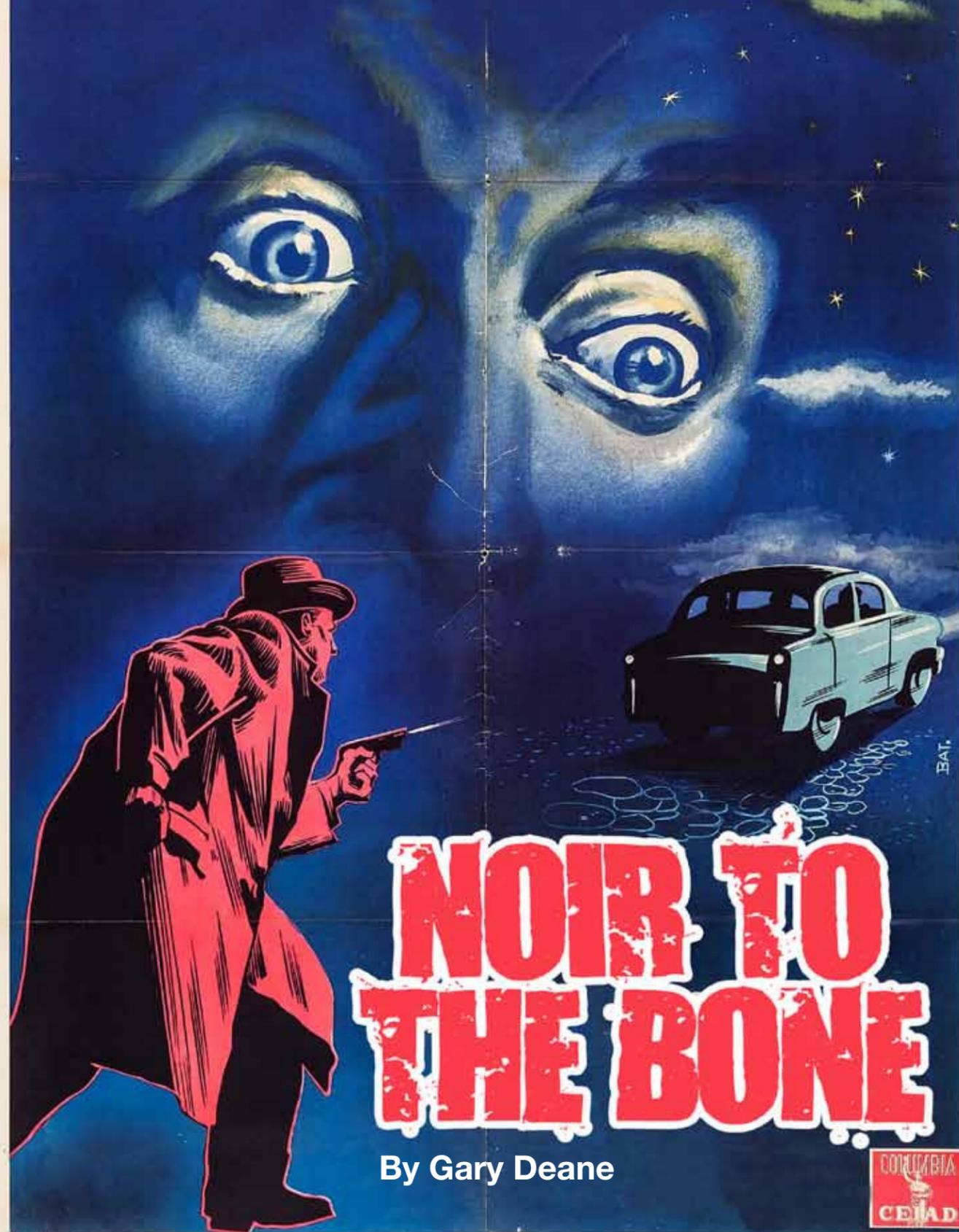


# ANDREW AND VIRGINIA STONE



*Andrew Stone and his fantastically helpful wife-editor have evolved an entirely different ethos of film-making ... If they want to blow up a train, they blow up a real train. If they want to sink an ocean liner, they sink a real ocean liner ... If the Stones had made On the Beach (1959), none of us would be around to review it."*

—Andrew Sarris

Andrew L. Stone rarely took 'No' for an answer. The maverick director had his own ideas about how things should be done, especially when it concerned the way movies should be made. Early in his career, after self-financing several films, Stone was offered a contract with MGM, one most movie makers would have jumped at. Stone turned it down flat. He later said, "I'd have had to pacify the stars and keep them happy—just like a priest who doesn't believe a word of what he says. Then there was a Paramount contract—no big stars, but freedom. That's the one I went for."

However, differences with Paramount flared up soon after he arrived at the studio. The relationship broke down during a shoot in a department store. The studio had taken over the space on a Sunday, bringing in props and lighting and hundreds of extras as shoppers. No, Stone said—the best way to film shoppers in a big store was to actually film shoppers in a big store. When the studio refused, Stone walked away from his production deal.



Kindred spirits at work  
—filmmakers Virginia  
and Andrew Stone



Business partners, co-creators, comrades-in-arms, and married couple — filmmakers Andrew and Virginia Stone

In doing so, Stone declared himself independent from the Hollywood system, joining the likes of Orson Welles, Charlie Chaplin, and Walt Disney as members of the Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers (SIMPP). In 1943, he formed Andrew L. Stone Productions, signing a distribution deal with United Artists. He also partnered professionally with Virginia Lively, who'd begun as a music cutter at UA when she was only 19-years old. In Lively, Stone had found a kindred spirit; the two would marry in 1946. Credited as Virginia L. Stone, the multi-talented Lively would serve as editor on company productions, as well as co-producing, collaborating on scripts, and composing. It was a partnership comparable in some ways to that of Alfred Hitchcock and wife Alma Reville. When the Stones left United Artists in 1947, they were lauded in the press as "Hollywood's only independent man-and-wife moviemakers."

Virginia was simpatico with her husband's low-budget, high-impact filmmaking style, which eschewed sound stages in favor of on-location filming, for both interiors and exteriors. Cheaper and faster was the order of the day. Whereas studio pictures might average eight set-ups a day, the Stones routinely were able to do 20. As a director, Andrew favored live sound (no post-synching) and natural lighting. "Cameramen have the biggest racket next to producers," he declared. "I insist on naturalistic lighting, not the sort where a room is lit by enormous lights in gantries. If a guy moves, the whole lot needs realigning. It takes hours and the result is lousy. We could shoot by matchlight if we wanted to." Stone also had no patience with rear projection, process photography, stock footage, miniatures, or any other trick that tried to fool the audience into believing

something that wasn't real.

Andrew Stone's earliest directing efforts had tilted towards extravagant musical productions such as *With Words and Music* (1937), *The Great Victor Herbert* (1939), and the ground-breaking "black cast" *Stormy Weather* (1943) or exuberant, offbeat comedies including *Hi Diddle Diddle* (1943), *The Bachelor's Daughters* (1946), and *Fun on a Weekend* (1947). But as independents, economics guided the Stones' approach as much as aesthetics. Working with smaller budgets, every dollar had to be stretched to make their films stand out. Because of this, the Stones would become drawn to crime stories and edge-of-the-seat suspense. From 1950 to 1962, they completed eight hard-edged thrillers derived from a wealth of source material, including a huge archive of true-crime magazines, a private collection of more than 15,000 criminal case histories, and relationships with police commands across the country. These signature productions, with their unabashed B-movie sensibility, would provide the Stones with their biggest successes—and be their lasting legacy.

The first of these, *Highway 301* (1950), starred Steve Cochran as the head of a gang of fugitive bank robbers. It featured a familiar cast of supporting crooks, including Robert Webber, Richard Egan, Wally Cassell, and Edward Norris as the gang and Virginia Grey, Aline Towne, and Gaby André as "the dames." Cochran dominates, brutalizing or killing anyone he sees as a threat, including his girlfriend





Steve Cochran, always on the hunt, attempts to go where he shouldn't with Gaby André, his best friend's girl, in *Highway 301*

(Towne), and the naive, André who thinks her boyfriend (Webber) is a travelling salesman. Based on a true story, the film was fashioned in the “semi-documentary” style of the era. Like others of the sub-genre, it’s burdened by a weighty “Crime Does Not Pay” intro and voiceover. But it’s a small price to pay. *Highway 301* is a chilling take on both gangster films and police procedurals, unromanticised and without redemption. Stone’s direction, impatient and decisive, strips characters and incidents to their essence. It’s free of both narrative and visual cliché, with no padding or cut-aways. And while Stone was dismissive of “lighting cinematographers,” Carl E. Guthrie (*Flaxy Martin*, 1949; *Caged*, 1950; *Storm Warning*, 1951) has his way with dark, wet streets and ominously shadowed stairways.

Virginia [Stone] was simpatico with her husband's low-budget, high-impact filmmaking style, which eschewed sound stages in favor of on-location filming, for both interiors and exteriors. Cheaper and faster was the order of the day.



Though lacking the mythic heft of a *White Heat* (1949), *Highway 301* was still a bravura entrée for Andrew and Virginia Stone into the world of film noir.

Their follow-up production, *Confidence Girl* (1952), written, produced, and directed by Stone, offered another torn-from-the-headlines story, this one about a pair of high-rolling Los Angeles scam artists. But as the county sheriff intones in his intro, “Sooner or later, they all end up in a mug book, imprisoned and penniless.” The film opens promisingly, but a sadly lifeless Tom Conway fails to measure up while glamorous and always reliable Hillary Brooke isn’t given nearly enough to do. Things get interesting as the cops—played by Stone regulars Jack Kruschen, John Gallaudet, and Edmund Cobb—start putting the pieces together. But halfway in, the plot frays and the movie fall backs on Stone’s vivid location set-ups and William H. Clothier’s poised camera, which in the end is *almost* enough.

Stone returned only months later with what’s generally thought to be the director’s most complete effort, *The Steel Trap* (1952). Starring Joseph Cotten and Teresa Wright (once uncle and niece in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1943 *Shadow of a Doubt*, now playing man and wife), the movie is an unrelenting nail-biter, about a bank employee’s plan to steal nearly a million dollars and escape to Brazil, which has no extradition treaty with the U.S. Among the film’s champions is author Foster Hirsch, who argues that *The Steel Trap* is one of noir’s purest

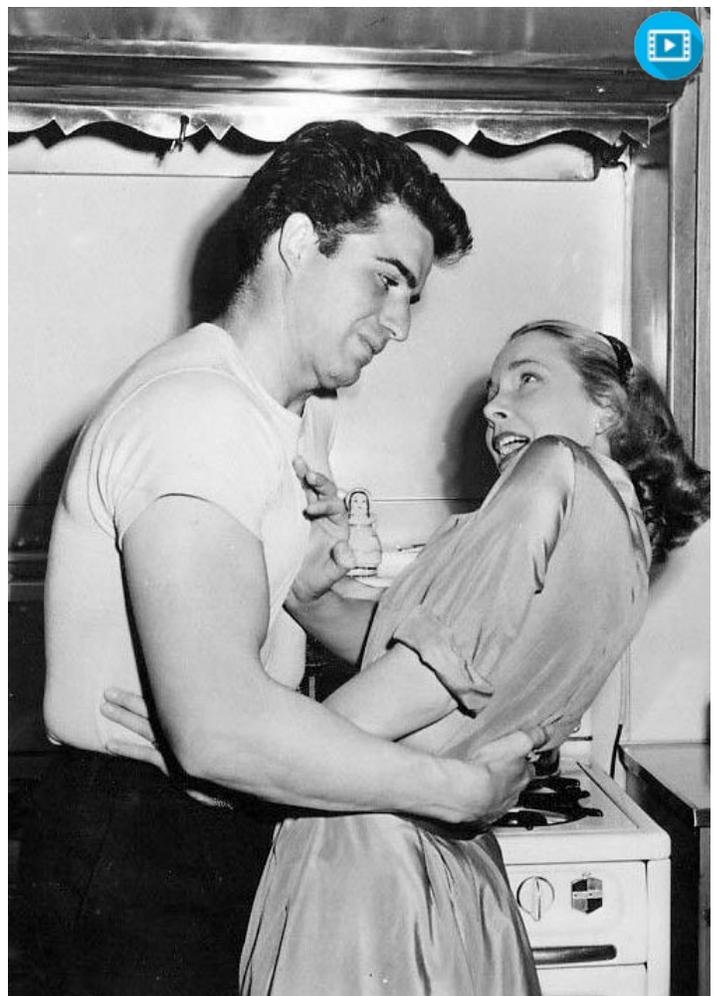


evocations. In *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen*, Hirsch writes, “Uncovering the criminal potential of an ultra-bourgeois, *The Steel Trap* is designed to strike a sympathetic chord in the average spectator. The audience actively wants the man to get away with it. The film exploits the universal fantasies of being bad, of defying the law, of getting rich no matter how; and its subversive undercurrent is not entirely eradicated by the return-to-normal ending.” *The Steel Trap* leaves one wondering which hell is worse for Cotten—in Brazil, separated from his family and his past, or in Los Angeles, condemned to a lifetime of drudgery and ennui. *The Steel Trap* was followed by *A Blueprint for Murder* (1953), a gripping, old-fashioned murder mystery starring Cotten and Jean Peters. Cotten comes to New York to visit his deceased brother’s second wife (Peters) and family. Shortly after he arrives, a daughter by his brother’s first marriage is hospitalized and dies of unknown causes. An autopsy establishes her death was due to strychnine poisoning. The family attorney (Gary Merrill) informs Cotten that Peters stands to inherit his brother’s estate should his children die before her. From that point on, she becomes the prime suspect—although Cotten himself is not entirely in the clear. *A Blueprint for Murder*, released through 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, has more studio-style panache, but it lacks the brio a director like Hitchcock could have brought to it. The film loses its conviction, but is redeemed by Leo Tover’s cinematography and its above-average

cast. Cotten is urbane and reassuring, and Jean Peters gets to play a more arch and guileful character than usual. It’s not at all bad, it just doesn’t live up to its promise.

In *The Night Holds Terror* (1955), the Stones returned to the semi-documentary style and a reliance on real locations. The film opens with aerospace engineer (Jack Kelly) picking up a hitchhiker (Vince Edwards) who forces him at gunpoint to rendezvous with the rest of his gang (John Cassavetes and David Cross). Later, after invading Kelly’s home and taking his family hostage, the gang learns that Kelly’s father is well-heeled; they demand by phone a \$200,000 ransom. The police, with the help of the telephone company, eventually trace the calls, but by then the movie has veered down roads different than expected. Inspired by the same true crime, *The Night Holds Terror* is often compared to *The Desperate Hours*, made the same year by William Wyler with a bigger budget and glossier, stagier production. With its low-rent authenticity (there’s not a studio set to be seen), *Terror* is the more fatalistic (and noir) of the two movies. It takes for granted that the family is in peril and that a single wrong decision can destroy lives. As the voiceover asks, “Who hasn’t picked up a hitchhiker before?” Although shot in a flat ’50s style, the film is in constant motion. The pace is heightened by Virginia Stone’s deft, intuitive cross-cutting between the hostage drama and the frantic pursuit of the authorities in this gritty underrated thriller.

*Julie* (1956), a damsel-in-distress melodrama starring Doris Day,



Low-rent authenticity: Vince Edwards takes liberties with captive Hildy Parks in the Stone’s 1955 semi-documentary styled *The Night Holds Terror*



To entertain and excite: Doris Day keeps friend and admirer Barry Sullivan (right) close by, holding off her psychotic husband, menacingly played by Louis Jourdan, in *Julie*

Louis Jourdan, and Barry Sullivan, was a bridgehead of sorts for the Stones. Produced by Day and her husband, Martin Melcher, the film was to be the first of a multi-picture distribution deal with MGM. It was also exactly the type of picture Andrew Stone was itching to make. Day's title character is a moneyed Carmel, California, country club matron married to Lyle (Louis Jourdan), a concert pianist whose pathological jealousy alternates between violent rage and teary remorse. He may have been responsible for the death of her first husband. After Lyle terrorizes her one time too many, Julie flees to San Francisco with the help of her old friend, Cliff (Barry Sullivan). She resumes her career as a stewardess, laying low at a hotel, then bunking in with another flight attendant. Lyle, who finds and kills Cliff, tracks down his wife and boards a flight she's working. Once in the air, Lyle makes his move—and what started as a story of jealous obsession turns into an action thriller and near-disaster movie. Stone's reach exceeds his grasp at times, as the melodrama dips into ridiculousness. But that's part of the risk the Stones take in their headlong determination to entertain and excite, no matter how improbable things get. *Julie* moves at breakneck speed, thanks to the crisp direction and rapid-fire editing. The cutting between Julie sitting nervously in her apartment and Lyle closing in on her is genuinely terrifying.

Doris Day was a smart casting choice, playing a woman who can make endless emotional sacrifices for her man, but has enough self-

worth to flee his insanity. Day had been married to a couple of "Lyles" earlier in her life<sup>1</sup>, which lent authenticity to the women-in-peril parts she played in *Storm Warning* (1951), *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), and *Midnight Lace* (1960). *Julie* may seem comical to modern audiences<sup>2</sup>, but it offered a prescient look at women trying to escape abusive spouses at a time when law enforcement rarely provide them protection and support. Stone ranked *Julie* among his best films. He was validated to a degree by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, which nominated Stone for Best Screenplay. It also got a nod for Best Song ("Julie"), written by Leith Stevens and Tom Adair, and sung, of course, by the film's star. Ironically, it lost out to *Que Sera, Sera*, from *The Man Who Knew Too Much*—also performed by Doris Day. Some actors found Andrew Stone's no-nonsense, utilitarian movie-making style a challenge. He was not inclined to coddle stars and his insistence on realism often resulted in demanding shoots. Among the undeterred was James Mason, who once told an interviewer: "I work better if a director will needle me, discipline me, help sharpen up my performance." Mason would make two films with the Stones, the first being the urgent hostage drama, *Cry Terror!* (1958), co-starring Rod Steiger, Angie

1 And Martin Melcher would soon prove to be another one, bilking Day out of most of her hard-earned money.

2 Several of its most outrageous scenes were parodied in the huge 1980 hit *Airplane!*



Experimental scientists, James Mason and Rod Steiger, examine their new super-power bomb—the size of a pack of cigarettes.

M.G.M. presents **"CRY TERROR!"**

58-70

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Dickinson, Inger Stevens, Neville Brand, and Jack Klugman. Mason plays a radio technician, Jim Molnar, contacted out of the blue by former Army buddy Paul Hoplin (Rod Steiger), who asks him to design a demolition device. If it's small enough, Hoplin suggests there may be a government contract in it. Molnar's device ends up being planted on a passenger jet to extort half-a-million dollars from the airline. Hoplin and his goon squad take the family hostage, forcing Mrs. Molnar (Stevens) to pick up the money by threatening to kill Molnar and his daughter. To make matters worse, the FBI suspects Molnar is the mastermind behind the extortion plot.

Like most Andrew and Virginia Stone productions, *Cry Terror!* covers lots of ground at breakneck speed; it may as well be a template for hundreds of crime thrillers to come, with its rapid shifts in both focus and tempo across a head-spinning number of locations and plot twists. Though it can put a strain



on logic and believability, it makes for a hugely exciting and frightening film, one which boasts not one but three separate climaxes over its 96 minutes. It also shows the FBI, for all its professionalism, being incapable of answering the call in a timely fashion. In the end, things get sorted out not by the authorities, but through the initiative of the hostages and the clumsiness of the criminal mastermind.

Among all the Stone's films, *Cry Terror!* benefits the most from stellar performances. Mason's Molnar, passive by nature, becomes more dominant as the film races along, finding his mettle with some thrilling derring-do in an elevator shaft. Rod Steiger is more restrained than usual and is all the scarier for it, his subdued commands belying deadly intent. A 26-year-old Angie Dickinson is impressive as his cold-as-ice companion, who's ready to stick a shiv into Molnar's daughter. She's the first to grab a gun and



Dorothy Dandridge and James Mason get to dry off, cool down, and share a moment on the set of 1958's *The Decks Ran Red*

start shooting when the cops arrive. Most memorable, however, are Inger Stevens and Neville Brand. Brand had by then mastered portraying deranged characters without going over the edge. He plays a Benzedrine-addicted sexual predator whom the other gang-members have nicknamed “Creep.” He starts circling Stevens as soon as the family is taken hostage and, left alone with her, tries to rape her. Steven’s portrayal is high-pitched, but the resolve and resourcefulness she shows dealing with the terror are the most believable things in the movie. This was the actress’ best performance in a life and career cut short by an “acute barbiturate intoxication” (drug overdose) at age 35.

The Stones followed up on *Cry Terror!*’s success with *The Decks Ran Red* (1958), again starring James Mason. In both films, Mason deals with a psychopath’s grandiose ambitions, this go-round it being a fat and ferocious Broderick Crawford. Mason plays Edwin Rummill, first officer on a luxury cruise liner. He’s offered command of a merchant vessel when the previous commander dies. It’s not much of a ship, but despite its restless crew and troubled history, he signs on. Meanwhile, crewman Henry Scott (Crawford), abetted by his henchman, Leroy (Stuart Whitman), is planning to take over the ship once at sea. Their scheme is to kill the officers and crew, partially scuttle the ship, and bring it in as derelict, collecting a \$1,000,000 reward for the ship’s recovery.

That’s the plan, anyway. Implausibility never deterred the Stones.

Andrew Stone’s direction is so brutally efficient it runs roughshod over our disbelief. And Mason and Crawford are so good as the antagonists that quibbles of logic and continuity are swept out the door. Filmed in deep focus black-and-white, *The Decks Ran Red* keeps the tension ratcheted up stem to stern. There’s even a dose of sexual tension in the mix after Rummill hires on a local cook, Pete, and his erotically charged wife, Mahia, played by Dorothy Dandridge.

The captain soon realizes that bringing Mahia on board may have been a mistake: “It never entered my mind that the woman would be so sensuous and exotically beautiful.” Crawford sees only “well-stacked doll,” but Whitman later forces himself on her. Stone said of Dandridge, “She was extremely professional. I never worked with any star that I liked better or was more competent.” His admiration is obvious in the way he showcases her scene to scene, starting with an entrance aboard the freighter that leaves the crew transfixed. Dandridge was a magnetic, if sadly underused, performer. Stone sticks with his preference for real locations and a terse shooting style, with the action swirling from the ship’s bridge to engine room, state rooms to officers’ salon.

Eschewing a traditional score, Stone opts for the raw, natural sounds of the ocean and clamorous shipboard activity. *The Decks Ran Red* is the cinema equivalent of 1950’s men’s magazines like *Men Only* and *Stag*, which sold lurid tales of modern day piracy, danger, and exotic sex as “true stories.” Or, at least, ones that felt real. And if

**Implausibility never deterred the Stones. Andrew Stone’s direction is so brutally efficient [in *The Decks Ran Red*] it runs roughshod over our disbelief.**



Her arm trapped by a beam, Dorothy Malone has to make a do-or-die decision in the Stone's 1960 disaster picture *The Last Voyage*

anyone could make things feel real, it was Andrew Stone.

After flirting with on-screen disasters in their last several films, the Stone's next production, *The Last Voyage* (1960) would go all the way, relating the destruction and near-sinking of a cruise liner after a fire spreads to the ship's engine room and decks. Featuring an all-star cast (Robert Stack, Dorothy Malone, George Sanders, Edmond O'Brien, Woody Strode), *The Last Voyage* was inspired by the sinking of the S.S. *Andrea Doria* off the coast of Nantucket, Massachusetts, in 1956. True to form, Andrew Stone wanted—and found—an actual ship to destroy, the famed S.S. *Île de France*, a luxury liner that was headed for its final reckoning in a Japanese scrap yard. And nearly destroy it he does, with a combination of massive pyrotechnics and high-pressure firehoses, to the peril of both cast and crew. O'Brien called Stone "a psychopath with a death wish," while Robert Stack maintained, angrily, that he was lucky to have survived the production. That said, the film is agonizingly suspenseful and predated, by a decade, a glut of similarly themed disaster movies of the '70s. *The Last Voyage* is certainly not noir, but it displays, more than any other Stone production, the kind of obsessive quest for realism that animated their best movies.

It was Stone's next production, however, that personified Andrew Stone's affinity for high drama and headlong thrills. *Ring of Fire* (1961) stars David Janssen as Sergeant Steve Walsh, a small-town police officer in rural Washington state. He and his partner, Deputy Joe Pringle (Joel Marston), pick up a trio of juvenile delinquents as suspects in a filling station robbery. On the way to the police station, juvies Frank (Frank Gorshin), Roy (James Johnson), and Bobbie (Joyce Taylor)

overpower the cops. They force the officers to drive into the Olympic mountains, where they ditch the car, handcuff Pringle to a tree, and head into the forest with Walsh as their guide and hostage.

The sexual dynamics in the group are almost as hot as the massive forest fire that breaks out, the result of a cigarette tossed aside by Frank. *Ring of Fire* abruptly morphs into a whole other movie, a fiery catastrophe flick which circles back to the plot only at the conclusion, when the bad guy gets his due and Walsh, who's under suspension, shares a curiously intimate moment with Bobbie just before she's ushered off to jail. *Something* occurred out in the woods and we're left to ponder what it might have been.

David Janssen strikes all the right chords as the lawman in over his head, more used to dealing with barroom drunks and domestic spats than gun-toting psychos and teenage devil-dolls. Frank Gorshin, a stand-up comedian and character actor who'd played deranged adolescents before—in *Hot Rod Girl* (1956), *Runaway Daughters* (1956), and *Dragstrip Girl* (1957)—tops his turns in all those films. However, the real attraction is Joyce Taylor giving a performance as sexualized as any seen in American films to that time. Andrew Stone had never been afraid to push the movies' moral boundaries—and the notion of underage sex with a cop was just one more of his swipes at the beleaguered Production Code.

*Ring of Fire* even drew the attention of Bosley Crowther, high-toned critic of the *New York Times*, who made it a point of pride to shun such vulgar "B" entertainments. "As is their well-established custom, the Stones keep conspicuously away from intellectual complication," he wrote. "They set up the plot and work it fast, getting right to the meat of the matter and make it as hot as they can. It's





David Janssen with bad girl Joyce Taylor in *Ring of Fire* (1961)

plenty hot in this picture and the excitement runs fast and high. Call it well-popped corn.” Along with everything else, including William Clothier’s spectacular Kodachrome filming and the film’s shivery natural soundtrack (Duane Eddy’s haunting title song apart), *Ring of Fire* was an authentic *auteurist* achievement for Andrew and Virginia Stone, one that deserves an overdue widescreen Blu-ray release.

A year after making *Ring of Fire*, with interest waning in noir-affected movie fare, the Stones headed to England to begin the first of three productions they’d film there, a war film called *The Password Is Courage* (1962). As well as producing and directing, Andrew Stone wrote the screenplay based on a book of the same title about actual British Sergeant Major Charles Coward, played by Dirk Bogarde. After being captured in WWII by the Germans, Coward plotted an elaborate tunnel escape to get himself and fellow inmates safely into the nearby woods. Stone’s on-location lensing gave the film a gritty and realistic look, but also a noir feel. He overlaid the drama with lighter moments, which largely work due to Bogarde’s brash charm.

The Stones returned to the U.K. in 1964 for a comedy, *Never Put It in Writing*, about a young insurance executive’s frantic attempt to retrieve a letter he never should have sent. The film, written by Stone, starred likeable leads Pat Boone and Milo O’Shea and was a complete turnabout for the director, who the next year followed up with another light-hearted affair, *The Secret of My Success* (1965). Filmed in England and Portugal, the movie featured James Booth as a girl-happy British bobby who falls for the charms of a trio of fetching *femmes fatales* played by Stella Stevens, Shirley Jones, and Honor Blackman. The largely unfunny melange of mordant satire and melodrama didn’t add up to much, except problems for the filmmakers.

The Stones would not make another film until 1970, one they would live to regret. *The Song of Norway*, a nearly two-and-a-half hour biopic about the evidently dull life of composer Edvard Grieg

was a costly production and a critical disaster. *Life* critic Richard Schickel did not hold back: “The musical numbers ... when not downright ugly, are ludicrous.” *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael went further: “The movie is of an unbelievable badness; it brings back clichés you didn’t even know you knew. You can’t get angry at something this stupefying; it seems to have been made by trolls.”

Undaunted, Andrew Stone doubled-down—next making a glitzy remake of the 1938 musical, *The Great Waltz*, the story of Johann Strauss, starring Horst Buchholz. It met no better reception than had *Song of Norway*. Many blamed *The Great Waltz* (1972) for putting a stake through the heart of classic movie musicals, which promptly disappeared from the screen. In fairness, big studio musicals were already dead and done. What’s sad is that Stone, the one-time renegade visionary, was beyond seeing it.

*The Great Waltz* was Andrew and Virginia Stone’s last picture show, though Universal called him back in 1977 to help out on the action and disaster sequences in *Rollercoaster*. Mentally sharp into his 80s and tough as old shoe leather, Stone spent the last two decades of his life trying, unsuccessfully, to put movie deals together. He died in 1999 at age 96; Virginia, 19 years younger, had died two years earlier. By that time, Stone had a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in recognition of his contributions to the art and craft of filmmaking and the one-of-a-kind movies he’d written, produced, and directed. Unfortunately, Virginia was never similarly recognized.

Together, Andrew and Virginia Stone made movies that define what we talk about when we talk about noir (apologies to Raymond Carver). Their movies may not look like classic noir, but they espouse a true noir vision. In *The Steel Trap*, Joseph Cotten offers this clear-eyed comprehension: “The difference between the honest and dishonest is a debatable line. We’re suckers if we don’t try and cram as much happiness in as possible in our brief time, no matter how. Everyone is going to break the law.”

That’s noir to the bone. ■



Filmmaker Andrew Stone in a rare, pensive mood