

Film noir and postwar America

Charles Bogle
1 July 2008

Film Noir Classic Collection, Vol. 4 (Act of Violence/Mystery Street/Crime Wave/Decoy/Illegal/The Big Steal/They Live by Night/Side Street/Where Danger Lives/Tension). List price, \$59.98, recently priced at \$42.99.

This boxed set is the latest in the outstanding Warner Home Videos series of releases from the era of film noir (literally “black film,” an expression coined by French critics in the mid-1940s).

Within the general population of movie viewers, none of the 10 films on the five discs in this set has attained the almost mythical status of works found in the earlier ones—e.g., *Out of the Past*, *Murder My Sweet* and *Gun Crazy*. Moreover, while several of Vol. 4’s movies deserve at least as much acclaim as those last films, and one is truly a great American film, a few are neither particularly good nor, strictly speaking, film noir.

That being said, the collection of 10 movies is important, in part for the years it covers, from 1948 to 1955. During that time, the US underwent a striking political transformation. The real face of postwar American capitalism showed itself, and the illusion that the New Deal would lead to serious social reform was dashed. The US emerged as the dominant imperialist power in the world and for reasons of both foreign and domestic policy, launched the crusade against communism. Officially sponsored fear and suspicion attended the unfolding of the Cold War.

The Hollywood film community, including many members of the Communist Party or fellow travelers, was thoroughly unprepared for the brutal political changes. The betrayals of Stalinism, on the one hand, and the results of the postwar communist witch-hunts, spearheaded by the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, on the other, had ruinous consequences for American moviemaking. These consequences—the suppression of dissent and creativity; internal moral conflicts over one’s duty to authority or to principle; the stifling, dispiriting sense of living one’s life under surveillance—find various expressions in the collection.

Three of the stronger movies—*They Live by Night*, *Side Street*, and *Crime Wave*—reward close examination in chronological order.

They Live by Night, the singularly great movie in this collection, was adapted for the screen from Edward Anderson’s Depression-era 1937 novel *Thieves Like Us* by a young Nicholas Ray (who would later direct *Johnny Guitar*, *Bigger than Life* and *Rebel Without a Cause*) in 1946, but it wasn’t released in the United States until 1949. (Robert Altman filmed a version of this story under the novel’s original title in 1974.)

Ray, briefly a member of the Communist Party, and producer John Houseman were members of leftist theater groups during the Depression (Ray also traveled through the south with Alan Lomax on a Library of Congress project to record folk singers).

In the film, three escaped convicts—Arthur “Bowie” Bowers (Farley Granger), Chicamaw “One-Eye” Mobley (Howard Da Silva, who would be subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951) and Henry “T-Dub” Mansfield (Jay C. Flippen)—make their way across the southern US. They first hide out at a house and gas station belonging to Chicamaw’s alcoholic brother Mobley (Will Wright), before committing two robberies, which ultimately result in tragedy.

Because the camera’s sympathetic focus remains almost exclusively on the escaped convicts, those who aid them—Mobley; his daughter; T-Dub’s sister-in-law, Mattie Mansfield (Helen Craig)—and the people they encounter along the way who are also simply trying to get by, one comes to identify closely with their lives. The ex-cons and “normal” people share the same sense of loyalty to one another, the same dreams, and it is these loyalties and dreams that come into conflict with postwar America.

For example, T-Dub dies as a result of a bank robbery he planned to gain the money to pay for his brother’s release from prison, while Mattie Mansfield, T-Dub’s sister-in-law, will in the end give away Bowie’s hiding place to the police in exchange for the same man’s release.

The fact that the police themselves recognize this conflict but appear helpless to do anything about it adds to the movie’s tragic underpinnings. (The police appear infrequently and then due only to the Production Code’s insistence that Ray include some controlling authority over a movie they viewed as promoting the free movement of ex-cons.) Referring to Mattie’s guilt-ridden offer of Bowie’s life for her husband’s, the police official tells her, “That’s the only way he [Mattie’s husband] can live. Perhaps that’s our fault.” “That won’t help me sleep at night,” concludes Mattie.

They Live by Night’s undercurrent of tragedy reaches Shakespearean heights with the romance between Bowie and Mobley’s daughter, “Keechie” (Cathy O’Donnell). They are brought together by the shared experience of lost youth—the 24-year-old Bowie spent seven years in prison for a murder he didn’t commit, and the 23-year-old Keechie has spent most of her life caring for her alcoholic father—and a dangerously extended period of innocence.

Freed by Bowie’s share of the bank robbery, and his desire to appeal his wrongful murder conviction to the Supreme Court, the couple begin their own journey across the South, first by bus and later by car. Along the way, they are able to do very normal things, which were denied them in their youth, like holding hands and kissing. Eventually, they marry and conceive a child. The dreamlike, fairy-tale quality of this sequence is all the more effective for its use of soft-focus close-ups and dialogue expurgated to meet Production Code stipulations.

Fairy tale turns to tragedy after Bowie is wrongfully accused of another murder and the media turns him into the leader of the “Bowie gang” (*à la* the real life Bonnie and Clyde of the Great Depression). With no hope of appealing his case, he and Keechie are now driven solely by their love and desire to realize their simple dreams, and the result of this love and desire is tragedy.

The best artistic productions often present dreams, especially the pure, denied variety, as struggling to be realized against the rigidity of a twisted, distorted society. Art becomes tragic and great when it realistically portrays the means by which their realization is not only denied but also punished. *They Live by Night* fits into this tradition.

Side Street was released the following year (1950) and appears on the other side of the same disc. Directed by leftist Theater Guild alumnus Anthony Mann (*T-Men*, *Railroaded*, *The Naked Spur*), the movie also features an average American, World War II veteran, Joe Norson (again, Farley Granger), whose dreams, as elementary as wanting a private room

in which his wife, Ellen (again, Cathy O'Donnell), could deliver their baby, are thwarted by his low wages as a part-time mailman.

These unmet dreams lead him to commit what he thinks is the petty theft of \$200. The latter act winds up involving him in the schemes of a corrupt lawyer and leading him to be accused—like Bowie, wrongly—of a murder. Unlike Bowie in *They Live by Night*, Joe is finally freed of any charges and he, his wife and baby are reunited.

The movie's strongest points include some of the visual stylistics that would come to define film noir. World War II brought the possibilities of helicopters to the attention of filmmakers, and *Side Street* cinematographer Joseph Ruttenberg used them to shoot from above the New York skyline underscoring the insignificance and "rat-in-a-maze" living conditions of average New Yorkers.

Ruttenberg's early training in newspapers and newsreels is apparent in the film's documentary style, especially in the close-ups of characters whose evident pain and struggles in the periphery of camera shots emphasize the pressure on Joe Norson to somehow escape the life that has entrapped him.

Another film noir staple is the femme fatale character. Sometimes hardened and sometimes vulnerable, and often dangerous to the male, these figures in part reflect the fears of returning veterans. In *Side Street*, "Lucky" Colner (Adele Jergens) seems to personify the hardened, earlier manifestation of returning veterans' fears of unfaithful wives and women who had taken their jobs, while Harriette Sinton (Jean Hagen) foreshadows the later, more vulnerable figures of the consumer society of the 1950s.

The use of police captain Walter Anderson (Paul Kelly) as a narrator (another characteristic of film noir) adds nothing to *Side Street* aside from a reassuring voice of authority. One might rightly fault the writer and director for this superfluity, but the rapidly deteriorating political atmosphere of this period—by the time of the film's release, the Hollywood Ten had been convicted and the American filmmaking industry was doing everything in its power to prove its anti-communist credentials—might also account for *Side Street's* nod to authority.

Jean Hagen is particularly effective as the painfully needy Harriet Sinton, but while Farley Granger and Cathy O'Donnell retain their chemistry and ability to use their faces and bodies to register real emotions, O'Donnell's Ellen Norson is more dependent than her "Keechie" character in *They Live by Night*.

The 1954 release *Crime Wave*, directed by Andre de Toth (*The Gunfighter*, *The Day of the Outlaw*, *Ramrod*), focuses on the conflict between parolee Steve Lacey (Gene Nelson) and policeman Lt. Sims (Sterling Hayden).

Lacey's normal life as an airplane mechanic with his wife, Ellen, is abruptly changed when three of his friends from prison—among them, Ted de Corsia as the brains, "Doc" Penny, and a young Charles Bronson (credited as Charles Buchinsky) as the thug, Ben Hastings—break out. They rob a gas station for operating money—during which one of his prison associates and a police officer are killed—and force Lacey to join them as the "getaway" man in their bank heist.

The Lacey character is torn between principles and duty to authority. He only agrees to the escaped cons' plan to protect his wife, but when Lt. Sims learns of ex-convict Lacey's involvement, he (Sims) places Lacey under surveillance and pressures him for information about the gang's whereabouts and plans. Lacey balks at becoming a "stool pigeon."

De Toth's on-location, documentary style of filming *Crime Wave* in the seedier parts of Los Angeles suggests that no one in this community is doing very well and everyone is under suspicion. The camera follows a police dragnet into real bars where very real customers look over their shoulders in fear. We also follow Lt. Sims through the police department as he listens in on interrogations of ordinary citizens whose stories sound more like those of victims of an uncaring society than criminals.

The ambiguous feelings and tension evident in Sterling Hayden's Sims bespeak an alienation and uncertainty born of this same uncaring society. The viewer watches Sims amble through the movie like a ghost, distant from his fellow officers as well as from the criminals—suspected and otherwise—he tracks. We are never sure if Sims is the bullying, insensitive figure who hounds Lacey unmercifully, or the reflective figure he appears to be when he tells a police interrogator to release another parolee who's trying to live a respectable life.

This tension results in a poignant moment, and not only because of Sims's self-revelation. Lacey refuses Sims's demand that he (Lacey) inform on his friends with "One job like that and I'd be a rat for the rest of my life." Rising from his chair to look straight into Lacey's eyes, Sims tells him, "It isn't what a man wants to do but what a man has to do."

This line resonates not only with *Crime Wave's* stifling determinism, where everyone is either being watched or watching. In his autobiography, *Wanderer*, Hayden describes his self-loathing for having informed on his former comrades before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951: "I was a real daddy longlegs of a worm when it came to crawling [before the Committee]." Following his "cleansing" before the Committee, Hayden claims to have "swung like a goon from role to role," as Hollywood's new "sanitary culture hero." Speaking Sims's lines in a movie completed in 1952 must have had a profoundly troubling significance for Hayden.

And this helps make the tidy ending of *Crime Wave* all the more disappointing. After Lt. Sims's arrest of the gang members during an attempted bank robbery, he justifies his harassment of Lacey as an object lesson for those who don't inform. "Next time, call me," Sims tells Lacey. "Now, go home to your taxes, grocery bills, and three rooms." Quite the reward for those who buckle to authority, but Lacey and his wife do just that, just as Hayden and Hollywood did, after their own fashion.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact