

Junior High School

What becomes a musical most? Well, I'll tell you what becomes a musical most: When it has the courage to be a musical – you know, having characters actually break into song because speaking no longer does it. No disguising the fact that it's really a musical, none of this junk about musical numbers taking place in the character's imagination or as a performance number. This change in musicals happened because producers and directors don't think audiences will sit still for people just breaking into song. Well, guess what? They will – not if you do it poorly, but if you do it well, if you have the courage of your convictions and if you embrace that you're a real musical. Sit a teen down and show them *The Music Man*. They buy into it immediately – they don't run from the room screaming in horror. Same with *The Sound of Music*.

Junior High School was born out of a love of musicals. Its creators loved the form, embraced the form, and raised enough money to make a short musical film that is utterly charming and a complete delight from start to finish. David Wechter and Michael Nankin had already directed a critically acclaimed short film called *Gravity*, which had gotten them noticed. Two years later, just out of college, they joined some other friends, Steve Jacobson and Helyn Spears, to make another audacious short film – a real musical about a fictional junior high school. This was, of course, long before *High School Musical* and *Glee*. In 1978 there was no middle school; there was elementary school, junior high, and high school. The times they were a'changing – the late 1970s and early 1980s were the end of a certain kind of era, and *Junior High School* reflects that beautifully. There is a sweetness and innocence to the film that's palpable, even if it includes the classic song, "The Itty Bitty Titty Committee."

Made for under \$35,000 (the filmmakers raised the money and received a grant from the American Film Institute), the film was shot in one month at John Muir Junior High School in Burbank, California. It was a family affair, with many relatives and friends appearing in the film and working behind the scenes. Kids from all over LA auditioned, and the chosen cast is just so real and perfect, you can't imagine it being better, although only one of the actors went on to have a significant career – Paula Abdul.

The film is beautifully directed and shot (in 16mm), and David Wechter's songs are delightful, as is the script by Nankin, Wechter, Jacobson, and Spears. David's father, the great Julius Wechter, arranged the songs and wrote an original score. Julius, of course, was the leader of the popular Baja Marimba Band. He assembled some amazing players for the soundtrack recording, including several of the infamous Wrecking Crew. They include such luminaries as Bernie Fleischer, Bobby Findley (of the Ti-

juana Brass), Lou McCreary, Tommy Tedesco, Dave Frishberg (who also appears and sings in the film), Steve Schaefer, and the engineer was the great Larry Levine (pioneer of Phil Spector's "Wall of Sound"). The score and songs were recorded at Gold Star and A&M Records.

Junior High School won awards in dozens of film festivals and was an immediate sensation, so much so that critic Roger Ebert said, "I think it's probably impossible not to be charmed out of your socks by *Junior High School*." As a direct result of the audience and critical response to the film, Wechter and Nankin were hired by Walt Disney Studios to make a feature – at the ripe old age of twenty-three. That film, *Midnight Madness*, while not a hit, developed a major cult following that continues to this day. The following year, United Artists commissioned the team to expand *Junior High School* into a feature film. Executives on the project were Craig Zadan and, later, Barry Krost. But alas, the film never happened. Wechter and Nankin went on to pursue separate careers. Nankin wrote and produced (and occasionally directed) for the TV series *Life Goes On* and *Picket Fences*. He also wrote the cult horror hit *The Gate* and has directed episodes of TV's *Battlestar Galactica*, *Heroes*, *CSI*, and many other shows. Wechter

co-created the original script and story that became the hit film, *The Faculty*, wrote and directed the film, *Malibu Bikini Shop*, and has been a major player in the world of reality television for the past twenty years, including winning the Writers Guild of America award for *Penn and Teller: Bullshit!* (he also received an Emmy nomination for the same show). He co-wrote the book for the musical, *The Brain from Planet X*, which has had productions all over the world, and did the same for the stage adaptation of the cult film, *The First Nudie Musical*.

We've added some very interesting material to the original soundtrack to *Junior High School*, including demos from the never-made feature version, the song and theme from *Gravity*, and some demo recordings from *Midnight Madness* and *Malibu Bikini Shop*. It's a pleasure to bring the soundtrack to *Junior High School* to CD, both score and songs. We've also just brought it to Blu-ray and it's well worth checking out, as they don't make 'em like that anymore. The music is all taken from the original mono session mixes done for the film, which sound superb.

— Bruce Kimmel

From the desk of
Herb Alpert

Sept 14, 1978

2.



David
Bravo! Sami & I
were totally swept off
our feet. (Even though
we were lying in bed)
you made an incredible
transition from amateur
to professional in one film.
Congratulations, and thanks
for wanting to share it
with me.
If I can be a
help --- I'm here
Warm wishes always
Herb