

INTRODUCTION

Walk into any bar where guys hang out and it's a good bet they are discussing one of three topics: sports, women or movies. It's also a good bet that most of those guys can speak with knowledge and intelligence about two of those topics.

This is a book about one of them—movies. More specifically, gangster movies.

Here's a little test. Ask any guy you know between the ages of 21 and 65 to complete the following movie quotes:

“Leave the gun, take ____.”

“Say hello to my ____.”

“Now youse can't ____.”

“I coulda had class. I coulda ____.”

These lines are part of the American lexicon, part of pop culture, part of every guy's experience interacting with other guys.

Indeed, gangster movies have influenced the culture since Hollywood first turned on the lights. Six decades before Joe Pesci's unhinged bantam tough guy terrorized the world in *GoodFellas*, Edward G. Robinson did exactly the same in *Little Caesar*.

The bad guy is always mesmerizing. We all want to believe we're rebels underneath our law-abiding skins. And so when we sit in a dark theater rooting for the gangster, we get the vicarious thrill of striking out at authority without, well, actually breaking the rules ourselves.

In some ways, the gangster represents the American dream come to life—he gets the money, he gets the power, he gets the women. This country was built on guts, vision, bloodshed and a good deal of criminality. It is no coincidence that each of those elements contributes to a solid gangster film.

Gangster movies are also the urban version of Westerns, that great early genre of film. As Americans moved from farms and small towns into the cities, Tom Mix became Tom Powers and, later, Tommy DeVito. The James Gang became the John

Dillinger Gang and, later, the Corleones.

Even the real gangsters have always loved these movies. Dillinger was gunned down by lawmen in 1934 while leaving a theater showing *Manhattan Melodrama*, a film featuring Clark Gable as a racketeer. Decades later, infamous Gambino crime family hit man Sammy “The Bull” Gravano quoted lines from *The Godfather* to his allies and enemies.

There is also a *Godfather* connection to Joey Merlino, a young wiseguy long suspected of the attempted murder of fellow mobster Nicky Scarfo Jr. in an Italian restaurant on Halloween night in 1989. A gunman wearing a mask and carrying a trick-or-treat bag walked up to Scarfo's table in a South Philadelphia eatery and opened fire. Scarfo survived the hit, but that's not the point.

Merlino, according to law enforcement and underworld sources, deliberately dropped his gun as he walked out of the restaurant. The reason? He knew Scarfo's father, jailed mob boss Nicodemo “Little Nicky” Scarfo, was a big fan of *The Godfather* and especially liked the scene where Al Pacino blows away a mob rival and a corrupt cop in a Brooklyn restaurant. In that scene, Pacino drops his gun as he walks away.

In a case of art honoring art, the great HBO series *The Sopranos* often nodded to the mob films, including when Silvio Dante imitated Michael Corleone in *The Godfather: Part III* or when Christopher Moltisanti spouted another of his always-errant movie quotations, such as:

Christopher: “Louis Brasi sleeps with the fishes.”

Big Pussy: “Luca Brasi. Luca.”

Christopher: “Whatever.”

Getting those lines correct is important. As part of our analysis in this book, we highlight both the quotes that “made” the gangster movies, as well as those that have made it into our national consciousness. We've transcribed these quotes

directly while watching the films. In these days of fast-and-loose information dispersal via the Internet, you never know if a film quote referenced in informal discussion is accurate.

This book is designed to identify and discuss what we consider the Top 100 gangster movies ever made. It is not a book geared toward critics or film students; neither of this book's authors went to film school. Rather, it's a book for guys (and gals) who love the genre, who know what they call a Quarter Pounder in France, who would agree that while Pacino certainly earned the Oscar he won for *Scent of a Woman*, he probably deserved seven more for the roles he played in movies featured on our Top 100 list.

You may not agree with our choices. In fact, we would be disappointed if you had no quibble with our rankings or omissions. The point of a book like this is to spark debate. De Niro or Pacino? Coppola or Scorsese? *A Bronx Tale* or *Gangs of New York* or, for that matter, *King of New York*?

One of the biggest issues we dealt with was how to define a gangster movie, which is not as easy as defining a sports movie or a romantic comedy. To that end, we came up with this: a gangster movie is a film featuring an ongoing illegal enterprise conducted by a group of criminals; a movie in which the bad guys—not the police—are the central characters.

Under that litmus test, excellent films such as *L.A. Confidential* and *Bullitt* don't make the cut. Some entertaining caper films like *Ocean's Eleven* and *The Sting* also fail to meet our criteria due to their lack of an “ongoing” criminal enterprise.

Bottom line: Your definition may be different than ours. And sometimes we make exceptions to our own rule, such as our inclusion of *The French Connection*. We'll suggest that our label of “gangster film” mostly follows U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's inarguable characterization of pornography: “I know it when I see it.”

In selecting our Top 100 gangster films, we considered both artistic merit and historical value. We looked for movies that had a powerful script, three-dimensional characters, memorable scenes and a good bit of action and violence. Because a

movie where no one fires a gun is not much of a gangster movie.

Gangster movies can make you laugh (*Get Shorty*, *Snatch*). They can shock you with their brutality (*Scarface*, *Reservoir Dogs*). They can even make you cry (check out our 69th-ranked movie, the underappreciated *Let Him Have It*).

They often show a slice of history. *Gangs of New York* portrays the rise of street gangs in the Five Points area in the 19th century. *Kill the Irishman* accurately recounts the Cleveland mob wars of the 1970s, down to every last car bomb.

And they are sometimes just nonsense. Nobody's going to argue that Billy Crystal's attempt to pass himself off as a mob boss (“Benny the Groin, Sammy the Schnozz”) in *Analyze This* bears any resemblance to reality. Still, it is damned entertaining.

Gangster movies date back to the onset of cinema. The first box-office success was 1912's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*—D.W. Griffith's Dickensian look at the American immigrant experience, set in the squalor of Manhattan's Lower East Side.

The genre really gained traction two decades later because of changes in America. The Volstead Act, which mandated a prohibition of alcohol sales from 1920-33, didn't stop Americans from drinking so much as it led to bootlegging and the growth of organized crime. Mobsters like Al Capone and Lucky Luciano became celebrities, their stories luridly told by newspapers—and then by the cinema.

“Until Prohibition, mobsters were thugs who would hit you over the head and steal your money,” said Nicholas Pileggi, the author of *GoodFellas* and *Casino*. “Now they had opportunity. That's really how the genre started.”

At the end of the 1920s, the nation was struck by the Great Depression. Americans were perplexed by an economic system that failed them. This helped make folk heroes out of outlaws like

John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde who robbed banks and shot their way to fame and fortune.

The executives at Warner Brothers—the major Hollywood studio that also owned movie theaters in America’s big cities—wanted to provide the nation’s urban immigrants with fare they liked. And so, starting in 1931, the studio created three landmark gangster films—*Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface*.

Police chiefs and censorship boards were appalled. But filmgoers were delighted, and often sympathetic to the bad guy—typically a young man trying to make his way in a country that didn’t exactly embrace him.

Looking at the films now, they may seem a bit dated in everything from their dialogue to special effects. But if you can suspend your critical eye just a bit, they are still extremely entertaining.

Plus, they created a new art form. Calling *The Public Enemy* one of 15 films that “had a profound effect on me,” Martin Scorsese wrote in 2010: “The shocking, blunt brutality; the energy of Cagney in his first starring role; the striking use of popular music (the song ‘I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles’)—this picture led the way for all of us.”

Looking at the black-and-white classics of the 1930s and 1940s, you can still see the charisma of their stars—James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson and Humphrey Bogart. They were on-screen tough guys, sure, and were always headed for a fall at the movie’s end. But they also allowed audiences to escape into the fantasy that somehow it would be fun to be a gangster. Their great work endures.

As America continued to change, so did its gangster films. After World War II, the old “ripped from the headlines” format seemed passé. Gangsters began to be portrayed less as gun-crazed killers than as businessmen running corrupt empires. You’ll find some of those movies here, like *On the Waterfront* and *Underworld, U.S.A.*

You’ll also find those that came out of a form called film noir, dark potboilers often taken from pulp fiction paperbacks of the era. The best of them, like *The Asphalt Jungle* and *The Killers*, tend to feature a disillusioned non-hero trying to sur-

vive in a world beset by greed and corruption.

The genre lagged for a while, until 1967’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, starring Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway, brought it back, more brutal and sexy than ever. That film reinvented the movie gangster as antihero and spawned a series of boy-girl “on the run” films that continued all the way through *True Romance*. Its graphic, slow-motion finale set a new standard for movie violence.

Of course, it was Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* that created the modern gangster film in 1972. An epic, a family saga, a period piece, a Shakespearean tragedy, *The Godfather* got everything right. It showed organized crime—the Mafia—from the inside in a way approached by no film before it. Its script, with all those memorable lines, may be the most-quoted in history.

Two years later, *The Godfather: Part II* came close to equaling the original’s brilliance. Sixteen years after that, *The Godfather: Part III* fell way short. You will still find it in this book, but you’ll locate it quicker if you start thumbing from the back.

Since Coppola, three great directors have dominated the gangster genre. Brian De Palma created *Scarface*, *The Untouchables* and *Carlito’s Way*, three very different looks at the subject.

Martin Scorsese, arguably the genre’s greatest talent, created five movies that appear among our first 22, from 1973’s *Mean Streets* to 2006’s *The Departed*. The five masterpieces have much in common—deep, talented casts (including Robert De Niro in three of them), shocking violence (consider the baseball bat scene in *Casino*) and dense, evocative soundtracks (like the use of Derek and the Dominos’ “Layla” during the mass killing scene in *GoodFellas*).

In the 1990s, Quentin Tarantino entered the scene as a writer and director. His version of organized crime features dark humor, stylized violence and nonlinear plotlines. His mobsters, like Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield in *Pulp Fiction*, are seemingly regular guys who converse about fast food and foot rubs before blowing off the head of someone who did their boss wrong. Tarantino’s brilliance is in making you sympa-

thetic to the hit men, right up to the moment that they commit a heinous act.

Tarantino sparked a line of imitators, some talented, others not. One we like is Britain’s Guy Ritchie, whose 1998 effort, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, is up to Tarantino’s standards. You’ll also find Ritchie’s follow-up film, *Snatch*, on our list.

Indeed, Great Britain is represented by seven films in our Top 100. There are four from France (starting with the great 1955 caper film *Rififi*), two each from Italy, Japan and Hong Kong, and one each from six other countries.

“I think people around the world are fascinated with gangsters,” said British actor Tim Roth, who makes our book for his work in three films. (And don’t miss our interview with Roth on page 82.) “Every country has got its version of the mob, right? And it doesn’t matter where you’re from. If you can slip into that dangerous underworld for two hours, have a few thrills and a box of popcorn, and then go home safe. . . . Well, that form of entertainment is never going to become passé.”

There is a vast reservoir of movie information—some of it accurate, some of it not so accurate—in today’s world of the Internet. We took advantage of some of the best websites, including the Internet Movie Database (www.IMDb.com), during our research. We also found articles and reviews—some decades old—that were helpful in giving context to films and adding background on actors and directors.

There is even a site (moviebodycounts.com) that offers “body counts” in action movies. And while we’re on that topic, please note we tried our best to be accurate, but when bullets are flying and bodies are dropping, an exact count is sometimes impossible to come up with. Add to that the reality that not everyone who falls down after being shot dies and you see the problem. If you want to quibble with us about the number of kills in a given movie, well, go ahead.

Finally, a word about our take on foreign-language films. These were perhaps the most difficult to rank, in part because their stories take place in different cultures, but also because subtitles take

something away from a movie. Consider this: how do you think the classic explanation for the meaning of the term “fuhgedaboutit” in *Donnie Brasco* would play with French or Japanese or German subtitles? So, when we’re viewing a foreign film, we assume there’s always a bit lost in translation.