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John Sayles explores music with the adventure of a Texas Ranger.

His critically acclaimed film "Lone Star" is set in a Texas border town. The director uses music to connect the past with the present, and in the process, the songs break down boundaries.

In recent years, the lanky filmmaker-writer has been seen in Chicago stores, dropping \$300 at a pop for bluegrass, country-western, Tex-Mex and other roots-related recordings. The glorious "Lone Star" soundtrack (Daring Records) reflects his eclectic tastes.

It features the Tejano big band dance hit "Sabor a Mi"; a new Freddie Fender version of the Ivory Joe Hunter hit "Since I Met You Baby," sung in Spanish; the Lucinda Williams escape anthem, "The Night's Too Long," and a few spooky Little Willie John chestnuts.

"Music was one of the things that brought me to 'Lone Star,'" Sayles said during a recent stopover in Chicago. "You can walk into a bar in Texas, look at a jukebox, and there's Bob Wills, the Circle Jerks and Stevie Ray Vaughan. For 'Lone Star,' I wanted the idea where you go to a small place and you have stuff from every era on the jukebox, yet there were songs that could take you back."

In a director's statement, included in the "Lone Star" press kit, Sayles wrote: "In a personal sense, a border is where you draw a line and say, 'This is where I end and somebody else begins.' In a metaphorical sense, it can be any of the symbols that we erect between one another - sex, class, race, age."

Personal borders arise from apathy or worse, ignorance. Sayles makes an effort to keep his ears open to all styles of music.

"I try to listen everything from a region, from an era," said the director, who is 45. "Then I start to find themes within it, styles within it. For 'The Secret of Roan Inish' (1994), it was just to learn the difference between a ballad, a jig and a reel. I don't read music or anything, but now I can listen to them and tell you the differences."

Once he assimilates a soundtrack's musical history, Sayles delves into instrumentation with his collaborator, composer Mason Daring, who did the original "Lone Star" score. For example, Sayles explored the instrumentation of rural country music for "Matewan" (1987), a coal mining story set in West Virginia, based in part on Sayles' novel, Union Dues.

"For that we decided to use the whole hill country vocabulary, except banjos. It was just not a banjo movie. It was of mountain ballads. To use banjos would have evoked Flatt and Scruggs and 'Bonnie and Clyde.' " Or worse, "Deliverance."

However, Sayles does not go as far as director Quentin Tarantino, who has been known to comb his expansive record collection and then allow his script to follow the music. "Rhythmically, I don't do that," Sayles said. "But with 'Baby It's You' (1982), I printed lyrics in the script."

Set in 1960s New Jersey, "Baby It's You" explores the adolescent dreams of a Catholic boy and a Jewish girl. The "Baby It's You" soundtrack featured Sam the Sham's "Wooly Bully" and a Bruce Springsteen song.

Sayles culled the old Vee-Jay record vaults for much of the "Baby It's You" soundtrack, paying roughly \$3,000 a song in licensing rights. "It costs about three to five times as much to buy a song now," he said.

Sayles also played the soundtrack for actors and extras as he was shooting the movie. With a sly smile, he said, "The movie starts with 'Wooly Bully,' so I'd just blast 'Wooly Bully'. All these high school kids were waiting behind the door, and I'd tell them to keep that rhythm in them and in their animation."

The "Lone Star" soundtrack is more subtle. Sayles uses songs to bridge transitions from present to past, where earlier in his career, he might have used a camera pan to achieve the same effect. "Now, we might change the amplitude of the song somehow in the mix," he explained. "So that it went from being a very squeezed car radio version to a louder jukebox version, or from a jukebox version to someone playing on the street."

For "Lone Star," Sayles and Daring also used music to underscore dramatic themes. Lydia Mendoza's "Jurame" is used to heighten the intensity of a mother-daughter relationship.

Sayles selected the conjunto ballad, sung in Spanish, even though "Lone Star" is marketed primarily for an Anglo audience. "You can have a vocal without people thinking about the lyrics too much, because they don't understand (the lyrics)," he said. "The emotion gets through."

"You have to be very careful when using songs with strong lyrics, that they aren't right on the money. . . . They can get in the way of your character and define things. Having done a few rock videos, where you really are serving the lyrics, you don't necessarily want your movie to be serving the lyrics."

For example, at end of "Lone Star," the audience learns how Sheriff Charley Wade (played by Kris Kristofferson), a native of Brownsville, Texas, met his maker. Sayles

originally used Little Walter Jacobs' bawdy "I'm Blue and Lonesome" for the scene. "But it was so `Little Walter,' it put us in a smoky Chicago bar instead of Texas," Sayles said. "But the feeling of the music was right for the scene."

So the director then cut the scene to Little Walter's version and then took the time to have Daring and guitarist Duke Levine re-record "I'm Blue and Lonesome" as an instrumental, with Levine's six-piece band.

During the shooting of "Lone Star," Sayles drew on the musical knowledge of singer-songwriter Kristofferson. "It was interesting, because a lot of his songs are like little short stories," Sayles said. "We talked about that incredible economy a short-story writer or a songwriter has to have. You get a feeling of something so general that can be applied to so many things. (Kristofferson's) `Me and Bobby McGee' is a little story, but the emotion of that song goes a long, long way."