

ENTERTAINMENT | MOVIES

# The TV theme song is dead. The SF-set NBC show 'Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist' revived it.

By Adam Duke

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"I've Got The Music In Me," episode 102 from "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist."  
Sergei Bachlakov/NBC

Y2K might not have been the end of the world, but it may have seemed that way for fans of TV theme songs. The style of song that offered the entire premise of the show, a la "Gilligan's Island," has been dead for quite some time, but by the turn of the millennium, theme songs in general were becoming less popular, particularly in half hour sitcoms.

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Shows like "Modern Family," "Broad City," "black-ish" and "The Good Place" filled the transition after the cold open with sound effects or short musical riffs. It's not always a bad thing, but they lose the nostalgia and sing-along factor.

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An exception to the new trend, a blend of the old and new, is the NBC musical comedy-drama “Zoey’s Extraordinary Playlist,” which returned for season two on Jan. 5. “Zoey’s” doesn’t use a traditional theme; instead, members of the cast cover a pop hit in a prelude to the title screen. The camera then focuses on Zoey (Jane Levy) who usually mouths a curse word, censored by the show’s title card. Donald Glover’s “Atlanta” has adapted similarly, displaying the show’s title in unique locations throughout the city, while playing a different rap song at the beginning of each episode.

So why is the sun setting on the tradition of having a catchy theme song? The answers may just be time and money, but Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, says there’s more to it.

“It used to be that people were sitting in front of a television set that had three to five channels,” Thompson said in a recent phone interview. “Once cable comes in and the remote control becomes standard equipment in the American home, in the 45 or 60 seconds it took to go through a theme song, people would lose interest and would be channel surfing to other places.”





Jane Levy stars in "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist" as a whip-smart computer programmer who hears the innermost thoughts of people around her through songs. It began a second season Jan. 5, 2021.

Nbc/Sergei Bachlakovr/NBC/Lionsgate

Because of the lack of attention span, shows cut down the length of their theme songs, a shift that continued for decades.

Several half-hour sitcoms of the 2000s and 2010s ("Community," "The Office," "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia," to name a few) bucked the short theme trend, choosing a longer theme with lyrics or an instrumental.

Gary Portnoy, songwriter (and often performer) behind the iconic themes from "Cheers," "Punky Brewster" and "Mr. Belvedere," believes the audience loses some attachment without a theme and that songs can outlive their shows.

"The theme song was a whole other layer of connectedness with the show and the experience of watching the show," said Portnoy. "When they were at their best, they just wrapped their arms around you and drew you in."

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Another key piece in the disappearance of themes was the change in the way TV was viewed; a song no longer needs to have a “calling in” effect, announcing the start of a show, because of DVRs and streaming.

“It was part of the golden age of television and, luckily for me, it lasted into the '80s and perhaps a little beyond that, but it certainly seems to be over now,” said Portnoy. “I know they say what comes around goes around, but I don’t know if it’ll ever come back.”

Keith Slettedahl, lead singer of The 88, who wrote and performed the “Community” theme song, sees a possibility for the return of the theme song.

“I don’t doubt that there’ll be a reaction to what’s happening now; there will probably be more ‘song-songs,’” he said.

Portnoy and Slettedahl saw the “Seinfeld” theme as a sign of the decline. Once something is successful on TV, other shows emulate it. Portnoy recalled being at the height of his songwriting career when theme lengths were cut from 60 seconds to 45 or even 30, and he said that the “Seinfeld” bassline was his cue to exit the business.

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From left, Skylar Astin as Max, Lauren Graham as Joan, Jane Levy as Zoey and John Clarence Stewart as Simon in "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist."  
Photo by Sergei Bachlakov/NBC)/Sergei Bachlakov/NBC

Before his exit, Portnoy's "Where Everybody Knows Your Name" charted at No. 83 on Billboard and stayed on the list for four weeks in 1983. From 1960 to 1979, a total of 29 theme songs reached the top 60. Since 2000, that number has been zero. Slettedahl

cited a change in pop music for this, saying that to chart on Billboard today, a theme would have to sound more like an Ariana Grande song.

If any show could pull that off, it would be "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist," with its soundtrack touching on a surplus of musical genres and using them thematically or as a plot device. So the thought that a theme song of the modern pop genre couldn't be successful standing on its own is not necessarily true.

Many shows from the "golden age" Portnoy referenced never lived to see the establishment of the "Outstanding Original Main Title Theme Music" category at the Emmys. The category was created in 1988, and there were nominees (including "Simpsons" and "Twin Peaks"), but inexplicably no winners declared until 1993 (for "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine"). There was a push to scrap the category entirely in 2010, but following a vote, it was allowed to stay.

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At the 2020 Emmys, four of five nominees for the award, including the winner ("Hollywood"), were from streaming services. The Outstanding Music Composition for a Series (Original Dramatic Score) and Outstanding Original Music and Lyrics categories had similar outlooks, with a combined six nominees from streaming services, five from HBO and just one from network TV between the two categories,

exemplifying how paid services dominate soundtracks.



Alex Newell as Mo (left) and Jane Levy as Zoey in "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist."  
Sergei Bachlakov/NBC

In early 2020, following Netflix's cancellation of the 2017 reboot of "One Day at a Time," Pop TV revived the series. The reboot had previously used a Gloria Estefan cover of the original show's theme, "This is It," by Polly Custer, but after being picked up by the network, the theme was cut down.

"We don't have that 50 seconds," said executive producer Gloria Calderón Kellett at the Television Critics Association press tour, shortly after Pop TV picked up the show. "We need it for the show." The reboot was canceled midway through shooting season four due to COVID-19.

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Kellett's comment reflects once again how money and time have dramatically affected the realm of television themes.

One show creator who stands by the art is Steve Franks, creator and performer of the song for NBC's "Psych." Always walking around with a song in his head, Franks, similar to Portnoy, believes a theme song helps audiences connect with the show.

"I really miss themes as a part of the show," he said. "The music comes on and I start to settle in with the thing I love, the people and characters I enjoy spending time with."

Streaming services being willing to air longer theme songs, like Netflix did with "One Day at a Time," could even be advantageous to network shows, potentially encouraging people to watch online for the additional content, as runtime is less relevant.

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"I think everything is cyclical, especially with streaming," said Franks. "Time is not a problem. You could write a three-minute theme song if you wanted. It might ruin your momentum, but there's no limit on how long the show is going to run."



Jane Levy as Zoey Clarke and Mary Steenburgen as Maggie in the pilot episode of "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist."

NBC/NBCU Photo Bank via Getty Images

While the disappearance of themes from network television can mostly be attributed to conservation of time, streaming shows have likely done so as an artistic choice. "Stranger Things" and "Daredevil" have used the lack of time constraints to incorporate more developed musical openings; shows like "Fleabag" and "Living With Yourself" have taken the avenue of the shorter theme, with intense riffs firing the viewer right into the action.

Thompson attributes the artistic spin to showrunners not wanting their products to seem old-fashioned, a throwback or campy. Thompson also said that if a show today were to have a theme similar to "Gilligan's Island" or "The Brady Bunch," it would be done as a parody. He said even longer openings like "Game of Thrones" or "The Sopranos" fit the artistic category and have remained successful, though he doesn't necessarily consider them to be "theme songs."

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Portnoy would argue that minimalism is exactly what is destroying the art, that without lyrics, there is no heart.

"I think the absence of that is kind of reflective of the modern world: 'Get to the point,'" he said. "A TV theme is married to the show, with feeling and thought, and not just, 'Let's get to the show and get a few more advertisements in.'"

*Adam Duke is a freelance writer who has been published in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and Buffalo News.*

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## Adam Duke

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