



Reviewer

Location: **Livonia, MI USA**
 Join Date: **Feb 2001**
 Local Time: **04:10 PM**
 Local Date: **10-01-2008**
 Posts: **6,084**



L.A. Confidential: Two-Disc Special Edition

Directed By: Curtis Hanson

Starring: Kevin Spacey, Guy Pearce, Russell Crowe, Kim Basinger, Danny DeVito, James Cromwell, David Stathairn

Studio: Warner Bros.
Year: 1998
Rated: R
Film Length: 138 minutes
Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1
Subtitles: English, French
Release Date: September 23, 2008

The Film

L.A. Confidential follows the complex course of three police officers in 1950s Los Angeles. Bud White (Crowe) is a brutish officer with a particular hatred for wife beaters and a soft spot for women such as call-girl Lynn Bracken (Basinger). Jack Vincennes (Spacey) is a spotlight-embracing cop who invites tabloid editor Sid Huggens (DeVito) to his pot-busts of Hollywood stars and relishes his ties to the Dragnet-like cop show for which he is a technical advisor. Ed Exley (Pearce) is a straight arrow, advancement minded son of a hero cop who considers himself above the ethical compromises made on a regular basis by his fellow officers. While they would seem to have little in common besides their employer, and in the case of White and Exley, there is even a deep seeded dislike between them, their divergent activities surrounding the investigation of a shooting at a local diner, an unusual prostitution ring headed by Pierce Patchett (Strathairn), and narcotics lead them to uneasy alliances and shocking discoveries.

Curtis Hanson's *L.A. Confidential* adapts James Ellroy's sprawling epic novel of the 1950s Los Angeles Police Department into a slightly less sprawling epic film. The screenplay, co-written by Hanson and Brian Koppelman, is a miracle of condensation in that it captures almost all of the mammoth novel's most memorable elements, including its balanced three-protagonist structure, despite casting its net much less widely and bringing the whole [enterprise](#) together in less than two hours and twenty minutes. This involves some invention on the part of the screenwriters, but with the exception of "Rollo Tomas" (you'll know what I mean when you watch the film), these elements of invention feel like they are still in the spirit of Ellroy's original creation. They also cleverly took one of the subtexts of the novel, the conflict between appearances and truth, and brought it forward to be the overarching theme of the film.

Hanson's visual approach is perfectly suited to the material, with a stylized philosophy that consistently informs everything from the costumes, sets, location selections, and cinematography. It is recognizably a period film, but it also avoids screaming "period" by steering clear of most clichés. While set near the time that many postwar film noirs were produced, and certainly containing signature noir elements to its story, it does not go for the high-contrast photographic style associated with the genre. Instead, Storaro's lighting set-ups emphasize a naturalistic look with lighting appearing to come from real sources even when it is not. The stylization extends to the soundtrack, which combines several pieces of pre-rock popular music of the early 50s with Jerry Goldsmith's spare but just about perfect score with its liberal use of alternating aggressive percussion and solo trumpet.

In addition to its technical merits, the film features a particularly fine ensemble cast. Kim Basinger received a supporting actress Oscar for her performance as the "Veronica Lake" in a ring of celebrity lookalike call girls, and while she does indeed deliver a fine performance, it is only one of several, and not necessarily even the strongest in the film. Of the three male leads, Kevin Spacey was the best known at the time thanks to his supporting actor Oscar for *The Usual Suspects* and strong turns in *Seven* and *A Time to Kill*, but even he was making a new step into cinematic leading roles. Producers must have been dumbfounded when Hanson told them that his other two leads would be filled by relatively unknown Australian actors, but Russell Crowe and Guy Pearce both deliver convincing breakout performances as opposite number detectives. If Danny DeVito's slimy tabloid reporter constitutes typecasting, the casting of James Cromwell, at the time best known as the kindly farmer from *Babe*, as hard-nosed Police Captain Dudley Smith was a stroke of genius casting against type.

Released in the early fall of 1997 to generally positive reviews, the film was initially a disappointment at the box office, possibly due to a weak marketing campaign. Warner's marketing department was having trouble at the time figuring out what to do when they had something unique or special to sell (Exhibit B: *The Iron Giant*). The studio

extended its run by several months to last through Oscar season and it slowly but steadily found a respectably sized audience. It was also doomed to be underserved during awards season due to the juggernaut that was *Titanic* but still managed to benefit from the awards consideration it did receive

The Video

While the 16:9 enhanced 2.35:1 video transfer is not a large departure from that of the previous release, viewing it on a very large screen reveals better overall compression resulting in a more stable image. Viewers watching on more modest sized displays may be more hard pressed to detect an improvement, but it is there. The film carries healthy amounts of natural film grain which occasionally gives the compression algorithm fits, and the use of long lenses often insures that background items are out of focus, making the image quality difficult to judge. That being said, it struck me as an above average DVD rendering of the film as I remember it from theaters.

The Audio

Audio comes courtesy of a Dolby Digital 5.1 track that gets a bump up to 448 kbps bitrate from the previous release's 384 kbps track, but otherwise sounds much the same, which is generally a good thing. Fidelity is strong with wide dynamic range occasionally given a boost from the LFE channel. As expected, the climactic gunfight offers the best opportunity for multi-channel surround fun. There are no other alternate language dubs so the French 5.1 track from the previous release has been dropped.

The Extras

A full complement of extras sets this release apart from the previous single disc special edition from 1998. In addition to the newly produced material, all of the features from the previous release have been carried over except for a series of text-based features on the cast crew, production, and history of L.A..

Disc one includes an "oral history" large group audio commentary cobbled together from several interviews with most of the film's key creative participants and one critic/scholar. Commentators include critic/historian Andrew Sarris, novelist James Ellroy, Russell Crowe, Kevin Spacey, Guy Pearce, James Cromwell, costume designer Ruth Myers, David Strathairn, Kim Basinger, screenwriter Brian Helgeland, production designer Jeannine Oppewall, cinematographer Dante Spinotti, and Danny DeVito. Commentators are identified by on-screen player-generated subtitles. The comedic highlight of the commentary comes early just before the four minute mark when Russell Crowe relays a typical answering machine message he would get from James Ellroy when he was preparing for the role of Bud White. Hanson does not participate in the commentary, but he is so well represented across the documentary featurettes that his absence is tolerable.

Carried over from the first release of the film is a *Music-Only Audio Track* that occupies a separate Dolby Digital 5.1 track. It highlights the large number of pre-rock pop and jazz songs in the film as well as Jerry Goldsmith's sparse but effective score. It is not selectable on the fly while watching the film, and must be played by going through the disc's Special Features menu. I was hoping this would mean that chapter stops would be re-arranged to coincide with music cues, but ... no such luck. They did bump the bitrate for this feature to 448 Kbps from the previous disc's 384kbps.

Also on the first disc is a collection of trailers, promos, and **TV** spots carried over from the previous DVD release. All are presented with Dolby Digital 2.0 audio with aspect ratios and running times as indicated below:

- Showest Trailer (4:3 - :37)
- "Nite Owl Action" TV Spot (4:3 - 1:07)
- "Hollywood" TV Spot (4:3 - :37)
- Theatrical Trailer (16:9 - 2:21)
- Soundtrack Promo (including interview segments with Hanson) (4:3 -1:01)

The second disc is jam-packed with video-based extras, all of which are presented in 16:9 enhanced video with Dolby Digital 2.0 stereo sound unless indicated otherwise below.

Whatever You Desire: Making L.A. Confidential (29:28) kicks off a series of newly produced documentary featurettes from Gary Leva. As with his work on the recent 2-Disc Special Editions of Stanley Kubrick films, Leva does a nice job of creating featurettes that stand well on their own and also compliment the other features on the disc with only a reasonable amount of overlap. Topics covered in this overview retrospective featurette include how Hanson was drawn to the material, difficulties selling the film to Warner Bros., characters and casting, creating the look of the period, finding locations, cinematography, costumes, and the reception of the film. On camera interview participants include Curtis Hanson, James Ellroy, Russell Crowe, Producer Arnon Milchan, Producer Michael Nathanson, Guy Pearce, Kevin Spacey, Kim Basinger, Danny DeVito, James Cromwell, David Strathairn, Production Designer Jeannine Oppewall, Cinematographer Dante Spinotti, and Costume Designer Ruth Myers.

Sunlight and Shadow: The Visual Style of L.A. Confidential (21:02) Covers both technical and thematic decisions that informed Dante Spinotti's cinematography and how it integrates with aspects of the production design including costumes, sets and locations. On camera interview participants include Hanson, Spinotti, Ellroy, Myers, Basinger, Oppewall, Crowe, Pearce, Strathairn, and Spacey.

A True Ensemble: The Cast of LA Confidential (24:33) is a look at the characters and actors playing them. This topic was covered extensively in the *Whatever You Desire: Making L.A. Confidential* piece, but this featurette has much more in depth comments from the actors themselves. On-camera interview participants include Hanson, Crowe, Pearce, Spacey, Basinger, Strathairn, DeVito, Cromwell, Ellroy, Editor Peter Honess, Helgeland, Milchan, and Nathanson

L.A. Confidential: From Book to Screen (21:06) is the last of the newly produced featurettes. It looks specifically at how the novel was translated to film including screenplay adaptation difficulties, how Helgeland and Hanson came together after approaching the project independently, Helgeland as a fan of Ellroy, how they worked together, structural considerations, jettisoned subplots and backstories, the invention of Rollo Tomasi, and the re-invention of the shootout at the Victory Motel. The heart of it is an interview with Hanson and Helgeland sitting together, but other on camera interview participants include Ellroy, Nathanson, Pierce, Crowe, Milchan, and Spacey.

Off the Record (18:48) was created for the previous DVD release, and offers a surprisingly efficient overview of the production over its nineteen minutes. It is presented in 4:3 full frame video. Topics discussed include the tradition of Warner Bros. crime films, the appeal of Ellroy's book to Hanson, David Wolper's attempts to adapt it as a