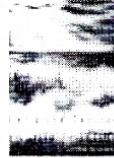


Books

Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies by James Sanders



Paul Byrne

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If New York didn't exist, chances are, Hollywood would have invented it by now. It's the perfect cinematic setting: magnificent and decrepit, romantic and dangerous, fabulously wealthy and, just around the corner, dirt poor.

The fact that New York pretty much invented Hollywood is one of the revealing insights in *Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies*, James Sanders' comprehensive study of the Big Apple's big screen career.

Sanders is a self-confessed movie buff and a practising architect who already gave us *New York: The Illustrated History*. So he could hardly be more qualified for the job at hand. His knowledge of, and enthusiasm for his subject shines through on every one of the 450-plus pages here.

Sanders's book, he's quick to point out, is a tale of two cities -- one "a real city, an urban agglomeration of millions", whilst the other is "a mythic city, a dream city, born of that most pervasive of dream media, the movies".

As noted film historian Michael Wood says: "The movies did not describe or explore America; they invented it, dreamed up an America all their own, and persuaded us to share the dream". And New York is plainly the capital city of dreams when you consider its played host to (and starred in) such classics as *King Kong*, *The Naked City*, *Annie Hall*, *Taxi Driver*, *Do The Right Thing*, *42nd Street*, *Ghostbusters*, and Sanders' personal favourite, *Rear Window* (he dedicates no less than a dozen pages to Hitchcock's classic).

Sanders begins with the formation of America's filmmaking industry. New York's burgeoning cinema community debunked to LA during World War I, partly for the weather, partly because of economics. The money men and the lazy stayed behind to look after the business end of things, but when the Wall Street Crash hit, the lazy headed west too.

Once they got to LA, they celebrated their own beloved city more than any one. And not merely out of nostalgia; from the very beginning, it was recognised that

New York was a city quite like no other. Through the magic of the movies, they were going to make it even more special. And so it was that the mythmaking began.

Whether it was Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing in art deco nightclubs atop skyscrapers, or James Cagney going head to head with Fr Pat O'Brien in rat-infested tenements over the souls of the *Dead End Kids*, New York proved the perfect backdrop.

Sanders may very occasionally come across as an anorak (he describes a production still from Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* thus: "note the dolly track beneath the camera, allowing it to glide smoothly along the pavement, matching Lee's pace"), but his knowledge of both cinema and New York itself is hugely impressive.

It's the small details -- such as the fact that for 1957's *The Sweet Smell Of Success*, Hollywood re-created the interior of New York's famous '21' Club right down to the very last toy model and pine panel at a cost of \$25,000 -- that titillate and thrill as Sanders guides us through the years.

After the initial opening chapter, *Sidewalk Moments*, which deals with the early years 1896 to 1928, Sanders takes a less chronological approach.

Dreaming the City deals with New Yorkers immersing themselves in Hollywood after the arrival of sound (ironically, an idea first mooted in New York) brought on the sudden demise of their own film industry.

Building The Dream looks at how the studios began perfecting their own New York skylines, before Sanders moves on from mythic cities to examining the many facets of New York city itself, from its trademark skyscrapers to Broadway, Times Square and the homes of the rich and the poor. Sanders examines it all, both the reality, and the cinema reality, and in minute detail too.

He had almost completed *Celluloid Skyline* when the September 11 tragedy occurred, and only had time -- having decided to proceed with the publication as originally edited -- to include a brief note on the subject. He did so "in the hope that the book may in some way help to further understanding of why the New York skyline -- in both image and reality -- has had such a profound and personal meaning for people all around the world".

At the heart of *Celluloid Skyline*, Sanders argues, "remains the proposition that the movie city, the mythic city, is ultimately far more than a mere mirror." It is, he argues, "a place unto itself".

Herman Melville said of New York: "It's not on any map; true places never are", but Sanders takes us closer than ever to understanding, and appreciating, the many faces of this incredible, even fantastical city.