

RESCUED FROM THE ASHES

EDDIE MULLER



WOMAN on the RUN





Joan Shawlee, Syd Saylor, Dennis O'Keefe, and Ann Sheridan discuss romance and marriage in a San Francisco saloon

Saturday, 18 January 2003

As I entered the Castro Theatre, the manager grabbed me—the projectionist needed me in the booth, ASAP. When a projectionist *wants* to talk to you, assume the worst. It was the second day of the inaugural NOIR CITY film festival and we were about to screen our first “buried treasure,” a film virtually no one, not even devoted noir enthusiasts, had heard of: *Woman on the Run*. With me was the theatre’s programmer, Anita Monga, who had helped me unearth what we suspected was the sole surviving print of this 1950 feature. We shared a fear-filled walk through the rapidly filling auditorium, to the upper reaches of the balcony, and knocked on the fireproof door.

“I won’t bother asking if you’ve seen this print,” projectionist Jim Marshall said. “I know for a fact that *no one* has.” Several long paper bands dangled from his fingers. “These are the original seals from the laboratory. They were still on the reels.” A delirious smile, which he’d been struggling to conceal, appeared. “Today is the first time this print has *ever* been through a projector. We are about to show a 50-year-old print for the very first time.”

That ecstatic moment was the culmination of years of detective work.

I had seen *Woman on the Run* only on an intolerably bad VHS taped off television. It seemed special, but the muddy images and dreadful sound left ample room for doubt. Lack of a clean copy forced me to neglect the film in my 1998 book *Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir*, a decision I sorely regret. The film was not cited in any of the major reference works on film noir; it never showed up

on any of the all-movie television networks. It seemed fated to be forgotten—or worse—erased from existence. Once I started programming festivals in 1999, locating a 35mm print of *Woman on the Run* became a priority. After several years of searching, it seemed unlikely a print would ever surface.

But one day, combing through paperwork at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, my colleague Gwen Deglise, programmer at the American Cinematheque (where I first began screening rare noir), discovered a distribution agreement between Fidelity Pictures, which produced *Woman on the Run*, and Universal-International, which distributed it. Within was a clause stipulating that if the agreement were not renewed, one archival print of *Woman on the Run* would remain in Universal’s possession.

Of course, we’d asked Universal if it had a print, to no avail. What no one realized was that once the original distribution deal lapsed, ownership of the film reverted to Fidelity, a company long since gone. When Universal installed a computer database to manage its inventory, *Woman on the Run* was overlooked, since the studio no longer owned its exhibition rights. Now we had proof the studio was contractually obliged to retain a print, and Universal executives ordered a physical search for *Woman on the Run*, rather than relying solely on the database. Once found, a final hurdle remained before it could be projected: a Letter of Indemnity was signed, protecting Universal from a lawsuit should the rights-holder reappear. I eagerly signed it—*So sue me!*—and *Woman on the Run* gained a new lease on life.

Sitting in the Castro's balcony that Saturday afternoon in 2003, Anita and I realized that, indeed, we had reclaimed a buried treasure. The audience greeted *Woman on the Run* as a revelation—partly because it offered a travelogue of the city in all its mid-20th century glory, and partly because it was thrilling to find something so completely unknown that was so *good*. The film's director, the late Norman Foster, would have been especially pleased, as his forgotten gem shared the bill that day with *The Lady from Shanghai*—made by his mentor, Orson Welles. But this day, Welles was overshadowed by his protégé. And hundreds of people who'd never seen her before suddenly recognized Ann Sheridan as one of American cinema's grandest wise-cracking dames.

That was a glorious day.

Cut to:

Los Angeles | 1 June 2008

As I exited my Hollywood hotel room, a terrible dread overwhelmed me: black smoke was churning through the sky over Burbank. *Warner Bros. or Universal is on fire*, I thought. Later it was learned that a welder working on the Universal lot in the dead of night had left his torch burning, igniting a blaze that destroyed a large section of the lot—as well as a significant portion of the film and video vault located across the “New York City Street” from the soundstage where the fire had started.

For weeks I resisted the urge to ask studio archivists about the fate of *Woman on the Run*. In the years since its resurrection at the Castro, that sole surviving print had been projected at numerous festivals, the film discovered and critiqued by eagle-eyed cinephiles. The terrible video copy I'd watched in 1997 had even become the “master” for an abysmal DVD release. I encouraged my colleagues at Universal to deposit the 35mm print of *Woman on the Run* at the UCLA Film & Television Archive, since technically it was no longer the studio's property. Ensnared in the archive, we could restore the film through the Film Noir Foundation, the non-profit corporation created in 2005 to protect and preserve at-risk films.

Finally, I received the dreaded news: “Sorry, Eddie—but the print of *Woman on the Run* burned in the fire.”¹

“Okay, then—I have something to tell *you*,” I replied. “When we showed it the first time, in 2003, I made a digi-beta copy before we shipped it back. I couldn't in good conscience return the film knowing it was the only print, not without making a copy for insurance.”

Although what I'd done was technically “piracy”—reproducing a film to which I had no rights—the studio's vice president of assets,



O'Keefe and Sheridan on location—in Santa Monica—for the film's climactic scenes

Bob O'Neil, an wonderful old-school gent, responded to this news with a simple email response: “Good stewardship.”

That digital version of *Woman on the Run* became the basis of a recent DVD release of the film in France, packaged within a hard-cover book I'd written about the film's intriguing history. Soon after, colleagues at the British Film Institute allowed me to be one of the beta-testers on the archive's newly completed database. First words I typed into the BFI's system: *Woman on the Run*. And wouldn't you know—up came listings for a dupe negative and a 35mm master sound track. Restoring the film—as *film*—became the FNF's immediate priority. And when we discovered that the BFI's sound material had irreparable damage, the digi-beta I'd made in 2003 proved vital to restoring those sections of the sound track.

After learning the details of our long-term rescue mission, the good folks at the Hollywood Foreign Press Association's Charitable Trust (The HPPA Trust) awarded the Film Noir Foundation in 2014 a \$65,000 grant toward the restoration of the film.

The Film Noir Foundation can now declare the witty and wonderful *Woman on the Run* permanently rescued from the ashes—and from undeserved obscurity. ■

¹ To its great credit, Universal Pictures has made a tremendous investment in new 35mm prints of films lost in the fire, including a number of rare *films noir* we have shown at our festivals, such as *Abandoned*, *Johnny Stool Pigeon*, *Shakedown*, and *The Story of Molly X*.