

Excerpts from Jonathan Menjivar's “Using Music for TAL”

1. Generally, we don't use music at *This American Life* to create a mood in a story or make things sound pretty. Instead, it's there to help you make your point.
2. We're trying to point out what you should be listening for in the tape so you get the same joy or sorrow out of a story that we're feeling. And we use music the same way — it's a little flashlight that helps us get our ideas across.
3. We often use music to propel a story forward. When there's rising action in the story there's probably going to be music. Usually it starts in the middle of the rising action.
4. In general, a music entrance or exit will signal a shift in the story. Either a new scene is starting or a scene is ending, or you're shifting from plot to a moment of reflection, or some idea you want to underline.
5. The other way we'll underline some idea or feeling in a story is to create a music post: we'll let the music play without any talking for a few seconds. A typical post will last 4 to 7 seconds, but they can be as short as 2 or 3 seconds and as long as 10 or 12. To state the obvious: this gives the listener time to absorb what's just been said before moving on
6. Once music starts, it's usually in for about a minute, or maybe a minute and half. Sometimes it's longer — up to 2:30. Sometimes it's shorter — as brief as :40 or :45. We'll bring in music for even less than :40 now and then, but it's pretty rare. If you're going longer or shorter, ask yourself why.
7. Once you've finished a piece of music, don't bring another in too quickly. Stories need room to breathe.
8. Vary the way you start music so the rhythm of the piece isn't predictable and boring. Start some music in the middle of a long stretch of talking, other music in the clear, other music :03 or :08 or :12 from the end of a stretch of talking.
9. If you start a scene with music, and it goes away because the scene shifts, and you return to the same scene or subject later, sometimes it can be nice to reuse the same piece of music — the way film composers use leitmotifs.

