

# Too Late Blues

In 1951, Alex North's electrifying and jazzy main title for *A Streetcar Named Desire* burst from movie theater speakers – and movie scores were never the same: jazz had come to the movies. From there it was a short leap to Leonard Bernstein's jazzy, jagged rhythms for *On the Waterfront* and Elmer Bernstein's brilliant *Man With the Golden Arm* and *Sweet Smell of Success*. Classic jazz scores to *I Want to Live* by Johnny Mandel, *The Subterraneans* by André Previn, and *Odds Against Tomorrow* by John Lewis (leader of The Modern Jazz Quartet), soon followed. And the 1960s would bring even more jazz people to film scoring, including Quincy Jones, Lalo Schiffrin and Dave Grusin, to name three of the best.

John Cassavetes, who'd been acting in films and television since the early 1950s, had a one-of-a-kind, quirky and dynamic screen presence. In 1959 he transferred his unique personality to the director's chair when he helmed his first film, *Shadows*. It was an independent film when independent film actually meant something. It was raw, powerful, jagged, edgy and original. There was nothing easy about it. It wasn't slick, and it felt off-the-cuff because it was – a film clearly made by an original, a maverick. It was, in fact, a movie that was to filmmaking what jazz is to music – a series of brilliant improvisations around a theme. Improvisations always have danger in them – you never quite know where things are going. There are always surprises around every corner, and the whole thing is free-form and exhilarating if everyone concerned is firing on all cylinders.

Given the maverick nature of Cassavetes and his film, it was truly bold of a major studio, in this case Paramount Pictures, to hand the reins of a studio production to someone like Cassavetes. But in 1962 that's exactly what happened with *Too Late Blues*. It was a perfect match between subject matter and filmmaker, since *Too Late Blues* is about the world of jazz. In 1959, Cassavetes had starred in a TV series called *Johnny Staccato*, playing a jazzman who moonlights as a detective. It was a wild series – unpredictable, dark, violent, with great jazzy music by Elmer Bernstein. Cassavetes had directed several of the series' episodes.

*Too Late Blues* is certainly one of the greatest films ever made about the jazz world. Despite being a studio movie and being

scripted, it feels like jazz, like an improvisation. Bobby Darin stars as an idealistic, obstinate pianist and leader named Ghost Wakefield. There are obvious parallels between Darin's character and Cassavetes himself: Wakefield has to decide whether to stay with his quintet where he has complete and total freedom, or to work with a label where his producer would be calling the shots. It would mean money and fame to Wakefield, but it would also mean artistic compromise – much like when Cassavetes went from being an independent maverick with total creative freedom to working in the confines of a major studio production. (From most reports, however, he was given an astonishing amount of creative freedom by Paramount – something practically unheard of in those days.)

Also starring is Stella Stevens, who gives a wonderful performance as the young woman and aspiring singer who comes into the lives of Darin and his musicians. The rest of the cast were mostly newcomers, some of whom had worked with Cassavetes before and would work with him again. The film received mixed reviews and quietly disappeared. But, as sometimes happens, it found new admirers and developed a cult following as people discovered it from its occasional television airings – and eventually on home video, including its recent Blu-ray release. As *Time Out* magazine said in their capsule review, "...this attempt to recapture the spontaneous energy and 'realism' of his much-acclaimed, independently made *Shadows* in a rather more plot-bound film for Paramount remains one of the most impressive Hollywood movies to be set in the hip, flip jazz world."

The fact is, *Too Late Blues* is a beautifully made film, with fantastic black-and-white photography courtesy of Lionel Lindon (the Cassavetes series *Johnny Staccato*, *Conquest of Space*, *I Want to Live* and *Around the World in Eighty Days* – for which he won an Oscar), costumes by none other than Edith Head, and a top-tier group of behind-the-scenes artists. But where the film really shines and enters extraordinary territory is with its score by David Raksin.

There is a lot of jazz in *Too Late Blues*. The easy way out would have been to do standards, but Raksin wrote all original music for the film, even for the source cues. And what music it is – Raksin at his best, and Raksin at his best is as good as it gets. It

didn't hurt that he was working with some of the best West Coast jazz players of that era, including Red Mitchell, Benny Carter, Shelly Manne, Jimmy Rowles, Milt Bernhart, and the best studio musicians anyone could hope for – including the amazing trumpet player Uan Rasey.

The use of music in *Too Late Blues* is as unconventional as the film. Instead of hearing a traditional orchestral statement over the Paramount seal, we hear solo bass, joined by piano, trumpet, and saxophone, instantly setting the jazz feel of what's to come. The main titles play over shots of African-American kids listening to live jazz musicians – the music cuts off abruptly at the end when one of the kids grabs a musician's saxophone and runs off. From there, we get jazz that's either played on screen during scenes or heard as source music. The first actual dramatic score cue doesn't occur until over an hour into the film, and when it comes it is a truly powerful moment. Raksin wrote one of his most exquisite and inspired themes for the film, which he titled "A Song After Sundown." It's heard in jazz guises, within the dramatic score, and even as a vocalise performed by Stella Stevens' character. It's a haunting, melancholy theme filled with sadness and yearning – classic Raksin, as are the jazz cues and the dramatic score. It's all of a piece – absolute perfection in the picture and wonderful to listen to outside the film as well.

This is the world-premiere release of *Too Late Blues*. We had access to the scoring session masters and the original prerecords done for the "live" playing in the film. The latter were all recorded in one-track mono, while the score cues and some of the source cues were recorded in three-track stereo. Given how the music functions in the film, we took a different approach in sequencing the album, trying for an optimal listening experience rather than strict film order – which would have given an hour of jazz cues before the first score cue. We have included all the music written for the film – first the film cues, and then a bonus section filled with alternates and various odds and ends (including an alternate opening for the Paramount seal that *does* make an orchestral statement).

— Bruce Kimmel