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Still WANTED after all these years

The life — and death — of the infamous gangster is a natural for the cinema. And who better than a pirate and murderous barber to play the role?

By Charles Leroux

April 2, 2008

Filming for the movie "Public Enemies," with Johnny Depp as John Dillinger and Marion Cotillard as his girlfriend Evelyn "Billie" Frechette, has begun with scenes scheduled to be shot in Wisconsin, Indiana and Illinois. Dillinger, 74 years after his death, is back where he belongs — in the Midwest and, soon, up on the silver screen.

John Herbert Dillinger's life of crime began at age 12, stealing coal from railroad cars in Mooresville, Ind. It ended in a hail of bullets on a sticky July night in 1934. Dillinger had just emerged from the movies at the Biograph Theater on Chicago's Lincoln Avenue. Government agents had been tipped off and were waiting for him.

As a crowd gathered around the outlaw's corpse lying in an alley just south of the theater, women dipped their handkerchiefs in his blood. Later, at the coroner's office, 1,000 people stood in line to view the remains. According to the American Folkloric Center, Dillinger's violent life and death inspired 13 songs — "Dillinger's Doom," "Dillinger's Fate," etc. Shelves of books were written about him.

Long after his death, rumors would persist that Dillinger, in fact, wasn't dead. Like Elvis decades later, Dillinger was the subject of sightings by those of the public reluctant to accept that he was gone. In a crime spree lasting only a year, this Hoosier holdup man took far more than cash. He captured the imagination of the nation.

Dillinger's exploits played out against a backdrop of the Great Depression, when banks foreclosed on many homes and farms and bank failures gobbled up life savings. When banks were robbed, there was little public sympathy. At the same time, the outlaw with the sly smile became something of a folk hero. He and his gang swept through — instead of



Sherwood Forest — Midwestern town squares. Sometimes, when robbing a bank, they burned mortgages the bank was holding too.

He could be gallant. After relieving the Mason City, Iowa, First National Bank of \$52,000, Dillinger forced hostages to stand on the running boards of his getaway car as human shields. As he drove out of town, a woman hostage said: "Let me off. This is where I live." He did.

He thumbed his nose at authority. Once, while on the lam, he asked an unwitting policeman to take a photo of him with a girlfriend. While under arrest in Crown Point, Ind., a photo was taken of Dillinger with his right arm draped over county prosecutor Robert Estill's shoulder. Dillinger shot a knowing smile at the camera while his right hand seemed to be held in the shape of a gun — a request, some speculated, to his gang.

The photo ended Estill's political ambitions.

Bill Helmer, a former senior editor at Playboy, has written extensively about Dillinger and, in a telephone interview, noted the bank robber's appealing qualities: "He had a cocky and good-natured personality. He wasn't violent like some of the members of his gang. I've always said he was crooked, but he wasn't twisted.

"My father, who lived through the Depression, was a Dillinger fan. He used to say, 'I don't approve of what he did, but you've got to give him credit.' "

Billie Frechette, sent to prison for helping to hide Dillinger from authorities, said pretty much the same thing: "I always figured that what he did was one thing and what he was was another," she wrote from her jail cell. "I was in love with what he was. Oh, maybe I was wrong, but you can't argue yourself out of falling in love!"

America fell for him too. During Dillinger's robbery spree — from the National Bank in New Carlisle, Ohio, June 10, 1933 to the Merchants National Bank in South Bend, Ind., on June 30, 1934 — Warner Brothers newsreels depicted the Bureau of Investigation (later renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation) manhunt for the notorious criminal. Movie audiences in darkened theaters across the nation cheered when Dillinger's image appeared on the screen. They hissed when BOI special agents were shown.

Growing up, Dillinger went to the movies (not yet the talkies) where he would watch John Barrymore in films such as "Raffles, the Amateur Cracksman," a 1917 film about a gentleman thief, or Douglas Fairbanks Sr. swashbuckling through "The Mark of Zorro" in 1920 and "Robin Hood" in 1922.

Dillinger's later life would seem to mimic the definition of such heroes — "swaggering, flamboyantly reckless and boastful," and after his death outside a movie theater, his story would be told over and over on the screen.

There was "Dillinger" in 1945; and, in 1973, another film of the same name starring Warren

Oates. A TV series in 1971 called "Appointment With Destiny" devoted one episode to "The Last Days of John Dillinger."

A 1991 made-for-TV movie, again called "Dillinger," with Mark Harmon as Dillinger featured Milwaukee portraying Chicago. A documentary, "Public Enemy #1" appeared on PBS in 2002. That same year, Variety reported a deal that would have David Mamet write a script for a Warner Brothers film about Dillinger. That project seems to have been sidetracked.

Mark Wolper was the producer of the Harmon film and checked out a story about Dillinger that he ended up not filming.

"It would come across as too unbelievable," he said then.

It seems that, during one of the gang's robberies, some people happened to walk into the lobby of the bank. "What's going on here?" one asked. Dillinger turned and smiled. "We're making a movie," he said.

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