

Won Ton Ton: The Dog Who Saved Hollywood

Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad

Sometimes it's just the luck of the draw. In 1976, Paramount had an interesting slate of releases featuring dramas, comedies, and even two musicals. Two of the comedies and both musicals were spoofs, but this was several years before Paramount would hit it big with the spoof to end all spoofs, *Airplane!* (the big hit comedy from Paramount that year – *The Bad News Bears* – wasn't a spoof). The musical spoofs that came and went were *The First Nudie Musical* and *Bugsy Malone*, both of which would go on to cult film status. The two comedy spoofs were *The Big Bus*, a send-up of disaster movies, and *Won Ton Ton: The Dog Who Saved Hollywood*, a send-up of the silent film era and canine movie heroes like Rin Tin Tin and Lassie. Mel Brooks had made two highly successful spoofs by that time (*Blazing Saddles* and *Young Frankenstein*), but it seemed like the handful of other tries were just not scoring with audiences in 1976. One wonders if even *Airplane!* would have been a hit had it been made that year. Timing is everything.

Looking at it now, *Won Ton Ton* seems almost the end of an era. The cast included a huge number of cameos by an amazing array of Hollywood veterans, including: Sterling Holloway, William Demarest, Virginia Mayo, Henny Youngman, Rory Calhoun, Billy Barty, Henry Wilcoxon, Ricardo Montalban, Jackie Coogan, Aldo Ray, Ethel Merman, Yvonne De Carlo, Joan Blondell, Andy Devine, Broderick Crawford, Richard Arlen, Jack La Rue, Dorothy Lamour, Phil Silvers, Nancy Walker, Gloria DeHaven, Louis Nye, Johnny Weismuller, Stepin Fetchit, Rudy Vallee, George Jessel, Rhonda Fleming, Ann Miller, Dean Stockwell, Dick Haymes, Tab Hunter, Robert Alda, Fritz Feld, Jane Connell, Janet Blair, Dennis Day, Mike Mazurki, The Ritz Brothers, Jesse White, Victor Mature, Fernando Lamas, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Cyd Charisse, Huntz Hall, Edgar Bergen, Morey Amsterdam, Eddie Foy Jr., Peter Lawford, Patricia Morison, Guy Madison, Regis Toomey, Alice Faye, Ann Rutherford, Milton Berle, John Carradine, Walter Pigeon and more – it was kind of a pint-sized 1970s *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, cameo-wise. The leading cast featured Bruce Dern, Madeline Kahn, Teri Garr and Art Carney, and a brilliant performance by Augustus von Schumacher as Won Ton Ton. To the filmmakers, it must have seemed like a film that could not lose.

Arnold Schulman (*Wild Is the Wind*, *A Hole in the Head*, *Love With the Proper Stranger*, *The Night They Raided Minsky's*, *Goodbye, Columbus*, *Funny Lady*) and Cy Howard (*My*

Friend Irma, *Every Little Crook and Nanny*) wrote the freewheeling screenplay; the director was Michael Winner – maybe not the first person who'd come to mind to direct an out-and-out raucous comedy, given his output of films like *The Nightcomers*, *Chato's Land*, *The Mechanic*, *Scorpio*, *The Stone Killer* and, especially, the huge Paramount hit that preceded *Won Ton Ton*, *Death Wish*. The film came out, received middling reviews, and disappeared until the advent of home video and cable allowed people to find it and enjoy it for what it was – a fun, celebrity-filled lark with some truly amusing sequences. And the producers could not have made a better choice of film composer than the great Neal Hefti.

By the time of *Won Ton Ton*, Neal Hefti had been scoring major Hollywood films for a dozen years, beginning with *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1964. With that film, it was instantly apparent that Hefti had a unique musical voice – and it kept being apparent with each new score he wrote, including *How to Murder Your Wife*, *Synanon*, *Harlow*, *Boeing, Boeing*, *Lord Love a Duck*, *Duel at Diablo*, *Barefoot in the Park* and his classic and iconic score for *The Odd Couple*, as well as the immortal theme from the 1960s TV show *Batman*. His style was breezy and melodic, but he was also an expert dramatic composer – even in his comedy films – and such is the case with *Won Ton Ton*. The flavor of the main title music, which evokes the 1920s, continues throughout the score for the upbeat cues, but Hefti also has several beautiful themes running throughout the film to underscore the sweet affection the dog feels for the Madeline Kahn character. It's a truly delightful score, both in and away from the film, and it's classic Hefti all the way. It couldn't have been written by any other composer – that's how unmistakable the Hefti sound is. Sadly, *Won Ton Ton* would be Hefti's final film score, although he would live another three decades, passing away in 2008.

This is the world premiere release of *Won Ton Ton*, taken from the multi-track tapes stored in the Paramount vault and newly mixed especially for this release, in wonderful stereo sound.

Our second feature is Hefti's infectious score to the 1967 comedy *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad*, an adaptation of Arthur L. Kopit's 1962 play, which was directed by none other than the brilliant Jerome Robbins. The play premiered off-Broadway (with Jo Van Fleet, Austin Pendleton and Barbara

Harris), had a national tour and ended up on Broadway for a short run in 1963 with the tour cast of Hermione Gingold, Sam Waterston and Alix Elias. Paramount shot the film version in 1965, with Richard Quine directing and a cast that included Rosalind Russell, Robert Morse and, repeating her role from the play, Barbara Harris. The screenplay was by Ian Bernard, who had the daunting task of taking Kopit's avant-garde play, which he described as a "pseudoclassical tragicfarce in a bastard tradition," opening it up and making it work as a screen comedy. After a few previews, it was decided that the film, which had already veered from the play in major ways, needed more comedy and something that could perhaps help the audience understand what was going on. And so entered Jonathan Winters, who shot a new prologue and narrated the film with quips and asides to the audience. The film was released in 1967 and did not fare well with either critics or audiences, although Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times* found things to like: "Barbara Harris from the original play is as wacky as she was on the stage... Her tussle to accomplish her purpose, with the corpse falling out into the room every time she's about to score a field goal, is still the funniest scene." And Crowther had this to say about Jonathan Winters: "His appearances from time to time in a corner of the frame within an iris circle to make remarks directed mainly to his son and stating his feelings about his widow provide the liveliest humor."

For the film, Neal Hefti created another melodic and fun score, including a bouncy main title song and several classic Hefti tunes along the way. Hefti himself put the album together in the style of LPs back then – as a listening experience away from the film. Therefore, the album presentation doesn't really adhere to the way in which the music appears in the film, but we've decided to leave it as Mr. Hefti sequenced it since it is indeed a delightful listening experience. Our source for this CD was the original four-track album master.

— Bruce Kimmel