MERVYN LE ROY (15 October 1900, San Francisco—13 September 1987, Beverly Hills, Alzheimer's disease) quit school at 13 to become a newsboy. “I saw life in the raw on the streets of San Francisco,” he said. “I met the cops and the whores and the reporters and the bartenders and the Chinese and the fishermen and the shopkeepers. . . . When it came time for me to make motion pictures, I made movies that were real, because I knew first hand how real people behaved.” What does that imply about his opinion of the other filmmakers he knew? His first film was No Place to Go in 1927; his last was as uncredited director of John Wayne’s hyperbolic The Green Berets 1968. Le Roy’s career in show business began in vaudeville, then his movie-mogul cousin Jesse Lasky hired him at Famous Player-Lasky, where he worked in wardrobe, then as a film tinter, and then as an actor in minor roles. He wrangled a directing job at another studio and made profitable simple entertainments until Little Caesar 1930, which invented the ‘30s gangster genre and made him a major director. His Gold Diggers of 1933 is generally regarded as one of the classic film musicals of the 30’s. It includes some of Busby Berkeley’s most spectacular production numbers. Some of the other 65 films he directed were Mary, Mary 1963, Gypsy 1962, The FBI Story 1959, No Time for Sergeants 1958, The Bad Seed 1956, Mister Roberts 1955, Rose Marie 1954, Million Dollar Mermaid 1952, Quo Vadis? 1951, Any Number Can Play 1949, Little Women 1949, The House I Live In 1945, Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo 1944, Madame Curie 1943, They Won't Forget 1937 (a great social issue film, also notable for the first sweatered film appearance by his discovery Judy Turner, whose name he changed to Lana), I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang 1932, Two Seconds 1931 and Little Caesar 1930. He produced 28 films, one of which was The Wizard of Oz 1939 hence the inscription on his tombstone in the Garden of Honor in Glendale’s Forest Lawn Cemetery: “Over the Rainbow.” In addition to Judy/Lana Turner, he is credited with discovering Clark Gable, Loretta Young, and Robert Mitchum. Le Roy wanted to cast Gable as Rico’s dancing buddy in Little Caesar but the studio bosses said no: his ears were too big for movies.

PAUL MUNI (Meshillem Meier Weisenfreund) (22 September 1895 Lemberg, Austria-Hungary [now Lviv, Ukraine]—25 August 1967 Montecito, California, USA, heart problems) received Oscar nominations for his first (The Valiant, 1929) and last (The Last Angry Man, 1959) screen appearances. Began in Yiddish theatre in NYC. Some of his other films: Angel on
My Shoulder (1946), Commandos Strike at Dawn (1942), The Life of Emile Zola (1937, Oscar nomination), The Good Earth (1937), The Story of Louis Pasteur (1935, Oscar), and I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932, Oscar nomination), Scarface 1932. In 1955 he won a Tony for his portrayal of Clarence Darrow in the Broadway play Inherit the Wind, a role played by Spencer Tracy in the screen adaptation


**I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang! (New Georgia Encyclopedia)**

*I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang* was a sensational best-selling book by Robert Elliott Burns. Published in 1932, it recounts the dramatic story of the author's imprisonment in Georgia and his two successful escapes, eight years apart, with seven years of freedom, business success, and emotional intrigue in between. It was also the basis of a popular movie entitled *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, produced later that year by Warner Brothers.

**The Book**

A native of Brooklyn, New York, Burns was a drifter and a battle-scarred World War I (1917-18) veteran who found himself living in a cheap hotel in Atlanta in 1922. In February of that year Burns and an accomplice stole $5.80 from a local grocer, Samuel Bernstein. They were arrested instantly; Burns was swiftly tried, convicted, and sentenced to six to ten years on the Campbell County (later Fulton County) chain gang. It did not take the stunned northerner long to comprehend that ten years on the chain gang was practically a death sentence. Southern chain gangs, notorious across the rest of the nation, had their origins in the scandalous convict-lease system of the late nineteenth century. When convict leasing was abolished in 1908, with the demand for convict labor still growing, the chain gang took its place.

Burns's book is full of sensational, lurid, yet mostly verifiable descriptions of mistreatment, brutality, disgusting food, and labor so unrelenting and exhausting that it left men in a stupor. As he soon learned from his wretched fellow prisoners that to leave the chain gang a man had to "work out, pay out, die out, or run out," Burns decided to run out. He did so in June 1922, after serving only a few months' time. Burns's dramatic escape to Chicago was crowned by brilliant success in the publishing business, social recognition, and marriage. But years later when he proved an unfaithful husband, his wife, Emily, turned him in to the authorities. His arrest on May 22, 1929, caused a sensation in Chicago. Burns had never told Emily about his past, but she discovered his secret by opening letters from his brother, the Reverend Vincent Burns, an Episcopal priest.

In negotiations with officials from Georgia, Burns arranged to return to Georgia, take a soft job in the prison system, and receive a pardon after one year—or so he believed. But the state of Georgia was unrelenting, and Burns once more faced the hardships of the chain gang, this time at a prison in Troup County. In September 1930 he escaped a second time and made his way to Newark, New Jersey. There he wrote, "Georgia cannot win! . . . I have decided to write the true story, while in hiding, of my entire case." Burns's memoir, first serialized in True Detective Mysteries magazine, was published in January 1932 and was an instant success. "It would be hard to find a more thrilling story in either truth or fiction," a New York Times reviewer wrote.

Some critics and scholars believe Burns's brother ghostwrote the book. Vincent Burns, who was known mostly for his patriotic and religious poetry, served as the poet laureate for the state of Maryland from 1962 until his death in 1970. He also wrote *Out of These Chains* (1942), a sequel to *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!*, and *The Man Who Broke a Thousand Chains; The Story of Social Reformation of the Prisons of the South* (1968), a memoir of Robert Burns. Vincent Burns later sued his brother for a greater share of the profits received from the book and the film.

**The Film**

A motion picture version was put into production shortly after the book's publication, directed by Mervyn LeRoy and
starring one of Hollywood's finest actors, Paul Muni, in the title role. Burns himself went incognito to serve as a consultant on the film. As indignant as Georgia officials were over the book's publication, they were even more upset over the movie, and they insisted that Warner Brothers drop "Georgia" from the film's title. Upon the movie's release in late 1932—during one of the darkest periods of the Depression and days after the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt—the theaters could not screen it often enough. A telegram to Warner Brothers in Hollywood told the tale: "fugitive biggest broadway sensation in last three years stop thousands turned away from box office tonight with lobby delay held four hours stop."

In spite of its rather stilted script, the film was one of the major achievements of 1930s Hollywood. LeRoy had just completed Little Caesar, the first great work in a new genre, the gangster film, while Muni himself had just completed another classic gangster picture, Scarface. Thus, both star and director were moving from the founding of one genre toward establishing a second, the southern prison adventure. Fugitive was named Best Picture of the Year by the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures. Muni and the film received three Oscar nominations. It was remade in 1987 under the title The Man Who Broke 1,000 Chains (HBO Films, directed by Daniel Mann). Scenes, themes, and motifs from the 1932 LeRoy picture also abound in Cool Hand Luke (Warner Brothers, 1967, directed by Stuart Rosenberg).

Aftermath

Burns was apprehended yet again in December 1932 in Newark, but the state of New Jersey refused to extradite him, despite the insistence of Georgia officials. After two other failed attempts to bring him back to Georgia, Burns met newly elected Georgia governor Ellis Arnall in New York in 1943 and requested a pardon. Arnall arranged to have Burns return to Georgia in November 1945 to face the parole board, where he stood by Burns's side as his counsel. The board commuted Burns's sentence to time served. Governor Arnall's gesture capped an administration devoted to prison reform, including the abolition of chain gangs. Burns died on June 5, 1955, at his home in Union, New Jersey, where he had worked as a tax consultant.

From "Crime and Gangster Films" (Filmsite.org) Warner Bros. was considered the gangster studio par excellence, and the star-triumvirate of Warners' gangster cycle, all actors who established and defined their careers in this genre, included:

1. Edward G. Robinson
2. James Cagney
3. Humphrey Bogart

Others who were early gangster stars included Paul Muni and George Raft.

Three great classic gangster films (among the first of the talkies) marked the genre's popular acceptance and started the wave of gangster films in the 1930s in the sound era. The lead role in each film (a gangster/criminal or bootleg racketeer of the Prohibition Era) was glorified, but each one ultimately met his doom in the final scenes of these films, due to censors' demands that they receive moral retribution for their crimes.

The first two films in the cycle were released almost simultaneously by Warner Bros.:

1. Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* (1930) starred Edward G. Robinson as a gritty, coarse and ruthless, petty Chicago killer named Caesar Enrico (or "Rico") Bandello (a flimsy disguise for a characterization of Al Capone), who experienced a rise to prominence and then a rapid downfall; Robinson was the first great gangster star.

2. William Wellman's *The Public Enemy* (1931) starred James Cagney (in his first film) as a cocky, fast-talking, nasty, and brutal criminal/bootlegger named Tom Powers - most memorable in a vicious scene at the breakfast table where the snarling gangster assaults his floozy moll girlfriend (Mae Clarke) by pressing a half grapefruit into her face. [Both are still in their pajamas, indicating that they spent the night together.] The startling finale included the door-to-door delivery of Cagney's mummy-wrapped corpse to his mother's house - the bandaged body falls through the front door. [The same stars were reunited in another Pre-Code quasi-gangster/comedy film, *Lady Killer* (1933).]

*Scarface* - 1932(3) Howard Hawks' raw *Scarface: The Shame of a Nation* (1932), a Howard Hughes' produced film from UA starred Paul Muni as a power-mad, beastly hood in Prohibition-Era Chicago (the characterization of Tony Camonte was loosely based on the brutal, murderous racketeer Al Capone). Other stars were George Raft (as his coin-flipping emotion-less, right-hand killer) and Ann Dvorak (as Tony's incestuous sister Cesca).

The ultra-violent, landmark film in the depiction of Italian-American immigrant gangsters included twenty-eight deaths, and the first use of a machine gun by a gangster. It was brought to the attention of the Hays Code for its unsympathetic portrayal of criminals, and there was an ensuing struggle over its release and content. [In tribute over fifty years later, Brian de Palma remade the film with Al Pacino in the title role of *Scarface* (1983). Ironically, this film was also criticized as being too brutal.]

Mervyn LeRoy's *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932) was another early landmark film with Paul Muni in a nominated role as an innocent man sentenced to a chain-gang in the South - a victim of society's brutal, degrading criminal system. And Cagney also starred again
(with Mae Clarke as his moll) in *Lady Killer* (1933) as the head of a New York crime ring who must relocate and hide out in Hollywood.

**I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang, Ed w/ introduction by John E. O’Connor. U Wisconsin Press 1981**

Such films of social consciousness as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang, Heroes for Sale* (1933), *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933), *Black Fury* (1935), *Black Legion* (1937), *They Won’t Forget* (1937) did more than pluck at the public’s heartstrings. They all implied that forbidding forces were at work that were wholly unpredictable and yet capable of overtaking the hopes and ambitions of an individual.

Since the time of its release in 1932, *Chain Gang* has earned a reputation as one of the few Hollywood products that can be directly associated with social change—not only a shift in popular attitudes but a revision of government policy. According to film historians, the reform of the southern chain gang system can be attributed to the public outrage generated by this movie. Jack Warner, Darryl Zanuck, and Mervyn LeRoy have since taken personal credit for creating this hard-hitting document.

The film that eventually reached the screen has earned mention in almost every survey of American genre film. (Muni and the Warners sound department each won an Oscar for their work.), the film is interesting because it directly addresses an obvious issue of social concern, because its dramatic conception and especially its inconclusive ending were so unusual, and because Paul Muni’s powerful and intense performances even today, almost fifty years later, makes the viewing of the film a gripping experience.

Moreover, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* is a valuable document for the study of popular values and attitudes in Depression America...Especially in its portrayal of the role of women and of the ambitions of middle-class Americans at the time, the film touched sensitive nerve centers in the national consciousness. In its aura of humanitarian concern the film suggested a new departure for Hollywood as a force for social reform.

**COMING UP IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:**

Sept 20 Howard Hawks **Bringing Up Baby** 1938 (DVD)
Sept 27 Victor Fleming **Gone with the Wind** (DVD)
Oct 4 Akira Kurosawa **Stray Dog/Nora Inn** 1949 (35mm)
Oct 11 Vittorio de Sica **Umerto D** 1952 (35mm)
Oct 18 Robert Bresson **A Man Escaped/Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut** 1956 (35mm)
Oct 25 Luis Buñuel **Diary of a Chambermaid/Le Journal d'une femme de chambre** 1964 (35mm)
Nov 1 Andrei Tarkovsky **Andrei Rublev/Andrey Rublyov** 1966 (DVD)
Nov 8 Peter Yates **Bullitt** 1968 (35mm)
Nov 15 Woody Allen **Annie Hall** 1977 (35mm)
Nov 22 Rainer Werner Fassbinder **Marriage of Maria Braun/Die Ehe der Maria Braun** 1979 (35mm)
Nov 29 Terry Gilliam **Brazil** 1985 (35mm)
Nov Dec 6 Luchino Visconti **The Leopard/Il gattopadro** 1963 (35mm)

**SPECIAL GUSTO FILM PRESENTATION AT THE ALBRIGHT-KNOX ART GALLERY SEPTEMBER 23**

Two silent film classics, introduced by Bruce Jackson & Diane Christian and accompanied by Philip Carli

Buster Keaton's **The General** (5 p.m.) And F.W. Murnau **Sunrise** (8 p.m.)