

the wrong man: music from the dark side of the moon

I want it very cold and very factual.

—Bernard Herrmann’s instructions to his orchestra

The Wrong Man is about a wrongly imprisoned bass player who has good reason to pluck the blues. According to Henry Fonda, who plays Manny Balestrero, the downbeat hero, this was a uniquely challenging assignment, but not for the lines he had to learn. “Memorizing the scripts is a cinch. Learning to thump a bass viol for the Warner film was something else again.... Hitchcock insisted I actually learn to play four numbers.” Fonda had “tootled on the trumpet” at the University of Minnesota, the extent of his musical experience. He spent six weeks studying with Allen Stanley, learning the finger movements for numbers like “Mambo 5” and “Shi-Shi-Shi.”¹

Fonda’s enforced bass lessons are an indication of Hitchcock’s determination to make *The Wrong Man* look, feel, and sound authentic. The characters are singularly unglamorous, the black-and-white cinematography gritty and ungratifying. Hitchcock’s films have a strong grounding in reality and often center on ordinary people, but they are generously overlaid with comedy, aesthetic playfulness, and dreamlike effects. Little of that is here, unless one counts the hallucinatory camera work inside Manny’s cell or the ambiguously supernatural miracle near the end, a nice trick that still has critics guessing and interpreting.² Departing from his usual trademarks, Hitchcock made this film as a faithful telling of a true story, appearing on camera at the beginning to tell us what we are about to see is factual, a far cry from his witty cameos and sardonic television introductions. This is his only cameo that isn’t fun.



The Wrong Man. Henry Fonda plays Bernard Herrmann’s jazz Prelude at the Stork Club.

This film must have had a deep and personal meaning for Hitchcock, or he would not have violated his usual procedures and doggedly plunged ahead in a project for which he donated his services. A consummate audience pleaser, he must have known this desolate movie would not easily sell tickets, yet he made it anyway—then followed it with *Vertigo*, another dark, personal experiment, though replete with gorgeous colors and visual effects.

Ostensibly, what drew Hitchcock to the story was the childhood trauma, recounted throughout his career as a set piece, in which his father took a misbehaving young Alfred to the local constable and had him thrown in a cell for a dreadful twenty minutes or so, an eternity for a child. Whether this incident is true or whether his neurosis had to do with broader experiences—childhood abandonment, Catholic guilt—Hitchcock had an obsessive dread of being imprisoned by police, which he projects in film after film, this one the most literal and specific. The “wrong man” motif in so many of his movies here becomes the entire narrative: an innocent man is locked up for a crime someone else has committed, his life torn apart, his wife unhinged so badly she is imprisoned too—in an asylum. Then, just as arbitrarily, the right man is found and the wrong one released. End of story. No romantic interest, quirky minor characters, or subtexts.

Yet *The Wrong Man* is undeniably haunting. We emerge from it in a cranky mood, but we don’t easily forget it. Like Flannery O’Connor, Hitchcock was a Catholic immersed in Poe and Kafka, and the spirits of both permeate this film: it has a dark Poesque claustrophobia and a Kafkaesque nightmarishness in its depiction of an innocent man suddenly imprisoned by an all-powerful authority for something he didn’t do and doesn’t know about. In another perverse jolt, one worthy of a Hawthorne short story, he is just as suddenly released. How he goes on from there, his life and family having been decimated, we are not shown.

This is another Hitchcock movie in which music is central to the narrative. Manny’s career as a musician is a bond of humanity that holds his family together, at least for awhile. In *Waltzes from Vienna*, music is an occasion for bitter competition between father and son. Here, it is a manifestation of love and connectedness between Manny and his boys. Manny works hard for little money but passes on a valuable legacy to his children. While practicing a Mozart piano Minuet, Manny’s son Bob is joined by his younger brother, Greg, who attempts an uninvited harmonica duet. When Bob pounds the keys and shouts at Greg to desist, Manny gently intervenes, urging Bob never to give up or “let anything throw you off the beat.” He assures the boys they both have talent and promises to give them music lessons, a pledge that becomes an emblem of hope after disaster strikes. “He’ll give us music lessons as soon as he can,” one of his boys says, desperately trying to console his brother following their father’s arrest. The promised lessons become the children’s mantra to keep them sane, just as Manny’s Stork Club performances, intercut into the story line during his bail, sustain him. As in *Saboteur*, music and performance are linked with trust and innocence in the face of injustice. Manny’s speech to his sons about not allowing anything to throw them off the beat becomes key to both his survival and his children’s. His wife, Rose, the only member of the family who does not play an instrument, has a complete breakdown.

The authorities who imprison Manny view his job with suspicion and hostility. A family man should have a normal job. Being a professional musician is bad enough; playing jazz is worse. In 1956, jazz (soon to be displaced by rock and roll as an object of demonization) was viewed by much of society as both a cause and a reflection of deviant behavior. The police use Manny’s Stork Club gig as part of their case against him—all those “women, drinks, a pretty high old time there.” The staid Manny—probably the only Hitchcock hero who *doesn’t* drink—could actually use a high old time, but that doesn’t matter. Jazz and related forms of dance music form a slippery slope; Manny is automatically a suspicious character.

Hitchcock reverses the usual moral equation, presenting the police as cold and unfeeling, men without music; when Manny is interrogated and put on trial, music ceases, a silence consistent with other Hitchcock police-station and courtroom scenes. Manny may be relentlessly ordinary, but once he is convicted and sent to prison, he becomes a musical martyr, canonized at the end by a cue called “Prayer” and a mysterious montage of a Christ figure looming over a superimposed image of a criminal double as he plays at the Stork Club before his resurrection from darkness.

Denying catharsis, the bleak score by Bernard Herrmann increases pity and terror rather than releasing it. After the genteel pastorate of *The Trouble with Harry* and the classical-pop of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Herrmann was entrusted to create something grittier, more urban and contemporary. This was not necessarily the original scenario. Hitchcock considered using jazz standards; he had Herbert Coleman order three sets of 78s that included “Brazil,” “Jalousie,” and “Begin the Beguine.” The legal team was instructed to engage a “Latin male vocalist.” But by the time the sparse cue sheet (twenty-nine cues) emerged in December 1956, Herrmann was listed as the only composer, the sole exception being Mozart, whose Minuet Herrmann arranged as the piano-harmonica duet for Manny’s sons.³ Hitchcock knew he would get something special; he had so much faith in Herrmann that he pressured Warner Brothers into raising the composer’s fee. *The Wrong Man* suffered at the box office, but discerning critics praised Herrmann: *Variety* admired the “simple yet effective score”; the *New York Post* spoke of

the “excellent musical score by that master of the medium.”⁴

Hitchcock knew that his faux-documentary style in this picture could benefit from Herrmann’s methods. The violinist Louis Kaufman once remarked that Herrmann “had his own conceptions of sound. We tried to please him and be as expressive as we possibly could—a lot of vibrato and so forth—and he immediately shut down on it.... ‘Cool it down! I don’t want a hot sound.... I want it very cold and very factual.’”⁵ With his penchant for muted strings and trumpets, low woodwinds, and sinister clusters, Herrmann was able to create something very factual to complement *The Wrong Man*’s stark images.

This is an early “black and white score for a black and white movie” (Herrmann’s famous description of *Psycho*). Indeed, it is even starker and more monochromatic. *Psycho* has the most sensational musical effects in film history, all the more so in that they are achieved by strings alone. There is nothing sensational about *The Wrong Man*. Even the Latin-jazz Prelude that Fonda plays in the Stork Club (a favorite Hitchcock hangout) in the main title has been criticized as limp and insufficiently jazzy—a misunderstanding of its function, since it accurately represents the dour Manny Balestrero, whose drearily regimented lower-middle-class existence in the 1950s is anything but jazzy.⁶ At the end of the main title, Manny appears on the left of the screen standing rigidly, like a marionette, a striking contrast to the festive balloons floating above.

Hitchcock’s use of jazz here is consistent with his other movies: an exuberant surface barely hides a feeling of danger. Hitchcock’s vision of the form resembled that of his fellow European émigrés, notably Ernst Krenek, who called jazz “the new unknown world of freedom.”⁷ Jazz is risky—it marks Manny as a shady character in the eyes of the police—but also liberating, as the camera shows in an elegant close-up of Manny’s bass next to a saxophone just before his dramatic exoneration. This complexity echoes the scene in *Rear Window* where the jazz ensemble in the composer’s living room cues the menacing arrival of Thorwald at the precise moment it saves Miss Lonely Hearts’s life.

Hitchcock got what he needed from Herrmann. Marked “Allegro Brillante,” the Prelude has a lugubrious undercurrent, with a jaunty fanfare undercut by a pensive woodwind countertheme. Herrmann favored contrasting, widely spaced colors; here he sets Manny’s bass pizzicato against high, snarling brass. This music is central to the picture. Uniting score, source music, and the hero’s profession, it is unobtrusive but insistent; it gets under our skin and stays there, creating a claustrophobia matched by the confining bars that appear everywhere in the movie, even in the insurance office Manny allegedly robs, culminating in the camera’s excruciatingly detailed inspection of Manny’s cell as he paces in mounting panic. Everything grows from the ostensibly upbeat but strangely pensive Prelude; Manny’s bass begins in the narrative as a real Latin American number played in a club, then stalks like an apprehensive ghost through the rest of the film: into his children’s bedroom when he peeks in on them; into “The Car,” following his apprehension by the police, who tell him the pickup is “just a routine matter.... There is nothing for an innocent man to worry about”; into “The Store” and “Second Store” where he is misidentified by the owners; into the precinct office where he is fingerprinted; and into the cell, where the bass sinks lower as the brass spit higher, then spin out of control, following the camera circling Manny’s terrified face intercut with his anxious children as they wait for their father to come home. In the scenes preceding the imprisonment, the bass plucks repeating patterns of major seconds and minor thirds against low woodwinds, evoking an inevitable catastrophe that contradicts the police’s insistence that Manny, if innocent, has nothing to fear: music speaks far more truthfully than words.

The music notes from August, four months before the film’s release, have numerous parenthetical and speculative instructions, but the imprisonment scene, the most powerful in the film, was fully planned:

Music starts at finger printing and continues through to Manny being led to front desk for booking by Lieutenant. Here it stops. Music starts again when cell door slams—sneaks in and very soft... from Manny pacing in cell TO Manny being led along catwalk at Long Island City Jail prior to being put in cell.... Full Stork Club band starts on Manny’s turn to look at bed ... continues through cell scene getting louder and louder and gradually losing instruments one by one until double bass is only instrument playing when cut of Manny’s clenched fists is on the screen. Music increases rhythm with the picture and finally fades out. Music starts again and continues through all the tank scenes up to Warden: Let’s go, men.⁸

The combination of intensity and emptiness—the music “getting louder and louder and gradually losing instruments”—was thus calculated early on. Simply called “Cell 1” and “Cell 2,” this cue brilliantly dramatizes anxiety and isolation. Herrmann did make changes. The full Stork Club band called for in the notes became, in the final version, a grim percussion explosion spreading out, then thinning and vanishing. And though the notes stipulate that Manny’s lonely bass is left as the only instrument playing when he clenches his fists, Herrmann did not eliminate the brass. This is an instance when he ignored the literal instruction while heightening its intent; far from covering the despairing emptiness of the double bass, the muted trumpets intensify it. From here, Herrmann followed the notes precisely: the music increases rhythm with a frantically circling fanfare, then fades out on an

excruciating minor second for brass and low woodwinds.

Herrmann refuses to indulge in the kind of lyricism that any Hollywood composer writing for a dark film—John Williams in *Minority Report* (his own “black and white” score), Herrmann himself in *Taxi Driver*—usually offers as respite. But the score does have an understated compassion. Icy as it is, Herrmann’s music humanizes what would otherwise be unbearable. A powerful example is Manny’s brief reunion with his family after being released on bail. The orchestration is limited to winds, and the restraint pays off. Henry Fonda’s “I never knew what my boys meant to me until now” is not sentimental but emotionally resonant; the gentle music has the same quality. This understated cue is like Henry Fonda’s acting, which Hitchcock admired: it speaks softly, with eloquent authenticity.

Manny’s wife, Rose, played with uncompromising ashyness by Vera Miles, is the other victim of law and order. In “Farmhouse,” a piercing harp against a snowy landscape and Manny’s relentlessly pacing bass evoke her despair over the family’s inability to corroborate Manny’s alibi. Unison winds depict her collapse into dementia, brilliantly dramatized in the casual details of Miles’s performance: her empty eyes and distracted scratching. (The music notes describe her “vacant look” during scenes with Manny’s lawyer.) In the ugliest cue, “The Mirror,” her guilt delusions flash into rage as she strikes her husband with a hairbrush, smashing a mirror that reflects his shattered face; the madness is made more palpable by splintering glass, a chiming alarm clock, and a rumbling subway (a haunting noise throughout the film) counterpointing Herrmann’s gloomy woodwinds and harp.

Summarizing the world of the film, Rose’s psychiatrist describes her as trapped in “a maze of terror” and existing on “the dark side of the moon,” a mental wasteland the music captures with spectral organ music called “The Parting” (precursor of the graveyard organ in *Vertigo*) as Manny takes her to the asylum. Beginning with *Secret Agent*, continuing with the novachord in the *Rebecca* era, and culminating in avant-garde sonorities in Herrmann and Williams, Hitchcock used the king of instruments to cue psychological states, in this case crushing depression. In a heartbreaking montage, what the music notes call a “boisterous” version of the Prelude blasts from the Stork Club as the right man is apprehended and Manny is cleared; all Rose can utter, to Herrmann’s blackest music, is, “That’s fine for you,” as the camera slowly inspects her asylum corridor, much as it did Manny’s prison (and exactly as it would Scottie’s asylum hallway).

At the end, the clouds lift, the mutes disappear, and the full orchestra blooms into a desperately upbeat finale as titles explain that Manny was released from prison and Rose eventually restored to sanity. What they don’t tell us is how to regard a justice system that has destroyed a family and is so incompetent that the newly arrested criminal could easily be as innocent as Manny. Never trust the teller, trust the tale, D. H. Lawrence once said; never trust the titles, we might add, trust the movie.