

MR. BIG

When I was a wee sprig of a twig of a tad of a lad of a youth and growing up in Los Angeles in the 1950s, going to the movies was fun. Going to the movies today – not so much, at least for me. Today, everything has to be an event, the next big thing, bigger, better, louder – even supposedly low-budget independent films go to film festivals all over the world and being a low-budget independent film is nothing like it used to be, where we could have the cheap, the cheesy, the funky, the weird, and the wonderful – today independent films mostly look like studio films. Right up until the late 1970s you could still regularly see weird and wonderful low-budget films of all sizes and shapes. And then it all changed, and not for the better, I'm afraid.

Back in the 1950s, when the public's movie-going appetite was insatiable, every week you had many new double bills to choose from; the top of the bill picture, and the bottom of the bill lower budget programmer. Sometimes the programmers ended up on the top of the bill, depending on the stars or the genre. In the early 1950s, Hollywood discovered that low-budget science fiction and horror were suddenly popular with the younger moviegoers, and we began to get a steady diet of films like *Invaders From Mars, Them!*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *Forbidden Planet* – some from major studios like MGM, Warner Bros., or Universal, but many of the really low-budget ones (and the most fun) from independent distributors like Allied Artists or American-International Pictures. We flocked to them at the Saturday matinee shows, seeing a great double bill, cartoons, sometimes a Three Stooges short, and sometimes even a chapter from a serial. My favorites were always the big mutant creatures run amok pictures, like *Godzilla* and *Tarantula* and *Them!*

Amongst the filmmakers who started out in the era of the low-budget sci-fi/horror programmers, one director's name always leapt out at me from the screen as his credit would come up – Bert I. Gordon, or, as he later became affectionately known, Mr. BIG. Whether it was giant spiders in *Earth vs. The Spider*, or giant grasshoppers in the supremely wonderful *Beginning Of The End*, or a giant man in *The Amazing Colossal Man* (and its sequel *War Of The Colossal Beast*), or a doll maker shrinking people down to doll-size in *Attack Of The Puppet People*, there was such a sense of fun and spirit and fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants filmmaking that was so oddly endearing and pleasurable that it just wafted out over the audience. I knew that if I saw the name Bert I. Gordon I was in for a good time.

Mr. BIG kept at it during the 1960s, but even then the business was changing drastically and the giant mutant bug or shrinking person picture had fallen out of favor, while Roger Corman had found a new and highly profitable way with his Edgar Allan Poe series. Mr. BIG's films of that era were *The Magic Sword*, *Boy and the Pirates*, *Picture Mommy Dead*, *Village of the Giants* – all fun, and all filled with his usual love of filmmaking. There were some lean years, film-wise, but in 1976 Mr. BIG bounced back BIG with *Food Of The Gods*, which had not one but many giant critters (wasps, chickens, worms) and seeing the film was like a great ride back in time to the good old days. The film did well enough at the box-office that Mr. BIG followed it immediately with *Empire Of The Ants* (these two and *Village Of The Giants* were all "adapted" from H. G. Wells stories).

FOR THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH... SOONER THAN YOU THINK!

*Empire Of The Ants* is the story of a scam artist (played by Joan Collins) who is trying to bilk people out of money to buy into Dreamland Shores, a community to be built on a beachfront somewhere in Florida (where the film was shot). While she shows her potential marks where all the luxurious things are going to be built (there is almost nothing on the beachfront but signs that say things like "country club to be built here"), and how wonderful it's all going to be, we know something bad is coming because at the very beginning of the film we've seen big barrels of radioactive industrial waste wash ashore on the beach and I think we all know what big barrels of radioactive industrial waste leads to – BIG MUTANT THINGS! In this case, the BIG MUTANT THINGS are GIANT ANTS, which are quite fond of attacking anybody they can get their giant mutant ant claws on. Eventually our intrepid crew gets to a town and tells the police what's been going on. Of course the police and everyone in town pretend they're going to help them, but in fact they are being controlled by the ants and that is because the Queen ant emits a strange vapor that causes people to obey her and make sure she's always having a sugar high. Some people die horrible ant deaths, and some people escape, and in the end the ants go up in blazing flames of fire. It's all grand fun, and even though Mystery Science Theater loved to make fun of films such as these, the making fun of them is never as much fun as the films are themselves.

For the score, Mr. BIG hired a young composer, Dana Kaproff, who was just starting out and who'd been recommended to Gordon by a music supervisor. Kaproff, who was 24, had begun working in TV, and *Empire Of The Ants* would be his first feature film score. Kaproff came from a musical family – his uncle was a well-known contractor for orchestras and his father, Armand Kaproff was a highly respected studio cellist, who played on many top film scores. For the *Empire Of The Ants* score, Kaproff would have an orchestra of about forty-five players, and he orchestrated the score himself. It was recorded over a two-day period in Los Angeles.

Kaproff's score is quite effective, using repeated hammering notes on the piano, along with misterioso string writing, excellent giant mutant ant music, and, as with the film, there's a sense of real spirit and fun to the score. Kaproff would go on to be a prolific composer for television and film, and some of his terrific work includes scores for hit TV shows such as *Cagney and Lacey* (many episodes), *Falcon Crest*, *The Bionic Woman*, *Matlock*, along with a whole slew of TV movies, plus such films as Sam Fuller's *The Big Red One*, the classic chiller, *When A Stranger Calls*, *The Golden Seal*, and many others.

For this CD, we used the original two-track session masters, which were in excellent condition. As is always the case, some of the music in the film was truncated or cues were repeated, but we present the cues in as close to film order as possible and in the way that Kaproff originally wrote them. Kaproff wrote quite a few jazz source cues, only a couple of which are in the film, but we thought they were so good that we've included a few Jazz Ants bonus tracks.

MEETING MR. BIG

Pictures like *Attack Of The Puppet People* played top of the bill and I saw it at one of the most beautiful first-run houses in LA, the Wiltern. I loved it so much I stayed to see it twice (in the days when you could do such things). In that film, there was an adorable little girl who brought her doll in for repair. Later, I saw the same adorable little girl playing Danny Kaye's daughter in *The Five Pennies*. Only later did I find out that the adorable little girl's name was Susan Gordon – yes, you got it, the daughter of Mr. BIG.

Back in 2001, through a peculiar series of interlocking events, I finally met Susan Gordon. I'd posted about her on my website (which I'd just started), wondering what had ever happened to her. As fate would have it, an old high school pal of mine happened to search me via Google, and she found my website and read that post. She posted on our discussion board that she was still in touch with Susan (Susan had gone to my high school and my pal had known her, but somehow Susan and I had never met). I told her to say hi next time they wrote or spoke to each other. Two nights later I was playing on the computer and I got an IM (remember those) from someone I didn't know. When I inquired as to who was IMing me, the IMer replied – Susan. We became friends, met in person, and have remained friends ever since and even worked together when I produced a CD called *Jeepers Creepers: Great Songs From Classic Horror Films*. In a lovely bit of serendipity, Susan came in and sang "You're My Living Doll" from *Attack Of The Puppet People*, in which she'd made her film debut. I got Susan to come to LA and take part in one of those celebrity autograph shows that I occasionally took part in. She was amazed at how many people knew her and loved her. We talked about her father and I mentioned that he should do one of the shows, that they'd love him. She didn't think he would. But a couple of years later, she called and said he was interested. So, I called him and spoke to him and arranged the whole thing – Susan would come out and they'd sit next to each other at the show.

That was the first time I met Mr. BIG, and we hit it off wonderfully. We laughed and joked and he was still sharp as a tack. I took Bert and Susan (and Bert's other daughter Christina) to dinner at my favorite Chinese restaurant, Genghis Cohen, and we all had the best time and Bert fell in love with the place. A year later, Bert and I did the autograph show and sat next to each other, and again, it was just great fun and we really bonded, and once again dined at Genghis Cohen. And every time we go to dinner (always Genghis Cohen) I just think to myself how amazing it is that I'm sitting having a meal with someone whose films have given me so much pleasure over the years. And for someone in his 80s, Mr. BIG is working away – he's just written a book, he's got ideas for new screenplays, and I can only hope that they include GIANT MUTANT THINGS and let me tell you I'll be the first one in line to see them.

I'm delighted that Kritzerland is the first label to finally bring a score from a Bert I. Gordon film to CD – so delighted that I feel like going out and eating a giant chocolate-covered mutant ant.

— Bruce Kimmel