

HOW TO MURDER YOUR WIFE LORD LOVE A DUCK

“Hey, Hey, Hey!”

The times they were a changin’ although you wouldn’t have known it by *How To Murder Your Wife*. If one were to show this film today the PC people would be outraged by it (although these same people go to see today’s comedies, many of which are much less funny and much more outrageously offensive, and laugh long and loud – apparently that’s okay), but back in 1965 audiences loved it and found it hilarious (it was), and, I hate to tell you this, that includes men and women. I know this for a fact because I saw the film prior to its release at a sneak preview where the laughs from the full house were huge, and I saw it about ten more times during its engagement, always with full houses and always with huge laughs. Watching it today, if one can still put it in the context of the time in which it was made, the film is still very funny, with expert comic performances by Jack Lemmon, Terry-Thomas, Eddie Mayehoff, Claire Trevor, Sidney Blackmer and a wonderful performance by Virna Lisi, in her American film debut. And what a debut it was – one of the greatest entrances ever – coming up out of a cake at a stag party. Miss Lisi is so unbelievably beautiful and sexy, that it’s actually breathtaking to watch. One feels exactly like Mr. Lemmon does when his eyes lock on hers – pure, unadulterated adoration. She’s not only one of the sexiest and most beautiful women to step in front of a movie camera, she’s also really funny.

How To Murder Your Wife was written by George Axelrod, a terrific screenwriter/playwright, who’d already had great success with *The Seven Year Itch*, *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter*, and his screenplay adaptations for two all-time film classics, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (Oscar-nominated), and *The Manchurian Candidate*. It was directed by Richard Quine, who’d had a lot of success with movies such as *The Solid Gold Cadillac*, *Operation Mad Ball*, *Bell, Book, and Candle*, *Strangers When We Meet*, *Sex And The Single Girl*, and others. Quine did this type of film as well and sometimes better than anyone, but his personal demons would soon get the better of him and a few short years later his career would basically be done. Mr. Axelrod also suffered from the same demons as Quine (both were heavy drinkers), although he did get back to work in the late 1970s and kept working throughout the 1980s. *How To Murder Your Wife* was a hit with audiences, and despite its obviously dated aspect, some of it is still very droll, amusing, and laugh-out-loud funny.

Richard Quine had already used Neal Hefti on his film *Sex And The Single Girl*, for which Hefti had provided a delightful score, his first motion picture scoring assignment – it was a marriage of the minds, as Hefti’s music was perfect for the types of films Quine was making at the time. So, it was a

natural that Hefti would score *How To Murder Your Wife*, and he would go on to score two more Quine films – *Synanon* and *Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Mama’s Hung You In The Closet And I’m Feeling So Sad*. For *Wife*, Hefti provided a brilliant score, one that perfectly captures the tone of the film and its visuals. When you hear that music and see the Richard Sylbert-designed bachelor pad of Lemmon, you are immediately put into the world of the film, and from then on Hefti provides one memorable theme and tune after another – the score is chock full of incredibly catchy melodies. Hefti, born in 1922, was a master melodist and composer, a great trumpet player (he played with the Woody Herman band), as well as a fantastic arranger and composer for Count Basie (for whom he wrote many tunes – including an entire album of Hefti compositions). He also arranged and conducted a classic album for Frank Sinatra.

“Down on my luck-o
Stuck in the muck-o”

A year after *How To Murder Your Wife*, Axelrod wrote the screenplay (with Larry H. Johnson) to a wild, wacky, and weirdly weird film called *Lord Love A Duck*, on which he also made his directorial debut. The film, a satire of just about everything that was happening in the Southern California of 1966, was an immediate box-office and critical flop. However, over the years it’s attained cult classic status and is a real time capsule of the era in which it was made. The same thing was true of *The Manchurian Candidate* – as Axelrod said, “The movie went from failure to classic, without passing through success.” *Lord Love A Duck* is filled with Mr. Axelrod’s quirky sense of humor, and it’s loaded with a sense of comic anarchy (“Our economy is based on built-in obsolescence”). But for audiences of 1966 the film was clearly way too surreal, with its very strange tone shifts, beach party scenes blatantly shot on a soundstage at the Goldwyn Studios, and a non-ending in which the film just basically stops. Roddy McDowall is the film’s odd leading character – although he’s too old for the role, McDowall is clearly having a really good time – and Tuesday Weld is perfection, as is Ruth Gordon. Axelrod turned to his *How To Murder Your Wife* composer, Neal Hefti, to provide the score to *Lord Love A Duck*. By that time, Hefti had already composed the legendary theme to the *Batman* TV show, he was about to compose what would become his best known theme and score, *The Odd Couple*, and he’d either written or was about to write great scores for *Duel At Diablo*, *Harlow* (which featured a tune that would become an all-time Hefti classic, “Girl Talk,” for which he was nominated for two Grammy awards), and *Barefoot In The Park*. In *Lord Love A Duck*, Hefti’s music doesn’t really serve as a conventional film score – it just sort of shows up every now and then, adding some funky color. His themes are, as always, maddeningly catchy, especially the title song (with lyrics by Ernie Sheldon), as sung by The Wild Ones. As with all Hefti scores, this becomes rather an addictive listening experience.

How To Murder Your Wife was previously released as part of the Film Score Monthly box set, the MGM

Soundtrack Treasury. That set, a limited edition of 1200 copies, sold out immediately, and those who either missed it, or only wanted one or two of its twenty-some-odd scores were basically out of luck. So, it’s a particular pleasure to be able to release a couple of these as single issues. In the box set, *Wife* was coupled with Hefti’s *Duel At Diablo*, but I thought two Hefti scores to two George Axelrod-written films was perhaps more apt.

The soundtrack album for *How To Murder Your Wife* was, in fact, a re-recording, much in the style of what Henry Mancini was doing at the time – rearrangements of the themes from the film, but in more pop-sounding versions. The LP included a sung version of the title theme, and a track called “Requiem For A Bachelor” that had uncredited lyrics and singing – neither of those tracks appears anywhere in the film and were done specifically for the album. For this CD release, we went back to the album masters to do a brand new and fresh transfer. While taking delivery of those tapes, MGM also gave us two mono tapes, which we assumed were the mono album masters – we didn’t really need them, but there they were when we picked up the tapes. I wasn’t even going to look at them, but just happened to glance at the log sheets on the tape boxes – and I immediately realized that they weren’t the mono album masters, they were the entire original score tracks to the film (the liner notes for the FSM box set said the original score tracks had been lost to time – which just goes to show, never say never). My transfer guy, John Davis, put the tape on the machine and lo and behold out came those glorious original soundtrack cues just as they appear in the film, all fifty-something minutes of them. This was, of course, a revelation, a surprise, and, for me, a cause for much joy.

My plan was to include about sixteen minutes of these original cues (which would have made for a single 77-minute CD), but the more I thought about it the more I knew I wanted to release all of the original score cues, for both historic reasons and because I’m such a huge Hefti fan and fan of this score. So, I finally decided to make this a two CD set – with the original soundtrack cues on one CD, and then the re-recorded album presentation and *Lord Love A Duck* on the second CD. I hope that when you hear these original film tracks that you’ll agree with me that this is one of Neal Hefti’s finest scores and also one of the finest comedy scores ever. For anyone who’s used to the album versions, I think this will be a most welcome surprise, because it shows just how gifted a film composer Hefti was. Neal Hefti passed away in October of 2008, just shy of his eighty-sixth birthday.

— Bruce Kimmel