

Review #74 : *They Live By Night* (1949)

Farley Granger and Cathy O'Donnell in stunning Noir about star-crossed lovers

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fgEAlwopjY>



With those words, superimposed over images of Farley Granger and Cathy O'Donnell tenderly kissing, Nicholas Ray's masterpiece *They Live By Night* declares its **allegiance to poetry rather than realism**, which is what sets it apart from the dozens of lovers-on-the-lam pictures that would follow in its footsteps. The film's story is simple as usual : after busting out of jail, Granger meets a nice girl, O'Donnell, and makes a concerted effort to go straight, **which circumstances continually prevent**. But Ray inflects every aspect of this primal, tragic narrative with **overpowering strangeness and beauty**, creating a private world for the couple that reinforces that dynamic opening statement : fresh, romantic, youthful...

Some of this effect was accomplished simply by doing things nobody had thought to do before — by some reckoning, *They Live By Night* is the first movie that used a helicopter to shoot actors performing, as opposed to merely an establishing landscape. The film shares with *Citizen Kane* the sense of a born director **reinventing the medium on the fly, with reckless, thrilling disregard for its established conventions**. Basic close-ups are frequently shot at **slightly odd angles** that emphasize the characters' **emotional fragility**, and both Granger and O'Donnell give heavily stylized performances that don't resemble what any other actor was doing in the 1940s. Together, with Ray's masterful assistance, they convey the sense of two people **thrust into a situation they don't understand**, improvising wildly until there's nowhere left for them to run. It's a **précis of the human condition**, in other words — beguiling and heartbreaking...

SYNOPSIS

'This boy and this girl were never properly introduced to the world we live in...' — opening credits

Farley Granger stars as Bowie, a young man who escapes from a prison farm where he was doing time for a murder beef. He escapes with one-eyed bank robber Chicamaw (**Howard Da Silva**) and burly T-Dub (**Jay C. Flippen**). Bowie naively goes along with a bank robbing scheme the other two propose. He figures if he gets enough money, he can hire a hotshot lawyer to prove he's innocent. It's such a stupid plan, but, as the opening credits state, Bowie doesn't understand how the world works. Later on he explains how his father was shot and his mother married the man who shot him. The cards were stacked against Bowie from childhood.

They manage to pull off the bank robbery, but Bowie's back is injured during the getaway. The three men flee to a grungy gas station where T-Dub's sister-in-law, Mattie, lets them hide out. Mattie's daughter Keechie (the stunning natural beauty **Cathy O'Donnell**) helps take care of Bowie and soon the two become lovers. Once Bowie is well enough, the two take off on their own in search of an honest, normal life.

The world beyond the gas station strengthens the fairytale feeling — it resembles the world outside the children's home in *Night of the Hunter*. As the title suggests, Bowie and Keechie do most of their travelling at night, so the world they see is one of shadows **completely cut off from normal society**. When they do interact with society, it is a cheap *facsimile* that offers them nothing but tactless insensibility. Even when they get married, the happiest day of their lives, the little chapel's doorbell plays an off-key version of the wedding march, and the man from whom they buy a wedding licence pushes 'the deluxe package' on them like any other retail vulture.

The star-crossed lovers in the film become outlaws not so much because of the crimes Bowie has committed, rather because they want to be happy and **live a simple life in a world that won't allow it**. The only refuge they find is in a backwoods bungalow they rent to spend their honeymoon in. It's cold and draughty, but at least they're together. Soon it's Christmas time and the newlyweds decorate their little bungalow. Keechie goes into town to buy a gift for Bowie and while she's gone, Chicamaw rolls into the house. **The past has got up with Bowie**.

He's got a job proposal for Bowie — another bank heist with T-Dub. Bowie is bullied into it by Chicamaw, who loafs around the cabin, breaking Christmas ornaments until Bowie gives in. Again, **outside forces refuse Bowie a normal life**. The law is still after him, so pulling another job might not be the best idea, but he figures once again that if he does just one last job, they can move on to be straight. Bowie and Keechie are forced to leave behind their Christmas presents and go on the lam (again). Christmas is ruined.

The film reaches a powerful conclusion that's so hard to witness. Back then, movie studios **wouldn't let a killer go free : they had to be punished**, So Bowie has got to go. He gets ambushed and Keechie is left with nothing but a devastating farewell note that she reads aloud. The film ends with a devastating close-up of her face.

They certainly don't make love stories like this anymore. *They Live by Night* is **a lyrical, bittersweet tale** devoid of any clichés. Despite being full of **noir sensibilities, particularly in the visual department**, Ray tells the story with a level of **compassion and sensitivity** you don't really see in this **cynical genre**.

REVIEW

Today *They Live By Night* is remembered for two distinctly unthrillerish reasons. Firstly, there's its **pervasive atmosphere of melancholy and missed opportunities**. No wonder the French loved it. Then there's the **central romance and the soft innocence** of its leads.

'The film's bittersweet, rueful tone, which sets it apart from any other noir drama, is supported by shrewd casting. Farley Granger is a perfect noir victim, the eternally dazed man in a net, said critic Foster Hirsch. Cathy O'Donnell is luminous, but at the same time vulnerable and genuine — a rare and lost talent.'

This couple is at first **extremely androgynous** — our first sighting of Cathy is in overalls with her hair up — and sexless. This **sophomoric quality** is reinforced by their being under the wing of gang cronies who seem parental. Their leader Chicamaw is notoriously 'one-eyed' and foreshadows the Jim Backus father figure whom **James Dean** bridles against in *Rebel Without a Cause*. When Chicamaw crushes the Christmas ornaments out of frustration with an uncooperative Bowie, it's a clear portent for our pretty but fragile protagonists.

Besides casting, visuals tell the story, consistently remaining in a **deeply claustrophobic darkness**. There's a great shot of O'Donnell where she is framed behind broken glass, through which a gun passes, vividly showing her as distanced, vulnerable and fated. *They Live By Night* is justly famous for the overhead helicopter shots which open it and punctuate the action. These are thrilling but also, through repetition, show the protagonists as **rats in a maze** from which they can never escape.

As with all such there's an **interlude** — complete with swelling romantic music — where they briefly live the dream of the happy couple, young and blissfully in love... But their 'honeymoon' is the only time they are allowed to 'breathe' and the gloom is so all-enveloping it makes most of their life seem oxygen-deprived. Originally titled *The Twisted Road*, the film's eventual title achieves full expression in a scene driving across the Mississippi late in the 'honeymoon' phase, when Keechie wistfully longs to visit this beautiful countryside by day.

There is one outstanding supporting performance by **Helen Craig** who plays Mattie, the wife of a jailed gang member. As she rats out the kids on the run to free her man, projects a **real poignancy of inner conflict** that recognises her own entrapment even as she sets up theirs. Of course there's **no mistaking whose side we're meant to be on**, as the final shot of Keechie ends with a corona of light around her fading-to-black face to form a halo makes plain — underlined by silence, despite her being surrounded by cops swarming on to a fresh crime scene.

'All of Nicholas Ray's films tell the same story of a violent man who wants to renounce violence, and his relationship with a morally stronger woman.' (**Francois Truffaut**)

Ray's perspective often reveals an empathy with the **teen-angst version of Romantic suffering** ; here, as in *Rebel without a Cause*, the grown-ups are basically another species. Ray is *'the cineaste of the twilight of the soul, of the falling night.'*

MORAL PROBLEMS

The storyline is a commonplace about a young escaped convict *on the lam* and his romance with a nice girl whom he picks up and marries but this one is told with **pictorial sincerity and uncommon emotional thrust**. Although the film is **morally misguided in its sympathies for a youthful crook**, this crime-and-compassion melodrama has the **virtues of vigour and restraint**.

Edward Anderson's novel was no doubt inspired by the two or three real-life sagas that we've had of boy bandits and their brides, and the well-designed motion picture that came out of it is entirely due to sharp direction by Nicholas Ray, who has **an incredible eye for action details**. His staging of the robbery of a bank, all seen by the lad in the pick-up car, is excellent. And his sensitive juxtaposing of his actors against highways, tourist camps and bleak motels makes for a vivid **comprehension of an intimate personal drama in hopeless flight**.

However, *They Live by Night* has the moral ambiguity of **waxing sentimental over crime**. Usually *crime noir* does not have an **overriding social message**, well, except the old chestnut that *crime doesn't pay*. Otherwise the genre, especially in the 1940s, was pretty much about police

procedural stuff, and got the handcuffs out with no feeling whatsoever. A film like *They Live By Night*, perhaps a little more melodramatic than necessary, tries to **break some moral ground** on the way. And the propositions stated in the film are none too pretty, then or now. Basically it runs the premise that once one rides down the criminal road, alone or with help, young or old, maybe even guilty or not guilty, the **doors to social or penal rehabilitation**, in short, the **doors to salvation... are closed**. *Ouch !*

As the story proceeds, the plot line and unfolding characterizations tend to underline that hard premise. The details of Bowie's imprisonment, except that he came from a **broken home and was on his own early in life**, do not concern us except to form the **underlying basis for his eternal damnation**. *Wrong step number one*. He broke, and was consciously broken, out of home along with (and by) a couple of very nasty **career criminals**. *Wrong step number two*. In gratitude, and frankly because he had developed a certain criminal panache while in stir, he aided the pair wherever they went, and naturally got his share of the take, *no questions asked*. In short, Bowie does those bank jobs just to get some dough to get himself straight again with the law. *Wrong step number three*. So there's not much in Bowie to be sympathetic about. So far. Except that the criminal in question is young, very good-looking and spirited... and in love with a naïve kind of tomboyish girl — although through the magic of cinema she gets to be pretty fetching by the end of the film.

Bowie and Keechie are both **socially immature and both desperate to find their place**, some place, some *small happy place* in a world that they did not make. And that is where the moral part of the story comes in. By the middle of the film, Bowie and Keechie are trying to **break out from the old crime wave pattern** and lead a normal existence, if not here then maybe down in Mexico where the living is cheaper, and once Bowie gets straight with the law. But that fantasy was not to be. Bowie is shown being forced to do that one hold-up job too many and the pair had to go on the lam once again. *Wrong step number four*. You already know what that means. **They had dough, they had each other, but the cards were stacked against them**. In the end, one of the bandits' kin sells them. There is no redeeming in the end, just **fate and despair**, as in *Doorway to Hell* (1932) starring **Lew Ayres**.

Or is it because man is not as merciful as God ?