TWO FORGOTTEN FILM NOIRS

OFF BEAT (Northrott Films—British Lion, 1961) Directed by Cliff Owen
Produced by M. Smedley Aston; Original story and screenplay by Peter Barnes;
Camera: Geoffrey Faithful; Music by Ken Jones; 75 mins.
With William Sylvester (Steve Layton); Mai Zetterling (Ruth Lombard); Anthony Dawson (James Dawson); John Mellon (Johnny Hemick); John Phillips (Supt.
Gaul); Victor Brooks (Tom Adams); Joseph Purst (Paul Varne); Neil
McCarty (Leo Farrell); Ronald Adam (J.B. Wykeham).

Despite its too-tricky double-pun title, "Off Beat" is a sensible and unusual thriller that is virtually unknown here. It has no theatrical release to my knowledge, so it's non-theatrical market bookers would take a chance on a film nobody had heard of? and so far as I am aware, no tv distribution. There are so many of these
little British films of the 50's and 60's - some better than this, many
admittedly far worse, but all of them interesting and satisfying - that
there is going to be a huge backlog of rediscoveries for some Museum or Archive 20
years hence!

"Off Beat" poses some interesting moral dilemmas and puts the audience in the
awkward position of getting to root for the rather likeable villains. Anthony Dawson, the would-be murder in "Dial M for Murder", is particularly
good as the leader of the gang. Incidentally the film represents the first
effort of a young new director, Cliff Owen, who went on to specialise in
well-crafted, outsized crime thrillers and comedies like "The Wrong
Arm of the Law". One of the major pleasures of a film like this is its
unpredictability, so I'll say little more about it and leave its qualities
of surprise intact.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE CROOKED WAY (United Artists, 1949) Directed by Robert Florey
Produced by Benedict Bogeaus; Screenplay by Robert H. Landau from the
radio play "No Blade Too Sharp" by Robert Monroe; Camera, John Alton;
Music, Louis Forbes; 57 mins.
With John Payne (Eddie Rice); Sonny Tufts (Vince Alexander); Ellen Drew (Nina)
Rhys Williams (Lieut. Williams); Percy Kelton (Peter); John Doucette (Sgt.
Barrett); Charles Evans (Capt. Anderson); Gretta Granstedt (Hazel); Harry
Bronson (Denny); Hal Fiebening (Coke); Crane Whiteley (Dr. Kemble); John
Harmon (Kelly); Snub Pollard (news vendor).

Film Noir peaked both in quantity and quality in 1947; thereafter it didn't
exactly decline -- some of the best and most complex noirs were still to come
but it did tend to become more standardised, and few new themes were
introduced. At the time "The Crooked Way" was overlooked because, regardless
of its stylistics which were first-rate, it was becoming old hat, and didn't
have the literacy of the literati (and three years earlier) "Somewhere in
the Night" by Mannix. Indeed, its plot almost parallels the kind of parody
that Dave McCarthy provided in "Men in Black". John Payne plays a
wounded and amnesiac war veteran, who wakes up in hospital knowing only
that his first name is Eddie and that he comes from Los Angeles. Not too
surprisingly, he takes the only chance there is of establishing his
identity - going to Los Angeles and hoping that someone will recognise him.
No sooner is he off the train than he is accosted by police, by underworld
thugs and a tough blonde. Instead of asking questions, he tries to bluff
everything out, resulting in approximately one beating per reel until his
personal mystery is solved. Were the film less accomplished stylistically, it
would be difficult to take it too seriously, but luckily Robert Florey and
John Alton manage to prevent the levity from creeping in. Although Florey
was not a noir specialist, he was an expert director of snappy thrillers - as
you will know from the many fine "S"s of his that we have run. Generally
speaking, the bigger the budget with Florey, the less interesting the film.
But producer Benedict Bogeaus was notoriously economical with his budgets,
and though officially an "A", "The Crooked Way" is really just a programmer,
so Florey still has the challenge of coming up with fancy compositions, cuts
and lighting to make the film more exciting than it is. And John Alton, the
definitive noir cameraman (especially in collaboration with Anthony Mann)
likewise rises to the occasion with superbly lit interiors and exteriors.
One other novelty (then) was the casting of genial all-American-Sonny
Tufts as the vicious psycho killer - a move presumably intended to
duplicate the success of Dick Powell's invasion of tough underworld
territory in "Murder by Sweet". The magic didn't work for Tufts, but it's
still an interesting performance. Unlike most noir thrillers, "The Crooked
Way" is a radio play, with most of the essential information
conveyed by dialogue. It is quite good, too, as a testing itself on the
move and in shifting much of its connecting scenes to the dim alleys
and deserted warehouses so indigenous to noir, and especially to Alton.
Incidentally John Payne had spent most of the peak noir years as a romantic
leading man at Fox (and in the army) but after "Miracle on 34th Street" he
too followed Dick Powell into rough melodrama, his sullen demeanor making
him almost a definitive later noir hero in the 50's.

---- Wm.K.-Evroner
Program Ends approx. 10.30. (No discussion this week; there will be next week.