

The Panic in Needle Park

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE: NED ROREM'S DIARY ON *THE PANIC IN NEEDLE PARK*

Based on the novel by James Mills, which itself was inspired by the author's pictorial essay published in two issues of *Life* magazine, *The Panic in Needle Park* is one of the most shocking portrayals of the drug subculture. The rights to the book were initially purchased by Avco Embassy Pictures, but they were later acquired by Dominick Dunne, whose journalistic writings usually dealt with the misdemeanors of high society – one of his most shocking writings covered the trial of his daughter's murderer. Yet in his cinematic career, Dunne changed his focus and produced films that dealt with underground subcultures, especially in the New York area. His first film, *The Boys in the Band* was directed by William Friedkin and is a milestone in gay cinema. *The Panic in Needle Park* was destined to achieve something similar for the drug subculture.

The film is notable for the starmaking turn of a very young Al Pacino just a year prior to his great breakthrough in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. Pacino plays the character of Bobby, a small-time drug dealer whose illegal dealings are contrasted with the genuine humanity he shows early on in the film – one simply cannot see the parallels with Pacino's other similar character, Tony Montana from *Scarface*. Kitty Winn, who'd later appear in *The Exorcist* as Regan's tutor Sharon, plays Helen, a young girl from Indiana who gets more involved in Bobby's drug deals once she hooks up with him. Both of them start hanging around Sherman Square which has been renamed Needle Park due to the high number of dealers and addicts hanging around the place. Throughout the film we learn more and more about the drug subculture, their habits, their distribution methods and their lingo. Director Jerry Schatzberg uses the precision of a documentarist to turn this fictional tale into a gritty depiction of reality – and this idea, in fact, lead to the film's hidden secret: a musical score that was never used.

Although it plays entirely without music, *The Panic in Needle Park* used to have a score, provided by noted avant-garde composer Ned Rorem. The American-born Rorem is a versatile force of contemporary music: he wrote operas, symphonies, chamber music, many celebrated choral pieces and songs; now aged 92 he still lives and works in New York City. Apart from writing music, Rorem also famously published the "scandalous" and marvelously entertaining journal *The Paris Diary of Ned Rorem* (1966) which was followed by several other published journals that highlight the composer's day-to-day life and creative process. The diary entries for *The Panic in Needle Park* started on for March 3, 1971 where Rorem wrote he was being "felt out" with a screening of the film. This initial diary entry suggests that Rorem wasn't exactly stormed with musical ideas – "I've not one musical notion," he wrote at one point about the film whose "viewpoint" he didn't understand. "How music?" he summarized briefly at the end of that day's entry. In fact, there are no other entries about the score for a month and when we do get more information, the reader is hit in the face with this entry: "Stravinsky died last night. Today is Shirley's birthday." Those were the main points in the diary for April 7, 1971 – the day when

Ned got to record his eventually unused score for *The Panic in Needle Park*.

Further excerpts about the score: "With Shirley's husband Seymour Barab, old friend and fine cellist, acting as contractor, we assembled twenty solid performers who, for four hours this morning and four more this afternoon, recorded the score for *Panic in Needle Park*. In less than a month I've composed a half-hour's worth of original music for this film, orchestrated it, copied the parts myself, assembled and arranged another half-hour's worth of source music and dealt with a thousand non-musical details," explained the composer who was obviously not well-versed in studio pressure. He then adds: "Although I'm no conductor I conducted the sessions, as I always do with my stage music (good union musicians just need someone to beat time), under the jaundiced eye in the control booth of the film's director, Jerry Schatzberg, who knows what he wants, and now I'm exhausted, but with honor, and relieved. Tomorrow we edit."

But within 10 days, the score was rejected. A succinct entry from April 16, 1971 states: "Special delivery from Dunne stating with distress that they have decided not to use a score, any score, in the film. Only sound effects, as in a documentary. Beyond shredding my ego, this news brings no compensation." While Rorem also went on to write that the work consisted of too short cues so it couldn't be compiled into a suite either, one part of the score was repurposed later on. The "Sifting Powder" sequence was later reworked into the sixth section of Rorem's *Air Music* (1974), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1976. This also shows that the music has a lot of merits – it may just not be the ideal match for the film it was written for.

FINDING THE TREASURE IN THE PARK: DISCOVERING THE SCORE

I've always been fascinated by the world of rejected scores and the fact that they offered endless possibilities of "what if" scenarios even for beloved films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Chinatown*. While working on my book *Torn Music* (2012, Silman-James Press), I was motivated to uncover as many stories as I could – *The Panic in Needle Park* however was not among them. I simply didn't know about the score and it was brought to my attention by a friend who read about it in one of Ned's many published diaries (*The Later Diaries of Ned Rorem: 1961–1972* – portions of the book have been excerpted for these notes). The unused score was mentioned only in passing on a few days, but it was enough to get me started on my hunt for the music. The first result of my research was a concert booklet, which mentioned that Ned Rorem had reused some of the score in one of his concert works – more proof that this thing existed. But did a copy survive?

The next step unfortunately doesn't have the wonders of an Indiana Jones adventure – I merely used a social networking site to reach out to an official looking Ned Rorem site, which turned out to be

handled by Mary G. Marshall, who proved to be essential in getting this release done. Mary confirmed that the music existed and that tapes were, in fact, located in the Library of Congress, which housed the Ned Rorem Collection. Since I was insistent to continue my research, Mary arranged for a CD transfer of the tapes, which she got for herself and Ned. She confirmed that the music not only existed, but was in really excellent-sounding mono and a very nice recording. However, I didn't get my own copy of the music then and I moved on to some other commissions, keeping the story of *The Panic in Needle Park* on the backburner.

I reignited the research when I read the announcement of the new Twilight Time Blu-ray releases which included *The Panic in Needle Park* set for a June 2016 release date. This was in spring, so I contacted Nick Redman about whether they'd have an isolated score on it or not. He was a bit perplexed, since the film had no score and after confirming that Twentieth Century Fox had no corresponding musical elements, I revealed to him that there was a music score hiding in the Library of Congress. Since the title was already announced, we had a very short deadline to create an isolated score for the Blu-ray – we had to use Mary's personal copy of the CD as our source and since we didn't even have time for posting it, Nick's daughter Rebecca picked it up in NYC and made a digital upload for us so we could get started working.

Perhaps I should reveal a bit about creating an isolated score for a film which has no music. This is a tricky job, but I've been honored to do restorations like this (my latest being for Twilight Time's release of *Used Cars* which featured Ernest Gold's unused music). When I put a rejected score back to the film, all I'm left with is the paperwork – luckily the tapes had a piece of paper attached to them which featured the actual track titles and the reel numbers which are essential in positioning the cues in the film. A reel number like 8M2 (which was the code for "Sifting Powder" for instance) reveals that the given cue was the second piece of music in the eighth reel of the film. The only part of the reel numbers that were tricky were the blanks – for instance, "An End" was meant to be 12M2, but there was no 12M1. This anomaly is due to the source cues that were planned for the film and thus they were labeled, yet they never got recorded after the original music was jettisoned.

While the Blu-ray release by Twilight Time gives viewers the chance to view the film together with its score, the CD by Kritzerland will prove that Ned Rorem's music is just as exciting and innovative on its own and is a worthy addition to anyone wishing to experience another curious "what if" scenario of Hollywood film history.

— Gergely Hubai