

Unsung Sherman Brothers

By the late 1960s, the songwriting team known as the Sherman Brothers was already legendary thanks to *Mary Poppins*, *The Jungle Book*, and any number of other Disney classics, not to mention their Disneyland anthem, “It’s a Small World.” And, of course, there was *Chitty, Chitty, Bang, Bang*, with its fantastical song score. So, it’s hard to imagine that in 1969 three exciting new Sherman Brothers projects were all cancelled, back to back, one after another. And these projects were heartbreakers for “the boys” (as Walt Disney called them), three that got away. And so these three projects languished for forty-six years, the only remnants being demo recordings that sat tucked away in the home of Richard Sherman. As Al Sherman, their songwriting father, told them, “If you can’t take a curve, get out of the game.” But three curves in a row was devastating, but rather than let it defeat them, as it might have any other songwriting team, as Richard put it, “We found another game.”

Ever since I produced what should have been called *The Sherman Brothers Album*, Richard and his lovely wife Elizabeth and I have become very close friends. They are two of my all-time favorite people. Richard and I even wrote a song together (“Two Roads”), and we’ve done several evenings of Sherman Brothers music in our Kritzerland monthly cabaret shows. And he contributed a beautiful song to my new musical revue, *L.A. Now and Then*. We were chatting one day and talking about Victory Canteen, the precursor to what became the brothers’ Broadway musical *Over Here!* And somehow, in one of those fortuitous little happy happenstances, Richard got on the topic of the three projects that got away. Of course, I wanted to know everything about them, so he had me pull out the book he’d given to me several years ago, *Walt’s Time*, and showed me the stuff about what the brothers called “our great corpse of work.” Well, I was intrigued. And then, astonishingly, he sat down at the piano and played me three songs from one of the three that got away. Amazingly, Richard, at eighty-eight, can remember just about everything.

The next thing I knew, he came over with demos from the other two projects, along with orchestral tracks for the three songs he’d played me from the third project – those orchestral tracks had never had vocals put on them. As we listened to all this material, I was in Sherman Brothers heaven, hearing these songs from forty-six years ago, songs that no one had heard since then. I turned to him and said, “We have to put these out.” He agreed immediately and I decided right then that we’d call it *Unsung Sherman Brothers*, as I’d already done several rarities albums with the *Unsung* moniker – *Unsung Sondheim*, *Unsung Musicals*, and *Unsung Irving Berlin*. And so we put it on the fastest track ever. I got all the stuff to the wonderful audio restoration expert, Chris Malone, who’d singlehandedly saved what even three years ago could not have been saved – the soundtracks to *A Place in the Sun* and *It’s a Wonderful Life*. I call Chris The Miracle Worker.

So, here’s some history about the three projects.

THE 13 CLOCKS ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

In 1950, the great cartoonist/humorist James Thurber published his fantasy story, *The 13 Clocks*, a tale about a prince who must perform a seemingly impossible task, to rescue a maiden from an evil duke. Thurber, who by then was blind, could not do the drawings for the book, so he turned to a friend, Marc Simont. The book has been in print ever since, and read by thousands of happy readers all over the world. In 1968, Warner Bros. hired producer Mervyn LeRoy to make a film of it, and the Sherman Brothers were to write the score, having just come off their first film away from Disney, *Chitty, Chitty, Bang, Bang*. As the brothers wrote in *Walt’s Time*: “We were paired once again with our good friend (screenwriter) AJ Carothers, and set about adapting James Thurber’s short novel into a full-length musical feature. *The 13 Clocks* is a story about killing time – as an evil Duke who lives in the town of Onceuponatime smashes all the clocks in an effort to prevent ‘someday’ from ever coming.”

In May of 1969, the screenplay was finished and it and their songs were turned into the studio. As the brothers continued: “And then, our time ran out. Warners was purchased by the Kinney conglomerate, who cancelled almost every project in development – including this one.” But happily they’d made a demo of their song score, orchestrated by Don Ralke, sung by the Don Ralke singers and guest singer Fred Darian. As you will hear (finally) the score they wrote is classic Sherman Brothers, filled with their trademark hummable tunes and wordplay.

SIR PUSS-IN-BOOTS ■ ■ ■

That same year, the brothers formed an alliance with two educational film producers, Ira Englander and Barry Taper. They wanted to branch out so, with the brothers Sherman, they formed a new company called Musicclassics, to musicalize classic stories.

They enlisted Jack Kinney, a 27-year veteran of Disney animation (the Goofy cartoons as well as *Dumbo* and *Peter Pan*) to direct. For their first project, they created an original musical that would, in the brothers’ words, “borrow a little bit of mythology from every fairy tale we could think of.” They titled it *Sir Puss-in-Boots*. As they wrote in *Walt’s Time*: “In our story, a magical prince gives a cat the ability to talk (not to mention wearing boots, a vest and a hat). To repay the favor, our pussycat sets out in a boat with his trusty friend Rowl the Owl to find an evil ogre who lives at the top of a giant beanstalk. Our Puss-in-Boots defeats the Ogre, saves the Prince’s beloved Princess – and as a reward is knighted Sir Puss-in-Boots.”

The brothers wrote the screenplay and songs, and storyboards were made from them. They assembled an amazing voice cast for the film: Sammy Davis, Jr. as Sir Puss-in-Boots, Karl Malden as the Ogre, comedian Jack Carter as Rowl the Owl, Jinny Tyler as Mumsy Ogre, and English radio host, Michael Jackson as Sir Lungemore Lancewellington. Everything was going well until the money ran out – the producers hadn’t realized how long, arduous, and expensive the an-

imation process is, and they could not raise the money to continue. And so, the second project was cancelled.

Again, thankfully, a demo recording was made, with several of the voice actors singing their songs, including Sammy Davis, Jr., Karl Malden, and Jinny Tyler. And again, the brothers’ songs are toe-tapping tuneful wonders – from the kicky “Sir Puss-in-Boots” to the great “Rhythm of the Road” (we also include a more “Sammyized” version of that, which is simply supercalifragilisticexpialidocious), to the fun “Ogre Song,” which Karl Malden obviously has a field day with.

ROMAN HOLIDAY ■ ■ ■ ■

In 1953, Paramount Pictures released what would become an instant classic, the William Wyler film, *Roman Holiday*, starring Gregory Peck and newcomer Audrey Hepburn. Written by Dalton Trumbo and John Dighton, the film was embraced by audiences and critics, doing huge business at the box-office and garnering an astonishing ten Academy Award nominations, winning three (including one for Audrey Hepburn).

In 1969, Paramount and director Franco Zeffirelli (riding high on his success with his film of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*), decided to make a musical update of *Roman Holiday*, and Zeffirelli invited the brothers to join the project. As the brothers said in *Walt’s Time*: “But producer Dino De Laurentiis was less enthusiastic when he heard our names. He thought that only an Italian composer could do justice to the music he envisioned. So we took the challenge and wrote three songs to demonstrate what we could do – ‘We’ll Still Have Rome,’ ‘So Simpatico,’ and ‘The Bells of Roma.’ Paramount Pictures flew us to Italy and we played the songs for Mr. De Laurentiis. When we were done, he looked at us in amazement and said, ‘Are you sure you’re not Italian?’ He loved the songs and the project was a go – until the day the studio pulled the plug.” And that was the third cancelled project. But while the project was still a go, the brothers had the great good fortune of having the brilliant conductor, arranger, and orchestrator, Irwin Kostal, do orchestral recordings of the three songs. But before vocals could be put on them, the ax fell.

For this CD, we took those three orchestral tracks and brought in singers to record the vocals all these years later, a *Roman Holiday* indeed. All the other tracks come from the demos that Richard had, and Chris Malone has done amazing work in cleaning them up.

I cannot tell you what a treat it is to bring this music out, to let the millions of Sherman Brothers fans all over the world hear these unsung songs, to let these three projects finally see the light of day, albeit in audio form only. But we all have imaginations and can just picture in our heads how delightful these three movies would have been if fate hadn’t caused this one-two-three punch. So, sit back and enjoy three brand spanking old Sherman Brothers musicals.

— Bruce Kimmel