



THE MANY DEATHS OF STEVE COCHRAN

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He was a man who died a thousand times—or maybe it just seemed that way. Film noir's most notorious bad boy, both on and off screen, had a flair for death that was unrivaled in the genre. In fact, as an actor who thrived on portraying chumps, crooks and cretins, he might have accumulated more toe tags than anybody in the whole of cinema history.

Who else in the annals of film and television ever had not one but two fatal head-on collisions with locomotives? Who else ever felt the hot lead of Eliot Ness' machine gun on two separate occasions, as two different characters?

**WARNING:
Contains
Spoilers**

Who else was so despicable that he was willfully shot to death by his own mother? Who else took a climactic death plunge off an industrial tower, and also got tossed off a carnival Ferris wheel by a freak show ogre? Who else perished as a dim-witted Klansman, and also met his maker by being ravaged by a vengeful sled dog in the Arctic wilderness?

Who else actually kicked off a film as a dead man, having been rolled into the desert to rot, then had the backstory of his demise told over the course of the flick?

Finally, in terms of the ultimate bucket-kick, who ever had a strange, suspicious, and sordid real-life death to match and possibly exceed any of those in which he checked out in front of a camera? Ok, there have been more than a few bizarre deaths in Hollywood history over the past hundred years, but none so consistent with the check-outs this man delivered time and again in movie houses of the 1940s and '50s.

We've identified the body...and his name is Steve Cochran. He was a truly mutable corpse, a one-man death toll, with screen terminations numbering around two dozen crossing over all genres, with a solid dozen of those occurring in film noir. That doesn't even count his stage turns, where he once played what must have been the most improbable Richard III ever. Suffice it to say not even a legend like James Cagney, who so famously plugs Cochran's Big Ed Somers in 1949's *White Heat* before going up in a plume of fire himself atop a petroleum tank, could match that career level of lethal exits (And Cagney's career was twice as long!).

Of course, while he was hardly a huge star at any point in his career, there is much about Cochran's life and many deaths that still fascinates fans of film noir and stamps him as a certified icon, DOA or otherwise. Unlike Dan Duryea, profiled in *Noir City's* last issue, Cochran followed the noir code—live fast, play hard, die young—away from the studio, and this has become a significant part of his lingering allure.

With his swarthy good looks, steely blue eyes, uber-hairy chest, and chiseled physique, Steve's exploits as a serial womanizer were well documented. Adding to the legend was his sexual weaponry—he was purported to be one of the most well-endowed "performers" in the film industry, with a libido to match his equipment. He cavorted with grand old dames (Mae West, Joan Crawford), young ones (at 44, he married his third wife, who was 19), and every age of skirt in between. His list of alleged affairs reads like a Hollywood who's who of starlets.

He drank heavily, smoked incessantly and was involved in a number of well-publicized brawls and other acts of violence, most notably clubbing an ex-boxer over the head in his own home with a baseball bat. He loved high-powered motorcycles and sports cars, and once led police on a high-speed chase that only ended after a warning shot was fired at him. He also took up flying, and was chased down in his small-craft plane by a police helicopter for flying too low and tipping his wings over Tinseltown. He owned a series of odd pets, including goats, monkeys, and a dog he claimed could play piano.

In short, Cochran's life was tantamount to one long movie role of wild escapades, debauchery, and general strangeness. He played that role to the hilt, ultimately delivering the sad but perhaps appropriate grand finale: a shocking premature death at age 48, when he went belly-up aboard his sailboat "Rogue," with three Mexican female survivors ages 25, 19, and 14. It remains anybody's guess the full responsibilities of that nubile crew.

To this day, nearly 50 years after Cochran was found dead aboard that drifting boat on June 26, 1965, details are sketchy and spec-

ulative as to what might have happened, with foul play a distinct possibility. Having been dead for ten days and his body badly decomposed, however, the official cause of death was ruled to be the result of a lung infection. Perhaps, as a result of burning the candle at both ends for so many years, Cochran was deteriorating rapidly—it showed noticeably on screen in his 1960s roles—and he'd admitted to being in questionable health. That said, the true facts of Cochran's real-life demise are likely to forever remain a mystery.

What *isn't* a mystery is that Cochran left behind a legacy of death scenes unmatched in film noir, and possibly in the film industry as a whole. The following is an autopsy of his very best croaks:

DEATH BY LOCOMOTIVE 1 (*The Chase*, 1946)

Cochran had appeared in a handful of roles, including a couple of hoods in Boston Blackie films and a solid minor part in *The Best Years Of Our Lives* (1946), when he made *The Chase* during the same year as that all-time classic.

The Chase is a classic in its own right in that it's Cochran's true coming-out party as the eccentric, sadistic gangster Eddie Roman, whom you know is doomed from the outset. Roman lives in a huge mansion with his henchman (Peter Lorre), his disillusioned, desperate wife (Michele Morgan), and his man-eating monster of a dog in the wine cellar. He spends much of his time at home in an almost opiate haze, listening to classical piano dirges and plotting his next act of mayhem.

His best gimmick is his car, a true "power toy": Roman controls both the gas pedal and brake from the backseat while the driver helplessly steers the wheel. In the first car scene, he hits the gas to outrun a speeding train to a crossing intersection with frantic hero Robert Cummings at the wheel, then slams on the brakes at the last second.

In the climax, however, he's being chased by the law and has to try and outrun the train to the intersection with Lorre at the wheel. No braking this time. The end result is a spectacular, albeit messy, start to Cochran's long march of doom.



DEATH BY CRAZED CAGNEY (*White Heat*, 1949)

Surprisingly, it took three years for Cochran to get another juicy bad-guy part as the right-hand man of Cagney's psychotic, mother-loving gangster Cody Jarrett. As Big Ed, the next dimension of Cochran's screen persona is revealed. He not only does the tough gangster thing, he's scheming behind Jarrett's back and stealing his woman (Virginia Mayo) in the process after Cody is sent to prison.



When Jarrett escapes, Big Ed thinks he's all prepared to trap him in a showdown, but he gets surprised at his hideout thanks to Mayo's double-cross and gets two slugs in the back from Jarrett trying to make

a run for it. For good measure, Cody kicks him down the stairs after wasting him. *White Heat* is Cagney's star vehicle pretty much all the way, but Cochran has his moments, particularly in his electric scenes with Mayo. Rumor is that Cochran tried to romance her off screen, but she wouldn't have it. She was one of the few who resisted his off-screen charms.

DEATH BY LOCOMOTIVE 2 (Highway 301, 1950)

Cochran elevates an otherwise tepid police procedural with his unforgettable portrayal of ruthless killer/bank robber George Lagenza. It also was Cochran's first true starring role, and he dominates every scene he's in with his cold-hearted actions, most notably when he stalks and then guns down his bitchy, big-mouthed girlfriend Mary (Virginia Grey) in cold blood as she tries to escape from him down a flight of stairs.

After Lagenza and his gang terrorize their way through Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, you know a violent end is inevitable. But it's nonetheless one of Cochran's most memorable death scenes. After overturning his getaway car in a high-speed chase with the law, he climbs out of the wreckage and staggers onto a set of

train tracks. He is dropped to his knees after getting hit by a spray of machine gun bullets but somehow doesn't die. Ah, not to worry. Here comes a giant locomotive, and unable to move his legs, Steve looks up to meet the grille of the speeding train chin-first. Screen death doesn't get much more full-frontal than that.

DEATH BY MOB RUB-OUT (The Damned Don't Cry, 1950)

It should be noted right at this juncture that Cochran must have set

some sort of unofficial record starting with *White Heat* in which he met a violent end in seven consecutive Warner Bros. films—five noirs and two Westerns—before finally getting to live in the excellent *Tomorrow Is Another Day* (where he only *appears* doomed) at the end of 1951.

Cochran's exit in *The Damned Don't Cry* is of special merit in that it likely set another record for speed of demise. Steve comes up dead right after the opening credits, when his lifeless corpse is dumped out of a car by mobsters in the middle of the desert.

Fortunately, the path of flamboyant, reckless mob lieutenant Nick Prenta is told in flashback, and we learn of his plot to stage a coup of mob boss George Castleman (David Brian). The results are predictable, with Castleman beating Joan Crawford's Ethel Whitehead senseless for information, then gunning down Prenta much as Jarrett did Big Ed in *White Heat*.

DEATH BY KKK (Storm Warning, 1951)

Cochran said in interviews that this was his favorite role because it brought attention to racial prejudice and injustice. To be sure, it was a surprisingly strong film and a big character turn for Cochran—he plays backwoods hayseed redneck Hank Rice, who gets involved with a Ku Klux Klan chapter and winds up the one member who pays the ultimate price for his racist shenanigans.

In one of the wackiest bits of casting ever—Ronald Reagan, Doris Day, Ginger Rogers and Cochran play the four primary characters—Cochran's Hank decides the best way to solve a climactic nighttime showdown is a shoot-out with D.A. Reagan's crusading unit. Not surprisingly, our man Steve gets cut down rather quickly, but not before one of his own errant shots kills Day, his wife in the picture. To be sure, if you take Doris Day with you in your big death scene, it's a decidedly indelible moment.



DEATH BY DOG BITE

(*Back To God's Country*, 1953)

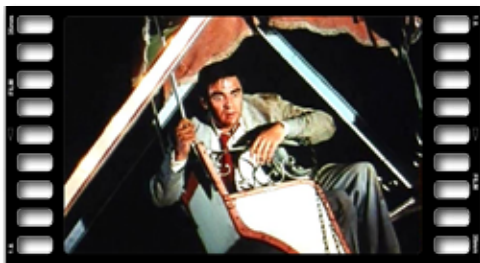
Well off the noir path, this obscure, cheesy Alaska wilderness tale is noteworthy primarily for Cochran playing a nasty outdoorsman who opens the film by killing an Eskimo, pillaging his wares, and beating his dog with the help of an accomplice, played by Hugh O'Brian.

He then sets out to steal not only some furs but the wife of a schooner captain (played by a young Rock Hudson), and a violent woodsy melodrama plays out to a big finish, with Cochran being attacked and chewed to death by the same giant sled dog he beats in the opening scene. It's worth the search-and-view just to see one of Steve's gnarliest trips to the other side.

DEATH BY FERRIS WHEEL FLING

(*Carnival Story*, 1954)

Not a good movie overall, but a terrific, seedy vehicle for Cochran to show off his full womanizing talents. He's carnival barker Joe Hammond, a lecherous two-bit heel who gets comely but destitute Anne Baxter a job with the carnival. He then promptly seduces her, cheats on her, seduces her again after she marries a high-diver, covertly kills the high-diver by sawing off a ladder rung, steals her money and runs off with some other dame, then comes back to seduce her yet again.



Through it all, Baxter's character tries to fend off Joe's wolfish advances but simply can't resist this virile hunk (it's in color, too, so we get to see Cochran's remarkable blue eyes). At long last, she breaks free of his sexual spell, tells him so, and he doesn't like it one bit. He backhands her to the ground, but in an ill bit of timing, slaps her when the idiot carnival strong man walks into the tent. The oversized galoot grapples with Cochran, then chases him to the top of a Ferris wheel, where he tosses him to the ground like a rag doll.

It's cheap, sleazy melodrama from start to finish. You feel like taking a shower after watching it, but it's nonetheless definitive Cochran, and thus essential.

DEATH BY MORTIFIED MOTHER

(*Slander*, 1957)

Cochran plays H.R. Manley, editor of a trashy tabloid magazine called *Real Truth*, the TMZ of its day. He's basically out to ruin reputations for profit, because he knows scandal sells, and sales are flagging.

He finds a solution when he learns upstanding TV kiddie show host Van Johnson is a former convict. His subsequent *exposé* not only results



in the unraveling of Johnson's life but the death of his young son.

Cochran's character dotes on his frail old mother (played by Marjorie Rambeau), but after Johnson goes on television to plead his goodness and tell of his child's death, Mom is so repulsed she pulls a pistol from a drawer and delivers a remarkable eye-for-an-eye by offing her own son. Face it, you get blown away by your own mother, you've pretty much gone the full distance in the death department.

DEATH BY SWAN DIVE

(*Il Grido*, 1957)

With his big-screen career becoming troublingly inconsistent, Cochran was an almost unthinkable choice for the lead in Michelangelo Antonioni's grim tale in impoverished rural Italy. When Cochran, as hired hand Aldo, is rejected by his lover after proposing marriage, he makes off with their shared daughter and drifts from town to town, meeting and struggling with various other women along the way, including the owner of a run-down gas station and a prostitute.

Somehow, even with his dialogue dubbed in Italian, Cochran pulls off one of his best performances as a poor sap who can't seem to find emotional fulfillment in his life. His sensitive portrayal is totally against type with one exception—yes, of course, he dies in the end! It's one of his better farewells, too, as he slowly, sullenly climbs to the top of a refinery tower and jumps off, killing himself in front of a woman who seemed agreeable to fill his desires.



DEATH BY HIT-AND-RUN

(*The Twilight Zone*, "What You Need," 1959)

Cochran found some measure of payday haven in television roles in the late 1950s and early 1960s and, in an early episode of Rod Serling's classic anthology, he delivers one of his sharpest efforts in "What You Need."

Cochran plays a bitter, self-pitying barfly crumb who notices an old peddler helping bar patrons improve their lives by selling them unlikely objects. He gives Cochran's Fred Renard scissors that eventually



save him from a freak elevator accident; then, when Renard demands more, he is given a leaky fountain pen that drips onto a newspaper racing form that subsequently delivers a big payoff at the track.

Not satisfied, he bullies the old man for a third item and gets a pair of shoes. But as he learns the hard way, they're slippery shoes, and when he steps out onto a rain-slicked street, he can't avoid getting pummeled by a large car. Implied moral: This creep's real need was that he'd be better off dead. Serling couldn't have picked a better man than Cochran to play the part.

DEATH BY ELIOT NESS MACHINE GUN—TWICE! (*The Untouchables*, "The Purple Gang" and "90 Proof Dame," 1960-61)

Many a bad guy tasted the hot lead of Robert Stack's Ness at the conclusion of an *Untouchables* episode. Leave it to Steve Cochran to be the one actor who would get riddled with holes on two different occasions, as two different murderous toughs, in the same season.

In the seventh episode of the show's second year, Cochran plays Eddie Fletcher, leader of the notorious Purple Gang, which is into all manner of kidnapping, drug running, and murder. Fletcher not only has Ness after him but Al Capone's chief goon Frank Nitti. Ness gets him first, in a dark warehouse.

In the 32nd episode of the same season, "90 Proof Dame," Cochran returns as bootlegger Nate Kester, who's trying to rub out a competitor so he can better move his own inferior brand of hooch. He gets aerated by Ness' bullets in the hay loft of a barn.

Cochran is over-the-top sinister in both episodes, and while the first episode is superior from an action standpoint, the character portrayal in the second—his Kester has a creepy smiling quirk, even when facing the Ness gun barrel—is untouchable and unforgettable.

Alas, Cochran didn't make any more

movies with death scenes as graphic or noteworthy as those late-period TV demises, and certainly none better than those in his 1940s-50s heyday in feature films. What's remarkable is that he suffered so many more fatalities of the fairly mundane shot-to-death variety, from noirs such as *Private Hell 36* (1954) and *I, Mobster* (1958) to numerous Westerns such as *Raton Pass* (1951), *Dallas* (1950), and *Quantrill's Raiders* (1958). And yes, he did manage to squeeze in a few films and TV shows where he managed to survive.

All of this came in a screen career that lasted barely twenty years before the weird, premature final curtain dropped on him in real life (or perhaps that should be real death). Whatever, no one cashed in his chips more often and in more fascinating fashion than Steve Cochran. That's undoubtedly why film noir fans, nearly fifty years after he succumbed at sea, still love him to death. ■



Crawford, Cochran and David Brian in
The Damned Don't Cry