

One Composer's Biggest Score

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By **BRUCE BENNETT**



Three decades after "Heaven's Gate" went so overbudget and proved so underwhelming at the box office that it torpedoed United Artists, historical consensus on Michael Cimino's film remains divided. For some, the epic Western melodrama, based on the wars between landowners and immigrants that erupted in Wyoming in the 1870s, remains an overcooked indictment of profligate auteursim run amuck. For others, it's an overlooked artistic triumph whose worthwhile budgetary excess and tragic theatrical stillbirth allowed know-nothing Hollywood bean counters to take back American cinema from the visionary creatives of the 1970s.

But one element of "Heaven's Gate"—which screens Friday night at the New York Film Festival in a Cimino-supervised restoration commissioned by the Criterion Collection for a pending home-video release—comes in for nearly universal praise: its soundtrack, specifically the contributions of composer and performer David Mansfield.



Enlarge Image

Bryan Thomas for The Wall Street Journal

Musician David Mansfield, who composed the score to 'Heaven's Gate,' in Manhattan this week.

"People who like it or don't like it and people who've not seen the film or don't care about it all love the Mansfield score," said the film historian Bruce Lawton who spearheaded the 1999 CD reissue of the "Heaven's Gate" soundtrack.

Mr. Mansfield's initial involvement with "Heaven's Gate" was solely as the violin player at the frontier roller rink and dance hall that gave the film its title. "They wanted a real band," Mr. Mansfield, now 56 years old, recently recalled of the

casting process. "I think it was perhaps part of Cimino's success with working with nonprofessionals in 'Deerhunter.'"

Nevertheless, at the ripe old age of 24 and with no prior film scoring experience, Mr.

Mansfield would eventually take the movie's musical reins entirely. Not only did he compose, arrange and record the score of one of the most expensive films produced up to that time, but, outside of a string orchestra used on certain themes, he played almost every instrument himself. The "Heaven's Gate" score remains a model for using simple melodies and uncluttered arrangements to gently root spectacle in intimacy and emotion.

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Mr. Mansfield had also appeared, along with fellow "Heaven's Gate" band performer T. Bone Burnett, in Mr. Dylan's own ill-received film from 1978, "Renaldo and Clara."

"What I learned on 'Renaldo and Clara,'" he said, "was not to look at the camera—not that that would have mattered."



Everett Collection

David Mansfield, at left with fiddle, in a scene from Michael Cimino's 'Heaven's Gate,' with stars Isabelle Huppert and Kris Kristofferson.

Isabelle Huppert achieves cinematic epiphany. And for much of it Mr. Mansfield is playing violin while skating.

"I've talked to people almost sheepishly about 'Heaven's Gate,' Mr. Lawton said. "You know, 'I'm nuts about this picture, but it has this history....' But if I want to show them something from it, I always show that two-part scene."

Mr. Mansfield said his East Coast childhood helped him to execute his character's rolling accompaniment. "Some of those things I did as a 10-year-old in the recreation center where I grew up in Jersey," he said. He is, however, quick to defer to fellow band member Sean Hopper, later of Huey Lewis and the News. "Sean was a West Coast guy and one of those sorts of early skating whizzes. He used to skate around the rink with his bass."

Throughout the shoot, Mr. Lawton said, Mr. Mansfield would listen to performers playing immigrants who in many cases had been hired because they themselves were first- or

By the time of the "Heaven's Gate" auditions, Mr. Mansfield's résumé was already tough to beat. "Straight out of high school I was in a band that signed to Warner Bros.," he said. "When I turned 19 I joined Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue."

The learning curve on the "Heaven's Gate" set in Kalispell, Mont., was another story. There, a daily itinerary of rehearsal and specialized training necessary for the company to impersonate real frontier pioneers was nicknamed "Camp Cimino." "The music we played in the film we arranged ourselves," Mr. Mansfield recalled. "Then we'd go to a studio in Billings or someplace and cut it. We shot the [music] scenes pantomiming to ourselves."

"It was like summer camp," Mr. Mansfield recalled. "A typical day might have been roller skating, then buck-board driving, then riding and then maybe shooting with blanks and then maybe a band rehearsal."

The roller-skating training paid off. A mid-film sequence that depicts the film's immigrant community musically blowing off steam followed by a pas de deux between leads Kris Kristofferson and

second-generation, singing folk songs they'd been taught by their elders.

"After production was finished I made some recordings and arrangements of some of the Eastern European folk songs used in the film," Mr. Mansfield said. "I was hoping that maybe they'd need some source music or that their composer might want to use some period instruments. Everybody was thinking that way. When we were up in Kalispell, T-Bone wrote a song, 'The Ballad of Heaven's Gate,' that he was hoping might find its way into a main or end title. I still have it on cassette somewhere."

In the meantime the film's original composer, John Williams, opted to accept the conductor-ship of the Boston Pops. "I got the tape to Michael anonymously and rather than filing it away until the actual composer came in, he started playing with it against scenes," Mr. Mansfield said. "He got excited and when he used up the maybe four tunes I'd given him, he asked for more."

Since his battle-field promotion from performer to first-time film composer 32 years ago, Mr. Mansfield has amassed some 60 film and television scoring credits, including four subsequent collaborations with Mr. Cimino. Asked about the budgetary price tag that toppled UA, he suggested that proof is in the picture. "If you look at the set of Caspar, Wyo., it's mind-boggling. You can't get something like that when you're watching the clock every second. Honestly, I doubt that there was a penny wasted on 'Heaven's Gate.'"

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