic to become a genuine holiday classic.”

It is a very personal film that stays faithful to Burton’s original vision thanks to a group of dedicated artists working for nearly three years on this stop motion animated gem. The puppets were painstakingly moved incrementally for each frame of film, twenty-four frames a second, to create the action of the animation. It was labor of love for the artists and animators that worked on the project. That passion can be felt on every beautifully handcrafted frame of the film.

Released in 1993, the film exudes a wonderful warmth and carries a universal message that it is okay to be different—to be yourself, which is profoundly appropriate for the entire family this time of year. The real lesson of the film is that it’s okay to be yourself, to make mistakes, and to learn from those mistakes. Nearly twenty-five years since it was first released, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* has proven to be a venerable holiday classic, one with a strong heart, which is examined more fully in my forthcoming new book from Disney Editions.

*\*Tim Burton’s The Nightmare Before Christmas will be screening at the El Capitan Theater in Hollywood from September 12 – 25, 2019. Opening night on Thursday, September 12<sup>th</sup> will be hosted by Don Hahn and Dave Bossert.*



Sources referenced include: the author's own research and experiences working on *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Disney studio production notes, song lyrics by Danny Elfman, and the author's interviews with Danny Elfman, Tim Burton and other film makers. Some of this material has been extracted from concert program notes and other previously published work by the author.

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