

# Review #91 : *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956)

James Stewart and Doris Day

## TRAILER

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXCGf\\_8NHLU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXCGf_8NHLU)

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Alfred Hitchcock's thriller begins in **Marrakech, Morocco**, and concludes in London with a climactic scene in **Royal Albert Hall** with Bernard Hermann conducting his cantata, *The Storm Clouds*, with the London Symphony Orchestra.



## SYNOPSIS

While on vacation in Morocco, Dr Ben McKenna (**James Stewart**), his wife, the former musical actress Jo Conway (**Doris Day**), and their young son Hank accidentally meet **Louis Bernard** on a bus and further their relationship at their hotel. The mysterious Frenchman initially mistook them for another couple, the Draytons, who had made acquaintance in a restaurant with Dr. and Mrs. McKenna and had invited them as company to the market the following day.

In the market, **Louis Bernard is stabbed to death**, collapses near Dr McKenna and whispers a message in the doctor's ear before expiring. The Draytons offer to take Hank back to the hotel while the McKennas go to the police station to answer questions about the incident. At the police station, Dr McKenna receives a telephone call warning him not to divulge anything about the message if he wants to see his son again.

Back at the hotel, the McKennas discover that **the Draytons have checked out**, taking Hank away with them. Despite warnings from Scotland Yard, Ben follows up on the one clue in his possession : **Ambrose Chappell**, which Ben has written down from what Bernard told him. At London airport they are met by the British police and taken for an interview with the inspector of Scotland Yard ; he informs the McKennas that **Bernard was a French spy**. Ben and Jo refuse to cooperate for fear of what may happen to Hank if they reveal the message to the authorities.

Assuming Chappell is the name of a man, Ben finds his address in a telephone directory. What follows is an almost comic interlude which ends in a melee, with Ben barely escaping before the police arrive, while Jo, who has figured out the clue, proceeds to the destination.



The final scene shows Jo at the Concert Hall as she stands helpless to prevent what she knows is about to happen. From here the story turns more implausible, especially with Jo singing '*Que Sera, Sera*' in a foreign embassy while Ben goes to find Hank.



## REVIEW

Alfred Hitchcock's 1956 remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* is one of the most fascinating remakes in cinema history. After all, it's not very often that a great director will remake his own film. Despite the remake's larger budget, bigger stars and greater popularity, many cinephiles still insist that the director's chilly 1934 version remains the superior take on the tale. Each version has its virtues, but it's hard to disagree with the notion that this version is simply more satisfying. It used to be one of my favourite Hitchcock films. It's a thriller loaded with generous doses of **tension and wit** : on the whole, a fine and lively entertainment, with enough mystery and suspense, and that occasionally approaches greatness.

**James Stewart** tops his job here as the man who knows too much, and **Doris Day** is very effective as the mother who is frantic about her child. She also has a beautiful sequence in which she signals to the boy with a song. Bernard Miles and Brenda de Banzie are properly creepy as the British couple who snatch the boy.

The **Albert Hall sequence**, the longest in the film — with 12 minutes and 124 shots — intercuts wordlessly Jo, the assassin whom she's spotted, the visiting head of State, sitting in a highly visible and vulnerable box, the oblivious audience, and, of course, Bernard Hermann and the orchestra performing the concerto — the bullet will be fired at a precise point during the performance, a point signalled in an earlier scene inside the kidnapper's lair.

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The sequence builds strongly, returning repeatedly to Jo, as she **struggles between saving the head of state and saving her son.**



Hitchcock, however, doesn't end the film there. Taking advantage of his female star's singing talents, he sets up a **second climax** inside a foreign embassy in London, with Jo giving an impromptu singing performance. Jo's voice serves as a **homing beacon calling out to her son**, hidden somewhere on the embassy grounds. Ben is, of course, present, taking the active role of searching for their son, but it's Jo's singular talents that provide the opportunity for the search in the first place.

On a thematic level, the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* is a much Americanized version well versed in the **patriarchal conservatism of the Eisenhower decade**. Ben is the perfect example of the 1950s-era male : financially and socially successful, possessive of his beautiful wife (who even gave up a successful singing career in exchange for domesticity), he often trusts his own judgment over the advice of others, including his wife, but fails often miserably, and is thus ridden with **self-doubt and anxiety about his social status**. From that point of view, the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* points to an awareness, by both Hitchcock and his screenwriter **John Michael Hayes**, of the new **contradictions inherent the nuclear family** in '50s America.

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