

HOME THEATER

Explore the dark allure of film *noir*



'Hell or High Water' (2016)

In a dismal, blighted, sun-bleached Texas, the Howard brothers — Toby (Chris Pine) and Tanner (Ben Foster) — have baggage: Their mother died of cancer while Tanner was incarcerated. Naturally, the Howards pick this moment to embark on a string of risky bank robberies. Steady rolling Toby needs money for his ex-wife and son, while loose-canon Tanner is helping out and getting some kicks.

They are trailed by near-retirement sheriff Marcus Hamilton (Jeff Bridges) and his wing man, Alberto Parker (Gil Birmingham), who is of Mexican and Comanche descent.

As the Howards continue their spree and the cops follow clues, we sense the love in both parties — even *if* Tanner is unstable, and Marcus likes to tell tone-deaf jokes about Alberto's dual heritage. David Mackenzie's unhurried contemporary western sidesteps action-movie clichés.



'Chinatown' (1974)

Though flawed, "Chinatown" is a fine modern twist on the 1940s gumshoe *noir*, with all of the cigarettes, booze, arcane dialogue, plot twists and Venetian blinds required.

Jack Nicholson — hair slicked back, in finely tailored suits — is in his prime as laconic private eye J.J. "Jake" Gittes, who is not your father's detached detective.

Faye Dunaway gives the performance of her career as troubled beauty Evelyn Mulwray. John Huston is at once charming and creepy as power broker Noah Cross. The director of 1941's "The Maltese Falcon," Huston brings a palpable sense of history to this revisitation of the genre.

You've got to admire the paces director Roman Polanski puts his actors through. That's really Nicholson swimming for his life and vaulting a fence. And that's really Dunaway driving the getaway car.



'Get Carter' (1971)

A London hitman revisits his dreary hometown of Newcastle to attend his brother's funeral — and find out how and why he died. You root for Michael Caine as steely-eyed gangster Jack Carter in Mike Hodges' film, even though Carter is a terrible person doing terrible things.

After all, he sincerely cares about his niece (Petra Markham) — or is she his daughter? And if she throws a drink in your face at her presumed father's wake, Carter will slip some dough in your pocket for the cleaners. A confident man in spiffy suits, Carter is also quite the Don Juan. But he's no gentleman, devising particularly gruesome retribution for his brother's sure thing (Dorothy White).

The gray, gloomy exteriors, lovingly photographed by Wolfgang Suschitzky, are like a postcard with the slogan: "You Won't Like Newcastle."



'The Big Heat' (1953)

In Fritz Lang's "The Big Heat," we meet two couples, but they aren't exactly double-dating.

One is straight-arrow detective Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford) and his warm, funny wife Katie (Jocelyn Brando, sister of Marlon). Katie makes home a respite for Dave, whose stressful job and unpredictable hours wear on them both.

The other couple is sadistic mob enforcer Vince Stone (Lee Marvin) and brassy girlfriend Debby Marsh (Gloria Grahame). Debby has no illusions about where Vince's loyalties would lie, should there be a contest between her and his gangster boss Mike Lagana (Alexander Scourby).

After a veteran policeman commits suicide, Bannion is assigned to the case. But he's being a little bit *too* good at his job, according to his boss (Willis Bouchee). Lang's riveting film is considered a hallmark of *noir*.



'D.O.A.' (1949)

A distraught man stumbles into a police station to report a murder. The cops ask who the victim is. His reply: "Me." *Wha?* Edmond O'Brien stars as accountant Frank Bigelow, who is slipped a lethal dose of slow-acting poison, and has hours to find out whodunit before, well, you know.

Frank plays fast-and-loose with women, including his needy secretary (Pamela Britton). We see several instances in which he could have been slipped the poison. Frank's secretary exchanges their drinks in a bar; a stranger exchanges drinks in a bar; room service delivers drinks to his hotel room. (Yeah, there's a lot of drinking in this movie.)

While far south of a masterpiece, Rudolph Maté's low-budget *noir* is a memorable genre entry. Eventually, the movie becomes as much about whether Frank is really getting what he deserves as who poisoned him.



'Detour' (1945)

As a mug who descends from a suave, if two-bit, pianist to an unshaven vagrant, Tom Neal wears a haunting, hunted look. It's as if while he's filming his scenes, he knows his bookie is waiting just outside the studio gate. (Neal's real life wasn't any prettier than his "Detour" one.)

He meets his match in Ann Savage as a rough young dame with an extremely bad attitude. As styled and written, Savage is no beauty, which Neal notes in this inspired bit of narration: "Man, she looked as if she'd just been thrown off the crummiest freight train in the world."

It's obvious that Edgar G. Ulmer's "Detour" was shot on the cheap and on the fly. But there is something in the assuredness of Ulmer's storytelling — and especially in the earnestness of the performances by his two principals.

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