

Anne Bancroft, Mel Brooks, and Dom DeLuise is a *FATSO*

In 1978, I was the music director for the rock biopic *The Buddy Holly Story*, and I also composed the dramatic score. When *The Buddy Holly Story* hit theaters, it started generating a lot of attention, and buzz began circulating about its potential for Oscar nominations.

The film ended up being nominated in three categories at the 1979 Oscars: Gary Busey for Best Lead Actor, Joel Fine for Sound Recording, and I received a nomination for Best Adaptation Score. At that time, Anne Bancroft was in pre-production for a film she co-wrote and was about to direct, and she took note of my success with *The Buddy Holly Story*.

The film was *Fatso*, and she envisioned it as a movie that showcased the average Italian-American lifestyle, steering clear of the typical, somewhat demeaning Mafioso portrayals.

Dom DeLuise and Anne Bancroft first crossed paths at the Actors Studio in New York City in the early 1950s. They were both part of the studio's program and collaborated on a script idea inspired by their shared Italian-American heritage. The script was a compilation of all the *Fatso*-type bits they had developed during their scene studies in class. The main character, played by Dom, struggled with overeating and had issues with dating. It wasn't too hard for him to play because, in real life, Dom had indulged a bit too much now and then.

Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft met in 1961 while working on the Broadway production of *The Miracle Worker*. In this show, Bancroft took on the role of Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller's teacher, while Brooks worked behind the scenes as a writer and director.

Mel and Anne tied the knot in 1964. Opposites attract, right? By 1970, they decided to move to Los Angeles, a change prompted by Mel's enormous film successes, including *The Producers*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Young Frankenstein*, *Silent Movie*, and *High Anxiety*. Brooks had successfully transitioned from the world of Broadway to Hollywood, and Anne was thrilled to support him in his fabulous success.

As time went on, Mel realized he wanted to explore projects beyond his renowned comedic classics. He tapped into his strong business instincts and established Brooksfilm. He wisely plotted to keep his involvement low-key, avoiding the typical hype that often accompanies the LA film industry. His first film under this new banner was based on the book *The Elephant Man*.

Brooks needed a director for this film. The story was weird, dark, and traumatic, but Mel recognized its enormous power. Knowing he couldn't direct it himself, he had to find the right director. After seeing David Lynch's *Eraserhead*, he knew immediately that Lynch was the one.

Anne, ever supportive of Mel's creative ventures, took note of the role of Mrs. Kendal. She suggested to Mel that she could play the part. Mrs. Kendal is a stage actress who befriends John Merrick, the Elephant Man, and helps him navigate the challenges he faces due to his condition. Mel loved the idea of Anne playing Mrs. Kendal, and naturally, she was amazing.

Upon the film's completion and release, the studio brass were not thrilled. They thought it was too shocking, too horrible... but as time went by, it took the country by storm, and Brooksfilms was off to a fantastic start. It occurred to Anne that Mel might be interested in the *Fatso* script she and Dom had written back in their New York days. She thought it would be perfect for his new upstart company, Brooksfilms. She was right; Mel was captivated by the screenplay.

Clearly, Anne was enthusiastic about *Fatso*, and in the process of bringing it to life, she realized she wanted to direct it and make her debut as a director. What actor doesn't dream of directing?
And she was remarkable—*The Graduate*, *The Miracle Worker*—hello?

Mel decided to produce the film for his company and green-lit it. The movie featured a slightly overweight young Italian man, played by DeLuise, who is infatuated with his first serious love, Lydia, portrayed by Candice Azzara. Anne was determined to keep the film authentic. After all, she was a true Italian American herself—her real name was Anna Maria Louisa Italiano. In keeping with the film's authenticity, she focused on creating an homage to Italian Americans and their lifestyles in the USA—a group of immigrants with rich traditions. When it came time to select a composer for the score, she specifically sought out an Italian American and noticed my name, which ended in a vowel, largely due to the buzz surrounding *The Buddy Holly Story*.

She reached out to me and set up a meeting at Fox Studios in the offices of Brooksfilms.

During our first meeting, she gave me the "Are you a real Italian?" test; I was auditioning. I talked about my knowledge of Italian street music, having been born and raised in South Philly, and how I actually knew musicians who played in street processions and feasts that often featured a saint on a pedestal carried through Italian neighborhoods, with musicians playing some truly authentic Italian music.

At that first meeting, I played a recording of a piece I had just completed as an homage to my uncle, Marcus Aurelius Renzetti, an Italian immigrant, art teacher in Philadelphia, and a well-known sculptor. The music was for two guitars with a small orchestral accompaniment. When I played it for her, there were tears.

In the end, she concluded that I was the right person for the film, and we struck a deal. I was officially attached to *Fatso*, and we got to work. The next two or three meetings we had were spotting sessions, where the composer and the director discuss the film to determine where, when, and what feelings the music should evoke.

During these spotting sessions, I encouraged her to talk to me as she would to an actor. We discussed drama, motivation, and story, and I translated those ideas into music.

During the recording sessions with a fairly large orchestra, there was one particular scene where all the pigeons fly up as Dom and his girlfriend kiss at the Columbus Circle fountain. I had composed a big crescendo and upsweep in the string sections. Anne touched my arm and said, "Joe, this is the best part of making the movie." What an honor, wouldn't you say?

After, all the music was recorded and transferred to magnetic film stock—how we mixed in those days before digital recording—the next step was to go to the dubbing stage, which was essentially a small movie theater with a massive mixing console in the middle. Three recording engineers were present: the lead engineer in charge of dialogue and the overall mix, a sound effects engineer (SFX), and a music mixing engineer (MUX). These engineers mixed down approximately 30 to 40 separate audio tracks into about three tracks. The director, producer, and sometimes the composer would be in the studio consulting, guiding the process, and discussing technical aspects. With that many tracks there were about 10 to 20 playback machines playing magnetic 35 mm film strips, each containing three tracks of audio. They were the size of tall refrigerators.

When they all rolled, played, it sounded like you were in a submarine—very noisy! This room containing all the playback equipment was located far from the theater, so the sound was blocked from being heard in the theater itself. The film was divided into ten-minute sections—ten-minute reels. It took an entire day to record and mix down one reel. Given that most films run around an hour and 20 minutes, that meant about 12 reels had to be mixed. It was a long and tedious process, and I was there for the first few days. Anne found the process quite overwhelming, especially as she had a young baby boy at home—Max Brooks. So, she decided to have her husband, Mel Brooks, come in and finish the mix.

When Mel came in and introduced himself, we got to work. He liked the music and respected that his wife, Anne Bancroft, loved it too.

During the mixing session there was a sound effect that was off, and the engineer in charge stopped the playback and said to Mel, "That's wrong, Mel; we gotta change that." Mel's response was, "No, let's leave it in. I like to have little things like that that are wrong just to give people something to talk about. Also, I'm a knower; I know what's good and bad in a film. So respectfully, let's leave it the way it is."

However, there was one section in Anne's stationery store where Dom DeLuise and Anne's character began to dance to the tune of

"Sweet Georgia Brown." Mel pulled me aside and said, "Hey Joe, let's step out into the hallway, I want to talk to you about something." I wondered what was wrong. He spoke to me politely and respectfully, saying, "Joe, I love the music, but we really don't need it during the dance between Dom and Anne's character. Would it be okay if we didn't use your background music and just let them sing and dance au naturel. It made perfect sense to me; there was no band or orchestra on camera in that store. I also realized that "Sweet Georgia Brown." was very personal and meaningful to them as a couple in real life. In retrospect, it was clear that it should be just them having their moment.

I found Mel Brooks to be not only a kind and talented comedic genius but also a smart and respectful collaborator. It was a fabulous experience for me—a kid from South Philly, yuz know whad I mean?

Soon after finishing the mix, there was a screening for the cast and crew, followed by a wrap party celebration. Everyone called for Mel Brooks to get up and sing and play the drums, and he did! Someone requested that I get up and play the guitar. There was a band at the party, so the instruments were available.

We ended up doing a version of “Sweet Georgia Brown” in a Dixieland style. I took a solo, and Mel Brooks took a drum solo—he played a great solo! However, I was reminded of a saying that my friend, music contractor, and a fabulous drummer, a member of the Hal Blaine’s Wrecking Crew, Frank Capp often said: "No one really likes a drum solo, not even drummers." But I truly enjoyed Mel's drum solo!