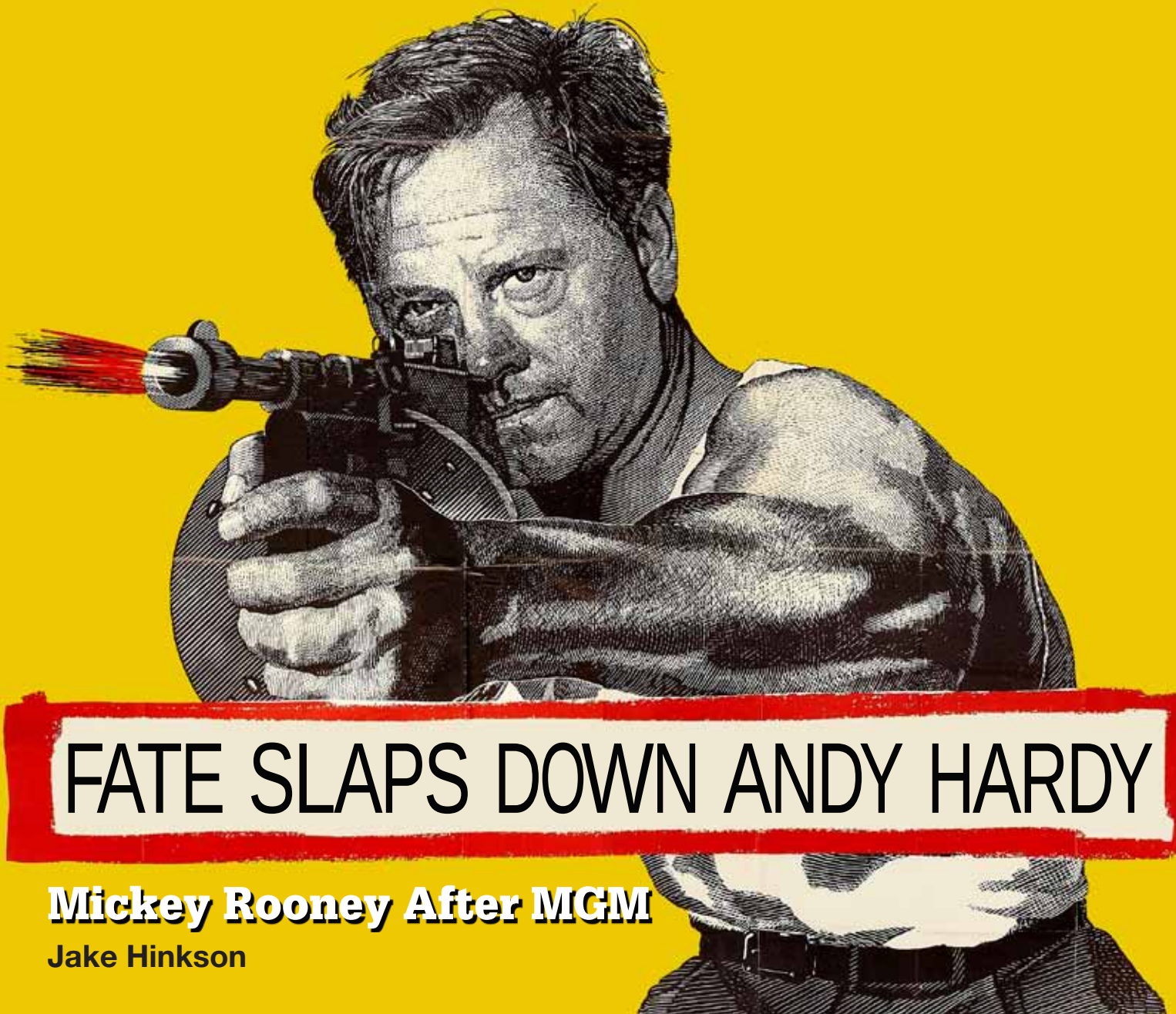




FATE SLAPS DOWN ANDY HARDY

Mickey Rooney After MGM

Jake Hinkson

It's easy to get in over your head when you're only five-foot-two. Mickey Rooney found that out the hard way in the 1950s. After singing and dancing his way through most of the '30s and '40s, he suddenly found his particular brand of sunshine out of fashion in postwar America. Potential career oblivion must have come as a shock to a man who, only a few years before, was the biggest (if also the shortest) male movie star in America. Up to that point, his career had been a rocket ride.

Born Joe Yule Jr. in Brooklyn on September 23, 1920, the son of vaudeville performers, he was hustled onstage in a tiny tuxedo at 17 months old. In a sense, he never left the spotlight. After his parents divorced in 1923, little Joe's mother, convinced he had the makings of a star, hauled him out to Hollywood. He didn't make the cut for *Our Gang*, but he did land a part as a midget in the short *Not to Be Trusted* (1926). After he was cast as Mickey "Himself" McGuire in a series of popular comedy shorts, his mother legally changed his name to "Mickey McGuire" to cash in. A few years later, when he was ready to branch out into other roles (and following a lawsuit by the

creator of the original Mickey McGuire comic strips on which the character was based), he was rechristened Mickey Rooney.

In the 1937 B-movie *A Family Affair* he turned the supporting role of a spunky kid named Andy Hardy into a moneymaking powerhouse. Over the course of 14 Andy Hardy films, he represented a worry-free American boyhood (a precursor to the precocious TV kids who would supplant him in the '50s). More successes followed: hit musicals like *Babes in Arms* and *Strike Up the Band* with Judy Garland, a critically acclaimed dramatic turn in *Boys Town* opposite Spencer Tracy, the smash hit *National Velvet* with Elizabeth Taylor. From 1939 to 1941, he was Hollywood's biggest box-office draw.

Then came Pearl Harbor. By the time the war was over, everything had changed—from Hollywood itself to the country it was trying to entertain. Rooney himself put in 21 months of service in the Army only to come back and find his career in serious trouble. No longer a kid, he faced darkening horizons. The country had taken a turn for the noir.

Like many a man faced with trouble, Rooney tuned to crime—at least on screen. In 1950, he teamed up with actor-turned-director

Irving Pichel for the cautionary tale *Quicksand*. In the film, Rooney plays a cash-strapped mechanic named Dan Brady. In the opening scene, Dan's drinking at a greasy spoon diner with a couple of buddies when a beautiful woman (Jeanne Cagney) walks through the door. Her name is Vera, and like all women named Vera in film noir she seems to have wandered in from hell looking for a man to kill.

Dan volunteers to take her out for a good time because he's too dense to see that all Vera really wants is a \$2,000 dollar mink coat. Since he can't even afford to take her to the boardwalk, he borrows 20 bucks from the cash register at work. This one act of dishonesty sets into motion a nightmarish chain of events. Every move Dan makes only gets him into deeper trouble, and yet moment by moment his decisions seem to make sense. His mistakes are huge, but it's easy to see how and why he makes them.

Something of a film theorist, director Irving Pichel wrote for the leftist film journal *Hollywood Quarterly* (a forerunner to *Film Quarterly*) in which he expounded on camera technique and advocated an *auteurist*-like theory of filmmaking in articles with titles like "In Defense of Virtuosity." His work in noir gravitated toward weak-willed protagonists (as evidenced by the superior 1947 *They Won't Believe Me* featuring Robert Young, of all people, as a philandering husband). Written by the talented Robert Smith (99 *River Street*), *Quicksand* never feels like an object lesson. Like many noirs, it stumbles in the last few minutes with an unconvincing resolution, but the



Jeanne Cagney wants the money not the man (Rooney) in *Quicksand*

methodical death march to get there is thrilling.

The film owes a lot to Rooney's willingness to complicate his iconic optimism. In past roles, this quality had always been a plus, an all-American can-do assertiveness. Part of what he does in *Quicksand*, however, is to let that attribute curdle into a little man's in-

security and bluster. Dan's a dope and doesn't know it—and, this being film noir, that's exactly as it should be. Watching this film is like watching fate stick out its foot to trip Andy Hardy.

Fate wasn't done, either. In 1951, Rooney starred in the curious musical noir *The Strip*. The set-up is pretty standard stuff: he plays a Korean vet fresh out of the psyche ward who gets involved with a numbers-running gangster and an icily beautiful nightclub dancer played by Sally Forrest. The film alternates between this crime story love triangle and a series of musical numbers featuring people like Louis Armstrong, Vic Damone, and Monica Lewis. Forrest, a trained dancer, gets to hoof it up in a couple of numbers, and Mickey does a duet with William Demarest. The film is not for every taste, to be sure, but it's entertaining and well made. Moreover, it's a real noir, not just a musical with noir cinematography. The ending is curiously perfect. The plot has been resolved, and the only take-away moral of the story is that sometimes life sucks. So, hell, why not strike up the band for one last song?





By the mid-'50s, Rooney must have felt like he was out of songs. He had become a national punchline. His movies flopped, and his attempts at television failed. Most damning in the public eye, he seemed to treat marriage like a hobby—notching up five marriages by 1958 including stormy, short-lived unions to noir goddesses Ava Gardner and Martha Vickers. This last point made him a dependable gossip rag headline, but it didn't seem to help him convince people that he was genuine noir material. The ultimate child star had become the ultimate washed-up child star. During this same period, though, he did make a truly extraordinary film.

Drive a Crooked Road (1954) tells the story of Eddie Shannon (Rooney), a mechanic and part-time race car driver. Without knowing it, Eddie catches the attention of a group of bank robbers led by Steve Norris (Kevin McCarthy). Norris needs a wheel man for a job he's planning, a job that will require a driver of great skill. He dispatches his sexy girlfriend Barbara (Dianne Foster) to seduce the little guy and talk him into helping them pull the job. Eddie balks at first, but he's simply too in love with Barbara to resist for long.

What happens next is interesting. We might expect the bank job to go badly, or for Norris and his gang to stiff Eddie on the money, but the film makes a rather unexpected detour. The money (oddly enough for a film noir) isn't really the sticking point here. The fallout is really over matters of love.

While Rooney still had some spring in his step in *Quicksand*, in *Drive a Crooked Road* we find him playing a very different kind of role. For one thing, the film uses none of the usual tricks to lessen the impact of the actor's height. Everyone in the film, including Foster, towers over him, and the film uses his diminutive stature as a catalyst in the

drama. Eddie Shannon is an odd little guy. He's quiet, even around his buddies at work (and Rooney's surprisingly effective as an introvert). He's a lonely man, and the gang picks him out *because he's a lonely man*.

As good as *Drive a Crooked Road* is, it did little to staunch the bleeding of Rooney's career. He reteamed with Quine and Edwards to create the short-lived sitcom *The Mickey Rooney Show* (aka *Hey Mulligan!*), but the viewing audience didn't buy the 34-year-old Mick as a bumbling teenager. He blamed himself for the show's failure, telling a reporter years later that "I guess it was because of my unfortunate marriages."

It was true that the private Mickey Rooney had never measured up to his MGM-created image. Being the onscreen embodiment of sweetness and light had financed decades worth of booze, hookers, and a particularly egregious gambling problem (reportedly causing Louis B. Mayer to once implore him, "You're the United States! You're a symbol! Behave yourself!"). By the '50s Rooney was showing up in the papers for ducking child support payments and getting into brawls, once duking it out with actor Fred Wayne over singer Mary Hatcher and bragging to the papers, "I don't need a bodyguard." Actor Ernie Kovacs would later bitterly tell an interviewer that Rooney had "a big chip on his miniature shoulder."

In the late '50s, Rooney decided to take his dark side out for a spin. In Don Siegel's *Baby Face Nelson* (1957), he took on the role of psychotic Lester Gillis, the trigger-happy bank robber known to the world as George "Baby Face" Nelson. During the Depression, the real Baby Face Nelson was a kidnapper, murderer, and thief who



The puny Rooney falls in with robbers Jack Kelly and Kevin McCarthy in *Drive a Crooked Road*



teamed up for a time with the famous John Dillinger. Baby Face never had Dillinger's flair—in part because unlike Dillinger Baby Face was a full-tilt nutjob—but after the more famous bank robber was gunned down by the FBI, Baby Face took Dillinger's spot as Public Enemy Number One. He didn't keep the title very long before he was killed in a shootout with the authorities.

Siegel's *Baby Face Nelson* doesn't depart too much from that basic narrative (though it rewrites some history in order to make Baby Face more important than he was). Always a trooper, Rooney is servable in the role without being dynamic in it. While he could dominate a screen as well as anyone in a musical or comedy, in drama he seemed to shrink. Good films like *Quicksand* and *Drive a Crooked Road* used this quality and played off Rooney's small stature. *Baby Face Nelson*, on the other hand, uses his smallness as an explanation for the killer's psychological scars (Nelson was about 5'5"). In short, he's a psychopath because he's short. Beyond this very basic idea, the film doesn't see fit to go. Siegel apologists have turned the film into something of a cult classic, but aside from the fine performance of Carolyn Jones as Nelson's wife it is a rather drowsy affair.

Drowsier still was *The Big Operator* (1959), a bargain-basement *On the Waterfront* starring Rooney as "Little" Joe Braun, a ruthless gangster who's the real power behind a labor union. Steve Cochran plays the honest everyman trying to stand up to the gangsters.

Though indifferently shot and staged, the film is notably violent—including surprisingly vigorous threats against Cochran's young son. Ultimately the film is an uninvolved bore, but it does offer the unintentionally hilarious sight of a climactic fracas involving (among others) Rooney, Cochran, Mel Tormè, Mamie Van Doren, and future *Gilligan's Island* star Jim Backus.

At the time, the public wasn't buying Rooney's switch to gritty crime dramas. Of course, for a while there, the public wasn't buying anything Rooney was selling. By the '60s, he was doing supporting roles and working nightclubs while hacking through an ever-expanding thicket of divorce proceedings and bad press. In 1958 his fifth wife, Barbara Ann Thompson, nearly died from an overdose of sleeping pills. In 1966, she left Rooney for the actor Milos Milosevic, but when she and Rooney made plans to reconcile, Milosevic murdered her in Rooney's home and then shot himself. Rooney, despondent, fell into a deep depression. Later that same year, he married Thompson's best friend. Three months later, they divorced.

As the years went by, the actor found his equilibrium. In 1978, he married for an eighth and final time, to actress Jan Chamberlain. His career rebounded as well when Rooney transformed himself into a character actor. He appeared in Mike Hodges's 1972 neo-noir *Pulp* (alongside Lizbeth Scott). In 1978, he was nominated for Best Supporting actor playing a horse trainer in *The Black Stallion* (a role he reprised on television during the 1990s in *The New Adventures of the Black Stallion*). In 2006, he found himself in a box office smash when he played a supporting role in *Night at the Museum*.

Eighty-five years into his Hollywood career, Rooney is still making films. In a profession not known for shelf-life, his career stretches from silent one-reelers to CGI blockbusters. Outside of longevity, though, what will be his legacy? How will he be remembered? Unlike his frequent co-star Judy Garland, Rooney never achieved an enduring *Wizard of Oz*-sized phenomenon. And while Shirley Temple movies have had staying power, does anyone watch Andy Hardy movies anymore? If he is to be remembered as more than a song and dance man who peaked at the age of 21, Rooney's surprising work during the '50s might make for an excellent point of reevaluation. After all, if Louis B. Mayer was right, and Rooney was a symbol of a more innocent America, it's worth noting what happened to him as history pressed forward and left that idealized vision of America in the dust. ■

