

## Martin Denny and the Sounds of Exotica

*This in an updated version of an article originally published in  
Film Score Monthly (Vol. 2, No. 4, June 1997).*

*A look at the unique circumstances of **Forbidden Island**.*

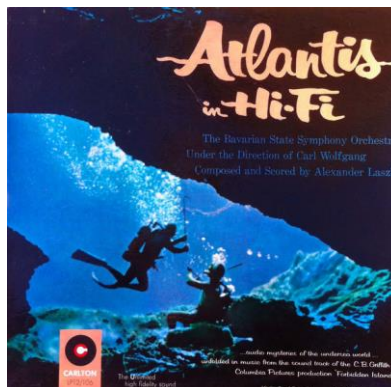
The mysteries of the tropics await!

by Kerry J. Byrnes, Okemos High Class of 1963

Some twenty years ago John Bender's article ("First Dive...Into the Dark Pool of 'Soundtrack Related'") published in **Film Score Monthly** (FSM#69) prompted me to pick up the **I, Swinger** CD by the musical group Combustible Edison, especially as Bender had referred to the CD as a "knock off" of a number of musicians, including Martin Denny, one of my all-time favorites. But I was most intrigued by Bender's statement that Denny had "even managed to get one film score under his belt." Bender's next sentence added the needed clarification: "Let's hope Denny's music for *Forbidden Island* isn't as hopelessly lost as the film itself seems to be."

But *Forbidden Island*, as later clarified, is not lost (though not yet commercially available on DVD). Produced by C.B. Griffith in 1959, *Forbidden Island* was shown on cable's TNT in August of 1992 as part of a package of films TNT licensed from Columbia, now owned by Sony (film not included in the current package of newer films Sony has licensed to TNT). Fortunately, a video of TNT's screening of *Forbidden Island* was preserved by none other than the Maestro of Exotica – Martin Denny – who kindly loaned his copy so I could make a dub.

Leonard Maltin's **1995 Movie and Video Guide** provides a synopsis of *Forbidden Island*: "Sleazy film with [Jon] Hall a skindiver seeking to find sunken treasure before a gang of crooks uncovers the loot." The film's score, however, was not composed by Martin Denny but rather by Alexander Laszlo, and can be heard on the **Atlantis in Hi-Fi** LP (Carlton LP-12/106), the liner notes for which state: "audio mysteries of the undersea world...unfolded in music from the sound track of the Columbia Pictures production *Forbidden Island*."



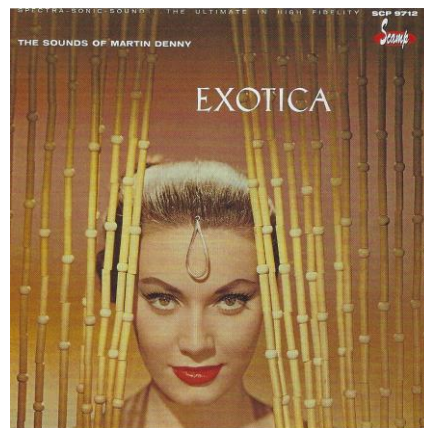
The liner notes for **Atlantis in Hi-Fi** describe *Forbidden Island* as dealing “almost wholly...with underwater sequences. For his soundtrack setting, Laszlo has painted a modern audio picture in symphonic hi-fi of the now still, now stormy subterranean world where perhaps today...the fabled Atlantis does exist and breathe.” Recorded by the Bavarian State Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Carl Wolfgang, the LP has nine cuts: The Coral Empire, Temple of Poseidon, Traffic of a Sunken City, Sunset on the Ocean Floor, Night Below the Reef, Conference of the Sea Gods, Rapture of the Deep, War at Ninety Fathoms, and Exiles of Atlantis. As none of these titles bears any connection with *Forbidden Island*, it appears that Carlton was inspired to market this LP less as the soundtrack to *Forbidden Island* and more as a musical essay on the mythical Atlantis.

So what is Martin Denny's connection with *Forbidden Island*? Denny was one of several persons instrumental in launching the sounds of exotica in the mid-1950s. Denny first came to Hawaii to perform at Don the Beachcomber's Dagger Bar, where Denny opened January 1, 1954.



By 1956, Denny's group had moved over Henry J. Kaiser's Hawaiian Village Shell Bar, where Denny's group came to invent the musical concept of “exotica.” Key to this invention was the accidental discovery of a whole new sound for Les Baxter's “Quiet Village.” “One evening while performing ‘Quiet village,’ Denny recalls in his liner notes for Denny's **Exotica/Exotica Vol. 2** CD (Scamp SCP-9712),

those frogs, in the pond behind the stage, started croaking very loudly. As soon as we stopped playing, they stopped croaking! I thought “Was it a coincidence or what?” When we repeated “Quiet Village,” they started croaking again! The guys in the band thought it was really funny so they joined in with the frogs, doing these bird calls like we were back in a jungle somewhere. The whole thing just cracked up the audience. The next evening when somebody asked me if I would do that song with the birds and the frogs I was kind of mystified. Then I realized this guy was serious! He thought those effects were really part of the show. So at the rehearsals I had the boys do different birdcalls, spacing them about every four measures. Because they each had different voices, it sounded like we had several species of birds making noises. I would do the frog sound on a guiro – a small grooved cylindrical instrument that looks like a potato masher. I’d rub a pen or pencil on it, which made a sound just like a frog – “ribet, ribet, ribet, ribet,” and from that point on people started requesting “Quiet Village” repeatedly.



These lush tropical sounds – bird calls, croaking frogs, temple bells, wind chimes, among others – combined with Denny’s unique musical panache quickly became known as the sound of “exotica.” [And with this musical canvas also came a series of Martin Denny album covers featuring the most drop-dead gorgeous cover art model – Sandy Warner – ever to appear on an LP jacket! - J. B.]

Now, over fifty years later, Denny’s music continues to garner aficionados, with various Internet sites and streaming services featuring information about and the music of Martin Denny. Over the years various labels have reissued various Denny albums, including his *Forbidden Island* LP which includes a 2:59 version of the song “Forbidden Island” composed by Denny. “Forbidden Island,” Denny recalled, has “twelve tone introduction and ending which adds to its mysterious and foreboding sound.” “I was appearing at Don the Beachcomber’s in Waikiki, when my friend Charles Griffith, who had written lyrics to some of the songs I had composed, was getting ready to produce and direct the film *Forbidden Island* at Trader Vic’s. Charles asked me to play a cameo part of a piano player in a bar, like Sam the piano player in *Casablanca*. He also let me use the title of *Forbidden Island* for what became my third album for Liberty Records.”





Mono and Stereo Versions of Martin Denny's *Forbidden Island* LP



In the film's opening scene, Denny's character, "Marty," delivers the line "Night, honey" to the film's blond female lead played by Nan Adams. Denny again appears, still playing the piano, in the film's last scene. Denny indicated in a recent interview that his piano playing in the film was purely improvisation, that there never had been any discussion of Denny composing the film's score, and that he never met the film's composer. Despite Denny's cameo in *Forbidden Island*, he went back to being a real life piano player and musician *par excellence*, with Hollywood's loss being the world's musical gain. Denny went on to compose "Forbidden Island" which was included in the LP of the same title (Liberty LST-7001).



"Going someplace, Jo? ... Night, honey." [Martin Denny (right) at beginning of film]



"This drink's on me. ... What for?" [Martin Denny at end of film]

While Denny's "Forbidden Island" was not composed for the film of the same name, a Denny composition, "Firecrackers," was used in *Joe's Apartment*. "Firecrackers" appears as a loop repeating a rhythm pattern recorded by Japan's Yellow Magic Orchestra, with a song "De La Funky Towel" recorded over it by rap group De La Soul. Warner Brothers was upset when the studio learned that the film had used copyrighted material without giving credit to Denny, thus leaving the studio open for a law suit. According to the Honolulu Star-Bulletin (C-20, July 27, 1996), the Songwriters' Guild of America represented Denny in obtaining a settlement from Warner Brothers.

The flip side of not having a Denny-composed soundtrack for *Forbidden Island* is the apparent loss of *The Sacred Idol*, a film scored by Les Baxter, the soundtrack LP for which was released in 1959 as **The Sacred Idol** (Capitol ST 1293). However, the film actually was not released until 1964 and under the title *The Mighty Jungle*.



**The Sacred Idol (1959 release of the music Les Baxter composed for *The Mighty Jungle*)**



**Poster Art for & VHS of *The Mighty Jungle* (1964)**



**The Sacred Idol** LP liner notes read: “Les Baxter’s mastery of exotic music finds exciting new expression here as he combines haunting melodies and primitive rhythms in selections inspired by the savage splendor of the fabled Aztec Empire.” *The Sacred Idol* is also remembered in the liner notes for the CD titled **Exotic Moods of Les Baxter** (Capitol 2438-37025-2):

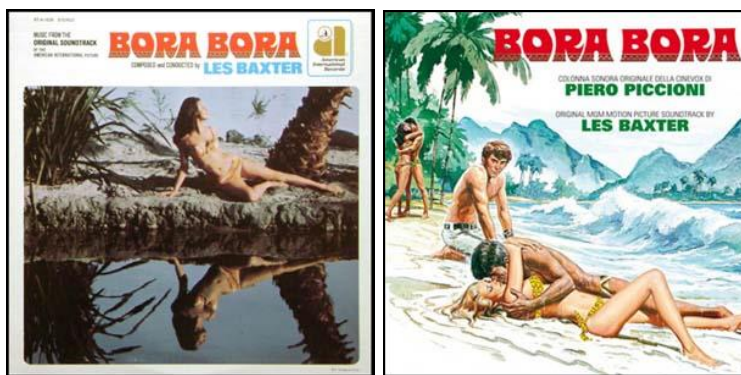
Consider 1959’s exquisitely melodramatic *The Sacred Idol*. Baxter gives the album an Aztec side and a Conquistador side, and uses them to tell a musical tale of “the savage splendor of the fabled Aztec Empire.” Baxter makes it sound hypnotic ... fanciful ... fabulous. This met the needs of a post-war world anxious to be told, over and over again, that it was a small world after all. It was no accident that Les Baxter’s music played in Disneyland’s Enchanted Tiki Room.”

Les Baxter’s bent for the exotic was again displayed in *Bora Bora*. An American International Pictures release, Baxter’s score for this film was released in the U.S. in 1970 on American International Records (ST-A-1029). As the soundtrack album’s liner notes read:

*Bora Bora*, in legend and art, represents an island that is the quintessence of Polynesian paradise. ... Here, no one but Les Baxter could capture the naive beauty and sensual sound and feeling of the South Sea islands, as confirmed by his big hit “Quiet Village”.... In *Bora Bora*, Les uses contemporary electrified sounds and combines them with the exotic sounds of the islands today.

*Bora Bora*’s original score by Piero Piccioni was released in 1970 in Italy on LP (Cinevox MDF 33/10 - see first photo) and later reissued on an Italian budget label (see second photo). The same year (1970) that Piccioni’s score was released on LP in Italy, Baxter’s score for the same film was released in the United States on LP (American International Records ST-A-1029 - see third photo) in the United States. An expanded version of Piccioni’s score was issued in Japan in 1996 as an expanded CD (SLCS-7166 - same cover as first photo). In 2012 both the Piccioni and Baxter versions of the score were issued on CD (Quartet Records MS013).





Denny's "exotica" sound covered numerous film and show tunes on many LPs, notably, **Exotic Sounds Visit Broadway** (Liberty LST-7163) and **Exotic Sounds from the Silver Screen** (Liberty LST-7158). The latter, Denny's most ambitious film-related LP, includes such film music as Ruby, Carioca, I'm in the Mood for Love, Sayonara, Children's Marching Song, Singin' in the Rain, Chattanooga Choo Choo, Paradise, Frankie and Johnny, Over the Rainbow, We're Off to See the Wizard, and Love Is A Many Splendored Thing. Denny twice recorded David Raksin's *Laura*, on **Quiet Village** (Liberty LST 7122) and **Exotica Classica** (Liberty LST-7513), a further proof that Raksin's *Laura* is, in Denny's words, "my favorite film score."

Denny, interviewed for this article, noted that film music was one of many sources of inspiration for his own music. Indeed, scattered over his many Liberty albums are cover versions of film themes representing a veritable who's who of film composers: Dimitri Tiomkin (*Return to Paradise*), Alfred Newman (*Moon of Manakoora - Hurricane*), Elmer Bernstein (*Walk on the Wild Side*), Ernest Gold (*Exodus*), Nelson Riddle (*Route 66*), Leith Stevens (*The Wild One*), David Amram (*The Manchurian Candidate*), Nino Oliviero and Riz Ortolani (*Mondo Cane*), Miklos Rozsa (*The V.I.P.s*), Alex North (*Cleopatra*), Johnny Mandel (*The Sandpiper*), Bert Kaempfert (*Strangers in the Night - A Man Could Get Killed*), Maurice Jarre (*Lara's Theme - Doctor Zhivago*), Jerry Goldsmith (*A Patch of Blue*), Elmer Bernstein (*Hawaii*), Charles Chaplin (*The Terry Theme - Limelight*), John Barry (*Born Free* and *Midnight Cowboy*), Michel Legrand (*I Will Wait for You - The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*), Max Steiner (*Tara's Theme - Gone with the Wind*), Francis Lai (*Live for Life*), Burt Bacharach (*The Look of Love - Casino Royale*), Alex North (*Was It Really Love - Hard Contract*), and Lionel Newman (*Adventures in Paradise*).

The third major proponent of the exotica sound was Arthur Lyman. A member of Denny's original group, Lyman left Denny's group to form his own group. While Lyman never (to this writer's knowledge) scored a film, his HiFi albums and album reissues on various labels have included exotica covers of film themes, including such songs as: March of the Siamese Children (*The King and I*), *Blue Hawaii*, Colonel Bogey March and 76 Trombones (*The Music Man*). The CD **Sonic Sixties** (Tradition TC1031), a retrospective of Lyman's 1960 recordings, includes upbeat treatments of John Barry's *Born Free*, Johnny Mandel's *The Shadow of Your Smile* (*The Sandpiper*), and Morton Stevens' *Hawaii Five-O*.



At the time the original version of this article was published in mid-1997, Les Baxter had passed just the year before (January 15, 1996). Martin Denny and Arthur Lyman were still alive. At the time, Denny, 85, frequently played piano as a volunteer at the St. Francis Hospice in Honolulu, while Lyman was “still vibing the tunes...every Friday and Saturday afternoons” at the New Otani Beach Hotel in Honolulu. In the 1990s the “exotic sound” pioneered by these musicians in the late 1950s and early 1960s experienced a resurgence of interest with a new audience as younger generations, as was the case with their parents, sought safe ports of call from a hectic world.



### **The Exotica Three: Les Baxter, Martin Denny, and Arthur Lyman**

Today, you may indulge your appetite for the sounds of exotica – Les Baxter, Martin Denny, and Arthur Lyman, among others – by listening to their CDs that you may yet be able to find at your local record store in the easy listening section or under the “bachelor pad,” “space age,” or “ultra-lounge” categories that do not quite connote the magic that one hears listening to *The Sounds of Exotica*. That sound may be as elusive as the mythical Martin Denny soundtrack to *Forbidden Island*. Alternately, search on the Internet for these artists’ albums at Amazon.com and other vendors or listen to their music on Internet streaming services such as Pandora, Spotify, etc.

For readers interested in other film composers who scored films with tropical themes/settings, check out the accompanying list of soundtrack “exotica” (see Box on next page).

I would like to extend appreciation to John Bender for providing inspiration with his “Soundtrack Related” article as well as a special note of gratitude to Martin Denny for his insights and music. Sadly, Denny passed on March 2, 2005, with Arthur Lyman preceding him on February 24, 2002.

Mucho Mahalo to Les, Martin, and Arthur !!! Kerry J. Byrnes (article updated in September 2018)

**Copyright Disclaimer under Section 107 of the Copyright Act 1976, allowance is made for "fair use" for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research. Fair use is a use permitted by copyright statute that might otherwise be infringing. Non-profit, educational or personal use tips the balance in favour of fair use.**

### **A Road Map to Soundtrack Exotica**

John Barry's *The Dove* and *King Kong*  
Les Baxter's *The Sacred Idol* and *Bora Bora*  
Elmer Bernstein's *Hawaii*  
Frank DeVol's *Krakatoa, East of Java*  
Georges Delerue's *Day of the Dolphin*  
Jerry Goldsmith's *Islands in the Stream*, *Medicine Man* and *Papillon*  
Maurice Jarre's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Man Friday*  
Bonislau Kaper's *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *Lord Jim*  
Angelo Francesco Lavagnino's *The Lost Continent*  
Alexander Laszlo's *Forbidden Island (Atlantis in Hi-Fi)*  
David Livingston's *Hawaiian Eye*  
Henry Mancini's *The Hawaiians*  
Ennio Morricone's *Oceano* and *Dedicato al Mare Egeo*  
Alex North's *South Seas Adventure*  
Piero Piccioni's *Bora Bora*  
Basil Poledouris's *The Blue Lagoon* and *The Blue Lagoon 2*  
Richard Rodgers & Oscar Hammerstein's *South Pacific*  
Laurence Rosenthal's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*  
Nino Rota's *Hurricane*  
Max Steiner's *Bird of Paradise* and *King Kong*  
Morton Stevens' *Hawaii Five-O*  
Herbert Stothart's *Mutiny on the Bounty*  
Dimitri Tiomkin's *Search for Paradise*  
John Williams' *Diamond Head*  
Victor Young's *Around the World in 80 Days*

Additions to or deletions from this list are welcome.