

# MovieMaker

THE ART AND BUSINESS OF MAKING MOVIES

To enhance reality and avoid the “convoluted scavenger hunt” of music rights, it’s jingles all the way

## Cheap, Easy Tunes for Your Movie

BY DAVE ROOS

**Y**OU’VE NEVER HEARD of JAM Creative Productions of Dallas, Texas, but we promise that you’re intimately (if only subconsciously) familiar with its product. For the past 30 years, JAM has produced tens of thousands of radio jingles for over 4,500 radio stations around the world. JAM’s bread and butter are “classic” jingles: a station’s call letters (“W-A-B-C!”), sung in earnest, multi-part harmony over a big-band backdrop.

What few moviemakers realize is how cheap and effective these radio jingles can be in establishing a scene’s setting. Take, for example, the very first scene in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, which opens with a radio blaring “W-L-S!” followed by an announcer reading, “It is a beautiful day in Chicago...” The “W-L-S!” portion is a real JAM jingle from a real Chicago radio station. Foregoing a sweeping helicopter shot or a stale title card that reads “Chicago, 1986,” director John Hughes informs the audience of a particular time and place with nothing more than a catchy, two-second ditty and a simple voiceover.

JAM is a jingle syndicate, meaning that it creates custom jingle packages for stations of different formats—adult contemporary, country, news-talk—and then “syndicates” those background music tracks by recording the call letters of dozens, or even hundreds, of different client stations on top. If a moviemaker wants to use a particular radio station’s jingle, he or she shouldn’t assume that the station owns the rights. JAM, and most other jingle producers, license their jingles to clients for specific terms of use, but maintain full ownership of the material and associated copyrights. From a moviemaking perspective—and a legal one—this actually makes things a whole lot easier.

Take the example of Stu Pollard, an independent moviemaker whose second feature, *Keep Your Distance*

([www.distanceflick.com](http://www.distanceflick.com)), revolves around a fictitious talk radio personality at a real radio station, WHAS, in Pollard’s hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. Pollard remembers trying to buy the rights to a short film clip for a previous project. The studio sent back a quote in the five figures. “Plus, we had to talk to the musician’s union about the score playing in the background of the scene, and we had to talk to the Screen Actors Guild about paying the actors,” Pollard says. “We just dropped it right there.”

When Pollard heard that WHAS Louisville didn’t own the rights to its jingles, his heart sank. “I’m a movie that’s well under \$5 million in budget,” he says. “Well under.” He imagined this big company in Dallas that would want “\$25,000 or something crazy to license these things.” What Pollard found out was that JAM founder Jonathan Wolfert owns all of the masters and all of the publishing rights to his jingles, essentially doing away with what Pollard calls the “convoluted scavenger hunt” of chasing down rights and creating a “one-stop shopping” market for jingles. To make things even easier, Wolfert also owns the rights to all the jingles created by PAMS Productions, Inc. of Dallas, the pioneering jingle syndicate of the 1950s and 1960s. If you need a cut from KELO Sioux Falls from 1959 or KDKA Pittsburgh from 1967, Wolfert’s got those, too. Obviously, this could come in handy for period pieces or documentaries.

In Pollard’s case, he needed not only the real jingles for WHAS Louisville, but new lyrics customized for his fictitious radio host, David Dailey. All JAM had to do was bring in some singers to lay down a new vocal track on the existing WHAS jingle package. Pollard received a CD with 15 authentic cuts of varying length and style. “From a filmmaking standpoint,” says Pollard, “getting to hear that stuff with your character’s

name in it is a real kick.” Pollard plans to keep over a minute of jingles in his final cut. Every time the audience hears a JAM jingle, Pollard says, it “lends credence to the fact that this isn’t a movie taking place on a set, this is a story taking place at a real radio station.”

And it’s not just radio-themed movies that can benefit from authentic jingles. JAM has supplied jingles for scenes where a character is driving across the country and the director wants to play different jingles from different locales to indicate the distance the character has traveled. JAM also supplies many of the jingles for the BBC and other international stations. Why not save the plane fare to London and stick your character in a room with a radio?

Neither Pollard nor JAM recommend trying to make a jingle yourself. Pollard says that as a moviemaker working in contemporary reality, authenticity is top priority. “Anytime you see a ‘Greeked’ beer label or a soda label or anything fake in a film, like a 555 phone number, it always distances you a little bit,” he says. Wolfert of JAM agrees. “It’s like saying, ‘Let’s not actually use The Beatles. Let’s get four guys in the studio and have them sing something,’” he says. “They’re not going to sound the same.”

In terms of price, JAM declines to quote specifics, citing that each situation is different, depending on whether the jingle is in the foreground or background and whether or not the moviemaker is willing to give JAM a credit. In the past, JAM has done film-related projects for as little as a few hundred dollars to several thousand. Pollard didn’t want to quote prices either, but said that he and JAM agreed to terms that were “very friendly to both sides.”

To learn more about JAM and listen to samples from their jingle archive, go to [www.jingles.com](http://www.jingles.com), or call their Dallas office at 214/388-5454.



Gil Bellows stars as WHAS talk show host David Dailey in *Keep Your Distance*.