



JANUS FILMS PRESENTS



DETOUR

As he hitchhikes his way from New York to Los Angeles, a down-on-his-luck nightclub pianist (Tom Neal) finds himself with a dead body on his hands and nowhere to run—a waking nightmare that goes from bad to worse when he picks up the most vicious femme fatale in cinema history, Ann Savage’s snarling, monstrously conniving drifter, Vera. Working with no-name stars on a bargain-basement budget, B-movie auteur Edgar G. Ulmer turned threadbare production values and seedy, low-rent atmosphere into indelible pulp poetry. Long available only in substandard public-domain prints, *Detour* haunts anew in its first major restoration.

NEW 4K RESTORATION

Detour was restored by the Academy Film Archive and The Film Foundation in collaboration with the Cinémathèque royale de Belgique, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Cinémathèque Française. Restoration funding was provided by the George Lucas Family Foundation.

United States | 1945 | 69 minutes | Black & White | Monaural | 4K DCP | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

Booking Inquiries: Janus Films
booking@janusfilms.com • 212-756-8761

Press Contact: Courtney Ott
courtney@cineticmedia.com • 646-230-6847

EDGAR G. ULMER

By Noah Isenberg

Edgar Georg Ulmer was born on September 17, 1904, in the Moravian capital of Olomouc (or Olmütz), then still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and today part of the Czech Republic. The eldest of four children, he was raised in Vienna, the native city of his mother, Henriette, an opera singer, and the adopted city of his father, Siegfried, a Moravian-born wine merchant. The Ulmer family lived in Vienna's Second District, the Leopoldstadt, known for its high concentration of Jews, both secular (like the Ulmers) and Orthodox, mainly from the eastern provinces. After completing high school, Edgar began a course of study in architecture. Like many aspiring cineastes of his generation, he found his way to theater impresario Max Reinhardt, under whom he studied drama and set design,

eventually putting those skills to use on a number of acclaimed silent features—mostly in an uncredited capacity—from the early Weimar period.

In April 1924, Ulmer crossed the Atlantic for the first time to assist Reinhardt in staging the American production of *The Miracle* at New York's Century Theatre. He quickly traveled onward to Hollywood, where he worked in the art department at Universal, assisted on a number of two-reel westerns, and worked as assistant art director on *Sunrise* (1927), F. W. Murnau's stunning American debut at Fox. Ulmer returned to Berlin at the end of the 1920s, and, in the summer of 1929, he codirected with Robert Siodmak the late Weimar silent classic *People on Sunday* (1930). He and Siodmak made that low-budget picture

in collaboration with a group of young Hollywood-bound talents that included Billy Wilder, Fred Zinnemann, Curt Siodmak, and Eugen Schüfftan.

Although Ulmer enjoyed a promising start as a director at Universal, making *The Black Cat* (1934) as his first major feature, he promptly fell out of favor with studio boss Carl Laemmle, and spent most of his thirty-five-year directorial career working on the margins of Hollywood, in offbeat markets (B movies, underground cinema, European independents) and eclectic genres (race pictures, health shorts, horror, science fiction). Arguably his best-known film, *Detour* was made at the apex of his dizzying eleven-film, four-year stint at Producers Releasing Corporation (PRC) in the 1940s.

THE MAKING OF *DETOUR*

By Noah Isenberg

ORIGINS

The story of *Detour* has its origins in a slender pulp novel of the same name, written by Martin Goldsmith and published in 1939. Soon after the novel appeared, a reviewer in the *New York Times* hailed it as “a red-hot, fast-stepping little number.”

In October 1944, PRC's head of production, Leon Fromkess, paid Goldsmith \$15,000 for the rights to his book. Soon after the deal was settled, an industry rumor circulated that actor John Garfield had read the novel and urged Warner Bros. to acquire the rights for him to play the male lead (Ann Sheridan and Ida Lupino were reportedly considered for the two female leads).

That plan never gained traction, however, and Fromkess retained the property for PRC, hiring Goldsmith to adapt his own novel. Untested as a screenwriter, Goldsmith prepared a sprawling draft—a script that would have necessitated shooting a film more than twice the length of what PRC would ultimately allow—that was then heavily pruned by associate producer Martin Mooney and Ulmer himself, who later in life dismissed Goldsmith's novel as “a very bad book.”

PRODUCTION

With an official production budget of less than \$88,000 (after retakes and other added costs, the bottom line was just over \$117,000), *Detour* was, like other films that Ulmer made at PRC, an exercise in austerity. Ulmer famously claimed—and several actors and crew members corroborated—a mere six-day shoot, though



cinematographer Benjamin Kline claimed a total of fourteen camera days, with a start date of June 14, 1945, and an end date of June 29 on the official production budget.

Filming was largely confined to PRC's soundstages and studio lot on Santa Monica Boulevard, with the filmmakers making ample use of such cost-saving measures as smoke pots, repurposed sets, stock footage, and abundant rear projection, with minimal location shooting.

Earlier the same year, Ulmer had worked with actor Tom Neal—whom he selected to play Al Roberts, the antihero of *Detour*—on *Club Havana* (1945); Neal was guaranteed two weeks at a rate of \$1,250 per week. While still shooting *Club Havana*, Ulmer had Ann Savage, who had already played opposite Neal in several B movies made at Columbia, come in and test for the part of Vera, the acid-tongued hitchhiker, which she promptly got. She was guaranteed three weeks at a rate of \$700 per week.

Owing to the exceptionally tight budget, Ulmer and his crew made use of a number of corner-cutting techniques—technical cheats, work-arounds, creative solutions to keep things in the black—impacting everything from the score to the wardrobe to the release print of the picture. Composer Leo Erdody, a frequent collaborator of Ulmer's while he was at PRC, had initially hoped to use Duke Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady" on the score he prepared (and it is listed on the original ledger), but by substituting it with the Tin Pan Alley number "I Can't Believe That You're in Love with Me," he and Ulmer could shave \$2,000 off the bottom line.

Likewise, when Vera is first introduced in the film, shown hitchhiking in front of a desert gas station, Ulmer felt the need to underscore the transgressive nature of a woman hitching, so he had the costume designer employ a trick that wouldn't require any new expenses: tightening Ann Savage's sweater with a chain of safety pins running all the way up her back, still visible in the finished film as she gets into Al's car, her backside fleetingly exposed.

He also had the hair and makeup artists streak Savage's hair with dollops of cold cream and dirt, to give her the grimy appearance that Al comments on in his voice-over narration, and rehearsed Savage's lines with her, urging her to spit them out with as much speed and ferocity as possible, to the point that her voice got appropriately hoarse.

The film is rife with other notable imperfections, including continuity flaws like the inverted negative of Al hitchhiking in the Mojave Desert—seen for nearly twenty seconds using his left hand and with the cars driving on the left side of the road—which was simply kept, uncorrected, in the release print.

RECEPTION AND LEGACY

In the run-up to its debut, *Detour* garnered a considerable amount of press in the industry trade papers. The *Hollywood Reporter* pronounced it "an excellent picture" and "the best film PRC has ever produced," asserting further that the overall "achievement is unmistakably attributable to Ulmer." Although less effusive, the review in *Variety* had kind words for Ulmer, who, the critic insisted, "manages to keep

the show smartly paced." In addition, an unnamed critic from the *Los Angeles Times* offered the kind of praise most B movies could only have dreamed of: "One of the most poignant and disturbing stories to reach the screen in any year is this one."

In the many decades since its release, *Detour* has accumulated more than its share of champions among critics, fans, and filmmakers. In his highly influential 1968 publication *The American Cinema*, Andrew Sarris dubbed it "a poetic conceit from Poverty Row," and by 1992 the film had made its way into the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress, the first B movie ever to earn the distinction. Six years later, Roger Ebert hailed *Detour* as "an embodiment of the guilty soul of film noir."

For Ulmer, it was by far his best-known film, one that he even had hoped to remake late in his life. In 1968, two years after Peter Bart had published a profile of the director ("How to Be a Loner in Hollywood") in the *New York Times*, Ulmer wrote a new script called *The Loser*, which took the plotlines of *Detour* and set them against the backdrop of the late-sixties counterculture in San Francisco. The screenplay, though, was never made.

In 1992, film collector and producer Wade Williams undertook a remake of his own, casting Tom Neal Jr. in the role his father had once played (and even repurposing the same car used in Ulmer's film), but hewing more closely to the spirit of Goldsmith's source novel by giving the character of Sue her own voice-over narration.



2018 RESTORATION

By Michael Pogorzelski, restoration cosupervisor and director of the Academy Film Archive

Edgar G. Ulmer's daughter, Arianne Ulmer Cipes, has worked tirelessly her entire life to ensure that her father's films are preserved and available. In 2002, she brought her impressive collection of film elements and video masters to the Academy Film Archive and asked if we could help make a proper restoration of *Detour* a reality.

That would mean finding elements of higher quality than the ones in circulation in the various public-domain editions. There was a 35 mm duplicate negative in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, but a lot of frames and jump cuts were missing from it. Academy Film Archive preservationist Heather Linville spent ten years (on and off) searching the world for 35 mm elements that were comparable to or of higher quality than the MoMA element.

In 2017, we reached out to the Cinémathèque royale de Belgique in Brussels, which was widely known to hold a 35 mm nitrate print of *Detour* in its collection. This element had never been considered as a possible preservation source because it contained both Flemish and French subtitles burned into the frame. We asked to have a scan made thinking that perhaps we might get lucky and find some shots that didn't contain subtitles that could fill in the frames that were missing from the MoMA element. Instead of a few frames here and there, we got one of the best surprises of our careers: the print had been struck from the original camera negative of *Detour*, and the image quality was better than anything we had seen in ten years of searching.

We now had blessings from Brussels to utilize the 4K scans they had made from the print, and funding from The Film Foundation, and the challenge of the restoration became removing the subtitles in a way that didn't affect the amazing image quality of the print. Roundabout Entertainment in Burbank, California, employed two methods of digitally removing the subtitles. One method was compositing the subtitled frames with frames from the MoMA negative. However, there were several shots from which the MoMA negative was missing frames. In shots that contained either camera movement or significant movement within the frame, the compositing results were not satisfactory. In those instances, the solution was to meticulously digitally paint out the subtitles by hand, being sure to leave no trace or digital artifact of the intervention.

There was also the issue of one shot that did not exist in either element but, fortunately, *did* exist in a 35 mm safety print in the Cinémathèque Française. Our colleagues in France agreed to scan this one shot and contribute it to the restoration effort.

This is the best that *Detour* has looked or sounded for generations. The restoration reveals that, despite the severe restrictions of time and budget, Edgar G. Ulmer and his collaborators were able to craft one of the best and purest film noirs of all time.

