

VOLUME

FOR ALL THINGS LOUD

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

Two mega stars Mann up in crime drama

by Michael Clawson
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Public Enemies was much better when it was called *Heat*.

Both films are about relentlessly organized bank robbers and their police counterparts. In both there are lovely women who complicate the bank robbers' continued success. Both are long, drawn-out examinations on police and criminal procedure, and both are directed by Michael Mann, one of the most underrated directors in the business.

Similarities aside, though, Mann's new movie is hardly self-plagiarism — *Public Enemies* moves to its own rhythm — even if it is awfully similar to 1995's *Heat*, a movie that used atmosphere and mood to evoke a bank robber's unceasing paranoia of capture, or just loneliness. Maybe Mann (*Miami Vice*, *The Insider*, *Ali*) was channeling John Dillinger while directing *Heat*, and now here he is telling Dillinger's story in a film he couldn't have foreseen 14 years ago. Or maybe he just repeated himself in a new time period. I can't speculate further without infringing on a talented moviemaker's catalog of crime capers.

John Dillinger, "public enemy No. 1" as J. Edgar Hoover called him, was a criminal of principle who outshined his contemporaries and brought the entire federal government crashing down on him. Here he's played uncannily by Johnny Depp, who gives him more humanity than a criminal and murderer deserves, but it is that humanity that gives Mann's movies their unique edge.

The film follows Dillinger's rise in the 1930s from ex-con to the folk hero of crime lore, betrayed and gunned down on the sidewalk outside Chicago's Biograph Theater, where his last moments alive were spent watching Clark Gable in *Manhattan Melodrama*. Yes, that's the destination of *Public Enemies*, but it's not the route.

In scenes of daring bank robberies, armed shoot-outs with Thompsons clucking away and high-speed chases in Model A Fords, Dillinger is shown as a loyal alpha male slugging men for their rude behavior, demanding love from his latest flame (Marion Cotillard) and forcing the mobs' hand when he brings a reconstituted FBI and its crimestopping G-Men sweeping through the Midwest looking for trophies for Hoover's mantle. Dillinger may have been a brute, but Depp plays him as a lover and a fighter, and a man deeply focused on beating the system. Of course, he's wealthy beyond his imagination, but it's not satisfying because money alone isn't proof of victory.

The film shares with us Dillinger's biggest flaw: his friends. "Baby Face" Nelson, "Pretty Boy" Floyd and Capone associate Frank Nitti, these were the men that would eventually contribute to his ultimate demise, if not directly than from the heat brought in from Washington, D.C. where the FBI had a third of its operating budget designated for Dillinger's capture or death. Also, Dillinger never stopped robbing people, which couldn't have helped his wanted status.

Investigating the crimes is FBI agent Melvin Purvis (Christian Bale), who was later erased from bureau history by a vendetta-prone Hoover, that weasel. Bale, whose single-note performance grows very thin here, never seems Depp's equal and the FBI scenes droop because of it. For once I would have preferred that Mann stuck exclusively with the criminals rather than getting both sides of the story. One actor, Stephen Lang, plays an older FBI agent who has the best, and last line, in the movie in a jailhouse interview with Dillinger's girlfriend. After Lang's big scene ended I was picturing him in the Purvis role and admiring the potential improvements. For once, Bale was all wrong here.

Exactly how accurate the events from the movie are — the prison break, the dust-up at the Little Bohemia Lodge, the set-up at the Biograph — I will let you discover with a Google search. A caution, though: The film is not the history of the facts, but a scenario of Dillinger's potential emotions so don't take too much stock in Mann's revisionist Dillinger history.

Overall, this is not one of Mann's strongest films. It's a well-made picture, with wonderful costumes and cars, and with all of Mann's trademarks — an inconspicuous near-ambient score, terrifying weapon effects that seem too real to be just effects, and beautiful night photography — but it's missing the forward momentum of some of his past works. And despite the big names in the cast list, *Public Enemies* drags itself to a point we all know is coming outside the Biograph. The route, in this case, wasn't worth the trip.

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Public Enemies



Starring Johnny Depp, Christian Bale, Marion Cotillard, Billy Crudup, John Ortiz, Stephen Graham and Stephen Lang. Directed by Michael Mann. From Universal Pictures. Official Web site: www.publicenemies.net. Rated R for gangster violence and some language. Opens tomorrow.

POP IS DEAD

No punch lines here.

Michael Jackson has finally escaped them. Although, the King of Pop was so sheltered and secluded the last two decades of his life that I doubt many punch lines ever made it to those ears. He was our joke, and he was never in on the laughs — the plastic surgery wisecracks, his creepy fondness for children, his effeminate whisper. In his mind, the world sung his praises.

Wasn't that part of his appeal, though: That his child-like innocence somehow afforded him the luxury of being wistfully unaware of the negativity directed toward him? His fans adored him because he refused to care about what people said, the jokes they made and the rancor they flung from their perches hovering over his public life. To them, and Michael Jackson himself, he was a victim of the world's collective hatred of the free spirit.

Talking to people since Jackson's passing last week, it's remarkable how the population is so polarized on the subject. There are those who regard the man as a musical genius, a showman in his purest form, an immortal entertainer. Then there are those who see nothing but the train wreck that was the last half of his life — the dangling baby on the balcony, the disintegrating lips and nose, the pajamas in the courtroom. They kinda shake their heads as if to say, "It's sad what he became."

Nevermind that Michael Jackson has outsold pretty much everyone in the music business, branded himself better than most Fortune 500 companies and had written his name in the stars with his electrifying music. All that is secondary to the weirdness. We can thank TMZ and all the other celebrity stalker sites for that. Aside from his molestation trial — acquitted on all charges — nearly every headline about Jackson of the last decade was unnecessary tabloid filler. The kind that usually translated to, "Look! Freak show here!"

This isn't a call for mourning or some kind of plea for respect. It's not a Jackson obituary either — read the *New York Times*; it's a fitting tribute to everything he was, faults and all. This is just a tiny comment on the Jacko punch lines, which now seem so meaningless and cruel. And for once they've stopped, this time just a little too late.

— Michael Clawson

