

“In France the girls wear scanties,
But on lamb chops they put panties
I’m telling you
it’s a mad, mad, mad, mad world”

Stanley Kramer was not exactly known as Mr. Comedy. He was a socially conscious filmmaker who had produced or directed (or both) such hard-hitting and classic films as *The Men*, *High Noon*, *The Wild One*, *The Caine Mutiny*, *The Defiant Ones*, *On The Beach*, *Inherit The Wind*, *Judgment At Nuremberg*, and others. So, it came as something of a surprise when he announced he was going to make a huge all-star comedy extravaganza called *It’s A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*.

The screenplay, originally titled *Something A Little Less Serious*, was by William and Tania Rose. Kramer’s goal from the outset was to make “a comedy to end all comedy,” and he assembled a cast to end all casts, starting with the leads – Sid Caesar, Milton Berle, Jonathan Winters, Ethel Merman, Mickey Rooney, Buddy Hackett, Edie Adams, Dick Shawn, Dorothy Provine, Phil Silvers, and Terry-Thomas – and then the incredible roster of supporting players and guest stars, just about everyone who was anyone in the world of comedy, names like Buster Keaton, Jack Benny, Don Knotts, Jimmy Durante, The Three Stooges, William Demarest, Jerry Lewis, Jim Backus, Andy Devine, Joe E. Brown, Eddie “Rochester” Anderson, Paul Ford, Stan Freberg, Peter Falk, Selma Diamond, Sterling Holloway, Marvin Kaplan, Arnold Stang, Carl Reiner, Jesse White and on and on, and, as the glue that holds the whole thing together, the great Spencer Tracy as Captain Culpepper.

The story revolves around the death of Smiler Grogan, a thief on the lam. At the beginning of the film, several motorists witness Smiler’s car as it careens off the twisting mountain road and crashes. They stop to help. As he lies dying, Smiler tells them about \$350,000 that is buried in Santa Rosita State Park under a Big W. He then literally kicks the bucket. The motorists, all bitten by the greed bug, at first try to be fair about splitting the money, and then all try to do whatever they can to get there first and have it all to themselves. The film becomes a merry chase by car, by truck, by airplane, filled with slapstick, verbal humor, the Twist, slapstick, and then, for good measure, more slapstick, all shot in Ultra Panavision 70 (and advertised as being in Cinerama, even though it wasn’t – not true Cinerama), gorgeous color and stereophonic sound.

For the score, Kramer turned to Ernest Gold, who’d already done several films for him, including *The Defiant Ones*, *On The Beach*, *Inherit The Wind*, and *Pressure Point* (which Kramer produced). Comedy is hard and writing music for comedy is equally hard, without resorting to cornball tricks and mickey-mousing. Gold turned out to be the perfect choice – one simply cannot imagine this film without his music. For the main theme, he came up with a maddeningly and brilliantly tuneful theme, which is used throughout the score in a whole variety of guises, even sung, with mad lyrics by Mack David. Kramer completely entrusted the musical aspect of the film to Gold, and Gold worked for many months on creating his merry-go-round of a score. It was recorded by the Los Angeles Philharmonic probably in keeping with the Kramer ethos of bigger, bigger, and bigger.

The film premiered on November 7, 1963 at the newly built Cinerama Dome Theater in Hollywood, California, USA (it was the first new theater to be built in Hollywood in thirty-three years). At that point, according to most reports, the film ran approximately 190 minutes, but that included the overture, an intermission series of police calls reporting on what was happening with various characters in the film – those could be heard in the lobby as patrons were buying their snacks – the entr’acte and exit music. At some point during its road show engagements, the film was cut by twenty minutes (but six of the twenty minutes were the intermission police calls, so really only fourteen minutes of actual movie was cut). For the general release version in 35mm, the film was further cut by eight minutes and was also shorn of its overture, police calls, entr’acte and exit music for a total running time of 154 minutes. For the laser disc release of the film, some, but not all, the cut footage was found and interpolated back into the film. Because the quality of the cut material was not of sufficient quality, the DVD presented the 154 minute version, but with the entr’acte and exit music restored. While various sources have reported that anywhere from forty minutes to an hour was cut from the film, doing the math proves it simply is not true. It would seem that only about twenty-four minutes of footage was actually cut from the version that premiered at the Dome. One can hope that a film with such enduring popularity will someday get the restoration it truly deserves.

The reviews were mostly excellent – Bosley Crowther’s New York Times review pretty much said what needed to be said:

“It’s a wonderfully crazy and colorful collection of “chase” comedy, so crowded with plot and people that it almost splits the seams of its huge Cinerama packing and its 3-hour-and-12-minute length. It’s mad, as it says, with its profusion of so many stars, so many “names,” playing leading to 5-second bit roles, that it seems to be a celebrities’ parade. And it is also, for all its crackpot clowning and its racing and colliding of automobiles, a pretty severe satirizing of the money madness and motorized momentum of our age.”

Two weeks after the film premiered, America and the world were thrust into the epic tragedy of President Kennedy’s assassination. It was a mad world indeed, but the film continued to play and to help people in their grief with the healing power of laughter. It ran at the Cinerama Dome alone for 67 weeks. The film garnered several Oscar nominations, including sound, editing, cinematography, and music – one for Mr. Gold and his score, and one for Gold and Mack David for the title song. The only Oscar the film took home was for Best Effects, Sound Effects. In the years since its release and with each new generation, the film has found countless new fans and I think it’s safe to say we will never see its like again.

The original United Artists LP of Ernest Gold’s score was a re-recording, as was occasionally the fashion in those days. The original CD issue of the score included dialogue snippets after almost every track. We’ve eliminated those and gone back to the original LP presentation, transferred from the original album masters created in 1963. As bonus tracks, we’re thrilled to include the original film versions of the overture, main titles (both *with* the sound effects, which were designed to go hand in glove with Gold’s score and Saul Bass’s fantastic title design, and *without*), intermission, entr’acte, finale, and exit music.

As Stanley Kramer put it in his brief liner notes for the original LP: “Since the advent of sound, music has been an essential adjunct to a motion picture. But in the score for *It’s A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, Ernest Gold has accomplished what has long been sought; he has succeeded in making the score one of the stars of the film.”

Did he ever.

— Bruce Kimmel