

Babylon, I'm Coming:

The *Paradiso e Inferno* of Italian exploitation film music

by Thomas Bey William Bailey

"I don't care about the golden days of ancient Rome...give me 1969!"

-Christian Kessler, liner notes to *Beat at Cinecitta Vol. 2*

"FUN." Admittedly, this is not one of the first words anybody would use to describe me if they had to speak at my funeral tomorrow. I'd imagine people might make kind remarks about how I certainly knew a lot about the Vienna Aktionists, or how neat and tidy I kept the spare furnishings in my apartment, or how I always had a quote from Cioran or Nietzsche on hand to put certain quotidian affairs into perspective (or to "bum people out," to use the local slang for ruining someone's day.) Still, I have a feeling that people will not remember me for being an entertaining (or easy to entertain) kind of guy. In my defense, I have to say that I occasionally enjoy slipping out of my avant-garde apparatchik guise and like to unwind just like everyone else- and I like to unwind in style. To me, nothing is more synonymous with 'leisure time' music than much of the music scored for Italian exploitation films in the 1960s and 1970s- a celluloid feast of gangsters, cowboys, young lovers, beatniks, secret agents and whole boat-loads of hapless "Italians abroad" or bewildered "(insert non-Italian nationality here) in Italy": it was a time and place in which narcissistic consumerism actually looked and sounded good, when 'globalization' seemed like an idea which would lead the youth of the day to an infinitely exciting party, rather than into the iron grip of trans-national corporate feudalism. Like the films which this music accompanied, the emphasis was on displacing the listener to the wild world beyond Italy's boundaries (sometimes several locales being conjured up in the same song), and to do this, a slick and seductive *mélange* of clashing sonic implements were marshaled: on the 'hot' end of things, jazz idioms were borrowed from the playbooks of Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington, while space-age female choruses soared wordlessly over faultless rock backbeats. Holding down the 'cool' end of the music, lush vibraphones and sleepy flute solos occasionally wafted in from out of nowhere to chill the proceedings to a comfortable level. The new musical technology of the day was also represented in the form of swirling electric organ, novel synthesizer squiggles (heavy on the portamento) and rude bursts of fuzz guitar. Complement all this with some hall reverb or other multi-track studio trickery, and you had a recipe for consistently entertaining music. Basically, any ingredient that *could* be thrown into the musical soup *was*, so long as the final flavor of that soup was a richly melodic one and one that could adapt itself to the short time durations allotted to soundtrack pieces. This kind of music had to enliven all sorts of cinematic scenery from square-jawed fistfights and pistol play to spontaneous surges of romance, and so aimed for a boisterous / flamboyant quality which could apply itself across this entire spectrum of visual information, while not sounding out of place in the sultry environs of the local nightclub, either. The iconography which accompanies the album releases of this music aims to be equally striking: models posing in front of

undulating Bridget Riley Op-art patterns, or bold images of “girls with guns” feminine assertiveness taken from spy thrillers (for an example of the latter, it would be difficult to find a more iconic image than Ursula Andress’ machine-gun bra in *La Decima Vittima* [The Tenth Victim.])

The question remains, though, what makes all of this music different from the similar material being cranked out by the London-Paris-New York dream factory during the cultural explosion beginning in the mid-‘60s? One answer could lie in the fact that the Italian film industry was less likely to censor lurid scenes than the Anglo-American film industry was, and so a more “explicit” soundscape was designed to match. Undoubtedly, music scored for Italian cinema is some of the world’s finest, when it comes to intertwining itself with its accompanying visuals: who could imagine the barren and perilous backdrops of Sergio Leone’s Westerns without their being animated by Ennio Morricone’s ingenious blend of incidental music and pure orchestral drama, or Fellini’s *Amarcord* without the bittersweet, haunting refrains –courtesy of Nino Rota- that underpin the film’s protracted nostalgic sighing? However, films like these are not the kind that you might have to justify your fondness for, if the local film critic or academic purist catches you watching them- they’re acknowledged classics of cinematic lyricism rather than “guilty pleasures,” and that itself is a designation more easily applied to the unholy trinity of *mondo*, *giallo*, and exploitation movies that also rolled out of Italy at a dizzying pace during the 1960s and 1970s. Lumping three different genres of Italian film into one phenomenon does smack of laziness on my part, but they do have some overlapping elements in spite of their different lineages- principally their sheer audacity and cheerful abandonment of dogmatic morality. It was the American exploitation producer Sam Arkoff, boss of American International Studios (is that an oxymoron or what?!), who probably came up with the best summation of the, er, ‘values’ encoded in this kind of film when he made his famous “Arkoff formula”: using the letters that form his last name, he decided that ‘action, revolution, killing, oratory, fantasy and fornication’ were the cinematic attributes that the youth of the day truly craved. *Mondo* movies often made good on at least 3 of the above elements, and were especially amusing for their ham-fisted attempts to present themselves as true-to-life documentary overviews of exotic locales. They were so drenched in fantasy (think lots of sex) that they were often the polar opposite of Italian post-war ‘neo-realist’ films, or of the abstruse Marxist / existentialist commentary employed by Michaelangelo Antonioni: the dry dialogue and crushing *ennui* of a film like Antonioni’s *La Notte* couldn’t be further from a carefree *mondo* such as Luigi Scattini’s 1968 cult classic *Svegia- Inferno e Paradiso* [Sweden: Heaven and Hell], a collection of fake documentary vignettes which laughably pretends to offer serious appraisal of topics like hippie decadence, sexual coming-of-age and Stockholm policewomen who moonlight as nude models. Likewise, the famous works of Vittorio De Sica –like *The Bicycle Thief*, with its aura of desperate economic struggle- are a world removed from films like *La Decima Vittima*. The catch to all this, though, is that the latter film and selections from De Sica’s filmography *both* feature music contributed by the inimitable jazz-trained composer Piero Picconi (whose delightfully snappy “Babylon, I’m Coming” provides the title for this article.)

Indeed, some of the more renowned Italian composers of the '60s and beyond were unique for adventurous flexibility, and their refusal to shy away from scoring works for both 'exploitation' cinema and for more high-brow works. In other words, theirs was a world where pleasure was to be found both in wine made from Sangiovese grapes and in J & B whisky (a product whose placement occurs in old *giallo* films with alarming regularity.) This non-specialist flexibility may be what really separates the greats of Italian film music from their contemporaries elsewhere in Europe and America. Ennio Morricone has long been a point of critical contention for balancing a 'pop' sensibility with his rigorous study of classical orchestral technique, while his success has encouraged the work of other prominent collaborators, such as Bruno Nicolai. It was Nicolai who often took up the conductor's baton for the Morricone-scored orchestras featured in Sergio Corbucci Westerns like *Vamos a matar*, *Compañeros* and *Il Mercenario*- further down the road, he would score that penultimate attempt at fusing high-brow narration (in the person of Shakespearean master John Gielgud) with pornographic excess: Tinto Brass' *Caligula*. All this, and the man still manages to pull off the perfect mid-'60s pop song with the title theme for *Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang*, a goofy, satirical clash of Euro-spy and comedy clichés. The tune's syrupy, pining female vocal lead, gently *oooh*-ing choral vocals and heavy backbeat make it capably hold its own against any other pop music of the day.

This kind of music has experienced a couple of well-deserved and notable revivals as of late. One came in the mid-late 1990s, part of that forgettable decade's panicked re-assessment of almost all popular recorded media- with geopolitical observers like the disgraced Francis Fukuyama prematurely declaring the "end of history" earlier in the decade, amateur archivists must have felt they had some serious homework to catch up on: many went into overdrive and began vacuuming up virtually anything that had previously evaded the pop cultural radar, including scads of "exotica" records from the 1960s and 1970s: those upbeat and faux-tropical gems from composers Les Baxter, Martin Denny, Esquivel, *et. Al.*, which allowed middle-class Americans to temporarily convert their living rooms into the sites of pagan ritual and idol worship. Such offerings were also greedily snapped up from garage sales and thrift stores by the post-modern American hipsters who reveled in ironic, kitsch gestures. These dutiful commodity fetishists, flush with cash, helped contribute to this music's getting aired once again in the requisite urban dens of hip-ness, even though their attitude towards it was often one of forced neutrality (showing sincere enthusiasm for such cultural artifacts seems to be a major *faux pas* in a hipster scene built on the suppression of emotion.) Some sincerely enthusiastic proselytizers helped to get this music back into the CD supermarkets, though, including the hyperactive film auteur Quentin Tarantino. Tarantino's entire career has been one lengthy homage to the underrated ability of certain low-brow film styles to lift the spirits, yet that shouldn't discourage people from exploring further on their own: the selections of Italian film music that he borrows for use in his *Kill Bill* movies' soundtracks are lively examples of the genre. Italian film music of this kind is also heavily represented on reissue-oriented record labels: Right Tempo does the homeland honors with themed releases like *The Psycho Beat* and *Bikini Beat*, and is also your one-stop shop for the many different musical manifestations of Piero Umiliani. Others, like Germany's curiously-

named Crippled Dick Hot Wax, offer up compilations like *Beat at Cinecitta* (a series which concentrates heavily on Picconi's tunes.)

As many others before me have noted, the genesis of the home video market in the 1980s sounded the death knell for the freaky fun of the "midnight movie" circuit that brought Italian exploitation cinema to wider international audiences of insomniac thrill-seekers. One can hardly blame the advent of home video for a severe paradigm shift in the Western world, though. A deluge of far-reaching tragedies in the '80s – AIDS, brutal conflicts in Afghanistan and Central America, the rise of mass-media religious eschatology- darkened the overall public mood and made it possible for a seismic shift in *mondo* culture: away from the careless *eros* of films like *Svezia...*, and into the murky necropolis of 'death scenes' videos (many of which featured faked footage, although that hardly makes the creators' intentions any more noble.) The newer death fixation is best exemplified by one of the most infamous *mondo* title of the early 1980s, Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust*- kind of like a travelogue filtered through the writings of Georges Bataille. The film contains a biting critique of cultural imperialism (much of the film centers around an arrogant group of Western documentarians who set out to film a group of indigenous tribesmen, and later become viciously cruel when becoming repulsed by their tribal customs.) Whatever moral lesson this imparts, though, the film's unwarranted scenes of real animal slaughter have earned it my personal condemnation. Still, even *Cannibal Holocaust*, might not have left such an indelible stain on my consciousness if it weren't for the Riz Ortolani score which accompanied it: the sweet, lilting string part and dreamy swells of the title theme sound like they were meant to be used for a much more light-hearted romantic romp: the juxtaposition of such music with the merciless action of the film keeps it fresh in your mind long after you want it to be forgotten.

The 'death trip' that began with the '80s generation has been a long and sobering one, but if history proves anything, it is that attitudes like this are difficult to maintain forever, and that severe burnout sets in eventually: sometimes it takes just a single generation to reverse the cultural trend from broodings on death to colorful celebrations of vitality. For an example of this, one needs look no further than one composer of easy, swinging Italian film music: none other than Benito Mussolini's son Romano. His "Romano Mussolini All Stars" was one of the most in-demand jazz bands within Italy of the 1960s, and if nothing else, his laidback palette of sounds have almost nothing in common with the ceremonial pomp that was the mark of his father's oratory. It's also safe to assume that the younger Mussolini's song "Duke" (complete with a whistling solo and sparse Thelonious Monk-styled piano) is a tribute to the Ellington of the same name, and not the "Duce" himself.