

Album Review
Journey of Natty Gann
by Tim Greiving

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The Journey of Natty Gann (1985) ****



JAMES HORNER
Intrada Special Collection Volume 103
16 tracks - 43:09

Composed in the era of James Horner's highest quality output, *The Journey of Natty Gann* is a stellar family drama score that has finally seen the light of day thanks to a splendid Intrada release. The music effectively glories in folksy American elements for its girl-meets-wolf, cross-country adventure story set during the Depression, showcasing along the way Horner's many talents.

Natty Gann is chock-full of melodies and satisfying musical ideas. The "Main Title" is a lovely, lyrical theme introduced on harmonica and propelled by acoustic guitar. It bears an undeniable similarity to the latter half of Horner's theme for *The Land Before Time* (written three years later). This theme gets plenty of airtime; some great performances of it are in the gorgeous "First Love" and the joyful "Early Morning."

The B section of the main theme is developed as a secondary theme, first heard in "Leaving." It's a wistful, longing melody reminiscent of Elmer Bernstein's main theme for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, especially when performed by solo recorder. In many ways this score sounds like Horner's take on *Mockingbird*—which is either ironic or obvious, because Bernstein originally wrote the score for *Natty Gann* only to have it rejected.

"Freight Train" is a highlight track, opening with a delicate piano and guitar ostinato that picks up speed alongside the train, bearing the main theme, before it erupts into the stirring trumpet motif from Horner's "Alamo Jobe" contribution to the concurrent *Amazing Stories*.

Horner goes Copland on the tracks "Into Town" and "Rustling." The latter would be revisited in the ant rodeo material from *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*. "The Forest" is a teasing foray into Horner's famous mysterious/fantasy writing, even trotting out his signature shakuhachi (perhaps his first time to do so).

"Farewell" is a surprisingly weighty rendition of the main theme—still beautiful, but making it clear that Natty is "all grown up." Horner milks every wonderful finalé trick he knows in the "Reunion—End Title" track. A pulsating piano drives the beautiful tension of aching strings; then a noble, swelling statement of the main theme plays, followed by a climactic medley of the "Main Title" and the secondary theme.

Included at the end of the album are four bonus tracks with markedly inferior sound quality. "Locked Up" features a lovely, desperate variation of the main theme. "Riding the Rails" is a precursor of Horner's pounding action material for *Aliens*, written the following year.

There isn't a dull moment in *Natty Gann*. Lyrical friendship themes are followed by joyful traveling music, which in turn is followed by infectious Coplandesque material. It is a veritable nursery of ideas and motifs that Horner would later mine for many films—making it not only an important study for the budding Horner scholar, but also a seminal achievement that any fan of the composer should own. Too bad it's sold out. —**Tim Greiving**