

## Rock, Pathos, Shivers: The Music of *Supernatural*

Janet K. Halfyard

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[See table of contents](#)

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## Rock, Pathos, Shivers: The Music of *Supernatural*

Janet K. Halfyard

Straddling 15 years, *Supernatural*'s music shows both how far TV music has come (because it is slightly old fashioned in some ways, and not just because of the classic rock) but also how good the basic approach was, right from the start. There are three main musical elements that appear in almost every episode, the rock, pathos and shivers of my title. These are: 1) classic rock; 2) the limited use of lyrical, more melodic scoring; and 3) a large amount of generic horror scoring, the latter two categories being written by the series' alternating composers, Jay Gruska and Christopher Lennertz. A fourth element, the use of music as a component of parody and experimentation, occurs more rarely but is nonetheless an important aspect of the show's wider willingness to, as Abbott notes, "bend stylistic rules, blur generic boundaries, and break with narrative conventions" that mark it as part of the dovetailing of cult and postmodern TV that began with *The X-Files* (Abbott 2010, 98)

The old-fashioned element of *Supernatural* is its resistance to what is now the normal approach to TV music, a thematically-driven score. Major cult shows that appeared both before and after *Supernatural* began its epic run, including *Lost* (2004–10), *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–09), *Dexter* (2006–14), *True Blood* (2008–14) and *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), have all explored slightly different ways of employing memorable melodic themes as the basis of their scores. *Supernatural* in contrast has only one theme in its composed score that obviously reappears throughout all seasons, a gentle melody composed by Gruska that points to Dean's intense vulnerability in all things concerning his extended family. That in turn reveals what is perhaps the oddest thing about *Supernatural*'s music: it has only one character at its heart, Dean Winchester, to whom both the recurring melodic theme and the rock music belong. Other shows create a clear musical identity for a multitude of characters. *True Blood*, *Battlestar* and *Game of Thrones* are all replete with character themes of one kind or another and even *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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**Dr. Janet K. Halfyard** is Head of BMus programmes at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Her research is focused on music in horror/ supernatural and superhero film and TV, and publications include *Danny Elfman's Batman: a film score guide* (2004), *Sounds of Fear and Wonder: Music in Cult TV* (2016) and the edited collections *Music, Sound and Silence in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2010) and *Music in Fantasy Cinema* (2012). Current projects include noise as music in contemporary horror, music in *Game of Thrones* and DC Universe superhero scoring.

(1997–2003) gave clear if not extensively developed musical identifies to Willow, Xander and Giles alongside the various themes written for Buffy’s love-interests. However, it is quite difficult to make the argument that anyone other than Dean makes their presence felt musically within *Supernatural*. Very occasionally, a musical idea from one episode will obviously reappear sometime later. So, for instance, in the middle of season 5, we hear a plaintive cello theme at the end of “Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid” (5.15) as Bobby Singer sits by the funeral pyre of Karen, the wife he killed many years ago when she was possessed and now has had to kill for the second time when she returned as a sort of zombie. The same theme reappears in “Of Grave Importance” (7.19), by which point Bobby himself is dead and a ghost. As Sam and Dean discuss what they are going to do about him, we hear that same theme again, reminding us of Karen, reminding us that like her, Bobby may have died once but his death is also not yet final and such situations are unlikely to end well. In the way the final shot lingers on Bobby as the theme plays, it allows us to infer that he too is making the connection between what happened to his wife, the monster she unwillingly became, and what is likely to become of him.

This kind of musical linking of widely separated-events in *Supernatural* is for the most part extremely rare: specially-composed themes simply do not drive the music the way they do in many other cult TV series. Dean, therefore, owns the music of *Supernatural* in a very unusual way, with both that sole recurring theme and the rock music as part of his territory, themselves presenting us with a divided landscape, the soft vulnerability of the melodic theme as counterbalance to the more muscular and aggressive rock. Like his leather jacket and ‘muscle’ car, the ‘muscle’ music was inherited from his father John, but in terms of our experience of the show, that is mostly information we are told, not what we see and hear. What we witness instead is Dean’s ownership of the musical character of the show. Given that the show is about two brothers, Sam is a curiously empty musical space—we are only very rarely allowed to know what he listens to. As Stan Beeler rather laconically puts it, “we must assume that Sam’s tastes in music are closer to that of the target [18-34 women] audience, although they are not given extensive expression in the series” (2011, 21). The closest we get to knowing Sam musically is when Dean takes back ownership of the Impala at the start of season 4 (“Lazarus Rising” 4.1) and disgustedly throws Sam’s ipod onto the back seat when it starts playing the distinctly modern sound of Jason Mann’s 2005 song “Vision.” Even in an episode like “Mystery Spot” (3.11), told almost entirely from Sam’s perspective, the music does not establish a sense of identity for him. Jay Gruska, responsible for most of the melodic scoring on the show, scored this episode and he entirely omits Dean’s lyrical theme while introducing nothing comparable for Sam’s

unbearable trial of repeatedly watching Dean die. In the final act, when Sam spends six months on the road hunting the trickster, the montage is scored with generic, rock-pastiche rather than using an actual song that might bring some level of extra-textual meaning via the lyrics, the choice of artist or musical genre. Even in this most personal of episodes, Sam's musical identity remains muted.

Dean's classic rock music permeates the show at a number of levels, moving between the Impala, various radio alarm clocks in motel bedrooms and the non-diegetic soundtrack; but also manifesting in the names borrowed from rock musicians the brothers give themselves for their FBI aliases, and song titles as episode titles, especially in season 2 (see Beeler 2011, 23). This side of the music speaks to the mission: the rock tracks tend to be fast, driven, active, aggressive even. The other side of the musical coin, Dean's melodic theme, speaks to the emotional cost of that mission. In some ways, Sam doesn't need this theme in the way Dean does: we know Sam is more reluctant to be a hunter, and that he had a normal life as a student and would-be law graduate; Dean's abnormal lifestyle and devastatingly effective violence could make him profoundly unsympathetic, which the theme therefore offsets (albeit helped inordinately by Dean's extreme prettiness and meltingly lovely blue eyes). It is difficult to pin down succinctly what the theme signifies: Zimshan, *Supernatural's* most dedicated music blogger, rather clunkily named it 'Dean's family dedication theme'. I understand what she is trying to say: the theme represents a complex bundle of conflicting emotions, because it attempts to capture how Dean feels about his family, and that is very complicated. There is love, abandonment anxiety, a desire for approval and sense of inadequacy, intense loyalty to family alongside a sense that however much he sacrifices his own needs to the mission, it will never be enough, all bound up in one little theme. It first appears at the end of season 1, usually played gently on piano; thereafter, in perhaps four or five episodes per season, so it never quite goes out of mind without suffering from overuse. It would be beyond tedious to list every single appearance, but some edited highlights are: its first full appearance to accompany Dean's "The things I'm willing to do" speech in "Devil's Trap" (1.22); the heroic, last-post trumpet version of "All Hell breaks Loose Part 2" (2.22) when Sam dies in Dean's arms; Dean's confession to Tessa the reaper in season 4 ("Death Takes a Holiday" 4.15) that he wished he'd gone with her when she came for him in season 2; Dean's encounter with the memory of his mother as he and Sam search heaven in "Dark Side of the Moon" (5.16) and regularly in every season thereafter. An extended hearing occurs as John, Mary and the boys are magically reunited for one final family dinner in "Lebanon" (14.13) where it brings the poles of its complex emotional range into play: simultaneously heartbreaking, as they know that this is their first and final

reunion, while also bringing warmth and closure to Dean's need to hold his family together. What this and the other examples shows is how flexible the theme is: it can play to heartbreak, desolation, nostalgia, death wish and life-affirmation.

It occasionally crops up in relation to Sam, and the most notable example occurs at a point where Dean is effectively absent, having become a demon at the start of season 10, his evil nature signified by him singing terrible, drunken karaoke. In "Soul Survivor" (10.3), we hear the theme as Sam looks at family photographs in Dean's room. Here, the music serves as a memory of the real, ensouled Dean as much as it underscores Sam's emotional state, but this transference of the theme to Sam is short lived. By the end of the episode, his soul restored, Dean reclaims it as part of his own soundtrack. Initially, he looks at the photographs as Sam did earlier, but whilst there is gentle piano music, there is no theme until Castiel comes to offer reassurance that things can return to normal, the theme finally restored—like his soul—to Dean.

One of the defining features of cult television is its willingness to experiment, to push what an audience may or may not be willing to accept. It is remarkable how often that experimentation involves music: Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* (1986); *The X-Files*' (1993-2002) "The Post-Modern Prometheus" (5.5); *Buffy*'s "Hush" (4.10); regular outbreaks of fantastic performance in *Six Feet Under* (2001-5), *Ally MacBeal* (1997-2002) and *Buffy*'s "Once More, with Feeling" (6.7) among other TV musical episodes; and the recurring device of the demon, Lorne, reading someone's aura and seeing their future when they sing in *Angel* (seasons 2-5). *Supernatural* has continued that legacy of playful experiment involving music, especially "Monster Movie" (4.5) on which I have previously written (see Halfyard, 2016: 126-134). Some of the episodes that involve deviant title sequences to relocate the narrative in a different genre also use music intertextually as a key part of that relocation, including the specific musical and visual allusions to *The X-Files* opening credits in "Clap Your Hands If You Believe" (6.9); the general reference to westerns (visually *Bonanza*, musically *Rawhide*) in "Frontierland" (6.18); and more quirkily, to wedding chapel music in "Season 7, Time for a Wedding" (7.8), where the usual guitar riffs used for continuity between scenes are replaced by similar riffs on a Hammond organ; and perhaps the most elaborately experimental episodes, "Changing Channels" (5:8), which has the longest deviant title sequence, a song visually and musically modelled on 1980s sitcoms like *Full House* (1987-95) and *Who's the Boss?* (1984-92)

The spirit of playful experiment is seen and heard nowhere more clearly than in the way *Supernatural* wrote fandom into the show. *Star Trek* (1966-69) and *The X-Files* were both key in the formation of avid fan

audiences for cult TV (see Reeve, Rodgers and Epstein 1996); and *Buffy*'s makers were among the first to connect directly with fans through a fansite, *The Bronze*, where Joss Whedon and others from the production team took part in online forums. In "The Monster at the End of This Book" (4.18) *Supernatural* took this to a quite different level with the introduction of the prophet Chuck, a pulp fiction writer (well, actually God, but we don't find that out for another few seasons) whose novels are actually his visions of the Winchesters, reproducing the TV series as a book series located within the diegetic reality of the show itself. The book series' diegetic fans know every detail of the Winchesters' lives, write fan fiction and engage in cosplay, as well as getting dangerously obsessed at times (mostly Becky). The show inserts the fans into the narrative, and celebrates them in the 200<sup>th</sup> episode, when Marie, a high-school fan of the books, stages her musical version of *Supernatural*, with all the characters played by teenage girls, discovered by a perplexed Sam and horrified Dean as they investigate a case ("Fan Fiction" 10.5). Having previously presented Becky as representative of female fandom in a problematic light (not meeting the usual televisual standards of everyday beauty; emotionally unstable; using magic to seduce and marry Sam),<sup>1</sup> the writing of this episode is remarkably affectionate toward the aspects of avid female *Supernatural* fandom that some critics have found deeply disturbing (see Cherry 2011 for an appraisal of this), giving us in particular the "BM moment" (boy melodrama, not bowel movement) that lightly acknowledges the erotic repurposing of the Sam/Dean relationship in a significant amount of the fan literature. In "Fan Fiction", this is turned into a positive when in the final scene of the musical, the dialogue between the on-stage Sam and Dean, itself a recreation of actual dialogue we heard in season 1, is allowed to stand in place of what Sam wants to say to Dean at this point; and this is followed by an onstage rendition of "Carry On Wayward Son" by the girls, sung as a poignantly evocative ballad, the tempo slowed down and the boisterous male voices and electric guitars of the original replaced by female voices in a ethereally high soprano register. Jay Gruska plays the piano for the reimagined rock song: the gentle piano music recalls the lyrical writing and Gruska's recurring theme, bringing the two sides of Dean's musical landscape together in a single space, rock meeting pathos.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Becky returns in Season 15 ("Atomic Monsters" 15.4). Although her ultimate fate is uncertain at the time of writing, it is clear that she has a happily stable life, still a devoted fan of *Supernatural* but now turning her fandom into a successful online business selling handmade merchandise, which she manages from home whilst also being happily married and a mother. This confident and settled Becky, whilst still very much the same enthusiastic woman as before, is refreshingly uncrazy in comparison to our last sight of her in "Season 7, Time for a Wedding" (7.8).

On one level, one has to ask how can this song be here? It appears in virtually every season finale but only in the extradiegetic soundtrack of the TV show; books do not have soundtracks, and this song is not played by Dean on his car stereo in any episode we see. But it could only have been this song: to all intents and purposes, this is the series' theme tune, the only piece of music that regularly appears at the top of a show that has only a 10 second ident as its usual opening title. The song (normally) only appears once per season but no other piece of music holds such a privileged and iconic position in its narrative—it operates as much as a theme marking the moment of narrative climax in the season finale as Dean's theme points to his vulnerability, and the lyrics of the song can easily be adopted in the narrative as John Winchester speaking directly to his sons, giving it a direct relevance to the ongoing mission. In “Fan Fiction,” marking not the start of the episode but its end, not the season climax but the series reaching a landmark episode, we have it musically transformed, reflected back at us in a way that allows it to generate new meaning. For the first time, Sam and Dean diegetically hear this song sung about them and to them, recognizing themselves in it, just as we hear a familiar song made unfamiliar as it sung to us in our own voices, the voices of the fans.

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