

BANK SHOT

“Nobody messes with Bulldog Streiger!”

In the early 1970s, three of Donald E. Westlake's comic caper novels were brought to the screen with varying degrees of success: *The Hot Rock*, *Cops and Robbers*, and *Bank Shot* (prior to that, there had been several adaptations of books he'd written under his pseudonym, Richard Stark, including the classic *Point Blank*).

Of those first three films, only *Cops and Robbers* was a box-office success. *The Hot Rock*, despite a great cast, a William Goldman script, and a good director, just didn't catch on with audiences. And *Bank Shot*, despite the presence of George C. Scott, was not well-reviewed and disappeared quickly from theaters. Looking at it now, the film has lots of fun moments, but back then audiences weren't having it – it didn't help that 1974 was the year of such films as *The Godfather II*, *Chinatown*, *Lenny*, *The Towering Inferno*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *The Conversation*, *Murder On The Orient Express*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Young Frankenstein* – well, you get the idea. It was an incredible year for film and movies like *Bank Shot* just came and went, lost amidst an amazing roster of critical and box-office successes.

Bank Shot was one of only two films directed by Gower Champion (the first was the 1963 Debbie Reynolds vehicle, *My Six Loves*). Champion began his career as a dancer (with wife Marge), appearing in many MGM musicals of the 1950s. During that time, he also began directing and choreographing for the stage and had a nice success with a musical revue called *Lend An Ear*, which put Carol Channing on the road to stardom. And during that time, he directed a couple of things for television, and staged numbers for several movie musicals. In 1960, Champion hit Broadway pay dirt and fame his first time out of the gate, with the smash hit *Bye Bye Birdie*. He followed that with *Carnival*, and then followed that hit with an even bigger smash that put him in the pantheon of great choreographer/directors – *Hello, Dolly!* That was followed by yet another hit, *I Do! I Do!*, which starred Mary Martin and Robert Preston. Surprisingly, while he had a few moderate successes like *The Happy Time*, *Irene*, and *Sugar*, his career was also plagued by some huge flops like *Prettybelle* and *Rockabye Hamlet*. In fact, it would be many years until he finally had another major homerun hit and that would

prove to be his final show, *42nd Street* (he died on the day the show opened). But even in his biggest flops his work as choreographer and director always showed flashes of his genius.

There isn't much written about the production of *Bank Shot*, other than a brief reference to it in a very unreliable biography of Mr. Champion, in which we're told that Champion made the film up as he went along. Like most of the stuff in that biography, one can probably take that with a large grain of salt, because Champion wasn't really the type to make stuff up as he went along. George C. Scott plays Walter Upjohn Ballentine (in the novel, it's John Dortmunder – the lead character in several of Mr. Westlake's novels). Mr. Scott gives a very odd performance, but it's quite endearing – he speaks with a slight lisp, and his timing, as always, is impeccable. Joanna Cassidy is equally endearing, and the excellent supporting cast includes Sorrell Booke, Clifton Davis, Bob Balaban, Bibi Osterwald, G. Wood, Frank McRae, and many others, all giving very broad, comic performances. Champion keeps the action moving right along (the film runs a brisk eighty-three minutes), and the plot about Scott and cohorts trying to rob a bank by literally moving it (the bank is temporarily housed in a motor home), is a lark and a good deal of fun. Much of the film was shot on location in the San Fernando Valley, specifically on Sepulveda Boulevard north of Reseda, and there's a merry chase on the 405 freeway near Sunset Boulevard.

For the film's musical score, Champion turned to John Morris, with whom he'd worked on *Bye Bye Birdie* (Morris did the dance arrangements). John Morris began his career in the early 1950s, providing dance arrangements and incidental music for such Broadway shows as *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Pipe Dream*, *Bells Are Ringing*, *Wildcat* (starring Lucille Ball), *All American* (the show on which he met Mel Brooks, who'd written the book), *Baker Street*, and others. Then, in 1966, he wrote the music, and co-wrote the book and lyrics for his one and only Broadway musical, *A Time For Singing*, a musical version of *How Green Was My Valley*.

He began his career as a film composer in 1968, when he scored Mel Brooks' first film, *The Producers*. He would go on to become Mr. Brooks' composer of choice, creating wonderful scores for almost all of Brooks' films, including *Blazing Saddles*, *Young Frankenstein*, *Silent Movie*, *High Anxiety*, *A History Of The World, Part One*, *Spaceballs*, and others. He also wrote the brilliant score for David Lynch's film of *The Elephant Man*, as well as diverse scores for such films as *Clue*, *The In-Laws*, *Yellowbeard*, *The Woman In Red*, *Johnny Danger-*

ously, along with a lot of scores for TV movies. His approach to *Bank Shot* was very circus-like, which is appropriate since the film is free-wheeling and manic and, yes, circus-like – in feel not far removed from *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. Morris' score is a delight, filled with terrifically tuneful themes that just make you smile. For this CD, we found the original three-track scoring session tapes in the MGM vaults. Since the score was not recorded in film order, the first thing we did was to put it all in its proper order. Once that was finished, I then watched the DVD. The film seems to have had post-production blues – my guess is that the not-so-funny and completely unnecessary narration was an afterthought, and while some of Morris's cues have been used as they were recorded and in the scenes for which they were recorded, many other cues were truncated, removed, moved around, or occasionally dialed so low in the mix they may as well not have been there at all. There were three versions of the main title – the original, an alternate, and a revision (so named on the log sheets). The version used in the film was a shortened version of the revision, and we've used that as the main title music for our CD, although in its full-length version (the main titles in the film are really brief, which is why they apparently shortened the revised main title music to under a minute). We've put the other two versions on as bonus tracks. All the cues are in film order – we've edited together a few cues to make a more cohesive listening experience, but basically you're getting every note Morris wrote for the film.

Several of the film's sequences have wonderful scoring, where image and music come together as if in a choreographed Gower Champion dance. Scott's character gets his own theme, as does Bulldog Streiger. There's a beautiful traveling theme for Scott and Cassidy as they motorcycle to LA. There's a groovy sitar piece of LA source music. And in my favorite two cues, a great bit of scoring as the intrepid thieves actually move the mobile home that houses the bank, and then a lovely bit of Champion magic at a drive-in movie theater, with all the actors moving about in silhouette in front of a movie screen, with Morris's sweet music perfectly accompanying it. While Champion doesn't seem quite at home on film as he does on stage, he still manages to stage some impressively clever scenes such as those.

So, here's a really fun film music rediscovery, by one of my favorite composers. Join Walter Upjohn Ballentine and motley crew as they try to stage the perfect *Bank Shot*, all to the delightful music of the great John Morris.

— Bruce Kimmel