

TELL THEM WILLIE
BOY WAS HERE

Coast FM & Fine Arts

March 1970 • 75 Cents

SYNTHETIC MUSIC:
Ohm Sweet Ohm

PATTON:
Quixote In Khaki

IGOR STRAVINSKY:
The Write Of Spring



John Cage

years without a "country," 20 years in which the Garfield personality simmered and boiled and cooled to a solid core of hate and mistrust.

WILLIE BOY is a remarkable achievement from the nether side of American film history, a rare opportunity to see style, feeling, and characterization lost from the perspective of time. It demonstrates expertise and sensibility (the moment when Coop slips his hand into the muddy mold made by Willie captures perfectly that feeling: we are both the hunter and the hunted), and it certainly would be hard to blame Polonsky for failing to forgive and forget. But if he is allowed to make more films, as he should, there will hopefully be an integration of *his* past and *our* present. And the ensuing statements may be shattering.

PAUL SCHRADER

THE MAGIC CHRISTIAN

The easiest way for a movie critic to show off his erudition — and by long odds the safest — is to take a film and compare it unfavorably with the book from which it has been adapted. It's not a difficult exercise, but it is essentially a pointless one, since the requirements of page and screen are so very different. They are, in fact, possibly mutually antagonistic; but so long as movies have a dependence on the other media — whether from Broadway or the best-seller list — we have to make the most of what we have. So, to say of *THE MAGIC CHRISTIAN* that it doesn't much resemble Terry Southern's novel *could* be high praise. Except that, in this case, it isn't.

Main change of emphasis, book to movie, has been to shift the action bodily from America's East Coast to England, thus opening up a whole new can of worms. *LOLITA* was filmed in England but stuck resolutely to its American setting, and Southern's roots tangle much deeper into the American milieu and the American experience than Nabokov's ever could. Hence Southern's black-bitten American humor suffers a sea-change into something quite startlingly different.

THE MAGIC CHRISTIAN is still the story of how the richest man in the

world (Peter Sellers) decides that the world's greatest inspirational force isn't love but greed. And how, in the company of his adopted son, Youngman, (Ringo Starr, as the poorest boy in the world suddenly thrust into enormous wealth) he plays *The Great Game*: finding the price for which each man will sell himself. *THE MAGIC CHRISTIAN* is an inversion, a perversion, of the Judao-Christian ethic. Try making a movie out of *that*.

It can be done, of course. It *has* been done and done properly. The whole idea is worthy of a Bunuel, *L'AGE D'OR* up to date, as it were. But I can't see the theme forming the basis for a popular movie, and it is here that the whole conception of the book has been betrayed. For whatever the producers of *THE MAGIC CHRISTIAN* may claim to the contrary, what they are really after is a thumping box-office success, and anything *really* controversial has been repressed to that end. As with *CANDY*, the central theme of the book has been camped up, worked over and pummelled completely out of shape. Old jokes, older jokes, bad jokes, even worse jokes have been substituted for the sinewy sacrilege of Southern's prose. And since the author himself has shared in the screenplay, he's helped wield the knife for his own emasculation.

A couple of things almost come off. The good, solid middle-class citizens of London wallowing around a great vat of ordure (to put it politely), searching for the banknotes the grand guy, Guy Grand, and Youngman have tossed in. And the whole conception of publishing pornographic literature with blanks left for the reader to fill in his own choice of words. These episodes have a nice sense of the crud in our universal experiences. But within three shots you know there's going to be nothing here on a Bunuelian level of brilliance. So, fine, I'll settle for the second-best of inspired Goonery if I have to.

THE GOON SHOW, for the uninitiated, was a British radio program of the Fifties, magnificently irreverent and surreal. There's never been anything quite like it, not

even in British radio, which has an enviable tradition of surrealistic humor. *THE GOON SHOWS* were run on American radio but turned out, I think, too fast-paced for listeners bred on Hope, Benny and a more literal tradition of comedy.

Some of the unique Goon flavor shows through in Richard Lester's early movies. *THE RUNNING, JUMPING, STANDING STILL FILM* is Goonery complete, if not inspired, and there are glimpses of it in *A HARD DAY'S NIGHT* and *HELP*. And Peter Sellers, brought to prominence by *The Goons*, is joined in *THE MAGIC CHRISTIAN* by that irresistible zany, Spike Milligan, funniest and farthest-out of the Goon Trio (Sellers, Milligan, Harry Secombe). Milligan comes off deliciously in his cameo role of a traffic warden corrupted into eating his own parking ticket. And, once, the old spirit of goonery strikes back, when a very tweedy shooting party suddenly finds itself surrounded by bombardments from rockets, flares, stenguns, tanks, and what seems to be the entire British army. It was the one segment I found even moderately and tolerably funny.

So what else is there? Situation comedy? That, I suppose, is what *THE MAGIC CHRISTIAN* consists of, situation comedy cemented together with assorted guest stars, billed (Richard Attenborough, Leonard Frey, Laurence Harvey stripping to Shakespeare, Christopher Lee going through his *Dracula* routine, whip-cracking Racquel Welch slave-driving 83 topless galley-girls) and unbilled (John and Yoko, Roman Polanski, Yul Brynner) and a dubious set of In-jokes — dubious because while they may be In they're not very funny. In short, a movie based squarely on snobbery rather than comic invention, a nose-thumbing film which dares its audience not to be with-it. And a depressingly ugly work to look at, and I don't mean in terms of photography.

Pauline Kael pointed out not long ago, and pretty accurately I think, that while the British have a strong literary tradition, their record in the visual arts is miserable. They're word-spinners rather



Films

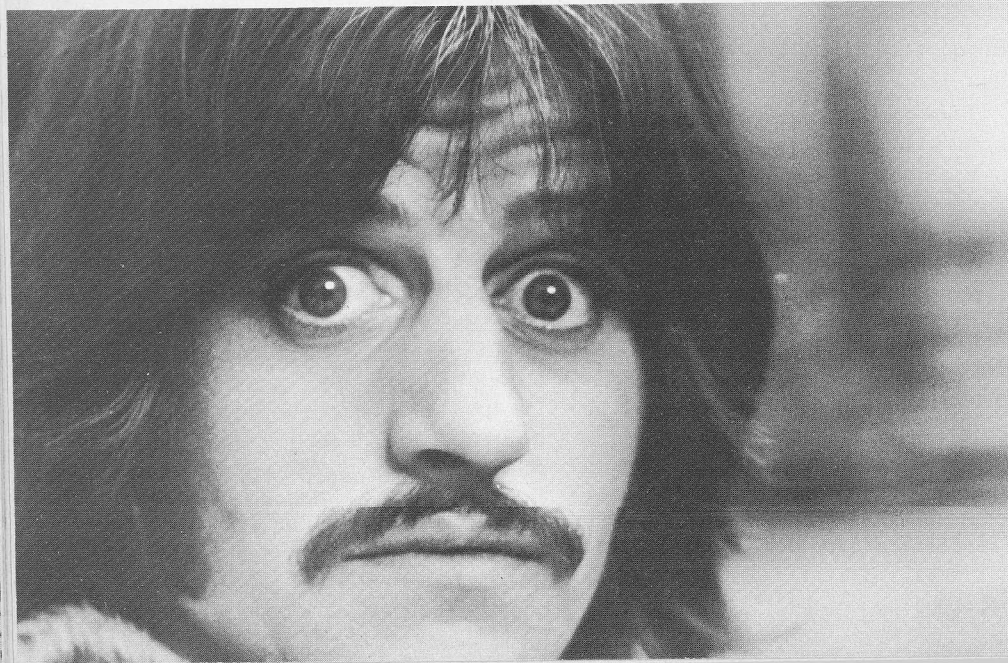
Continued from Page 23

framework of a genre the French describe as *cinema noir Americaine* — films about the underworld of dark, rainy streets, tough loners and sultry women. This cynicism was organic; it sprang naturally from its seedy surroundings. It was only a heartbeat away from romanticism, and liable to lapse into sentimentality at any moment. The John Garfield of *FORCE OF EVIL* was an urbanite like E. G. Robinson or James Cagney — the small, tough guy on the make. The Forties brought him a measure of intelligence and sophistication, and with these came cynicism. His emotions were no longer on his sleeve, but they were only a short way up it, and he could be called upon to function as a romantic hero at any

time. The style of *FORCE OF EVIL* was as romantically-cynical as its hero; the film echoed with empty corridors, dimly lit stairwells, and places alive with danger, mystery and passion.

The cynicism of *WILLIE BOY* is inorganic and self-consciously anti-romantic. The principals do not arise indigenously from their environment, but seem set consciously upon it, like the clowns in *WAITING FOR CODOT*. Not only do they look wrong (especially Katherine Ross), but they act wrong. They are not simply 19th Century people caught in a 20th Century dilemma (as in Peckinpah's *WILD BUNCH*), but they are 20th Century nihilists, cut from a tougher, rougher fabric than John Garfield, in a 19th Cen-

"The Magic Christian"



tury situation. No wonder they're nihilists: they're responding to dilemmas the 19th Century hadn't even posed.

The studied quality of *WILLIE BOY* not only goes against the grain of its subject matter, but against contemporary viewing trends. Pauline Kael complained in a *NEW YORKER* review that *WILLIE BOY* was selling anti-Americanism to young Americans in the same way *MIDNIGHT COWBOY* and *EASY RIDER* had. Although I agree that the subject of Polonsky's film is anti-Americanism, I disagree that he's selling it to anyone. In fact, Polonsky's cynicism isn't the sort that even young America is willing to support. The anti-Americanism in current movies is strictly of the romantic sort; it is in the tradition of *PUBLIC ENEMY*, *YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE*, *WHITE HEAT*, *REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE* and *FORCE OF EVIL*. Today's Peter Fonda is hardly more cynical than were Garfield and Cagney in their times. The naivete, simple-mindedness and romanticism of *EASY RIDER* is the type of anti-Americanism audiences are willing to respond to. The movies are selling men with dashed dreams about America, but they are not selling men without countries. Only the smallest dispossessed minority, whether it be Panthers or Weathermen, will accept Willie's "Tell-them-I-was-here" ethic. Defeatism isn't the current American game, but it is Polonsky's. The anti-Americanism of *WILLIE BOY* doesn't come from the present or from the Forties. In fact, it would never have come from Polonsky at all were it not for twenty years of limbo and resentment called blacklisting.

WILLIE BOY looks as if Polonsky spent every one of those twenty years mulling over the film, perfecting every nuance, weeding out softness and naivete, making sure that the political references were neither too well disguised nor too childish. (Technically this is not the case: the novel Polonsky adapted was written in 1967, and Polonsky claims he had six months to write the screen play — but who knows how 20 years' experience filters into one film?) The mutant style of *WILLIE BOY* comes from 20

event will I ever advance Patton beyond army command."

The man defied description. One war correspondent is reported to have said that there were fifty thousand men in the Seventh Army who would shoot Patton if they were given the chance. Yet it was due to Patton's dash from the south that the Battle of the Bulge was contained in as narrow a front as it was.

It was Patton, too, who sent a tank column racing into Germany to liberate a prison camp in which his son-in-law, John Waters, was believed to be a prisoner. The column, under the command of Captain Alexander Baum, fought its way to the camp, but, without supplies and outnumbered by German reinforcements, only fifteen men plus a scattering of prisoners ever returned to cross American lines — out of a total of 307 men in the Baum column. It is reported that Patton broke down, sobbing over the thought of what Omar Bradley (his former second-in-command) and Eisenhower might do to him.

Scott's performance is bound to make waves come Oscar time. It's a towering effort for him. I was told by someone close to him that Scott closely studied films and newsreels of Patton, copying details so minute as Patton's crooked teeth and warts.

What's more, Scott fought and fought over what he thought was right for the movie and his role. With him was Paul D. Harkins, who was Patton's chief-of-staff until the general's death. Although Omar Bradley is listed as senior military advisor, I'm told that he was nowhere near the set. It was Harkins who hung in there, fighting to keep the movie as authentic as possible.

Consequently Scott's performance rings true. His character is a man with as many faults as virtues. He doesn't relieve officers of their duties, he "fires" them. He doesn't take orders, he interprets them for his own personal gains. He is a glory-monger, but never tries to hide it. "Hell," he explains to Bradley, "I know I'm a prima donna . . . I admit it. What I can't stand is that Monty won't admit it." (General Montgomery, as close as

the British could come to military sparkle, had been snubbed and outclassed by Patton in North Africa, Messina and Italy. He sniped at "Old Blood And Guts" for years, and was satisfied only when Eisenhower passed Patton over for promotion.)

It's pretty much all there: Patton's invasion of Sicily, his blunders and triumphs in France, his amazing relief of Bastogne and his ultimate and inglorious dismissal.

George C. Scott does full, proud justice to the role. And by the same token, the movie does full, proud justice to General Patton. If Patton were alive today he would no doubt leave his offices at either the Minutemen, or some other militantly pro-America organization in order to see the film, because, while everybody used to jokingly say that his story would get to Hollywood before anyone else's, Patton *knew* it. Besides, who in hell cares enough about Omar Bradley to write a movie about *him*?

TELL THEM WILLIE BOY IS HERE

Abraham Polonsky's TELL THEM WILLIE BOY IS HERE is a chronological mishap, a film which would never have been made given a "normal" course of events in Hollywood. It is a measure of the chaotic state of current movie-making that Universal, one of the last bulldogs of "Old Hollywood," would experience either the guilt or the initiative to call Polonsky back from the pale of twenty years' blacklisting to direct a politically-conscious film about America. Like any mutant, WILLIE BOY is unable to function as it was intended — Polonsky misses the targets he deliberately aims for — but instead furnishes unexpected information about the supposedly normal society in which it exists.

The style and technique of WILLIE BOY seem inconsistent not only with its theme and subject, but also with the talents of its director. In this sense it is a "perverse" style, a style derived not so much from either the film or the natural talents of its director, but from circumstances homogeneous to

neither. Polonsky is too intelligent to continue film-making where he left off in 1949, and his intervening experiences have been too bitter to allow him to step into the main stream of current film-making. The resulting film looks like it was made by the Man Without a Country: displaced in time, style, and theme.

WILLIE BOY is a chase; not a chase headed anywhere, but an existential chase, with two stoic and defeated archetypes plodding after each other. Willie Boy (Robert Blake), an Indian who can't get justice in the white man's world, takes his squaw (Katherine Ross), and flees. The hunter, Coop (Robert Redford), isn't too enthusiastic about the white man's world either, but he seems normally able (although not unwilling) to protest his predicament, and therefore continues to hunt down society's remaining virtues, personified in Willie and his girl. Willie's squaw commits suicide (or is mercy-killed by Willie), and Coop is forced to shoot the exhausted, unarmed Indian. The moral of the chase, which seemed from the outset a futile ritual, is, at least to Willie, that "they'll know I was here," a circular form of logic which is the last defense of the defeated.

The style of WILLIE BOY is extremely "studied": its camerawork, cutting and plotting are ordered, predictable and precise. One feels that there must exist somewhere in Polonsky's mind a graph of the film, like some Medieval chart of the Heavens, which outlines every minute rise and fall of character and plot, every camera nuance, every emotional inflection, keeping everything within a well-disciplined sphere. Studies films are not unknown in American cinema (Budd Boetticher's westerns are classics of this sort), but they are outside the big studio commercial mainstream — which was also Polonsky's mainstream. Although it is difficult to evaluate a man's style after a 20-year lapse (Polonsky wrote BODY AND SOUL in 1947 and directed FORCE OF EVIL in 1948), the studied approach of WILLIE BOY is markedly different from Polonsky's earlier work. FORCE OF EVIL was also cynical, but its cynicism was in the

More Films on Page 40