

THE CHASE

By Fred Hobbs

These days, it seems that nine out of ten Hollywood movies involve chases, which inevitably wind up as crashes. The villains pursuing the good guys in souped-up cars, helicopters, space ships, all kinds of speedy and often improbable conveyances. The sound track is cranked up to ear-splitting volume. Sparks, flames and smoke usually fill the screen with glaring visual effects. Eventually and miraculously, the evil ones are dispatched as the chase ends in a pile of rubble from which the heroes emerge triumphant with hair still combed neatly and no visible scars.

One should not be such a cinema-viewing curmudgeon that he or she can't appreciate a really humorous chase scene. Who could ever tire of seeing repeats of the classic pursuit by Chicago's men in blue of Elwood and Jake, the Blues Brothers? That chase included a spectacular leap of their vehicle (a stolen Chicago police car), over a rising draw-bridge and the destruction of an entire shopping mall.

Chases in classic western films, of course, are accomplished on horse back with an occasional buckboard or covered wagon thrown in. The drama comes in the form of thunderous hoof beats, clouds of dust and lots of gun shots with maybe a "Hi Yo, Silver" for good measure. Perhaps it's generational, but somehow those chases, though corny and predictable, seemed more genuine and plausible than those splashing across 21st century movie theater screens.

The popular film noir movies of the 1940s and 50s offered pursuits of a quieter, but no less dramatic nature. In one in the series of black and white films which featured Raymond Chandler's fictional hard-boiled detective Phillip Marlowe, the chase centered on the hunt for a missing night club singer. The dialogue or narration was terse and staccato, no need for noisy crashes or dramatic visual effects. In 1944's "Murder, My Sweet", Dick Powell as Marlowe described what happened in the course of that pursuit: "I caught a blackjack right behind my ear. A black pool opened up. I dived in. It had no bottom." Now, isn't that more dramatic than tires squealing and 'copter blades whirling overhead? Well, maybe not, but it surely had audiences riveted without assaulting their eardrums.

In that same era, chases were the main focus of almost every cartoon made for the movies. The cat and mouse chases of Tom and Jerry, the hapless Elmer Fudd's relentless pursuit of that "waskly wabbitt" Bugs Bunny and the futile efforts of Wile E. Coyote to catch up with the Roadrunner. Despite overwhelming evidence of prior encounters, kids weren't really sure that the mouse would prevail, Bugs would survive or Wile E. might actually nab his intended prey.

Perhaps the best genre of exciting movies that involve chases of a more cerebral kind are spy tales...from the "Scarlet Pimpernel", to Alfred Hitchcock's "39 Steps", the James Bond thrillers and more recent offerings such as "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier Spy and "Bourne Identity" and its sequels.

And, for those to whom "The Chase" involves reality and not just Hollywood fantasy, personal choices are available: to chase the blues away, to chase a rainbow or better yet, to chase a dream.