Alexander Payne presents

I Knew Her Well

a film by
Antonio Pietrangeli

starring
Stefania Sandrelli

Synopsis

Following the gorgeous, seemingly liberated Adriana (*Divorce Italian Style*'s Stefania Sandrelli) as she chases her dreams in the Rome of *La dolce vita, I Knew Her Well* is at once a delightful immersion in the popular music and style of Italy in the sixties and a biting critique of its sexual politics and the culture of celebrity. Over a series of intimate episodes, just about every one featuring a different man, a new hairstyle, and an outfit to match, the unsung Italian master Antonio Pietrangeli, working from a script he cowrote with Ettore Scola, composes a deft, seriocomic character study that never strays from its complicated central figure. *I Knew Her Well* is a thrilling rediscovery, by turns funny, tragic, and altogether jaw-dropping.

Janus Films is proud to present the U.S. theatrical premiere of a new 4K digital restoration undertaken by the Criterion Collection in partnership with the Cineteca di Bologna.

Alexander Payne on *I Knew Her Well*

My favorite national cinemas, other than American, are Japanese and Italian from the forties to the seventies—and particularly from the fifties and sixties. As one continues to dig, one finds in this period an inexhaustible supply of gems, and *I Knew Her Well* is nothing short of pay dirt. It stands with *La dolce vita, Il sorpasso,* and Michelangelo Antonioni's trilogy as a brilliant—and brilliantly entertaining—document of Italy's contradictions in the second decade after the war, and, like Antonioni, Pietrangeli put women at the center of his films. Here, winds of both sadness and compassion blow through his portrait of an aspiring starlet who moves to Rome and, in a series of minutely observed episodes, allows herself to be used by a string of men. The perfectly cast Stefania Sandrelli plays Adriana, a wannabe who realizes too late the pointlessness of her dreams. Pretty much everyone who sees this movie is blown away.

Cast

Adriana Astarelli **Stefania Sandrelli**
Emilio Ricci **Mario Adorf**
Dario Marchionni **Jean-Claude Brialy**
The writer **Joachim Fuchsberger**
Cianfanna **Nino Manfredi**
Roberto **Enrico Maria Salerno**
Gigi Baggini **Ugo Tognazzi**
Paganelli **Franco Fabrizi**
Antonio Marais **Robert Hoffmann**
Italo **Franco Nero**

Credits

Directed by **Antonio Pietrangeli**
Screenplay **Ruggero Maccari, Antonio Pietrangeli, Ettore Scola**
Producer **Turi Vasile**
Cinematography **Armando Nannuzzi**
Editing **Franco Fraticelli**
Production design **Maurizio Chiari**
Set decoration **Bruno Cesari**
Music **Benedetto Ghiglia, Piero Piccioni**

Italy • 1965 • 115 Minutes • Black & White • In Italian with English Subtitles • 1.85:1

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Getting to Know *I Knew Her Well*

Antonio Pietrangeli's *I Knew Her Well* may not be familiar to international viewers today, but it ranks among the most important and acclaimed Italian films of the sixties. It was made during a period of major economic growth in the nation's film industry, when Italian cinema was becoming a huge export and directors were becoming increasingly emboldened to try new narrative approaches. Though there was no centralized New Wave in Italy during the sixties as there was in such countries as France, Japan, and Czechoslovakia, the films by such disparate, stylistically distinct directors as Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Pietro Germi, and Dino Risi were reflective of the overall shift in European art filmmaking, darker toned works that dealt with the existential crisis brought about by a dizzyingly modernizing continent. Pietrangeli, quite fluent in French culture, was perhaps the Italian director of this period most influenced by the French New Wave. *I Knew Her Well,* with its rapid editing and chronologically fragmented structure, has a distinctly modernist, French feel to its portrayal of a young rural woman (Stefania Sandrelli) trying to establish a career as a model and actress in Rome. Pietrangeli's last completed feature, it would prove to be the culmination of his career-long interest in the plight of women.

As neither mother nor wife, Sandrelli's Adriana is an uncommon female protagonist for an Italian film of the era. The first scene, set on the Ostia beach near Rome, appears to aggressively objectify her bikini-clad body, but it becomes clear that the film takes the fetishizing camera gaze as one of its primary subjects. Pietrangeli intended Adriana to be the prototypical constructed image of woman, as created by the controlling male spectator. Throughout the film's nineteen discrete episodes, she is treated as a barely animate object by a succession of mostly bourgeois men: agents, directors, writers, and other barnacles on the hull of an entertainment industry that seeks only to commodify and exploit her. It's a venal business, as underlined in the scene set at a decadent party, where an aging actor, played by Ugo Tognazzi (*La Cage aux Folles*), is forced to do a degrading dance on a table until he nearly drops dead. Despite the clearly corrupt and predatory nature of show business as it's depicted in *I Knew Her Well,* Pietrangeli leaves Adriana's response purposely obscured; the film never gives voice to her internal monologue. This keeps her at a distance from us, emphasizing the fact that she is unknowable—despite Pietrangeli's frequent use of the close-up. In this way, the film's title is tantalizingly ironic: no one, including us, really knows Adriana, and the despairing ending doesn't change that.

Meet Antonio Pietrangeli

Antonio Pietrangeli was a driving force in Italian cinema years before he ever worked on a movie. Pietrangeli began his film career as a critic, just like one of the figures he most admired, French director François Truffaut. A constant advocate in the late thirties and forties for a movement toward authenticity in Italian cinema, Pietrangeli (who originally studied to be a doctor) wrote ideologically fueled articles for the Italian journal *Cinema* and the French *La revue du cinéma* that rejected the notion of movies as escapism and insisted on the political importance of realism on-screen. "In art there is no innovation or renewal if not starting from the extreme validity of the real and of truth," he wrote. As a consequence, Pietrangeli is widely credited, along with another journalist turned director, Giuseppe De Santis (*Bitter Rice*), with having helped lay the groundwork for the Italian neorealist movement, which began in earnest in the late 1940s, with films by Vittorio De Sica (*Bicycle Thieves*), Roberto Rossellini (*Rome Open City*), and Luchino Visconti (*La terra trema*), and ended up having an incalculable influence on the history of world cinema.

Pietrangeli entered the film industry as an assistant on Visconti's pulpy-realist *Ossessione* (1943) and also worked on the screenplays for such neorealist landmarks as *La terra trema* (1948) and Rossellini's *Europa '51* (1952). His directorial debut, *Il sole negli occhi,* was released in 1953—notably, the year that Italian film scholars usually identify as the end of neorealism. In this drama about a peasant girl who goes to Rome to work as a maid and ends up a defiantly single mother, Pietrangeli was moving away from the stricter realist tenets of the movement. Perhaps even more importantly, he was establishing one of the recurring themes in his career: the plight of women, marginalized both in contemporary Italian society and in cinema. He further explored these ideas in films that skirted the line between drama and social satire, such as *Adua e le compagne* (1960), which concerns prostitutes trying to escape their past after their brothel closes, and *La parmigiana* (1963), a comic portrait of a young woman who's forced out of her village because of scandal and decides to live a life independent of men.

Pietrangeli was also deeply invested in surveying the cultural and financial landscape of contemporary Italy, which was still going through rapid modernization twenty years after the end of World War II and the resultant "economic miracle." *I Knew Her Well,* which Italian film scholar Roberto Silvestri has called "the most important movie of the 1960s," was perhaps the greatest synthesis of Pietrangeli's interests, focusing on a beautiful young woman from rural Italy trying to make it as a model and actress in a materialistic, emotionally mechanized Rome.

Tragically, Pietrangeli would never complete another film. He died in 1968, at age forty-nine, in a drowning accident, while he was filming *Come, quando, perché,* which was ultimately finished by director Valerio Zurlini.

Filmography

1953 *Empty Eyes* (*Il sole negli occhi*)
1954 *Girandola 1910* (part of the omnibus film *Mid-Century Loves*)
1955 *The Bachelor* (*Lo scapolo*)
1957 *It Happened in Rome* (*Souvenir d'Italie*)
1958 *March's Child* (*Nata di marzo*)
1960 *Adua and Her Friends* (*Adua e le compagne*)
1961 *Ghosts of Rome* (*Fantasmi a Roma*)
1963 *The Girl from Parma* (*La parmigiana*)
1963 *The Visit* (*La visita*)
1964 *The Magnificent Cuckold* (*Il magnifico cornuto*)
1965 *I Knew Her Well* (*Io la conoscevo bene*)
1966 *Fata Marta* (part of the omnibus film *The Queens*)
1969 *How, When, and with Whom* (*Come, quando, perché;* completed by Valerio Zurlini)

Stefania Sandrelli

The delicately beautiful Stefania Sandrelli was one of the most sought-after actresses in Italy in the sixties. After winning a beauty pageant in 1960 in the Tuscan city of Viareggio, where she was raised, Sandrelli became a cover girl for the famous fashion magazine *Le ore.* The director Pietro Germi, having seen her magazine photos, called her in for a screen test and eventually cast her in her breakthrough role, as the object of Marcello Mastroianni's desire in the Oscar-winning *Divorce Italian Style* (1961). For the rest of the decade, Sandrelli continued to appear in Germi films, including *Seduced and Abandoned* (1964) and *L'immorale* (1967), but she was also hired by other filmmakers: by Antonio Pietrangeli for *I Knew Her Well* (1965), probably her greatest role; by Bernardo Bertolucci for *Partner* (1968); and by Carlo Lizzani for *The Bandit* (1969). Her fruitful collaborative relationship with Bertolucci also resulted in her most widely recognized role, as Giulia in *The Conformist* (1970), as well as significant parts in *1900* (1976) and *Stealing Beauty* (1996). In the decades since, Sandrelli has appeared in films by such international directors as Tinto Brass, Ettore Scola, Mario Monicelli, Margarethe von Trotta, Bigas Luna, Daniel Burman, and Gabriele Muccino. She made her directorial debut in 2009 with the film *Christine Christina.*

The Music of *I Knew Her Well*

Like so many popular Italian films of the 1960s, the soundtrack to *I Knew Her Well* is loaded with hit songs from the era. Antonio Pietrangeli employs the music in a unique manner, not just setting the film in a specific time and place but also offering commentary on the action, using the radios and record players on-screen as a sort of Greek chorus. Here are the songs in their order of appearance in the film.

"L'eclisse twist," Mina
"Addio," Mina

Mina was one of the most successful Italian recording artists of all time: a versatile, controversial figure who toggled easily from straightforward rock and roll to traditional ballads to torch songs. Pietrangeli employs three songs by Mina in *I Knew Her Well.* The first comes near the beginning, when Adriana turns on the radio in the beauty salon as her employer attempts to seduce her; the song, "L'eclisse twist," was a hit single by Mina that also appears with the opening credits of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1962 *L'eclisse.* We hear only two lines—"The clouds and the moon / Speak to lovers' hearts"—but their tenderness couldn't be further from the images they accompany. Later, Mina's "Addio"—written by the film's composer, Piero Piccioni—plays on the car radio while Adriana and a male partner dance in the headlights during a night journey to an isolated lovers' lane. Reflecting both her emotional sincerity and her status as a creature of pop culture, Adriana sings along to lyrics that read like a preemptory good-bye to her temporary lover:

Every new day
Brings a new world with it
And every love that dies
Is the end of a world
It's too late
Too late for us

"Le stelle d'oro," Peppino di Capri

To mark the next stage in Adriana's evolution—her new look and hairstyle, and her first meeting with a small-time publicist who promises to get her exposure in a magazine— Pietrangeli sneaks in a few seconds of Peppino di Capri's "Le stelle d'oro," an upbeat pop number that sounds like it's emanating from a radio in the busy courtyard. The song comes across as pure bitter irony here, as Adriana pays for the agent's dubious services while di Capri sings about the "golden stars" of the song's title.

"Sweet William," Millie Small

In one of the film's many jarring edits, Pietrangeli cuts to Adriana as she and her lover, Dario, dance to "Sweet William" in a sparsely populated nightclub. "Sweet William" is an irresistible song by Millie Small, the daughter of a Jamaican plantation owner who found success as a singer in the UK under the literal tutelage (including lessons in diction) of record executive Chris Blackwell. In the context of Adriana and Dario's relationship, however, the song's upbeat expression of love becomes unsettling:

I love sweet William
Yes, he's my boy
And I'm his little doll
His favorite toy

He brings me candy
And kisses too
Because I'm stuck on him
I'll stick to him like glue

Oh, I need Sweet William so
I'll never let him go
And I know our love will grow

I love sweet William
Yes, he's my thrill
And who will marry me?
Sweet William will

"Oggi è domenica per noi," Sergio Endrigo

Pietrangeli follows this with another blunt edit that smashes "Sweet William" directly into "Oggi è domenica per noi" (Today Is Sunday for Us), by the singer-songwriter Sergio Endrigo, which plays in the background of a restaurant where Dario's behavior begins to annoy Adriana. Dario—who forces a waiter to trade places with him and attempts to prepare an omelet in the restaurant—contrasts pathetically with the song's lyrics, especially in light of the following day's revelation that he left Adriana behind in the hotel, their bill unpaid.

Today is Sunday for us
I will leave my world
And come with you
Wherever you are

Today, forget yourself
And the boredom will go away
For a day with me

"Mani bucate," Sergio Endrigo

"Mani bucate," another song by Endrigo, follows, playing almost in its entirety as Pietrangeli executes a stunning single-shot sequence that zooms out from the canal, as seen from Adriana's window, to her puttering around her apartment. The first song in the film that Adriana plays on her beloved portable record player, "Mani bucate" sets an appropriately melancholy mood.

You could never hold on
To anything for long
Not even a sincere smile
Though you had the whole world
In your hands
You lost everything, even love
Tossed aside without a care
Now you're left empty-handed

You could never hold on
To anything for long
Not even an honest friend
You had so much
And always gave it away
To just anyone
You lost everything, even my heart
Tossed aside without a care
Now you're left empty-handed

"Lasciati baciare Col. Letkiss," the Kessler Twins
"Roberta," Peppino di Capri

As "Mani bucate" comes to a close, Adriana's reverie is interrupted by a phone call from a man she briefly dated in the past, whose name and identity she can't remember. After a quick flashback, Pietrangeli cuts to Adriana's turntable, which plays a sequence of two pop songs—an oompah novelty by the German duo the Kessler Twins and another ballad by Peppino di Capri—as she makes a date, changes her clothes, gets ready to go out, then agrees to babysit for her neighbor instead.

"What Am I Living For," Millie Small

Leaving the film to composer Piero Piccioni for the next forty-five minutes, Pietrangeli doesn't feature another preexisting song until Millie Small's "What Am I Living For," which introduces the film's centerpiece scene, a party where Adriana gets her closest glimpse of the world of celebrity.

"More," Gilbert Bécaud

While the film's opening song, "L'eclisse twist," references the Antonioni movie, Pietrangeli refers to another film when Adriana plays a single of the then ubiquitous international hit "More," here performed by the popular French singer Gilbert Bécaud. This song was the main theme from *Mondo cane,* a dubious but highly influential 1962 documentary that collected random scenes of "perverse" behavior from around the world, in an attempt to shock and titillate viewers. It's not hard to draw parallels between the practices shown in *Mondo cane* (the beheading of bulls, fishermen force-feeding sea urchins to sharks) and the horrifying examples of selfishness and cruelty depicted by Pietrangeli. And the juxtaposition of the song's fantasy of all-consuming love ("More than the world has ever known") with the banal reality of Adriana alone in her apartment is yet another of Pietrangeli's reminders of the empty promises offered by popular culture.

"E se domani," Mina
"Abbracciami forte," Ornella Vanoni
"Dimmi la verità," Sergio Endrigo

Next begins an extraordinary sequence of songs, all literally kicked off by Adriana as she jostles the record changer with her foot. Mina's "E se domani" offers more fatalistic romanticism ("If tomorrow / I suddenly lost you / I'd be losing the whole world"), and as the song reaches its emotional climax, Adriana's eye makeup is running down her face in black streaks. When she turns to look in the multiple panels of her dressing-table mirror, she stares directly into the camera at the viewer.

When the doorbell rings, Adriana rushes to wipe away her tears and starts the next song, "Abbracciami forte," by Ornella Vanoni. Another ode to an impossible love ("Hold me strongly and forget me / Hold me strongly and forgive me"), the song would also have been familiar to Italian viewers as the one that won Vanoni the top award at the prestigious Festival of Songs in Sanremo, Italy.

Adriana opens the door as the song continues. She receives a piece of mail from Luciano, a young neighbor boy with whom she dances to "Dimmi la verità," by Sergio Endrigo. As Endrigo pleads with his lover to tell him if "something has changed" between them, Adriana and Luciano dance slowly, until the boy runs away in embarrassment.

Another quick edit takes us to a club where Adriana dances frantically to Piccioni's score, reconnects with an abashed Dario, and stays on the dance floor until the end of the night, leaving with a man who takes her out on a motorboat, to a restaurant for pizza, and finally to an aviary, where the couple sit in their car, enraptured by the sounds of the birds inside.

"Toi," Gilbert Bécaud

At dawn, Adriana drives home in her car while Pietrangeli lets Gilbert Bécaud's "Toi" play in full. For three minutes, we watch Adriana drive with a blank stare as the lyrics speak of a love lost:

> You . . . Whom I never thought I'd meet
> You . . . Who appeared to me in the same old city
> You . . . Whom I'd looked for all over
> You . . .
>
> Who appeared to me
> Amid a crowd of nobodies
> You were there for me
> Time stood still
> And for a moment
> We lived life together
>
> You . . . I'd known for centuries that you were mine
> You . . . A gust of happiness for me alone
> You . . .
>
> You'd have given me
> The impossible
> But my moment passed
> And you said no

Though Adriana kicks her turntable into action for one more song—an instrumental version of "Lasciati baciare Col. Letkiss"—Bécaud's expressions of angst and loneliness are, fittingly, the final lyrics we hear in the film.