

# *The Driver. The Star Chamber. Black Widow.*

Three very different films from one studio, Twentieth Century-Fox, directed by three very different filmmakers, connected by one very gifted composer – Michael Small.

Michael Small began his film music journey in 1969 with the teen comedy, *Out of It*, which starred Barry Gordon and about-to-be star, Jon Voight. But Small's breakthrough film happened two years later when Alan Pakula hired him to score his first film as a director, *Klute*. Prior to that, Pakula had been a producer with his partner, director Robert Mulligan. Together, they made some incredible films, including *Fear Strikes Out*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Love With the Proper Stranger*, *Baby the Rain Must Fall*, *Inside Daisy Clover*, and *Up the Down Staircase*. The one thing you get instantly by looking at that list of films is that Pakula and Mulligan had impeccable taste in composers – Elmer Bernstein, Andre Previn, and then-newcomer Fred Karlin. And so it was with Michael Small. The marriage of director and composer on *Klute* was absolute perfection and Small's score was unique, original, and immediately put him in demand.

From there, he went on to write incredible scores for some classic 1970s films, including Pakula's *Love and Pain and the Whole Damn Thing* and *The Parallax View*, *The Stepford Wives*, *Night Moves*, *The Drowning Pool*, *Marathon Man*, and *Audrey Rose*, with each score unique, original, and filled with the Michael Small sound, which was unlike any other composer working back then. He continued to be Pakula's composer of choice, and in addition to the films already mentioned his scores for Pakula also included *Comes a Horseman*, *Rollover*, *Dream Lover*, *See You In the Morning*, and *Consenting Adults* – it was a long and fruitful collaboration. But along the way, he worked with many fine directors on many fine films, including *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Continental Divide*, *Going in Style*, *Those Lips, Those Eyes*, *Target*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Jaws: The Revenge*, and *Mountains of the Moon*. In the midst of all that wonderful work, he wrote three of his finest scores, and those are the three scores represented in this two-CD set: *The Driver* (1978), *The Star Chamber* (1983), and *Black Widow* (1987), for directors Walter Hill, Peter Hyams, and Bob Rafelson. They are a perfect neo-noir musical trilogy.

**SHE MATES AND SHE KILLS.  
NO MAN CAN RESIST HER.  
ONLY ONE WOMAN CAN STOP HER.**

We begin with *Black Widow*, a terrific thriller that starred Theresa Russell and Debra Winger, along with Sami Frey, Dennis Hopper, Nicol Williamson, Diane Ladd, and Terry O'Quinn. Written by Ronald Bass, *Black Widow* is the story of a woman (Russell) who marries for money and then dispatches the husbands, and the Department of Justice agent (Winger), who is obsessed with bringing her to justice. At the time of release, the film received respectful reviews, with reviewers admiring the parts more

than the whole. Today the whole looks a whole lot better than it did back in 1987 – today the film looks like the beautiful and stylishly made neo-noir it always really was. The acting is superb, the photography of Conrad Hall is amazing, as always, and the production design of Gene Callahan is stunning. Michael Small's score is as entrancing, captivating, alluring, and dangerous as the Black Widow of the title. In describing the main title from the film, Michael Small talks about the effect he used that is repeated throughout the score. "It's a very unusual effect where three or four approaches to hitting strings are all used. That's pizzicato, plucking the strings; *col legno*, hitting them with the wood of the bow; and snap pizzicato, pulling the strings. They are all combined, and it creates a very eerie wooden effect. This is combined with a synthesizer playing a brief string sound, which goes into a repeating echo."

But the score goes way beyond that effect – strings play a dominant role, but there's also brilliant use of woodwinds, harp, and percussion. It has all the hallmarks of a classic Michael Small score and is one of his best.

**THEY HAVE COMMITTED EVERY CRIME  
IN THE BOOK.**

**YET THE LAW CANNOT TOUCH THEM.**

**THEY ARE FREE TO WALK THE STREETS.**

**UNTIL TONIGHT'S MEETING  
OF THE STAR CHAMBER.**

*The Star Chamber*, directed by Peter Hyams, is about a young, idealistic judge who is becoming disillusioned with the judicial system, a system that has him acquitting the worst kind of criminals on the basis of minor technicalities. A friend tells him about a secret judicial society that metes out punishment to the most heinous of criminals who have escaped the law. But things go wrong and the young judge finds himself at odds with the group and from there the tension mounts as all parties do what's necessary to protect their own sense of justice. Featuring a stellar cast, including Michael Douglas, Hal Holbrook, Yaphet Kotto, and Sharon Gless, *The Star Chamber* received mixed reviews, with some critics liking parts of it, while regretting what they perceived as the film's weaknesses, and it did only middling business at the box-office. But it became kind of a cult film thanks to cable TV and home video and is generally well thought of today.

Once again, Michael Small provides a terrific score, beginning with its classic Small main title, majestic-yet-ominous, strings, woodwinds and piano doing an uneasy dance against a steady rhythmic pulse, a perfect beginning for the music and drama to follow. As in *Black Widow*, strings play a starring role in the score. But solo trumpet also gets to shine ("Star Chamber" – a gorgeous cue), and eventually brass gets a full workout, too. There are themes

here, but it's the atmosphere of the music that makes it work so perfectly.

**TO BREAK THE DRIVER,  
THE COP WAS WILLING TO BREAK THE LAW.**

Walter Hill's *The Driver* is a quintessential 1970s movie – it looks, smells, feels and sounds like the 1970s. If anyone is unsure of this, the fact that Quentin Tarantino has referenced it in two films and thinks it's one of the coolest movies ever made cements its reputation and is probably one of the key reasons the film has just been remade. The characters have no names – it's *The Driver*, *The Detective*, *The Player*, *The Connection*, and on and on. The plot is simple: A professional driver drives the getaway cars in major robberies. A detective will go to any lengths to catch him. During the length of the film the title character speaks very few words, there are some splendid car chases, it is both minimalist and stylish (think the films of Jean-Pierre Melville), it is LA neo-noir at its finest. The cast couldn't be better – Ryan O'Neal as the *The Driver*, Bruce Dern as *The Detective* determined to catch "the cowboy who's never been caught," and beautiful Isabelle Adjani as *The Player*. And Michael Small as *The Composer*.

Small's score for *The Driver* is, like the film, lean, cool, stylish and, yes, unique. Small uses electronics sparingly amidst the strings, reeds, and brass, and plays off The Detective's line about The Driver being "the cowboy who's never been caught," with the use of a twangy country-western guitar that occasionally insinuates itself into the music.

The film was not a huge hit in the United States, but did do very well overseas, and, of course, in the intervening years has become a huge cult film, especially now thanks to Mr. Tarantino's branding it as cool. That branding brought the film to a whole new group of young film geeks, as Mr. Tarantino's fans rushed out to get the DVD or watch it on cable.

All three scores were previously released by Intrada – *Black Widow* as a standalone and *The Star Chamber* and *The Driver* as a two-fer. For this release, all three have been remastered by Mike Matessino, carefully removing numerous small dropouts and ticks and pops, most especially on *The Driver*. *Black Widow* and *The Star Chamber* are in stereo, while *The Driver* is in mono.

Michael Small was a major film composer who, sadly, has been somewhat forgotten in the last decade. But his film scores speak for themselves – they are still, to this day, as fresh sounding and unique as they were the day he wrote them. He understood impeccably the relationship between film and music. As these three brilliant scores will attest – there was no one quite like him.

— Bruce Kimmel