

The Omega Man

Score Analysis by Dirk Wickenden

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THE FILM – BACKGROUND

The Omega Man (1971) is based on author Richard Matheson's classic novel I Am Legend. There had been a previously filmed version starring the late Vincent Price in 1964, an American-Italian co-production entitled THE LAST MAN ON EARTH [since publication of this article sixteen years ago, there has been a third version of the property using the book's title, starring Will Smith but in the opinion of this writer, not as enjoyable as the Chuck Heston flick].

The Omega Man was a Warner Bros. production and starred Charlton Heston at his ultra-cool best as Robert Neville, with Anthony Zerbe (COOL HAND LUKE, THE DEAD ZONE, PAPILLON) as Matthias. Also featured were Rosalind Cash (AMAZING GRACE, TALES FROM THE HOOD) as Lisa and Paul Koslo (ROOSTER COGBURN, JOE KIDD) as Dutch. Eric Laneuville as Lisa's brother Richie would go on to star in the television series St. Elsewhere and would go on to direct some episodes, as well as the TV movies The Mighty Pawns (featuring Rosalind Cash), and The Ernest Green Story.

The film was directed by Boris Sagal, who had previously helmed GUNS OF DIABLO and the Elvis Presley starrer GIRL HAPPY and later directed the television mini-series MASADA. Production duties were handled by Walter Seltzer, who also produced the later SOYLENT GREEN, again featuring Heston. The screenplay was written by John William Corrington and Joyce Hooper Corrington, who also wrote the screenplay for BATTLE FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES.

SYNOPSIS

It is 1977. Two years after a Russian-Chinese war, the survivors of a germ warfare virus are attempting to create a world devoid of machines and the weapons that reduced them to their current state. Enter one Robert Neville, an immune doctor-turned exterminator who has taken it upon himself to kill the germ warfare-created mutants, known as 'The Family'. They have an aversion to the light and at night taunt Neville, attempting to lure him from his fortress and to certain death...

THE MUSIC BACKGROUND

Australian-born composer Ron Grainer was perhaps best known through his theme tunes for the two cult British television series Doctor Who and The Prisoner. Other television themes included Man in a Suitcase, Tales of the Unexpected and Steptoe and Son.

In the movie world, he composed the scores for the British films A KIND OF LOVING (1962), directed by John Schlesinger and the 1967 production TO SIR WITH LOVE, starring Sidney Poitier and directed by James Clavell. THE TIGER MAKES OUT (1967), directed by Arthur Hiller and starring Eli Wallach and the 1964 Disney film THE MOON-SPINNERS,

starring Hayley Mills and again Eli Wallach, were amongst his rare forays into American cinema.

Grainer passed away in 1981, six months before his 59th birthday, leaving behind a legacy of music composed for television and movies, including the subject of this article.

THE SCORE

Grainer's music is of the type found in many films of the early to mid seventies, such as John Williams' *THE EIGER SANCTION*, whose main theme functioned as does Grainer's, passing between different styles with ease (jazz, rock, baroque). Jerry Goldsmith's *ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES* and *THE CASSANDRA CROSSING* also combined up-tempo themes with 'strange' sounds. David Shire's *THE TAKING OF PELHAM 1, 2, 3* could be a distant cousin (once, twice, three times removed – sorry!)

The music of *The Omega Man* meshes well with the other elements of the film and is dubbed in at a fairly high level, but not annoyingly so. Amongst his collection of 'strange sounds', the composer utilised a waterchime (previously identified by author Randall Larson in his first edition of *Musique Fantastique* as a water bell plate), an instrument invented by percussionist Emil Richards, which is struck and then dipped into water (Michel Legrand used the instrument in *ICE STATION ZEBRA* and Michel Colombier used it in *COLOSSUS: THE FORBIN PROJECT*).

MAJOR THEMES AND MOTIFS

1. **Last Man Theme:** A melodic, melancholy tune.
2. **Neville:** A motif closely linked to theme No. 1.
3. **The Family:** A two-note cell for pipe organ; the waterchime is also closely associated with the Family.
4. **Action Motif No. 1:** Incorporates an up-tempo version of Theme No. 2.
5. **Action Motif No. 2:** Incorporates an up-tempo version of Theme No. 1.
6. **Finale:** Heard only once, at the climax of the film – an uplifting, anachronistic theme.

SOURCE MUSIC

1. *A Summer Place* (composed by Max Steiner).
2. *Woodstock* – the film that Neville watches, featuring two artists.
3. *Swinging at Neville's*.
4. *Round Midnight* (composed by Thelonious Monk).
5. *All Through the Night* (composed by Cole Porter).

Source cues 1, 3, 4 and 5 are all performed by the same ensemble, consisting of tenor sax (played by Plas Johnson), piano, vibes, bass and drums.

THE SCORE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE FILM

1. A Summer Place (1:14): The film starts with camera zooming in on a solitary car driving through a quiet city. The film cuts to the driver (Charlton Heston) as he slips a tape into the car's 8-track player and Max Steiner's immortal *A SUMMER PLACE* emanates from the speakers. The film cuts to a view down on the car from a high vantage point and the music

grows fainter accordingly. Nothing appears to be amiss – it could be a quiet Sunday morning. Neville (although we won't learn his name for a while) brakes to a halt as he passes through rubbish strewn streets and suddenly jumps out of his seat and fires a machine gun at a silhouetted figure within a building. The music is drowned out, then is audible again as Neville continues on his way. The source music segues to...

2. Main Titles (1:45): The Last Man theme segues from the previous cue and is orchestrated for mid-range strings, flutes and percussion. The film follows the car as the main titles commence and we pass through deserted streets and past abandoned buildings. The music halts when the driver oversteers around a corner and crashes into a kerb, puncturing a tyre. He picks up a fuel can and his gun from the back seat and walks to a used car showroom.

3. The Calendar (1:23): Music starts as Neville stares at the calendar in the deserted showroom, with the date 'March 1975'. The cue contains electronic organ, brass and percussion. Neville pulls the calendar from the wall and trumpet and piano present the 'Neville' motif as he fills the car with fuel whilst talking to the dead salesman in a corner. Trombone replaces the trumpet then is ousted by the trumpet. As he focuses on the corpse, the composer scores a single strike of the waterchime, then the world-weary tune continues, which tails out as he starts the car and drives through the window.

4. Woodstock (source) (1:20): The film cuts to a cinema at which the movie Woodstock is showing. Neville comments "Great show, held over for a third straight year". He goes into the cinema, fires up the projector and sits in the auditorium watching the film and talking along with the dialogue (he's obviously seen the film a lot in the past few years!). The film cuts to Neville exiting the cinema and placing his gun in the car as he looks up at the sun. Suddenly, every public phone in earshot starts to ring and Neville shouts "There is no phone ringing, damn it!" at which point they all stop – it was his imagination. He again looks up at the sun: "My God, it's almost dark – they'll be waking up soon!" Neville tears off towards home, crashing through roadblocks. The scenes since leaving the showroom have received no underscore – the silences work well, actually commenting on Neville's solitary existence.

5. The Attack (0:53): Neville reaches the garage next to his home and opens the door with a remote control as the music starts with guitar and woodwind. Suddenly, cloaked figures appear from above and set fire to the car as the driving Action Motif 1 takes over on organ, brass and percussion. The cue sounds very Prisoner-like as Neville shoots at the men and drives into the garage, leaps out and kills three of them. The music halts on a 3-note cell for piano and extinguishes the flames.

6. Lighting Up (0:41): Neville powers up his generator and the music starts with a less forceful version of the previous Action Motif, scored for organ, brass and percussion (including the waterchime). Bright lights shine out from his 'fortress' and drive away the cloaked figures gathered outside. Cut back to the garage as Neville enters the lift, accompanied by muted trumpets. The music tails out on organ as he presses one of the buttons. The film shows a flashback to footage of a 'Russian/Sino war', as the voice-over of newsreader Jonathan Matthias informs us. The view returns to Neville as he exits the lift and talks to a bust of Caesar, then turns on his surveillance equipment. He is disturbed by shouting outside and goes to the window to see hordes of the cloaked people. No music is scored since the entrance into the lift.

7. 'They Almost Got Me Tonight'/Fixing Dinner (2:47): The music (a cut-back cue) starts on strings and percussion when Neville talks to the statue and we hear the plagued people outside calling to him. The brass surges in with Action Motif No 1 as the film cuts to outside and the people burning books, which is replaced by organ as Matthias (the ex-newsreader) talks of his 'brethren'. Cut back to Neville with a quotation of the melancholy Neville motif on solo trumpet as he prepares his dinner, which is replaced by percussion, organ and strings as the film cuts back to the exterior. The music tails out on strings as there is another flashback.

The flashback is of Matthias as the newsreader reporting on the plague that has befallen mankind and there are shots of scores of people being overcome. The film also shows Neville (a doctor) in his office watching the broadcast. He receives a phone call and exits the building to climb aboard a helicopter with an experimental vaccine. Whilst in the air, the pilot and Neville are overcome by the virus and crash land. Neville survives and injects himself with the vaccine. The flashback is devoid of music.

8. 'With Fire, Brothers' (0:37): Music starts on the crossfade to the 'present' quietly featuring guitar, percussion and strings, which tails out on the cut to Neville cooking and talking to Caesar.

9. Swinging at Neville's (source) (1:56): Music starts as Neville puts a record on and sits down to his chess game against Caesar. The music continues quietly as the film cuts to the outside and the Family start firing flaming missiles at the building. Continuing with the sourced record works well, as opposed to using the organ Family motif or an action motif. Cut back to Neville as one shot gets through and he puts out the flames. The recorded music is drowned out as he shoots at the torch-carrying mutants with a machine gun fitted with a night vision scope. He sits back down and the record ends.

10. 'You Used to be a Nice Guy Once' (0:43): Music starts on cello performing the Last Man theme, as the film crossfades to the following day and is joined by violins and percussion as Neville jogs along with gun in hand. The underscore tails out as he stops to look at the map. He dictates his ongoing search for the Family's nest into a tape recorder, which is unscored.

11. Echoes/The Hotel (3:29): Neville shouts 'Hey, Matthias' to the deserted city and his call echoes around the city. Of interest are the shots of different parts of the city which the film cuts to with each reverberation of Neville's voice. The music starts after the echoes die out, scored for electric piano and organ. As Neville looks round a hotel, he encounters a dining room, accompanied by an 'echo' motif. As his eyes alight on a corpse in the corner, the water bell is struck once. The cue continues as he goes into the basement garage. He then goes up to the bedrooms, opening unlocked doors before finding a locked one. He forces it open, and as he approaches a bed a pipe organ plays the Family motif and the waterchime is repeatedly struck. As he pulls back the sheets to reveal two decaying corpses, a stinger is performed by a gong. The music becomes quieter as he goes back downstairs and bell tree, shaker, timpani, and other percussion are scored when he picks up an empty sardine tin from the waste bin. He opens an office door to the pipe organ to see one of the cloaked family members slumped over a desk from the plague – another stinger is presented with electronics. Neville's recorded journal entry is unscored.

12. The Department Store/The Chase (3:24): The film crossfades to Neville entering a department store. He passes by a mannequin and organ is scored when he chooses two new tracksuits and tries some aftershave. The music becomes ominous as he passes through the

ladies department. A noise makes him snap around to a glockenspiel stinger and he stalks, gun at the ready to timpani and bell tree. A negro 'mannequin' turns towards him then she runs off – it's a real woman, not succumbed to the plague. Grainer scores Neville's chase after the woman with an up-tempo, fragmented Last Man theme on flutes, strings and electronic effects, electric bass, organ and percussion. Outside the store, horns and electronics alternate. The music ends when Neville loses the woman and sits on a park bench, deciding she was a figment of his imagination.

13. Round Midnight (source) (0:53): the film cuts to Neville in a bar. He inserts a tape into an 8-track player – the music starts immediately as he pours himself a drink. The sound of a bottle shattering whips his head round and he sees a sign pointing to a wine cellar, to which he enters and walks down the stairs. The source music grows quieter accordingly, then segues to...

14. The Wine Cellar (1:01): Music segues from the previous cue and the composer scores a strange electronic wail, glockenspiel, timpani and later trombone as Neville looks around. Suddenly a wine rack is pushed down on top of him by some of the Family, accompanied by their motif on organ, which tails out as they overcome him. The film crossfades to Neville regaining consciousness in a courtroom to find he is in chains. Matthias is talking to his followers. The scene is devoid of music, as is the following scene of Matthias and Neville alone. Matthias instructs Neville to admit to being 'guilty' of causing the plague. Neville responds, telling him to organise his people and to help find a cure. Matthias shouts 'There is none!'

15. Matthias And Neville/'The Angel of Death' (1:04): As other Family members return, we hear organ, timpani and gong. This continues as Matthias and the Family remove their sunglasses, revealing their pupil-less eyes and Grainer scores an eerie motif. The music tails out on the gong.

16. The Punishment (2:56): The music starts when Brother Zachary (Lincoln Kilpatrick) says "We are ready, brother" with a baroque organ motif and percussion. The film cuts to soft focus flaming torches and Neville being forced into the back of a wooden cart. The Action Motif No 2 is performed by strings with counterpointing brass and percussion. As he is taken to the 'place of punishment' brass takes over the theme with string chords and a baroque-sounding organ. This continues, then is inherited once again by the strings. As Neville is about to be burnt at the stake in a stadium, the spotlights flare up and the Family are driven back. The strings and percussion erupt along with French horns. A 'normal' man releases Neville and they run off as the lights are turned off. Neville is pushed into a room to a final note from the brass and is held at gunpoint by the coloured woman he chased in cue No 12.

17. The Great Escape (2:50): As the film cuts to Matthias and his followers racing through the tunnels under the stadium with flaming torches in hand, the brass and percussion present Action Motif No 2. Baroque piano and percussion follow Neville and the woman (whom we later learn is named Lisa) mount a motorbike. The man (Dutch) who freed Neville throws bombs at the Family as Neville roars off through the stadium to Action Motif No 2 orchestrated for organ and percussion. The film goes into slow motion as they jump over barricades in an Evel Knievel ("Who's he?" ask our younger readers) – like stunt, accompanied by an electronic stinger. The music tails out as the film cuts to the two travelling through the countryside in the daylight. They arrive at the house and Neville is shocked to discover a handful of children: "I didn't know there were any left." Lisa testily replies that

“they had to lay low”, what with the Family and Neville “shooting at anything that moved.” Dutch arrives and they acknowledge their awareness of Neville’s Bio-War research. Whilst he and Dutch talk, Lisa goes to see her brother Richie, who has succumbed to the plague and is turning white (now we know what’s wrong with Michael Jackson!). The scenes since the motorcycle jump are unscored. When the children appeared a short cue commenting on Neville’s surprise would perhaps have worked out well.

18. The Examination (0:58): The music starts as Neville goes to see Richie with quiet guitar, cushioned by soft strings as he examines the boy, accompanied by the organ. The music tails out when Dutch, talking about a plague-ridden friend says “I killed him”. The conversation continues unscored as Neville announces that he himself is immune and that his blood could be used as serum.

The film cuts to Dutch driving Neville, Lisa, Richie and a little girl (Jill Giraldi) to the city. After they put Richie to bed and Neville injects him, Dutch and the little girl set off, after she asks Neville “Are you God?” No music is presented here.

19. The Treatment (1:04): Music commences on the cut from Dutch leaving to a shot of Richie hooked up on a drip. The orchestration consists of piano, harp, strings, and eerie electronics. As the film cuts to the Family emerging at night, the music becomes more ominous. Strings tail out as Richie is injected.

20. All Through the Night (source) (3:05): Whilst Neville pours some drinks. Lisa puts a record on. The Family call to Neville from outside. As Lisa and Neville are about to kiss, the record player slows to a halt and the lights go out – Neville didn’t keep the generator filled with fuel.

21. Power Cut (4:30): The cut-back cue starts on cutting violins when Lisa gasps ‘The Family’. Neville jumps up and passes a rifle to Lisa. The composer scores a brass cell, which is repeated by organ and a string pad as Neville climbs down the lift shaft. The film cuts a number of times to the Family, Lisa then Neville in the three different locations, with piano, electronics and the waterchime at various points. During the cue, Zachary uses a grappling hook to climb up the wall to an open window, accompanied by water bell plate with a rendition of the Last Man theme on cello for Neville. Action Motif No. 1 also enters on brass. Once the generator starts we hear triumphant brass. Then the film cuts to Lisa listening to the lift rising and Grainer presents a musical ‘red herring’ with the waterchime and ominous brass until Neville arrives in the lift, then raises his machine gun to apparently shoot Lisa. He actually shoots Zachary, who has entered the room and in a bloody exit falls back out the window accompanied by organ and is impaled on the fence below, to which an electronic stinger is scored.

22. ‘The Only Girl in the World’ (1:10): The film cuts back to Lisa and Neville as they kiss to strings and percussion in an easy listening-like arrangement. Crossfade to morning with Neville in his lab. Piano and strings tail out as the film cuts to the two of them in a store taking supplies, then cuts to a temporary hospital as they arrive by car and go inside.

23. The Hospital (0:33): A high pitched electronic whine (not unlike a theremin or ondes martenot) and piano are scored as they enter a laboratory at the hospital, which soon halts. The film cuts back to Neville’s place and Richie’s further treatment. Another cut to a bright light shining at us reveals itself to be shining in Richie’s eyes – his condition is improving.

The plan is to get everyone out of the city and to “head for the hills.” Lisa decides to go shopping for more supplies.

24. ‘Can I Borrow Your Credit Cards?’ (0:22): The music starts on an organ motif as Lisa jokes with Neville. Trumpets and percussion are scored and as we see Lisa entering a store (the camera shows a body in the car in the foreground), the waterchime is struck – this possibly presents another musical ‘red herring’ in case the ‘body’ chases Lisa, or Grainer is dropping a hint of what will happen to her in cue No.28. The cue tails out on piano and water bell plate as the film cuts to Neville drawing more blood and telling Richie that soon the boy’s blood could also be used for serum – this sets Richie thinking.

25. ‘Go Eat Your Soup’/Shopping (2:04): The music starts when Neville tells Richie to eat his soup, on flute and piano. Uplifting strings play on the cut to Lisa in the store, then a cut to a view of the city from Neville’s rooftop. Richie tells Neville that now there’s a serum he should ‘cure or kill’ the Family. Neville is surprised when the boy reveals where the Family are “holed up” – in the civic centre (his search for the ‘nest’ has taken two years). The composer supplies violins and pizzicato cello on the cut to Neville driving to Dutch’s place and yelling ‘it works!’

26. ‘It Works!’ (1:42): On Dutch’s reiteration of the line ‘it works!’ and stumbling down a bank, guitar and percussion with horns and flutes enter. On the cut to Richie leaving a note for Neville in the city, baroque-sounding strings comment. Harp, piano, and gong are scored on the cut to Neville returning. There is a scene then of Lisa with flutes and guitar and then as Neville reads Richie’s note “Going to find out who’s right, you or me”, the music ends on the waterchime, with a shot of the boy riding a motorcycle to the civic centre.

27. Into the Lair (0:54): Richie enters the building and walks through the deserted corridors. The music starts on quietly pulsating strings. Marimba and percussion with thundering timpani commence, then he becomes afraid and runs around a corner, into the waiting arms of two members of the Family and the strings crescendo in a variation of the Last Man theme. As the film cuts back to Neville in uniform preparing to go after Ritchie and loading his jeep with weapons, brass presents a five note motif, which organ repeats. The music tails out as on strings as the film show a dose up of Matthias saying ‘Well, Richard, why are you here?’ The composer remains silent as the boy says he is there to help and reporting that there is now a cure. Matthias refuses to listen and, furious, says ‘Tonight, I think Neville will come out.’

28. Lisa Goes Over/Bloodlust (2:13): Cut to Lisa with her arms full of shopping, still wearing headscarf and shades since daylight. She hears the Family chanting, led through the streets by Matthias. She sees them carrying torches and drops her shopping. The music enters on waterchime, with guitar and percussion, strings and brass, in a Last Man theme variant. The music crescendos as Lisa slowly removes scarf and glasses to reveal white hair, skin and pupil-less eyes – she has ‘gone over’. Cut to Neville driving along to a continuation of the cue. Gong, brass and waterchime are scored as he pulls up and enters the civic centre with electric torch in hand, with the Last Man theme on organ with brass in a quiet counterpoint and percussion. Neville throws a smoke bomb into the courtroom and when the smoke clears, he sees a staring Richie with blood coming out of his mouth – he is dead. Neville utters ‘Oh my God’ to waterchime and then the film cuts to him tearing along in the jeep. The orchestra erupts with the Action Motif No. 1 on brass, furious percussion and strings as he crashes through barricades set up by the Family and as they push a car into his path. He crashes into a truck and overturns. He scrambles out, dragging his gun, ammo and explosives as the cue halts and segues to...

29. Shoot-out (1:10): Carrying on from Cue No.28, pipe organ presents a baroque-like Last Man theme as Neville fires his machine gun at the cloaked men and blows them to smithereens with explosives. The music is very anachronistic and plays against the action, which signifies Neville using modern weaponry against the Family's (literally) sticks and stones. Cut to Neville walking into his garage as the music tails out. He enters the lift and leans against the wall.

30. At Home With the Family (2:01): As Neville enters the room, he calls to Lisa – he tells her about Richie's death but she already knows as Matthias told her. She walks into the light and his field of vision to reveal she is wearing a black cloak. She is of the Family. Matthias approaches and his followers are carrying clubs and spears. The music starts out with horns, percussion and waterchime in a rendition of Action Motif No.2. The Family hold Neville down whilst his room, paintings and lab equipment are smashed. Strings perform the Action Motif No. 1, which tails out as the television screen is smashed.

31. A Hasty Exit/Thicker Than Water (2:48): Water bell plate and other percussive bells are scored as Matthias tells Neville they can now start to rebuild. Neville answers 'Build coffins – that's all you'll need.' Matthias instructs his brethren to "bring him along" and the man fights off his captors to Action Motif No.2, with waterchime and brass, bells and percussion. The Neville motif appears on piano as he runs towards the lift, dragging Lisa. He goes outside into the darkness towards the fountain. Matthias calls out with brass and percussion and Neville tries to shoot at him but his gun jams. Lisa walks back towards the house and Neville pleads for her to "Get back into the Light." As he is distracted, Matthias picks up a spear and throws it. It pierces Neville's chest and he falls back into the fountain. He pulls the spear out to organ and percussion and his blood mixes with the water as Matthias calls to him. As he hooks his arms around the sculpture in the middle of the fountain, Lisa says 'I'm part of the Family, Robert I'm sorry' and she falls to the ground accompanied by waterchime. The strings perform the Last Man theme as the film crossfades to...

32. 'Old Macdonald had a Farm' (0:09): We hear children singing as the film shows Dutch and them driving to Neville's house. They pull up outside and see Neville in the fountain barely alive. In the daylight he pulls a bottle of his blood from inside his jacket, fumbles and drops it in the water – Dutch retrieves it.

33. Finale/End Credits (2:00): Music starts on piano and strings as Neville whispers 'Lisa' and she is picked up and taken into the jeep as she calls 'Robert'. Neville slips further into the water as he finally dies. Dutch takes the spear from the water and throws it away to guitar, piano and organ. He says 'Let's move, kids – we've got a long way to go.' The little girl fishes Neville's cap from the water and lays it on the side of the fountain. The cue becomes very bright and sprightly, which plays against the scene as we hear the jeep driving off to a shot of the cap. The camera pans up to Neville's body, his arms held up by the buoyancy of the water and his back against the sculpture – the movie's Christian reference but with all the violence beforehand, the gesture is an empty one and maybe sacrilegious. There is also the Christ-theme of Neville's blood saving the world. The picture turns into a negative, with red the predominant colour and the cast list is presented with horns, violins and percussion.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Omega Man shares little with the source novel I Am Legend. Gone is the vampire element (Matheson offered scientific reasoning for the vampire-like victims of the plague),

the stakes and garlic. These are replaced by machine guns and so on. Matheson was not fond of the film and he is quoted as saying 'I don't know why they bothered, really. The film shares common ground with the earlier BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES (1970) and the later LIFEFORCE and THE QUIET EARTH (both 1985). THE OMEGA MAN's music, whilst not always being dramatically correct, is exciting and a fine addition to the film. A soundtrack album has yet to surface but I for one would welcome a recording (a legitimate release, of course!) [Of course, in the years following this article, Film Score Monthly would release it twice!].

ORIGINAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my thanks to Gareth Bramley of Screen themes for biographical details on Ron Grainer.