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Once Upon a Time in America (1984)

A year ago, I published my first column in the Once Upon a Time in Film Scoring series for *Drunk Monkeys*. I inaugurated the series by examining the score to *Once* Upon a Time in the West (http://www.drunkmonkeys.us/2017-posts/2018/4/28/filmonce-upon-a-time-in-film-scoring-sean-woodard) by Ennio Morricone, my favorite film composer. It's been an interesting and rewarding journey since then. Not only do I feel I've grown as a writer, but my role in that time span has shifted from a staff writer to that of Film Editor. I hope I can serve the publication well in this capacity.

To celebrate the one-year anniversary of this series, I wish to return to discussing Ennio Morricone's compositions, this time focusing on his last collaboration with

Leone's final film may be his most melancholic endeavor. Spanning three decades and exploring the intersections of regret, memory, friendship, and betrayal, the gangster epic Once Upon a Time in America was met with acclaim at the Cannes Film Festival but sadly was distributed in a butchered version for its U.S. theatrical release. Even Morricone's score was overlooked for an Academy Award nomination due to a paperwork technicality. Despite its troubled production and release history, the film remains a tour de force and its score recognized as one of the Morricone's

Told in a fluid manner, the narrative transitions between three time periods as it follows Robert De Niro's character, David "Noodles" Aaronson, as he reflects upon his life in order to confront ghosts from his past that have returned to haunt him. Morricone's score is appropriately somber in tone, but what is particularly effective

Similar to his approach in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Ennio Morricone

piece from the film, "Deborah's Theme" is introduced early in the narrative. It embodies Noodle's feelings for Deborah Gelly (alternately played by Elizabeth McGovern and a young Jennifer Connelly in her first film role). Coupled with Morricone's arrangement of the 1920 composition "Amapola" (which is largely remembered as a hit 1941 recording by Jimmy Dorsey and His Orchestra), the piece encompass Noodles' initial infatuation with Deborah and the conflict he faces

"Deborah's Theme," which contains a haunting strings melody that is doubled by wordless vocals by Edda Dell'Orso, is used to transition between 1968 and the 1920s. As the camera focuses on De Niro looking through a peephole in a wall, the theme then transitions to "Amapola" as a memory cue. Leone closes the camera in on Noodle's eyes, before showing a reverse shot of what he is seeing. When the camera cuts back to Noodles, he is introduced as a teenager, spying on Deborah dancing in her father's restaurant storeroom. The song is played on a gramophone, its melody

carried by an oboe. The jazzy arrangement is measured and restrained.

Later in the film, Morricone rearranges the tune for strings to be played by musicians in a restaurant that Noodles takes Deborah to on a date. The strings convey a sweeping, romantic tone as Noodles tries to win her heart. However, the evening does not go as planned and, in the film's most heartbreaking scene, Noodles

selfishly takes advantage of Deborah on the car ride back to town because she

facial expressions cannot express on their own.

memory invades his present situation.

Bless America" plays.

evoked by the film's score.

rejected him in favor of leaving for Hollywood to become an actress in. As he rushes to the train station the following day to catch her before she leaves, her theme plays over the sequence, carrying the weight of his guilt as the train pulls out of the station. When they meet again years later in Deborah's dressing room, the theme's melody resurfaces, conveying the resentment that a few cryptic lines of dialogue and

While "Deborah's Theme" and some of Morricone's other themes for the film have been explored by musicologists and film scholars, I would also like to address a few

selections that have not been as examined closely from the soundtrack.

The first is Morricone's arrangement of the Lennon-McCartney composition, "Yesterday." As Noodles escapes capture from gangsters on the lookout for him, he purchases a bus ticket to get out of town. The music is cued when he passes through the doors, which are framed by a painting of a giant red apple. The next shot we see is the older Noodles catching his reflection in the door's mirrored glass. As he does this, a soothing voice sings the word, "Yesterday," followed by strings picking up the melody. This pattern is repeated as the vocalist sings, "Suddenly." This muzak version almost feels anachronistic to the tone of the first half hour of the film; however, given the son's popularity during the 1960s, it is easy to see how re-

recorded renditions of the Beatles song may have populated the airwaves and record stores. Seen in this context, Morricone's version appears to be suitable in the scene. In addition, since the song's unspoken lyrics—"All my troubles seemed so far away / Now it looks as though they're here to stay"—are consistent with how Noodles'

Lastly, given the song's prominence in the media this year, I would like to draw attention to the film's inclusion of Kate Smith's 1938 rendition of "God Bless America." The song appears near the conclusion of the film as Noodles is leaving Senator Bailey's party. As he walks down the road, he believes he sees Bailey

disappear into the back of a garbage truck. However, we are unsure if this is a trick of the light or of Noodles' mind. Directly following this, three convertible cars emerge from a tunnel. However, they appear to be from the late 1920s or 1930s instead of 1968. Even their passengers are dressed in styles more suitable for a party thrown by Jay Gatsby. As the cars race past Noodles, Kate Smith's version of "God

Recently, the revelation that Smith also recorded songs containing lyrics of a racist nature has caused controversy, with a large number of people requesting the New York Yankees to replace her version with a different arrangement at their home baseball games. While I am not going to defend Smith's version, it is important to note why Leone and his collaborators may have chosen to include it in the film.

Given Once Upon a Time in America was primarily shot in the United States, it is understandable that Leone aimed for an authenticity to the New York City scene and the portrayal of its immigrant population. Given that Smith's version was perhaps the most popular rendition of "God Bless America" at the time, it would make sense that the Italian director and the film's producers included it to contribute to that air of "American" authenticity. However, in retrospect, any version could easily be substituted in this scene, since it is the lyrics that actually relate to the film's thematic

arcs. If a person views the film through the lens of economic ascension and the American Dream, it is easy to see how lofty such a goal is, given the fates of Noodles and his companions. Senator Bailey is facing a trial, Noodles' aspirations have been stolen from him, and the notion of what constitutes success has become clouded. Since America is often described as the land of opportunity, the lyrics of "God Bless America" provide a sort of contradiction to that statement in the context of this scene. Rather than achieve success, it is greed, financial ruin, and betrayal that has brought down the film's characters. In this context, any sense of pride or American exceptionalism the song conveys are presented in a negative, almost ironic, light. Instead, it provides a bitter reminder of one of the film's themes of loss that is further

Sergio Leone's magnum opus celebrates the 35th anniversary of its Cannes premiere this month. While not as lauded as his westerns Once Upon a Time in the West and The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, Once Upon a Time in America remains a sprawling, yet flawed, epic that continues to reveals layers of its mystery upon repeat viewings. I

would encourage those who can sit still for its 229 minutes running time to experience this beautiful, brutal, and bittersweet story that is elevated by Ennio

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Visalia, CA, he now resides in Orange County.

Morricone's exceptional film score and the inclusion of period music.

developed musical themes for the film's numerous characters. The most well-known

filmmaker Sergio Leone, Once Upon a Time in America (1984).

best compositions.

is how the music carries the emotional weight.

between choosing his love for her and a life of crime.

Upon a Time in Film Scoring / Once Upon a Time in America / Sean Woodard