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## L.A. Confidential: Special Edition (1997)

WARNER



Reviewed by [Colin Jacobson](#) (September 11, 2008)

Many years the Academy Awards race for [Best Picture](#) seems to come down to a battle between the critics' choice and the popular favorite. One major example of this occurred in 1995 when critical darling [Pulp Fiction](#) lost to the mega-successful [Forrest Gump](#).

This kind of situation repeated itself to a degree in 1998 when the two top contenders were [Titanic](#) and [LA Confidential](#). This battle didn't equal the *Gump/Pulp* feud, since *Titanic* received a much better critical reaction than did the saccharine *Gump*, but nonetheless the critical consensus backed the less crowd-pleasing *LA Confidential*.

I rooted for *Titanic* to win both because I liked it best and because I'm a big fan of James Cameron - [Aliens](#) remains possibly my all-time favorite film - so I was pleased with the result. Had the voting gone the other way, however, I would not have been terribly disappointed, for *LA Confidential* was an undeniably solid film as well.

Initially I didn't really care to see *LA Confidential*. I've never been a big fan of the kind of stylized period piece it seemed to be, so I planned to take a pass on it. However, good reviews and a long day in a strange town with nothing else to do conspired to send me to see it.

As you've undoubtedly already concluded, I felt quite pleasantly surprised. *LA Confidential* didn't present a pretentious attempt to redo Raymond Chandler after all; instead I found it to be a compelling story of corruption and the forces that drive people to do what they do. Although it occasionally sagged, it maintained a fairly consistent level of interest and entertainment over its two-plus hour running time.

I've now seen *LA Confidential* an additional five times on DVD, and although the film essentially offers a mystery - a genre that tends to lose a lot of appeal on repeated viewings - the movie continues to intrigue and interest me. Partially this is because the plot is complicated enough that it takes a few extra sittings to truly take it all in; the film has an above-average number of characters, all of whom do quite a lot, so there are rarely dull moments.

As a whole, the cast is terrific, and the quality of their acting also supports repeated viewings. When I first saw *Confidential*, I was startled to learn that both of the then essentially unknown leads - Russell Crowe and Guy Pearce - were Australian; you'd never know from their performances. (While a lot of their dialogue appears to have been dubbed, that is the case with much of the cast, so this doesn't appear to be one of those [Goldfinger](#) cases where the actors' original speech was at fault.) Kevin Spacey and Danny DeVito live up to their reputations as well, and David Strathairn provides a typically fine supporting job.

Two performances are of special note. First, Kim Basinger's work deserves comment since she won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for this role. I'm still not sure her acting was award-worthy, but I do acknowledge that she did quite well with the role. It's a very low-key, subdued performance, during which she never displays any of the kind of movie-star glitz that I would have expected from her; she truly brings out the weariness of her character.

I also wanted to note the acting of James Cromwell because I've slowly started to realize that he's one of the most versatile and consistently solid character actors around today. Look at a cross-section of a few of his roles: kindly Farmer Hoggett in [Babe](#), eccentric inventor in [Star Trek: First Contact](#), and sleazy police captain in *LA Confidential*. In each of these roles and many more, he quietly but convincingly did his work. All that, and he played a shifty swinger in

### MOVIE INFO

#### Director:

Curtis Hanson

#### Cast:

[Kevin Spacey](#), [Russell Crowe](#), [Guy Pearce](#), [James Cromwell](#), [Kim Basinger](#), [David Strathairn](#), [Danny DeVito](#), Graham Beckel, Paul Guilfoyle, Ron Rifkin

#### Writing Credits:

James Ellroy (novel, "L.A. Confidential"), Brian Koppelman, Curtis Hanson

#### Tagline:

Off the record, on the QT, and very hush-hush ...

#### Synopsis:

Director Curtis Hanson captures the duality of 1950s Los Angeles in this striking film noir adaptation of James Ellroy's novel. The City of Angels might be sunny, inviting, and glamorous to the rest of the world, but it's also filled with corrupt cops, elegant hookers, murder cover-ups, and manipulative paparazzi, all of which are just the tip of the iceberg. It's impossible to know exactly who's trustworthy and who's not as three detectives (Kevin Spacey, Russell Crowe, and Guy Pearce) each use their own tactics to investigate a coffee-shop massacre.

**Box Office:**

Budget  
\$35 million.  
Opening Weekend  
\$5.211 million on 769  
screens.  
Domestic Gross  
\$64.604 million.

**MPAA:**

Rated R

an episode of *Three's Company* I saw a few months back! Now that's versatility!

I still prefer *Titanic* and think it deserved its honors, but *LA Confidential* remains a solid flick. It adeptly creates a modern film noir without ever coming across as a weak imitation of a prior genre. The movie provides terrific acting and taut story telling and continues to provide a slick effort.

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### The DVD Grades: Picture C/ Audio B/ Bonus A

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**DVD DETAILS****Presentation:**

Widescreen 2.35:1/16X9

**Audio:**

English Dolby Digital 5.1

**Subtitles:**

English  
French  
Closed-captioned

**Supplements Subtitles:**

None

**Runtime:** 138 min.

**Price:** \$20.97

**Release Date:** 9/23/2008

**Bonus:****DVD One:**

- Audio Commentary with Critic/Historian Andrew Sarris, Producers Arnon Milchan and Michael Nathanson, Novelist James Ellroy, Costume Designer Ruth Myers, Screenwriter Brian Helgeland, Production Designer Jeannine Oppewall, Director of Photography Dante Spinotti, Editor Peter Honess and Actors Russell Crowe, Kevin Spacey, Guy Pearce, James Cromwell, David Strathairn, Kim Basinger and Danny DeVito
- Music-Only Track
- Trailer Gallery

**DVD Two:**

- "Whatever You Desire: Making *LA Confidential*" Featurette
- "Sunlight and Shadow: The Visual Style of *LA Confidential*" Featurette
- "A True Ensemble: The Cast of *LA Confidential*" Featurette
- "*LA Confidential*: From Book to Screen" Featurette
- "Off the Record" Featurette
- "Photo Pitch" Featurette
- "The LA of *LA Confidential*" Interactive Gallery
- *LA Confidential* TV Pilot

- Bonus CD Sampler

*LA Confidential* appears in an aspect ratio of approximately **2.35:1** on this single-sided, double-layered DVD; the image has been enhanced for **16X9** televisions. The transfer provided a rather mediocre presentation.

Sharpness looked erratic. While some parts of the film looked reasonably well-defined, many parts demonstrated light softness. I thought delineation was usually acceptable but that was about it; this was rarely a particularly crisp image. No shimmering occurred, but I felt the film seemed somewhat blocky at times. In addition, I noticed light edge enhancement as well as some motion artifacts. Source flaws were insignificant. I detected a small speck or two but that was about it.

*Confidential* tended toward a sepia palette to fit its period setting. Colors were decent and not often much better. A few scenes featured brighter tones, but these remained fairly average. Blacks were acceptably dark, while low-light shots showed good delineation. Though those shots tended to suffer from the most noticeable softness, they presented fine clarity in terms of shadows. At no point did *Confidential* become a bad transfer, but I thought it seemed average.

The **Dolby Digital 5.1** soundtrack of *LA Confidential* worked reasonably well, though it didn't provide a broad enough soundfield to merit more than a "B". The track showed good stereo spread throughout the movie, and the forward channels offered a nice sense of atmosphere. Elements blended well and moved smoothly across the front spectrum. As for the surrounds, they contributed moderate reinforcement of the front elements and only sporadically provided unique information. The shootout at the end of the film definitely gave us the most active use of the rear speakers.

Audio quality appeared fine, though speech suffered due to all the film's looping. Much of the dubbed dialogue seemed too obvious, and this made the track come across as more artificial than it should. The lines remained natural and distinct, though, and they showed no issues related to edginess or intelligibility. Effects sounded clean and accurate, and they displayed no distortion. Some of the louder elements line gunfire kicked in solid bass response. Music also seemed vibrant and robust with deep and rich low-end. In the end, the track lacked the sonic ambition to earn a high grade, but *L.A. Confidential* still provided a quality auditory experience.

How did the picture and audio of this 2008 Special Edition compare to those of the **original 1998 release**? Both presented virtually identical audio, and I thought the visuals were pretty similar as well. The old transfer was a little dirtier, but the new one seemed blockier. That made comparisons a wash, as neither appeared to be noticeably superior to the other.

The 2008 Special Edition brings back the smattering of extras from the original 1998 disc and it adds a bunch more. I'll note repeated extras with an asterisk. If you fail to see a star, the component is new to this set.

On DVD One, we open with an **audio commentary** from critic/historian Andrew Sarris, producers Arnon Milchan and Michael Nathanson, novelist James Ellroy, costume designer Ruth Myers, screenwriter Brian Helgeland, production designer Jeannine Oppewall, editor Peter Honess, director of photography Dante Spinotti, and actors Russell Crowe, Kevin Spacey, Guy Pearce, James Cromwell, David Strathairn, Kim Basinger and Danny DeVito. This is an edited piece, not a running, screen-specific one. The track looks at the source novel and its adaptation, getting backing for the project and the filmmakers' approach to it, cast, characters and performances, inspirations and influences, costume and production design, music and cinematography, and a few other filmmaking issues.

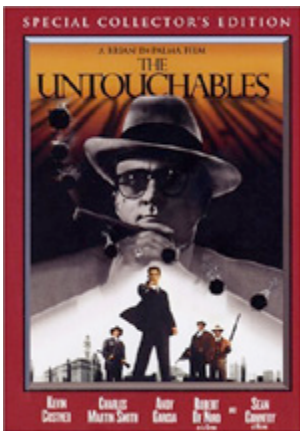
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## EQUIPMENT

Panasonic 50" TH-50PZ77U 1080p Plasma Monitor; Harman/Kardon DPR 2005 7.1 Channel Receiver; Toshiba A-30 HD-DVD/1080p Upconverting DVD Player using HDMI outputs; Michael Green Revolution Cinema 6i Speakers (all five); Kenwood 1050SW 150-watt Subwoofer.

## RELATED REVIEWS



The absence of director Curtis Hanson disappoints, but otherwise, I find little reason to complain about this solid discussion. The track covers a good variety of subjects related to the flick, and it does so in an involving manner. Some may not care for the edited nature of the piece, but I don't think many will feel let down by the quality of the material, as the commentary covers the movie well.

Another audio option appears on DVD One. We can listen to the film via a **\*Music-Only Track**. This allows fans to hear Jerry Goldsmith's score in its full Dolby Digital 5.1 glory. While I don't have a great fondness for movie music, I think this is a nice bonus for film score buffs.

DVD One comes to a close with a **\*trailer gallery**. Here we find three TV spots for *Confidential* along with its theatrical trailer and an ad for its soundtrack CD.

With that we head to the extras on DVD Two, where six featurettes fill most of the space. **Whatever You Desire: Making LA Confidential** goes for 29 minutes, 28 seconds and mixes movie clips, archival materials, and interviews. We hear from Ellroy, Milchan, Crowe, Nathanson, Pearce, Spacey, Basinger, DeVito, Cromwell, Strathairn, Oppewall, Spinotti, Myers, and director Curtis Hanson. "Desire" covers Hanson's desire to make the story and his approach to the material, the script and its path to the screen, cast, characters, and performances, visual design and locations, cinematography and costumes, and the movie's reception.

While some repetition from the commentary occurs here, the presence of Hanson adds a valuable perspective. The show also brings out some info not heard previously, such as specifics about Bud White's costumes. Of course, the program doesn't prove as informative as the commentary, but it becomes a useful complement.

For the next piece, we get the 21-minute and two-second **Sunlight and Shadow: The Visual Style of LA Confidential**. It includes notes from Hanson, Spinott, Ellroy, Myers, Oppewall, Basinger, Crowe, Pearce, Spacey and Strathairn. "Shadow" digs heavily into cinematography, sets, and costumes; it also discusses some cinematic influences and other visual issues. Yes, we learned a little about these in the prior pieces, but "Shadow" allows for greater depth in terms of those topics. It provides more good details and turns into another enjoyable show.

To learn more about the actors, we shift to **A True Ensemble: The Cast of LA Confidential**. This 24-minute and 23-second show provides statements from Hanson, Nathanson, Milchan, Crowe, Pearce, Spacey, Basinger, Strathairn, DeVito, Cromwell, Honess, Helgeland, and Ellroy. As expected, the program examines the actors, the characters, and the performances. The show expands on these topics well to turn into an involving piece.

More info about the source novel comes via the 21-minute and seven-second **LA Confidential: From Book to Screen**. It features Hanson, Ellroy, Helgeland, Nathanson, Pearce, Crowe, Spacey and Milchan. We learn more about the source novel's adaptation and the script. I expected "Screen" to follow in the footsteps of its predecessors, and it does so. It throws out plenty of nice notes about the text, with particularly intriguing comments about changes from the novel.

An 18-minute and 49-second featurette called **\*Off the Record** includes notes from Hanson, Helgeland, Ellroy, Basinger, Pearce, Crowe, Spacey, DeVito, Milchan, and executive producer David L. Wolper. "Record" provides a good general overview of the film. It emphasizes the novel's adaptation, getting the project off the ground, and casting. While somewhat redundant after the prior programs, it turns into an enjoyable piece.

**\*Photo Pitch** goes for eight minutes, 25 seconds. In it, Hanson leads us through his use of the "photo pitch" he gave to cast and producers. This was part of the way he managed to get involvement in the project. It offers a neat look at this process.

Next we find **\*The LA of LA Confidential**. This program provides brief snippets of real-life details for the locations used in the film. It seems interesting but the awkward interface mars the piece. Although it features 15 locations, you can only access one clip at a time. Due to the brevity of the clips – they last about 20 to 30 seconds each – it can become a tedious exercise



to watch all of them. The DVD should have provided a "Play All" option to make access easier.

For something quite intriguing, we go to the **LA Confidential TV Pilot**. Shot in 2000, the 46-minute and 27-second program stars a pre-24 Kiefer Sutherland in the Spacey role. (Then-unknowns Josh Hopkins and David Conrad play the Crowe and Pearce parts, respectively; no one from the movie appears in the show.) The show demonstrates general similarities with the movie in terms of characters and setting, but it makes quite a few changes as well. It takes place a few years prior to the events in the film, so Exley is a sergeant with Internal Affairs, Vincennes doesn't yet work on TV, White is a patrolman, and Lynn just arrived off the bus from Arizona.

Given that Sutherland is the only "name" in the cast, it comes as no surprise that he gets the most screen time. Sutherland doesn't totally dominate, though, so expect a lot of the others as well; in particular, we see a good deal of Exley. White and Lynn receive attention, but not to the same degree, though they become more prominent as the show progresses.

As far as I know, the *Confidential* series never made it past the pilot stage. Indeed, this program was shot in 1999 but it didn't even air until 2003; IMDB notes that it was supposed to become a 13-part mini-series on HBO but that never materialized. That's too bad, as I think the series had potential. The pilot doesn't dazzle, but it intrigues. Granted, most of the actors seem lackluster. Sutherland lacks Spacey's glib charm, and both Hopkins and Conrad feel awfully anonymous. In particular, Hopkins is awfully low-key and mild; he bears virtually no resemblance to the film's hotheaded White. Taylor Pruitt Vince does the best job of capturing his character, as his Sid Hudgens matches well with DeVito's.

Some lackluster performances aside, the pilot does provide an interesting start to matters. It's fun to get a bit of an "origin story" for the film's characters. The show doesn't always fit neatly into the flick's chronology, and it takes some liberties. For instance, it keeps Exley's father alive and puts him in the public sector, where the movie makes him a dead law enforcement role model. The series does this for plot choices to create some tension between Exley and his dad's expectations/pressures.

Whether or not these decisions were good remains to be seen. Since the series never went anywhere, it's impossible to say if the plot threads would've paid off or not. In any case, the pilot presents an intriguing start to a series that never made it anywhere.

The package concludes with a **CD Sampler**. It includes six songs from the movie: "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive" (Johnny Mercer and the Pied Pipers), "Look for the Silver Lining" (Chet Baker), "Hit the Road to Dreamland" (Betty Hutton), "Wheel of Fortune" (Kay Starr), "But Not For Me" (Jackie Gleason), and "Powder Your Face With Sunshine (Smile! Smile! Smile!)" (Dean Martin). As with the isolated score, I doubt I'll ever want to revisit this collection of tunes, but I appreciate its presence. It's a nice capper for a fine package.

One of the better modern film noirs, *LA Confidential* holds up well after more than a decade. It definitely stands as one of the best Oscar runner-ups in history, as it offers an involving, dynamic tale. The DVD suffers from a bland transfer, but it comes with fairly good audio and a terrific roster of supplements.

I continue to really enjoy *Confidential* and highly recommend it, so new fans will want to grab this special edition. As for those who already own the original DVD, my recommendation depends on how much you like extras. While the SE includes tons of new bonus materials, I don't see it as an upgrade in terms of picture and audio; the SE looks different than its predecessor but not necessarily better. I like the SE for its supplements but its mediocre visuals disappoint.

**Viewer Film Ratings: 4.625 Stars**

**Number of Votes: 8**





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