

# JOHN WAYNE AT FOX — THE WESTERNS

John Wayne at Fox – not a lot of films, but some extraordinarily entertaining ones. Interestingly, John Wayne's first credited screen appearance, *The Big Trail*, was for Fox. The 1930 western should have made him a star – but it didn't. Wayne toiled in all kinds of films for all kinds of studios and it took John Ford and his smash hit film, *Stagecoach*, to make Wayne an "overnight sensation" and box-office star. Unlike many of the stars of that era, Wayne wasn't tied to one studio – he bounced around from studio to studio, maintaining his independence. He returned to Fox in 1958 not for a western but for *The Barbarian and the Geisha*. But a couple of years later, he returned to Fox for the first of three films he'd make there over the next eleven years, all westerns.

*The Comancheros* (1961), based on the 1952 novel by Paul I. Wellman, was directed by Michael Curtiz, the great director who'd done any number of classics, including some of the most beloved films of all time – *Casablanca*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *Captain Blood*, *Angels With Dirty Faces*, *The Sea Hawk*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Mildred Pierce*, *White Christmas*, to name just a handful. Starring were Wayne, Stuart Whitman, Ina Balin, Lee Marvin, Nehemiah Persoff and Bruce Cabot. The screenplay was by James Edward Grant and Clair Huffaker, and behind the camera was the great William H. Clothier, shooting in Cinemascope and color. Curtiz was very ill during filming and according to those who were there, Wayne would occasionally take over those chores. It was, sadly, Curtiz's last film.

*The Comancheros* is the story of an escaped gambler facing the death penalty and the Texas Ranger who catches him but with whom he then must join forces to fight, a bunch of bad guys called, what else, the Comancheros. It's a wonderful film with colorful performances, gorgeous photography, and a rousing musical score by Elmer Bernstein. At the time, Bernstein had just written what would become one of the most iconic western scores ever, *The Magnificent Seven*. *The Comancheros* was his follow up western score, and it, like the film it graces, is colorful, bigger than life, and filled with action and adventure. You know what you're in for as soon as the first chords of the main title music begin, one of Bernstein's all-time classic themes. But the score is rife with melody and invention and

Bernstein's music is as iconic and big as the Duke himself.

A year earlier, the John Wayne Fox western was *North to Alaska*, a big, sprawling comedy western starring the Duke, Stewart Granger, enticing Capucine, Ernie Kovacs and teen heartthrob Fabian. The director was Henry Hathaway, a regular at Fox, who'd helmed such classics as *The House on 92nd Street*, *Call Northside 777*, *Kiss of Death*, *Fourteen Hours*, *Niagara*, *Prince Valiant* and many others, as well as several films with Wayne, including *The Shepherd of the Hills*, *Legend of the Lost*, *How the West Was Won*, *Circus World*, *The Sons of Katie Elder*, and, of course, the film that won Wayne an Oscar, *True Grit*. The screenplay (based on a play by Ladislav Fodor) was by John Lee Mahin, Wendell Mayes and Martin Rackin, with Cinemascope and color photography by Leon Shamroy. The story involves Alaska, girls, gold, gold thieves and lots of brawling and a happy ending. Wayne is his usual wonderful self as Sam McCord, Stewart Granger is his usual charming self as George Pratt, Ernie Kovacs is his usual amusing self, and Capucine is fetching and feisty as Angel, and Fabian is charming. The score, credited solely to Lionel Newman, but containing music by several others, fits the film like a glove. It's got a tuneful title song by Mike Phillips, a nice song for Fabian called "If You Knew" and some fun original orchestral cues by Newman. The score, like the film, is light and fluffy, all expertly orchestrated by stalwarts Bernard Mayers and Urban Thielmann, along with vocal direction by the amazing Ken Darby.

Next we jump to the third of the Fox Wayne westerns, the 1969 film *The Undefeated* (Wayne's other film from that year would be one of his greatest – *True Grit*), starring Wayne and Rock Hudson, along with Roman Gabriel, Lee Meriwether, Bruce Cabot, Ben Johnson, Jan-Michael Vincent, Harry Carey, Jr., Paul Fix, Richard Mulligan, John Agar and Dub Taylor. The director was Andrew V. McLaglen, the script was by James Lee Barrett and the cameraman was William H. Clothier. *The Undefeated* concerns itself with Confederate and Union soldiers dealing with the aftermath of the Civil War. Emperor Maximilian of Mexico has offered land to the "undefeated" Confederates (who refused to accept defeat), Hudson being one such Con-

federate who decides to burn his plantation (rather than leave it to the carpetbaggers) and take his people to Mexico. Wayne is a Union soldier trying to sell horses – the two former enemies join up and there follows much excitement, drunken brawls, a romance between Wayne's adopted Indian son and Hudson's daughter, and more excitement, all rousing scored by Hugo Montenegro.

Montenegro, born in 1925, began as an orchestra leader in the mid-1950s, then going to Time Records, where he did several great albums in the early 1960s. Throughout that decade, Montenegro did cover versions of various film and TV music, along with cover versions of pop music, all of which were very successful. In fact, his version of Ennio Morricone's *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* was a huge pop hit, reaching number two on the Billboard chart and selling over a million copies. He began his film journey in 1964, conducting and arranging music for *Advance to the Rear*. He turned out some wonderful scores in subsequent years, including *Hurry Sundown*, two Matt Helm films – *The Ambushers* and *The Wrecking Crew – Viva Max* and *Charro*. He was also extremely prolific in television, composing for such classic shows as *Hazel*, *The Monkees*, *Here Come the Brides*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Bracken's World*, *Mission: Impossible*, and *The Partridge Family*.

Montenegro's music for *The Undefeated* is big as all outdoors, with strong themes and a real sense of storytelling. As with many Western scores, there's a lot of Copland "Americana" as well as a stirring main theme, some great dramatic scoring, some Mexican-flavored cues and even a hoedown. It's a gem of a score and it's a shame Montenegro didn't have a bigger film career. He passed away in 1981.

Both *The Comancheros* and *The Undefeated* were previously released on CD by FSM, and *North to Alaska* was released on CD by Intrada. But we're pleased to bring them all together in one 2-CD set – they've all been newly remastered for this release.

— Bruce Kimmel