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L.A. Confidential: Two-Disc Special Edition

[Warner Bros.](#) // R // September 23, 2008
List Price: \$20.97 [Buy now and save at [Amazon](#)]

Review by [Thomas Spurlin](#) | posted September 23, 2008 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

Tragically losing out to that behemoth boat movie for Best Picture accolades in 1997, *L.A. Confidential* showcases a much broader, more intriguing swatch of themes and conflicts than any of its competition -- and many films of the '90s, period. It soaks into the hopping 1950s Californian prestige, ushered in with velvet snarkiness by our "noble reporter" of Hush-Hush magazine. Instead of the beauty behind it all, Hanson's adaption of James Ellroy's novel focuses on loyalty, corruption, and justice within the Los Angeles Police Department. Well written from floor to ceiling with surprisingly sharp prose from *Payback* director Brian Helgeland, *L.A. Confidential's* script dissects the hell out of several distinct characters rich with starkly differing methodologies. It's easily one of the best films of the nineties, and grandly sits in the company of the likes of Welles' *Touch of Evil* and Kubrick's *The Killing* as one of the better detective noir films to date.

The Film:



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CONTENT ★★★★★

VIDEO ★★★★★

AUDIO ★★★★★

EXTRAS ★★★★★

REPLAY ★★★★★

ADVICE **Highly Recommended**

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The film's rapid start wastes little time in throwing its audience into the bowels of corruption and malice surround the city and its law enforcement. It gathers together the up-and-coming prodigy Ed Exley (Guy Pearce, *Memento*), the goodhearted bulldog Bud White (Russell Crowe, *American Gangster*), and the socially-aware narcotics / homicide detective Jack Vincennes (Kevin Spacey, *Usual Suspects*), who happens to be a consultant on a police television show that closely mirrors the classic detective serial "Dragnet". They all operate under the umbrella of Chief Dudley Smith (James Cromwell, *The Green Mile*), a highly-decorated staple in the police force with a concentric focus on both brute force and suave police work to get to the root of investigations.

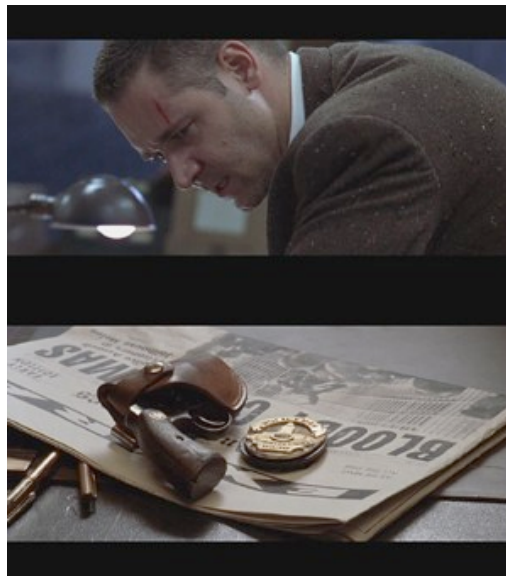
They get tied up in the murderous activities surrounding the Night Owl Massacre, a brutal slaughter that occurs late at night in a hot-spot coffee joint. While Jack uses this highly-publicized opportunity to unravel the mystery for his own celebrity-like vanity's sake and White barrels through his line of clues with blunt force, Exley tries to grind through the prim-and-proper methods of discovery. All this occurs in the aftermath of a departmental shakedown that rustled Exley from the woodwork as a snitch, while also getting White and his partner fired and Vincennes reassigned to the homicide department away from his typically wealth-inducing narcotics post.

Within this two-hour-plus span of police politics and vulgarities, we get the chance to soak in dialogue that seems crafted for razor-tongued swiftness. It flickers with bluntness and charisma aplenty, giving us an atmosphere that has become influential to lyrical neo-noir successors. The language has a personality all its own, mirroring the 1950's mood -- but with a harder, almost rhythmically modernized edge. Words feel authentic and humorous, but with that same kind of gravitas that makes listening to vintage dialogue a joy. Each character has his or her own kind of language, from Vincennes' cheeky humor to Smith's coy Irish mumblings. Most enjoyable, however, is how overwhelmingly blunt Crowe's gruffness can be, which combines with his threatening energy to craft an effectively intimidating manner.

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Hanson's casting search was geared towards finding electric personalities that were a) affordable, and b) unrecognizably electric -- a feat that he succeeded in with spades. Though, looking back now, it almost looks like a premeditated shortlist of all-star powerhouses. Naturally, the performances from Crowe and Spacey rely heavily on their respective charisma instead of fluid character assimilation, but that's how we like it from them. Spacey's surprisingly gripping as Jack Vincennes, as his celebrity status as a vigilant crusader for Hugh-Hush magazine actually fondles the sensitive cash-packed underbelly of the booming narcotics industry in Los Angeles. Crowe, on the flipside, plays the street-smart thuggish cop bit quite well, pumping full-blooded veracity into a short-fused character hell-bent on beating the truth out of anyone who holds back. Several intriguing supportive characters adorn the scattered locales of Los Angeles' tainted socialite circles as well, each brought to life with grin-inducing precision. David Strathairn adds dashes of charismatic dodginess as a high-scale porn king / pimp, while DeVito's bustling reporter persona as Sid Hudgens borderlines on classic.



But the true dramatic talent comes from Guy Pearce as the bookworm-ish, straight-edged rising star in the homicide department, Ed Exley. Pearce is an unbelievable chameleon, something that has really stretched to its limits with the gritty western film *The Proposition* and, naturally, his hauntingly vacant persona in Chris Nolan's *Memento*. However, his transforming personality here is a force to be reckoned with once he starts to acclimate to the rugged brutality and brashness of detective work. In one of the best-performed scenes of his career -- and that's coming from a huge admirer of Nolan's twisty mystery film -- Pearce lights up the screen with tension and unrelenting intelligence during a piercing interrogation between three murder suspects. He's stiff, slick,

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smarter than he should be, and impressionable to the sliminess of the division. Watching both his preemptive strikes and stalwart reactions towards corruption is splendid.

Constructing this downward spiral and swaying malleability for its characters helps *L.A. Confidential* gyrate around one key theme: the balance between unblemished purity and proper justice. Captain Smith, during a moment when he tries to deviate Exley's interest from the detective homicide position, comments that Bud White is able to "say yes" to a few questions that he has posed to him a few times. These questions pertain to the common beating, trickery, and dishonesty that came with the territory of being a successfully ardent cop in the '50s. It also creates one of the more entertaining analytical dynamics I've experienced, crafting an atmosphere where we compare the tactics of cops to each other -- especially between Exley and Bud White -- for positives and negatives, successes and loopholes, and the comparable ways each one gets what they want from their targets.

Once this moral dynamic is introduced early on, it rarely backs down from its gripping and questionable nature. Since then, several films have tinkered with the idea of constructing elaborate schemes to dodge the law, such as in *Gone Baby Gone* and, on an international scale, *Memories of Murder*. Its frequency in *L.A. Confidential* drains the shock out of that mechanism, instead allowing its audience to see the tactic as a tool used for everything between idle threats directed at a wife beater to the planting evidence on a known felon to ensure criminal indictment. It raises the question in our own minds, "in that situation, would I plant evidence to get a evildoer off the streets?" Most important, the film doesn't take a stand by answering that question, instead utilizing different methods to allow us to make up our own minds -- or see them coalesce for what they both have to offer.



When it's not playing the role as moral guide through this acceptable dark underside, *L.A. Confidential* also tackles vanity among those disconnected symbionts that thrive and feed off of the dark underbelly of Los Angeles. Utilizing the Fleur-de-lis prostitution ring as a springboard, it focuses on the time period's newly-discovered infatuation with public image. This ushers in the radiant Academy-award winning performance from Kim Basinger (*Batman*) as the lucid prostitute Lynn Bracken. Her dynamic personality creates such depth and duality around her sophistication that it speaks her history without words. From the moment that we witness her iconic turn-and-gaze at Bud White in the liquor store, we see a woman trapped in a world vastly inferior to the blooming warmth that she exudes.

This old-Hollywood beauty, projecting her likeness to Veronica Lake, quickly builds a relationship with Bud White -- something that might seem questionable to some at first glance. However, combined with the crumbling wall that Crowe lowers in Bud's personality, Basinger's Lynn somehow becomes epitomic to his eyes and sells us on the connection that arises the instant they meet. The existence of her prostitution ring, a gig that revolves around the business model that each employee resembles a specific Hollywood starlet, sketches out the painfully obvious obsession that society has with obtaining things we cannot have. This ideal arises as a potential catalyst that could be fueling Bud's attraction, clouding real passion with the lust arising in the oft-fantasized notion of sleeping with "Veronica Lake".

When aligned with Exley's desire to have justice and purity in equal measure, it builds a grand play on those unsatisfied archetypes that lie beyond our reach. Moreover, this fascination with public image becomes an explosive and unnerving mechanic that electrifies the escalating tension brewing between all characters caught in this loop. As a plateau to this tension, *L.A. Confidential* showcases one of the best close-quartered shootouts in cinema within its explosive conclusion, not just because of supreme editing but also due to well-crafted claustrophobia. Dante Spinotti's cinematography accentuates this by layering point-of-view shots with clean, expository pans that paint a perfect image of each character's whereabouts in a small, darkly-lit house. Several parallel scenes, many of which revolve around raids on similarly confined spaces to that of the house, keep the tense pacing throttling along until this engulfing, satisfying climax.

It reflects the film's commonly well-designed spatial conception, all of which helps in crafting a pragmatic nature within the iconic pulp dialogue and ravishing visuals of one of the '90s strongest and most thoroughly entertaining films. Curtis Hanson and Brian Helgeland have gone on to direct other strong films following this, but none of them compare to the one-in-a-lifetime concoction that sizzles in *L.A.*

Confidential's pitch-perfect marriage of cast and crew. It's a film that zeroes in on corruption themes that apply just as much in the '50s as they do to our modern era. That's a rare feat, one that has to be experienced to appreciate. Witnessing a film like *L.A. Confidential* that retains potency and ferments with time is one of those true, enthralling benchmarks of film as a medium.

The DVD:



Warner Brothers released a "Special Edition" of *L.A. Confidential* in 1998 within their tradition snapper-case presentation. Oddly, this is a Tenth Anniversary of sorts: ten years since the previous DVD was released. Here, in this new Two-Disc Special Edition, we're treated to a lush package with highly-attractive coverart, accentuated by a glossy slipcover. Some might think that the prominence of Lynn's presence on the cover might be a little misleading to the story, but think about it -- she's a façade of vanity's height, a tool that she uses to mask her own self-awareness. It's kind of fitting to see her lurking over photographs of the key testosterone-fueled characters in the film. Plus, this new artwork really is smashing.

Here's an interesting bit of information, though: this isn't a two disc edition -- it's actually a three-disc package from Warner Bros. What's the third bonus disc? A CD sampler disc featuring six tracks from the film. So, for a tag for under \$21 bucks (and, certainly, to be had much lower with some shopping), you're getting three discs of quality material about a powerhouse '50s throwback noir film. If you would've told me that was going to be the norm from Warner Bros. three or four years ago, I would have questioned your sanity.

The Video:

Watching this new transfer for *L.A. Confidential* has an odd effect: it reminds me of how great the old anamorphic discs's transfer is for a DVD of its age. Presented in a 2.36:1 widescreen transfer enhanced for 16x9 televisions, this new digital image offers many subtle improvements in several intricate areas. First off, it enhances color replication to a welcome degree. When comparing the two discs next to each other, shadowing and facial tones seemed a bit lacking in the depth department for the first release. Saturation is adjusted in several spots; we're not just working with a boosting in color, we're also witnessing some desaturation in certain points. It renders a more natural and absorbent palette, creating substantially improved facial tones and backdrop color solidity. Noticeable alterations can be seen in many places where red / pink / magenta hues fill the screen, as well as other bright primary colors.

Left = 1998 SE, Right = 2008 SE

Click Each for Larger Captures:



The original disc wasn't too bad at showing off detail within the image but, as expected for such an old disc, both compression artifacts and pixelation make it messy by today's standards. Here, the film only has to fight with the other language tracks and a few trailers / TV spots for space on the first disc, so there's more breathing room for the image. The result is stronger facial features, cleaner lines, heightened depth in shadows and contours, less noisy blocks of color, and a much more even balance between contrast and brightness. However, though they're undoubtedly improvements, they don't provide the drastic revelation of a clean-up that you might expect. Plenty of noise can still be seen in the image, while some blocking and pixelation still pop up in many facial

features. Also, a few scant specs and scratches can still be seen -- though, most of them seem to have been wiped clean. Altogether, I'm very happy with this new presentation, but there's still room for further improvement by DVD standards.

The Audio:

Where the older disc really shows its weakness is in a deflated, underused Dolby Digital 5.1 track that doesn't do *L.A. Confidential's* rich sound design justice. Thankfully, we're working with a better mix on this new edition, and it sounds exceedingly solid for a standard Dolby option. The mixing is largely similar to the first, containing comparable balances regarding voiceover ADR and sound effects. A few scenes have a bit of a thwarted buzz with a few louder thumps and shots, which improve a bit with this new track. But verbal clarity and dimensionality has been nicely boosted, stretching out its arms and legs a good bit. With this stretch, the surround track becomes more of an enveloping aural experience in regards to surround activity and fidelity. Furthermore, the aural richness of the Academy-award winning score sounds wonderful in this mix. Like the video, the audio sounds similar, but has been tweaked to provide a richer overall experience. Only the English 5.1 audio track is available on this disc, as are optional English and French subtitles.

The Extras:

While the visual and aural attributes render adequate improvements to justify a purchase, the supplemental material packs the meaty punch that makes this phenomenal package worth purchasing. Shown for the most part in widescreen enhanced presentations, this new array of special features build quite a comprehensive package for fans of the film:

Commentary Track with -- (gasp) -- Critic Sarris, Author Ellroy, Crowe, Spacey, Pearce, Cromwell, Caster Ruth Meyers, Strathairn, Basinger, Writer Helgeland, PD Jeannie Oppenwall, Cinematographer Spinotti, and DeVito:

No, the filmmakers and cast don't split off into separate houses for a couple of audio commentaries. This track includes each and every name mentioned above in connected quips, though they don't lend themselves to being scene-specific. Each actor and crew member verbalize their feelings on the project and its themes, which are strung together and pop up during their specific scenes. For example, Strathairn's portion of the commentary pops up during his initial interrogation with Russell Crowe's character, while Kim Basinger starts to give her informative bits during Bud White's first visit to Lynn Bracken's home. One of the great things about this track is how earnest and non-back patting

the material is; sure, it has its moments when it totes the greatness of the experience with working on this magical production, but the material is mostly engaging and insightful. Ellroy carries his normal gruff, yet respectful tone, Basinger bubbles with earnest joy throughout, while Crowe and Pearce hammer home a lot of insight about their acting processes during the film.

Also included on the first disc is the unexpected part of the **Music-Only 5.1 Track** available on the initial release, as well as a series of **Trailers** that both carry over the spots included from the previous release and an anamorphic trailer. Heck, we've even got a contextual advertising spot for the L.A. Confidential soundtrack.

On Disc 2 ...



Whatever You Desire: Making L.A. Confidential:

An all new featurette, this 30-minute spot differs a bit from the typical "rush to piece this together for home video" style of featurette. Largely similar to the audio commentary, though rarely repetitive, this piece highlights interview time with each of the primary characters and filmmakers, especially with Curtis Hanson. It illustrates how each of the cast members were enlisted in the film, as well as highlighting their concerns for agreeing to do a project like this. It also concentrates on some of the production of the feature, concentrating on Oppenwall's efforts to capture '50s-ish attitude in its filming. It's an aptly pieced-together featurette with a suave concentration on interesting thoughts from the filmmakers.

Sunlight and Shadows: The Visual Style of L.A. Confidential:

Shifting gears hardcore to aesthetics, this featurette focuses on how the crew zeroed in on blending visual attractiveness with the sparse style that throws back to the '50s film noir films. It's clear that Hanson and cinematographer Spinotti wanted to make a noir film that didn't look terribly much like a noir, which they nailed down with gravitas. It also focuses on the palette moods centering around the wardrobe and framing around each character.

A True Ensemble: The Cast of L.A. Confidential:

L.A. Confidential boasts one of the greatest ensemble casts of the '90s, which is accentuated through this twenty-five minute featurette that highlights the seven prime characters. It emphasizes the usage of two "no-name" actors, which happen to be Guy Pearce and Russell Crowe. It's no coincidence that the two performers have become, you know, just a hair over recognizable nowadays. It closes in on each actor's motives in taking their parts, emphasized by interview time that reveals their hearty, REAL feelings about each one. It's a whole mess of positive, but it all feels overwhelmingly genuine.

From Book To Screen:

Here, Helgeland and Hanson concentrate on verbalizing the translation of Ellroy's novel to screen. It discusses their synchronicity with their ideas about how to formulate a proper tone. They discuss their give-and-take nature of their relationship, which started with what "makes them happy" It's pretty much a conversation with the pair of them, which is wholly welcome and enjoyable, with bits of interview footage with James Ellroy as he affirms some of their ideas.

Off The Record: (From Old SE)

Acting as the "making-of" featurette on the 1998 disc, this one takes more of a traditional run-and-cut rhythm that we've gotten used to. It lasts a little over 18 minutes and encompasses everything mentioned above -- that took between twenty to forty minutes a piece to emphasize intricacies. It's a fine piece, but very surface-level compared to the rest.

Photo Pitch: (From Old SE)

At several points in the supplements, Hanson and crew mention a collection of photos that he utilized in selling the film. This eight (8) minute bit actually "recreates" the pitch for us, which is a heck of a lot of fun to watch. Not that it's all that animated or anything, but just watching Hanson's influential photographs from '50s sources as they tie into his vision is a treat.

L.A. of L.A. Confidential: (From Old SE)

Surprisingly, this disc also carries over the "LA of L.A. Confidential" featurette with a new map interface(!). When you select certain points on the map, the scene from the film where each place is featured plays for you. It's a novelty, but still informative with a voiceover that informs you of its

history.

L.A. Confidential (TV):

As a token to completism, Warner has also included the 45-minute television version of Ellroy's story. It stars Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Vincennes, while taking a really accentuating path that focuses on the Hush-Hush writer Sid Hudgens. It was clearly supposed to be a segmented mini-series, but couldn't get picked up by any of the networks.

On Disc 3 (Soundtrack Sampler) ...

Here's the track listing for the Bonus 3rd CD:

Johnny Mercer and the Pied Pipers -- "Ac-Cent-tchu-ate The Positive"

Chet Baker -- "Look for the Silver Lining"

Betty Hutton -- "Hit the Road to Dreamland"

Kay Starr -- "Wheel of Fortune"

Jackie Gleason -- "But Not For Me"




Dean Martin -- "Powder Your Face With Sunshine"

Final Thoughts:

Adoration for *L.A. Confidential* is an easy feat considering its exquisite ensemble, outstanding visual composition, and resonant dialogue surrounding 1950s Los Angeles. But tearing through strong themes of morality and justice within a real-world environment makes *L.A. Confidential* significant. Sure, there are detective / crime dramas that are -- almost -- as entertaining as Hanson's film, but few of them can approach the balance that it strikes between entertainment, social endurance, and moral play. It's a wonderfully engaging film that, seriously, only gets better with time. Warner Brothers have done the film right with suitable audio and visual tweaks, but have also stepped up their game to provide a solid barrage of supplemental features and pieces to grip its fans. Combined with the fact that the price tag sits nearly at \$20 list, it's no hush-hush matter that I offer just the facts and **Highly Recommend** this new edition of *L.A. Confidential*.

Agree? Disagree? You can [post your thoughts](#) about this review on the DVD Talk forums.

L.A. Confidential

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