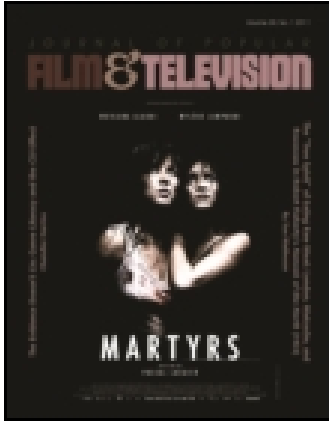


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Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos: The Historical Roots of Italian American Stereotype Anxiety

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Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, AND Sopranos

The Historical Roots of Italian American Stereotype Anxiety

By JONATHAN J. CAVALLERO

Abstract: Throughout the 1930s, Italian characters challenged American ideals while simultaneously being blamed for their failure. Filmmakers and audiences were thus allowed to ponder the subversive challenges such characters posed while distancing themselves from similar thought patterns. Today, understanding the rhetorical use of these characters is essential when evaluating contemporary Italian American visions.

Key words: gangster films; Italian American stereotypes; 1930s Hollywood cinema; Marx Brothers; Rhodes, Erik; *The Sopranos*; stereotyping



In recent years, groups such as the American Italian Defense Association and the National Italian American Foundation have protested the depiction of Italians in the HBO television series *The Sopranos* (1999–present) while ignoring most contemporary presentations of Italian ethnici-



The gangster: Paul Muni as Tony Camonte in a scene that was cut from the final version of *Scarface, Shame of the Nation*. Camonte's childish qualities are obviously on display in this grotesque image.

ty and even applauding the depictions of Italians in television commercials for Ragu, radio advertisements for Sprint PCS, and television programs such as the NBC series *Friends* (1994–present).¹ Such choices indicate a double standard on the part of these groups as they disparage the gangster

but fail to provide the same degree of scrutiny for non-gangster Italian stereotypes. The image of the Italian gangster certainly has had real effects on the Italian/Italian American community for decades,² but such an intense focus on the gangster allows other stereotypes to go unchecked.

Furthermore, the criticisms leveled against *The Sopranos* and other fictional mafioso characters often lack an appreciation for the history or historical significance of the stereotype (Shohat and Stam 199). Minimizing the evolution of the gangster character without sufficient regard for the socio-

cultural climate surrounding its creation allows critics to simply disparage what is a multifaceted vision of ethnicity, far different from the one found in 1930s feature films.³ However, although such a double standard is troubling, what is more problematic is a reductive understanding of stereotypes that insists on an either/or, “positive” or “negative” dichotomy. I will attempt to assuage these oversights and oversimplifications by rendering a historical and cultural analysis of three Italian male stereotypes that were prevalent in 1930s Hollywood films to expound on the existing knowledge of how Italian ethnicity was used in the past and how it has evolved to its current state today.

For Italians and Italian Americans, the 1930s were a time characterized by the rise of Italian American heroes and the continued denigration of Italians at large.

Any discussion of stereotyping should strive to move beyond the so-called accuracy or inaccuracy of stereotypes. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have shown, passing judgment on the realism of a particular stereotype almost invariably relies on another stereotype as the barometer of accuracy and thus leads to the creation of an equally damaging and limiting “positive stereotype” (198–204). Shohat and Stam have proposed linking analyses of stereotypes with the ideological climate surrounding their creation and their reception (180–81). By doing so, the assumptions of the critic are transferred from how a particular ethnicity should be represented to how a particular character or group of characters relate or are related to the culture that produced them. In this way, the material that the film or television series offers becomes the most important aspect of the critique while the

personal hypotheses regarding “proper representation” are minimized.

Analyses of this type require an understanding not only of the culture that produced such images but also of the culture of those targeted by these visions. For Italians and Italian Americans, the 1930s were a time characterized by the rise of Italian American heroes and the continued denigration of Italians at large. The 1920s had seen new curbs placed on non-Anglo-Saxon immigration⁴ and the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.⁵ Now, in the 1930s, Al Capone was convicted on tax evasion charges the same year that Angelo Rossi became mayor of San Francisco. Between 1933 and 1939, Fiorello La-

Guardia was elected and reelected mayor of New York City. Frank Capra won three Best Director Academy Awards. Russ Columbo rivaled Bing Crosby as the most popular singer of his time. Frank Sinatra began his singing career at a New Jersey nightclub, and as part of their effort to secure and expand their fan base by signing players of Italian descent, the New York Yankees welcomed Joe DiMaggio to the “House That Ruth Built” (Cramer 66–67). During this same period, Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia sparked tensions between Italian Americans and African Americans (LaGumina 250–52). Lucky Luciano was arrested on prostitution charges, and “nativists” argued for the deportation of Italians and other aliens as a way to quickly and easily solve the economic ills that plagued the United States (“Drive for Law”). This “bad press” tended to be applied to

Italians generally, whereas the “good press” tended to treat the Italian American heroes as exceptions, as different from the average Italian. *Life* wrote of DiMaggio in 1939, “Although he learned Italian first Joe, now 24, speaks English without an accent and is otherwise well adapted to most U.S. mores. Instead of olive oil or smelly bear grease he keeps his hair slick with water. He never reeks of garlic and prefers chicken chow mein to spaghetti” (Busch 69). Meanwhile, in *The New Yorker*, Capra’s doctor attributed the famed director’s survival of a burst appendix during his childhood to “the fact that Sicilians, conditioned by generations of knifings, have very hardy interiors” (Hellman 7). Thus, Capra was painted as an individual who was able to benefit from an undesirable past while rising above it, and DiMaggio was just as exceptional in terms of ethnicity as he was as an athlete.

Within the Italian American community, the rise of Mussolini and fascism in Italy had divisive effects, as some vehemently opposed his regime while others supported it by sending money and even wedding bands to Italy (Mangione and Morreale 319). The second generation⁶ was coming of age, and many of these sons and daughters of immigrants shunned the cultural norms that defined their parents’ lives. *La via vecchia* or the “old way” was replaced with a “more American” approach to life, as many second-generation Italian Americans preferred speaking English to Italian and began dating outside of their ethnic group (Gambino 199–200). Second-generation Italian Americans found ways to fight the prejudices and injustices that their parents had accepted (Gardaphé, *Italian Signs* 57), and this too agitated the generational conflict between new and old.

These internal conflicts coupled with cultural intolerance isolated Italians from mainstream American society and left many feeling alienated even within their own neighborhoods and families. Fears of Italian hoods sparked an active imagination, and wide-scale prejudice against average Italians persisted as the Depression

continued and war with Italy seemed inevitable. According to Fred Gardaphé, “If the Italian was not seen as a gangster or a knife-wielding, mustachioed foreigner who had taken away American jobs from the earlier immigrants, then he was depicted as ‘a restless, roving creature who dislikes the confinement and restraint of mill and factory,’ ‘very slow to take to American ways,’ ‘volatile, and incapable of effective team work’ (Orth, *Our Foreigners*, 182–3)” (*Italian Signs* 56).

In Hollywood films, these societal prejudices toward Italians became an effective tool that allowed filmmakers and audience members to distance themselves from the subversive challenges that films such as *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930) posed to the myths of the Protestant Success Ethic and the American Dream. As a result, “Americans” mired in the economic chaos of the Great Depression could gaze critically on the myths that were so lauded by American mythology while blaming their failure not on the myths themselves but on the ethnic characters that corrupted the still viable, Anglo-American ideals.⁷ In the process, some of these character types fashioned a series of value judgments on the virtue of assimilation, warning audience members about the corrupting influence of ethnic others while encouraging ethnic minorities to distance themselves from their ethnic identities or face the possibility of similar scrutiny. Others took a more accommodating approach, as they effectively sided with the ethnic others and castigated societal prejudices and social institutions.

Gangsters

Adopting an atypical rhetorical strategy for Hollywood features, *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931), and *Scarface*, *Shame of the Nation* (Howard Hawks and Richard Rossen, 1932), three of the most widely watched and critically discussed of the early gangster films, attempted to frame the experience of viewers with a text message that preceded each of the narratives.⁸ Claiming that “[*The Public Enemy*’s] Tom

Powers and [*Little Caesar*’s] Rico Bandello are problems that we—the public—must solve” and that *Scarface* is a series of “reproductions of actual occurrences,” the films attempted to shift attention from the challenges the narratives posed to American ideals to a less subversive fascination with crime. It would seem that these efforts were not entirely successful as scholars and critics, from Robert Warshow (240–44) to Andrew Bergman (6–13), have commented on the challenges the gangster has posed to conventional success.⁹ *Little Caesar*’s Cesare Enrico “Rico” Bandello (Edward G. Robinson), *The Public Enemy*’s Tom Powers (James Cagney), and *Scarface*’s Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) stage a full-scale corruption of the Protestant Success Ethic and the American Dream. They work hard and outmaneuver their competition, but they revert to the most sinful of means to achieve the most revolting of ends.

Certainly, the ethnic identity of these characters (Powers is Irish, and Bandello and Camonte are Italian) plays an important role in the narratives.¹⁰ By depicting Bandello, Powers, and Camonte as different, as not quite American, the challenges that the films pose to American ideals are made less threatening to “average Americans.” That is to say, because ethnic characters instigate a corruption of American ideals, non-ethnic Americans are afforded the opportunity to blame the failure of American myths during the Great Depression on the individual ethnic characters and their respective ethnic groups rather than on the failure of the myths themselves. In this regard, the films’ assertions of realism are once again important to consider, as such claims would seem to validate the ethnocentric and subversive depictions of ethnic others. The marketing strategies of *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*, for instance, included lauding the films’ “Snatched from Today’s Headlines” authenticity (Clarens 53). Similar claims were made about *Scarface*, and the introduction that was added to the Hawks and Rossen-directed film at the behest of the Production Code

Administration had a similar effect. *Scarface* is said to be “an indictment of gang rule in America and of the callous indifference of the government to this increasing menace to our safety and liberty.” One wonders whose “safety and liberty” are being threatened in *Scarface*, as the narrative seems to offer the possibility that the “our” of “our safety and liberty” does not include all Americans.

Although ethnicity in general played a central role in the rhetorical strategies of each of these works, the three gangster films, as well as their respective protagonists, are not interchangeable. Instead, *The Public Enemy* tends to treat Irish gangster Tom Powers in a much more benevolent fashion than either *Little Caesar* or *Scarface* treats its Italian gangsters. As the films open, this becomes abundantly clear. The first several minutes of *The Public Enemy* follow the young Tom Powers as he eases into a life of crime. Powers is clearly developed as the product of an economically disadvantaged upbringing and an abusive father. Adults around him smuggle beer in paint cans during the Prohibition era, and his father beats him mercilessly for the most trivial of deviances. As a result, *The Public Enemy* attempts to explain the existence of its Irish gangster by blaming the social ills that poverty has caused. Viewers are encouraged to criticize the environment for the creation of Powers, opening up the possibility that changing the environment would alleviate the problem.

Despite being a gangster, Powers exhibits some admirable traits. He demonstrates his intelligence, albeit a criminal one, by concocting elaborate heists. He can be, though is not always,¹¹ socially tactful, as the film includes several scenes in which Powers comfortably operates at elegant clubs. He is a murderer, but he only indulges his murderous impulses when he has been wronged or when a friend of his has been killed.¹² Thus, Powers is shown to hold loyalty, another respectable character trait, in high regard. In fact, he is so loyal to his boss, “Nails” Nathan (Leslie Fenton), that

when Nathan dies in a horseback riding accident, Powers buys the homicidal horse for \$1,000 and then shoots it.¹³

Eventually, Powers's life as a gangster catches up with him, as it did with most cinematic gangsters after 1930 (Jacobs 27–51). Powers is hospitalized after single-handedly taking on a rival gang that has killed his best friend, Matt Doyle (Edward Woods), once more demonstrating his loyalty. Powers's mother and brother flock to his bedside, where Powers promises them that, when he is discharged, he will return not to his penthouse but to the humble Powers family home. Tom's relationship with his brother has been mended, and he seems to have rejected his past ways in favor of a life that takes a less subversive approach to American ideals. By the end of the film, redemption seems within Powers's grasp.

The hopes of Powers, his family, and the audience, however, are dashed when he is returned to the Powers home as a corpse, a victim of mob violence. Nonetheless, Powers has become a sympathetic character whose murderous actions have been somewhat justified, even admirable, and certainly the result of the poverty that surrounded him as a child. The film mourns his passing and his choice of career, as his intelligence, loyalty, and social tact are lost to the economic inopportunities that characterized his childhood. Significantly, no Irish American groups protested *The Public Enemy*, a fact that Carlos Clarens attributes to the performance of James Cagney (64). However, although Cagney's performance is skillful, a different gangster develops here than in *Little Caesar* or in *Scarface*.

Unlike Tom Powers, the existence of Rico Bandello and Tony Camonte is not "explained." Instead of opening with a sequence that shows these Italian mobsters as children, *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* begin with the gangsters as adults. Viewers do not see the characters slide into a life of crime. Underprivileged environments and abusive fathers are absent, and as a result, Bandello's and Camonte's criminal tendencies can be blamed only on the

characters themselves and on their ethnicity. Such a rhetorical structure has a significant impact on a viewer's experience of these films and the films' critiques of American ideals. Despite *The Public Enemy*'s use of Irish ethnicity to create a distance between American viewers and Irish American gangsters, the film and in particular the sequences that depict Powers's childhood still encourage viewers to cast a critical eye toward American institutions and myths. Thus, Powers was excused of culpability, making Irish ethnics recuperative within the American success ethic. *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* encourage a more reactionary response toward the Italian characters of Bandello and Camonte. Because their actions cannot be attributed to the poverty and broken homes of the current imperfect American system, their undesirability becomes something that is largely, if not completely, attributable to their ethnic identity.

As *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* progress, they continue to develop a viewing experience that diverges from that of *The Public Enemy*. Bandello and Camonte lack the social tact, intelligence, and loyalty of Powers. They are blindly ambitious, targeting not just other gangsters but also small business owners and anyone who may be in the vicinity of a gangster during a "hit." Thus, they are shown to lack Powers's maturity, restraint, and sense of fairness. Whereas Powers indulges his murderous impulses selectively, Camonte and Bandello engage theirs impulsively and indiscriminately. As several scholars have noted, Bandello and Camonte are depicted as adults who have the maturity of children (Dika 83–84). In one of *Scarface*'s most famous scenes, Camonte secures a tommy gun from a now dead, would-be assassin and, with the joy and fascination of a child at Christmas, tries out his new toy. In *Little Caesar*, the childlike Bandello is so ecstatic about the possibility of having his picture in the newspaper that he happily poses for photographers, neglecting the effect such public exposure will have on his career.

Unlike Powers, then, Bandello and Camonte are not early versions of the gentleman gangster. Instead, they are loyal only to themselves. They are robbed of rational thought, and they show little in the way of intelligence, relying instead on instinct and, hence, seeming animalistic. They exercise no restraint and opt for excess, rather than the Italian ideal of moderation (Gambino 16), in every aspect of their existence. Camonte, for instance, wears a new shirt everyday. Life and crime are games to these characters, and they vacillate between childish gaiety and immoderate violence. They kill their way to the top of the mob world for no reason except their desire to be in charge, and once there, they bask in the glow of their infamy, exhibiting no respect for loyalty, intelligence, tact, or human life.

Although the Italian gangster is perhaps the most prominent intersection of Italian ethnicity and a critique of American myths, he is certainly not the only character of Italian descent that appears in these films. In *Little Caesar*, for instance, Rico's former partner Joe Massara (Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.) gives up his criminal pursuits once he achieves his goal of becoming a professional dancer.¹⁴ This decision to forsake a life of crime for one of dance has led some to view Massara as a more or less "positive" character (Casillo 397). However, such a reading neglects that Massara is shown to be a prisoner of his ethnicity. Before becoming a dancer, Massara was engaged in a life of crime; even after establishing a legitimate career for himself, Massara is coerced back into criminal activities by Rico. Massara clearly cannot escape what the film views as the criminal aspects of his ethnicity; as a result, his character helps the film to vilify Italian Americans as a whole.

Scarface similarly vilifies Italian Americans with the non-gangster character of Tony's mother (Inez Palange). Like Massara, she too has been seen as "positive," as one scholar has written that she "represents superior morality" (Casillo 398). However, her inability to control or properly

raise her children demonstrates a critique of Italian American culture and significantly undermines the morality she is said to represent. Although the film does recognize a generational conflict within this Italian American family, it also depicts a dysfunctional situation that encourages a critical distance on the part of viewers.¹⁵ This “others” the film’s Italians, and allows non-Italian, non-ethnic moviegoers to separate themselves from the characters onscreen.

Less ambiguous Italian characters such as Ma Magdalena (Lucille La Verne) in *Little Caesar*, a maternal figure for Bandello, who demonstrates no loyalty and pilfers most of the \$10,000 he hides with her,¹⁶ and members of Italian social clubs¹⁷ in both films, which are much less elegant than the clubs Powers frequents, further encourage viewers to vilify Italians. In fact, without these characters, the Italian gangster is merely an individual character type. It is Massara, Camonte’s mother, and other non-gangsters that essentially belittle an entire ethnic group.

As the decade progressed, efforts were made to curb the ethnic divisions that defined good and evil in early 1930s films. These efforts included amendments to the Production Code in 1934 that specifically targeted negative portrayals of ethnic groups and external pressure from such groups as the Sons of Italy (Casillo 399). Hollywood films, however, managed to evade such efforts and continued using ethnicity as an effective means of division. In some instances, filmmakers changed characters’ names from Italian to Anglo-Saxon but based the characters on infamous Italian gangsters and cast Italian actors in the lead roles. Such was the case when Warner Brothers introduced audiences to gangster John Vanning (Eduardo Cianelli) in *Marked Woman* (Lloyd Bacon, 1937). Vanning, a thinly disguised depiction of Lucky Luciano—a fact not missed by contemporary audiences (“Marked Woman” 66)—displays a number of Hollywood’s semiotic signs for Italian ethnicity¹⁸ and surrounds himself with henchmen

who have a similar look. Thus, his Anglo-Saxon name carries little significance when the film’s visual elements and its source material are considered. Rather than alleviating the disparaging depictions of ethnicity, the changes made to the Production Code forced Hollywood’s depiction of ethnicity underground. A subtler, less open ethnocentrism replaced the more blatant, more easily recognizable ethnocentrism of *Little Caesar* and *Scarface*.

In a scene from *Scarface*, several characters discuss Tony Camonte and his fellow criminals. One of them offers, “Put teeth in the Deportation

offered, “It is time that our immigration and deportation laws have teeth put into them whereby courts and other officials of our country can instantly ascertain the activity of aliens in crime, lawlessness, and red propaganda and promptly deport them . . .” (LaGumina 217). Such a message from both elected officials and Hollywood films had serious consequences, as seven years after Green’s remarks and just three years after the release of *Scarface*, Congressman Martin Dies of Texas introduced legislation to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Immigration calling for the deportation of six million aliens. Dies

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and becomes the problem itself.

Act. These gangsters don’t belong in this country. Half of them aren’t even citizens.” To which an anonymous Italian responds, “That’s true. They bring nothing but disgrace to my people.” It is interesting that an American film based on the life of Al Capone, a gangster who considered himself American, includes a sentence that establishes Italians and Americans as different. Such sentences distance “American” viewers from the “disgraceful,” subversive messages that the films offer regarding American myths. In the process, they vilify an ethnicity and leave the impression that the apparent failure of these myths can be placed on the ethnics who have corrupted admirable ideals. Ethnicity, then, becomes an important rhetorical tool in these films, as it replaces the failure of these myths and becomes the problem itself.

The quotation from *Scarface* echoed a sentiment expressed before Congress by Representative Robert A. Green of Florida in 1928. Green

claimed that at least 150 congressmen supported the measure and that “if there were no aliens in this country we would not have an unemployment problem” (“Drive for Law”). Clearly, Dies saw non-Americans as the cause of the Great Depression or at least the cause of its prolongation, and although it would be questionable to assume that gangster films were the sole motivation behind such policies, it would be equally irresponsible to believe that they did not have an effect at all, especially when they echoed sentiments that existed in American society. When Dies proposed his legislation, no distinction was made between gangsters and non-gangsters, the division between good and evil was drawn along ethnic lines.

Fessos

In 1930s Hollywood films, the gangster was not the only stereotypical, ethnic character that presented significant challenges to the American Dream and the Protestant Success



The fesso: Erik Rhodes (right) in *Top Hat*. Rhodes's attire and his expression clearly mark him as the outsider, and his stupidity becomes one of the recurring jokes throughout the film.

Ethic. Usually, right by the gangster's side was his brutish, dim-witted sidekick, the *fesso*. *Fesso* literally translates to "fool" and describes an individual who is ignorant of the reality that surrounds him. In Italian culture, few fates are worse than that of the *fesso*, and lessons on how to avoid that label are viewed as fundamentally important for Italian children (Gambino 150). The *fesso's* close proximity to the gangster has allowed critics to ignore his unique characteristics, as the challenges the two characters posed to American ideals were quite similar.¹⁹ As the decade progressed, the *fesso* moved from being a brute that could not answer the telephone

correctly in *Scarface* to a character unto himself in films like *The Gay Divorcee* (Mark Sandrich, 1934) and *Top Hat* (Mark Sandrich, 1935). Completely removed from his former employer, the *fesso* posed unique, though similar, challenges to American myths.

The characters of Tonetti in *The Gay Divorcee* and Alberto Beddini in *Top Hat* (both played by Erik Rhodes)²⁰ are oblivious to the reality that surrounds them, whereas the non-Italian characters are somewhat aware of the narratives' events and their significance. Tonetti and Beddini are mocked for their idiocy, and without intending to, they become comic char-

acters and the ridicule of film and audience alike. These Italians are complemented by the films' other Europeans, the British Aunt Hortense (Alice Brady) in *The Gay Divorcee* and the British Bates (Eric Blore) in *Top Hat*, who, although not as clueless as Tonetti and Beddini, are absentminded. Each of these non-American characters challenges and questions American myths and ideals by being both stupid and incredibly wealthy. They have managed to succeed without the faculties that are typically associated with success. Thus, whereas the gangster abided by the tenets of the Protestant Success Ethic in an unusual and subversive way to achieve an unusual and subversive end, these characters reject the notion of the Protestant Success Ethic altogether.

However, although each of these European characters is scrutinized during the film, it is only Rhodes's Italians who are *not* redeemed by the films' endings.²¹ The implication is that an unintelligent Anglo-Saxon will find his or her way in the world, but an inept Italian must rely on others. As a result, the difference between Tonetti and Beddini and the films' other obtuse characters is quite similar to the difference between the Irish gangsters and the Italian gangsters. Taken together, the two stereotypes (gangster and *fesso*) establish what amounts to a hierarchy of ethnicity, with "Italian" resting somewhere near the bottom. Certainly, the comical tone of the films mitigates the serious challenges that these characters pose to American ideals, but far from being "a relatively innocuous satire of an Italian" (Casillo 395), the *fessos'* ethnicity plays an important role in both the films' rhetoric and the public image of Italians.

To embellish their imbecility, the films develop the *fessos* as arrogant and poorly spoken. Tonetti and Beddini constantly reference themselves in the third person while repeatedly mispronouncing words and continually answering questions in an incoherent manner. The characters clearly have nothing to be arrogant about, a point emphasized by their choice of careers.

Tonetti, a married man, works as a male “correspondent,” and Beddini is a hot-tempered fashion designer specializing in women’s clothing. Although these careers are identified with opposing gender roles, the films paint both characters as excessively feminine with the use of make-up, wardrobe, and Rhodes’s gestures and movements—a fact that has led Pellegrino D’Acierno to ask, “What better revenge, Hollywood-style, against the dangerous Valentino cult than to cast a sissy in the role of the gigolo Tonetti (‘Your wife is safe with Tonetti, he prefers spaghetti’)?” (595)

Tonetti and Beddini attempt to compensate for their feminine images with an excessive sexuality and aggressiveness that, one suspects, would emphasize their masculinity if it were not for the comic manner in which Rhodes plays these roles.²² As a result, Tonetti and Beddini inhabit social roles that are of extremes. This furthers the films’ rhetoric vis-à-vis the American Dream, as the characters are not only shown to be intellectually inferior but also socially inept.

Audience members are not the only individuals who recognize Tonetti’s and Beddini’s idiocy, as the films’ other characters mock and exploit the stupidity of Rhodes’s Italians. In *The Gay Divorcee*, Guy Holden (Fred Astaire) tricks Tonetti into believing that the shadows he sees on a wall are Holden and Mimi Glossop (Ginger Rogers) dancing in the next room. After several minutes of film time (possibly several hours of real time), Tonetti realizes that Holden has fooled him when he discovers two paper dolls circling a turntable. Holden has humiliated Tonetti, and the audience’s attention is drawn to Tonetti’s foolishness. In *Top Hat*, Beddini’s stupidity is linked not with gullibility but would-be vengeance. Beddini spends the entire film paranoid that he is being ridiculed, and so, he is constantly in search of someone to slay. He believes that this demonstration along with his money will prove his love and win Dale Tremont’s (Ginger Rogers) heart. This mindset only alienates him from the film’s other characters, as Beddini

becomes a person they (and hence the audience) wish to avoid.

As “escapist comedies,” *Top Hat* and *The Gay Divorcee* are sometimes dismissed by reviewers as simply entertainment. However, it is precisely because the films are comedies that they are able to deal more directly with issues confronting American society. Motion picture comedies work to liberate viewers by allowing them to deal with serious social issues in a more candid fashion (Musser 41–42, 65). As a result, critics who dismiss the films are missing a strong

those who spoke English correctly and who understood American colloquialisms could feel secure in their intelligence and supremacy when they saw the wealthy but ignorant *fessos* onscreen. In effect, the character fulfilled a psychological need by depicting an inferior (Italian) people—a people so far removed from “real Americans” that they were not really Americans at all. Thus, rather than being “harmless” comedy, these films and characters not only questioned American myths but also disparaged a group of people as they denigrated

During the Depression, those who spoke
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fessos onscreen.

sociopolitical critique that lies therein, as both films offer significant challenges to American myths. Rather than mitigating the importance of the characters’ background, ethnicity becomes a rhetorical tool that allows the filmmakers to mitigate the subversive messages their films carry. In this sense, the mere escapist comedies of Astaire and Rogers and the dramatic, much more often criticized 1930s gangster films use ethnicity in a similar fashion. Ethnicity continues to be a trope that allows viewers to distance themselves from the dissenting arguments the films offer on the validity of American ideals during the Great Depression. Once again, Italians are shown to be not quite American.

Further, the *fesso*, whether he came in the form of Erik Rhodes or the gangster’s sidekick, offered an air of superiority to the non-ethnics in the audience. During the Depression, a time of insecurity and self-doubt,²³

Italians in an effort to alleviate the fears of those non-ethnics affected by the Great Depression.

Tricksters

The trickster stereotype is not unique to 1930s Hollywood films, nor is it always applied to Italians (Gardaphé, “A Class Act” 56–57). Some Native American cultures labeled these characters “coyotes”; African American literature has often featured characters that exhibit the characteristics of the trickster, and Charles Musser has used the more general term of “bad boy” in discussing filmic visions of these characters (47). This cultural flexibility is exhibited within Italian versions as well, as actors of Jewish ancestry often play tricksters with Italian names. Such was the case in the 1930s when the Jewish Chico Marx²⁴ played Italians with names like Faustino, Corbaccio, Ravelli, Fiorello (an obvious reference to the then-mayor of

New York City), Chicolini, and Baravelli.²⁵

Like the gangster and the *fesso*, the trickster poses significant challenges to American ideals. The characters are manipulative, disloyal, and unintelligent (in a traditional sense). They change jobs frequently, and they lie in order to succeed. In *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933), Chicolini switches sides during a war, only to switch back to Rufus T. Firefly's (Groucho Marx) army when he believes Firefly's side has more food. Hence, Chico's Italians make whatever decision is to their best advantage, but unlike the gangster this self-centeredness is not seen to be unique to Italians in these films. Other characters also espouse such selfish outlooks, and the trickster's power comes in large part from his ability to recognize this shared characteristic.

In addition to being acutely aware of the self-centered nature of those that surround them, Chico's tricksters also recognize the fallibility of the world they inhabit, the unjust values of upper class institutions, and the corrupted validity of the American Dream and the Protestant Success Ethic. Living in chaotic and unjust worlds where traditional values would lead only to failure, tricksters are forced to adapt to survive and succeed. The villains in these films are those who cling to or are associated with such corrupt social institutions (Winokur 131). As a result, the audience accepts and applauds what would otherwise be seen as subversive, as they root for the untraditional triumphs of these social outsiders. In *A Night at the Opera* (Sam Wood, 1935), for instance, the audience roots for Fiorello when he kidnaps Rudolpho Lassparri (Walter Woolf King), because Lassparri has been obstructing Ricardo Baroni's (Allan Jones) love and career. Thus, the chaotic nature of the world they inhabit and the immorality of their enemies excuse Chico's tricksters from the moral standards that dramatic characters are held to. The audience then bases their judgment of these tricksters on the goals they are attempting to achieve, which are almost always well intentioned. As a



The Marx Brothers' comedies use Chico's tricksters to incorporate a critique of ethnic stereotypes into the more overarching critique of American myths and ideals.

result, individuals who are usually scorned, such as Chico's Italians, are elevated in status and celebrated for their ability to simultaneously succeed and criticize the establishment.

Thus, although the gangster, the *fesso*, and the trickster are similar in that they all question American myths, the rhetorical use of their shared ethnicity varies. Rather than using a character's ethnic identity to mitigate the films' subversive messages, the Marx Brothers' comedies use Chico's tricksters to incorporate a critique of ethnic stereotypes into the more overarching critique of American myths and ideals.²⁶ As a result, the tricksters seek

to empower Italians by mocking the very stereotypes that they represent, and they further empower the Jewish Chico as they allow him to break through the socially prescribed boundaries of his own ethnic identity.²⁷ Chico's performances, then, criticize the prejudices held against not only Italians but other ethnicities as well.²⁸

Reducing the rhetoric regarding ethnicity to a single character in the Marx Brothers' films, however, is somewhat reductive. In *A Night at the Opera*,²⁹ Fiorello, Tomasso (Harpo Marx), and Baroni, all Italian characters, find themselves on a ship bound for the United States. As stowaways scroung-

ing for food, they are forced to flee the authorities. Meanwhile, their pseudo-partner, Otis B. Driftwood, played by Groucho Marx, dines with the boring and pretentious elites. Such a disparity in existence emphasizes both the injustice of social institutions and the arbitrary nature of wealth and privilege. Driftwood is equally disloyal, and yet he eats plentiful meals and enjoys luxurious living quarters.

As they move throughout the ship, the three stowaways happen on a celebration held by the steerage passengers. Based on their prior experiences, Fiorello, Tomasso, and Baroni are not optimistic about their chances of securing a meal. However, almost without asking, their plates are filled with spaghetti, meats, and breads. They eat a bounteous dinner (typical of an Italian *fiesta* or festival) and then entertain themselves and their fellow shipmates (most, if not all, of whom conform to the semiotic image of Italians found in 1930s Hollywood films)³⁰ with music and dancing. Fiorello and Tomasso even share a few intimate moments with the Italian children, and all are having an enjoyable time.³¹ This laudatory endorsement of Italian customs and Italian identity is particularly remarkable when one considers that outsiders often held such celebrations in contempt (Mangione and Morreale 172).

There is a cut to the pretentious elites who are now looming over the steerage passengers. Lassparri spots the three stowaways and points them out to the authorities. The powers that be descend on Fiorello, Tomasso, and Baroni, and capture them. In a few short moments, the establishment has managed to quell any happiness and has replaced it with chaos. For the characters and the audience, singing, dancing, plentiful food, generosity, and happiness are confronted by greed and jealousy and transformed into a night in the detention cabin. Despite the exaggerated depiction of Italian characters and customs, this scene endorses the worldview of the steerage Italians as they find much more happiness, friendship, and meaning in their lives than their rich counterparts do in theirs.³²

The traits that are so admirable and simultaneously laughable in Fiorello, Chicolini, and many other Italian characters found in the comedies of the Marx Brothers are scornful when they manifest themselves in the gangsters and the *fessos* of other 1930s Hollywood films. What is disparaging in *Little Caesar*, *Scarface*, *Top Hat*, and *The Gay Divorcee*, however, takes on an opposite meaning given the very different context of the Marx Brothers' films. Here, the Italian is not a murderous hood nor is he a wealthy

cans, despite the ethnic habits that traditionally identified them as "inferior" outsiders.

Conclusion: Yesterday and Today

Although the economic and social climate of the United States has changed since the 1930s, the Italian stereotypes of the past persist. In each case, changes have occurred, and the characters have genuinely evolved. Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), the modern-day gangster, now lives in the suburbs and sees a psychotherapist.

The traits that are so admirable and simultaneously laughable in Fiorello, Chicolini, and many other Italian characters found in the comedies of the Marx Brothers are scornful when they manifest themselves in the gangsters and the *fessos* of other 1930s Hollywood films.

idiot. He is just a poor individual trying to get by—a situation that Depression-era audiences would have sympathized with. Further, by featuring villainous characters that accept the stereotypical image of ethnics without question and by making this belief system part of their downfall, the roles confronted the establishment's attitudes toward ethnics, and in particular Italians, and undermined them. As Mark Winokur has suggested, "The Marx Brothers are a fantasy of not feeling shame at the gaps in one's education in the hegemony, of instead turning the tables and assigning shame to the cultural hegemony that imposes shame on the suppressed minority" (158). Chico's Italian tricksters become heroes in the films by overcoming an unjust society that harbors unjust prejudices toward ethnic individuals. As a result, the films encourage audiences to accept ethnic Ameri-

Joey Tribbiani (Matt Le Blanc) of *Friends* carries on the tradition of the *fesso*, occasionally surprising his friends with an astute comment, but usually remaining clueless. And the now-syndicated *Seinfeld* (1990–98) features George Costanza (Jason Alexander) who demonstrates that the Italian trickster has become more abrasive while his world has become less chaotic. Each of these characters continues to challenge the American Dream and the Protestant Success Ethic by either corrupting the tenets of these ideals or by achieving success without espousing them. Italian ethnicity continues to be a rhetorical trope that distances "non-disenfranchised" viewers from the subversive messages these works offer. Nonetheless, Soprano, Tribbiani, and Costanza are neither as destructive nor as uncomplicated as their 1930s counterparts.



The modern-day gangster: James Gandolfini (right) as Tony Soprano in the HBO television series *The Sopranos*. Although markers of Italian ethnicity are present, the sociocultural context that surrounds the production and reception of Italian character types has changed.

Robert Casillo has written that many of the 1930s gangster films “neglect the deeper causes—historical, cultural, and sociological—of ethnic crime: the gangster’s behavior is a *given*” (Casillo 399; italics in the original). Indeed, there was a time in American history when Italians were marginalized and when institutional prejudice was connected with stereotypical portraits. It was a time that was

very different from today, and herein lies a major difference between Rico Bandello and Tony Soprano. Whereas Rico appeared at a time when widespread social prejudice against Italians was connected with institutional measures that sought to deport and segregate them, Tony Soprano appears at a time when anti-Italian prejudice is greatly diminished. This is not to suggest that Italians are not still discrimi-

nated against or viewed as somehow different. It is not to suggest that Italians do not continue to suffer the effects of these stereotypes. However, it is to suggest that the “plight” of Italians in the twenty-first century is far removed from the plight of Italians in the 1930s. Italian Americans are no longer viewed as outsiders and have generally become members of the white establishment. It is now other ethnic and racial minorities that have become the targets of hate crimes, sometimes instigated by Italians,³³ and it is Middle Eastern males who are questioned simply because they are Middle Eastern males. Questioning the patriotism of Italians seems to be a thing of the past.³⁴

Furthermore, Italians have moved into a position of power within the media industries, and their depictions are no longer limited to a series of stereotypes. On television, *The Practice* (1997–present) features attorney Jimmy Berluti (Michael Badalucco). Presidential campaign director Bruno Gianelli (Ron Silver) appears on *The West Wing* (1999–present), and Dr. Robert Romano (Paul McCrane) is a surgeon on *ER* (1994–present). In films, Italian characters have become white-collar office workers and shop owners in *Jungle Fever* (Spike Lee, 1991) and small business owners in *Return to Me* (Bonnie Hunt, 2000). *Cradle Will Rock* (Tim Robbins, 1999), a film set in Depression-era New York City, includes a scene that illustrates the divisive effects that Mussolini’s rise to power had on Italian American families, as Aldo Silvano (John Turturro) argues with relatives over the validity of Mussolini’s policies. Finally, television shows such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996–present) and films such as *Big Night* (Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott, 1996) and *Mac* (John Turturro, 1992) not only expand this wide range of Italian personalities but also celebrate Italian ethnicity. Often these films and television shows are written, directed, produced, created, and acted by Italian Americans. Unfortunately, by focusing so intently on *The Sopranos*, Italian American groups have missed an

opportunity to applaud the multitude of Italian characters offered by today's media and have reduced the diversity that exists to a single program, which they then remove from its sociocultural context. Italian Americans, as a group, have made a great deal of social and economic progress since the 1930s, but this point has been lost or ignored by today's anti-*Sopranos* protests, which offer the impression that Italians continue to feel as marginalized as other cultures.

In addition, *The Sopranos* offers a much more complicated viewing experience than most previous visions of the Italian gangster did. In fact, Gardaphé has argued that Tony Soprano and his cohorts symbolize the assimilation of Italians into American society, as Tony and his family confront many of the same issues that non-ethnic Americans face today.³⁵ Nonetheless, Italian American defense groups continue to hold this fictional program³⁶ to a standard of realism, arguing that the percentage of Italian American characters who are gangsters far outnumbers the actual number of Italian Americans involved in organized crime. This reductive approach to the series oversimplifies or even ignores some of the reasons for its popularity with both audiences and critics.

Still another difference between *The Sopranos* and the gangster films of the 1930s is their impact on the desire of ethnic viewers to assimilate. In 1930s Hollywood films, ethnic characters abound, and Italian character types are only one example of a more general trend.³⁷ Overall, these characters blamed the failure of American myths on ethnicity and simultaneously encouraged assimilation as the characters' ethnic behaviors were scrutinized and discouraged and their assimilation applauded. Audience members who spoke with accents³⁸ were thus stigmatized and encouraged to distance themselves from any ethnic habits they might have had. This conformity promised them anonymity but helped to homogenize American society.

Today, several episodes of *The Sopranos* preserve the idea of Italian

ethnicity.³⁹ In the second episode of the series, "46 Long," Tony's henchmen travel from coffeehouse to coffeehouse trying to track down an individual to whom Tony would like to speak. As they visit more and more establishments, Paulie "Walnuts" Gualtieri (Tony Sirico) becomes more and more incensed. Eventually, he offers, "Fuckin' Italian people! How do we miss out on this? . . . Fuckin' espresso! Cappuccino! We invented this shit, and all these other cocksuckers are gettin' rich off of it. . . . And it's not just the money. It's a pride thing. All our food, pizza, calzone, buffalo mozzarella, olive oil. These fucks have nothing. They ate 'pootsie' before we gave them the gift of our cuisine. This? This is the worst. This espresso shit." By depicting ethnic characters that accept and in this case protect their ethnic identity and culture, the series defies the homogenizing effects of Americanization in a time when Americanization is both a national and an international norm.⁴⁰ Thus, the characters of *The Sopranos* tend to resist being relegated to the espresso and cappuccino at the local Starbucks and instead seek to secure success without relinquishing their ethnic roots. This is a vastly different message from the one offered by *Little Caesar*, *Scarface*, *Top Hat*, and *The Gay Divorcee*. *The Sopranos* as well as many of the other television series and features films of approximately the last ten years are not efforts to perpetuate the message of assimilation or discrimination but rather attempts to preserve and celebrate ethnic ties.

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NOTES

1. In 1999, actor Matt Le Blanc, who plays the character of Joey Tribbiani on *Friends*, was awarded the National Italian American Foundation Entertainment Achievement Award.

2. In New Orleans in 1891, for instance, when nineteen Italians were acquitted of the murder of Chief of Police David Hennessey, fears of an Italian mafia

led to a mass protest by thousands that ended with the lynching of eighteen of the nineteen Italians. More recently, in May 1993, a senior United States district judge offered the following statement when sentencing three mobsters to life in prison: "I believe there is a large part of the young Italo-American community that should be discouraged from going into this line of work" (LaGumina 2-3).

3. For a more thorough discussion of the complexities of *The Sopranos*, see Gardaphé, "A Class Act."

4. See the Immigration Act of 1924.

5. For a more detailed discussion, see Mangione and Morreale, 293-301.

6. Many refer to the sons and daughters of immigrants as first generation, arguing that the immigrants themselves were not Americans but Italians. I prefer to refer to the immigrants as first-generation Italian Americans, as I believe my immigrant great-grandparents believed they were Americans.

7. Charles Musser notes that early cinema "imposed an essentially assimilationist ideology on its diverse, often immigrant audiences" (40).

8. According to Carlos Clarens, Daryl Zanuck added introductions to both *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* in 1931, which means the prologues were in place just before or very soon after their initial releases. The introduction that precedes *Scarface*, *Shame of the Nation* was added at the request of the Production Code before the film's release in 1932 (57).

9. Jim Cullen has defined the faith that lies behind the American Dream as "Anything is possible if you want it badly enough" (53).

10. In an otherwise stellar analysis of gangster films, Clarens argues that Bandello "did not convey an ethnic background" (56) and that Paul Muni "acted like an immigrant all right, though not quite Italian" (87). As Clarens does not define how someone would act Italian, it is difficult to determine the meaning of his assertions. Clarens does claim that Camonte's immigrant mannerisms and habits are slowly replaced with more American speech patterns as the narrative progresses, but Clarens does not sufficiently differentiate between Italian mannerisms and other ethnic/immigrant mannerisms.

11. In a scene that Bosley Crowther labeled "one of the cruelest and most startling acts ever committed on film" (qtd. in Clarens 61), Tom Powers smashes a grapefruit into his girlfriend Kitty's (Mae Clarke) face.

12. Although there are vague discussions of other murders that Powers has committed, none are ever specifically discussed, nor are they shown onscreen.

13. Although the film treats this moment with a comic touch, it is worth noting that

a similar event actually took place. After his boss, Samuel “Nails” Morton, died in a horseback riding incident, Louis “Two Gun” Altieri shot and killed Morton’s horse (Clarens 60).

14. In this way, Massara also challenges American myths. Viewers must question what role Massara’s criminal ties have played in his success in a highly competitive field.

15. Unlike the family of *The Public Enemy*, the dysfunctional family depicted in *Scarface* does not encourage viewers to sympathize with Tony Camonte. Tony is not a child growing up with a merciless and emotionally distant father. Instead, he is a known gangster, whose mother requests that he assume the role of father and disciplinarian. These actions are morally questionable at best, and they—along with Tony’s incestuous attraction to his sister—ensure the disgust and disdain of audiences.

16. When Rico comes to Magdalena for protection from the police, she shelters him but only out of self-interest. With Rico deprived of places to turn, she effectively steals his money by giving him \$150 and keeping the rest. This is done not to teach Rico a lesson but to allow Magdalena to profit herself. With Magdalena’s behavior mirroring Rico’s prior criminal mindset, Rico is plunged into poverty.

17. In *Little Caesar*, the Palermo Club is for all intents and purposes a gangsters’ fraternity in which awards are given for despicable acts, and the First Ward Social Club of *Scarface* gets a new gangster/president each time their former president/gangster is murdered. The films infer that every individual who is a member or a patron of these obviously Italian clubs is guilty of criminal activity.

18. These characters have dark hair and what appears to be olive skin and wear the neatly tailored suits, trench coats, and hats that have come to be associated with characters like Rico, Tony Camonte, and a number of Hollywood’s other Italian American gangsters.

19. Clarens, for instance, refers to Camonte’s social secretary (played by Vince Barnett) in *Scarface* as a “tiny, stupid hood” (95).

20. Ernest Sharpe was born on February 10, 1906, in El Reno, Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). After adopting the name Erik Rhodes, he became a stage actor and enjoyed a brief Hollywood career from 1934 to 1939. Rhodes played twenty-five roles in six years and became the master of the *fesso*, playing characters with names like Spadissimo and Spaghetti Nacio.

21. At the end of *The Gay Divorcee*, Tonetti stands by helplessly while the waiter (Blore) exposes Cyril Glossop (Walter Austin) as the married Professor Brown. Because Glossop is already married, his

ability to impede the romantic desires of Mimi and Guy Holden is subverted. Similarly, in *Top Hat*, Bates (Blore) confesses that, while masquerading as a clergyman, he “married” Beddini and Tremont. Beddini stands in shock and does not respond to Jerry Travers’s (Astaire) question about why he (Beddini) is in Tremont’s room. The film dissolves to a shot of Jerry Travers and Tremont dancing, and then fades out.

22. Although he works as a male “correspondent,” Tonetti frequently calls his wife and is upfront about his profession. During one of these phone calls, Tonetti hears a deep voice in the background and becomes enraged when he suspects his wife’s infidelity. He is quickly calmed, however, when his wife explains that the deep voice heard in the background is that of his nine-year-old son. Tonetti hangs up the phone and happily tells Astaire and Rogers that he cannot believe his nine-year-old’s voice is already changing (which, of course, it is not). This scene evidences both Tonetti’s hypocritical jealousy and his stupidity. It is the classic example of a *fesso*.

23. See Kennedy or Terkel.

24. Chico is pronounced Chick-O, not Cheek-O, and originally referred to Marx’s love of women. Chico, along with his famed brothers, would star in fourteen Marx Brothers’ films.

25. Musser has argued that the Marx Brothers’ characters should be viewed as Jewish, despite Jenkins’s claim that they never played specifically Jewish characters. Key to Musser’s contention is a moment in *Animal Crackers* (Victor Heerman, 1930), a relatively early Marx Brothers film, in which it becomes apparent that Ravelli (Chico) is masquerading as an Italian. Focusing so intently on a single instance in the Marx Brothers’ *oeuvre*, however, discounts the audience’s experience, as it is unlikely that viewers would remember a single line in an early film or that that single line would frame their entire experience of other Marx Brothers’ films. Further, Ravelli’s admission does not necessarily apply to the separate characters of Fiorello, Chicolini, or any of the other Italians characters that Chico played. See Musser, 63–69.

26. In an interview in 1970, Groucho said of *Duck Soup*, “We were trying to be funny, but we didn’t know we were satirizing the current conditions. It came as a great surprise to us” (qtd. in Jenkins 186). Whereas the Marx Brothers were apparently ignorant of the larger social critiques found in their films, many critics and theorists have been quick to identify them.

27. Because Chico could shed and resume ethnic identities at will, he became an assimilated American. His ethnicity was no longer a prison but rather a choice.

28. For a more detailed discussion, see Rogin.

29. *A Night at the Opera* was made at MGM after the commercial failure of the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* had forced them out of Paramount. Henry Jenkins has argued that character motivation became more important in these later Marx Brothers films and that the Marx characters took on a role that supported more conventional narrative patterns. In this film, according to Frank Krutnik, the Marx Brothers assume the role of supporting characters that assist in the realization of Baroni’s romantic interests. See Jenkins and also Krutnik.

30. Most seem to have an olive complexion (which is again difficult to discern in a black and white film, but their skin is certainly darker than the non-Italian characters). They have dark hair, and many of the men have moustaches. In addition, the characters are dressed not in suits or elegant dresses but rather in what might be labeled ethnic costumes.

31. Jenkins has argued that such star turns in film sometimes have little to no narrative motivation (145). However, in this case, the incident demonstrates the vast degree of difference between two lifestyles and is vitally important in formulating the film’s rhetoric regarding ethnicity.

32. This instance harkens back to earlier Marx Brothers films, in which, according to Mark Winokur, the brothers “do not act as if they wish to be included in [the conventional] world at all” (140).

33. In 1989, for instance, Yusuf Hawkins, a sixteen-year-old African American, and three of his friends, also African Americans, entered the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, an area that is populated predominantly by Italian Americans. They were chased by a group of thirty whites, and Hawkins was shot and killed. Two years later, when the Reverend Al Sharpton led a march through Bensonhurst to protest Hawkins’s murder, an Italian American male, wielding a knife, approached Sharpton and stabbed him.

34. This, of course, was not always the case. For a discussion on the evacuation, internment, and treatment of Italians during the early years of World War II, see DiStasi.

35. See Gardaphé, “A Class Act.”

36. This is not to argue that the series is “just entertainment,” as some prominent Italian Americans have suggested. Such a shallow approach completely discounts the idea that television and film reflect the cultures in which they are produced or received. Furthermore, it insults the individuals involved in the production of what is both art and a cultural artifact.

37. Racial character types are also abundant in American film history. For a detailed investigation of this topic, see Bogle.

38. Accents, although a valid reminder of an ethnic past and a small signification

of the difficulties of immigration, are reduced in these films to an objectionable and indisputable trait that singles out non-Americans.

39. Central to this contention is the identification that viewers feel with the characters of *The Sopranos*. Despite his deviation from conventional American norms, Tony Soprano is attractive to viewers because he faces many of the same challenges and complications that non-ethnic or other ethnic viewers confront in contemporary American society. See Gardaphé, "A Class Act."

40. See Barber.

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Cop Rock REVI

Unsung Series and Musical Hinge in Cross-Genre Evolution

By GEORGE PLASKETES

Abstract: Hindsight and context reveal that, despite its critical and commercial failure, Steven Bochco's police musical/drama *Cop Rock* (ABC, 1990) represents a plausible progression of permission and possibility for music and narrative in television. The unsung series might be viewed as a musical muse and martyr that foreshadowed the further exploration and integration of music into dramatic and comic narratives. As a hinge linking Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* (BBC, 1986) with contemporary television series, *Cop Rock* quietly cultivated creativity and cross-genre aesthetic advancement.

Key words: Bochco, Steven; *Cop Rock*; musical narrative; *The Singing Detective*; television

SITTED



On the June 10, 2001, edition of CBS's cultural magazine show *Sunday Morning*, media critic John Leonard invoked the television title *Cop Rock* in the lead to his review of the film *Moulin Rouge*. The citation was a curious connection, or resurrection, considering that the Steven Bochco-produced police drama/musical lasted a mere half-season, eleven one-hour episodes on ABC in 1990 (September 26–December 26). In contrast, director Baz Luhrman's anachronistic, romantic musical spectacle—a three-ring Cirque du Soleil, rock popera, garage collage of farce and folly—received considerable recognition, including an Academy Award nomination for Best Film.

Bochco's experimental *Fame* meets *Hill Street Blues* medley was a formula for failure. The fusion was better suited for stage rather than the small screen. Television audiences were not ready for crooning cops, suspect serenades, junkies jammin', and judge and jury jingles from week to week in a dramatic series. Responses to Bochco's police project from audiences, ABC affiliates, advertisers, and critics

ranged from "ambitious, innovative, risky, and audacious to baffling, off-putting and irritatingly odd" (B. Carter 25).

Hindsight and context reveal that, despite its critical and commercial failure, *Cop Rock* represents a plausible progression for the police genre during the inaugural MTV era of the 1980s into the 1990s and beyond. Bochco borrowed, blended, and blew up formulaic fragments from the genre, including conventions from two of the decade's touchstone series—his own *Hill Street Blues* and Michael Mann's stylish *Miami Vice*. At the same time, Bochco paid homage to Dennis Potter's farcical British television productions *Pennies from Heaven* (1978) and, more specifically, *The Singing Detective* (1986).

Cop Rock also might be viewed as a musical muse and martyr that foreshadowed the further exploration and integration of music into dramatic and comic narratives. Thus, it may not be critical hyperbole to suggest, as Leonard does, that *Cop Rock*'s lyrical legacy can be linked to the Napster approach to postmodern pop/rock period pieces in film such as *Moulin*

Rouge and *A Knight's Tale*. In television, Bochco's series served as a stepping stone or hinge between Potter's *The Singing Detective* and comedies and musical dramedies, particularly *Ally McBeal* and other musical episodes of series including *The Drew Carey Show*, *Chicago Hope*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Retrospection reveals that *Cop Rock* quietly cultivated creativity and contributed dramatic musical license to various productions and cross-genre formal and aesthetic advances.

Steven Bochco: Beginning a Blue Streak

I think what is amazing about my career is that I've never had any specific goals and ambitions. I like the *process*. I like the work. I have no idea what I'll do next.

—Steven Bochco
(qtd. in Christensen 82)

Television series, like any cultural product, are subject to numerous individual, collaborative, organizational, sociocultural, and economic conditions and circumstances that collectively foster or hinder their inception, development, distribution, and success

or failure. Production ethnographies, authorship studies, and literature on innovation suggest that, within television, the development of an unconventional form, such as *Cop Rock*, may be determined by variables such as a producer's or production company's track record and relationship with a network, a producer's ability to operate "outside" the normal organizational channels, the competitive environment between networks and their positions in the ratings, and programming executives' willingness to take risks and allow a show time to cultivate an audience (Ettema and Whitney).

In 1987, Steven Bochco left NBC, the network that had nurtured much of his success as a writer-producer. After turning down an offer to be president of CBS Entertainment, Bochco signed an unprecedented ten-year, ten-series, \$50 million guaranteed contract with the ABC network. The deal was ideal and unusual by any creator's standards, as it represented both financial and artistic freedom. If one of Bochco's ideas was rejected or a show ran fewer than the standard thirteen-episode run before renewal, Bochco was still paid and paid well. Cancellation compensation was \$1.5 million. More staggering to industry observers was the stipulation that Bochco would own the rights to his shows.

To ABC, whose prime-time schedule at the time lacked prestigious and successful programs, Bochco was an investment in high ratings, hits, and respectability. Bochco was proven product, a writer-producer with an impressive track record, particularly for police and detective series. His creative cop credits date back to the 1960s as a writer for the NBC series *The Bold Ones* and *The Name of the Game*. His 1970s work includes *Columbo*, *McMillan and Wife*, *Richie Brockelman*, *Private Eye*, and the CBS series *Delvecchio* starring Judd Hirsch and *Paris* featuring James Earl Jones. In the 1980s, Bochco established himself as one of television's top creators of drama with two groundbreaking shows for NBC—*Hill Street Blues* (1981–87) and *L.A. Law* (1986–94). Both series introduced new candor to

prime-time drama and pioneered what would become central elements of Bochco's stylistic signature: large ensemble casts featuring ten to fifteen relatively unknown actors and actresses playing complex characters, serial storytelling with multiple plotlines that weave in and out of an episode and take weeks to resolve, absurdist humor, fast-paced scene changes, and a gritty cinematic realism.

Collaborator David Milch was among many who characterized Bochco as a "Wunderkind," adding that the adulation from his acclaimed shows (*Hill Street* and *L.A. Law*) perhaps tempted Bochco "to think that he could do anything" (Christensen 81). Some of Bochco's post-*Hill Street* projects and his inaugural ABC endeavors reinforce Milch's notions of Bochco's indulgence in creative whimsy. For example, *Bay City Blues* (NBC, 1983), a minor league baseball drama with a big league budget, rivaled Fred Silverman's *Supertrain* (ABC, 1979) as one of the biggest financial fiascos in broadcast television history. Production costs included set design consisting of a stadium built exclusively for the show and crowds hired at \$85 per person per day. The investment did not pay off as the series lasted only four episodes.

One of the notable programming trends that emerged in the 1987–88 prime-time schedule was the comedy/drama hybrid labeled "dramedies," represented in series such as the one-hour *Moonlighting* (ABC) and half-hour series *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd* (NBC), *Frank's Place* (CBS), *The Wonder Years* (ABC), and *The "Slap" Maxwell Story* (ABC). Bochco's contribution to this subgenre, *Hooperman* (ABC), featured John Ritter as a San Francisco detective. According to Bochco, the show "just popped out of my face . . . the whole thing came to me in five minutes" (qtd. in Christensen 76). In 1989, when *Hooperman* ended its two-season run, Bochco paid tribute to his father, a child prodigy violinist, with *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, another half-hour dramedy series about a sixteen-year-old physician.

The Soap Copera: Hill Street Blueprint, Broadway, and the BBC

[It would not make sense to invite comparisons with a breakthrough program like *Hill Street*] unless you find a compellingly different way to reach people. And music reaches people; it reaches them underneath their flak jackets.

—Steven Bochco (qtd. in B. Carter 34)

During the 1980s, conventions of the police/crime genre on network television were largely redefined by the cluttered, gritty realism of Bochco's *Hill Street Blues* and the pulsating pastels of Mann's *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984–89). According to broadcast programming lore, the idea for *Miami Vice* originated from a note—"MTV Cops"—scribbled by NBC Entertainment President Brandon Tartikoff. Mann used Jan Hammer's theme and score, along with popular songs performed by original artists, to create a striking soundtrack that linked music to story the same way composer Henri Mancini did in the 1950s with *Peter Gunn*.¹

Bochco and Mann took somewhat divergent paths of progress with the sequels to their successes. Mann chose the retro route with *Crime Story* (NBC, 1986–88), a cop and mobster *Untouchables* update set in Chicago in 1963. The only hint of *Miami Vice* in the show was the opening theme, which featured a revamped version of Del Shannon's 1961 hit "Runaway." With his next project, Bochco looked beyond the commercial viability and creative convenience of duplicating *Hill Street Blues* in its entirety.² He was particularly interested in advancing the use of music beyond the norms of soundtrack. Bochco's vision was vaudevillian; he was inspired by both Broadway and British productions, specifically the work and vision of Dennis Potter, whose characters frequently break into song, miming the words from old recordings. "I think [*The Singing Detective*] is possibly the best seven hours of television I've ever seen. Period; without qualification," Bochco said. "It gave us permission, at least internally. Creatively, it gave me permission to do *Cop Rock*" ("Bochco/Potter").

In addition to Bochco's admiration for Potter's productions, he considered a suggestion to adapt *Hill Street Blues* to Broadway as a musical. Although the theatrical project did not materialize, the seeds of song for a small-screen "soap copera" had been sown. "Why not reverse it [the idea of a police musical], I thought; bring it to this medium [television]," said Bochco (qtd. in B. Carter 33). Mike Post, one of television's busiest and best music composer-arrangers, cautioned Bochco about the costs and creative risks of producing a weekly television musical. Despite the words of discouragement from his friend and collaborator, Bochco proceeded and even convinced Post to be the show's musical producer despite his reservations.

Post's concerns about the elaborate nature of such a production appeared well founded. Every stage of the process, from pre-production to post-production, presented unusual problems that required special planning and puzzle solving. Casting weekly guest roles had to be based on the performers' abilities to not only act but to sing and dance as well. Complicated rehearsals required an eight-day-per-episode shooting schedule, one more than standard for an hour-long show. The editing process was also demanding as it required mixing music and dialogue tracks. The cumulative result was a budget for *Cop Rock* that exceeded the average cost for a one-hour show by nearly 40%, translating into approximately \$1.3 million a week to produce.

The fragmented formula for the series required two creative staffs, one for the script and one for the songwriting, music, and choreography. Bochco envisioned 5 original songs per episode, with no cover versions and no lip-syncing. Projected over a season of twenty-two episodes, that meant 110 songs would have to be composed, performed, and choreographed within conventional dramatic scenes. The songs were central to the narrative, serving essential dialogue purposes of providing information, advancing the plot, and revealing character and emotion. Popular singer-songwriter Randy

The songs were central to the narrative, serving essential dialogue purposes of providing information, advancing the plot, and revealing character and emotion.

Newman composed and performed *Cop Rock*'s main title theme "Under the Gun" and wrote the pilot episode's 5 songs. However, the cost of keeping a company of songwriters of Newman's caliber on a weekly song-on-demand basis was not feasible. In subsequent weeks, six to eight lesser known songwriters were assembled under Post's musical direction. The group included Amanda McBroom, who wrote the song "The Rose," and Donnie Markowitz, who won an Oscar for the song "I Had the Time of My Life" in the film *Dirty Dancing*. Bochco eventually hoped to enlist other popular artists, such as Paul Simon and Billy Joel, as special guest composers for episodes. Another long-term musical goal was to compile the show's best songs into a *Cop Rock* soundtrack. "My anxiety with *Cop Rock* wasn't whether it would be a hit, but whether we could actually do the damn thing and get it on the air every week," said Bochco of the production process (qtd. in Tucker 65).

The "*Hill Street Blues* on Broadway via the BBC" blueprint became *Cop Rock* on September 26, 1990, at 10 p.m. (EDT) on ABC. True to its novel design and framed by Bochco's signature style of storytelling, characterization, and production values, *Cop Rock*'s premiere fused familiar conventions of the police/detective genre with traditional elements of the musical. From the opening scene—a cluttered, nocturnal collage of hovering

helicopter search lights, plainclothes officers, and swarming S.W.A.T. teams in a frenzied, break-the-door-down descent on a crack house—the nervous camera, shadowy, low lighting, gritty realism, and urban setting are vintage Bochco, with a hint of the reality camcorder cop series *Cops* (Fox).

Cop Rock's unflinching violence, unsettling plot twists, frank dialogue, realism, and intensity rise above the levels of other television dramas. A car chase involving cops and a red-light-running van squealing and swerving through streets and alleys appears like standard stock from cop formulas seen in *C.H.i.P.S* or *T.J. Hooker* until the pursuit climaxes with a graphic shootout near a playground and a slain officer, which establishes the "cop killer revenge" theme. During an interrogation in "the box," a determined detective tortures a suspect by forcing him to drink hot coffee after each question until he urinates in his pants. As the storyline develops, the same renegade detective shoots a bound suspect point blank and becomes a heroic avenger to the squad. The lone dissenter is the captain, who, like *Hill Street*'s head Frank Furillo, represents the busy precinct's moral center.

In addition to Bochco's usual masterful exploration of the gray areas of the law through cops who often resemble criminals, there is characteristic contrast in partners: male/female, young/old, black/white, clean/corrupt. Sprinkled in for comic relief are a few offbeat characters, such as a pistol-packing police chief who duels with a mechanical gunslinger in his office closet for spontaneous rounds of target practice.

The familiar dramatic narratives shift into diverse song and dance intervals that substitute for action and dialogue. Following a drug bust, a group of apprehended suspects who are being escorted into squad cars begin rapping a response in a handcuffed chorus, taunting the arresting officers, "In these streets, we got the power." A junkie mother croons a lullaby on a bus stop bench before selling her baby.

A police line-up becomes a threatening chorus line. A cop's eulogy is a spiritual. Some of the production numbers border on spectacle: Homeless people emerge from under a bridge into the streets to perform an extensively choreographed musical number reminiscent of the "Be a Pepper" long-form television commercials for Dr. Pepper or the pop star Pepsi ads showcased during the Grammy Awards in the 1980s. The mayor does her best Helen Reddy roar about graft and corruption from atop her office desk. A jury delivers its verdict in a rousing gospel choir fashion, with the entire courtroom swaying and clapping to the beat. Other performances seem better suited for animated Disney tales. A forensics specialist sings a forlorn love ballad in his dimly lit den. The good captain listens to his wife's lyrical lament about "watching my dreams and wishes drown in dirty dishes." Still others are farcical. An agitated yuppie, watching his BMW being impounded after being busted for buying cocaine in a seedy parking lot, wails a pseudo-soulful "I want my Beemer back."

Singin' the Blues: "Flop Rock," "Cop Wreck," and De-Fameing the Force

Despite a heavy promotional campaign, which included trailers in movie theaters (an uncommon marketing strategy for television series at the time), *Cop Rock* could not sustain sufficient audience numbers beyond the initial episode's curious crowd. Nor was there a groundswell of support from critics. Although many commended

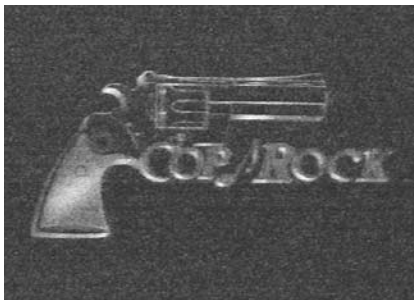
The critical consensus concluded that the show needed to be de-Famed; the shotgun marriage of musical fantasy and inner city mayhem just did not work.

Bohco for his creative courage, they also got carried away with cute in their columns, using playful pity in paraphrased epithets pronouncing the police project "Flop Rock" and "Cop Wreck." The critical consensus concluded that the show needed to be de-Famed; the shotgun marriage of musical fantasy and inner city mayhem just did not work. Although programming executives at ABC pledged patience, they were not encouraged by the initial ratings response to the series. "When you try something as different as *Cop Rock*, you have to be prepared as a programmer for the fact that it is just not going to work," said ABC Entertainment President Robert Iger (qtd. in Roush). The struggling third-place network was committed to developing shows that "created different experiences" for viewers. From 1989 to 1990, in addition to *Cop Rock*, ABC boldly introduced *Twin Peaks*, the David

Lynch/Mark Frost surreal "sap opera" set in a timber town in the Pacific Northwest; *Elvis*, a bio-drama of Elvis Presley's early years; *The Young Riders*, a revisionist Western about Pony Express recruits; and *America's Funniest Home Videos*, a contemporary *Candid Camera* and programming precursor to the current reality show trend.

Cop Rock exceeded ABC's ambitious agenda for "different" programming in excessive, not to mention expensive, form and fashion. However, in this case, deviant distinction meant demise. "Viewers do seek a comfort level in programs and the music can create some discomfort and probably has," said Iger of *Cop Rock*, sounding like a programming doctor diagnosing an ailment or, perhaps more appropriately, a coroner at an autopsy (qtd. in Roush). *Cop Rock* went from an off-Broadway audition to off-television as the series was canceled in December after eleven episodes.³

Iger's assessment of the audience's uneasiness may have been understated. Bohco himself likely was aware from the show's conception that he might be committing telecide with his small-screen "soap copera." Fusing fragments of Tin Pan Alley, Disney, Broadway, and MTV with a realistic police drama was a drastically different, if not discomfiting, experience for viewers. The musical medley both challenged and violated standard expectations inherent in the genre. The singing was incompatible with character and continuity and too often interrupted the narrative flow. Minus the music, *Cop Rock's* storylines and char-



Cop Rock title: Firing false notes?



Judge and jury deliver a gospel rendition of the verdict in an episode of *Cop Rock*.



acters combined to create a quality drama comparable to any on television, including Bochco's best. Yet, the musical interludes became intrusions that fostered apprehension and misplaced anticipation of the next song rather than plot twists or character arcs. The singing sequences demanded that viewers suspend disbelief and balance intense emotionalism with farce and absurdity of characters who appeared to have trained with Debbie Allen at a dance academy rather than at a police academy.

Cop Rock's colliding conventions were so incongruous that the show could not even manage "acquired taste" status beyond the initial curiosity attraction of the pilot episode. In subsequent weeks, when viewers were presumably better prepared for the show's musical elements, the distraction did not diminish; the show's ratings dwindled. In the end, Bochco's creative vision was undermined as much as anything by the venue itself. Even with music video established for nearly a decade by MTV in the American cultural experience by the time *Cop Rock* premiered in 1990, the musical in its more traditional form did not translate well to the confines of television sets in living rooms. *Cop Rock* was better suited to a theatrical stage and setting where audiences expect characters to sing their lines, a point that Bochco himself concedes:

In retrospect, I think the show embarrassed viewers—it made them uncomfortable to see characters bursting into song in a TV drama. When we tested the pilot for groups of people, it always went over great. Now I realize it was because we had a group of people together, as you would in a Broadway theater. But watching it in your living room, it came off more like Uncle Joe, loaded at Thanksgiving, with a lamp shade on his head and singing "Sweet Sue." (qtd. in Tucker 65)

Musical Interludes: Scenes, Soundtracks, and Small-Screen Spectacle

In the early 1990s, creators of crime-time television series did not take a musical cue from Bochco's chorus of cops. Instead, producers pre-

Bochco himself likely was aware from the show's conception that he might be committing telecide with his small-screen "soap copera."

ferred camcorder cops. Low-budget, reality-based dramatic crime re-creations and missing person crusades emerged as a programming trend in *Cop Rock's* immediate wake. The video *vérité* variations included *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC)—hosted by a trio of ex-television cops Robert Stack, Raymond Burr, and Karl Malden—*Top Cops* (CBS), *Cops* (Fox), *FBI: The Untold Stories* (ABC), *Secret Service* (NBC), *True Detectives* (CBS), and *Stories of the Highway Patrol* (Syndicated).

Music continued to be widely integrated into other comic and dramatic presentations during the same period, although not on the scale of *Cop Rock*. *Northern Exposure's* (CBS, 1990–95) use of music was arguably the most eclectic, captivating, reflective synthesis of soundtrack and storyline on television, particularly during each epi-

sode's closing three minutes. A scene depicting a coffin catapulting through the sky toward its final resting place in a lake as Procol Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale" plays ("We tripped the light fantastic. . .") is emblematic of the meditative codas to the narratives involving fictional Cicely, Alaska's, colorful characters, their relationships, and rural rituals.

Pop star cameos also became commonplace, especially during competitive ratings sweeps periods. Soundtrack synergy also emerged, just as Bochco had envisioned with *Cop Rock*. One-hour dramatic series, particularly those with key teen demographic appeal such as *Melrose Place* (Fox) and *Party of Five* (Fox), spawned accompanying music collections of songs featured in the shows. By the late 1990s, soundtracks were established as a standard across genres on networks and cable. Shows ranging from *Dawson's Creek* (WB), *Gilmore Girls* (WB), and *Providence* (NBC), to *Friends* (NBC) and *Scrubs* (NBC), to *The X-Files* (Fox) and *The Sopranos* (HBO) were among the expanding catalog of television music.

An increasing number of series began to devote at least one of its twenty-two episodes in a season to a special musical production, often presented in some fantasy form or dream narrative. Recent examples include *That 70s Show* (Fox), which marked its 100th show in 2001 with a musical episode featuring The Who. On *Scrubs*, a comedy that uses numerous unconventional production techniques, including *Wonder Years*-style voice-



Hospital staff of NBC's comedy series *Scrubs* perform their own version of *West Side Story*.

over commentary, young interns transform Sacred Heart Hospital into song and dance scenes from *West Side Story*. Perhaps the most stunning stage-like presentation can be found in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* (UPN) musical episode "Once More with Feeling," a surreal, small-screen spectacle featuring original singing performances by the cast. Promoted as a "special television event," the episode was nominated for an Emmy Award, and complete versions of all the songs are compiled in an original soundtrack recording.

Elaborate mini-production numbers have become a distinguishing trait of *The Drew Carey Show* (ABC). The blue-collar comedy's opening title tunes—the Vogues' "Five O'Clock World" for two years and, in subsequent seasons, a cover version of Ian Hunter's "Cleveland Rocks"—have been accompanied by large-cast choreography. Flamboyant productions over a number of seasons include a *Full Monty* strip routine, a rowdy dance-off outside a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and a musical fantasy sequence with Carey explaining his escape from a mental institution to Leo Sayer's "Long Tall Glasses." In 1999, the series commemorated its 100th episode with an ambitious "Brotherhood of Man" production adapted from *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*. Its 2001 season premiere, "Drew Carey's Back to School Rock and Roll Comedy Hour," features Sugar Ray, Uncle Kracker, Motorhead, Joe Walsh, Peter Frampton, SHeDAISY, and Smash Mouth at

the Cleveland cast's watering hole, the Warsaw Tavern.

Cop Rock Crossovers: Music and Medicine, Lyrics and Lawyers

I'm singing because it's easier than talking. It's like a mask; it's one step from reality.

—Dr. Jeffrey Geiger,
Chicago Hope (1997)

Every time she speaks it sounds like a song to me.

—Client to Ally McBeal,
Ally McBeal (2002)

A 1997 musical episode of the medical drama *Chicago Hope* (CBS), created by Bochco protégé David E. Kelley, simultaneously mirrors *Cop Rock* and magnifies some of its generic miscalculations.⁴ Elements such as setting, soundtrack, and the subconscious combine to make the presentation more accessible as a musical.

The storyline centers around neurosurgeon Dr. Aaron Shutt, who is stricken with a life-threatening brain aneurysm. The script establishes music as the central narrative thread when the cantankerous Shutt collapses in pain to the floor of a convenience store while trying to unplug an annoying old-timey, tin-roll piano locked in an unrelenting "Red Red Robin" loop.

Shutt's perilous condition not only grounds the story with an inner logic that lacked in *Cop Rock's* episodes, it provides permission for a surreal, soul-searching sing-along involving friends, family, and colleagues. As Shutt is gurneyed down the halls of the emergency room, the disabled doctor is in delirious drift. His cloudy col-

leagues hovering over him appear as lounge lizards lip-syncing Dean Martin's "Ain't That a Kick in the Head." The setting smoothly shifts from emergency room to nightclub with the singing doctors dressed in tuxedos, leaning against a bar. Various medical personnel check charts and push morphine drips in criss-cross choreography through the scene. The visual transition is one of several seamless segues. In another, as the anesthetized Shutt drifts off into oblivion, the camera pans from the operating room into a recording studio where the staff rehearses, once again with lyrical tongue-in-cheek, "Well I think I'm going out of my head / Over you."

Melody and movement mix well with all things medical. The set, props, and iconography supply a more natural backdrop for a musical production than the streets, tenements, alleys, guns, speeding cars, and low-watt interrogation rooms of a police drama. A hospital's interiors intrinsically resemble a stage set, from the emergency room entrance to the colorful, checkered floors of linoleum to the long hallways leading to luminous operating rooms. Studio-like props abound: carts and charts, tubes and operating tables, X-rays and exit signs, monitors and machines. Characters appear in costume, wearing scrubs, gowns, lab coats, and masks, accented with accessories such as stethoscopes and syringes.

Within this setting, the singing is less intrusive; music is a staple of surgery, recovery, and bedside manner. Diverse production numbers become an ethereal narrative for Shutt as he confronts his mid-career crisis, clashes with colleagues, and life choices are playful, among them a roller-skating nurse's flirtatious Melanie classic "Brand New Key," the hard-line chief surgeon's soft and supportive gender reversal of Helen Reddy's "You and Me against the World," and the surgical staff in a coordinated Elvisian coif and costume chorus of Frankie Vali and the Four Seasons' "Walk Like a Man." An elaborate, full-cast song and dance routine to Frank Sinatra's "Luck



Chicago Hope's homage to Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective*.

Be a Lady” fuses fear and fate into benediction moments before Shutt’s delicate surgery. When a complication suddenly arises during the procedure, a multiple monitor montage chronicles Shutt’s life in music video fashion with Jimi Hendrix’s electric version of “All Along the Watchtower” playing. The song and dance details delightfully and faithfully mirror Dennis Potter’s *The Singing Detective* and, to a lesser degree, elements of *Cop Rock*. The homage is undeniable as the brain surgeon brought in to operate on Shutt is named “Denise Potter.”

The episode illustrates subtleties between singing and soundtrack. Whereas *Cop Rock* opts exclusively for authenticity with the cast performing original compositions, *Chicago Hope* goes the safer route with its medical staff lip-syncing familiar songs. Other than Shutt’s off-key Sinatra, the only character who actually sings is Dr. Jeffrey Geiger (played by Mandy Patinkin), whose numbers include a shivering falsetto cover of the Jackson Five’s “I’ll Be There” and a vaudevillian “Red Red Robin,” which echoes Shutt’s convenience store collapse. The production and casting nuance is that Patinkin, in addition to being a Tony Award-winning actor, is an established recording artist who specializes in show tunes.⁵ Although both dramas deal with life and death situations, *Chicago Hope*’s costume karaoke approach signals a more fanciful presentation. *Cop Rock*’s characters singing original, unfamiliar tunes may be a slight contrast to lip-sync and cover versions,

For television series, especially those merging music with narratives, location may not be everything, but it certainly does make a difference.

yet the method amplifies the incongruity between the music and narrative’s dramatic realism.

As always, there are exceptions. In the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* musical, the characters sing original songs. The disparity again lies in the setting. The horror/fantasy realm of *Buffy*’s dark underworld is theatrical, thus conducive to creepy choruses, singing spirits, and dancing demons. For television series, especially those merging music with narratives, location may not be everything, but it certainly does make a difference.

Incorporating musical elements into a storyline of a single episode is obviously less complicated than sustaining singing from week to week as the basis for an entire series. *Cop Rock* clearly demonstrates that the pitfalls outweigh the possibilities when producing a weekly musical. A single episode or special production contains

novel appeal for audiences, creators, and casts. Audiences are willing to tolerate, if not welcome, a refreshing diversion from the weekly, often weak, formulaic storylines. Likewise, writers, producers, and performers have a rare opportunity to temporarily deviate from the norm and construct a creatively convenient, “anything goes” atmosphere, often in the form of flashbacks, fantasies, or dream sequences for their characters and storylines. In addition, the special episodes usually benefit from extensive promotion as “viewing events,” which better prepares the audience and modifies conventional expectations.

Cop Rock’s telecidal mission magnifies the “one-episode musical” as the safe standard, the genre and audience allotment for a series. It is highly unlikely that *Chicago Hope* would have succeeded had it been designed solely as a musical series. Conversely, it is safe to speculate that *Cop Rock* might have lasted longer minus the music. And Bochco likely could have arranged a musical extravaganza with *Hill Street Blues*, *L.A. Law*, or *NYPD Blue*, as long as it was limited to a single episode.

There is one network program that provides a series rather than single episode frame of reference for music and narratives, however. The same season that the *Chicago Hope* musical aired, its creator David Kelley expanded elements of the experimental hospital episode into *Ally McBeal* (Fox), a flighty, one-hour legal dramedy that closely approximates *Cop Rock*’s musical ambitions. Obscure singer Vonda Shepard is cast as an accompanist on the show. She not only performs the opening theme “Searchin’ My Soul,” which became a hit single, but is cast in dual roles as a maestro and meandering muse. Shepard’s piano-driven, bluesy cover-song serenades thread scenes with moods and motifs, provide glimpses of leading lady Ally’s thoughts and emotions, and serve as nightclub karaoke classics for lawyers looking for love and libation at the local lounge.

Beyond Shepard, music is manifest in many variations throughout the



A *Chicago Hope* operating room becomes a recording studio lined with singing surgeons.



Chicago Hope surgical staff in an Elvisian coif and costume chorus of “Walk Like a Man.”

show. “You get the feeling sometimes the song comes first, and David [Kelley] writes the story and script around it,” says producer Steve Robin (qtd. in C. Carter). Swinging stall door song and dance numbers are common in the law firm’s unisex bathroom. Ally’s therapist, played by Tracey Ullman, encourages clients to have a personal “theme song.” The cavalcade of musical cameos includes Sting, Elton John, Mariah Carey, Tina Turner, Al Green, Gladys Knight, Gloria Gaynor, the Barrys—White and Manilow—and teen baritone Josh Groban. Jon Bon Jovi’s appearance led to a nine-episode acting stint. Conversely, Robert Downey, Jr.’s, role resulted in several musical moments for him, including an “Every Breath You Take” duet with Sting and an impressive rendition of Joni Mitchell’s “River.” Other cast members’ rock star and neon-Broadway fantasies routinely surface in minor, self-indulgent subplots that evolve no farther than the nightclub stage with Shepard’s piano accompaniment in scenes that often conclude episodes.

In its five seasons (1997–2002), *Ally McBeal* generated more than 400 songs or musical performances. On the surface, that total is striking, especially for a show not billed exclusively as a musical presentation. Yet, projections of Bochco’s aims with *Cop Rock* (5 or 6 songs per episode, multiplied by the standard 22 episodes for a series, equals 100–120 songs per season) would have exceeded 400 and set a precedent for music and drama. *Ally McBeal* also fulfills Bochco’s vision for musical guests, composers, and soundtrack synergy. The series’ songs were compiled into four soundtracks featuring Vonda Shepard: *Songs from Ally McBeal* (1998), *Heart and Soul: New Songs from Ally McBeal* (1999), *A Very Ally Christmas* (2001), and *Ally McBeal: For Once in My Life* (2001).

Ally McBeal may lose a hypothetical hindsight battle of the bands by the numbers, but its five seasons dominate *Cop Rock*’s mere eleven episodes. The reasons are obvious. Whether single episode or series, producer Kelley places music in a different dramatic context than Bochco. (Kelley also ben-

Cop Rock demonstrates how fragments of failure are capable of floating and finding themselves in other forms and fashions.

efited from having another legal series in prime time on another night, *The Practice* [ABC], where he could use serious storylines.) The settings and situations on *Ally McBeal* were safer, often surreal, and sometimes silly. Places make musical performances permissible and plausible. This primary distinction is demonstrated deftly in the opening musical montage of *Ally McBeal*’s series finale in May 2002. As episode fragments frantically flash before a wistful Ally in Wonderland—an urban Dorothy swirling in her inner tornado—she cries out, “But what about the music?” The record-scratch sound effect abruptly interrupts, and a voice-over clarifies, “It’s a fantasy!” For punctuation, the law firm’s familiar bathroom stall door opens, and Barry Manilow appears, singing “Even now. . . .”

Fusion’s False Notes: Permission and Possibility; Homage and Hinge

When we first did *Hill Street*, people didn’t get it at all. Then they kind of accepted what we were doing. And once they accepted it, it really did kind of change the rules of dramatic television. I think we can potentially do the same [with *Cop Rock*]; I think we can expand what’s possible.

—Steven Bochco (qtd. in B. Carter 34)

Twelve years after its final episode, *Cop Rock* lingers in obscurity as a television of the B-film, albeit without a B-movie budget. Its scant eleven episodes are barely enough to block a “cult classic” court, cop, or comedy mock marathon in cable’s kitschy late

night landscape. In July 2002, one of those rare *Cop Rock* citations materialized from the files of failure. This one was predictably less complimentary than John Leonard’s literate linking of *Cop Rock* with *Moulin Rouge* on *Sunday Morning*. In an article in its July 20–26 issue, *TV Guide* presented a list of “The 50 Worst Shows of All Time.” *Cop Rock* ranked number 8.

The deriding distinction is typical of *Cop Rock*’s legacy. Predictably, the predominant view is that *Cop Rock* is more laughable than legitimate. Attributing some sense of impact, influence, or inspiration to such a critical and commercial failure is a premise likely to be regarded as ridiculous and easily rejected on any level. Even minuscule mentions such as those by Leonard should not be misconstrued as literate lobbying for *Cop Rock*’s lofty place in broadcast programming history. Any acclaim for the show from critical corners risks revealing one of the potential perils of the auteur approach, that is, emphasizing the creator over the work itself, an evaluative blindspot that can elevate an undeserving production to a level of aesthetic quality.

Likewise, it is a comparable critical convenience to emphasize only successful texts—those leading in the ratings, charts, box-office sales, and critical kudos—and neglect or ignore the failures, overlooking any value they may contain. *Cop Rock* demonstrates how fragments of failure are capable of floating and finding themselves in other forms and fashions. Just as the short-lived series’ significance should not, and likely never will, be overstated, its value should not be dismissed, especially when placing the production within the context of genre evolution and cross-genre contributions.

The individual works that make up any genre represent stepping stones or links in its evolution. Whether the steps are big, small, or stumbling, the series of inventions and conventions embodied in narratives unfold and develop, defining and redefining a genre over a period of time. Following *Hill Street*’s and *Miami Vice*’s important advances within the police/crime genre’s evolution in the 1980s, *Cop*

Rock's inventive steps further explored and expanded the parameters of the genre's familiar conventions. "If you look at a 30-year curve, television has gotten much better, and you can't stop its progress," Bochco said. "We're moving forward, like it or not. Take a long look at television and you realize it just continually becomes smarter, broader in its appeal, more sophisticated" (qtd. in Tucker 65).

More markedly, *Cop Rock* signals a subtle shift on the television time line that extends beyond its own genre. By importing *The Singing Detective* and integrating its elements within the police/crime programming progression via *Cop Rock*, Bochco accomplished more than mere homage to Dennis Potter. *Cop Rock* represents a hinge, a pivotal point on the door of possibility. Just as *The Singing Detective* gave Bochco "permission" to create *Cop Rock*, Bochco, in turn passed along similar lyrical license to other producers to explore the further variations of music and narratives, whether situation comedy, dramedy, police, law, hospital, horror, or family dramas.

By the 2002 television season, the police/crime genre was so prevalent that the network prime-time schedule appeared to be wrapped in the yellow "police line" tape that outlines a crime scene. From Dick Wolf's *Law & Order* franchise on NBC, which includes *Special Victims Unit* and *Criminal Intent*; to Jerry Bruckheimer's highly rated *CSI* (CBS) series, its Miami clone, and Thursday night companion show *Without a Trace*; to *Boomtown* (NBC) and all precincts, perpetrators, and points in between, prime time has become a place crawling with cops, corpses, coroners, and forensics experts. However, none of the characters in television's crime spree and nightly police line-up sing or dance.

Although there may be little evidence of *Cop Rock* at the scenes of the current crime wave in television's dramas, its remnants continue to reveal themselves in other popular prime-time productions. The season premiere of the increasingly musical *Scrubs* in NBC's prestigious Thursday night line-up featured singer Colin

Hay as an omnipresent street musician turned serenading stalker. Hay, the former frontman for the "Big '80s" group Men at Work, strums an acoustic rendition of their hit "Overkill" while shadowing rumpled medical intern J. D. Dorian from his home to the hospital.

In an episode of the family drama *7th Heaven* (WB), the father, Eric Camden, undergoes heart bypass surgery. While under anesthesia, Camden hallucinates that he is Elvis Presley. Costumed variously in black leather, gold lame, and a spangled Vegas jumpsuit, Camden delivers Elvis versions of "All Shook Up," "Don't Be Cruel," "Teddy Bear," and "Rock-A-Hula Baby."

These musical moments are *deja vu*; they are distant duets that nod to Ally McBeal, her karaoke cast, and queen Vonda Shepard, and Buffy's singing spirits. Hay's unplugged cameo is Warsaw Tavern worthy of the Drew (Carey) crew. Eric Camden mirrors Aaron Shutt in Chicago Hope's operating room. The evolution of these musical interludes can be traced to 1990 with *Cop Rock*. Then, a few homage(nous) steps farther to 1986 with *The Singing Detective*.

Although *Cop Rock* will routinely be recognized among the "Worst Shows of All Time," it nonetheless remains an unsung series. *Cop Rock's* consequence is as a hinge, a preface of permission and possibility for music and narrative in television. *Cop Rock's* fusion, fragments, and false notes may not resonate; rather its residue and relevance ripple as a reminder beneath the surface of small-screen scenes and soundtracks. It is there that *Cop Rock* whispers; it winks; it whistles a faintly familiar television tune.

NOTES

1. Because the songs were performed by the original artists, *Miami Vice's* producers spent an average of \$50,000 per episode for music licensing rights.

2. Perhaps the closest Bochco comes to producing a *Hill Street Blues* sequel is with *NYPD Blue*, which premiered on ABC in 1993, complete with content controversy. Conservative groups targeted the show, objecting to its sex, profanity, and violence. Initially, 57 of 225 ABC affiliates

did not air the show. As *NYPD Blue's* ratings, critical acclaim, and advertising revenues increased, so did the number of station programmers who abandoned Reverend Donald Wildmon's conservative cause for Bochco's *Blue* bandwagon.

3. *Cop Rock's* swift demise did not deter Bochco from his risk-taking approach as a creator of television drama. His ensuing project in 1992 was *Capitol Critters*, an animated series set at the White House, featuring vermin—rats, mice, and roaches—as its central characters. The series' run was shorter than *Cop Rock's*, lasting a mere four episodes. In 1995, Bochco's *Murder One* (ABC) deviated from conventional law dramas by following one case for the entire twenty-two episodes. The timing of the series suggests the concept may have been inspired, in part, by the exhaustive coverage of the O. J. Simpson case.

4. Bochco mentored Kelley as a writer on *L.A. Law*. The two also worked closely together on *Doogie Howser, M.D.*

5. When Shutt confronts his long-time colleague Geiger—"Hey, why is that your real voice? Stop with the singing! I have never liked your singing. Never!"—it becomes subtext, a reference to critical reviews that have widely characterized Patinkin's voice as an "acquired taste."

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