

FALL EDITION  
Presenting Four Movies - A Great Deal

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A Way We  
Never Were?

## Stewart

*Jimmy*

By Martin Miller

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# Stewart

by Morton Marcus

Stewart is one of our most beloved actors, and I've always thought that his popularity was somehow based on how closely the wide-eyed, all-American innocent he portrays in the comedies that make up *The Jimmy Stewart Festival* resembles our conception of ourselves both as individuals and as Americans, as if in some way Jimmy is the embodiment of our National consciousness.

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## Jimmy Stewart

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Jimmy's early screen persona is unique among Hollywood's leading men of the '30's. He is no Cary Grant. Grant is too handsome, too suave, in the end too British. Jimmy most resembles Gary Cooper and Henry Fonda. Like them, he is tall and lanky and exemplifies small-town American manners. But Cooper's smile at times betrays an ironic attitude and his early, sleek, good looks reveal an unmistakable sexuality, whereas Fonda appears infrequently in comedies and is remembered for his portrayals of

outcasts, particularly working-class men who are abused by the establishment.

Jimmy has always portrayed an upstanding member of middle-class society—a lawyer, police inspector, reporter, small businessman—not a millionaire, but a "solid citizen," someone you can count on, a little guy, but one of the "haves" who believes in grass-roots American values because those values have worked for him, values such as integrity, honesty, hard work, concern for one's neighbors, and a naive idealism based on American democratic traditions.

That's how we saw ourselves in the 1930's. True, we'd closed our ears to the rumblings from Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, Jim Crow was rife in the South, and the Depression was still around. But FDR had instituted the New Deal three years before Jimmy

came to Hollywood, and by the time he was making his early classic comedies, we were emerging from our worst economic crisis with renewed confidence in our traditional values and in ourselves.

What makes Jimmy's '30's persona unique is the way he incorporated our traditional values into his image. He is the "boy next door," a trusted brother or best friend known for his sincerity and concern. "Next door," of course, is small-town America, where our virtues supposedly flourished.

Mimics portray Jimmy as a stutterer, but he rarely stutters: he's just awkward, the small-town boy unused to the sophisticated city ways he's usually thrown into in these comedies. That city life often involves corruption, and tests Jimmy's (and our) values, which Jimmy not only upholds,

but, through his tenacious belief, manages to instill in the corrupt city folk, usually reforming them in the process.

This is where the Stewart brand of love comes in. Of all Hollywood leading men in the '30's, he may have projected the least amount of sexuality (with the possible exception of Ronald Reagan). Jimmy's too much the boy-next-door, yet he is a leading man, and women do believably fall in love with him in these films. How? Why? The answer is in the women. They're usually one of two "types," either innocent, small-town females who share Jimmy's ideals and are further inspired by his beliefs (Donna Reed in *It's A Wonderful Life*, or Margaret Sullavan in a number of early films, including *Shop Around the Corner*) or they're "corrupted," cynical women who are reminded, through Jimmy's

goodness, of their lost "virtues" (Jean Arthur in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Marlene Dietrich in *Destry Rides Again*). Of course, Jimmy's lack of sexual appeal endeared him to us all the more: it made him more trustworthy—that is, no threat—to both the males and females in the audience.

The one trait that makes Jimmy's early screen image completely his own, though, is his continual loss of self-control. Except for a hardened jawline or an almost imperceptible twitch, Cooper and Fonda, in the grand tradition of American leading men, remain expressionless, no matter how trying the situation. They're stoics, hard men who, through almost superhuman control of their emotions, finally control the situation. Not Stewart. He's always flying into skittery, arm-waving, emotional outbursts.



And what unnerves him, what "sets him off," is what wins our affection completely and makes him such a beloved actor: it's his fervent belief in the American way. When he sees that way being tampered with or corrupted, he becomes self-righteously upset and flies into action to rectify the situation. Sitting in the theatre dark, audiences of the 1930's understood that his lack of self-control was the expression of his belief in us and who we were as a nation.

There is another trait that makes Jimmy's early persona unique. We aspire to be like most of our movie heroes. They are fantasy figures, exceptional beings we can only dream of becoming because of their extraordinary beauty, physical abilities or character strengths. They are beyond us. Not Jimmy. He is us. He's the hardworking, at times frustrated, neighbor who, like us, is trying to get by, but trying to get by with his values intact.

This is the character Jimmy Stewart portrays in his pre-WWII comedies, when we thought of ourselves as innocents. At that time, the chief Hollywood promulgator of these folksy, grass-roots values was director Frank Capra. He saw in Jimmy the "rock-ribbed honesty" of small-town America and made several films which immortalized Jimmy's persona—among them *You Can't Take It With You* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

Before the gushy nostalgia of these films overawes us and we begin prattling such words as "Life was simpler then, better. Why can't it be that way now?" it is best we remember that these movies do not reflect who we were at all. Jimmy's All-American boy portrayals appeal to the simplistic way we wanted to view ourselves (and still do). But they are as far as Disneyland from the inner terrors of human motivation and behavior later to be revealed by the performances of a Clift, a Brando, a Stelger, or a Dean. In essence, Capra—the great proponent of folksy Americana, who saw in Jimmy's persona his quintessential hero—was making films that were nothing more than fairy tales.

But reality has a way of catching up with fantasy. Shortly after Jimmy won his Oscar for *The*



Destry Rides Again with Marlene Dietrich and Jimmy Stewart

*Philadelphia Story*, WWII broke out and he enlisted as a private in the Army, working his way up to Colonel and leader of a squadron of B-24's. After the War, Jimmy made several comedies reminiscent of his pre-war films (the Festival's *Jackpot* and *Magic Town*). But he seemed weary in the Paris now and was called on more and more to play a paterfamilias.

Our image of ourselves was changing, and Jimmy's image was changing with us. Nowhere is this more frighteningly apparent than in his old mentor, Frank Capra's, bitter comedy *It's A Wonderful Life*. Here Jimmy is so bereft of belief in his fellow townsmen and the life they represent that he can think only of committing suicide. So overpowering is the evocation of this vision that even the film's redemptive conclusion doesn't relieve it.

In many ways *It's A Wonderful Life* is an introduction to Jimmy's post-WWII persona. Now he is the disillusioned idealist, the cynical loner who snappishly looks back on a world and people

who have betrayed his naive dreams of them—an image working in counterpoint to his early boy-next-door roles. This is the persona he portrayed again and again in the classic Westerns he made during the 1950's *Winchester '73*, *Broken Arrow*, *Bend of the River*, *Naked Spur*, and *The Far Country*, to name a few. He is middle-aged, bad-tempered, almost always alone. A sour, cold misanthrope who must be saved from himself.

As I said, this change reflects the nation's change. We had been traumatized first by revelations of brutality in WWII, then by the Cold War and the witch-hunt mentality that pervaded America in the '50s. These events showed us that our view of both ourselves and the world had been too simple, and we felt betrayed.

Jimmy does return to a middle-age reflection of his early persona in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1952) and in such sentimental bio-pics as *The Glenn Miller Story* (1954) and *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1958). But even Hitchcock saw the contradictions in Jimmy's image and

used it in *Rear Window* (1954) where Jimmy plays a lonely, voyeuristic photographer, disconnected from the life around him; and in *Vertigo* (1958) where, again as a loner (this time a disillusioned detective) Jimmy attempts to recreate the past with an obsessive intensity that is as terrifying as it is tragic.

Even in 1958's comic *Bell, Book and Candle*, where he plays the practical, middle-class American who attempts to reform the "bewitching" Kim Novak and her prankster brother (Jack Lemmon), Jimmy's character seems out of touch with a universe that is larger than his conception of it.

Keep the later films in mind: they will provide you with a perspective, as you watch the comedies. I'm not belittling the comedies, mind you. They're still enjoyable, still enormously popular—maybe because they represent all our youths: the young today and the young yet to come, as well as the young fifty years ago. I have to admit that there is something about these films that goes beyond nostalgia, beyond the simplistic and sentimental.

Maybe it is that through these comedies, Jimmy has come to personify an eternal youthfulness in us, a recurring dream of innocence that rises from the core of the American psyche—that shadowy place where for better or worse, our national identity is shaped. ♦

Morton Marcus, poet and novelist, is the author of the highly successful *Eight Ecstasies of Yaeiko Iwasaki: A Legend in Poetry, Dance and Music*, which begins its second run at Loudon Nelson on February 15. He teaches film at Cabrillo College.

## CinemaTimes

Program Editor  
JIM SCHWENTERLEY

Design and Production  
RICHARD CURTIS

Typography  
METRO TYPOGRAPHY

Advertising Representative  
WILLIAM STUART  
426-7507

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