

Technical Notes on *Begone Dull Care* (1949)

The Soundtrack

The music, although recorded before the visuals were made, was the result of a close collaboration between Oscar Peterson (with double bass percussion) and myself. Four days were needed to evolve the musical structure and details.

There was much give-and-take between us, in the sense that Peterson often did things on the piano that for me gave rise to new visual ideas; on the other hand, I had already certain visual ideas which dictated that he do certain things in the music. From his abundant improvisation I was able to select from and arrange ideas that would inspire us when I and Evelyn Lambart came to make the picture. The shaping of the music evolved almost bar by bar, and certainly phrase by phrase.

Preparation for the Visuals

The music was measured, note by note, phrase by phrase, etc. The measurements, transferred to a “dope-sheet” which charted the music on paper. The measurements were numbered, and these numbers were marked on the 35 mm celluloid, between the sprocket holes and along the edge of the film.

Making the Visuals

The movie is in three parts; the first and third were almost all painted on clear 35 mm celluloid leader; the second, (very slow part) was engraved on 35 mm black emulsion coated film.

The First and Third Parts

The clear celluloid was stretched out and pinned down to a very long narrow plank of wood (over 12 ft. or 4 meters long)

In a various ways, almost too many to list, we applied all kinds of transparent coloured dyes, and scratched or engraved on them.

One basic way was to apply a different colour to each side of the film, for the following reason. A flat wash of yellow on one side and blue on the other side gave us an overall green ground; engraving on the yellow side produced a blue pattern, on the blue side a yellow pattern.

We applied the dyes with big and little brushes, with stipple brushes, with sprayers, with finely crumpled paper, and with cloths of various textures. We pressed dry textured fabrics into washes of still wet dye. Netting, mesh and fine lace were stretched out tightly in various ways against the celluloid, to act as stencils when dye was sprayed on the film. Different types of dust were sprinkled on wet dye, which formed circles as it recoiled from each dust speck. We found a black opaque paint which, as it dried, created a crackle pattern. And so on.

Generally, in the first and third parts the frame-line was disregarded; we tended to treat the visuals in metrical lengths of textured patterns corresponding to the paragraphs and sentences of the music. However, sudden musical accents or short phrases were later emphasized by additional painting or engraving, in which case the actual frames of the film were taken into account.

In certain solo percussion sections we engraved on black film, individual frames with clearly defined images being synchronized with musical beats.

In the still other sections, painting with a full brush of wet dye was applied as the films moved through the gate of a moviola, the brush being moved to and fro, up and down, or pressed in and out, from its base to its tip, in rhythm to the music, which was run interlocked in the sound-gate of the moviola.

The Second Part

For the second, very slow section of the film, only black leader was used. While running in a moviola interlocked with the soundtrack, it was engraved on by a sharp-pointed knife. If the knife touched the film very lightly, the intermittent motion of the film in the moviola gate, made the knife bounce, so that little clear dots were created on each frame; if pressed harder the knife made larger dots with a faint tail; if pressed really hard, it made a more or less vertical line.

Thus, the knife-point was made to slide and move on the surface of the film; my hand pressed, guided and, as it were, made it “dance” to the rhythm of the music.

The total painted and engraved film was used as a master positive, from which was made a colour negative. Initial release prints were then struck from this negative.

Norman McLaren (1949)