

SECRET AGENT

The *Ipcress File* is one of Sidney J. Furie's best-known films. Starring Michael Caine as Harry Palmer its score, by John Barry is one of the composer's most well-loved, says Selwyn Harris. A lot of people may know that, but Barry's score is one of his jazziest as befitting a film composer who had studied with arranger Bill Russo

The jury is still out on whether or not the five-time Oscar winning, York-born film composer John Barry penned the famous 'James Bond Theme'. The story goes that the producers were unhappy early on with Monty Norman's music for the first Bond *Dr No* (1962) and so replaced him with Barry. This somehow caused authorship of the theme to become a grey area; the official line is that Norman had already written it and Barry did the arrangements and orchestrations. Subsequently Norman has received half a million in royalties as the sole writer. To this day Norman claims it as his alone and has sued any publication that suggests otherwise, so no comment from this one. However, at one of the trials John Barry himself testified in court that he actually was the real author. Anyway, it's not as if Barry needs the extra dosh; he went on to become one of the most successful international film composers of all-time, going on to write ten more memorable Bond scores and for some of us the best thing about the Bond films is easily Barry's music. In between writing two of them *Goldfinger* and *Thunderball*, the James Bond film producer Harry Saltzman invited him to put his signature sound on an alternative kind of spy thriller, one that would be less action-packed, more low key, and one that featured a new male star who was the antithesis of the 007 figure of fantasy. Based on the Len Deighton novel, director Sidney J. Furie's *The Ipcress File* (1965) reveals a pre-*Alfie* (*Jazzwise* 50) Michael Caine in his first starring role as Harry Palmer. Like Bond, he's a middle-ranking cold war spy but unlike Bond, his is not the glamour profession. 007 is a comic book super-hero in comparison: slick, glamorous, apolitical and with impeccable breeding. While our dashing, flawless hero surfs the world conquering both foe and the opposite sex with equal panache, Deighton's character Harry Palmer (although he wasn't given a name in the original novel) is an aspiring working-class bespectacled cockney, stuck in a dreary London espionage underworld. Caine as Palmer is excellent and very amusing in his cocky way towards his superiors; they are the old guard of the British military who now in the cold war have taken charge of the upper echelons of British espionage. It's the 1960s and Caine's character is a symbol of a new upwardly mobile generation of working class adults. Unlike the privileged Mr Bond who has everything on

a plate, Palmer "aspires" to culture and sophistication – he loves Mozart and continental cooking and while he has an eye for the ladies it's not of the kind of cold wham-bam-thank-you ma'm approach. Set in London with indoor filming taking place in two large houses in Grosvenor Gardens, *The Ipcress File* opens with the kidnapping of a leading scientist on a London train by Eastern European agents. Sgt Harry Palmer is transferred from a monotonous surveillance post to an espionage team investigating the "Brain Drain" of scientists disappearing from England. His old employer Colonel Ross (Guy Doleman) tells Palmer that his new boss

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Major Dalby (Nigel Green) will be far sterner than him – "he doesn't even have my sense of humour", says Ross inviting a typically deadpan sarcastic response, "I shall miss that sir", from Caine. Searching for the Albanian agent behind the kidnapping, on a hunch Palmer decides to mobilise his new team to break into an empty warehouse in which he believes the missing scientist is hidden. He isn't, but Palmer instead finds a piece of tape with *The Ipcress File* printed on it and so the mystery ensues. Considered by many as one of Barry's best scores, *The Ipcress File* is also more of a one-off entry in his discography in as much as it has jazz at the heart of its sonic universe. His mod-jazz score for the swinging London period feature *The Knack...* and *How To Get It* was written in the same year and perhaps put him in the mood. However, Barry is not normally associated with jazz, despite coming from a

background in which he developed a love for the music, especially the big bands, encouraged by his older brother Patrick. As a young teenager Barry played piano and trumpet and joined a local jazz band. He later admitted to becoming terrified of improvising on the trumpet in front of an audience. On National Service, Barry began to study composition and arrangement via a correspondence course with the Stan Kenton arranger Bill Russo. In 1955, Barry was demobbed and while working as a publicist for his father he played trumpet in local clubs. Sending some of his arrangements to bandleaders Ted Heath, Jack Parnell and John Dankworth (the latter reportedly using a few of them in his repertoire), Barry then formed his own successful beat combo the John Barry Seven. He was arranging also for pop singer Adam Faith, and when the singer got a part in the cult period feature *Beat Girl* (1960) Barry delivered his very first score. Barry's music is at the essence of *The Ipcress File*, with the ominous main melody of the title theme performed on the cimbalom, a stringed instrument of Hungarian origin set on a sounding board and played with mallets. The cimbalom became a favourite of a few jazz film composers in particular: Quincy Jones used it in *The Heat Of The Night* (*Jazzwise* 86) and Lalo Schifrin's use on later runs of the TV series *Mission Impossible* is probably the most memorable example, having been sampled by the band Portishead in 1994 for the hit 'Sour Times'. The use of an Eastern European instrument to symbolise the eastern bloc spy theme has its roots in the use of the zither (belonging to the same instrument family of strings stretched over a fret board as the cimbalom) on Anton Karas' famous title theme for Orson Welles' seminal *The Third Man* (1949), also a favourite score of Barry's. The cimbalom title theme comes with glissando flute counter riffs and an excellent muted trumpet jazz improv. The theme then typically goes through Barry's subtle variation process utilising an elegant, minimalistic palette of sound and instrumental colour. The arrangements have a forensic precision that, next to the stylishly terse cinematography by Otto Heller, sets the tone of the film and fits perfectly with the furtive rhythms of the spy narrative. A very good film, albeit one that still goes largely unheralded.

