

By Marena Bronson

# A Mixtape of Underrated Fantasy and Sci-Fi Film Scores from the 1980s

Art by Jessica Schultz



**It's a good time to be alive if you like fantasy and sci-fi. With second seasons of *The Witcher* and *The Mandalorian* happening, a *Lord of the Rings* series and a *Game of Thrones* prequel in the works, there's plenty for fans of this genre to be excited about. I know I am.**

But I also remember a simpler time. A time when the words "fantasy hero" might call to mind a young Tom Cruise, or a shirtless (and heavily oiled) Mark Singer (*Beastmaster*, anyone?) A time when fantastical creatures were puppets and not CGI, and when the space action was accompanied by progressive synth-pop and guitar riffs.

I'm talking about the 1980s, a decade widely-regarded as a golden age for fantasy and sci-fi cinema. Thanks to the success of *Star Wars* and the creation of cutting-edge special effects, '80s kids like myself got to experience some of the most imaginative fantasy and sci-fi films Hollywood has ever produced.

Swords, sorcery, spaceships, time-traveling DeLoreans, dragons, wizards, witches, unlikely heroes, battles of good versus evil—you get the idea. It was a magical time if you loved that genre. Some films were great, others not so much, but most of them went all out with their music.

A great original score can make or break a film. When it's done well, it can serve the director's vision and stand all on its own, separate from

the movie. Most people are familiar with some of the landmark genre scores from the '80s—*The Empire Strikes Back*, *The Thing*, *Blade Runner*, *The Princess Bride*, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, E.T., and pretty much every other John Williams score from the decade. But the '80s also produced some underrated gems that get overlooked. So

dust off your armor and suit up because I've traveled back in time to put together a mixtape of ten of my favorite 1980s original scores that deserve another listen.

#### **Excalibur (Trevor Jones, 1981)**

*Excalibur* helped kick off the wave of '80s fantasy films when it was released in 1981. It's got magic, mysticism, swords, knights, battles, heroes, and villains—pretty much everything you want from a fantasy film (except maybe a dragon). Director John Boorman takes some liberties with the original Arthurian legend as well as packs it with plenty of violence, gore, and sex.

The end result is visually stunning, and many feel it remains the definitive King Arthur movie to this day. Boorman wanted moviegoers to

focus on the story, so he decided to cast actors mostly unknown to audiences at the time. *Excalibur* marks the big screen debuts of Liam Neeson (Gawain), Gabriel Byrne (Uther Pendragon), and Helen Mirren (Morgana), and the first U.S. film appearance of Patrick Stewart (Leondegrance).

Boorman also decided early on he wanted to use pieces from Richard Wagner and Carl Orff in key sequences in the film so he needed an original score that could help fill the gaps between those classical works. Composer Trevor

Jones would become something of a fantasy specialist in the '80s, also scoring *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*. But in the early '80s, he was still relatively unknown. After hearing some of the filler music Jones created for *Time Bandits*, Boorman asked him to write the original music needed to complete *Excalibur*.

The result is a hauntingly beautiful score with a real medieval feel to it, setting it apart from other scores from this same genre. Wagner and Orff may be playing over some of the film's splashiest sequences, but

Jones' score is definitely worth a listen. Check out: "The Lady of the Lake," "The Land of the King," and "The Death of Arthur."

#### **Clash of the Titans (Laurence Rosenthal, 1981)**

I was obsessed with Greek mythology as a kid. I was also obsessed with Ray Harryhausen and stop-motion animation. So '80s-me loved *Clash of the Titans*. Current-me still loves it, so forget about the 2010 version—the original is where

it's at! The movie tells the story of demi-god Perseus, played by Harry Hamlin, who is sent on a quest by the gods of Mt. Olympus where he has to fight a series of monsters to save the woman he loves.

The film features an all-star cast including Laurence Olivier (Zeus), Maggie Smith (Themis), Burgess Meredith (Ammon), and Ursula Andress (Aphrodite). It's also the last film of stop-motion pioneer Harryhausen who created some

pretty fantastic Greek monsters for the film (release the Kraken!).

It also features a gorgeous score by composer Laurence Rosenthal. Both John Barry and John Williams were initially approached to score the film, but they declined.

Williams reportedly recommended Rosenthal—best-known for his Oscar-nominated film scores for *Beckett* and *Man of La Mancha*—and the result is one of the great fantasy scores of the '80s that doesn't get nearly the amount of love it should.

If you enjoy action/adventure/fantasy music, you're going to love it. It's got brass fanfares to get your blood pumping, heroic themes fit for Greek gods, and romantic melodies to make you swoon. Check out Perseus's theme introduced in "Prologue and Main Title," "Pegasus," "The Lord of the Marsh," and "The Constellations-End Credits," where you will hear a voiceover by Zeus himself, Laurence Olivier.

#### **Dragonslayer (Alex North, 1981)**

The late 1970s and early 1980s were an interesting time for Disney. The studio was experimenting with more diverse content and adult-themed material, including the 1981 *Dragonslayer*, co-produced with Paramount Pictures. Ralph Richardson and a pre-*Ally McBeal* Peter MacNicol star as sorcerer and apprentice in this sword-and-sorcery tale, featuring one of the coolest movie dragons ever.

The film received an Oscar nod for Best Visual Effects that year, and the dragon effects still hold up today, almost 40 years later. *Dragonslayer* has death and sacrifice, a little mud, baby dragons eating a princess, and a hero who doesn't get the glory in the end—definitely not what you expect from a movie made by Disney.

Alex North was an unusual choice to score a fantasy film like this. Already nominated for 13 Oscars by 1981, North was best known as the composer who brought progressive

jazz to Hollywood with his visionary score for the 1955 *A Streetcar Named Desire*. North had six weeks to compose *Dragonslayer*, which featured some music rejected from his score for Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. The result is dark, aggressive, violent, and sometimes chaotic—much different than the music from other fantasy films of the '80s. It earned North his 14th Academy Award Nomination.

There are several identifiable themes in the score, but North disguises them intentionally. He plays two or three of them at the same time throughout, helping to create an atmosphere of chaos and disarray which is appropriate for the film. It's complex music to listen to, but it's beautiful at the same time and a piece of storytelling all on its own. Check out the "Main Title," "Hodges Death," "Dragon Score-Ing," and "Destroy That Amulet!"

#### **Tron (Wendy Carlos, 1982)**

It's strange to think about it now—especially if you grew up with the internet and computers—but back in the '80s, this technology was still a magical and mysterious thing for most people. When *Tron* was released in 1982, it *almost* seemed possible that Jeff Bridges could be digitized into a computer mainframe and forced to ride light-cycles and play a life-or-death version of jai alai to battle an 8-bit enemy.

*Tron* received mixed reviews from moviegoers and critics alike and wasn't a big box-office blockbuster.



But it's still the first film to show actors in an (almost entirely) computer-generated environment and *Tron's* pioneering effects inspired an entire generation of animators working in movies today. While the CGI effects may not have held up over the years, the original score by Wendy Carlos has.

You may not be familiar with her name, but Wendy Carlos' work has influenced the music you've listened to. Wendy Carlos is one of the pioneers in the world of synthesizers.

She helped invent the Moog synthesizer, she's an LGBTQ icon, and is widely regarded as one of the most important figures in the history of electronic music. Best known for her innovative collaborations with Stanley Kubrick on *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Shining*, Carlos' unique digital/electronic score for *Tron* is the first to meld synthesizers with a large orchestral ensemble—in this case, The London Philharmonic Orchestra.

From rock to electronica, the *Tron* soundtrack has it all. Listening to this score gives you a nice little history lesson in early '80s sequencer trance, not to mention Carlos' electronic genius. Check out "Tron Scherzo," "Theme from Tron," "Ending Titles," and "Sea of Simulation."

**Krull (James Horner, 1983)**  
What do you get when you mix Robin Hood-style fantasy with sci-fi and a little bit of horror? The 1983 swashbuckling fantasy *Krull*,

directed by Peter Yates (*Bullitt*, *Breaking Away*). It's a story about Prince Colwyn, played by Ken Marshall, and his group of outlaws who live on a planet named Krull while they fight to save beautiful Princess Lyssa, played by Lysette Anthony, from a villain called Beast and his constantly teleporting Black Fortress. Colwyn's only chance to save the princess is the Glaive—a mythical five-pointed weapon he carries that looks like a star-shaped boomerang.

Sound like a hot mess? If you answered yes, '80s movie critics and audiences agreed with you. *Krull* wasn't a box-office success at the time of its release. It probably didn't help that it was competing against another little sci-fi movie you might be familiar with—*The Return of the Jedi*. I re-watched *Krull* recently and believe it or not, it's got a lot of things going for it. The movie has gorgeous cinematography by Peter Suschitzky (*Empire Strikes Back*), great visual effects, early film performances from Liam Neeson and Robbie Coltrane, and an amazing score by James Horner.

James Horner's scores for blockbusterers like *Aliens*, *Braveheart*, *Apollo 13*, and *Titanic* might get more attention, but it's some of his lesser-known works I love the most. Horner's 1982 score for *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* shot him to Hollywood's music A-list, and Columbia Pictures quickly tapped him to write the score for *Krull*. To this day, many regard it as one of his best, and it's one of the '80s

underrated genre gems. You can hear elements of the *Star Trek II* score in *Krull*, along with soaring fanfares, a sweeping love theme, and nice choral work throughout. The music has a dark tinge to it—which is appropriate for some of the darker moments in the film. Check out "Ride of the Firemares" for the score's main theme. It will get your blood pumping. "The Slayyers Attack," "The Widow's Web," and "Colwyn and Lyssa" are also worth a listen.

**The Last Starfighter (Craig Safan, 1984)**  
"Greetings, Starfighter. You have been recruited by the Star League to defend the Frontier against Xur and the Ko-dan Armada."

Drop that line on a lot of '80s kids, especially if they spent time in arcades back in the day, and they can tell you exactly where it's from—*The Last Starfighter*, a 1984 space fantasy starring Lance Guest as trailer park teen Alex Rogan. Alex likes to play a video game in his trailer park called "Starfighter," and when he earns the high score on the game he learns it's not just an ordinary game. It's actually a training tool sent to Earth from the Star League looking for the best pilots in the galaxy to fight Zur and the Ko-dan Armada in an interplanetary space war. Alex is their last hope.

1984 was a crowded summer for blockbusters, with *Ghostbusters*, *Gremlins*, *The Karate Kid*, and *Indiana Jones and the Temple*

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*of Doom* all playing in theaters. *Starfighter* quickly came and went, but it found an audience on home video and cable in the '80s and '90s. It has developed quite a cult following over the years. Seth Rogan, Edgar Wright, and Steven Spielberg (allegedly) are all fans, and Gary Whitta, who co-developed the story for *Rogue One*, is reportedly working on a *Starfighter* sequel.

The film's then-groundbreaking digital effects may not hold up well today, but Craig Safan's beautiful score just keeps getting better and better as the years go on. As movie scores from the '80s go, this one for me is one of the least appreciated—often getting overshadowed by all the brilliant John Williams scores from the decade.

Safan was asked to write a "space opera" for the film, and the result is a large orchestral score that grabs you from the brass fanfares in the opening theme and doesn't let go. Like many '80s scores, it's a blend of orchestral and synthesized music, but it's the orchestral elements that stand out for me. Bold, energetic, and heroic—it will have you humming along before you know it. In addition to the "Main

*Theme*" check out "Alex Dreams," "Centuri Into Space," and "Into the Starscape."

it was released, and Lynch himself has talked openly over the years about all the "mistakes" he made in making the film.

**Dune (Toto, Brian Eno, 1984)**  
I'm a big Frank Herbert fan, and I'm looking forward to seeing Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* in 2021 (not to mention getting to experience Hans Zimmer's full score for the movie after getting a small taste with his cover of Pink Floyd's "Eclipse" in the trailer). Set 10,000 years in the future, *Dune* follows warring royal houses fighting over control of the desert planet Arrakis—the only source of the precious spice mélange. I still have a very vivid memory of seeing *Dune* in 1984 on the big screen. I didn't understand most of it—like why was there a cat with a rat taped to its side that had to be milked every day?—but I didn't care. It blew my young mind, and I loved the characters, the costumes, and the music!

To be fair to David Lynch and the all-star cast (including Kyle MacLachlan, Sean Young, Patrick Stewart, Jose Ferrer, and Sting) Herbert's meticulously detailed story and language were never going to be easy to bring to the big screen. Watching it now, it's hard not to wonder what it would look like without all the recuts it underwent to get the running time down to a more manageable two hours and 17 minutes.

Despite its flaws, *Dune* has developed a cult following over the years, along with the original score by Toto and Brian Eno. If you're only familiar with Toto from their hit "Africa," this score will surprise you. Recorded with The Vienna Symphony Orchestra, it's reaching, epic, and subtle at the same time. It's Toto's only film score, which is surprising given how well it turned out.

At one point, Brian Eno was rumored to be composing the entire soundtrack, but in the end, he only contributed one track: the haunting

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synth hymn “Prophecy Theme.” Check out the “Main Title,” “Paul Meets Chan,” “The Floating Fatman,” “Prophecy Theme,” and “Take My Hand.”

While you are listening, I’m going to listen to the soundtrack again, too. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past, only I will remain.

## ***Ladyhawke* (Andrew Powell, 1985)**

A young thief named Phillippe the Mouse escapes a medieval dungeon and stumbles across the mysterious Captain Navarre who travels by day with a hawk. At night, the hawk transforms into the beautiful Lady Isabeau, and Navarre transforms into a wolf. The two are victims of a dark curse placed on them by a jealous Bishop who wants Isabeau for himself, and they only see each other in their human form during the brief twilight moment before they change. Always together. Always apart. Unless they can find a way to break the curse.

Matthew Broderick, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Rutger Hauer star in *Ladyhawke* (1985), directed by

Richard Donner. It’s an elegant and romantic fairytale that holds a special place in my heart with beautiful production design, lots of sword action, and some comic relief from Broderick. The film wasn’t a huge hit when it was initially released, but it’s developed a cult following over the years and remains a solid and family-friendly entry in the sword and sorcery genre.

The score for *Ladyhawke*—traditional orchestral music layered with Gregorian chants, soft rock, and electronic music—remains controversial to this day. Richard Donner said he was listening to music by

The Alan Parsons Project when he was scouting locations for his gothic fairytale in Italy. He decided he wanted to modernize the score and tapped British composer and conductor Andrew Powell to write it with rock producer Alan Parsons producing. While some found *Ladyhawke*’s score to be anachronistic, I loved it. I remember rewinding the VHS tape over and over again back in the day just to listen to the music playing over the end credits.

When you’re watching the movie there’s no getting around the fact that there are moments where the

music doesn’t fit a medieval fantasy film. It’s one of those scores that you’re going to enjoy more listening to on CD. It’s full of interesting themes and variations along with some funky rock rhythms. Check out “Main Title,” “Tavern Fight (Navarre),” “She Was Sad at First,” and “Final Reunion/End Title.”

## ***Legend* (Tangerine Dream/Jerry Goldsmith, 1985)**

Even Tom Cruise had his fantasy film genre moment in the ‘80s. After *Risky Business* and before *Top Gun*, a young Cruise (sporting some pretty bushy eyebrows) starred in Ridley Scott’s 1985 film *Legend*. It’s one I like to revisit every once in a while just because the fact it exists makes me smile, because seriously, WTF?! Cruise plays Jack, a child of the forest who tries to impress his crush, Princess Lili, played by Mia Sara, by showing her some sacred unicorns. Lily touches a unicorn even though it’s forbidden (because, who wouldn’t), setting off a chain of events that ends in dark winter falling over the land.

The Lord of Darkness, played by a very Satanic-looking Tim Curry, is also looking for unicorns, and he

kidnaps Princess Lili hoping Jack will bring a unicorn to him to save his love. The seductively satanic Curry tries to win the princess over with promises of power and glory and a magical goth dress that dances. In the end, he’s outsmarted by the princess and killed by Jack who restores the captured unicorn to life, ending the dark winter. I would love to ask Ridley Scott someday why *Legend* was the film he wanted to do after *Blade Runner*.

Sill, Scott’s eye for stunning visuals boosts this medieval fairy tale, Curry is amazing as Lord of Darkness, and it’s got not one, but two beautiful scores—one by Jerry Goldsmith and one by German electronic group Tangerine Dream.

The original director’s cut features a lushly romantic score by Jerry Goldsmith. Goldsmith had worked with Scott before on *Alien* and, even though that was a strained collaboration, Goldsmith agreed to work on *Legend* after falling in love with the script. He used classical orchestral techniques, folk music, and some modern electronic textures to create a powerhouse of a score.

After the film’s European release, studio executives decided U.S. audiences needed something that would appeal to younger audiences, and the film underwent extensive re-editing. Goldsmith’s score was replaced with one by Tangerine Dream that included some ‘80s soft rock ballads, including Bryan Ferry’s “Is Your Love Strong Enough.” I enjoy both scores—they’re just very different, and for this genre, Goldsmith

feels more at home. Check out “The Unicorns,” “The Cottage,” “Darkness,” and “Reunited.”

## ***Willow* (James Horner, 1988)**

Ron Howard’s *Willow* is a late addition to the ‘80s sword and sorcery fantasy genre. Developed from a story by George Lucas, *Willow* follows a child prophesized to have a special destiny and the magical creatures and humans who help him along the way. The titular character is a farmer living in a small village with dreams of becoming a great magician, played by Warwick Davis.

When *Willow* finds a baby named Elora Danan in a basket by the river of his village, he embarks on a quest to return the baby safely to the first “real person” he finds. Along the way, the unlikely hero meets all kinds of fairytale creatures: trolls, fairies, brownies, sorcerers, as well as a wise-cracking warrior named Mad Martigan, played by Val Kilmer in a long brown wig—YES, please!

Elora Danan is wanted by an evil witch queen who has foreseen that her death will be caused by the magical powers of the child. Willow’s quest ends in a battle of good versus evil that will leave you smiling at the end. Despite its big-budget, groundbreaking special effects from ILM, and a solid cast, the film wasn’t the blockbuster many predicted it would be. James Horner’s score is one of the best things about *Willow*, and like his work on *Krull*, it’s often overlooked.

It’s an enormous score, performed by the London Symphony Orchestra and members of the Kings College Choir. It’s got everything I love about Horner’s music: rousing action, emotion, memorable themes, darkness, and interesting orchestrations. Horner himself described his work on *Willow* as a “creative breakthrough,” and it set the foundation for many of his scores to come.

Some criticize Horner for reworking his own musical cues or “borrowing” from classical music references. I love Horner’s work so much that it doesn’t bother me. His music is part of the soundtrack of my life. If you’re a classical music fan you may recognize Schumann in the heroic theme for Willow, which is based on the Rhenish Symphony. Some of the Nelwyn traveling music is clearly inspired by Edward Grieg’s “Arabian Dance” from Peer Gynt. There are plenty of great tracks throughout the score. Check out “Elora Danan,” “Escape From the Tavern,” and “Willow’s Theme.” □