On "Detour," Et al.

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Now and again, I've thought about what I would have liked to have done for work if I hadn't done what I did, teaching and writing. The answer that's come to me recently, I'd like to have been a B movie director, or anyway, the equivalent of that since I wasn't an adult in the time when they were around. B's were low budget movies in the 1940s and '50s that were usually made to be half of a double feature, two movies for the price of one. They were most often crime stories, thrillers, and westerns. The closest thing to B movies in this time are indies—independent—films, so that's what I'd like to be, an indie film director. Though if I had lived back in the days of B films, that's what I would like to have been.

In particular, I would like to have tried to do what the B film director Joseph H. Lewis did with his 1950 movie "Gun Crazy," which was about a Bonnie and Clyde-type crime spree by a gun-toting husband and wife. Lewis was given a second-rate screenplay, second-line actors (John Dall and Peggy Cummins), and very little money and, with no expectation that it would be anything more than double-feature filler, made a film that is still analyzed and talked about respectfully by film aficionados all these decades later. In 1998, "Gun Crazy" was selected for preservation in the Library of Congress for being "culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant."

What a triumph for Lewis—no budget, no big stars, no expectations, and he creates something of timeless worth and importance. I would love to take on that challenge, and, come to think about it, in my own way, I have done that in my writing with at least minor success. A book I wrote almost two decades ago that nobody expected anything of, *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds,* has become niche classic or sorts and is still talked about with a good measure of acclaim all these years later. I'm incredibly gratified by

that accomplishment. I hope it's not too immodest to say that the "Fame" book is my "Gun Crazy."

Though I didn't know to call them that back then, when I was kid I used to go to B movies frequently in downtown Saint Paul, Minnesota where I grew up. I was about six, seven, eight, nine years old, and I'd go alone to the Lyceum and Grand and Garrick and Tower theaters, all within a couple of blocks of one another, which specialized in B films. I've recently learned that many of those films were produced by two film studios, or film companies, Columbia Pictures and Republic Pictures.

There were lots of movies theaters in those days. In addition to the ones just listed, there were those that showed "A" list films by the big studios like Warner Brothers, Paramount, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and RKO, such as the Paramount, RKO Orpheum, and World theaters. Plus, there were neighborhood theaters, right in the middle of residential areas: I went to the Randolph and Saint Clair and Gem (also called the "Gob," because it wasn't the best kept up).

Movies were a really big deal back then, before television took over in the 1950s. I've read that in those days, the average person went to the movies once a week; now, it's four times a year. If you want to learn about what people thought and how they lived during and just after World War II, check out what was in the movies at that time. Movies were our guides. Through the rest of the twentieth century, you could say the same thing about television. More than any other influences on me, all the movies and television I saw taught me who I was and how to be.

As I think about it now, there was no concern about me being downtown and going to the movies by myself at such a young age. It was a much safer time I guess. The far greater racial and ethnic diversity in our time, which is such a gift to us, so we are told, doesn't seem to have been contributed to the safety of children, or anyone else for that matter.

I started going to the movies at six when I lived for that year behind a plywood partition my dad put up in the back of his downtown barber shop. After we moved to the second floor of Mr.

Jenson's house a couple of miles away, I don't remember how I got downtown to go to the movies, whether I took the streetcar (there were electric streetcars in those days) alone or Mother rode with me and dropped me off, and I don't remember how I got back home.

I remember being so small I had to reach up high over my head to put my money up on the ledge at the theater ticket booth. It was change; movies for kids back then cost twelve cents, and then it went up to a quarter.

The Lyceum had posts that you had to avoid getting behind. It showed triple features, which I sat through. Movies were shorter in those times, most often not much over an hour long. But still, that's a long time to sit in a movie theater. I never got popcorn, candy, or a Coke; I just never thought about it.

I remember someone who worked at the Lyceum, where I went more than anyplace else, coming down the aisle several times and looking at me sitting there watching the movie. I asked my mother about it, what was he doing that for? I don't remember her answering, but thinking about it now, I suppose he was checking to see that I was OK, nice of him to do.

I've thought about the effect on me of all those hours I spent alone in movie theaters (and with TV too, I always watched it by myself). I've decided that it has something with do with being alone, just me, with my referent being what was happening on the screen, rather than being with others and grounded in here-and-now reality. Perhaps I was just a natural loner and dissociated from the world around me and that drew me to the movies and then television. In any case, it's still that way for me. I feel alone and apart from everything, and I'm not really in this place, now, or connected to other people. At this moment, I'm sitting alone on a leather couch writing about some other place and a far distant time.

Especially since my retirement four years ago, and without consciously planning to do it, I've pretty much seceded from the current reality: the internet, what Trump and the Democrats are up to, Fox News and MSNBC, the commercial sports drama (Major League Baseball, the National Football League, etc.), the latest

movies and books, what the celebrities are up to, what's currently in and out, all of it. I've gone away. Really, all the way back to watching movies and then television as a kid, I've never quite been here.

I subscribe to a Netflix-like streaming service called the Criterion Channel. https://www.criterionchannel.com It specializes in old, mostly classic, films. I recommend it to you if you are serious about film. I also stream old films on Vudu https://www.vudu.com and on a library service called Kanopy https://www.kanopy.com. Kanopy has a superb collection of both old and recent films and comes free with your library card. Check to see if your library offers Kanopy.

"Gun Crazy" is an example of what is called "film noir." In recent weeks, I have been watching, and very much enjoying, noir films. Those that come to mind at the moment are "My Name is Julia Ross," "Nightfall," "Human Desire," and one I'll discuss in a bit, "Detour." Here are excerpts from an article from "AMC [American Movie Channel] Filmsite" defining the film noir genre https://www.filmste.org/filmnoir.html:

> Film noir (literally 'black film" or "black cinema') was coined by French film critics who noticed the trend of how 'dark,' downbeat and black the looks and themes were of many American crime and detective films released in France to theatres during and following World War II, such as "The Maltese Falcon" (1941), "Murder My Sweet" (1941), "Double Indemnity" (1944), "The Woman in the Window" (1944), and "Laura" (1940).
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> Film noir films (mostly shot in gloomy grays, blacks and whites) thematically showed the dark and inhumane side of human nature with cynicism and doomed love, and they emphasized the brutal, unhealthy, nihilistic, seamy, shadowy, dark and sadistic sides of the human experience. An oppressive atmosphere of menace, pessimism, anxiety, suspicion that anything can go wrong, dingy realism, futility, fatalism, defeat and entrapment were stylized characteristics of *film noir*. The protagonists in film noir were normally driven by their past or by human weakness to repeat former mistakes.

> *Film noir* films were marked visually by expressionistic lighting, deep-focus or depth of field camera work, disorienting visual schemes, jarring editing or juxtaposition of elements, ominous shadows, skewed camera angles (usually vertical or diagonal rather than horizontal), circling cigarette smoke, existential sensibilities, and unbalanced or moody compositions. Settings were often interiors with low-key (or single-source) lighting, venetian-blinded windows and rooms, and dark, claustrophobic, gloomy appearances. Exteriors were often urban night scenes with deep shadows, wet asphalt, dark alleyways, rain-slicked or mean streets, flashing neon lights, and low-key lighting. Story locations were often in murky and dark streets, dimly-lit and low-rent apartments and hotel rooms of big cities, or abandoned warehouses.
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> Some of the most prominent directors of film noir included Orson Welles, John Huston, Billy Wilder, Edgar Ulmer, Douglas Sirk, Robert Siodmak, Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, Henry Hathaway and Howard Hawks.

Note the name of Edgar Ulmer in the list of directors. Three days ago, I'd never heard of him. Then I watched a B film he directed in 1945, "Detour." Wonderful; the best film I've seen in my memory. In fact, after watching "Detour," I've got my new "Gun Crazy." I wish I'd made "Detour."

"Detour" starred Tom Neal and Ann Savage, not exactly A- list actors, and was released by Producers Releasing Corporation, one of what were called "poverty row" film studios because they specialized doing things on the ultra-cheap. Accounts vary about the shooting schedule and budget with Detour—from six days to 28 days, and from $20,000 to $100,000. In any case, it was gotten out quickly and inexpensively, especially if it were six days and $20,000, which Ulmer said it was.

"Detour" underscores that doing things fast and within the tightest of financial restraints doesn't have to mean doing things that aren't any good. A good screenplay—which this was, adapted by Martin Goldsmith from his 1939 novel of the same name—a superb director as Ulmer was, a talented cinematographer like Benjamin H.

Kline, and two remarkable leads in Neal and Savage, were the makings of a superb film. Especially, Ann Savage's performance as Vera is one for the ages, not to be missed. As was "Gun Crazy," "Detour" has been selected for preservation by the Library of Congress.

A portion of a review of "Detour" by the late critic Roger Ebert:

> "Detour" tells the story of Al Roberts, played by Tom Neal, as a petulant loser with haunted eyes and a weak mouth, who plays piano in a nightclub and is in love, or says he is, with a singer named Sue. Their song, significantly, is "I Can't Believe You Fell in Love With Me." He wants to get married, she leaves for the West Coast, he continues to play piano, but then: "When this drunk gave me a ten spot, I couldn't get very excited. What was it? A piece of paper crawling with germs."
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> So he hitchhikes to California, getting a lift in Arizona from a man named Haskell, who tells him about a woman hitchhiker who left deep scratches on his hand: "There oughta be a law against dames with claws." Haskell dies of a heart attack. Al buries the body, and takes Haskell's car, clothes, money and identification; he claims to have no choice, because the police will in any event assume he murdered the man.
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> He picks up a hitchhiker named Vera (Ann Savage), who "looked like she'd just been thrown off the crummiest freight train in the world." She seems to doze, then sits bolt upright and makes a sudden verbal attack: "Where'd you leave his body? Where did you leave the owner of this car? Your name's not Haskell!" Al realizes he has picked up the dame with the claws. . .
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> "Detour" is an example of material finding the appropriate form. Two bottom-feeders from the swamps of pulp swim through the murk of low-budget noir and are caught gasping in [Edgar] Ulmer's net. They deserve one another. At the end, Al is still complaining: "Fate, for some mysterious force, can put the finger on you or me, for no good reason at all." Oh, it has a reason.

I won't go into rest of the story after Al meets up with Vera. Enough to say, the relationship between Al and Vera and their escapades go down in film history, and that Haskell's death isn't the only one in this film.

I checked into the director, Edgar G. Ulmer (1900-1972). Jewish, he was a refugee from the Nazis and carried on the German Expressionist filmmaking impulse from the 1920s with its exaggerated lighting and camera angles. This is the only film of Ulmer's I've seen, but from this limited evidence, he is at the top of the first rank of film directors; he matches up with anybody.

I was curious about the two lead actors, Tom Neal and Ann Savage.

Neal's film career came to an abrupt end in 1951. He was carrying on an affair with the actress Barbara Payton while she was engaged to the actor Franchot Tone. Tone was understandably put off with this and challenged Neal to a fight and Neal beat him to a pulp. Tone suffered a concussion, broken nose, shattered cheekbone, and fractured jaw. He remained unconscious and near death for the next eighteen hours. When Tone recovered, he and Payton were married. After 53 days, Payton left him and returned to Neal. Tone filed for divorce citing Payton with adultery with Neal. When the divorce went through, Neal and Payton announced their engagement, but they ended their relationship a few months later. With the extensive negative publicity engendered by all of this, the movie studios didn't want to have anything to do with Neal. He was a resourceful sort and developed a successful landscaping business. He married a couple of times after his split with Payton, fathering a son with the first of the two wives. He shot the second one in the back of the head and killed her and somehow got off with only six years in prison. He died at 58 from heart failure. His movie acting was cut short, and he had problems in his personal life, but he sure was great in "Detour."

I read a biography of Ann Savage I found fascinating, couldn't put it down (Lisa Morton and Kent Adamson, *Savage Detours: The Life and Work of Ann Savage*, Macfarland Publishers, 2009). Ann

Savage--born Bernice Lyon in South Carolina, then to Texas, and at nine, Los Angeles, didn't finish high school--despite her notable talent as an actress, never made it big in major-studio films, which was her ambition. Her film career ended a decade after her remarkable performance in "Detour." Her biography provides a good sense of the movie business during that period. She did some television and, near the end of her life, made a notable appearance as the mother of the protagonist in a pseudo-documentary called "My Winnipeg," a performance that generated talk of an Oscar nomination. She married money in the late 1940s and for a couple of decades lived the high life in New York City and traveled the world. Her husband died in 1969, and apparently he didn't look after her in his will, because in her later years she worked as a receptionist in an attorney's office. The book nicely recounts the story of a girl from a modest and turbulent background who was very bright and very capable and very determined to live life to the fullest, which she did the best she could until the end, dying in 2008 at the age of 87.

If you are of the sort to relate to this kind of thing, look into old B movies and especially film noir. You might find it well worth your time.