

THE ROAD MOVIE BOOK

Edited by
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London and New York

ON THE RUN AND ON THE ROAD

Fame and the outlaw couple in American cinema

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Outlaws On the Lam (that perennial fave with filmgoers everywhere, closet criminals of every age and gender). . . . Cars, guns, blood, and explosions. Let the camera weave its charm.

(Wright: 100)

The freeway was my show, my arena. It's always been home to me . . . I was born and bred for it. I'm an American. I love the freeway.

(Johnson: 41)

In twentieth-century American popular culture, there are really only two reasons to go on the road: to become famous or to hide. Born too late for the pioneer projects of blazing trails, extending natural frontiers, or just lighting out for the territory, modern Americans hit a road not only already taken, but paved, ramped, mapped, and marked by the commercial sites of mobile mass culture: the motel, the roadside diner, the filling station, and the drive-in movie theater. For those traversing this ground for purposes other than leisurely sight-seeing, the road points towards a promising future or leads away from a dead-end past: the slightest redefinition of perspective shifts the purpose of a road trip from seeking a desired goal into flight from a desperate origin. In fact, despite the strong emphasis given to departures and arrivals, the road trip is largely defined by its extended middle; as Jack Kerouac's terse title affirms, being "on the road," rather than starting or stopping, defines the postwar American experience. As the narrator of Bayard Johnson's road novel *Damned Right* insists: "That's why they're called freeways. It's on stretches like that you can be free in America . . . After all, it's a free country" (9). No matter how many actual lanes a modern superhighway expands into laterally, the American road is always metaphorically a two-way street generating either exploration (the panoramic view ahead through the windshield) or escape (the furtive backward glance in the rear-view mirror),

and, perhaps, the sudden reversibility of destiny and destination promised by the possibility of making a – legal or illegal – u-turn. Every American who knows "there's no place like home" – the mantra of America's most famous road movie – also remembers that "you can't go home again."

This essay attempts to demonstrate that, after the frontier-exploration narratives of conquest produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the cultural oppositions generated by the modern American road are most effectively narrativized in two apparently dissimilar though unusually self-reflexive film forms: the Hollywood musical and the distinct cycle or subgenre of classical and contemporary "road films" centered on the flight of a fugitive pair, or outlaw couple.¹ In fact, this essay's principal claim is that "*outlaw couple*" road films are *inverted musicals*, mirror forms that reflect a number of fundamental structural and thematic concerns despite their superficially opposed moods and styles; at the very least they are the two film forms that most insistently associate liberation with motion, whether automotive or terpsichorean. While I think the musical and outlaw couple road film intersect on a number of formal and thematic levels, I will especially emphasize how the two forms are essentially interrelated through their shared but differently expressed obsession with the cultural construction and maintenance of modern celebrity and fame, or, in their inverted terms, notoriety and infamy. Although both "kinds" of films are most commonly understood as examples of Hollywood genres – the musical and the more loosely defined road film, *film noir*, or crime genres – it might also be revealing to locate the examples discussed in this essay within the broader context of the twentieth century's mass-mediated "culture of celebrity," where personal "star" qualities like charisma and personality potentially lead to public fame and celebrity, a larger frame that might subsume more specific narrative patterns and generic meanings previously associated with these forms.²

Although we don't commonly think of them as "road" films, a significant number of Hollywood musicals, especially those set "backstage" in the entertainment world, or which Rick Altman subcategorizes as "show musicals," are structured whole or in part by taking their "shows" – the show within the show – on the road. Here *The Band Wagon* (1953) might serve as a model: all of the narrative's "problems," whether personal or professional, romantic or commercial, are repaired by "taking the show on the road." In fact, the road is apparently the only cohesive glue binding together what look like wildly discontinuous musical numbers in *The Band Wagon*'s finally successful show; repeated stock shots of trains with superimposed titles introduce and link the otherwise unrelated performances of: "Philadelphia" – Cyd Charisse's balletic "New Sun in the Sky"; "Boston" – Fred Astaire and Jack Buchanan's soft-shoe "I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan"; and "Washington" – Nanette Fabray's folksy "Louisiana Hayride." *The Band Wagon* furthermore usefully highlights the musical's most commonly identified structural

underpinnings: like the American cinema generally according to Raymond Bellour, but perhaps in its most consistent and emphatic elaboration, the musical's motive is to create a heterosexual couple through romantic, musical, and ideological harmony.³ This function of the genre is most fully defined by Altman, who insists that "in the musical *the couple is the plot*" (35). In other words, in the musical "the formation of the couple is linked either causally or through parallelism to success in the ventures which constitute the plot. . . . Time and again, to solve the couple's problems becomes synonymous with, and thus a figure for, a solution of the plot's other enterprises" (108–9).

The couple is of course the plot in "outlaw couple" films as well, but instead of creating or forming a couple, the general pressure of these films is towards finally destroying or "de-forming" the couple. Although many recent films (*The Getaway*, 1972 and 1994; *Wild at Heart*, 1990; *The Living End*, 1992; *True Romance*, 1993; *Natural Born Killers*, 1994; *Love and a .45*, 1994) allow their outlaw couples to live, most classic examples (*You Only Live Once*, 1937; *They Live By Night*, 1949; *Gun Crazy*, 1949) as well as many later films (*A bout de souffle*, 1959; *Pierrot le Fou*, 1965; *Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967; *Thieves Like Us*, 1974; *Badlands*, 1973; *Thelma and Louise*, 1991; *Guncrazy*, 1992; *Kalifornia*, 1993) tear the outlaw couple violently apart. Perhaps the main reason that musicals and outlaw couple road films are not commonly linked is because the ideological goals of each form seem so antithetical. Thomas Schatz's well-known distinction between "genres of indeterminate, civilized space" (including musicals) and "genres of determinate, contested space" (including gangster and detective films), for instance, would apparently oppose musicals, which "tend to celebrate the values of *social integration*," to "outlaw couple" films, which, especially in the classic examples produced under Hollywood's Production Code, "uphold the values of *social order*" (*Hollywood Genres*: 29). Outlaw couple films, however, consistently challenge Schatz's distinctions by dramatizing the typical "musical" or "comic" activity of coupling within the contested spaces and through the social conflicts usually associated with crime stories. But before they end up professionally teamed, married, incarcerated, or dead, the couples in both forms frequently meet one another and develop their relationships in surprising similar ways. The cocky Fred Astaire repeatedly irritates Ginger Rogers into submission – a pattern Gerald Mast calls "Fred's invitation and Ginger's initiation" (150) – until their first "challenge dances" clear the ground for the romantic and thus more conventionally gender-coded waltzes to follow. In *Gun Crazy*, the two main characters, who "go together . . . like guns and ammunition," form as a couple immediately after firing bullets at each other's heads in a carnival shooting competition that, Jim Kitses notes, "quickly develops ritualistic and symbolic dimensions that collapse combat and courtship" (29). Bonnie and Clyde become attached after the braggart Clyde robs a bank to impress Bonnie, and their attachment grows after he teaches her

how to fire a gun so that they can rob banks *together*. (*Annie Get Your Gun*, 1950, is perhaps the only example that directly forms its couple around sharing guns and music, a link condensed by the shooting/singing competition of the duet "Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better.") In short, the appeal of both musicals and outlaw couple films is in large measure fueled by our desire to see two individuals – who often dance, sing, rob, or kill quite effectively on their own – *team up and perform as a couple*; as David Laderman recognizes, although emphasizing male "buddy" pairs, "the road was destined to be traveled by a couple," and in terms consistent with Altman's "dual focus" pattern for the musical, he adds that "most often the road film couple is divided along these lines: one is more wild, the other more straight" (45).

Although it's tempting to contrast musical and outlaw couple films by claiming that the creation of musical couples is basically *romantic*, and the destructive passion of outlaw couples essentially *erotic*, the European Romantic tradition certainly provides the models of *l'amour fou* and *liebestod* still motivating most road films, as Godard recognized when he identified his characters in *Pierrot le Fou* as "the last romantic couple,"⁴ or perhaps when Carlos Clarens called *They Live By Night*'s doomed lovers a "Romeo and Juliet of the sticks" (227). Besides this deep continuity, I might also at least note here that the backstage or show musical and the outlaw couple genres in their dominant American forms emerge out of the same historical context of the American Depression: the 1930s romantic musical star couples – Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald – are all perhaps shadowed by the contemporary notoriety of outlaw couple Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow.⁵ Eric Mottram has suggested that even earlier "film, car, and jazz grew together as a key twentieth century triad," and by the Depression this triad might be more specified: film musicals (the only major sound film genre without silent precedents), getaway cars ("cars as wheels for guns," in Mottram's phrase), and radio (most obviously car radios) all revise and update the technologies of the previous decades, although at least through the 1950s the musical will persistently represent travel through the "public" transportation of the train, which always appears more communal than the "private" automobile. If the trains in musicals often retain their symbolic role, most explicit in the Western, as the vehicle for the expansion of American space, then cars replace the individual cowboy's horse, as their names (Mustang, Pinto) and measurement in "horsepower" often suggest. The train also, in musicals as late as *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), conveniently provides the necessary space for spontaneous musical performances. While the car radio certainly invites singing along, the automobile's restricted space encourages few other musical activities.

As many cultural historians have noted, the role of the motion picture as America's principal leisure activity in the early twentieth century continually

competes with the automobile's similar function "as a release," in the telling phrase of the authors of *Middletown*. (Eventually, of course, the development of the drive-in movie theater would explicitly address this competition between visual and automotive diversions.) By 1929, Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd recognized that "The threat which the automobile presents to some anxious parents is suggested by the fact that of thirty girls brought before the juvenile court in the twelve months preceding September 1, 1924, charged with 'sex crimes,' for whom the place where the offense occurred was given in the records, nineteen were listed as having committed the offense in an automobile." According to a local newspaper "The desire of youth to step on the gas when it has no machine of its own . . . is considered responsible for the theft of the greater part of the (154) automobiles stolen from [Middletown] during the past year" (258). Movies, and especially luxurious musicals set among the fantasy elite, remained popular throughout the Depression because, it is often assumed, they provided an "escape" from everyday misery; it's also worth recalling, as Mottram does, that "Even in the Depression decade, thirty-eight million cars were sold in America, ten million more than in the previous decade" (51).

As a late "non-integrated" musical, in which many songs don't clearly advance the plot or function to convey character feelings, *The Band Wagon* exhibits the structural tension between "narrative" and "number" frequently noted in discussions of musicals, wherein the performances that define the "musical" as such threaten to disrupt the narrative line linking the non-musical scenes together. Although the musical segments are the *raison d'être* for musicals, they commonly delay, detour, or completely derail the narrative's drive toward completion, as in Busby Berkeley's *The Gang's All Here* (1943), in which a thin narrative remains completely unrecovered after the final, typically surreal musical number. We might also recall that some musicals in the genre's history have been structured by a variety or revue format of narratively unrelated musical numbers, abandoning plot in the usual sense altogether: for example, consider *The King of Jazz* (1930), *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), *Invitation to the Dance* (1957), and the "greatest hits" format of the *That's Entertainment!* series (1974, 1976, 1994), which treats musical numbers from narrative films as fully isolatable segments. While rarely canonized among the "great" musicals, such examples nevertheless emphasize the potential escape from linear narrative in the musical's deep structure, and suggest an analogy with the notably loose or episodic plot lines of many recent road films, which may be products, as Michael Atkinson suggests, "of a generation raised on television and the open-ended, road-like format of the weekly serial" (14).

In their tension between narrative and number, or in the alternating pattern between "rhymed" segments Altman emphasizes, musicals bear an uncanny resemblance to many road films, which are also typically structured by a regular pattern of forward motion and more static "set-pieces," or stretches of driving and

regular rest stops. Whereas musical performers on a circuit of one-night stands stop at hotels, boarding houses, and theaters to sing and dance before getting back on the road, outlaw couples on the lam pull into motels, roadside diners, gas stations, and, increasingly, convenience stores, to steal and kill before resuming running for their lives. (*The Harvey Girls*, 1946, is perhaps worth recalling here, given its cross-generic status as a musical Western largely set in a [rail]roadside diner.) Moreover, the spectacle of musical numbers finds its evil twin in the road film's scenes of action and violence. It's now common for critics to describe Astaire and Rogers's intimate dance numbers as sublimated acts of sexual intercourse, as in Jim Collins's claim that "the actions of the dances themselves strongly suggest the sexual nature of the dance," and that a "total freeze in the action" of the "Check to Check" number from *The Gay Divorcee* (1934) "creates a symbolic or metaphoric orgasm" (144); similarly, Robin Wood observes that "Bonnie robs with Clyde as a substitute for intercourse: it is at least *one* exciting thing they can do together" (85), and Carlos Clarens recognizes that, in the shooting-match courtship of *Gun Crazy*, "gunplay substitutes for foreplay" (229). Just as big musical numbers are often preceded by brief rehearsal numbers (Mast: 125), the mayhem of armed robberies is frequently delineated in planning sessions: in *Gun Crazy*, robberies are outlined like stage blocking, and the characters even wear theatrical Western costumes for their crime spree suggesting a community theater production of *Annie Get Your Gun*. In *Thelma and Louise*, Thelma's lines and behavior during a videotaped hold-up are a reenactment of J.D.'s earlier coaching of the scene. Frequently, both musicals and outlaw couple films then proceed by a pattern of *escalation*, building from relatively intimate numbers like a duet or from "small" crimes, to lengthy scenes of mass musical spectacle or action-packed slaughter. As Mast points out, the numbers in Berkeley's films at Warner Bros. "grow as the cycle progresses," ranging from five to eventually eleven choruses which therefore demand a corresponding visual elaboration (128). The thirteen-minute "Broadway Melody" from *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and the seventeen-minute *An American in Paris* (1951) ballet demonstrate the similar tendency for MGM's Freed Unit to build their musical segments into increasingly complex numbers two decades later.

In a nightmarish reversal of this pattern, outlaw couple films like *Gun Crazy* or *Bonnie and Clyde* grow from armed robbery to murder, and from efficient little capers to messy bloodbaths. More recent examples like *Natural Born Killers* and *True Romance* weave their way toward long, bloody shoot-outs (a prison break and a complex drug bust) that yank in all the film's narrative threads. There are of course musicals like *Guys and Dolls* (1955), *West Side Story* (1961), and *The Cotton Club* (1984), or musical numbers like Astaire's *film noir* parody "The Girl Hunt" ballet in *The Band Wagon*, that suggest the musical's own awareness of its affinity with popular crime narratives, and I will later suggest that contemporary outlaw

couple films are often aware of their own ability to mutate into musicals. As Carol Clover (738) has recently pointed out with respect to the Hollywood musical's racial guilt, the police who often oversee and even "arrest" musical numbers like Kelly's "Singin' in the Rain" and both "Pettin' in the Park" and "Remember My Forgotten Man" from *Gold Diggers of 1933* imply that bursting into song or dance might need as much legal supervision as characters recklessly waving guns around.⁶

When the road doesn't provide an overall structure to musicals (like *Show Boat*, in which the road is, as it was for Huck Finn, the river), it is commonly represented through time-collapsing montage sequences that summarize the process of "paying one's dues" before achieving success, or which briefly outline the "rise to fame" of musical stars. Frequently such sequences demonstrate the expansion of "local" celebrity into national or "mass" recognition: in *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939), a long montage sequence detailing the commercial exploitation of products featuring the Castle name or image concludes with a high-angle shot of Astaire and Rogers dancing across North America, summarizing both the Castles' "whirlwind country-wide tour" of "35 cities in 28 days" as well as their commercial saturation of the American marketplace. This is a fantastic elaboration of the nondiegetic road maps commonly featured in outlaw couple films like *They Live By Night*, which clarify spatial shifts in the narrative and often suggest some of the tedium of unrelenting flight. (Graham Greene, reviewing the Bonnie-and-Clyde-influenced *Persons in Hiding*, could note only that "the story opens, as it were, in the middle . . . and after that it's all speeding cars and montage" [210]). An even more elaborate montage sequence from *Lady Be Good* (1941) follows the title song through its composition, transcription, publication, sheet-music sales, recording, record sales, and popular dissemination through a range of regional and ethnic interpretations. This "success montage" not only carries the film's central songwriting-team couple to greater fame, but secures their once-threatened romantic coupling, even as it links the stages of romance to the key commercial processes of the popular music industry. As a final example, consider the temporally and spatially mind-boggling "Born in a Trunk" sequence from *A Star Is Born* (1954), which traces the fictional metamorphosis of Esther Blodgett into Vicki Lester as well as the perhaps even more dramatic "real life" evolution of Frances Gumm into Judy Garland. In addition to these rather complex sequences, many musicals represent the performer's rise to fame with the speed and efficiency characteristic of classic Hollywood film-making generally; a brief segment from *The Jolson Story* (1946) represents the unknown boy singer Asa Yoelson's transformation into the young adult star Al Jolson — equating commercial success with cultural and ethnic assimilation — through a montage of picture postcards home, and a later scene summarizes Jolson's career through the montage-simulating collage of the show biz scrapbook as its pages are flipped

and newspapers from across the country re-create a tour itinerary. All of these examples, like the "road show" version of a Broadway musical or mass media technologies generally, extend the commercial range of a performer, show, or song beyond their limited local, "live" success on Broadway to address and profit from a mass audience. In the more jaded vaudeville tradition commonly reiterated in Hollywood musicals, "overnight success" is a myth: stars "pay their dues," "hone their skills," and "develop a following" through their years on the road.

One common range of terms to designate the achievement of fame by an entertainer revolves around the performer's *name* — not only are "given" names changed into "stage names" for commercial purposes, but the goal of the performer is "making a name for oneself," "seeing one's name in lights," or "getting one's name in the papers." Recalling the summary effect of the montage sequence, the musical can quickly show a performer's name travel from the bottom of a bill up to the position of headliner, or trace a beginning singer's recording up the charts of the national hit parade. Outlaw couple road films, inversely, are haunted by the public use of names. In classical examples like *You Only Live Once*, *Detour* (1945), *They Live By Night*, and *Gun Crazy*, the central couples are terrified of being "named," or identified by their real names. In both *They Live By Night* and *A Star Is Born*, the couples are hesitant about using their names at small-town wedding ceremonies: Bowie and Keechie want to hide the infamy attached to their real names, while Norman Maine and Vicki Lester wish to obscure the fame advertised by their stage names. In *Detour*, Al and Vera rent their squalid "newlywed" apartment as "Mr and Mrs Charles Haskell" (after the car owner-corpse who links them) and, in *You Only Live Once*, Eddie and Jo, just married after his release from prison, are thrown out of their honeymoon room because they sign their real names — which the motel operator has seen along with a mug shot of Eddie in a popular detective magazine. If the alias is the outlaw's inverted version of the musical star's stage name, the mug shot is the publicity photo's anti-glamorous double.⁷ In a well-known example from *You Only Live Once*, three newspaper headlines prepared in anticipation of Eddie's conviction, acquittal, or a hung jury are linked to three different photographs of Henry Fonda: if convicted, a glowering mug shot will accompany the story; if acquitted, a smiling publicity photo will be used (the hung-jury photo is of Fonda with a blank expression).

Once again, the interchangeable and transient "rest stops" in road films such as diners, filling stations, and motels offer anonymity to travelers in general, and especially to those on the run. Cynthia Kadohata's Japanese-American road novel *The Floating World* takes its title from this contradictory effect of life on the road: "We were traveling through what she [the narrator's grandmother] called ukiyo, the floating world. The floating world was the gas station attendants, restaurants, and jobs we depended on, the motel towns floating in the middle of fields and mountains. In old Japan, ukiyo meant the districts full of brothels, teahouses, and



Plates 4.1 and 4.2 Fame and infamy versus the couple's desire for anonymity in *They Live by Night* and *A Star Is Born*.

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public baths, but it also referred to change and the pleasures and loneliness change brings" (2–3). In Pagan Kennedy's road novel *Spinsters*, a character claims "There's nothing lonelier than the highway – after a while, you don't even have yourself anymore," causing the narrator to think: "I knew what she meant. With each motel, each diner, I felt more anonymous, wiped clean" (58). And the end of the road in Marc Behm's obsessive cross-country *roman noir* *The Eye of the Beholder* is announced by these terse lines: "No more motels. No more cars. No more money. No more airports" (149). All of these examples, as well as a folk song tradition running from Woody Guthrie through Hank Williams to Bruce Springsteen, emphasize the commercialized road's undifferentiated and lonely spaces, and might be contrasted to the giddy celebration of "the Functional Motel – clean, neat, safe nooks, ideal places for sleep, argument, reconciliation, insatiable illicit love" – that begins "outlaw couple" Humbert and Lolita's "extensive travels all over the States" in the second half of Nabokov's *Lolita* (145).⁸

But the outlaw couple's anonymity, their desire to be publicly unnamed, is commonly thwarted by the sort of publicity campaigns musical stars can't even buy. Wanted posters, mug shots, police radio descriptions, and especially newspaper reports or television reports in later films, all combine to threaten the outlaw couple with public recognition. Like scandal stories about movie stars, newspaper reports in *They Live By Night* or *Bonnie and Clyde* quickly escalate into descriptions of overlapping crimes in multiple states, building reputations for the criminals that they can't possibly support. Jo's sister in *You Only Live Once* complains that the couple "are being blamed for every crime committed in the country." In *Gun Crazy*, another typical montage sequence juxtaposes generic shots of police cars and roadblocks with newspaper headlines that come closer and closer to *naming* the outlaw couple: the sequence ends with their names being printed on a police Teletype, the crime film's version of the show business press release. Again, the outlaw couple's doom is secured by their achieving exactly what the ambitious musical star most desires: name recognition. (The fact that the female character in the film is named "Starr" perhaps insures her eventual public identification.) The inverted form of Hollywood's list of top box office stars is of course the FBI's "Most Wanted" list, a form of "publicity" that the Bureau in fact resisted until public demand and fascination with "celebrity criminals" forced the informal list to be codified.⁹

However, even early outlaw couple films betray an ambivalence about the ultimate desirability of complete anonymity: in *They Live by Night*, Chickamaw, Bowie's older partner-in-crime, resents the minimal attention the gang's early crimes receive from the local papers, and he's eventually incensed that "Bowie the kid" receives "top billing" (to use the obvious showbiz term) in later newspaper accounts. This is a concern motivated by brief lines in the film's source, Edward

Anderson's 1937 novel *Thieves Like Us*; "Just don't do anything to get your name in the paper. . . . That is the thing," Keechie reminds Bowie after he has told her "Why, Keechie, there's guys that will put on acts and do anything just to get their names big in the newspapers" (257-8). Anderson's "thieves" frequently read newspaper accounts of their exploits, and the novel ends with a newspaper report of the killing of Bowie and Keechie, although Keechie survives in both films adapted from the book. In later films, outlaw couples openly seek and generate publicity. In both *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Natural Born Killers* the criminals take the time to introduce themselves at crime scenes and leave victims "to tell their tale," and in *Kalifornia* the outlaw couple attach themselves to another couple producing a coffee-table photography book on American serial killers, who in effect serve as the outlaw couple's publicity agents. Bonnie and Clyde also produce self-staged "publicity" photographs, and delight in the publication of Bonnie's heroic ballad about the couple in a newspaper, a public memorial ("You made me somebody they're gonna remember," Clyde recognizes) which apparently cures Clyde's "private" problem of impotence.¹⁰ In *Guncrazy*'s electronic update of this moment, the equally impotent Howard Hickok can perform sexually with Anita only after the outlaw couple watch their story on television and thereby become fully aware of their notoriety: "Hell, we're celebrities - people will be asking for our autographs." In *Love and a .45*, a kid *does* ask the outlaw hero for his autograph as they stand in front of a wall of television sets tuned to the fictional Crime Channel's 24-hour coverage of the couple's crime spree.

In self-reflexive modernist and even more allusion-saturated postmodernist outlaw couple films, characters explicitly affiliate themselves with popular celebrities like Humphrey Bogart (*A bout de souffle*), James Dean (*Badlands*), Jerry Lee Lewis (*Breathless*, 1983) and Elvis Presley (both *Wild at Heart* and *True Romance*) as role models or spiritual advisers. In *Boys on the Side* (1995), a slight variation on the form following *Thelma and Louise* and *The Living End*, since it expands the couple to a same-sex, part-queer trio, the characters knowingly link themselves to the already mythic American figures of Thelma and Louise, and Amy tells Watty in *Love and a .45* that "we're movie stars, desperados and outlaws on the road to freedom. I swear to God we remind me of Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty. . . . Thank God we brought the Polaroid." *Natural Born Killers*, despite its wildly inventive style, finally seems an ineffective satire of the now commonplace idea that the modern media make celebrities out of society's monsters. Unlike the less indignant but possibly more revealing models of the form, it never clearly recognizes or admits to its own complicity in the culture of celebrity and the indulgence in violent spectacle that it wishes to attack.¹¹ *Cover Girl* (1944) provides a rather odd, but almost equally sadistic, musical comparison by consistently equating its female character's (Rita Hayworth) desire for fame with disloyalty to the male lead (Gene Kelly) and eventually, given the film's

wartime context, with a disturbing lack of patriotic, democratic values; but like *Natural Born Killers*, and to some degree almost all outlaw couple films, *Cover Girl* can't ever figure out how to make fame, however achieved, completely unattractive or undesirable.

While the obvious point to make about more recent outlaw couple films is that they acknowledge and perhaps satirize a society in which fame and infamy are finally indistinguishable, and in which celebrity culture includes serial killers as well as pop stars - a culture in which even popular sports figures might be murder suspects or professional figure skaters could contract hit men - it might be more interesting to redraw attention to the tendency of recent outlaw couple films to veer back frequently into the explicit style of the musical. It's worth noting that many classic outlaw couple road films contain nightclub musical numbers featuring song lyrics that bluntly comment upon the situations of the couples: Claudia Drake performs "I Can't Believe That You're in Love With Me" in *Detour*, Frances Irvin sings "I'm Mad About You" in *Gun Crazy*, and Marie Bryant provides "Your Red Wagon" in *They Live By Night*. However, the contemporary road film seems especially suited to the now dominant mode of constructing and marketing film soundtracks through a selection of semi-autonomous, nostalgic hits or newly recorded pop songs. In films which contain no explicit musical sequences, perhaps a dozen or more musical "numbers" link as well as sonically replicate the episodic stop-and-start structure of the road trip. Michel Chion briefly refers to this musical structuration in his analysis of *Wild at Heart*, noting that David Lynch "uses a contrasting mosaic of themes from hard rock, classical music, old-fashioned jazz and crooner songs," and adding that "this characteristic musical treatment for a road movie was encouraged by the novel [by Barry Gifford], which was already full of allusions to the car radio and bar music which accompany the protagonists" (134). While I am wary of identifying them as the first soundtracks to be constructed and marketed in this way, the nondiegetic pop songs by Simon and Garfunkel on the hit soundtrack of *The Graduate* (1967) and especially the multiple-artist soundtrack of the influential road film *Easy Rider* (1969) seem to have encouraged this construction for later films; by *Nashville* (1975), a film's opening credits could explicitly introduce the entire narrative film to follow as a kind of pop music compilation album. Modeled perhaps on the autonomous selections picked up by radio reception while driving - the explicit model for the soundtracks of films like *Thieves Like Us* or *American Graffiti* (1973), which have no nondiegetic musical scores - or heard on the radios and jukeboxes in motels (*A Star is Born*) and diners (*Detour*, *Natural Born Killers*) along the way, this dominant technique now allows films that no one would typically identify as "musicals" to nevertheless commonly contain more songs than many "proper" musicals. For example, *Gold Diggers of 1933* contains five songs to *Thelma and Louise*'s seven. The Astaire-Rogers RKO films contain from four to seven songs

each, whereas the soundtracks of most contemporary "non-musical" road films, such as *The Doom Generation* (1995) (twenty-six songs) or *Love and a .45* (twenty-one songs) are constructed out of dozens of whole or, more often, fragmented pop songs.¹²

American Graffiti's construction of its musical soundtrack out of the approximately forty "nostalgic" rock and roll songs heard on the characters' car radios suggests the historical origins of this practice while the film itself paved the way for future organizations of the soundtrack. Although early television's challenge to the motion picture studio system is well known, television's virtually complete appropriation of radio's successful narrative formats, including soap operas, Westerns, sitcoms, and crime dramas, also led to commercial radio's massive reorganization around pop music formats like Top 40 defined in 1955, the year of the teenage cultural milestones *The Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, and, increasingly, the narrowing of most pop music consumption to the postwar youth audience. Whereas radio dramas and comedies encouraged audiences to gather around the home set in rapt attention to unfolding narratives, the restructuring of programming around short, autonomous "singles," played in repeating cycles, seemed immediately ideal for providing "soundtracks" for both quick car trips and long cross-country drives. More than any other previous musical style, rock and roll also incorporated the language and imagery of automobile travel into its lyric content, as the key work of Chuck Berry and The Beach Boys, among many others, easily demonstrates.

Defined, once again, by generation as much as stylistically by "youth music," the popular appeal of rock and roll, with its structural origins (an eight-bar refrain) in African-American blues, also played a significant role in the simultaneous decline of the traditional Hollywood musical, since that genre had largely relied upon and perpetuated the more melodic and less rhythm-based musical form (the thirty-two-bar refrain) defined early in the century by Tin Pan Alley and Broadway composers such as George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin. Road films, which increase in number steadily after the rise of rock and roll, might therefore provide cultural compensation for the general absence of Hollywood film musicals in the same period. Musically saturated, and commercially successful at generating and promoting hit songs and soundtracks, road films may now replace narrativized musical spectacle for contemporary audiences that find the fantastic conventions of the traditional musical genre old-fashioned, undesirably unrealistic, or simply unfamiliar; road films thus participate directly in what Thomas Schatz has identified as "the shift from the traditional Hollywood musical to the 'music movie,' a dominant eighties form, and . . . an obvious precursor to MTV" ("The New Hollywood": 22)

Finally, the road films that center on outlaw couples preserve a romance plot, once the explicit base of Hollywood musicals, as the core structure of American

popular cinema generally, whether dramatized through song and dance or theft and murder. In the middle of Gregg Araki's nihilistic "heterosexual movie" *The Doom Generation*, Jordan tells Amy, "I hope we die simultaneously, like in a fiery car wreck, or a nuclear bomb blast or something." When she responds, "You are so romantic," the line plays like the typical punk irony that characterizes the film, as if her response actually demonstrates how unromantic these contemporary amoral and affectless youth have become. But of course her response is actually more aware of the romantic tradition than she or even the film-maker may know, relocating the couple's desire for unifying oblivion, once available in the transcendent dance or song sequence, into the ever-present possibility of the road film's lethal car crash.

Recent outlaw couple films also frequently shift into fragmentary performances of song and dance, a distinction that often distinguishes "musicals" from otherwise musically saturated films. This genre-crossing occurs quite explicitly in *Pierrot le Fou* when Marianne sings "Jamais je ne t'ai dit que je t'aimerai toujours" ("I never told you that I would love you forever") and later when she and Ferdinand pause in their flight to sing "Ma ligne de chance" ("My luck-line") and dance for an extended scene, or more realistically in *Bonnie and Clyde* when Bonnie's fascination with watching Busby Berkeley's "We're in the Money" from *Gold Diggers of 1933* is continued into the next scene through her own "performance" of the song before a mirror. Godard may be the most influential source (perhaps before Dennis Potter) for such jarring genre-shifting, but outdoor dances in *Badlands* (briefly to Mickey and Sylvia's "Love is Strange" and more elaborately to Nat "King" Cole's "A Blossom Fell"), manic dance scenes along the highway and in a nightclub in *Wild at Heart*, an impromptu transformation of a house trailer into a disco in *Guncrazy*, or a pre-credits murder spree and romantic waltz (as well as Mallory's solitary-confinement dancing and singing of "Born Bad") in *Natural Born Killers* all reinforce the sense that a tell-tale musical heart beats underneath the killing floor of the American crime story.

Despite earlier origins, both rock and roll music and the outlaw couple film achieve their greatest cultural impact in their adolescent phases, in the decade following the Second World War; now that rock and roll music defines the film soundtrack for almost all popular cinema, the teenager's fundamental evaluative judgment of the commercial pop song applies just as well to the contemporary outlaw couple film: it has a good beat and you can dance to it. As a compelling model for representing the road to twentieth-century fame, the Hollywood musical may now only survive with blood on its hands; mutated and inverted into the outlaw couple road film, the musical nonetheless sustains its core ideological belief that the road to fame is best traveled with a partner, someone who can carry a tune, complete a step, take the wheel, or reload a gun when you get tired.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Steve Cohan, Cynthia Erb, Ina Rae Hark, Pamela Robertson, and audiences at the 1995 Society for Cinema Studies Conference and at Wayne State University for helpful advice along the road. Thanks to Caryl Flinn for especially insightful travel tips.

Notes

- 1 The musical has of course been commonly understood as a genre, and most fully defined as such by Altman, but I shall not attempt to clearly define "outlaw couple" films as a genre in this essay. For my purposes, Krutnik's summary is sufficient: "these films are concerned with a heterosexual couple who find themselves branded as criminals, and who are consequently forced into an 'outsider' lifestyle, on the road" (213–14) (although the restriction to "heterosexual" couples now needs serious qualification.) Even the larger categories to which these films are commonly linked or subsumed – the road film (see Atkinson; Corrigan: 137–60; Kinder; and Laderman) and *film noir* (see Krutnik: 213–26; Silver and Brookover; and Silver and Ward: 419–20) – have proven especially resistant to stable definition as genres. Moreover, Corrigan's claim that "as a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women, the road movie self-consciously displays the crisis of gender" (143), or his reference to "the mostly token appearance of women" (148) in these films makes me question whether previous definitions of the road movie help us to understand more than three dozen "outlaw couple" films. Dargis's similar claim that "The road trip is always a male trip and the road movie makes literal the rite of passage that Oedipally-driven narratives demand of their male heroes" seems equally overstated, although she recognizes the consistent presence of women in the films, noting however that "If a woman hops a ride with a man, the journey, perfumed with a female sexuality, breeds danger and violence rather than pleasure" (16).
- 2 General studies of fame, celebrity culture, and "personality" that provide a backdrop for this essay include Braudy; Gamson: 15–39; James; Schickel; and Susman. More specific studies of the Hollywood star system and individual stars are also relevant but now far too numerous to mention here.
- 3 Bellour's (in)famously sweeping claim that "the creation of the couple . . . organizes, indeed constitutes, the classical Hollywood cinema as a whole" (88) is most fully developed and historically grounded by Wexman, in addition to Altman. Dyer's essay on heterosexuality and dance is also illuminating in this regard.
- 4 I justify the inclusion of Godard's *A bout de souffle* and *Pierrot le fou* in this study of "American" films and culture because of their obvious dialogue with the American tradition; Godard's "outlaw couple" films are clearly influenced by, and of course themselves influence, other films in my discussion. A larger segment of Godard's quotation is worth citing here: "I thought about *You Only Live Once*; and instead of the *Lolita* or *La Chienne* kind of couple, I wanted to tell the story of the last romantic couple, the last descendants of *La Nouvelle Heloise*, *Werther* and *Hermann and Dorothea*" (5).
- 5 On the "celebrity" of gangsters like Al Capone and John Dillinger and their symbolic intersections with the early careers of movie stars like James Cagney and Edward G.

- Robinson, see Ruth; and the superficial analysis in Prassel: 264–85. By emphasizing the "resolutely urban" (2) character of the gangster in the period of his study, Ruth points only toward the "outlaw's return to the countryside" (146) – or "the road" – around 1934, after "the media coronation of J. Edgar Hoover and his G-Men as the nation's crime busters" (145). Despite, therefore, an illuminating chapter on gangsters and their "molls," Ruth does not discuss outlaw couples such as Bonnie and Clyde. On Bonnie and Clyde see Treherne; Milner; and Prassel: 297–303. Keyssar, discussing *Thieves Like Us*, makes another point about the impact of the 1930s: "Since its colonial origins, physical mobility, across the land and toward new frontiers, has been uniquely conjoined in American culture with economic 'upward mobility. . . . The mobility of the thirties was of a different order, a fleeing from as much or more than an adventure toward a particular way of life, an attempt to sustain the illusion of economic mobility through the literal movement so aptly emblemized by automobiles and the proliferation of highways to accommodate these machines" (114). On highways and cinema, see the brilliant analysis by Dimendberg.
- 6 According to Clover, "The venue, at least, of the 'Singin' in the Rain' sequence and the figure of the policeman conjure up the 'school of the street' in which black tappers learned their trade in the shadow of the law. . . . If we in the nineties do not know the racial resonances of the trope of the street-dance-interrupted-by-policeman, Kelly and his colleagues surely did" (737–78). This dance-stopping cop has hardly gone unnoticed by the film's critics: in Peter Wollen's description of the same moment, "the cop comes into frame and Kelly stops dead, freezes, and then turns and steps back sheepishly on to the sidewalk. He has not done anything really wrong, but the cop acts as a censor who has caught him in the act, bringing his infantile behavior to an abrupt halt" (27). Jim Collins notes that "the suspicious glance of the policeman who enters at the end of the scene suggests how close the convention [of the musical] comes to a clinical violation of the law and how close Kelly may truly be to Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)" (141). The police presence in *Gold Diggers of 1933* also reinforces Pamela Robertson's reading of the film, which emphasizes the gold digger's links to prostitution; the musical performances of the film's working-class female characters continually imply other questionable professional activities (57–84).
 - 7 On early photography and the development of criminology, see: Tagg; Lalvani; Pultz; and Thomas. On the mug shot as a form of celebrity portrait, recall Marcel Duchamp's 1923 photo-collage self-portrait "Wanted, \$2,000 Reward," and Andy Warhol's 1964 silkscreen series "Thirteen Most Wanted Men," first installed at the New York State Pavilion, New York World's Fair, a series which combined the concerns of his earlier celebrity images (of Troy Donahue, Elvis Presley, Warren Beatty, Natalie Wood, Elizabeth Taylor, Jackie Kennedy, and Marilyn Monroe, among others, from 1962 to 1964), and his death and disaster series (1962–4), all illustrated in McShine. The "novelty" collections which followed the arrests, and tie-ins like mug-shot-photo T-shirts, of O. J. Simpson and Hugh Grant provide more recent examples; see Seminara; and *Famous Mugs*.
 - 8 According to Richard Corliss, Nabokov's *Lolita* is "a road movie in embryo; it is as curious about motel architecture and diner menus as it is about the mismatched man and girl who have sex in those beds and get sick on that food. . . . Most of the book is set in 1947, the year of *Out of the Past*, the year after *Detour*, the year before *They Live By Night*, two years before *Gun Crazy*. Moviegoers, if not readers, were used to the picture of two people, in the front seat of a car, staring ahead, nothing to say, anticipating a crash" (77).

- 9 According to Richard Gid Powers, the Chicago Crime Commission's "most famous contribution to law enforcement lore was the Public Enemies List, begun in April, 1923, with Al Capone holding top billing" (23). A sequence in the 1935 Warner Bros. film *G-Men* "has the movie's FBI director set up a public enemies list to dramatize his attack on gangsters. . . . Throughout the thirties the public believed that there was a public enemies list, although [Attorney General Homer] Cummings and [FBI director J. Edgar] Hoover, sensitive to charges that they were ignoring the vast majority of criminals to concentrate on a few celebrities, steadfastly denied that there was a scoreboard. All '10,000 Public Enemies,' they insisted, were being chased just as hard as Dillinger. The public enemies list does seem to have been a creation of Justice Department reporters, who borrowed the idea from the Chicago Crime Commission's famous list, because not until the fifties did the bureau begin its own 'Most Wanted Fugitive Program.' By showing the FBI director himself with the public enemies list, the film made the FBI conform, not to reality, but to the image created by the extravagant stories of the era's flamboyant crime reporters" (59–60). Hoover's most explicit attempt to challenge the celebrity status of criminals was his 1938 book *Persons in Hiding* (written in fact by crime reporter Courtney Ryley Cooper); a series of four films based on the summarized cases in the book was produced in 1939–40 by Paramount (following MGM's *Crime Does Not Pay* series from 1935 to 1947), although the first film, also entitled *Persons in Hiding*, was based on Bonnie and Clyde, who are not treated in the book. "Nevertheless," according to Carlos Clarens, "this little B-film . . . could not quite suppress the romantic aspect of an outlaw couple meeting by the roadside or hiding out in shabby rented rooms" (135).
- 10 The complete version of Bonnie Parker's "The Story of Bonnie and Clyde" is reprinted in Treherne: 192–4; Milner: 136–8; and Prassel: 342–4. Both of these studies briefly discuss the film versions of the story, reinforcing the common notion that Barrow and Parker are the historical models for most cinematic outlaw couples, at least until Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate's 1958 crime spree. On the 1967 film, which generated a great deal of commentary, see: Cawelti; Clarens: 259–69; Wake and Hayden (which includes the screenplay by David Newman and Robert Benton); and Wood: 72–91. On Starkweather and Fugate, and their cinematic influence, see Sargeant, who provides a brief and sloppy, but perhaps appropriately lurid account that discusses *Badlands*, *Wild at Heart*, *True Romance*, *Kalifornia*, and *Natural Born Killers*, and briefly identifies *Murder in the Heartland* (Robert Markowitz, 1993, made for television), *The Sadists* (a.k.a. *Profile of Terror*) (James Landis, 1963), and *Fingered* (Richard Kern, 1986) as indebted to the case, while noting that films like *Thelma and Louise* and *Heathers* "make oblique references to the Starkweather and Fugate case" without engaging in "the love-on-the-run thematic" (143–4).
- 11 In Tarantino's original screenplay for *Natural Born Killers*, the critique of the media celebration of criminals is explicit, but allusions to Westerns are more frequent than references to the musical (Mickey's final line, delivered in a John Wayne voice quoting *Rio Bravo*, is "Let's make a little music, Colorado": 119); however, in the script Mallory does dance (alone) and, when isolated from Mickey in the first half of the film, will communicate only by singing numerous pop songs like "He's a Rebel," "Leader of the Pack," and "I Only Want to Be With You"; in Stone's film this musical element is largely displaced onto the dense and highly fragmented soundtrack designed by Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails. Other recent parodies of the celebrity of criminals focus almost exclusively on the female killer/star who simply uses or

- deceives male partners: see *Serial Mom* (John Waters, 1994) and *To Die For* (Gus Van Sant, 1995), based on Joyce Maynard's novel.
- 12 The construction of so many contemporary soundtracks out of pre-existing "nostalgia" hits, new pop songs, or, more often, a mix of old and new pop songs, or new remakes of older songs, hasn't been adequately explored by scholars of film sound and music (or of the recent film industry, since the links created by entertainment conglomerates are often at the heart of this construction), especially given the ubiquity of the practice; see, however, the useful essays and especially many of the artists' statements in Romney and Wootton.

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