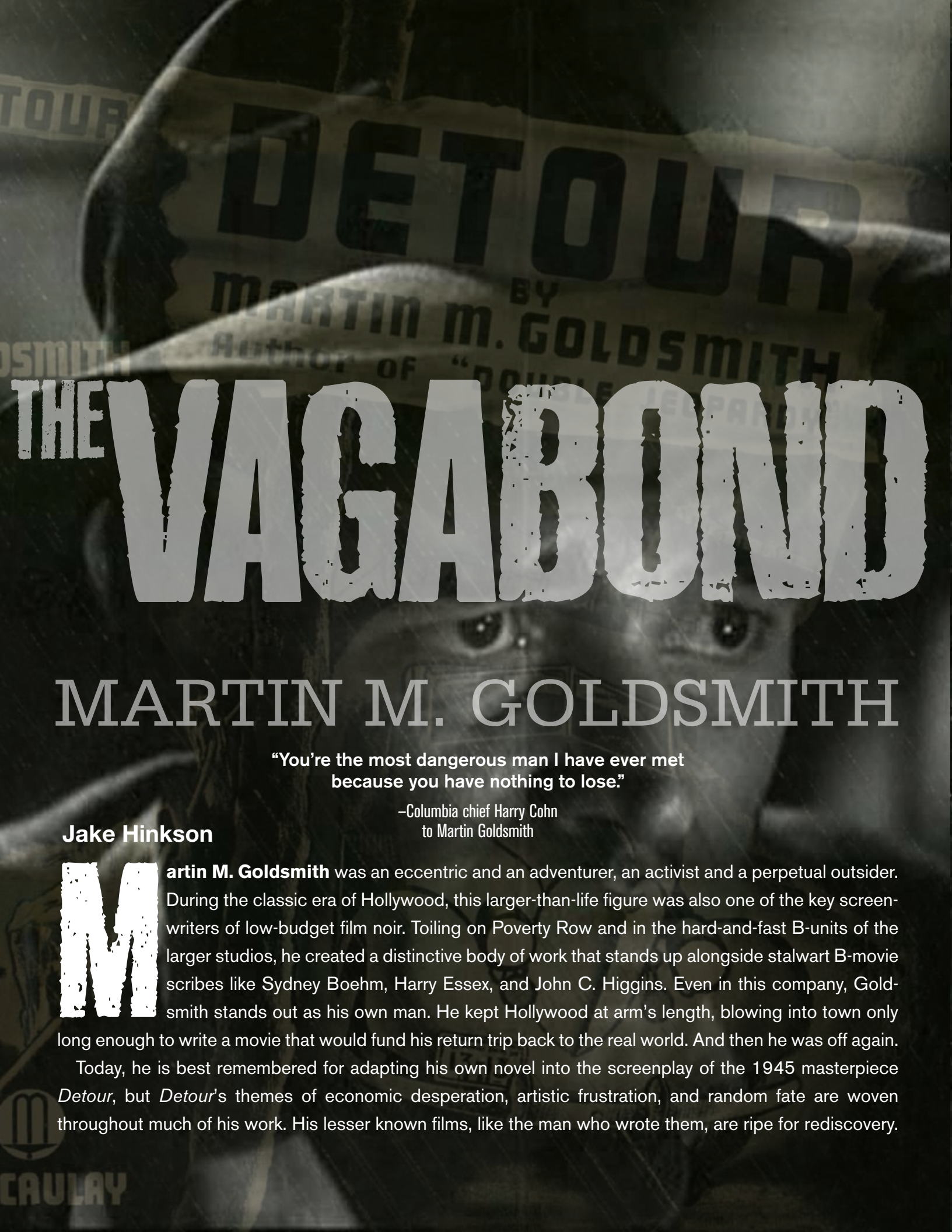



# THE VAGABOND

## MARTIN M. GOLDSMITH

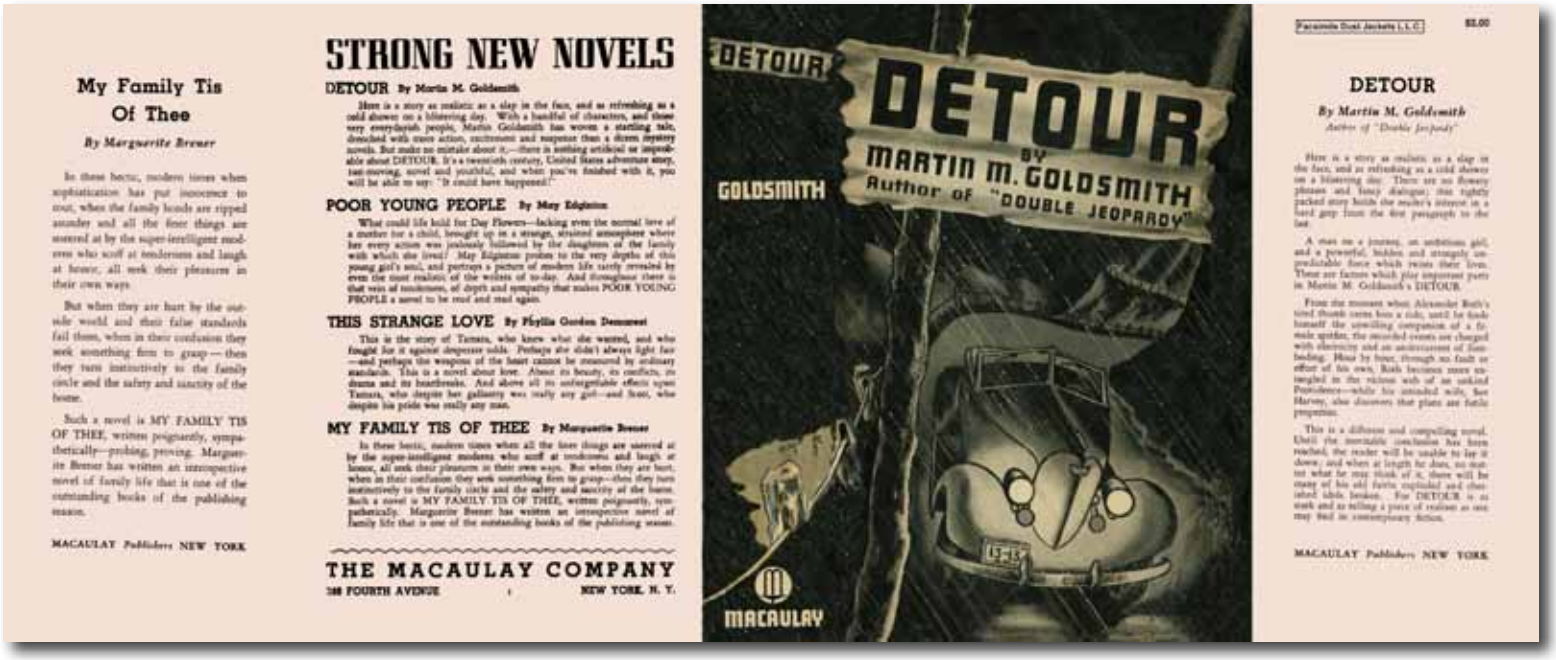
**"You're the most dangerous man I have ever met because you have nothing to lose."**

–Columbia chief Harry Cohn to Martin Goldsmith

**Jake Hinkson**

**Martin M. Goldsmith** was an eccentric and an adventurer, an activist and a perpetual outsider. During the classic era of Hollywood, this larger-than-life figure was also one of the key screenwriters of low-budget film noir. Toiling on Poverty Row and in the hard-and-fast B-units of the larger studios, he created a distinctive body of work that stands up alongside stalwart B-movie scribes like Sydney Boehm, Harry Essex, and John C. Higgins. Even in this company, Goldsmith stands out as his own man. He kept Hollywood at arm's length, blowing into town only long enough to write a movie that would fund his return trip back to the real world. And then he was off again.

Today, he is best remembered for adapting his own novel into the screenplay of the 1945 masterpiece *Detour*, but *Detour*'s themes of economic desperation, artistic frustration, and random fate are woven throughout much of his work. His lesser known films, like the man who wrote them, are ripe for rediscovery.



Courtesy of Mark Terry

## On the Road

Marty Goldsmith was born in New York City on May 6, 1913. He had wanderlust from an early age and left home when he was fifteen. Traversing the U.S. and Mexico "via the thumb route", he spent years sleeping in public parks or squatting in abandoned houses.

When the Depression hit, Goldsmith had already started selling stories, and in 1938 he published his first suspense novel, *Double Jeopardy*. Acquiring an old car, and a pool of desperate actors to help share travel expenses, he headed to Hollywood and got a job dismantling sets. At night, he wrote a novel inspired by his time on the road and the stark economic realities he'd found waiting for him in Hollywood. He called the book *Detour: An Extraordinary Tale*.

*Detour* reads like a cross between a gritty A. I. Bezzerides road novel and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*. In alternating chapters, it recounts the doomed love of violinist Alex Roth and singer Sue Harvey. As the story opens, Sue leaves Alex in New York to go to Hollywood, hoping to become a star. When Alex hitchhikes out to see her, he's picked up by a loudmouth gambler who suddenly drops dead. After stealing the man's clothes, money, and car, Alex meets another hitchhiker named Vera. She proceeds to destroy his life. The book ends with a desperate Sue sleeping her way into a possible acting gig, while Alex is left to wander the desert, lamenting that "God or Fate or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or on me for no good reason at all."

In his screenplay, Goldsmith would cut most of the Sue material to focus on the hitchhiker plot, but it is worth noting that the Sue sections of the novel contain his harshest indictments of Hollywood. Calling it "no more than a jerkwater suburb which publicity had sliced from Los Angeles," Sue notes that it's a town "peopled chiefly by out-and-out hicks" or "Brooklyn smart alecks who think they know it all." In the end, she says, "There was no glamour that I could see, unless twenty thousand or so kids scrambling for a dollar is glamorous." Goldsmith's work would not be notable for its attention to its female characters, but here he is sensitive to the plight Sue faces in a city that treats women as commodities. All told, Sue's Hollywood story is nearly as tragic as Alex's run-in with Fate.

After the release of the novel, Goldsmith kept writing and kept traveling, often on little or no money. In a widely circulated

**Veda Ann Borg is caught up in a weird family drama in Goldsmith's *Dangerous Intruder***


newspaper story in 1943, he touted his itinerate lifestyle, sounding every bit like a proto-hippie. "You can live in comfort anywhere if you just revise your ideas of comfort," Goldsmith told readers. "I think the ideal combination for making a man entirely independent would be a sleeping bag, a typewriter, a station wagon, and a telescope for stargazing."

## The Crown Jewel of Poverty Row

Reports differ as to how Goldsmith eventually wound up working for Producers Releasing Corporation in 1945, but the point of connection seems to have been PRC's all-around fix-it man Martin Mooney, a former journalist turned producer/publicity agent/ghostwriter. Mooney arranged to have PRC buy the rights to *Detour* and set Goldsmith to work writing screenplays.

His first produced work, preceding *Detour* by a few months, was 1945's *Dangerous Intruder*. Based on a story by F. Ruth Howard and Philip MacDonald, the film follows an out-of-work actor named Jenny (Veda Ann Borg) who is hitchhiking from Boston to New York when she's nearly killed by a motorist. Waking up later in the man's house, she's plunged into the middle of his strange family drama.

PRC was known for shooting quick and cheap, and the film, clocking in at just over 60 minutes, was only one of *six* movies that journeyman director Vernon Keays put his name on in 1945. Despite its stylistic limitations, however, *Dangerous Intruder* is an interesting programmer, and Goldsmith's screenplay previews key themes in his work. Jenny is a distinctly Goldsmithian protagonist. Like *Detour*'s Alex Roth, she's a creative type (musician in his case, actor in hers) reduced by economic hardship to hitchhiking cross country when a twist of fate lands her in trouble with a psychopath. After someone tells Jenny she's got a beautiful voice and face, she admits, "I developed the voice soothing landladies, and as for the face, if I didn't have it I'd be out of show business and spared a lot of grief." The goofy plot mechanics of the film's last act are fairly predictable, but that shouldn't outweigh the darkly off-kilter tone achieved thrugh most of the film. It was Goldsmith's first movie, and, as such, good practice.

Next was his adaptation of *Detour*. He was lucky in several respects with this project. For one thing, he was assigned PRC's best director, the talented Edgar G. Ulmer, a slumming genius who'd been forced onto Poverty Row after a scandal at one of the larger studios. For the cast, he got Tom Neal to play Al Roberts (the goyish new name for Alex Roth) and Ann Savage as Vera. Neither were stars, but they were perfectly cast—he as the hangdog loser and she as maybe the meanest *femme fatale* ever. Lastly, not only did Goldsmith get to adapt his novel himself—an uncommon occurrence in Hollywood at any level—he was able to remain remarkably faithful to his vision.

> The making of *Detour* was a collaborative effort that produced the single most important film ever to come out of Poverty Row.

The result was a B-movie distillation of the unadulterated noir ethos. Goldsmith's script tells the story of a low-rent piano player who tries to hitchhike from New York to LA, only to find that there's nothing in between except a spiritual desert occupied by loudmouth con-men and embittered she-devils. The script is the perfect showcase for Goldsmith's main themes: the emptiness of materialism ("When

**Vera (Ann Savage) and Roberts (Tom Neal) killing time until Fate catches up to them in *Detour***

**Al Roberts accidentally kills Vera in the brutal climax of *Detour***

this drunk handed me a ten spot…I couldn't get very excited. What was it I asked myself? A piece of paper crawling with germs. Couldn't buy anything I wanted.") and the fickleness of destiny ("That's life. Whichever way you turn, Fate sticks out a foot to trip you.").

Although Goldsmith cut the reference to God in the final line, he still closes with the solemn proclamation that "Fate or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or on me for no good reason at all." And then…that's it. That's the message of the movie. *Sometimes life is horrible. Have a nice drive home.* It's the purest ending, of what might be the purest film, in all of noir.

In the years since the release of *Detour* and the rise of the *auteur* theory, Goldsmith's hand in shaping the movie made from his book has been curiously overlooked. Ulmer didn't help things in his 1970 interview with Peter Bogdanovich when he dismissed Goldsmith's novel, essentially taking sole credit for the film's success.

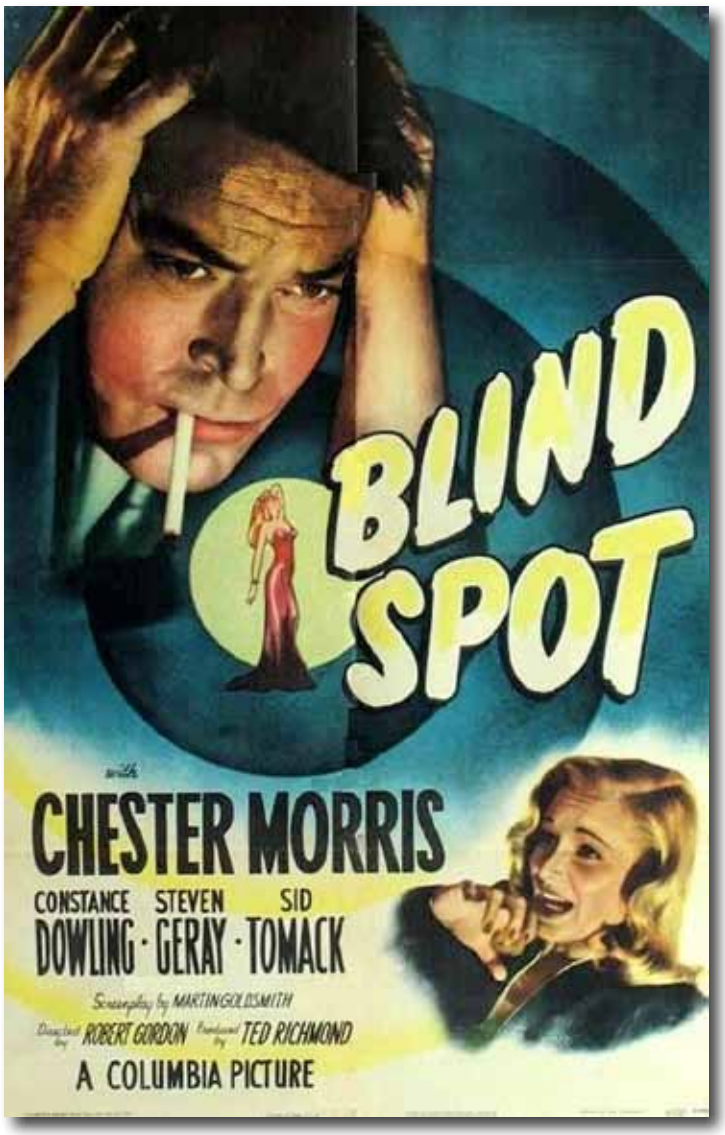
What we can say for sure is this: Martin Goldsmith created every character, scene, and line of dialogue in *Detour*. Edgar G. Ulmer and his talented cast, overseen by the ever present Martin Mooney, brought Goldsmith's script to glorious B-movie fruition, and the result is a distinctly low-rent masterpiece. No major studio could have made a film this cheap and dirty and hopeless. At a major studio, it would have been cleaned up and brightened, and Goldsmith would have been shown the door. Instead, at the penurious PRC, the making of *Detour* was a collaborative effort that produced the single most important film ever to emerge from Poverty Row, a film that is the ultimate repudiation of all of Hollywood's empty glamour and commodified optimism. It is, in its way, perfect.

## Upward

Nineteen-forty-five was a good year for Goldsmith personally because he met and married his wife, Estela. She was a match for his wandering, adventurous spirit, and the two stayed married for the rest of Marty's life. Both Goldsmiths became licensed pilots and bought a small surplus WWII plane that they used for lengthy excursions to places like Alaska, Athens, and Peru. Eschewing Hollywood, they lived in a cave on the Baja peninsula for five months while Marty worked on a novel.

Eventually, of course, work beckoned. In 1947, Goldsmith co-wrote (with Maurice Tombragel) the script for *The Lone Wolf in Mexico*, an entry in the Columbia mystery series. More impressive, that same year Goldsmith wrote the script for an underrated noir called *Blind Spot*. Ostensibly a murder mystery, underneath its rather conventional plot the film is something more, something darker and more interesting, and it's that *something more* which makes the film a gem in need of reevaluation.

The story centers around Jeffrey Andrews, a drunken writer of "psychological novels" which are greatly respected but don't sell. As the movie begins, Andrews staggers up to the office of his publisher to beg some cash. When he discovers the publisher is meeting with a famous mystery writer, he dismisses mystery writers as a bunch of



**Ambitious cameraman Jack Early (Howard Duff) faces off against corrupt businessman Nick Palmer (Brian Donlevy) in 1950's *Shakedown***

hacks and boasts that he could come up with a good murder story without even trying. Andrews proceeds to improvise a plot in which a publisher is found murdered inside a locked office, then staggers out and drinks himself into a blackout. The next morning, he discovers the publisher has been murdered in the exact way he described.

*Blind Spot*'s producer Ted Richmond had started at the bottom, Monogram and PRC, and worked his way up to the middle at Columbia. Together with first-time director Robert Gordon, Richmond created a film that is the quintessence of Columbia's B-unit. Chester Morris, taking a break from starring in the studio's Boston Blackie series, gives a nicely sour performance as the hard-drinking Andrews, and even when the plot machinations try to make him a two-fisted hero, he stays an ambiguous antihero.

The antiheroic dimension derives from Goldsmith's script, which is a revealing entry in his body of work. Here, from a story idea by Barry Perowne, Goldsmith fashioned a bitter howl of resentment straight from the heart of every would-be novelist and disaffected screenwriter in Hollywood. The first lines of the film, spoken in a voiceover by a hungover Andrews, are:

> *Maybe you've been seeing too many movies about authors lately. You know the kind, those with penthouse apartments, glamour girl secretaries, fur-bearing wives, and stock in the building and loan. Well, I wasn't that kind… Seems that writing good books and writing books that sell are two different things.*

These lines are delivered as the camera descends past a hobo plucking a cigarette off the street, down to a crummy basement apartment where we find the drunken Andrews getting dressed in front of a broken mirror. This, Goldsmith seems to be saying, is where good writers end up. Though the film takes place in the world of publishing rather than movies, it's hard not to hear Goldsmith's contempt for the whole Hollywood system (and for Columbia overlord Harry Cohn, in particular) in the lines:

> *He resented every dollar he had to pay me. Once more, he had me tied to a vicious contract, which circumstances had forced me to sign. There was no future for me as long as he had this contract in his possession.*

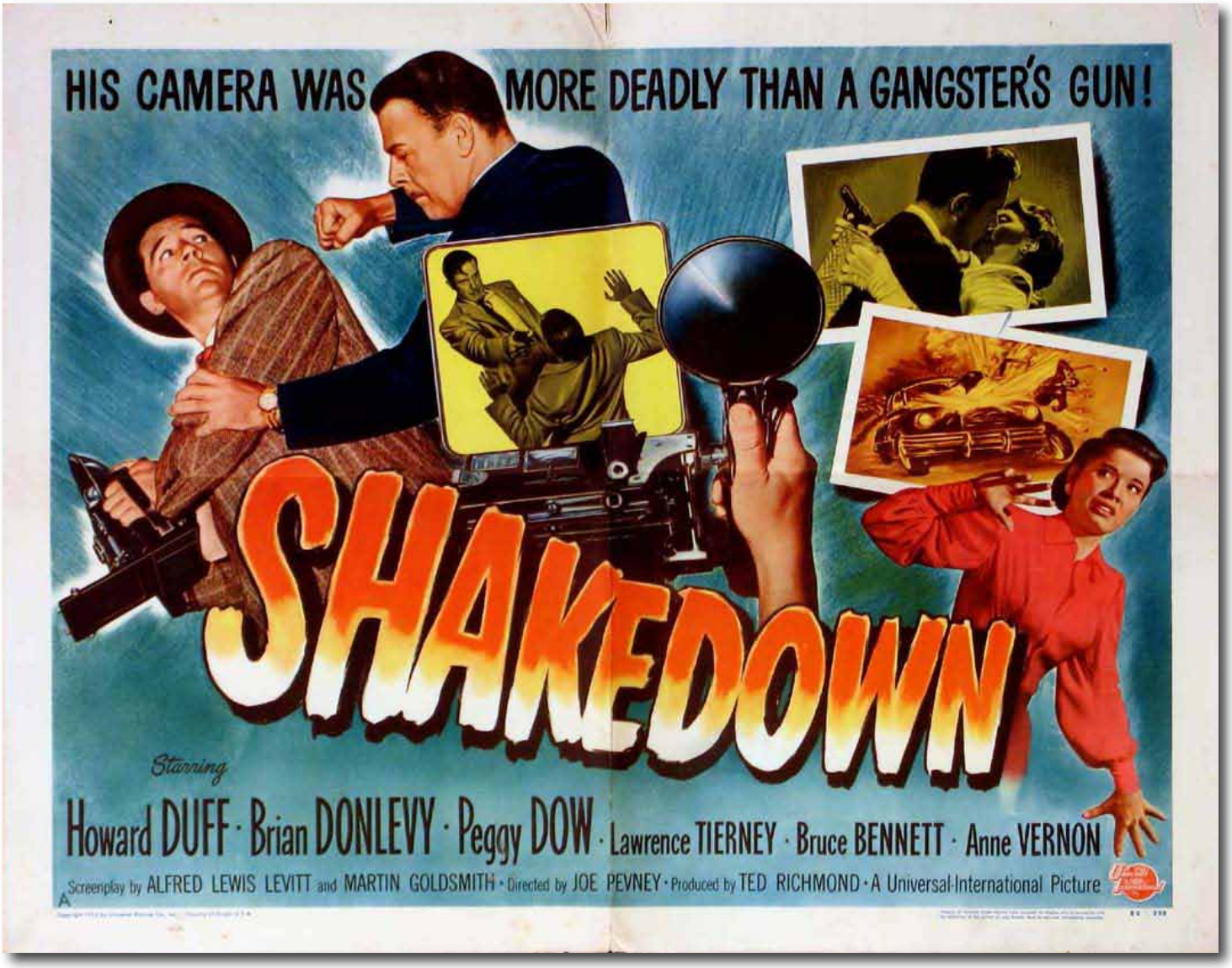
> "It doesn't matter if I don't work in television or films again," Goldsmith said. "The more material possessions you pile up – the more of a slave you become."

Considering that long term contracts with parsimonious studios were the bane of every working stiff in Hollywood, the plot here feels especially close to someone like Goldsmith, who was strident in his refusal to sign such deals.

Although there are some fairly common B-movie flaws that diminish the film a bit, what lingers about *Blind Spot* isn't the odd wooden performance or hackneyed plot complication—those are present in virtually every B-movie made in the 1940s. What stays with you is the unmistakable feeling of something real in the anger and desperation of the downtrodden protagonist, a working writer who can't seem to catch a break. One suspects *that* feeling came straight from the typewriter, and the heart, of Martin Goldsmith.

After *Blind Spot*, Goldsmith took off again for a few years, traveling around the world on the cheap with Estela and writing a new book. Despite his decidedly leftist politics, he seems to have avoided the blacklist by staying away from Hollywood, a self-imposed banishment.

He came back in 1950. It was a big year for him. He published his novel *The Miraculous Fish of Domingo Gonzales*, and he sold producer Stanley Rubin the rights to a story he'd written with Jack Leonard called "Target," which became the noir classic *The Narrow Margin* at RKO and earned Goldsmith an Oscar nomination.




That same year he co-wrote the screenplay for a tough Universal noir called *Shakedown*, which follows the rise and fall Jack Early, an ambitious news photographer played by Howard Duff. The movie begins with Early talking himself into a job in a newsroom run by the pretty Ellen Bennett (Peggy Dow) and the upright David Glover (Bruce Bennett). It's not long before the photographer is using evermore reckless methods to get his shots, and when he figures out a way to use his pictures to blackmail an unscrupulous businessman (Brian Donlevy) and a low-level crime boss (Lawrence Tierney), he sets his own destruction in motion.

The film is well directed by Joseph Pevney, but the real stamp of personality comes from the script by Goldsmith and Alfred Lewis Levitt. Both were leftists (Levitt would be blacklisted soon after the release of *Shakedown*), and the film is an indictment of greed and ambition. Working from a story by Nat Dallinger and Don Martin, Levitt and Goldsmith created one of the biggest heels in film noir. Jack Early is ruthless, playing off the affections of sweet Ellen Bennett, setting one man up to be murdered, and shaking down another for payoffs. Levitt and Goldsmith don't merely make Early a jerk—they locate his fatal flaw in an unquestioning acceptance of the capitalist hustle. Ellen finally sees through Early late in the film when she openly appeals to his sense of decency. "I've known a lot of guys who talked about decency and integrity," Early counters. "I knew a guy once, a wonderful old man, a genius with a camera. He tried to show me the beauty he saw in people and the world. He was a great man, and there were others. Guys with paint brushes. Guys with typewriters. And you know what? They all starved to death. Decency and integrity are fancy words, but they never kept anybody well fed. And I've got quite an appetite."

*Shakedown* is a character study of a kind of guy that Levitt and Goldsmith loathe but see with brutal clarity. The screenwriters were "guys with typewriters" who never made it big in Hollywood and watched as sellouts and scheming sycophants prospered, and the film can be viewed as an acidic take on the kind of guy who wants nothing more than to succeed.

*Shakedown* has an ironic ending that is the inversion of *Detour*. Whereas the main character of that film is punished endlessly for something he didn't do, *Shakedown* closes with Jack Early hitting the height of his fame at the moment of his own destruction, one last brutal twist of fate for a real heel.

## After Hollywood

In the years to come, Goldsmith would spend more time away from the movie business. He still wrote, of course. He co-wrote the story for Phil Karlson's 1955 John Payne vehicle *Hell's Island* and he contributed teleplays to shows like *Playhouse 90* and *Goodyear*


**Martin Goldsmith (in sunglasses) leads an 11-day fast to protest de facto school segregation in Los Angeles, 1964**

*Theater*, but his interests increasingly lay elsewhere.

As the 1950s gave way to the '60s, he grew more politically active, becoming a passionate member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In 1964, he led an 11-day fast to protest *de facto* school segregation in Los Angeles, occupying the hallway of the school-board, consuming nothing but water, and using his shoes as a pillow when he slept. The group was heckled by neo-Nazis with signs reading "Let Them Starve." Goldsmith was eventually helped into a meeting of the school board where he implored the members to "eliminate the seeds of bigotry."

When he participated in a protest against the testing of nuclear weapons, he was asked if he feared the affect his political activism would have on his career. "It really doesn't matter if I don't work in television or films again," he told reporters. "I think people are too much afraid of these things…The deeper you get into the net—the more material possessions you pile up—the more of a slave you become."

**George Takei in the banned *Twilight Zone* episode "The Encounter"**

His Hollywood career ended soon after that, but not before he issued one last blast from the heart writing an episode of *The Twilight Zone* called "The Encounter" which starred Neville Brand and George Takei as, respectively, a WWII vet and a Japanese gardener whose chance meeting goes violently wrong. Goldsmith no doubt intended the script to be an exploration of "the seeds of bigotry"—but it was pulled from the airwaves, the only episode of *The Twilight Zone* to be banned from syndication.

After that, Hollywood was through with him, and he was through with it. He worked on book projects and wrote plays like 1977's *Night Shift*, a Labor Theater production in New York. A drama about a "factory worker in crisis," it drew raves for the performance of its star, Rip Torn.

Goldsmith lived long enough to see some of his work become classics. *The Narrow Margin* became a cult favorite and was remade into a Gene Hackman thriller in 1990, while *Detour*'s reputation exploded as the years went by. In 1992, the film was chosen by the Library of Congress to be preserved in the National Film Registry. Goldsmith would die two years later, on May 24, 1994.

If Hollywood studios often treated writers like second-class citizens, *auteurist* critics haven't been much kinder, teaching generations of cinephiles to blithely overlook the contributions of screenwriters. Hopefully that trend is changing. Someone like Martin Goldsmith deserves to be remembered as a strikingly original voice calling out from the darkness of Poverty Row, chiding us for our materialism and our complacency, warning us to beware of God or Fate or some other mysterious force. ■