



Sweet Smell of Success is a summer, 2026 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that Criterion Collection double-disc dvd release.

United States 1957 black-and-white 96 minutes live action feature drama
 Norma Productions/Curtleigh Productions/Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions
 Producer: James Hill a Criterion Collection double dvd release

18 of a possible 20 points = ****1/2 = a minor classic

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 2 Direction: Alexander Mackendrick*
- 2 Editing: Alan Crosland, Jr.*
- 2 Cinematography: James Wong Howe*
- 2 Lighting: Homer Plannette
- 2 Screenplay: Clifford Odets* and Ernest Lehman from Lehman's novelette
Tell Me About It Tomorrow (1950)
- 2 Music: Elmer Bernstein* Songs: Chico Hamilton and Fred Katz

- 1 Art Direction: Edward Carrere
Set Decoration: Edward Boyle*
Costume Design: Mary Grant
Makeup: Robert Schiffer
- 1 Sound
Dialogue Direction: Thom Conroy*
Sound Effects: Robert Carlisle
Sound Recording: Jack Solomon
- 2 Acting
- 2 Creativity
- 18 total points

Cast: Burt Lancaster* (J.J. Hunsecker), Tony Curtis* (Sidney Falco), Susan Harrison* (Susan Hunsecker, J.J.'s kid sister), Jeff Donnell (Sally, Sidney's secretary), Sam Levene* (Frank D'Angelo), Joe Frisco (Herbie Temple, vaudeville comic), Barbara Nichols* (Rita, hatcheck girl), Emile Meyer* (Lt. Harry Kello), Edith Atwater* (Mary, J.J.'s secretary), Chico Hamilton, Paul Horn, Fred Katz, Buddy Clark (members of the Chico Hamilton Quintet), Jay Adler (Manny Davis), Robert Carson (Lou, headwaiter at Toots Shor's), Nick Borgani (waiter), Lewis Charles (Al Evans), Lawrence Dobkin* (Leo Bartha, gossip columnist), William Forrest (Senator Harvey Walker), Joseph Leon (Joe Robard, nightclub owner), Autumn Russell (Linda James, ambitious singer/escort), Charles Sherlock (bartender at Toots Shor's), Carson Smith (Carson Smith), Queenie Smith (Mildred Tom), Lurene Tuttle (Loretta Bartha, Leo's wife), Philip Van Zandt (radio program director), David White* (Otis Elwell, gossip columnist), others

One of director Alexander Mackendrick's finest achievements, *Sweet Smell of Success* served as an exposé of the connection between sleazy gossip and the "news" reportage of certain nationally syndicated newspaper columnists. Its putative target was Walter Winchell, whose mix of patriotic fervor and backstage innuendo titillated two generations of Americans and advanced or killed careers of numerous rising entertainers and ambitious politicians.

Building on a novelette by former publicity writer Ernest Lehman, published in 1950 under the title *Tell Me About It Tomorrow*, Mackendrick's film explored the seedier side of urban celebrity. Set in 1950s Manhattan, with mostly nocturnal scenes reminiscent of classic film noir, the drama boasted an electrifying jazz score by Elmer Bernstein and snippets of performances by the very real Chico Hamilton quintet, a chamber music ensemble that included flautist Paul Horn. Horn would find greater fame later in a solo career. Lehman's original profanity-soaked screenplay was tidied up considerably by Clifford Odets, with Lehman retreating to the South Pacific prior to the film's premiere. Laden with unforgettable one-line zingers, Odets's writing elevated what could have been tawdry melodrama into biting critique.

Casting reinforced scathing cynicism of Mackendrick's descent into the seemingly bottomless pit of American popular culture. Since *Sweet Smell of Success*'s two leads were each thoroughly repulsive characters, that customarily fatal recipe for box-office disaster needed offsetting by hugely attractive personas of stars Burt Lancaster as despotic gossip collector J.J. Hunsecker and Tony Curtis as a totally corrupted publicity agent whose clientele depended upon his success planting their names in a Hunsecker column. An even bigger bonus would be receiving a shout-out on J.J.'s radio program by the columnist himself.

This becomes quite an arduous task for Curtis's Sidney Falco due to a failed prior attempt at breaking up the romantic relationship between Hunsecker's younger sister Susan and jazz guitarist Steve Dallas, one of the players in Chico Hamilton's combo. J.J. wants to retain tyrannical control over Susan's life, not power share with newcomer Dallas. In order to achieve this, he insinuates to Falco the gossip gatherer would receive a tantalizing bonus through successful disentangling of Susan and Steve. That could be accomplished by whatever means Sidney prefers: libel, blackmail, a phony drug charge, even an unsubstantiated claim Dallas is a closet Communist. Just keep J.J.'s name out of the publicity so Susan cannot link the scandal back to him.

Watching Falco in ethically compromised action, it's apparent to viewers he's already short-circuited his conscience to such a degree even the possibility of becoming accessory to murder is no barrier to his machinations. Whatever J.J. wants, J.J. will get from Sidney. As long as there's a status boost waiting for delivery of goods as promised. Non-execution of J.J.'s order will result in a total

freeze on publicity for Sidney's clients. That, in turn, would bring Falco's career to a dead halt.

But J.J. and Sidney underestimate Susan's willingness to lead her own life. The process of achieving independence from J.J. proves a long and hard one for that young woman. All her shelter, clothing, and money comes from her brother. Either directly or indirectly. Yet, once she realizes J.J.'s fanatic obsession with possession and reputation offer nothing but a snare and cage, Susan opts for freedom. That's one thing neither Falco nor her brother can provide. She experiences a degree of success and change for the better. While malevolent scheming of Sidney and J.J. lead only to barren lives of loneliness, despair and, in Falco's case, an unending round of degradations.

The picture's plenitude of crackling, caustic dialogue benefits from reinforcement by perfect verbal demolition derby performances from Lancaster, Curtis, and Harrison. Exceptionally strong support comes from Sam Levene as hard-luck talent promoter Frank D'Angelo; Emile Meyer in the role of violent, overeducated cop Lt. Harry Kelso; Edith Atwater as Mary, the unflappable, ultra-efficient secretary to J.J.; Barbara Nichols as tart-for-hire hat check girl Rita; Lawrence Dobkin portraying justifiably shamefaced philandering columnist Leo Bartha; and David White as sensual gossip reporter Otis Elwell, whose sleazy deal-making with financially drained Rita and perennial negotiator Sidney represents one of the vilest episodes in the careers of these amoral shysters.

James Wong Howe's camerawork leads viewers through murky external luminescence of 1950s-era Manhattan's glaring and gaudy late night hotspots, such as the Stork Club and Toots Shor's. As the film progresses, grays and blacks deepen, with shadows becoming more prominent. Even in daytime scenes. Frequent use is made of key triangle shots with two characters in dialogue foregrounded and an observational third party positioned in the background. Highly effective in maximizing suspense and drama, such staging is perhaps at its potent best in such scenes as the disclosure of Bartha's infidelity, with an intrusive Falco and nonchalant Mrs. Bartha foregrounded while increasingly agonized Leo suffers ignobly behind Sidney. Another formidable triangulation occurs in the scene at Rita's apartment where Sidney and Otis exchange banter and conversation in a foreground parlor as Rita observes and sulks in her bedroom behind them.

Sound volume sometimes dips too low during speeches.

Lighting is constantly appropriately matched to mood.

Mackendrick's direction gets optimal acting from all cast members, even extras. That multiplies film impact considerably.

Edward Carrere's art direction is effective, but mostly concerned with mere duplication of existing nightclub interiors. The other Edward in the Art Department, Edward Boyle, has greater success cluttering interior apartments of Falco and Rita. He's equally adept in furnishing the Hunsecker apartment suite with what appears to be elegantly expensive paintings, hardcover books of the first edition type, and furniture which certainly looks handmade.

Despite low box-office returns on initial release, *Sweet Smell of Success* has evolved into a critical favorite. It was inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in 1993. It's also very highly recommended viewing, though strictly for adults due to depiction of multiple moral compromises and its atmosphere of all-encompassing venality.

Criterion's bonus features are comprised of a restored version of the film; an audio commentary by film historian James Naremore which is quite comprehensive and anecdotal; an original three-minute theatrical trailer; *Mackendrick: The Man Who Walked Away* (1986), a forty-five minute documentary about the career of Alexander Mackendrick in both England and the United States; a twenty-nine minute video interview titled *Gabler on Winchell* where film critic and historian Neil Gabler supplies a defensive and laudatory appraisal of the career of Walter Winchell, the prototype of J.J. Hunsecker; an extremely enlightening and personal 2010 twenty-six minute video interview with filmmaker James Mangold, who was mentored by Alexander Mackendrick, that features some of the latter's delightfully impudent and cogent aphorisms about filmmaking; critic Gary Giddens' essay about the film; an excerpt about Clifford Odets from Alexander Mackendrick's book *On Film Making*; Ernest Lehman's 1948 short story "Hunsecker Fights the World"; Lehman's short story "It's the Little Things That Count"; and an essay about adaptation from page to screen by Paul Cronin.