

Alien Nation

Some ideas seem like naturals – and the idea for *Alien Nation* was definitely a natural – aliens (Newcomers) land on Earth (in Los Angeles, naturally), and are being integrated into the population of the city, which makes the population of the city a little uneasy. It's not that far-fetched, really, if you think about it. And aliens co-existing with people would naturally bring out certain people's prejudices just like, well, just like, you know, real life. The 1988 film takes place in 1991, three years after the aliens have arrived, and while it may have seemed fanciful back in 1988, all one need do today is look around them at people texting the person sitting next to them, people walking down the street talking loudly on their cell phones without a care who hears them, people sitting in restaurants either texting or talking but not actually relating to the person they're dining with and it's not such a leap to think that we are indeed living in a world filled with aliens, especially in Los Angeles.

Directed by Graham Baker, produced by Gale Anne Hurd, with a script by Rockne S. O'Bannon, *Alien Nation* stars James Caan as a police detective and Mandy Patinkin as the first Newcomer to become a detective. So, we have a sci-fi film cross-pollinated with a buddy cop film and it's a surprisingly good fit. The future L.A. circa 1991 isn't that different from the L.A. of today. The Newcomers, called "slags" by many of the racist humans, live in a ghetto called Slagtown, are treated like second-class outcasts and, like other minorities, tend to frequent their own neighborhoods, their own clubs and bars and have their own underground. The film's structure plays out like a standard detective thriller, but the alien angle keeps it interesting and off-center – plus the character details for the aliens is fun. They eat only raw food and seawater is like acid on their alien skin – that and their rather large, bulbous heads with the brown spots. And like with any race of people, there are good Newcomers and bad Newcomers.

Caan and Patinkin are wonderful together. Patinkin's character, called George Francisco (Caan calls him Sam Francisco) was originally to be called George Jetson, but at the last minute, Hanna-Barbera, the creators of *The Jetsons*, refused to give permission and the character had to be rechristened. Patinkin was very upset by the change and insisted that at the very least the name George be kept. The look of the aliens was a key decision – as producer Hurd said, "We wanted the aliens to be more like a different ethnic race rather than like lizard people. We didn't want our audiences thinking, 'Gee, look how different these aliens are.' Rather, after about five minutes we wanted the audience to accept them as different from us, but not so different that no one is buying the storyline. We wanted the aliens to be characters – not creatures."

The alien makeup posed huge problems for cameraman Adam Greenberg, but after some disastrous camera tests, he learned what worked and what didn't, and his work on the film is really terrific, as is the set and production design. The pace is brisk and the film runs a tight 91 minutes, which is about 86 minutes without the end credits. The reviews were middling, but the film was a modest success and enough of one to spawn a TV series the following year. That ran but a single season (22 episodes), but because the film had developed a popular cult following as had the TV series, there followed five *Alien Nation* TV movies.

The legendary Jerry Goldsmith was hired to provide the score for *Alien Nation*. As he'd already done a handful of times before, he wrote an electronic score, which was produced by his son, Joel. It was a dynamic synth score, but when the film underwent considerable reediting, Goldsmith was either busy with other things or disinclined to revise what he'd written. Rather than chop it up and try to make it fit the new, leaner version of the film, his score was discarded and composer Curt Sobel was brought in to compose a new one.

The differences between the scores are fascinating. First of all, Curt Sobel's score fits the finished film like a glove. It's occasionally heavier on the atmosphere than the Goldsmith score, playing up the noir-ish aspects of the story (especially the main title), but still with the requisite action cues. It, like the Goldsmith score, is mostly electronic, but with some great guitar work from Tim May. Goldsmith's score is very propulsive, and it has a great and memorable theme – that theme was originally written for but not used in Oliver Stone's film, *Wall Street*. When the *Alien Nation* score was discarded, Goldsmith recycled the theme one more time and the third time was the charm – for the film *The Russia House*.

The Jerry Goldsmith score was originally released by Varese Sarabande as a limited edition. While Goldsmith was praised in the liner notes for that release, both film and Curt Sobel were given short shrift, which is a little unfair. The film is extremely entertaining, and Mr. Sobel, given a time-sensitive and difficult assignment, delivered what he was asked to deliver. The scores are, as noted, very different, but both work well on their own terms. The Curt Sobel score has never been issued on CD – this is the world premiere release and it's nice to have both *Alien Nation* scores available in one package. Sobel prepared an album master back in the day, and that is what we used for this CD. The Goldsmith score is basically the same as the Varese, although certain dropouts and other anomalies have been fixed.

There are no heroes or villains when a score is replaced in a film and it's happened to some of the biggest film composers ever. Whatever side one takes, it's the producer or director's decision and they do what they feel is best for their film. It's rarely about quality; it's about fit. In this case, we have two excellent scores for one film.

— Bruce Kimmel