

DRUNK MONKEYS | LITERATURE + FILM (/)

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FILM / ONCE UPON A TIME IN FILM SCORING / FROM NOON TILL THREE / SEAN WOODARD

Film (/2017-posts/category/Film)



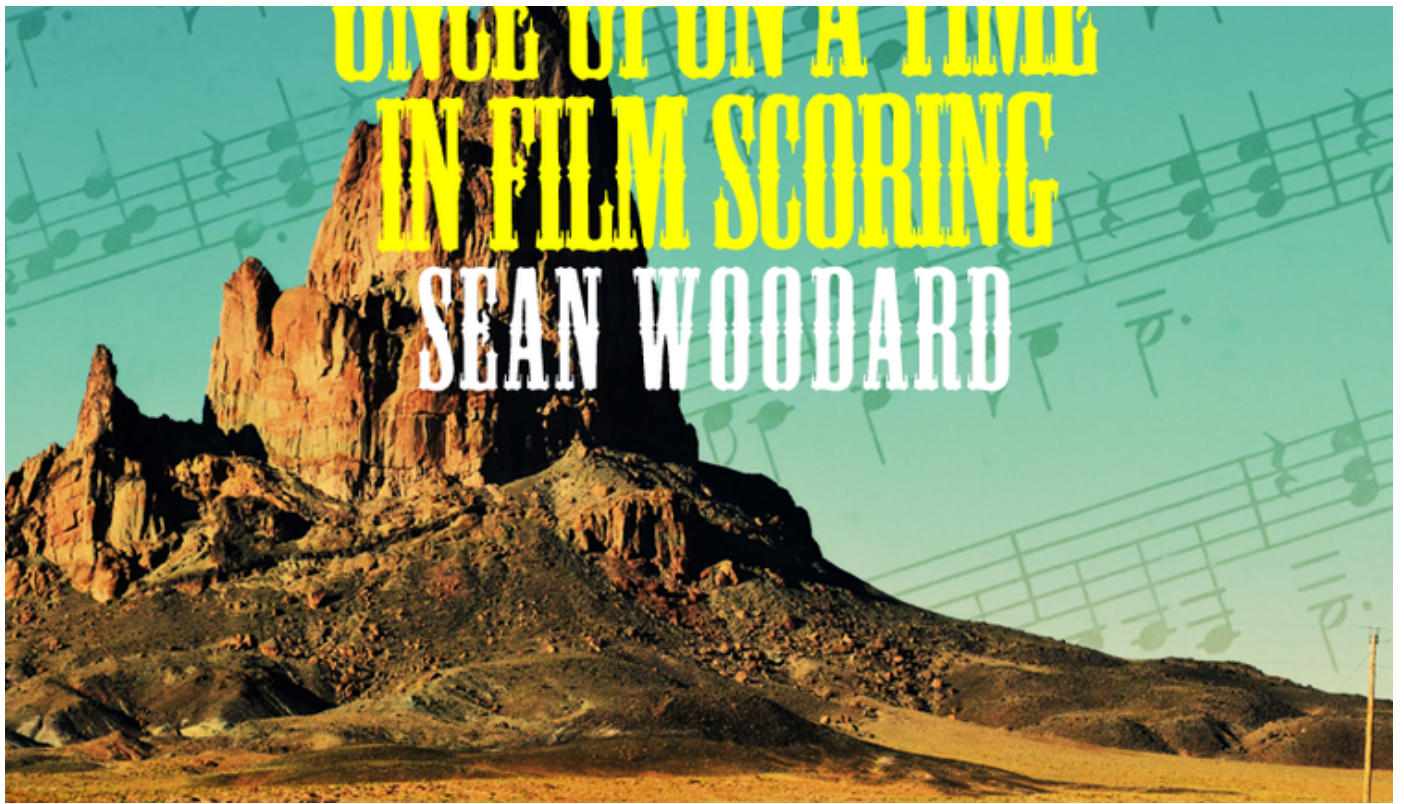


Image © Nathan Alan Schwartz

From Noon Till Three (1976)



Image © United Artists

For people who only know Charles Bronson as the stone-faced action star from *Death Wish* or his other 1970s and '80s output, then I recommend they explore his smaller films which show his wide range as an actor. He could often be quite charismatic and funny. One such film that is often overlooked in Bronson's filmography is called *From Noon Till Three*, written and directed by Frank D. Gilroy, from his novel of the same name. The film is a Comedy-Romance-Western hybrid released in 1976 at a time when the popularity of the Western was on a decline. In one sense, the film provides an opportunity to deconstruct the genre and examine how myths are born and perpetuated by society.

The movie follows Graham Dorsey, an outlaw who has a nightmare and gets cold feet the day the outfit he belongs to plans to rob a bank. On his way into town, his horse becomes hobbled. The band of outlaws stop at a nearby ranch house on the outskirts of town. A suspicious widow named Amanda Roebuck (Bronson's wife Jill Ireland) answers, saying she has no horse to loan. Graham, still fearing disaster, checks the barn and finds a horse. But he lies to his mates, standing behind the widow Roebuck's statement. The men argue over what they should do, ultimately deciding that they will return at three o'clock to collect him after the robbery.

The film possesses one problematic element: Graham Dorsey is lustfully attracted to the widow. He attempts to take advantage of the widow, despite her protests. In order to have sex with her, he then tricks her into a sad story about him being impotent. Somehow—don't ask me why—they happen to fall in love during those three hours, doing everything from making love to swimming in the nearby creek to eating lunch and waltzing in the parlor.

Soon after, a young boy knocks at the door to say the town has captured a band of outlaws who tried to rob the bank. Despite making fanciful plans with Graham, Amanda urges him to rescue his comrades. Graham agrees to do so, but secretly plans to do nothing; the idea of leaving the outlaw life to be with her is all that's on his mind. However, a posse soon chases after him. Graham switches places with a dentist and the posse grabs the wrong man, who is hung in his place. In disguise, Graham travels to the next town, where he finds himself thrown in jail for the dentist's dishonest practice.

By the time he is released from jail, the three hours he has spent with the widow have become a sensationalized legend that's produced a book, a song, a play, and a mansion tour led by Amanda Roebuck. It is here that the film becomes a tragi-comedy of mistaken identity as Graham tries to prove that he is the real Graham Dorsey.

For the film, Elmer Bernstein composed the musical score. I find it interesting how his brother Leonard always appears to be in the spotlight. Elmer Bernstein's work in this film and others shows how accomplished he was as a composer, equal to his brother who composed *West Side Story*. His

simple, sweet melody that repeats throughout *From Noon Till Three* serves as Graham and Amanda's love theme.



Although the theme is first heard over the opening credits sequence, it prominently becomes connected with the narrative when played on a gramophone as Graham and Amanda waltzes to the music. Graham is dressed in a tuxedo with tails and dons a top hat while Amanda wears a red ballroom dress. As they twirl around the room, you can see how Bronson and Ireland's chemistry as man and wife naturally is displayed in their portrayal of the two main characters.

The theme's instrumentation gives it a nostalgic feel. The music sounds as if it were reproduced by a music box. The song possesses characteristics of a classical piece. Not only is it in 3/4 time, as all waltzes are in, there are other elements that harken back to composers of the Classical Era. While the right hand melody rises and falls with each cadence, a left hand alberti bass—an arpeggiated broken chord accompaniment pattern named after Domenico Alberti—plays underneath. A good example of alberti bass in a Classical Era piece is that of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 16 in C Major, K 545.



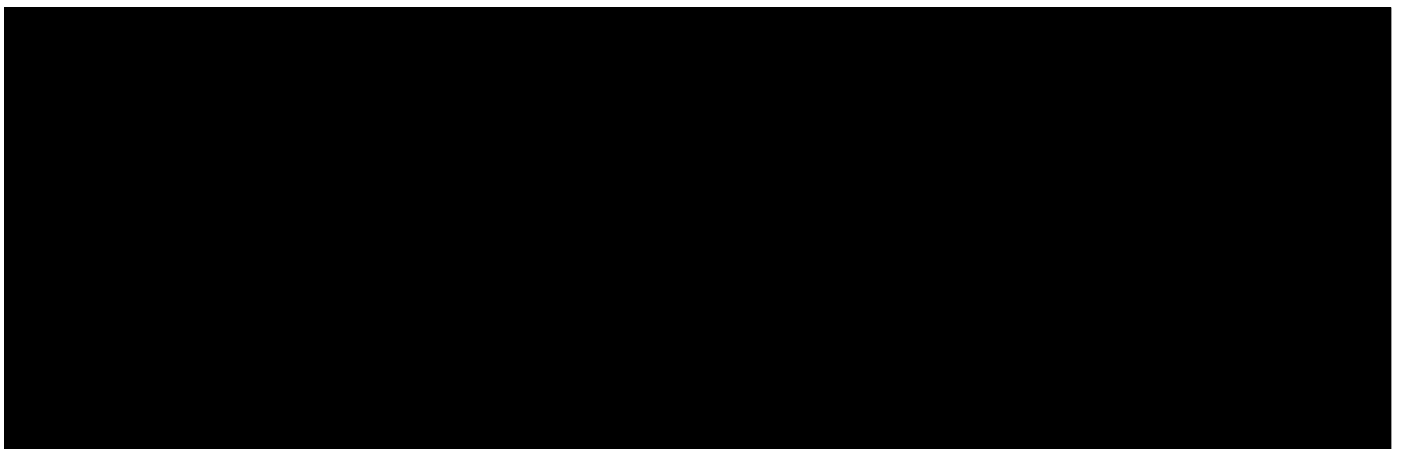


After Graham's "death," the story of his and Amanda's love affair reaches across the world. At one point, a pair of songwriters (including co-composers Elmer Bernstein and Alan Bergman in a cameo role) produce lyrics for the waltz piece. They entitle the piece "Hello and Goodbye." The chorus reads as follows:

"It's not how long the spring / It's not how wide the sky / It's just how sweet the time / Between hello and goodbye."

While the nostalgic charm of the piece remains, the lyrics add a schmaltzy quality to the song. In the context of the film, this becomes rather hilarious. As Graham Dorsey visits the town in disguise after his alleged death, the commodified aspect of their love affair highly amuses him. The song is rehashed in different versions—until it wears thin and reminds him of the pain of losing Amanda. In an attempt to rekindle their relationship, Graham visits Amanda, revealing that he is still alive. But Amanda kills herself; she'd rather keep alive the myth they created, rather than recreate the past with her lover.

Not only is Graham heartbroken, but any chance to reestablish his memory is now gone, too. Every time he hears the song, he complains. Bernstein's use of the melody as incidental music during this section of the film appears to not only mock him, but also reflect his pain. In a grand twist of irony, Graham eventually ends up committed to a mental institution, the only place where the other patients accept him for who he actually says he is. As the film's credits roll, the scene flashes back to when Graham and Amanda waltzed to the music.





Although the sweet melody returns—this time in a fully orchestrated version with lyrics sung by Jill Ireland—the musical piece acquires a melancholic air, coming full circle from its happy origins to its nostalgia-tinted conclusion.

Despite the film’s relative obscurity, Elmer Bernstein’s theme was nominated for a “Best Original Song—Motion Picture” Golden Globe award. Given the strength of its story, acting, and musical score, I highly recommend checking out the overlooked *From Noon Till Three* in Charles Bronson’s filmography.



Sean Woodard is a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University and Chapman University. Focusing on a wide variety of interests, Sean's fiction, film criticism, and other writings have been featured in *Horrorbuzz*, *NonBinary Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Cultured Vultures*, *The Cost of Paper*, and *Los Angeles Magazine*, among other publications. He serves as the Film Editor for *Drunk Monkeys* and as a co-producer of the faith and spirituality-based *Ordinary Grace* (<http://ordinarygrace.org/>) podcast. A native of Visalia, CA, he now resides and teaches in Orange County.

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