

Early Hopper

Movie star and character actor Dennis Hopper began his career as one of the semi-interchangeable screen punks of the Fifties, coming of age just as television was offering an enhanced level of exposure to performers with any basic talent or mastery of craft. Like a number of his counterparts, Hopper could do 'tough' and he could also do 'vulnerable,' even in the same character, and it was enough to keep him working while his youthfulness was itself a hot commodity in a marketplace that was increasingly responding to consumers of a similar age. His career soon leveled off, however, with occasional small film parts and TV guest star bits, and by the end of the Sixties he was aging out of the prime parts. It is only because, in a Zen-like manner, he turned his back on the casting rat race and made **Easy Rider** with some friends instead that he was able to catapult his career to a higher plateau (where it again pretty much leveled off until 1986, when the back-to-back success of supporting parts in **Blue Velvet** and **Hoosiers** cemented his reputation and fame).

Video Services Crop has released the *Johnny Legend Presents* title, **Dennis Hopper The Early Works** (UPC#778854179592, \$15), featuring three TV guest star spots that were shot in early 1955, along with a 1964 guest star appearance and what was essentially Hopper's one top billed film role before **Easy Rider**, the lovely 1961 **Night Tide**. Two trailers are also featured. Each TV episode runs a little short of a half hour, and there is no captioning.

The first of the three 1955 shows, which features Hopper's first major screen part, is an anthology program called *Medic* hosted by an unrecognizably young Richard Boone. In the episode, *Boy in the Storm*, Hopper plays a young man afflicted with epilepsy who is afraid to enter mainstream education because of his condition. It is an impressive debut, especially his nothing-held-back seizure scene, but other than that sequence, the episode is rather bland and predictable, with limited dramatic conflict.

Hopper is a street punk in the *Public Defender* episode, *Mama's Boy*, who is accused of murder when a boy he is fighting hits his head on a brick wall and dies. Reed Hadley is the show's hero, a lawyer who researches the victim's background—shown in flashback—to establish that Hopper's character was only defending himself. Hopper's character actually has protective affection for the victim and it is a stretch that the victim would lash out at him instead of at one of the other kids, just as it is another stretch that the victim's mother would recant her initial accusations and admit that her boy was at fault. Still, it is a lightly enjoyable drama in which Hopper demonstrates a competent range of personality and emotion.

The third episode is from *The Loretta Young Show* and is identified as *Inga II*. Young is the proprietor of a farm that also functions as a halfway house for convicts, and Hopper is a spoiled rich kid who is forced to spend some time there. The part is more predictable than the other two roles, but the show is also more sophisticated, and so Hopper's performance has to be more polished to sustain the consistency of the production, which it does.

Presented without the original theme song, the 1964 episode of **Petticoat Junction** that Hopper appears in, *Bobbi Jo & the Beatnik*, is available in better condition in one of the Paramount season sets. Nevertheless, it makes a nice contrast to the first three pieces, as the viewer can ascertain not only how Hopper has matured as an actor, but how television has matured along with him. Hopper's character is a poet who is wandering across the country and pauses long enough to attract the attentions of one of the show's characters, much to the consternation of her elders. Hopper has great fun with the part's humor—the poet's wild, abstract poetry—while the will she/won't she plot sustains enough emotional conflict to remain intriguing even if there is never any doubt as to its outcome.

Hopper is a sailor on leave in **Night Tide**, visiting a seaside amusement park where he meets and falls in love with a sideshow performer who earns a living pretending to be a mermaid. He returns on successive leaves to visit her, only to learn that she has a mysterious past and may have murdered her previous boyfriends. Running 84 minutes, the film is a pleasant romance with a nice atmosphere and just the right touches of ambiguity to suggest that darker forces are at work. Since the resolution is largely undefined, it can seem as if the movie has been one long carnival tease that amounts to nothing at all, but if you take it for what it is and suppress your expectations, it can be a very pleasant entertainment. Hopper wisely underplays his part throughout, which is in keeping with the film's generally understated tone and modest ambition.

The full screen black-and-white image on the first three episodes is quite soft and aged, but viewable. The image on the **Petticoat Junction** episode is a little cleaner but still somewhat soft. On all four, the monophonic sound is a bit rough but adequate. The black-and-white picture on **Night Tide** is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The source material is in reasonably good condition. There are stray speckles, but the image is sharp and contrasts are well defined. The monophonic sound is okay.

Terrific British B's

A marvelous little British murder mystery is combined with a somewhat more bizarre WWII tale on the VCI Entertainment release, **"Best Of!" British Classics Vol 1 Tomorrow We Live / Inquest** (UPC#0898598-39528, \$15). On both films, the full screen black-and-white picture is a little

soft, but is otherwise in good shape. The monophonic sound, however, is somewhat noisy. There is no captioning.

A farmer finds a loaded pistol, less one bullet, stashed away in his attic, and from there it is inferred that there has been a murder in the engaging 1939 courtroom drama, *Inquest*. The woman who had rented the farm finds herself on a virtual trial at the coroner's inquest, and it is only because of the diligence of her lawyer that she is not railroaded into an arraignment for doing away with her husband. Running 58 minutes, the acting is a little stiff, but the story has some good twists and it keeps you guessing most of the way.

Running 81 minutes, the 1943 *Tomorrow We Live* is about the activities of the French Resistance in a port town in Brittany. The characters are all French, and they are all played by English actors, creating this enjoyably weird mix of French culture and British attitudes. The hero, portrayed by John Clements, has information he must take to England, and the action pits his waiting to leave against the ever-tightening grip of the generally hapless Nazis. The narrative is fairly straightforward, but the film works well enough if you embrace its idiosyncrasies.

An even better double bill, both 'B' movies in **"Best Of!" British Classics Vol 2 Naked Fury / Cover Girl Killer** (UPC#089859859328, \$15) are terrifically entertaining and great fun. Running 57 minutes, the 1959 *Naked Fury* opens, like **Reservoir Dogs**, in the getaway car in the aftermath of a robbery. The crooks have abducted the daughter of a security guard, and the concern about 'what to do with her' as they try to settle into their hideout and stay cool until the heat passes takes up most of the story. The inevitable animosities and unplanned complications occur as the police close in, but something else, quite spectacular, also happens in the finale, and as much as we are dying to tell you about it (especially since it makes a superb metaphor for what happens to the scheme as a whole), it is best left for the wonderful surprise that it is. There is also a neat little jazz score to set just the right mood.

Equally engaging, *Cover Girl Killer*, from 1960, is about a serial killer who is targeting the models featured each month on the front of a girly magazine that a young ne'er-do-well has just inherited. As the police and the publisher figure out the pattern and start to lay a trap for the killer, the killer becomes more clever and more bold in eluding their grasp. Running 62 minutes, the characters are effectively developed—the killer is quite creepy, but very real, too—and the movie's atmosphere has just the right amount of seediness to contrast its classic British crime thriller traditions.

Because they are younger films, the full screen black-and-white picture quality on **Vol 2** is a little stronger than **Vol 1**, although there is still a softness to the edges and some weak contrasts that one would associate with a less than pristine tape transfer. The monophonic sound is also cleaner and sharper. There is no captioning.

Before the Secret Service worked for him

Almost lovable, the youthful Ronald Reagan starred in a series of four 'B' films for Warner Bros. in which he played a Secret Service agent, with Eddie Foy, Jr. as his sidekick. All four films have been bundled onto two platters in the Warner Home Video *Archive Collection* release, **Brass Bancroft of the Secret Service Mysteries Collection** (UPC#883316279120, \$20). In the films, Reagan conveys a stronger personality than many serial action stars, and handles himself well enough in the action scenes, so he was able to advance to the next rung of stardom as a Warner contract player. As for the movies, each lasts only around an hour and usually has a cliffhanger moment somewhere around the midway point. The action scenes are often freshly and imaginatively staged, and will thrill, if briefly, even today's jaded viewers.

Presented as the second film on the first platter, *Secret Service of the Air*, from 1939, is actually the introductory episode, where Reagan and Foy's characters are pilots who are recruited by the secret service to bust a ring that is flying immigrants into the country from Mexico, after a previous undercover agent was murdered by the group (dropped, with the immigrants, in midair, during the film's horrifically captivating opening teaser). To infiltrate the band, Reagan's character first has to make connections in a prison, so he is sent there on trumped up charges, and along with the flying scenes and car chases and crashes, there are some engaging prison sequences, too. There is also a very funny moment near the end of the 61-minute program. As Reagan's character takes off in the plane with the main bad guys, the Mexican police arrive to round up the remaining villains on the ground in Mexico, and the chief of the Mexican police declares the bad guys are under arrest. "The charges are smuggling of aliens into the United States." Think about it.

The companion film on the platter, also from 1939, *Code of the Secret Service*, is the weakest of the group. Reagan's character ends up in Mexico again, after traveling to Texas (on a lengthy plane ride from Washington D.C. illustrated in the film with a line advance across a map as if he were traveling around the world or something) to track down a group of counterfeiters. There is a terrific car crash in the finale of the 58-minute feature, but less of a story than the other three films manage to generate.

Reagan's character goes undercover in prison again in *Smashing the Money Ring* from 1939, unaware that the counterfeiters are actually using the prison's printing presses to manufacture their bogus currency (you'd think that the authorities would get suspicious about all of the green ink being used