



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Gun Crazy

Gun Crazy

Directed by: Joseph H. Lewis

©: Pioneer Pictures Corporation

A King Bros. production

Presented by: United Artists

Produced by: Maurice King, Frank King

Production Manager: Allen K. Wood

Assistant to the Producers: Arthur Gardner

Assistant Director: Frank S. Heath

Script Continuity by: Jack Herzberg

Screenplay by: MacKinlay Kantor,

Millard Kaufman

From the Saturday Evening Post story by:

MacKinlay Kantor

Director of Photography: Russell Harlan

Editor: Harry Gerstad

Production Designed by: Gordon Wiles

Set Decorator: Raymond Boltz Jr

Miss Cummins' Wardrobe by: Norma

Music by: Victor Young

Song 'Mad about You' Music by: Victor Young

Song 'Mad about You' Lyrics by:

Ned Washington

Orchestrations by: Leo Shuken, Sidney Cutner

Music Editor: Stuart Frye

Sound Engineer: Tom Lambert

Technical Adviser: Herman King

Dialogue Coach: Madeleine Robinson

uncredited

Screenplay by: Dalton Trumbo

Camera Operator: Fleet Southcott

Grip: Harry Lewis

Gaffer: Lloyd L. Garnell

Stills: Ed Jones

Make-up: Charles Huber

Hairstyles: Carla Hadley

Cast:

Peggy Cummins (Annie Laurie Starr)

John Dall (Bart Tare)

Berry Kroeger (Packet)

Morris Carnovsky (Judge Willoughby)

Anabel Shaw (Ruby Tare)

Harry Lewis (Sheriff Clyde Boston)

Nedrick Young (Dave Allister)

Rusty Tamblyn (Bart Tare aged 14)

uncredited

Trevor Bardette (Sheriff Boston)

Mickey Little (Bart Tare aged 7)

Paul Frison (Clyde Boston aged 14)

David Bair (Dave Allister aged 14)

Virginia Farmer (Miss Wynn)

Stanley Prager ('Bluey-Bluey', the clown)

Don Beddoe (Cadillac driver)

Robert Osterloh (Hampton policeman)

Harry Hayden (Mr Mallenberg)

Anne O'Neal (Miss Sifert)

Ray Teal (California border inspector)

Shimen Ruskin (guess your weight man)

Frances Irwin (Danceland singer)

USA 1949©

87 mins

Digital

Introduced by Josephine Botting, BFI National Archive curator (Wed 12 June only)

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Gun Crazy's inspired, lurid title hurtles onto the screen with the tabloid pizzazz of a headline. Just to complicate matters, however, *Gun Crazy* was originally released by United Artists in January 1950 as *Deadly Is the Female*, then re-released six months later under the title of the source material, MacKinlay Kantor's *Saturday Evening Post* short story. If the different titles problematised the question of whether Bart or his sharp-shooting inamorata, Laurie, owned the narrative and was responsible for its violence, the ill-advised attempt to avoid exploitative overtones with poetic inversion failed to fool a discerning *Variety*: 'Hiding behind the awkward title... is a story of desperate young love and crime.' In any case, the film was well received by a savvy local and trade press, the sharp critic in the *Los Angeles Times* impressed that 'a crime picture can come along at this late date and top nearly all that have preceded it... hell on wheels... use of the medium in its sharpest, simplest sense.'

Where a sophisticated eye saw iconographic purity, the more jaded view of national reviewers was dismissive – 'humdrum pulp fiction'. Although inevitably hurt by its uncertain release, it is doubtful whether the film could have done well in any case. What did it have going for it? No powerful imperialist studio logo roared a promise of prestige or glamour at the audience. MGM reportedly wanted to buy the film and lend its marketing clout, but a condition was the removal of the King Brothers' producers credit, in studio eyes synonymous with cheapjack product. The feisty Kings – the 'B-picture Kings', Frank, Morris and Hymie – predictably refused. *Gun Crazy* was doomed to become one of the great cult movies of American film history, the favourite B-movie of everybody-in-the-know. But what everybody would not know is that the film was conceived and released as a modest A-level production. The romantic myth surrounding the film has it the achievement of an auteur inspired by shoestring limitations to create the very epitome of B-film noir. Ironically, the truth is that the enterprising Kings – Monogram Studio masters of the cheapie and quickie, of formula efforts with no stars and lean budgets – were attempting to upgrade with *Gun Crazy*, and its proposed \$500,000 budget and 30-day schedule, to come in at the floor of the A-level production, the so-called 'nervous A'. Yet the film must have screamed 'B-movie!' at its original audiences, as it has at their successors.

One can see why. Despite aiming high (for them), the Kings were inevitably to live down to their reputation somewhat in mounting the production. The economising would be obvious in the small scale, the few crowd scenes, the stock footage. To helm the project they had originally considered art director Gordon Wiles, whom they had directed *The Gangster* the previous year, but in the end they brought in Joseph H. Lewis, a veteran of successful B-movie and, more recently, 'nervous A' studio assignments. But the crucial factor was the casting. The Kings had originally gone after both Gregory Peck and Dana Andrews for Bart, and later there was talk of pairing the likes of Farley Granger and Susan Hayward to play the outlaw couple. However, in the eyes of Hollywood's elite, lowbrow Monogram and the proletarian Kings were a standing joke, sources of the worst pictures on the market. Ultimately, they were forced to go with minor stars John Dall and Peggy Cummins, both a B-minus in name voltage, casting which would result in full-blooded and sensitive performances, but which lacked iconographic oomph.

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Apocalypse Now: The Final Cut

Sat 1 Jun 15:00; Sat 8 Jun 19:40; Sat 15 Jun 19:40;
Sun 23 Jun 19:20

The Wages of Fear

Le Salaire de la peur
Sat 1 Jun 17:40; Tue 11 Jun 20:15; Wed 19 Jun
20:30; Sun 30 Jun 14:40

Cléo from 5 to 7

Cléo de 5 à 7
Sat 1 Jun 20:50; Wed 5 Jun 18:10 (+ intro
programmer Jelena Milosavljevic); Fri 14 Jun 20:50;
Fri 21 Jun 12:10

It Happened One Night

Sun 2 Jun 13:00; Mon 17 Jun 12:10; Tue 25 Jun
20:30

Badlands

Sun 2 Jun 20:45; Mon 10 Jun 12:20; Wed 26 Jun
18:15 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, BFI Programme
and Acquisitions)

Sullivan's Travels

Mon 3 Jun 18:10; Mon 10 Jun 20:50; Fri 14 Jun
14:45; Mon 24 Jun 12:10

North by Northwest

Mon 3 Jun 20:20; Thu 6 Jun 14:30; Tue 18 Jun
14:30

Easy Rider

Tue 4 Jun 12:40; Fri 7 Jun 21:00; Sun 16 Jun 20:35;
Sat 22 Jun 13:20

The Searchers

Tue 4 Jun 20:30; Thu 20 Jun 12:10; Sat 29 Jun
15:20

Where Is the Friend's House?

Khaneh-je Doost
Kojast
Wed 5 Jun 12:45; Sat 8 Jun 15:40; Wed 19 Jun
18:15 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-
Large); Wed 26 Jun 21:00

Alice in the Cities

Alice in den Städten
Sun 9 Jun 20:20; Thu 13 Jun 12:00; Fri 28 Jun
12:20

Gun Crazy

Wed 12 Jun 18:20 (+ intro by Josephine Botting,
BFI National Archive Curator); Mon 24 Jun 20:30;
Thu 27 Jun 12:20

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**,
the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine.
Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK
only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

**SIGHT AND
SOUND**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you
can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on
demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British
and independent titles, films are available to watch
in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free
to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme
updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account
at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

In short, *Gun Crazy* both benefited and suffered from changes in the industrial landscape, as did its director. As Paul Kerr has argued, economic developments in Hollywood such as the break-up of block booking attendant on the Supreme Court anti-trust rulings in 1946-8, and the consequent divestiture of the studios' exhibition arm, boosted the efforts of enterprising independents like the Kings, and were critical factors in shaping the contours of *film noir* and the careers of B-movie directors such as Lewis. A system influx was opening up new directions for creative work, as evidenced by the limited but real advance in resources for a minuscule B-movie such as Columbia's *My Name Is Julia Ross* (1945). A 65-minute thriller with Nina Foch as the put-upon heroine, this modest picture was recognised as a sleeper by studio head Harry Cohn while it was in production, and given more shooting time, a preview and an independent release. It was an advance for director Lewis, whose career so far had consisted of some two dozen quickies at various studios.

But it was *Gun Crazy* that was to provide Lewis's only real breakthrough: a tight, evocative script, the support of independent-minded street-fighter producers, performances by two gifted, offbeat players, censors' interventions on behalf of a pushy Zeitgeist – all coming together with his stylish, inventive direction in a remarkable synergy. The result was a bona-fide American masterpiece, pint-sized though it may be, one of Hollywood's transcendent works, an indispensable portrait of a transitional moment and ethos, a world of small-time characters and big-time aspirations, brought to life in a genuine desert island movie (if the ship is sinking...). Starting in the late 1960s, auteur critics made valiant efforts to attribute the authorship of *Gun Crazy* to Lewis. In vain. A hodgepodge of a filmography absolutely resists reduction to any consistency, and provides vivid evidence of how dependent Lewis always was on collaborators. Although there are a number of interesting films, especially the distinguished, Philip Yordan-scripted, upper-echelon *noir*, *The Big Combo* (1955), as an auteur Lewis is essentially a stylist without a theme, and it is *Gun Crazy* that provides his body of work with its centre of gravity.

But it was not so much auteurism that drew the film into the spotlight in the '60s as the spectacular success of what some thought to be a direct descendant, the Arthur Penn-directed *Bonnie and Clyde*. Perhaps it was the visual link of the beret that both heroines sport, after the most famous photograph of the original Bonnie, but many critics invoked *Gun Crazy*, and in some cases preferred it. Over the years *Gun Crazy* has received a goodly share of attention for its pivotal place in the distinguished company of the fugitive-couple narrative cycle. Where Fritz Lang's depression-era *You Only Live Once* (1937) and Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948) see their subjects as innocent victims, the King Brothers were clearly more interested in the greater commercial potential gained by centring the romantic narrative on rebellious characters who actively choose to be criminals, as is suggested by press stories released during shooting which focused on Cummins as a 'female Dillinger'. And it is of course this radical shift in moral weight that gives the film its hard edge, and thereafter informs *Bonnie and Clyde* and its own offspring, *Badlands*, as well as the latter-day post-modern efforts, *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers*.

Extracted from *Gun Crazy* by Jim Kitses (BFI Film Classics, 1996)

Reproduced by kind permission of Bloomsbury Publishing. ©Jim Kitses