

Superman – The Blue Box

Listening Test

Introduction

The **Superman** film series, like the original comic hero, are part of the collective consciousness. The pursuit of truth, justice and the American way are very honourable ideals that separate Krypton's sole survivor from other super heroes.¹ The music is an indelible part of the films and it too is part of the collective memories of multitudes of moviegoers.

With exception of **Superman IV**, the **Superman** film scores have all seen album previously. An extravagant box set from Film Score Monthly titled **Superman: The Music (1978-1988)** collates the scores² and boasts a comprehensive 160 page hard cover booklet that chronicles the music to a level of detail that is unprecedented. Initially proposed as a 3,000 unit limited edition the 8 disc "Blue Box," as it has become affectionately known, also includes music from the 1988 animated series.

In this document I have presented a critical analysis of the box set with a particular emphasis on assessing the sound quality. This review is largely subjective and therefore may not represent your particular aural tastes.

"Why? You ask why? Why does the phone always ring when you're in the bathtub?"

Box Set Production Credits

Produced by Mike Matessino and Lukas Kendall
Restoration, mixing and assembly by Mike Matessino
Mastering by Doug Schwartz
Liner notes by Mike Matessino, Lukas Kendall and Jeff Eldridge

Superman

Box Set Discs 1 and 2 – Total Two Disc Time 146:03

Music by John Williams
Recorded and mixed by Eric Tomlinson at Anvil Studios, Denham, England
Assisted by Alan Snelling
35mm magnetic film recorded by Peter Gray

Like the Man of Steel himself, John Williams' score for **Superman** really needs no introduction although I will draw attention to a few compositions. Firstly, the "*Love Theme from Superman*" is a glorious piece that was given full reign of the soundtrack during the film's lengthy end credits.

A magnificent cue from the underscore is "*Jonathan's Death*" with incredibly emotive orchestration for solo trumpet, chimes, low strings and string harmonics before a powerful statement of the Smallville theme is made at the conclusion. The following cue, "*Leaving Home*," is equally as potent. It is the power of music affecting emotions and one that bought tears to the eyes of Alan Snelling and Eric Tomlinson whenever they played it. Both engineers concur that it is one of the most moving compositions to come from maestro Williams.³

¹ Yes, technically, the three Phantom Zone villains and Supergirl are also Kryptonian survivors.

² **Superman Returns** is not represented here.

³ Malone, Chris. Interview. 12 Apr. 2008.

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The **Superman** score was recorded over many disparate sessions commencing in the summer of 1978 and concluding in November that year. Director Richard Donner attended Anvil Studios, driving over from Pinewood with various colleagues and friends crammed into a Rolls-Royce Corniche convertible.⁴ Christopher Reeve had a passion for music and also attended the sessions where Eric Tomlinson observed him to be a generous and kind-hearted man. The extended post-production period enabled the engineer opportunity to see some of the flying sequences being filmed.⁵

Alan Snelling recalled that a newly installed MCI 24-track 2" analog tape machine was running the master session tapes. Separate transfer sessions took place for film and album with all cues mixed down from the 24-track units. The challenge of maintaining aural continuity between the numerous independent sessions was achieved through Tomlinson's consistent studio layout and miking choices coupled with the skill of composer John Williams.⁶

The **Superman** soundtrack has been released at least four times previously. Firstly, as a generous 2LP set through Warner Bros Records in December 1978. The first CD publication, again on Warner Bros in 1989, saw the LP programme represented on one disc save for two tracks. The quality of this issue was somewhat veiled at times and exhibited some issues with imaging however was generally satisfactory for being a straight port of the original album. A rare Japanese issue in 1990 restored the full running time onto one disc.

In February 2000, Rhino issued a 2CD edition produced by Nick Redman and Mike (then Michael) Matessino. This issue presented the full score chronologically and included an introductory note from Christopher Reeve. This edition was sourced from 35mm dubbing elements and further augmented with assorted open reels including the ¼" LP master tapes. Whilst the assembly was near perfect, the sound was somewhat lacking. Mastered by Dan Hersch, the CDs were characterised by brazen peak limiting, a nudge in the midrange frequencies and instances of over-modulation not obvious on earlier releases.⁷ Intra-cue changes in tone and stereo field – a result of the sources appropriated – were common that, when coupled with the rather fatiguing lack of dynamic range, regrettably made this a CD set that seldom saw my player.

The much anticipated Film Score Monthly Blue Box was released in February 2008 to the delight of **Superman** and film score fans, who were thrilled that the Man of Steel would fly again to a nestling place on their shelf. But did he straighten up and fly right?

On this occasion, the score was mastered from the original 6-track 35mm magnetic film mix downs spliced by music editor Bob Hathaway in 1978 to conform to his edit plan for each cue.⁸ The liner notes reveal that the 6-track units were transferred to digital in 2000 as part of Warner Bros restorative efforts for subsequent issuance of the film on DVD. Assembly of this new edition in the digital domain has permitted some of the bumps and more obvious transitions to be smoothed over making many of them undetectable.

The music sounds clean, dynamic and more internally consistent than ever before. Cleanliness, however, is not necessarily desirable because, with analog recording, hiss is conspicuous by its absence inferring that the score has undergone extensive digital noise reduction. Regrettably, some of the aliveness and ambience of the recording has been vacuumed up with the hiss and in its place is a rather sterile and false soundstage.

⁴ Malone, Chris. Interview. 12 Apr. 2008.

⁵ Malone, Chris. Interview. 29 Dec. 2007.

⁶ Malone, Chris. Interview. 12 Apr. 2008.

⁷ Refer to Appendix A for comparisons that illustrate the restriction in dynamic range.

⁸ Save for two tracks, sourced from the ¼" Warner Bros album master tapes.

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There is a wide frequency response, noted to reach 20 KHz, but there is a particular over emphasis on the lower registers creating a heavy and woolly sound. Cues including “*The Planet Krypton*,” “*The Mugger*,” “*The Truck Convoy*” and “*Miss Teschmacher Helps*” exemplify this characteristic. Significant attenuation, in the order of a massive 7 dB @ 200 Hz shelving, resolves this heaviness however there is a sharp peak, at 100 Hz, that needs its own attenuation by at least 0.5 dB. Not all cues require the same extent of this treatment to the lower cloud. Assorted cues also possess some minor 50 cycle electrical system hum. Generally speaking, and irrespective of bass concerns, the sound quality is rather laid-back and possesses a recessed midrange. A boost of 0.5 dB @ 1 KHz and 0.5 dB @ 3.5 KHz migrates the soundstage further forward and creates a more natural tonality to my ears but it is still not unspoiled.

An application of digital peak range limiting – seemingly more than expected from Doug Schwartz – is fairly restrained compared with some other film score CDs and, by and large, dynamic range is well preserved.

Make no mistake: this is the most significant issue of the **Superman** score. A superior source was obviously used, the balance is acceptable, it was dutifully assembled and the copious notes are marvellous to study. But the lack of breath and aliveness coupled with some bothersome EQ decisions may shade one of Williams’ most important scores in a lesser light than it could and should have been.

Superman II

Box Set Disc 3 – Total Disc Time 79:46

Music by Ken Thorne from material by John Williams
Recorded and mixed by John Richards at CTS Studios, Wembley, England
Assisted by Tim Pennington and James Abramson

Ken Thorne executed an admirable job adapting material from the first film in **Superman II**, with his full score available here for the first time. Thorne’s choices were always appropriate and sometimes quite inspired: such as “*Clark Fumbles Rescue*” reprising “*To the Lair*”; “*Superman Flies Off*” where material from the original film’s “*Prelude*” is set in a sombre tone; and the use of Williams’ unused, alternate “*Dome Opens*” cue for the “*Aerial Battle*” sequence. In all, it’s actually quite a delight having the first film’s music reorchestrated, stretched, condensed and re-recorded enthusiastically under Thorne’s baton. It would be nice to think that the Ken Thorne detractors will see his efforts as far greater than previously considered.

The orchestral balance heard within the film itself was, at times, observed to place woodwinds to the right and brasses to the centre, a switch of centre with right channels. Whilst the 5.1 mix is well rounded, the original Dolby Stereo matrixed mix lacks fidelity and bass favouring the percussion and woodwind channels. Whilst the original LP programme was largely representative of the intentions of the recording engineer, this new disc, mastered from the original 35mm magnetic film mix downs, boasts a full bodied sound that is crisp if not a little too bright.

There is a mastering issue with the last two tracks on the disc. The right channel in “*Lois Forgets*” appears to be attenuated by about 5 dB, ie it is slightly over ¼ of its proper volume. The right channel in the last track, incorporating the end credits march, is about 3.5 dB down however contains a significant azimuth (delay) error in the order of 6.145 ms. This can be corrected by delaying the right channel by 271 samples. The upshot of this error is that instruments panned to the centre – including woodwinds, snare drum and tuba – are indistinct and unfocussed. This is most apparent when the recording is summed to mono – the music becomes bass shy and centre material is diminished as frequencies around 81 Hz, the approximate equivalent of note E2, and multiples of it are cancelled.

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Superman III

Box Set Disc 4 – Total Disc Time 64:19

Music by Ken Thorne from material by John Williams
Recorded and mixed by John Richards at CTS Studios, Wembley, England

Superman III is a richly orchestrated score that has probably gone underappreciated having previously only seen one side of an LP. The “*Main Title*” is a terrific light-hearted piece that continues to amaze as it is so exceptionally well composed. The use of woodwinds and all those *staccato* rhythms, together with *pizzicato* strings, is a highlight of the score. The Superman fanfare statement accompanying the title logo is neat – it commences boldly and concludes, unresolved, with solo trumpet.

The detail in this opening piece is astonishing. For example, if you listen very closely you will hear a snare quietly beating away – with the snare strainer secured thus sounding like a tom-tom – during the woodwind passages at the opening and conclusion of the piece. At other points the snare strainer is unsecured, notably during the scenes accompanying the blind man. It is pushed back in the mix, just there to add nuance, and is all captured beautifully by John Richards.

There’s another spot worth highlighting commencing at about 2:15 into “*Saving the Factory*” where low woodwinds and strings are punctuated by trombones and marimba with a subtle harp glissando adding texture. Freed to head in his own direction, Ken Thorne created a commendable score that fits the **Superman** mould even if the film itself doesn’t. I don’t think they write with this degree of detail anymore.

Superman III sounds excellent with both this and the former score possessing the distinctive CTS Wembley quality captured with focus and delicacy by John Richards. This is the most tonally appealing score in the set with a full low end and upper frequencies slowly rolling off towards 20 KHz.

Superman IV – The Quest for Peace

Box Set Discs 5 and 6 – Total Two Disc Time 152:28

Music by Alexander Courage from material by John Williams
Recorded by Peter Kramper at Bavaria Studios, Munich, Germany
Recorded by Dick Lewzey at CTS Studios, Wembley, England
Remixed by Mike Matessino

Superman IV, previously unreleased in any format, is a treasure trove of interesting ideas. Adapted by Alexander Courage, this jewel contains three new themes for Lacy, young Jeremy and Nuclear Man penned by John Williams.

“*Lacy’s Theme*” commences with string chord changes that wouldn’t be out of place in John Barry’s **On Her Majesty’s Secret Service** score (neither would the saxophone). The arrangement has a texture that makes it seem older than the period in which it was composed.

“*Jeremy’s Theme*” has a progression in it that reminds me of Jerry Goldsmith’s train music from **The Great Train Robbery**. Perhaps it is the repeating two notes on french horn, strings and woodwinds. There’s a nice little arrangement in “*Flying with Jeremy*” that is heard immediately prior to the end titles.

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Some of the bold, low brass clusters in “*Enter Nuclear Man 2*” and other cues conjure Bernard Herrmann. As pointed out in the book, the Nuclear Man theme itself evokes feelings of other Williams scores from the late 1980s. The beat and brass stingers are reminiscent of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*’s “*Escape from Venice*” where the wooden boat is being pulped by the propeller.

“*United Nations*” may be the pinnacle of the score where a stirring presentation of the **Superman** B-theme concludes with statements of the fanfare, Lacy’s, Jeremy’s and the Lois Lane love theme coalescing. Amazingly, it doesn’t appear contrived or forced and flows wonderfully. It’s an interesting score that rises far above the film it ended up accompanying.

The score was recorded in Germany and London. Recordings from both locations have been edited together with little noticeable change in soundstage or positioning. Matessino deserves praise for accomplishing this arduous feat through carefully digitally remixing the 24-channel discrete sources. Sound quality is fine but I do wonder whether the original mix downs were available.

Superman – The 1988 Animated Series

Box Set Disc 7 – Total Disc Time 79:13

Music by Ron Jones

Recorded and mixed at Martinsound and Hallmark Productions by Gary Lux and Steve Hallmark

Ron Jones is a name immediately familiar to fans of quality TV music. Indeed, he created memorable music for his prolific contribution to the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* series. For **Superman** he crafted interesting dramatic music that is, at times, light hearted as conveyed in the “*Family Album*” cues but is always listenable.

Mastered from the composer’s personal ¼” stereo tapes, both the orchestral and synthesised music has an appealing tone. A wide frequency response is present and there are no issues with any particular registers being over emphasised. Musically and sonically, this disc is gentle on the ears.

Extra! Additional Alternates, Source Music and Songs

Box Set Disc 8 – Total Disc Time 68:27

This disc collates alternate versions of the “*Main Title*” and “*Can You Read My Mind*” from the first film together with source cues from the first three films and the Giorgio Moroder synthesised pieces composed for **Superman III**.

Some of the source cues from the first film have saxophone and trumpet progressions together with drum fills that probably wouldn’t be out of place in a 1970s police show. Recording quality is fine, although a little dated in terms of the drum kit sound lacking any stereo spread.

The source music from **Superman II** is more varied musically and engineering wise.

From **Superman III** there is an alternate ending to the “*Main Title*” together with an appropriately heroic Olympic fanfare. Whilst the Moroder synthesised pieces are heavily dated and rather grating, it is worth noting that the “*Love Theme*” served as a basis for Ken Thorne’s “*Lana and Clark*” cues. Rounding out the disc is a fully synthesised treatment of Williams’ march, which, thank goodness, was originally relegated to side B of the soundtrack LP. This track is imprinted with a 15 KHz flyback tone however this is present at a low level and is therefore not distracting.

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Conclusions

This new box set is a commendable effort for certain and I'm very grateful to own it. Of particular importance is the booklet, which contains some of the most comprehensive and thoroughly researched notes ever written.

Perhaps I am being overly critical of the sonic qualities of the first score however, as a paying customer, I am entitled to voice my opinion. I do hope that, one day, the mindless obsession with digital noise reduction and false, sterile sound will wane. Please, tape hiss is not the enemy. Refreshingly, in some circles at least, people are slowly but surely becoming aware of the horrors of digital peak limiting that has waged war by destroying quality recordings over the last ten years.

These digital tools, when used exceptionally (and I mean exceptionally) judiciously, have the potential of being quite effective. Regrettably, they seldom are and the warm analog sound of many important recordings is lost forever within a few mouse clicks.

This does raise questions about the very definition of the term "restoration."

What would a "restoration" of the Mona Lisa involve? Digitising the canvas in high resolution and then using Photoshop to: smooth over brush strokes; remove facial dimples; adjust back lighting; modify the depth of field; and redress the colour balance for modern audiences before printing the work to photo paper. I highly doubt it! The very thought of this digital restoration is considered sacrilege and is abhorrent to those that appreciate fine art. What restoration should involve is: carefully and cautiously filling cracks; repairing canvas tears; applying new natural resin varnish; tastefully reframing the work; and arranging lighting that expresses the texture and subtleties of the painting. It's all about sensitivity, restraint and tact.

Whilst the medium is different, the overall concept should be the same in audio: faithfully presenting art in the best possible way. Optimal signal retrieval and a shrewd application of EQ should be all that is required during the preservation of analog music recordings in digital. Perhaps that's the very word we should be aiming for: "preservation."

Digital noise reduction removes life, air and frequency content. Applying digital EQ to recover some of these lost frequencies afterwards is akin to putting lipstick on a pig. I challenge the dissenters to produce a "hiss only" signal from the music that they are butchering to prove their case. And brick wall digital peak limiting is distortion, plain and simple. This is not *restoration* – this is *obliteration* of audio signal.

Don't misunderstand me – a digital audio workstation is a marvellous tool for editing and assembling content on a lossless basis. It is also valuable tool for: the exacting removal of errant electrical clicks; smoothing splices; filling dropouts; adjusting minor group delay errors not addressed during transfer; levelling tracks relative to each other; and performing spectral analysis. But that's about it. Other alterations are purely subjective.

Legendary pop music recording engineer and producer Ken Scott describes the role of the mastering engineer elegantly as thus:

"The record producer () is the equivalent of the film director.
The recording engineer is the director of photography.
The mastering engineer is the projectionist.
His job is to bring into focus what the prior two did. Not to change it."*⁹

⁹ "Isn't the reason for Mastering to make music LOUDER?" Steve Hoffman Music Forums. 31 Mar. 2008. Ken Scott. 31 Mar. 2008.
<<http://www.stevehoffman.tv/forums/showpost.php?p=3362956&postcount=16>>

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(*) In the film music world it would be fair to substitute “composer / conductor” for “record producer.”

I am a little surprised that Doug Schwartz went to the extent that he did here – with noise reduction in particular – as previously I have been highly appreciative of his tasteful and subtle choices showcased on the many quality film score albums that he has mastered. More than likely though, it was a deliberate creative decision as part of the “restoration” efforts to make the recordings appear more “modern.”

It’s all in the mastering where less is actually more. And like Superman himself, I’m in pursuit of a few things too: *truthful*, *lively* and *accurate* sound when it comes to music remastered for CD.

All that said, the Blue Box deserves a place in every film score and **Superman** fan’s collection.

“Only one thing alive with less than four legs can hear this frequency, Superman, and that’s you.”

[Updated 27 March 2008 – Version 1.1]

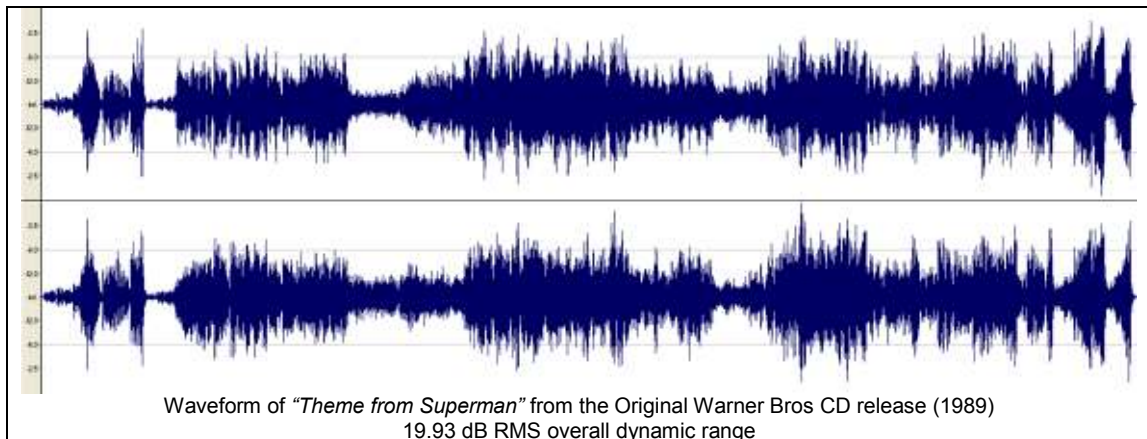
[Updated 12 April 2008 – Version 1.2]

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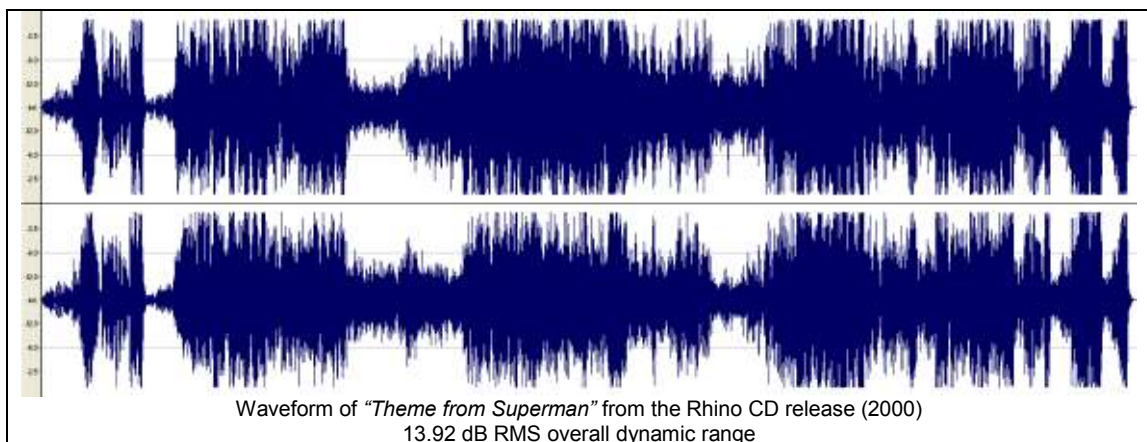
Appendix A – Waveforms

Comparing the various digital editions – waveforms of the “*Theme from Superman*” from the first film recorded in 1978. The RMS value, measured in decibels, describes the relative loudness of a track. It is an average of the sample values within a given section of music. A lower value indicates a lower overall dynamic range. The waveforms below show each track as extracted from their respective CDs. RMS calculations were performed after adjusting the audio content to 0 dB FS.

The original Warner Bros CD release from 1989 boasts an overall dynamic range of around 20 dB.



The Rhino 2CD release from 2000 is restricted to approximately 14 dB of overall dynamic range.



The FSM Blue Box is a little more relaxed than the Rhino offering 15 dB of overall dynamic range.

