

Theme Music Men

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Simple logistics would suggest that not every hero gets to move mountains, run at hyper-speeds, or deflect bullets from a chiseled chin. Someone has to provide support services to make heroes look heroic.

The loan officer gazed with open disapproval at the man on the other side of his opulent walnut desk.

"Now, as for your employment?"

"I have two jobs, really," Irwin Katzenbaum said, shifting uncomfortably. "I work for Polyphonic Studios in the audio recording department. I'm a senior technician, I've been there for eight years."

"Good, good," Mr. Gruber said. "And salary?" Katzenbaum told him. "... All right... You say you have another job as well?"

"Yeah, but it's not very income-producing most of the time," Katzenbaum said.

"We need it for the application," the loan officer said, silting back with the smug expression that said he had all the time in the world, Katzenbaum had already pegged him as one of those bureaucrats who enjoyed wielding their petty power against people who couldn't defend themselves.

Katzenbaum muttered, almost under his breath, "I'm Theme Music Man."

The banker leaned forward, "Say again?"

Irwin gave up. "I'm Theme Music Man," he repeated more clearly.

"Really?" Gruber asked, with real interest. "Well!... Well, we get a lot of people in here claiming to be petty superheroes. Would you mind demonstrating your talent? Um... make up a theme for me."

Irwin gulped. He knew what the music would sound like for this odious man: the saccharine violins that they always played in the silent films when the evil banker foreclosed on the house and flung the family out into the snow to freeze. Unwittingly, the music rose about him. It set his teeth on edge, even as it made him want to cry. Other people in the bank turned, to stare at them. Katzenbaum fought to contain his talent, and the misery song died away. Gruber looked dismayed and annoyed. Katzenbaum hurried to reassure him. He needed that loan.

"I've been sick with flu the last few days," he said. "Everything sounds like that."

"Oh." The banker nodded, unsatisfied.

"About the loan?"

"Well, we'll need a few days to consider it, check your credit references, you understand." Katzenbaum didn't understand, but he nodded. The banker rose and offered him a hand. "We'll call you."

"Thanks," Irwin said, and hastily left the bank. He could feel the misery song threatening to well up and drown out the Muzak in the beige marble lobby. He didn't want to whine that he needed a lousy three thousand bucks to buy a functional used car or lose the possibility of promotion to traveling sound crew. Superheroes didn't blubber on bankers' desks. Even marginally employed ones who really felt like crying.

Theme Music Man. No one outside the big city knew he existed, but they always suspected something like him did. Whenever a superhero charged into action on television or in the movies, it was to the accompaniment of heroic music that stirred the blood, made viewers catch their breath in awe, fear, and amazement. So where was it coming from?

If the cameras panned a little to the side of the main event, they'd show a modest, medium-sized man in a sort of modified bandleader's uniform. It was coming from him. Music seemed to burst from him spontaneously: the French horns, the kettle drums, the bassoons and trombones. He was Theme Music Man.

It all started when he was a kid. He thought he was like one of those people who wrote to the advice columns asking if they were crazy because they always heard music in their heads. The difference was that when it happened to Irwin Katzenbaum, everyone else could hear it, too. He used to get in trouble in school for making noise. The teachers kept sending him to the principal's office until they were convinced he didn't have a concealed radio or tape player. Then they just thought he was a freak.

Not until he fell in with a few of the real superheroes did he manage to find a peer group. It started in his teen years in Boston, when the street he was walking down turned into a shooting gallery. Ten mugs in panty-hose hoods were firing guns at a lone man wearing an immaculate white gi and black hakama trousers. Irwin recognized him at once as Kickfighter, Boston's pride and joy. How he eluded the hail of bullets and whirled in to knock out each man in turn, Irwin could never say later. He just watched with everyone else, dumbfounded.

When it was all over, the news crew summoned to the scene surrounded Kickfighter—and Irwin, who had been generating sweeping, daring musical phrases with an Oriental flair throughout the whole confrontation. Under the red domino mask, the Japanese-American superhero turned out to be a nice guy. He took Irwin under his wing, helped him train his talent, taught him what he was doing and how to control it... somewhat. The two of them ran together in Boston for three years, on adventures that came up after school hours, until Irwin graduated. Kickfighter was strict about not interrupting school, even when Irwin complained about missing all the good parts. Then Kickfighter insisted Irwin go on to college and get a decent education. Irwin was reluctant. He'd never have a more appreciative audience, but Kickfighter was adamant. Irwin went. Naturally, he majored in music.

After college, he moved to New York and got a part-time job in Polyphonic's tape library. His essays into crimenghting were a lot more frequent in New York. With an introduction from Kickfighter, Irwin started running with the superheroes he'd heard of all his life. He affected a costume that suited his talent: white tunic trimmed with gold braid, peck-measure cap, white spandex stirrup pants, and boots that used to be a horror to run in until the Wonder Lady tipped him off about a custom shoemaker who worked for the trade.

In spite of the danger, Irwin was thrilled to be involved with people who were admired. Whenever he was with one of the big names, the music he made was grand and heroic, suiting the situation and the hero. Every one of them had a different motif, a different melodic line. When he was with the Superguy, it was all kettle drums and French horns. The Superguy didn't like the fanfare, being a really nice, modest man who lived quietly most of the time. Theme Music Man loved it when he was allowed to hang around. The relationship didn't last because it was hard for the Superguy to sneak up on a crook when the French horns started blaring DAH da da da da DAN DA DA! DAN dadada dah DAN DA DAAA!

The Dark Detective had a moody, film-noir theme on saxophones that TMM really liked to play. It made him feel like he was in the middle of a Bogart picture, but it annoyed the heck out of DD, because an action bridge filling the air was not a conducive atmosphere to interrogate an uncooperative stoolie in private. The Dark Detective was relatively patient for a couple of weeks, then he passed Irwin on to the next big guy who was interested.

TMM thought he would last with Rap Brother, who did his thing as much with tunes as with his fists. RB's cause was getting kids off the streets. Irwin would stand by, generating scratching, samplings, and popcorn beat, and marveling at Rap Brother's sure sense of reality as he told the kids about right and wrong. He was one of the last of the great. Hollywood got him, not an assassin's bullet. It might have been more merciful. Once he hit the boob tube, kids took Rap Brother just about as seriously as the commercials. The producers used TMM's music as the basis for the show's sound track, providing a nice chunk of change for the kitty for as long as the program lasted, which was two seasons.

Since he was not particularly heroic himself, Theme Music Man's personal theme sounded a lot like a mouse sneezing into a kazoo. It inspired no one, not even him.

Where Irwin really shone was at superhero press conferences, because he provided a natural music track for the TV reporters' sound bites. He tried to time it so the big fanfares came right after the superhero made his or her most important statement. The times when he failed to control himself and ran right over the punch line didn't make him popular. Still, he did earn royalties from every time someone played one of his themes on the radio, on TV, or in the movies. ASCAP and BMI sent him a small check once a quarter.

Things had declined for him since all the big guys started disappearing. Bad guys' bullets and fatal traps claimed some of them, but some retired and, like Rap Brother, Hollywood got some of them, too. Without the principal hero, there wasn't much

need for a side-kick, however useful. Irwin took on side jobs to help support himself.

When he wasn't scoring press conferences for heroes or cutting together tape at Polyphonic, Theme Music Man hired out to politicians. His reputation for honesty was well known, so his endorsement meant something, ratings-wise. He was approached nearly every week by some candidate or incumbent to generate wonderful music behind the declamation of their latest self-aggrandizing plan. The trouble was that his talent was honest. The pols were counting on Also *Sprach Zarathustra* to rise up majestically behind the sound of their voices. Depending on TMM's faith in their convictions, they might get something like a John Philip Sousa march, or the "WAH wah wah wahhhhh" trombone from missing Bucket Number Six on the Bozo Show. TMM hired himself out to parties, bar mitzvahs, worked with story tellers, but it wasn't much of a life for a superhero.

Crime didn't pay, not for those committing it, and certainly not for the poor slobs who fought it. Irwin got on a bus, feeling sorry for himself.

The personnel department at Polyphonic agreed to hold open the field job one more week, until Irwin heard whether or not he had the car loan. He was on edge until the phone call came three days later. Begging an extended lunch break from his supervisor, Irwin took the bus down to the bank. He was excited; he'd already earmarked a used Chevy station wagon in a lot down the street. With the loan, he'd have enough to pay the title and license fees.

As soon as he got to the loan desk, Irwin knew there was bad news. The guy behind it looked glum.

"I'm sorry to pull you down here for nothing, Mr. Katzenbaum," the banker said, trying to look friendly. "I wanted to see you in person so you would understand there's nothing personal."

"You could have said that over the phone," Irwin said.

"Uh, well, you know, you are a superhero. I wouldn't want any of your friends to misread our refusal to give you a loan."

"Yeah." Irwin could imagine the banker didn't want anyone with superpowers to come up and shove him into the time-lock safe and fuse the door shut with heat-ray vision. Only an immoral jerk like a loan officer would even think of misusing powers like that. "Look, Mr. Gruber, I really need this loan. I'm up for a promotion, but I can't get the promotion without a car, and I can't get the car without money."

"How come, if you're a superhero, you're not rich?" the banker asked.

"Because we don't charge to fight crime," Irwin said. "It's unethical."

The banker's expression clearly said, "Suckers!" He composed his face. "Well, I'm very sorry. Your work record is good, but you just don't have sufficient income to support an unsecured loan."

"But the car—"

The banker shook his head. "First Financial does not want to end up owning a beater, Mr. Katzenbaum. Now, if you were buying a Mercedes..."

"Awright!" A harsh shout interrupted them. Irwin glanced up, and realized that the bank was full of guys with shotguns and ski masks. At their head was an unshaven man with a head of greasy blond hair. It was Dirtbag. Irwin recognized him from the blotter police circulated to all registered superheroes. The guy never bathed. He always ended up with a cell to himself in the lockup because the street bums and petty criminals complained about the smell. A whiff of acrid B.O. floated into Irwin's face, and his eyes watered.

"Everyone here on their feet! Up! Okay, you scum!" Dirtbag shouted, thrusting bags over each teller's desk. "Fill 'em up and no one gets hurt!"

Irwin, standing with the other customers and employees, noticed as one teller triggered the silent alarm button (superheroes were trained always to know where that was). In a moment, the cops or one of the big guys would come and rescue them. Dirtbag would end up in the slammer with another sentence.

He waited. The other people in the bank waited. The tellers filled the bags with money as slowly as they dared. No one came.

"All right, you morons, speed it up!" Dirtbag said, leaning over the desk.

"We're working as fast as we can, sir," the first teller said. He made the mistake of glancing toward the front doors. Dirtbag wasn't stupid. He knew that meant someone had called for help. He leveled his S&W pistol at the man behind the counter and backed away toward the middle of the lobby.

"You get that money into those bags, pronto. Nobody comes in or goes out until we're clear." To add weight to his orders, he pulled back the trigger with one grimy thumb. The teller nodded uneasily. Dirtbag signaled with the gun for his fellows to collect the sacks the tellers handed over.

One of Irwin's fellow hostages, a burly man in construction worker's clothes, started forward, fists ready. Dirtbag spun to cover him with the S&W. The man held up his hands, and returned meekly to his place.

"Nobody moves," the villain said. He glanced to one side, where a mother was shielding her young daughter with her own body. Dirtbag reached around her and yanked the girl toward him. He put the gun barrel to the child's temple. "Or she winds up dead."

"You creep!" Irwin shouted. He leaped for the gunman, hands out for the man's throat. Dirtbag, surprised, raised the gun to blast at him, and then dropped it to cover his ears.

Deafening blares of trumpet music filled the room. Rolling thunder from kettle drums echoed off the walls, making the windows shake, and the desks danced on the marble floors. Music burst out of Theme Music Man louder than it had ever done for anyone else, disabling the crooks. He closed with Dirtbag, and chopped him with a quick left to the belly, and a roundhouse right to the jaw. The girl fell on

the floor and crawled back, sobbing, to her mother.

As if the music had awakened them from somnambulance, the bank guards dropped their hands and waded into the fray beside Theme Music Man.

Dirtbag threw his arms around Irwin and squeezed. Irwin knew this move from Dirtbag's rap sheet: the perp was trying to use his incredible stink to disable him. Irwin concentrated on the helpless crowd around him. The brass band got louder, and louder, until he could almost sense Dirtbag's fillings rattle in his teeth. The villain let go, and Irwin clasped both hands together. With speed and grace that would have made Kickfighter proud, Theme Music Man spun in a circle, and connected with the side of Dirtbag's head. The robber dropped like a stone.

After one final, glorious crescendo, the music died away to a tweetie when the police arrived. By then, all of the robbers had been rounded up and were being held at gunpoint by the guards in a corner. Dirtbag and his men, heads still ringing, were taken into custody.

The chief of police himself congratulated Irwin personally for the television cameras.

"That was one daring move, Theme Music Man," Chief Hasselrich said, pronouncing the name carefully for the benefit of the viewers who didn't recognize the middle-sized man in blue jeans and zipper jacket.

"I couldn't have done anything else," Irwin said truthfully. In more ways than one. He didn't have a supersuit to protect him, or muscles from another planet, or the pharmacopoeia of a mad scientist to use against villains. It was just him, against a creep who would use threats against a little girl. "In fact, I didn't realize I was making music until it was all over."

"That was some music," one of the guards put in.

"But what were you doing here, Mr. Theme Music Man?" a reporter asked, pushing a microphone under his nose.

"Well, I came in to talk to them about a loan," Irwin said, "but they..."

"... We're always happy to do business with such a virtuous upholder of the law," Gruber said, shoving himself in front of the television cameras and microphones. "Mr. Katzenbaum was about to sign the papers when that gang tried to rob us. We were very lucky he was here." He put a firm arm around Irwin's shoulders, and gave him a big smile. Irwin wasn't about to blurt out the truth. He was going to get his loan, and that was all that mattered. Gruber wouldn't dare to back away on his approval now, not after having announced it on television.

"You realize there's a reward for Dirtbag's capture," the police chief said. "You've earned it, Theme Music Man."

"Thank you, Chief," Irwin said formally. They shook hands, and the crews switched off their lights and rolled up their sound cables. A reporter leaned in quickly with a big still camera and snapped off a flashbulb in their faces.

"Page one tomorrow, Mr. Theme Music Man, Chief!"

"Wow," said Irwin. Still dazed, he went back to Gruber's desk to sign his papers, and wandered out onto the street to catch a bus back to work.

He'd never done that before, foiled a crime all by himself. Since the beginning of his supercareer, Irwin had always been a sidekick. He, skinny Irwin Katzenbaum, whose only talent was being the world's only bipedal jukebox, had helped to capture a dangerous criminal and his gang!

He bounced down the street with a springy step as he remembered just exactly how it felt to kayo Dirtbag, to save the little girl—boy, he was scared! He wondered if all the heroes felt that way when they did their superdeeds.

The symphony rose around him again, filling the street with the bassoons and bass horns. The kettle drums rolled, and he conducted an invisible orchestra with his elbows akimbo. Never had he evoked such incredible music, and it was all for him!

An old woman strode up to him and thwocked him across the shins with her umbrella.

"Young man!" she shrieked, shaking the handle in his face. "Stop making all that noise!"

Irwin gawked at her. In an instant, the fanfare died away. The mouse and its kazoo were back, but it didn't bother Theme Music Man. He was happy.

He walked away humming.