

# It's A Wonderful Life

“STRANGE, ISN'T IT?  
EACH MAN'S LIFE TOUCHES  
SO MANY OTHER LIVES.  
WHEN HE ISN'T AROUND  
HE LEAVES AN AWFUL  
HOLE, DOESN'T HE?”

It is surprising to think that one of the most beloved movies of all time was a box-office disappointment during its original engagement. But, over the years, *It's a Wonderful Life* found its audience – a huge and enduring audience – and became one of the most beloved works in all of cinema. *It's a Wonderful Life* is now seen as the classic it always was, revered by people all over the world, a staple at Christmas, and a movie people watch over and over again without ever tiring of its simple and beautiful message: how our lives touch others' lives in profound and wonderful ways. It is one of director Frank Capra's crowning achievements in a career filled with them.

*It's a Wonderful Life* began its wonderful life as a short story called *The Greatest Gift*, written by Phillip Van Doren Stern in 1943, inspired by a dream he had several years earlier. He couldn't find a publisher so he sent out the 200 copies he'd printed as a 21-page booklet to friends as Christmas presents in December 1943. A producer at RKO Studios heard about the story and the studio purchased the screen rights in 1944, having a few screenwriters take a stab at adapting it as a screen story. A year later, RKO sold the rights to Frank Capra's company, Liberty Films. Capra collaborated with Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett on a screenplay; at various points writers Jo Swerling, Michael Wilson and Dorothy Parker were brought in to polish. The screenplay credit ultimately went to Goodrich, Hackett and Capra, with “Additional Scenes” by Jo Swerling.

Capra assembled a virtually perfect cast for the film, starting with James Stewart as George Bailey. Stewart turned in one of his finest performances, a performance filled with warmth, humor, pain and anguish. Watching him sink into the depths of despair followed by rebirth and his affirmation of his wonderful life is to peek into emotions that every person has felt at one time or another. Donna Reed, who had only done a handful of films prior to *Wonderful Life*, is Stewart's equal as the girl who has always loved George and who ends up as his wife. It's a performance of beautiful simplicity and honesty. The supporting cast is filled

with some of the best character actors ever, including Lionel Barrymore as Bailey's bitter nemesis Henry F. Potter, Thomas Mitchell as the scatterbrained Uncle Billy, Beulah Bondi and Samuel S. Hinds as Ma and Pop Bailey, H.B. Warner as Mr. Gower, Ward Bond and Frank Faylen as Bert the cop and Ernie the Bartender (from whence came the Muppet character names Bert and Ernie), and most especially Gloria Grahame as Violet Bick and Henry Travers as Clarence Oddbody.

In the cameraman's chair was the great Joseph Walker, who gave the film its absolutely stunning black-and-white photography. Capra's direction is filled with Capra touches but, as always, serves the story and is never about showing off with the camera. His sense of comedy and drama is perfect, and *It's a Wonderful Life*, thanks to his innate sense of what the story is really about, is one of the most profoundly moving films of all time.

Despite its somewhat less-than-stellar performance at the box-office, the film garnered some excellent reviews and was nominated for five Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Film Editing, and Best Sound Recording. It won none of those but earned a Technical Achievement Award for Russell Shearman and the RKO Special Effects department (for its use of simulated falling snow). But it was a very competitive year, with films like *The Best Years of Our Lives* (which won four of the five Oscars for which *Wonderful Life* was nominated), *The Jolson Story* (which won the other), Olivier's *Henry V*, *The Yearling*, *Brief Encounter*, *Duel in the Sun*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious*, *The Razor's Edge*, *The Spiral Staircase*, *Anna and the King of Siam*, *Children of Paradise*, *The Killers*, and others. But in the end awards didn't matter, for while it took a bit of time to happen, *Wonderful Life* entered the public consciousness and has never left it. As Capra said in a *Wall Street Journal* interview in 1984: “It's the damndest thing I've ever seen. The film has a life of its own now, and I can look at it like I had nothing to do with it. I'm like a parent whose kid grows up to be president. I'm proud ... but it's the kid who did the work.”

Capra hired Dimitri Tiomkin, with whom he'd worked on *You Can't Take It With You*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Meet John Doe*, to compose the music. Tiomkin wrote a wonderful score for *Wonderful Life*, interweaving original themes and quotes of popular music to great effect. But, as sometimes happens, Capra made lots of changes in the editing room. He cut several cues (letting those scenes play without

music) and rearranged where certain cues appeared; he removed sections of cues, and even tracked in music written for other films. Tiomkin was less than pleased and it led to a rift between the two men. In his autobiography, *Please Don't Hate Me*, Tiomkin called it “an all-around scissors job.”

But the score as written is exquisite—as heartfelt and moving as the film. And even though the way in which it's used in the movie works beautifully, hearing it complete (including unused cues) is a special treat. It is filled with Tiomkin's wonderful sense of film and character and drama.

This is, surprisingly, the world premiere release of Tiomkin's score. Tiomkin had a set of acetates for the film, some of which were in good condition and some of which weren't. They were filled with partial takes, aborted takes and full takes. Through careful editing, we were able to piece together everything that was provided to us and Chris Malone, our restoration expert, did a breathtakingly great job on it. Once before he saved for Kritzerland a score many thought could never be released – *A Place in the Sun* – and his work here is even more astonishing, resulting in close to fifty minutes of pure Tiomkin heaven. While a handful of cues are still a little problematic in terms of acetate noise, the majority of them have been cleaned up without sacrificing any musical or recording qualities and are quite stunning to hear. We have also included several interesting bonus tracks.

And so, at long last, here are the wonderful original score tracks to *It's a Wonderful Life*.

— Bruce Kimmel

“YOU SEE, GEORGE,  
YOU'VE REALLY HAD  
A WONDERFUL LIFE.  
DON'T YOU SEE  
WHAT A MISTAKE  
IT WOULD BE  
TO THROW IT AWAY?”