

Marco Polo

American International Pictures had begun making a cottage industry by picking up foreign-made films at reasonable prices and then releasing them in the United States, usually in slightly or majorly re-edited versions, and mostly with the original foreign scores replaced by brand new American ones. Such was the case with 1962's *Marco Polo*, a multi-cultural production directed by Hugo Fregonese and starring American Rory Calhoun, along with Yoko Tani and a large cast of multi-cultural players. AIP actually tinkered less with *Marco Polo* than with their other pick-ups – basically they cut five minutes off its running time, most of that coming from the film's opening.

Shot in Cinemascope and color, the film's locations and sets looked great and Rory Calhoun was a handsome and virile Marco Polo. There had already been *The Adventures of Marco Polo* with Gary Cooper, which was about as historically accurate as the 1962 *Marco Polo*, i.e. not at all. In this *Marco Polo*, Marco Polo is a womanizing bon vivant, vagabond and rake who has to leave Venice because of circumstances of his own making (you get the drift). A title card then tells us that Marco was an inventor and discoverer who is about to set off to discover many things, including spaghetti. He rescues a Chinese fellow, Ciu-Lin, who accompanies him on his colorful adventures. Along the way, he saves the life of a princess, he repeatedly tells anyone who'll listen that he's the son of Niccola and nephew of Matteo, not that anyone seems to care, he goes to the Monastery of 100 Buddhists (we don't actually see 100 Buddhists), he says pithy lines like "A song is an emblem of a gay heart," he wears some nifty leather hot pants, meets a rebel named Cuday, he does indeed discover spaghetti, he eventually goes to Peking, begins a romance with the princess he'd earlier saved, which doesn't make the evil prime minister Mongka happy at all, as the evil prime minister Mongka not only wants to overthrow

Kublai Khan but wants to have the princess for himself. But Marco, with the help of Cuday and the rebels, saves the day, gets the princess and evil Mongka gets what's coming to him. It's all painted in very broad strokes with tongue firmly in cheek, and it's a lot of fun in a Saturday matinee way.

Hugo Fregonese was a competent director of programmers and he managed to keep everything moving along at a steady clip. One of the film's four writers was Duccio Tessari, who'd already done several peplums and other genre films, including Sergio Leone's *The Colossus of Rhodes*, *Goliath And The Dragon*, *Mario Bava's Hercules In The Haunted World*, *Duel Of The Titans* and a whole slew of spaghetti westerns. The original Italian version's score was by Angelo Francesco Lavagnino. For the US version, American International went to their go-to composer, the great Les Baxter. And Baxter turned in a wonderful score, chockfull of great melodies, including an addictive main theme that repeats itself many times throughout the score. It was Baxter channeling Rimsky-Korsakov and other movie adventure scores and the result was a colorful, robust, and fun score that really helped give the film a sense of style, adventure, and fun.

Baxter had already made a name for himself with his 1950s exotica recordings, as well as several chart-topping instrumentals. Prior to *Marco Polo*, he'd already done *Goliath And The Barbarians*, *House of Usher*, *Goliath And The Dragon*, *Black Sunday*, *Goliath And The Vampires*, *The Pit And The Pendulum*, *Erik the Conqueror*, and *Master Of The World* for AIP, and he would go on to score many, many other films for them. For anyone who grew up going to these films, it was like American International and Les Baxter went hand in hand.

Many of those 1960s American International films have gone on to find cult fans everywhere, thanks to home video, TV,

and cable. But for whatever reasons, the AIP version of *Marco Polo*, other than a few TV airings, never came to video and has, over the years, completely disappeared from sight. It even had a comic book movie tie-in when it was released, so it wasn't like they were trying to hide the film, hence it's truly odd that the film has languished in such obscurity. There is now a new French DVD of the original version with the Lavagnino score, letterboxed, and that's fun to see as long as you understand French, as there are no subtitles. The only way to see the AIP/Baxter version is if you happen to have a 16mm print or know someone who does.

This is the world premiere release of the Les Baxter score to *Marco Polo* – none of it has ever been available before. The complete score tapes were housed in the MGM vaults – they were, of course, mono, and in very good condition, and contained all the music that Baxter wrote for the film, and it's a fairly long score.

In the last few years, there has been something of a Baxter renaissance, with a surprising number of Baxter soundtracks released on CD. We're really pleased to present a virtually unknown Baxter score and one of his most delightful. So, close your eyes, pretend you're back in 1962 at a Saturday matinee, buttered popcorn in hand, and revel in the magical music of Les Baxter.

— Bruce Kimmel