

Long, Derek, University of Wisconsin-Madison. "A Great Guy with Something to Sing About: James Cagney, Star Authorship, and Grand National Pictures"

In 1936, James Cagney walked off the Warner Bros. lot to pursue independent production with Grand National Pictures, one of the small production companies collectively known as "Poverty Row." While at Grand National, Cagney made two films: *Great Guy* and *Something to Sing About*. Both films were commercially and critically unsuccessful and led to Cagney's return to Warners in 1937. Using evidence from industry trade discourse, textual analysis of both films, and theories of star authorship posited by Richard Dyer and Patrick McGilligan, this paper will argue that Cagney's brief stint at Grand National offers a case study in star authorship and the various ways in which it might be revealed.

In *Stars*, Richard Dyer argues that "the study of stars as themselves authors belongs essentially to the study of the Hollywood production situation" (152), and I will argue that the specific production situation that characterized Cagney's relationship with Grand National allows the star's authorship to be more clearly codified by a combination of historical and textual evidence. Cagney, as one of the biggest stars in Hollywood in 1936, offered an economic opportunity for the marginalized Grand National that is difficult to understate, and the small studio accordingly gave him producer status and story selection privileges. An examination of trade discourse further reveals that Cagney self-consciously manipulated his own star image for the purposes of promoting his films, a manipulation thrown into relief by the absence of a major studio's publicity unit. Cagney's authorial impulse is further evident in the films themselves, in which the star simultaneously satisfied established audience expectations of the Cagney "genre" and consciously moved away from the misogyny and violence that had characterized his star image at Warners in the early 1930s.

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