

**LIFE**

**JOHN GARFIELD**

**REAL-LIFE NOIR HERO** by CARL STEWARD

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Faux LIFE cover, dated the day of Garfield's death, by Michael Kronenberg

Less than two years after *The Breaking Point* premiered in 1950, its noble but beaten-down antihero, John Garfield, would be dead. As we watch the film now, refracted through the historical lens of Garfield's own tragic demise, it's impossible to overlook the chilling parallels between the man himself and the character he played in the film.

Garfield plays Harry Morgan, an essentially decent man seeking his own version of the American Dream, but who finds himself besieged and ultimately bludgeoned by a series of day-to-day nightmares. In trying to provide a halfway decent life for his wife and family, Morgan gets nothing but the back of the hand from a dishonest, unsympathetic world; with each new setback, he becomes increasingly desperate—through no real fault of his own.

What did Morgan do to deserve such rude treatment and rotten luck? He'd served his country in the war. He worked tirelessly to become an independent businessman, albeit as a simple "boat jockey." In spite of temptations, he is wholly devoted to his "plain Jane" wife, Lucy. In a racially hostile world, his most trusted friend is a black man. He always returns home with presents for his two little girls. He doesn't seek riches. He just wants to make an honest buck and carve out a little piece of security.

In the end, Morgan winds up hoodwinked, with nothing but lint in his pockets; he's drawn into crimes he didn't orchestrate. It's a taut and bleak tale, noir to the core, and even though he remains better known for other roles, Garfield may have delivered his definitive performance, if only for the character's haunting link to his own unfortunate downward spiral and premature death at age 39.



Garfield testifying before the House Committee on Un-American Activities

As he was making *The Breaking Point*, Garfield already was being targeted by blacklisters for his support of the Committee for the First Amendment and its defense of the Hollywood Ten during the initial hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

He certainly wasn't singled out for persecution, but Garfield was a larger target than most. He'd already been identified as an extreme liberal and a tireless, outspoken activist, although there was no evidence that Garfield himself had ever been a Communist. (That evidence actually pointed in the direction of his wife, Robbe.) Clearly, he already was suspect when called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, April 23, 1951. Badgered mercilessly to identify possible Communists or sympathizers, Garfield refused to name anyone.

At the end of intense Congressional questioning, Garfield appeared to have gotten the upper hand with an impassioned final statement:

When I was originally requested to appear before the committee, I said that I would answer all questions fully and without any reservations, and that is what I have done. I have nothing to be ashamed of and nothing to hide. My life is an open book. I was glad to appear before you and talk with you. I am no Red. I am no "pink." I am no fellow traveler. I am a Democrat by politics, a liberal by inclination, and a loyal citizen of this country by every act of my life.

But ultimately, his words fell on deaf ears. His efforts to continue his career—another bleak noir, *He Ran All The Way* (1951), and a well-received revival of *Golden Boy* on Broadway—were not enough. HUAC intimated that they intended to recall him. Baffled and bitter at being singled out, Garfield's health



Coast Guard officer Rogers (Edmon Ryan, center) threatens to impound Harry's boat, leading to an economic—and existential—crisis for the beleaguered skipper



deteriorated quickly; he was found dead on the morning of May 21, 1952. His chronically weak heart had given out under the pressure.

For more than 60 years, John Garfield's fate became far better known than the character he played in *The Breaking Point*. The movie itself disappeared from view for decades, initially as a result of Garfield's fall from grace but over time in a series of legal entanglements involving the estate of author Ernest Hemingway. The movie resurfaced in 2001, a one-time broadcast on Turner Classic Movies as part of a John Garfield marathon. Director Alexander Payne chose the film as part of UCLA's series, "The Film That Inspired Me," curated by Curtis Hanson. That public screening finally pried the film from the vault at Warner Bros., and several screenings at NOIR CITY festivals followed, to great acclaim. Once the legal issues were resolved, the Film Foundation eagerly funded a restoration of the film, completed in 2011 and debuted in San Francisco at NOIR CITY X in 2012. It was finally released on DVD through the Warner Archive Collection. Perhaps it will now gain the recognition it deserves as the best and most faithful representation of the original 1937 Ernest Hemingway novel *To Have and Have Not*.

Everything about *The Breaking Point* is praiseworthy: Michael Curtiz's meticulous direction, Ranald MacDougall's sharp and absorbing script, Ted McCord's moody location cinematography; and the inspired performances of the principal cast: Patricia Neal, Phyllis Thaxter, Wallace Ford and Juano Hernandez.

But it's Garfield himself who drives the boat, brilliantly. In retrospect, with the knowledge of how his off-screen life and career were already crumbling, his opening voice-over seems to transcend the story itself.

*"You know how it is, early in the morning, on the water? Everything's quiet, except for the seagulls, a long way off. And you feel great. But then you come ashore, and it starts. In no time at all, you're up to your ears in trouble, and you don't know where it all began."*

Of course, Garfield played many characters like Morgan, confronting the hard knocks in life and not always winning. But with this particular character, his pain seems particularly acute, perhaps as a by-product of his troubled life away from the studio.

"I think it's the best I've done since *Body and Soul*," he assessed upon the film's release. "Better than that."

He was right and then some. Garfield evokes incredible empathy as Morgan tries so valiantly to do the right things, only to be hounded by creditors, lovingly henpecked by his wife, regarded with suspicion by the Coast Guard, jilted by a client, sucked into schemes by slimy lawyer, seduced by a cynical temptress, and cheated by a trafficker of illegal aliens. It's a bad world and it's closing in all around poor Harry, and when he is ultimately forced into being the waterborne wheel-man for a bunch of racetrack

robbers, it gets even worse—his best friend, Wesley Park (Hernandez), is ruthlessly gunned down by the crooks.

The film's ray of light emerges when Morgan risks his own life to avenge his friend's death and wipes out the entire gang once they head out to sea. Harry is severely wounded in the exchange, and he appears doomed as he falls to the deck muttering, "A man alone ain't got no chance." He utters it again to his devoted wife after he is rescued, whereupon she reassures him "you're the best man I know" and "everything will be all right."

As the film concludes, we're not sure what fate awaits Morgan, but the hint is that he will somehow survive the ordeal even though he's probably headed for jail and one of his arms is certainly going to be amputated.

If it's true that life imitates art, it's an eerie conclusion. In the wake of what we know now about the Red Scare, blacklisting and the HUAC witchhunt, Garfield was a man of noble, albeit occasionally rebellious, convictions who became a tragic victim of a cruel and paranoid society, much like the character he played in *The Breaking Point*.

But there is a significant difference in scale. Harry Morgan lost an arm; John Garfield lost his life. ■



Garfield back home, enjoying a rare moment of rest, relaxation and reflection in *The Big Apple*