"BROADWAY THROUGH A KEYHOLE" (20th Century-United Artists, 1933)
Directed by Lowell Sherman; scenario by Gene Towne & Graham Baker from a story idea by Walter Winchell; Cameraman: Barney McGill, Powerell Marley; Songs: Mack Gordon, Harry Revel; Musical Direction, Alfred Newman; 9 reels

An undeservedly ignored movie, "Broadway Through a Keyhole" is a loose, lawnmower picture of the careers of Ruby Keeler, Ruth Etting and Lida Diamond. While containing some of the standard cliches, a good script and Sherman's well-paced direction steer it so clear of formulism that it becomes brittle, cynical and even unpleasant at times. The sentiment is pleasingly honest, but the characters ring true. Guinan and Seeley emerge as the tough bebes that they probably were, a far cry from the standard Betty Hutton recreation. Despite the gangsterism, it all winds up rather like a Demon Runyon fable in reverse, with nobody very sympathetic and the few hearts of gold turning up in expected quarters. The dialogue is snappy and the musical scenes elaborate, although they seem deliberately down-played, as though to keep the film more as a musical framework. The biggest surprise of all is Russ Colombo; no great actor admittedly, he underplays his big scenes with real sincerity and suggests that he might have made a real mark in movies had not tragedy struck first.

"THE BOWERY" (20th Century-United Artists, 1933) Directed by Raoul Walsh
Screenplay by James Gleason and Edward Bosebrook from a story by Bessie Rogov Simone and Michael L. Simons; C here: B ray McGill; 9 reels
With: Wallace Beery, George Raft, Fay Wray, Jackie Cooper, Pert Kelton, George Walsh, Oscar Apfel, Herman Bing, Harold Huber, Ferdinand Manier, Fletcher Horton, Lillian Harner, Heintie Conklin, Irving Bacon, Kit Guard, Andrew Tombes.

Unseen in theatres since the very early 50's, "The Bowery" has also been afforded little tv exposure, doubtless because of the racial problems it poses. Since several minority groups are clobbered within the first five minutes, it's easy to see how a tv editorial department would give it all up as a bad job and alip in an nth re-run of an Alice Faye instead. Nevertheless, it's something of a classic of its kind, and beats "Mob Hill," "San Francisco," "Lillian Russell" and "Diamond Jim" hollow in its lusty evocation of an earlier era. Its braving, colorful canvas is presented with an incredible eye to detail and pace; its opening reels are quite breathless and the pace slackens only slightly thereafter until it limps into a rather weak ending. Not that there's any concession to taste or censorship; it's just that nobody seems to know how to end it, and the climax does have the look of a joint bright idea dreamed up at a script conference. But until that point the film's vigor is all the more remarkable in that it stands up under the weight of years of repetition and imitation. Despite our familiarity with the Beery-Cooper sentiment (prior to this in "The Champ", and subsequent to it in "Treasure Island" and "O'Shaugnassy's Boy") many of their dramatic scenes still work extremely well. Beery may be 100% type-cast but he's a good enough actor to get away with it, while the rich array of supporting players, from Pert Kelton to Herman Bing, is a joy to behold. And considering the limits of her dramatic range, Fay Wray survives well too. There's no disputing that she was, and is, a lovely lady, and one can't help suspecting that her better directors (notably von Stroheil) chose her more for the way they could manipulate her than for faith in her dramatic prowess. Perhaps what is so endearing about her is that her mannerisms, the hesitancy, the trembling approach to every line as though she has only just read it and doesn't think she can get away with it, the eternal virgin who seems to blush with shame from even knowing about facts worse than death - seem to be not so much deliberately applied mannerisms as natural characteristics. Even later playing sophisticates with modish clothes and perfect makeup, she retained a naivete which was both her greatest charm and her saving grace. In any event, together with "King Kong", "The Bowery" offers a definitive Beery role and performance. It also offers one of Raoul Walsh's best and most typical directorial chores, with plenty of his characteristic cheerful camerawork, as we witness the fire in the Chinese laundry, with tragedy played as pure slapstick. Oddly enough, it was to be his last major film (both in terms of budget, and directorially) until he joined Warners in 1933. The remaining seven years of the 30's marked a permanent low-point in Walsh's career - disappointing 'A's, some interesting 'B's, off-best work in England - but not one film with the style, guts, and recognisable Walsh flair of the spectacularly pre-Code 'The Bowery'.

--- William K. Everson ---