

The Girl They Loved to Kill

The Many Deaths of Peggie Castle | Jake Hinkson



In Hollywood's Golden Age, beauty was turned into a commodity, one found in abundance and renewed with each out-of-town bus. Thousands of lovely young women cycled through the system, had their physical attributes capitalized upon, and wound up back on the street with little more than the handful of cash it would take to get back home. Of these unlucky multitudes, few lived long enough to see themselves become a new kind of star: the rediscovered film noir icon, the object of scholarly study and geek adoration.



Though a lot of actresses played the doomed bad girl, Peggy Castle seemed to embody the ethos somehow. Something about her seemed dangerous—which is another way of saying, perhaps, that something about her threatened men. With her low, smoky voice and skeptical green eyes, she wasn't hot, she was cool. She never seemed to lose control. Her sensuality always seemed to be hers to do with as she pleased, a tool to get what she wanted. If this was her innate quality as an actor, then she was made to suffer for it in film after film.

That cool quality seemed to reflect the real woman as well. Well-educated and ambitious, she had a caustic wit about most things, and she evinced few romantic illusions about the business she'd chosen for herself. "The difference between an old fashioned kiss and a movie kiss," she said once, "is about 1500 feet of film."

She lived a disconnected life from the beginning. Born Peggy (with a Y) Thomas Blair on December 22, 1927 in Appalachia, Virginia, she was the daughter of an industrial efficiency expert named Doyle Blair and his wife Elizabeth "Betty" Guntner. Doyle's job kept the Blairs on the road with their only child. "The harder an efficiency expert works the sooner he's out of a job," she would later observe. "I attended 22 different schools while traveling from city to city with my father...so I've got a 'home town' story for dozens of reporters."

All scholarship and trivia aside, however, film noir is, in large part, a cult devoted to rescuing forgotten women from the obscurity that once seemed to be their final destiny. Because noir preserves these women primarily as symbols of sex, their onscreen legacy is lit with an especially erotic flame. This is certainly true of Peggy Castle, who came into the business as an 18-year old starlet, achieved moderate success as a *femme fatale*, and then found herself out of work by the age of 35. As a result, the images we have of her comprise a largely sexualized picture of a woman in her early twenties. What makes her legacy problematic, and fascinating, is the frequency with which this pretty picture is darkened by images of punishment and violence. Even in the fragile immortality granted by film, Peggy goes on dying, martyred again and again in misogynist fantasies of eroticized sadism.

You may not remember her. Most people don't. She was never really a star, not even in the insular world of film noir, where she was usually cast as an easily disposable sex object. In her most famous scene, she was shot to death while doing a striptease. It was that kind of career.



Castle retains a defiant dignity modeling a newspaper bikini (top left); the actress reflects a cool sensuality in another PR photo



tive: Peggy T. Blair, Peggy Call, Peggy Castle, Peggie Castle, Peggie C. Blair, Peggie C. McGarry, Peggie S. Morgenstern. She once quipped that a name-dropper in Hollywood “is an actress who’s been married six times.”

She did well in school but dropped out after only a year to work on the radio soap opera *Today’s Children* at \$375 a week. Still, her time in school seems to have shaped her perceptions of the world. “The college girl has more tolerance [than the average girl],” she would explain once she’d become a working actress. For an actress who would spend much of her time playing morally dubious women, it was important to her not to judge her characters. Later in her career she would muse to a reporter, “Most of our suspicions of others are aroused by our knowledge of ourselves.”

The account of her “discovery” by a talent scout while she ate lunch in Beverly Hills might well be one of those too-good-to-be-true Hollywood stories. She’d already been acting and modeling for years by 1947, when she made her debut, billed as Peggy Call, in the Adele Jergens comedy *When A Girl’s Beautiful* at Columbia.

It is certain that her second film had a bigger impact on her career. *Mr. Belvedere Goes To College* (1949) was the sequel to the hit comedy *Sitting Pretty* (1948), with star Clifton Webb reprising his role as the wryly funny Lynn Belvedere. When Webb got snippy with Peggy on the set one day, Peggy—no one’s doormat despite being only an uncredited bit player on the picture—got snippy right back. The director liked the exchange so much it stayed in the picture and caught the eye of super-agent Charles Feldman. “I’ve always had a

All this moving around seemed to give young Peggy a thoughtful, inward quality. Yet it was during this same period that the quiet girl found her love of the spotlight. While living in Pittsburgh as a child, she attended the Linden School in upscale Squirrel Hill where she studied French and ballet. At the age of eight, she danced and acted in a school play staged at the Pittsburgh Playhouse. She seemed to know, even then, that she wanted to be an actress.

It must have felt like fate when the Blairs settled in Los Angeles around the time Peggy turned 14. She attended Hollywood High School and, lying about her age, got a job as a photographer’s model.

After high school, she enrolled in the theater arts program at Mills College where she studied acting under Madeline Mihaud, then a refugee from Europe. In 1945, still a few months shy of turning 18, she married a 24-year old serviceman named Revis T. Call.

It was to be the first of many name changes. Over the years, through various marriages and professional rebrandings, in movie credits and news publications and government documents, she was listed under as many names as a CIA opera-



Peggie Castle, Shawn Smith, Mary Ellen Kay, and Dolores Donlon from *The Long Wait*



In a pattern that would repeat itself the rest of her life, she didn't stay single long. Shortly, she started seeing one of the junior executives at Universal, Bob Rains. They would elope in Juarez, Mexico in January the next year.

For all of the initial excitement of landing the job at Universal, the work itself amounted to little more than bit roles. The year 1950 was representative: a waitress in Crane Wilbur's *Outside the Wall*, another waitress in the Ida Lupino vehicle *Woman in Hiding*, a telephone operator in *I was a Shoplifter*, a hat check girl in *Shakedown*. She did her best "playing the roles Yvonne De Carlo turned down" and hoped for better.

More demeaning than the roles, however, were the endless scantily-clad publicity photos for which Peggie now found herself contractually obligated to pose. As the first signatory of Universal's new "cheesecake clause" she got a lot of press, though not really the sort an aspiring actress wanted. A brief hue and cry arose when Shirley Temple, who was just a year younger than Peggie, denounced the new mandated photos—which the press built up as something of an attack on actresses like Castle. Asked for her comment, Peggie was characteristically blunt, explaining that for an up-and-comer it was a matter of economics: "A lot of gals who won't pose for cheesecake won't be eating cheesecake, either."

Still, the photos had their drawbacks. Perhaps an actress as beautiful as Peggie was always bound to be judged for her looks, but the "controversy" seemed to establish her as little more than a pretty girl in a swimsuit. "Soon enough I'll be too old to be a starlet," she said hopefully, "thank goodness."

Among her fellow actors in Rosenstein's drama school, she held herself aloof. Years later, the actress Donna Martell would remember Peggie as "a living doll and a beautiful girl" but she also sensed a deep sadness underneath Peggie's beauty. "There was something missing in that girl's personality" Martell told writer Tom Weaver. "She was very lonely, and she was not a happy person. I felt that right away."

Peggie's time at Universal seemed to slog on, with the roles getting a little bigger but no better. After a run of exotic princess-types in cheesy budget-epics like 1951's *The Prince Who Was A Thief* and *The Golden Horde*, she complained to a reporter, "It's good to get some clothes on again and not have to wiggle to the tune of a snake charmer's pipe."

She was hopeful when the studio loaned her out to RKO for a

temper as long as I can remember," she later noted. "If I hadn't had a temper, I might not have come to Mr. Feldman's attention at all."

1950 was to be a big year for her. With Feldman's help, she signed a seven-year contract with Universal and changed her screen name to Peggie Castle. She also divorced Revis Call, bringing their brief marriage to a quick close. Not long after, she was linked to war hero-turned-movie star Audie Murphy. Finding herself in the tabloids only sharpened her sense of humor. "In Hollywood," she sighed "gossip goes in one ear and out the mouth."

In those early days at Universal, she entered into the studio's drama school under the tutelage of Universal's acting coach, Sophie Rosenstein. Her classmates included up-and-comers like Rock Hudson, Peggy Dow, James Best, Ann Pearce, and Piper Laurie.

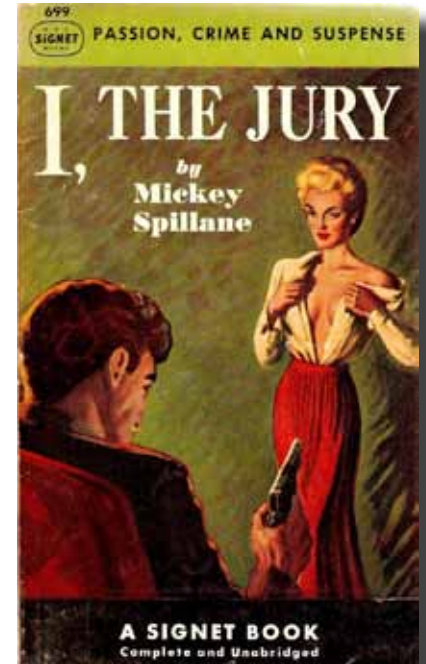
She didn't get along with one of her peers, ladies' man Tony Curtis (who would later recall Peggie as "a girl I didn't particularly like"), which led to an altercation between Curtis and Audie Murphy. Though he'd been widely celebrated as America's most decorated enlisted man during World War II, Murphy suffered from a particularly rage-filled version of post-traumatic stress disorder. One day in the studio hallway he grabbed Curtis and growled, "Peggie says you've been talking bad about her."

While Curtis calmed Murphy down that afternoon, Peggie decided the troubled war hero was too violent and called off their relationship. "Audie is impossible to understand," she told a friend. "You make every concession, then if you can't help him, it's better to say goodbye."





A sultry Peggie Castle about to meet her fate in the first Mike Hammer film, *I, the Jury*



many of the studios keep their young talent in the deep freeze instead of turning them out early...I wish I could figure it all out."

At the smaller studios and independent production companies, Peggie moved up to lead roles, though the pictures were of dubious quality: the Monogram western *Wagons West* (1952), Columbia's redbaiter *Invasion USA* (1952), Allied Artists' *Cow Country* (1953) with Edmond O'Brien. Her career seemed stuck.

Then her savior arrived in the unlikely form of Mickey Spillane. The pulp writer *cum* publishing phenomenon had launched his Mike Hammer series in 1947 and kicked off a juggernaut

small role in *Payment on Demand* (1951) with Bette Davis. It was an A-picture, at last, but after shooting had wrapped, studio head Howard Hughes demanded recuts and a tacked-on happy ending which pushed the release date back. By the time the film came out, it was overshadowed by Davis's triumph in *All About Eve* (1950), and Peggie was already back on the Universal lot.

If she wasn't waiting around the studio for another nothing part, she was on the road doing thankless publicity tours. "All I did was travel 56,000 miles [promoting] four pictures I wasn't in and had never seen," she lamented of her time there. "It was embarrassing when people asked me what I thought of the pictures."

In 1952, her option with Universal expired and she and the studio parted ways. It was a bitter end to what had seemed, only a couple of years before, like a dream job. Echoing the sentiments of many talented B-listers, she wondered aloud why the studio never found a place for her. "I used to watch wonderful parts go to outsiders while a lot of us gathered dust," she remarked later. "It seems odd that so

naut of sex, violence, and astronomical sales that reconfigured the literary landscape. It was only a matter of time before his grisly vision found its way to the screen. Spillane talked of starting his own studio and teaching the Hollywood sissies a thing or two about the movie business ("I told him," Peggie recalled, "I hope you have lots of money.' And he said, 'I have two million!"). In the meantime, the rights to his works were snapped up by producer Victor Saville.

Saville's first film was an adaptation of the debut Hammer novel *I, the Jury* (1953). In the lead role he cast a little known television actor named Biff Elliot, and as the film's villain, the sexy psychologist Charlotte Manning, he picked Peggie.

With her usual biting wit, she summed up the macho Spillane: "If you saw a picture of three guys, he'd be the little guy in the middle." She did acknowledge that playing the female lead in a Mike Hammer movie would at least get her recognized. "You seldom become famous playing good girls. I appeared in 20 pictures, mostly as a wide-eyed ingénue and nobody ever heard of me. Then I did *I, the*

Jury. It wasn't exactly the greatest picture ever made. But now people know who I am."

The movie begins with a pre-credits murder and then Mike Hammer shows up to swear bloody revenge (the *ur*-plot of the entire Hammer canon). The story consists of Hammer going from one place to the next grilling potential suspects. His interactions with men invariably end in violence, while his interactions with women invariably end in sexual innuendo. At the end, he suddenly figures

out Manning is the killer and carries out the execution.

The film's big selling point, aside from the gimmick of being a 3-D crime flick, was the showdown between Hammer and Manning. At the end of Spillane's novel, she strips naked in an unsuccessful attempt to dissuade Hammer from carrying out his execution. The poster for the film featured a graphic of Peggie unbuttoning her blouse—which seemed to promise the notorious striptease but, of course, the film itself had to work purely through innuendo. Peggie slips off only her rain coat and her shoes before Hammer guns her down. Her last words are, "How could you?" To which he replies, "It was easy."

What's notable here is that Peggie gives, pretty much by unanimous agreement, the best performance in the film. Whereas Biff Elliot's strained portrayal of Hammer consists mostly of petulant barks, Peggie has the exact combination of aloof beauty and devious intelligence that her role calls for, and one wonders what she might have done opposite a decent actor in the lead role. Her final scene in the film might be a distinctly puritanical form of misogynist fantasy—male stoicism obliterating the threat posed by female sexuality—but Peggie's mesmerizing in it. Captured in John Alton's shimmering black and white cinematography, with Franz Waxman's sultry jazz score pushing us toward the bedroom, Peggie's palpable sensuality is the driving force in one of the most sexual scenes in classic noir.

That same year, she made her best film noir, Phil Karlson's *99 River Street*, where she plays Pauline Driscoll, the cheating wife of ex-boxer turned cabbie Ernie Driscoll (John Payne). At the beginning of the film, she leaves Ernie for a hood named Victor Rawlins, played by cold-eyed Brad Dexter. This initiates a long dark night of the soul for Ernie, who crisscrosses nighttime New York City, dodging cops and gangsters, while he mends his broken heart with a chipper actress named Linda (Evelyn Keyes).

Noir doesn't get any better than *99 River Street*. It's marvelously acted and shot, and the cast is uniformly excellent. Payne was never better as a leading man, and Keyes is almost stunningly good, rocking her two big scenes (one recounting a murder and one seducing Dexter) like she's auditioning for greatness.

One can argue, however, that it is Peggie Castle's performance



Peggie Castle's Charlotte Manning offers Biff Elliot's Mike Hammer some refreshment in her breakthrough film, *I, the Jury*



Peggie Castle with John Payne in her best film, *99 River Street*

that ultimately makes *99 River Street* fascinating because it hints at a counter-narrative which complicates the main story. Peggie doesn't play Pauline as a type, as the rotten wife wooing her man to his doom for the sheer hell of it. Pauline seems truly disappointed in her life with Ernie. When she asks him to turn off a television rebroadcast of his last losing bout, she does it with a note of pained weariness. Their marriage is an old story: she married him on the way up when the future seemed full of parties and fur coats, but now that he's driving a cab, she feels like she made a mistake. She's not thrilled by Ernie's promises that maybe one day they'll be able to open a filling station. Well, hell, who can blame her?

Something else is troubling, something never explicitly stated in the film, but which, upon repeated viewings, becomes unmistakable: Pauline is terrified of her husband. After Ernie finds out that she's been cheating on him, she trembles as she tells Dexter, "He'll kill me. You don't know what he's like. He broods about things, and suddenly he explodes." Take Pauline's fear along with the fact that Ernie twice gets physical with nice girl Linda—lifting his hand to strike her in one scene and shoving her across a room in another—and it becomes clear that the Driscoll marriage isn't the simple story of a sweet guy and a rotten dame. Like all great femme fatales, Pauline has her reasons.

Our sympathy for Pauline only increases as her attempt to escape her marriage goes horribly wrong. Victor turns out to be very bad news indeed. He takes her to meet the fence for some stolen jewels (Jay Adler) and then lets a thug (Jack Lambert) slap her around. When Adler calls off the deal for the jewels because of Pauline's presence ("I don't do business with women!") Victor makes a cold-blooded business decision. He takes Pauline back to his apartment, kissing her while he tightens a scarf around her throat. As the camera moves past her face to his, she purrs "Victor, don't..." The next time we see her, she's been strangled and left in Ernie's cab.

In a disturbing trend, this marked the second time Peggie was murdered in an eroticized way in a film noir. As with her death in *I,*

the Jury her murder here has the effect of punishing her character in a sexualized manner. *This*, both films seemed to be saying, *is what happens to bad girls*. This message is suffused with a deep sexism, of course, but it also contains the integral ingredients of noir: transgression and ruin.

Consider something else. At the end of *99 River Street*, we find that good girl Linda has abandoned her lifelong dreams of being a Broadway actress so she can have babies and man the front desk at Ernie's filling station. Thus, Linda gets a happy ending complete with the socially sanctioned dreams of motherhood and middle-class prosperity. Pauline, on the other hand, is destroyed because her dissatisfaction with her marriage and her attraction to a *l'homme fatale* lead to her downfall. Though Pauline is discarded at the end, it is her story and Castle's haunting performance that give *99 River Street* its true noir heart.

By this point she was known primarily for playing the bad girls in crime pictures. Putting a good face on it, Peggie asked a reporter, "Well, doesn't every girl want to be a *femme fatale*?"

Sometimes, though, she admitted that being the bad girl had one redundant aspect. "I have yet to live through a picture," she joked in an interview. "There I am on the set reading the script, feeling just wonderful. I'm going to come out alive for a change. Then I turn the page and three bullet holes appear in my back. Peggie Castle bites the dust again."

What an odd thing, dying for a living. "I've been shot, knifed, clubbed, strangled, poisoned and hanged. I'm beginning to feel like



the girl everybody hates.”

What was it about her that made her, as one headline put it “The Girl They Love To Kill”? Was it the cool reserve, the green eyes that always seemed to be doing some inner calculations? Tall, voluptuous, and palpably intelligent—everything about her read as strength. In westerns, she was a surprisingly violent leading lady, often butched up in pants and six-shooters with ad copy like “No Man Could Tame Her!” The bitter irony, of course, was that she was forever being tamed, usually by force.

Her next noir utilized her dangerous vixen reputation to a different end. *The Long Wait* (1954) was another Spillane adaptation, though it wasn't a Hammer story. The movie stars Anthony Quinn as a tough amnesia victim named Johnny McBride who discovers that he's wanted for murder. He sets out to clear his name and the film follows the usual amnesia plot pretty much to the letter. McBride comes into contact with people who know more about him than he knows about himself—including the cops who want to bust him for murder, the crooks who seem to be after him for secret reasons, and a parade of beautiful women, one of whom may or may not hold the key to the mystery of McBride's past.

The film was again produced by Victor Saville, who also directed—and his direction is rather lacking, particularly in the performance that he gets out of his leading man. Anthony Quinn could be a dynamic performer in the right role, but here he mostly seems like a grumpy lunkhead. He kisses every woman in the picture like he's trying to wring information out of her face. There's not a



Peggie Castle sidles up to perpetually grouchy Anthony Quinn in her second Mickey Spillane outing, *The Long Wait*

single moment of genuine eroticism, and no one has any chemistry with anyone else, which might be the effect of Saville's particularly awkward reverse shots.

The picture has redeeming features, though, and chief among them is Peggie. Though her role is little more than a sexy red herring—turns out she's not the mystery woman with all the answers—she's still the most dynamic performer in the film. With her shimmering blonde locks and her air of quiet mystery, she handily gives the best performance in the movie, and every time she shows up on screen, *The Long Wait* perks up.

She also features in the film's strangest—and best—scene: an almost impressionistic little number in which Castle and Quinn are kidnapped by a gangster and taken to an abandoned warehouse. In the middle of a huge pool of white light, bordered by complete darkness, Quinn is tied to a chair and Castle is bound-up on the floor. In a montage of askew camera angles that stands out stylistically from the rest of the film, Castle crawls over to Quinn as the psychotic gangster throws obstacles in her path.

The scene was designed by the great art director Boris Leven, who drew a series of sketches for the director. Saville recalled using 87 different set-ups to match Leven's drawings, shot for shot. It's the big set-piece of the film, the one scene that everyone remembers. It also has the added benefit of summing up Peggie Castle's essential position in noir—bound and crawling across a floor, tortured by a man.

The sequence ends with Peggie retrieving a hidden gun, shooting the gangster, and getting shot in return. For once, she



lives, but although she takes a bullet for the hero, she still doesn't wind up with him in the end. Another dame gets him. Peggie gets a ride to the hospital.

For better and for worse, her screen image as the sexy-but-suspect woman of the world was set. To an extent, she accepted this fate. "Let's face it," she said. "Nobody likes nice women on the screen. Nice women are dull."

But there were other things she would have liked to have done. Given her quick wit, it's a pity no one ever put her in a comedy, something she longed for. "Not the slapstick type," she said "but the kind of comedy that Carole Lombard used to do. I think I could do very well in that sort of role, the tongue-in-cheek kind."

The comedy roles never came, though.

In 1955, she gave perhaps her most nuanced noir performance in Harold Schuster's *Finger Man*. Frank Lovejoy plays a hood named Casey Martin, who at the behest of the feds, is trying to infiltrate a gang led by Dutch Becker (Forrest Tucker). He enlists the help of a reformed prostitute named Gladys, played by Castle. As she helps him work his way into the gangster's good graces, Gladys and Casey fall in love.

"You're two people aren't you, Casey?" she asks him.

"Who isn't?" he replies.

"That's right," she says with a soft smile. "Who isn't?"

The best thing about the movie is the relationship between Gladys and Casey. Their scenes together have a deep, natural chemistry. Part of what made Castle an interesting actor is that, although she had a beautifully expressive face, her impulse was always toward restraint.

Lovejoy, one of the great unsung actors of the fifties, similarly held himself in check. Together they do a subtle duet, moving haltingly, cautiously toward love.

Here Peggie, at the end of her noir career, plays a slightly older, more roughed up version of her usual vixen role. Gladys, a past-her-prime beauty who's had some hard breaks, fears she may be coming to the end of things. Peggie still looks stunning, but at only 28 she can already do world-weariness like she means it. When he asks her "Where'd you get that halo all the sudden?" she just chuckles and says "Me? That's funny."

Unfortunately, Gladys doesn't make it to the end of the picture. Her time runs out when Becker's psycho henchman, played by Timothy Carey, decides to kill her.

We don't see Peggie's demise. In her last scene, she simply says goodbye to Lovejoy. Then she crosses Hope Street and disappears into the night.

With *Finger Man* she closed out her noir career—and with it, the roles that somehow best suited her. She found herself in increasingly inferior material. Something like the western *Two-Gun Lady* (1955) ("Every Man Was Her Target!") assembles a great cast including Peggie, Marie Windsor, and William Talman, and then wastes them in a shoddily produced mess of boring exposition and sloppy action. "It was lightweight," Marie Windsor later judged, "and done in a hurry!"

Peggie kept working: supporting Randolph Scott and Dorothy Malone in the western *Tall Man Riding* (1955); starring opposite Richard Conte in *Target Zero* (1955); headlining a no-budget western called *The Oklahoma Woman* (1956), one of the first productions of the young Roger Corman. In 1957, she headed to England to star opposite Zachary Scott in the tepid Anglo Amalgamated production *The Counterfeit Plan*—one of those transcontinental crime pictures that often signaled the death knell of a fading Hollywood career in the late 1950s.



Left to right: Forrest Tucker, Frank Lovejoy, and Peggie Castle in her most nuanced role: Harold Schuster's *Finger Man*



That same year she had a good role in an interesting horror film, *Back from the Dead*, written by the novelist and screenwriter Catherine Turney. Peggie plays a woman possessed by the ghost of her husband's first wife, an evil spirit who has returned from the dead to rejoin a Satanic cult leader. Part *Rebecca* and part *Rosemary's Baby*, the small production paired Peggie with the talented (but blacklisted) Marsha Hunt and gave her some juicy scenes to play, including a sequence where she gasses Hunt and takes a scythe to her dog. Her co-star was impressed with both Peggie and her performance in the film. "I had not known her or even her name prior to that," Hunt later recalled. "But she was professional and *very* good."

Back from the Dead might have been the highlight of 1957 but Peggie also hit her career nadir that year in the aptly titled *Beginning of the End*, a bargain-budget creature feature that found her teaming up with Peter Graves to fight giant killer grasshoppers. Graves remembered her as "a wonderful actress" who "always looked appealing" no



Don Haggerty and Arthur Franz restrain a raging, possessed Peggie Castle from knifing Marsha Hunt in the effective *Back from the Dead*

matter what, but viewers are more likely to notice that she looks bored in a movie that could only signal the demise of her career in features.

She had already started doing more and more television. This transition, of course, happened to the entire generation of second-tier stars in the fifties. As the B-movie market dried up (due to the decrease in studio output and the dissolution of the double feature), television work expanded. It was a living, but like many others, Peggie saw it as a step down.

"I hate television," she announced with her usual bluntness. "I don't like to watch it and I don't like to act in it. They make those half-hour shows so fast, you can't possibly do a good acting job. And they pay you shoe buttons."

But once the giant grasshoppers eat what's left of your movie career, what's a gal to do?

Befitting someone with noir cred, she did plenty of crime show work. She played the murder suspect in "The Case of the Negligent Nymph," an episode of *Perry Mason*. On a 77 *Sunset Strip* episode called "The Well-Selected Frame," she played a woman convinced that her husband is trying to kill her. And she waded back into Spillane territory one last time for an episode of *Mike Hammer* called "The Big Drop," in which she hires Hammer to find the man who killed her father.

Her longest gig in television, and very nearly her last, was for the western series *Lawman*. At first, she turned down the role of Lily Merrill. "They wanted me to be a regular on the series," she said, "but they wanted me to run the local café. I had a vision of myself serving coffee in an apron for 38 weeks so I said no." Besides, she had never bought into the mythos of the western. She suspected, she once said, that "the strange irresistible force which drives some men out into the wilderness is known as house cleaning."

Anyway, the job came with a hitch. They wanted her to sing. "I'd never sung in my life," she told reporters. "Not even in the bathtub."

But in the end, the job was steady work in the most popular genre of the day. The show's producers changed her character to a saloon owner and hired a voice coach to get her in shape for the singing. When they floated the idea of putting together a record, Peggie joked, "Well, I don't have the



greatest voice in the world. Maybe I can record an album titled 'Songs To Groom Horses By.'"

Unfortunately, *Lawman* itself was little more than a poor man's *Gunsmoke* starring stone-faced John Russell. The series added Peggie at the start of the second season to be a spunkier, sassier version of Miss Kitty (one headline read "Blonde Comes to Laramie to Defrost TV's *Lawman*"), but while she quickly became one of the best things about the show, the show itself remained a fairly pedestrian oater.

During her run on the program, Peggie started drinking more heavily. She still looked good, but the old sheen had disappeared. When *Lawman* surrendered its badge after three more seasons, Peggie decided she'd had enough and effectively retired from acting.

She had divorced second husband Bob Rains back in 1954, claiming cruelty and general boorishness. A few months

later she married assistant director William McGarry, who was twenty-two years her senior. "At least I'm glad I didn't marry an actor," she said. "That's one form of insanity I didn't indulge." In 1963, the year after *Lawman* was cancelled, she and McGarry had a daughter named Erin.

Their marriage outlived her career (she notched a final television appearance on an episode of *The Virginian* in 1966), but in 1970 she and McGarry divorced. Writer David J. Hogan reports that Castle's drinking had developed into a full-blown crisis by this time, hastening the end of her third marriage. "Her appearance changed for the

worse," Hogan wrote in "Green Eyes Crying" a 1992 article about Castle "and she gradually slipped away from reality. Her situation was made worse by increasingly unhappy relationships with her father and daughter."

After her divorce from McGarry, she moved into a two-room apartment over a garage in East Hollywood. She stayed inside for days on end, drinking alone and listening to records. Just before Christmas, the landlord went to check on her. She answered the door in tears. When he inquired what was





A smiling Peggie Castle is flanked by John Russell (left) and Peter Brown in this publicity still for the TV oater *Lawman*

save herself, that summer she checked into the Camarillo State Hospital. When she got out, however, she went back to drinking. She holed up by herself in a cheap room at the Hollywood Hawaiian Hotel and Apartments, just up the hill from Hollywood Boulevard where her star on the Walk Of Fame lay all but forgotten.

On the night of Friday, August 10, William McGarry, worried about Peggie, went to check on her. He found her sitting on the couch in her living room, dead. Authorities said she'd been drinking just before her death. An autopsy revealed what anyone could have guessed: cirrhosis. She was 45.

The next day, her passing rated a perfunctory write-up in the newspapers. Most mentioned *Lawman* and the grasshopper movie. They all mentioned the drinking and the divorces. They couldn't agree on the spelling of her name.

wrong, she told him, "Today's my birthday. Nobody remembered."

The model and actor turned Hollywood oral chronicler William Ramage was friends with Peggie's landlord at the time and later recalled his stories about the famous guest above the garage:

"She only left her apartment to buy groceries, Rainier Ale malt liquor, and gallon jugs of Almaden Chablis. Her car was a Ford convertible which was about twelve years old and in poor condition. Since the battery on the car was frequently dead, Lee, the landlord, had to use his jumper cables to help her get it started. Her speech was rarely slurred, but when she was drinking the malt liquor her language would turn profane and vulgar. Lee was afraid she would fall down the stairs drunk someday, so at the end of the six month lease, he asked her to move."

Not long after her move she met and married a businessman named Arthur Morgenstern in October of 1970, but the hasty fourth marriage did little to stop Peggie's alcoholic descent. In 1973, two events unraveled what was left of her life. On February 17, her mother, Betty, died. Then, just two months later, Morgenstern suddenly died.

Peggie plummeted into alcoholic despair. In a final attempt to

Hardly any of the obituaries recalled the noirs. Yet it is those films which have lasted; and, as rough a time as she got in them—perhaps *because* she got such a rough time in them—it seems only fitting that the noirs should be the ones to safeguard her memory.

After all, to save a film is to save images haunted by the mystery of brief, ineffable human lives. The film doesn't have to be an artistic masterpiece, either. It can be a cheap little B-movie, something like *Finger Man*, where Peggie plays a tragic ex-bad girl attempting to redeem herself. If you know her other films, and if you feel the weight of her real life behind them, then one scene in the film takes on a particular resonance. She has a short monologue in which she explains herself to Frank Lovejoy. As her eyes well with tears, Peggie beautifully delivers this, her noir epitaph:

"All my life, I've had dreams. Not big ones, just my share of the little things—that someone would like me, really like me, maybe even respect me...I know I'm no bargain. I've been around, plenty. I don't feel sorry for myself. Only, sometimes, I get the feeling there isn't any more time, like there isn't going to be any tomorrow. Be nice to me. Please." ■

