

Rio Conchos

By the mid-1960s the face of the western film had changed. That change began in the 1950s, where the line between hero and villain, which had always been black-and-white, began to be blurred, especially in the John Ford/John Wayne classic *The Searchers*. Yes, there were still classic westerns being made where you knew exactly who the good guys and the bad guys were, but the spaghetti western was about to change all that once and for all. In 1964, Twentieth Century-Fox released a widescreen western called *Rio Conchos*, whose “hero” is a bitter ex-Confederate soldier whose family was killed by Apaches and who, in the first scene of the film, is seen killing a whole slew of Apaches in revenge.

The film was an “A” production. Directed by Gordon Douglas, who’d helmed pictures in just about every genre, including comedies, dramas, suspense, science fiction/horror, romance and westerns, from a screenplay by Joseph Landon and Clair Huffaker (based on Huffaker’s novel of the same name), to the ace cameraman Joseph MacDonald, and a strong cast, including Richard Boone as the bitter Lassiter, Stuart Whitman as an army captain, Jim Brown, who’d just given up football to become an actor, as a Buffalo soldier, Tony Franciosa as a Mexican bandit and the great Edmond O’Brien as a rebel soldier selling guns to the Apaches, including the guns that killed Lassiter’s family. The resulting film was hard-edged, fast-paced and action-packed, but with strong characters and a story that keeps you involved from start to finish. Viewed today, *Rio Conchos* is kind of a forgotten classic, with excellent performances and great photography – the kind of movie that would be replaced by the westerns of Sergio Leone and, of course, Sam Peckinpah’s masterpiece *The Wild Bunch*, which would change everything.

By the time of *Rio Conchos*, composer Jerry Goldsmith was well on his way to becoming one of the busiest of the then-new composers scoring films. He’d already done great work for television, scoring several memorable and

classic *Playhouse 90*, *Twilight Zone* and *Thriller* episodes among many others, including his wonderful theme and occasional score for *Dr. Kildare*.

His film career had really taken off quickly and in a big way in the early 1960s, with such great scores as *Lonely Are the Brave*, *The Spiral Road*, *Freud*, *The List of Adrian Messenger*, *The Stripper*, *Lillies of the Field*, *The Prize*, *Shock Treatment* and *Fate Is the Hunter*. Before *Rio Conchos* Goldsmith had really only scored one western film, his very first feature film score, the 1957 film *Black Patch*. He’d scored a few western TV episodes from *Wagon Train*, *Gunsmoke*, *Rawhide* and *Have Gun – Will Travel*, and he’d also scored *Lonely Are the Brave*, which could be considered a modern-day western of sorts.

But with *Rio Conchos*, he immediately showed that he could score westerns with the best of them and it began a long and fruitful association with Twentieth Century-Fox. He would, of course, go on to score many other notable westerns, including *Stagecoach*, *Hour of the Gun*, *Bandolero!*, *100 Rifles*, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, *Rio Lobo*, *Wild Rovers* and others. But his score for *Rio Conchos* remains high at the top of that great list – like the film, his score is hard-edged, fast-paced and action-packed, with a memorable main theme that is one of his best. Right from the beginning, you know you’re hearing something uniquely original from Goldsmith, which would kind of become his trademark western “sound” and which would be often imitated by others. The “Main Title” introduces the film’s main theme, with its plaintive melody over the sound of percussion and whip crack. But it’s not just a one-theme score and it contains some incredible dark and dramatic music that ranks high with his other classics.

The original soundtrack was previously released on Film Score Monthly, with the entire score presented in mono with a handful of stereo cues, the only stereo that could, at that time, be saved due to

extreme wow and flutter. But thanks to new technologies that have emerged in the last couple of years, Mike Matessino was able to go back to the original elements and perform a miracle of a stereo restoration for the entire score except for three cues – those three cues are presented so seamlessly you might not even be aware they are mono.

— Bruce Kimmel

Restoring *Rio Conchos* was a particularly satisfying experience because the project occurred so early in Jerry Goldsmith’s feature film composing career, coming two years before his more “A-list” breakout scores for *The Blue Max* and *The Sand Pebbles*. Yet it is just as epic as those later works and no less an example of Goldsmith’s mastery of his craft. Half a century later this stereo restoration serves as a testament to the constantly evolving transfer and digital restoration technology that brings great music alive again. While an earlier edition featured the entire score in monaural sound, with a few bonus stereo cues that were deemed presentable at the time, we now find ourselves in the reverse situation: the entire work in stereo with the exception of just three cues. Those have been processed to blend seamlessly with the others, resulting in a vibrant listening experience that will hopefully be as enjoyable to hear as it was to engineer.

— Mike Matessino