

UNCHAINED MELODIES: The Film Themes of Alex North

It is, of course, the job of the film composer to help turn dreams into music. His function is to add dimensions that cannot quite be conveyed by words or acting or projected images. It is the least tangible and most difficult contribution to the complex, collaborative art of film, and it is only in the caliber of a composer like Alex North that its potential is ever realized. A clue to this ability to communicate on an almost extra-sensory level can be found in North's admission, "I find it practically impossible to score anything that does not move me emotionally." It is an admission that reveals the nature of the man – a man of sensitivity and compassion as well as extraordinary musicianship. Those who know this best are his fellow composers. The highly successful composer Jerry Goldsmith states the case simply, "Alex is a perfectionist. Of all of us, he's the master."

It may seem somewhat strange at this point in time to speak of the difficulty serious American composers had in establishing a foothold in Hollywood. But the fact is that the basic concepts in the formative years of film scoring in America were European. Many of the pioneering composers were either born abroad or educated abroad, and much of the musical thinking in Hollywood grew from the use of 19th century classical material in the early days of the industry. It was not until 1940, for example, that Aaron Copland appeared in Hollywood to score *Our Town*, and such was its lean, intrinsically American flavor that it was almost out of line with the then-prevailing styles. Despite Copland's prestige and influence he was never able to draw more than the occasional assignment in film scoring. It was another decade or so before the young composers who grew up admiring Copland and the other major American composers were able to employ their influences in Hollywood. The use of jazz colors in serious scoring did not register until 1951, when Alex North made his enormous breakthrough with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It was a major turning point in American film composition.

North came to film composing with a great deal of experience in many areas of composition. A graduate of the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, he afterwards attended the Juilliard School of Music in New York on a scholarship, while making a living as a Western Union telegraph operator, followed by a two-year period of musical study in Russia. On returning to America, North was able to spend time with both Aaron Copland and Ernst Toch in New York and with Silvestre Revueltas in Mexico City. During the Second World War he served with the Army and was put in charge of therapeutic self-entertainment programs in the hospitals, concluding his enlistment with the rank of captain. His first experience with film came with commissions to score a number of documentaries for various

branches of the government. North was particularly interested in writing for the ballet theatre, and his success in this regard widened to include composing incidental scores for stage plays. His association with director Elia Kazan on Broadway resulted in him being brought to Hollywood when Kazan did the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1951. By this time in his career North had also written a formidable list of orchestral and chamber works.

This compact disc represents North in the first seven years of his career in Hollywood. *Streetcar* is represented by his poignant theme for the wistful and pathetic Blanche, with its reference to the old dance tune "Varsouviana" echoing in her memory. The disc begins with North's most popular melody, which was used repeatedly in the recent hit movie *Ghost*, the theme from the film *Unchained* (1955), an otherwise minor picture about life on a California prison farm. *The Racers*, made the same year, starred Kirk Douglas and Bella Darvi as lovers in the frenetic world of sports car champions. The theme here recorded recalls one of the more tender moments. One of the most highly regarded of North's scores is *Viva Zapata!* (1952), starring Marlon Brando as the heroic Mexican revolutionary. The love of his life was a girl named Josefa, played by Jean Peters, and North's theme eloquently suggests that love. *The Bad Seed* (1956) was a searing account of a murderous eight-year-old girl, the kind only a mother could love, and North's "Lullaby" speaks for that aspect of the shocking tale. Paddy Chayefsky's *The Bachelor Party* (1957) told of the anguish of single life among a group of middle-aged men and their reactions as one of them (Don Murray) approaches marriage. The score is yet another example of this composer's ability to describe what cannot be said with words alone.

The 13th Letter (1951) was filmed in a town in Quebec and told of a community thrown into fear and suspicion by the antics of a writer of poison pen letters. Among those threatened is the lovely young Denise (Linda Darnell), here characterized by North. Another of his musical sketches of attractive girls is that of Eve (Susan Strasberg) in *Stage Struck* (1958), an amusing version of backstage life in the New York theatre. For a vastly different show business story, *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1955), North underscored the fall and regeneration of the alcoholic actress Lillian Roth (Susan Hayward) and helped convey the sadness and the courage of her life.

The final three themes on this disc are those for bolder and more flamboyant pictures. North scored the 1952 remake of *Les Misérables*, starring Michael Rennie as Jean Valjean. The theme here recorded underlines the love of Valjean's daughter (Debra Paget) for

the spirited young student Marius (Cameron Mitchell). In *The Rose Tattoo* (1955), an excellent film version of Tennessee Williams' play, the fiery Anna Magnani played a fiery Italian widow, scornful of men until thawed out by an ebullient truck driver (Burt Lancaster). North's "Bacio" relates to the thawing out process. And finally, the love theme from *Desirée* (1954), a grandly romantic account of young Napoleon Bonaparte (Marlon Brando) and his love for the beautiful Desirée Clary (Jean Simmons). The film was conventional – the score was not. The film music of Alex North is original and subtle and distinct. He has few peers.

— Tony Thomas
Original Bay Cities liner notes, 1991

Of course, we lost the brilliant Alex North on September 8, 1991, shortly after this album was released by Bay Cities. While this album followed the first phase of his film composing career, his true glory years lay ahead and what years they were, with such brilliant and breathtaking scores as *Spartacus*, *The Children's Hour*, *All Fall Down*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, *Bite the Bullet*, and many others, including his great score for *Rich Man, Poor Man* on television. But he was busy composing right to the very end, with *Under the Volcano*, *Prizzi's Honor*, *The Dead*, *Good Morning, Vietnam*, and his final film, *The Last Butterfly*. And, of course, his legendary discarded score for Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He was nominated for an Oscar fifteen times, never taking home the prize. But in 1986 that oversight was rectified when the Academy gave him an honorary Oscar.

His music was inventive, unique, original, and certainly influential from start to finish. There was simply no one like him.

For this reissue, we've done further work on cleaning up the sound, and we've included a wonderful bonus track of North's classical work, *Holiday Set*, close to twenty minutes in length.

—Bruce Kimmel