The sounds of silent movies

ROCHESTER, N.Y. (AP) Bang! It's a shootout. Crash! A chair falls over. Whap! The hero gets slapped in the face.

This is a silent movie?

These days, most people watch silent films with only the whir of the projector for accompaniment. Music Professor Donald Hunsberger compares that to cooking without salt and pepper.

"It's only half the picture," he

The authentic silent-movie experience, says Hunsberger, isn't silent at all.

The silver-haired professor, who teaches conducting at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, has spent the last decade re-creating the sounds of silent movies. He has compiled musical scores for more than a dozen silent films, which he performs with orchestras across the country.

Silent movies almost always had accompaniment of some kind, whether a single piano player or a full orchestra. In the early days of film, local accompanists hired by the theatres played whatever music they had on hand, with little regard to the action on screen.

Around 1915, movie distributors began issuing cue sheets suggesting specific pieces of music. Those were often generic, interchangeable pieces with names such as Dramatic Tension No. 1, intended "for general use," and Furioso No. 60, for scenes "depicting conflict and riot."

In a few cases, such as Charlie Chaplin's 1928 City Lights, an entire score was written for the film.

By 1929, the silent-movie era was ending, and much of the music written for it disappeared.

"Once the period was over, theatres had no use for the music," Hunsberger said. "They just threw it out.'

Not only the music, but many of the films themselves were lost. Tens of thousands of motion pictures were made between 1915 and 1929, the heyday of silent film. Only about one in 10 has survived.

Hunsberger works with the George Eastman House and its vast collection of silent films, and the Eastman School library, which has a collection of 15,000 film accompaniments. He is constantly listening for music he might be able to use in a film score.

"I heard something the other day that would be great for a train scene," he said. "I look for something that is going to reflect the mood of what's on the screen,

with the sensibility of today's audiences in mind."

With all the different musicians and ensembles that played with each silent film as it showed across the country, there is no single authentic score, Hunsberger said.

"If a show were shown in 10,000 theatres, there would be 10,000 different scores."

The films Hunsberger has scored

include Lon Chaney's The Phantom of the Opera and The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Douglas Fairbanks' The Mark of Zorro and Buster Keaton's Our Hospitality.

In modem-sound movies, the soundtracks are synchronized to the on-screen action with split-second, computer-generated precision.

Accompanying a silent movie takes more old-fashioned talents.







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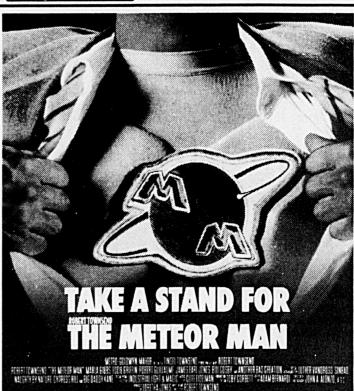
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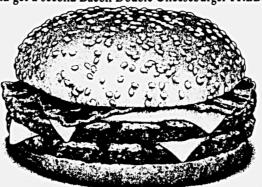
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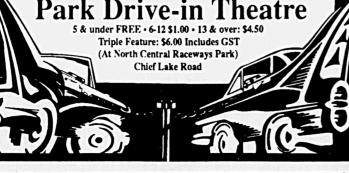
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