"SMART MONEY" (Warner Brothers, 1931) Directed by Alfred E. Green
Scenario: Kubec Glasmon, John Bright, Lucien Hubbard and Joseph Jackson; Camera: Robert Kurrle; 8 reels
With Edward G. Robinson, Jean Harlow, Robert Young, Evelyn Knapp, Noel Francis, Margaret Livingston, Maurice Black, Boris Karloff, Paul Porcasi, Morgan Wallace, Billy House, Gladys Lloyd, Polly Walters, Charles Lane, Wallace MacDonald, Eddie Kane, Edward Hearn.

Inevitably "Smart Money" disappoints a little inasmuch as it was not only a follow-up to Cagney’s "Public Enemy" and Robinson’s "Little Caesar", but was also to be the only film in which these two stars appeared together. Robinson and Bogart frequently gravitated together, as did Cagney and Bogart, but curiously this Karloff and Lugosi stood out as the gangster film’s leading man. But as a note of the gangster film, "Smart Money" is quite rewarding, relatively unmelodramatic and more relaxed and naturalistic than most of its genre. As with "Larceny Lane" (another Cagney of the same year), it’s sometimes an uneven film and one of shifting moods; the generally rowdy and bantering atmosphere gives way rather suddenly to stark tragedy in the closing sequences; but more power to it for being so unpredictable. Robinson’s role is by far the bigger of the two, and he makes the most of it with his anticipated scenes of menace, pathos and comedy. One suspects that the great role was written before he was actually slated for the part. If one of the lower-pressure Warner crime films, "Smart Money" is still a most enjoyable one, and not the least of its appealing qualities is its steady stream of hard-bitten blondes.

"FASHIONS OF 1934" (Warner Brothers-First National, 1934)
Directed by William Dieterle; story by Warren Duff and Harry Krains; scenario by F. Hugh Herbert, Carl Erickson, Gene Harkey & Kathleen Scola; musical number devised and directed by Busby Berkeley; camera: William E. Bees; 3 reels

William Dieterle came to Hollywood initially as a star of the German versions of early Warner talkies, but became established as a director remarkably quickly — and seemed to accclimate himself to American modes and Hollywood methods almost at once. His first few years as a Fox director produced some of his best work: some visually Germanic melodramas at Fox, lightning-pace thrillers at Warners, the best "lost generation" film of them all in "The Last Flight", and some sparkling pseudo-Lubitsch comedies. While his biographical classics (Golum, Pasteur, Andrew Johnson, Reuter etc.) and the outstanding "The Devil and Daniel Webster" came later, this early period was his most prolific and most interesting. Because it is not basically a musical, and uses its one big number not as the climax but as a kind of midway bonus, "Fashions" has garnered more reputation. But it is quite certainly one of the best of that strange group of Warner comedies and dramas ("Wonderbar", "Cain and Mabel") that somewhere along the line threw logic and the bankroll to the winds in order to let Berkeley have his head. Here his big musical number is one of his best, a fantastically erotic and Freudian affair in which he has a field day with provocative bosoms and sturdy thighs. This weird and wonderful display has something for everyone - the fetishist, the red-blooded American boy, and old squares that just enjoy simple hummable tunes. But "Fashions" has a good deal to offer in addition to this well-planned slice of mathematical pulorthoitude (which wisely doesn’t over-expend itself as "By a Waterfall" and some of Berkeley’s other numbers did). It’s a rattling good comedy which zips along with such pep, wit, good humor and cheerful vulgarity that one has no time to ponder how such thin material can be so delightful. A good deal of the credit belongs to the polished, urbane William Powell, who never puts a foot wrong as con-man Sherman Merian. Most of our old Warner cronies appear prominently in the cast, Frank McHugh garnering some of the best gags, and Bette Davis - somewhat over-made-up and unflattering photographed - doing her best to translate a Genevieve Tobin role into something more substantial. (Unhappy at Warners, she was to prove her point six months later with her triumph in "Of Human Bondage" on loanout to Rko). Dear old Reginald Owen, before he landed at MGM, tries desperately to make his British accent sound French by pronouncing "revoo" and adds to the fun too. But it’s the inspired madness of Busby Berkeley and the deftness of Dieterle and Powell that gives this trifile such class.

--- William K. Everson ---