

Program note for **Pinewood Dialogue with Richard Linklater** and screening of ***The Newton Boys***

March 15, 1998

Series: *Young and Restless: A Richard Linklater Retrospective*

THE NEWTON BOYS

Twentieth Century Fox, 1998, 122 mins. 35mm print courtesy Twentieth Century Fox.

Directed by Richard Linklater. Written by Richard Linklater, Claude Stanush, and Clark Lee Walker, based on the book by Claude Stanush. Produced by Anne Walker-McBay. Executive producer, John Sloss. Production design by Catherine Hardwicke. Photographed by Peter James. Costume designer Shelley Komarov. Edited by Sandra Adair. Original score by Edward D. Barnes.

With Matthew McConaughey (Willis Newton), Ethan Hawke (Jess Newton), Vincent D'Onofrio (Doc Newton), Skett Ulrich (Joe Newton), Julianna Margulies (Louise Brown), Dwight Yoakam (Brentwood Glasscock), Chloe Webb (Avis Glasscock), Charles Gunning (Slim).

From Twentieth Century Fox press kit:

"We wasn't gunfighters and we wasn't thugs like Bonnie and Clyde. All we wanted was the money. We was just businessmen like doctors and lawyers and storekeepers. Robbin' banks and trains was our business."

-Willis Newton, as told to author Claude Stanush

The Newton Boys is the true story of America's most successful bank robbers. From 1919 to 1924, they robbed over eighty banks from Texas to Canada, capping their career with America's largest train robbery, a three-million-dollar mail train heist outside of Chicago. From a poor upbringing as cowboys and cotton farmers the brothers brought their frontier-born "code of the west" into the Raring Twenties, considering themselves not gunfighters, but businessmen." True to their aims, they never killed anyone in spite of the mayhem they caused, stealing "more money than Jesse James, Butch, Sundance, Bonnie and Clyde and the Dalton brothers put together," says leader Willis Newton.

Until now, the sage of *The Newton Boys* remains unknown to most Americans. Success in bank robbing means getting away with it clean, not gaining notoriety quiet about the details of their "business." Former Life Magazine reporter and screenwriter Claude Stanush befriended Willis and Joe Newton in 1973 while collecting Texas tales for a book of short stories he was writing, and quickly decided The Newton Boys' lives and exploits were worthy of their own volume.

Stanush spent countless hours with Willis and Joe Newton, recording on audio tape their life story in their own words. He eventually transcribed, edited and compiled this material into an oral history, *The Newton Boys: Portrait of an Outlaw Gang*, published in Austin in 1994 by Statehouse Press.

After reading an article Stanush had written for Smithsonian magazine about The Newton Boys, producer Anne Walker-McBay and director Richard Linklater approached the writer about obtaining the motion picture rights to the book.

Stanush, who had scrutinized and rejected various offers over the years, was thrilled that Linklater and Walker-McBay would be bringing the brothers' story to the screen. "After meeting with Anne and Rick," Stanush remembers, "I knew they would tell an honest and interesting story that would say something about the history of the West. More importantly, I realized they wanted to make a film of which the Newton brothers would be proud."

Walker-McBay, in turn, found much to admire in Stanush's multi-textured account of the Newtons, combining not only a book, magazine articles, and a documentary film, but also a genuine friendship with the Boys. "The story captured my interest," Walker-McBay points out, "because it is an amazingly vivid piece of American history that had yet to be told."

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"A lot has been written of gunslingers and outlaws in the Wild West," she continues, "but the Newtons' story is much more than that. It has action and emotion. It's the true story of four real-life brothers who were the nation's most successful band robbers, yet they never killed a single person. Most outlaws gain their fame by killing a lot of innocent people. This story was different. It was that aspect, the part of the story that was about family, loyalty, and a personal code of ethics that fascinated me."

Linklater was similarly attracted to the story's mix of genres and its basis in historical fact. "I love Westerns, and I love Gangster films, and *The Newton Boys* is both. I've always been interested in outlaws who are career criminals - professionals who approach their work in a business-like way," Linklater continues. "The Newtons' professionalism was the reason for their success, and ultimately their obscurity. It was only later in their lives that they talked about it at any length. It meant everything to me that this is a true story-the strange twist and turns of what really happened to the Newtons is far better than anything that could have been made up."

Linklater also relished the challenge of bringing a legend to the screen intact. "The films I've done up to this point have all been more about character than story, but with *The Newton Boys* I felt for the first time I was telling an exciting action-filled story, but one that at its core was still driven by great characters."

After the rights to Stanush's book were secured, the author, Linklater and Clark Walker began writing the screenplay. Walker admits they had their work cut out for them. "We did a tremendous amount of research while writing," he remembers. "Fortunately, Willis Newton had a wonderful descriptive memory for places, dates, family names, geography of the land, what trains he rode, what banks he robbed and which towns they hit. It was our job to follow up with each county historian and learn exactly what happened. We also had help from the National Archives, historical societies and lots of folks who were there."

With the script in place, the filmmakers prepared for the next challenge: casting the "Newtons" and their co-horts. Matthew McConaughey came aboard to play Willis Newton, a role he tackled with his characteristic enthusiasm. "*The Newton Boys* is a great rags-to-riches story," he relates.

McConaughey also appreciated the film's vivid Texas locations as well as the opportunity to reunite with his "Dazed and Confused" director. "I felt a connection to the location because the Newtons were from my hometown of Uvalde, Texas," says McConaughey. "And it is great to work with Rick again."

McConaughey, who joined the production immediately after completing work in Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, further reflects on his character and motivations: "This is not a typical western. I liked the fact that the brothers were both Texan gentlemen and wild outlaws. Willis Newton made up his mind that it was okay to rob banks because he wasn't taking the people's money. The banks were insured-and the insurance companies were the biggest crooks of them all. So in his mind, everything was all right and he never looked back on the notion."

Joining McConaughey is Ethan Hawke, who plays Jess Newton. Hawke also re-teams with Linklater, his director on *Before Sunrise*. According to Walker-McBay, Hawke's casting was always in the cards. "when Rich and I were shooting *Before Sunrise*," she remembers, "we knew we wanted Ethan to play one of the Newton brothers; we just had to figure out which one."

Like McConaughey, Hawke enjoyed digging into his character and the historical context of the adventures. "The Newtons were living in a time when the spirit of the West was being curbed. But the Newtons stuck to this kind of Old West code, which stated that whatever you were man enough to do, you did. In this spirit, they robbed banks and trains. They were the quintessential capitalists."

Brother Dock Newton is played by Vincent D'Onofrio. "Dock is a soldier for Willis," explained the co-star of the box-office smash *Men in Black*. "The brothers are all soldiering for Willis. We are there to support him. Dock and his brothers liked robbing banks. He enjoyed the money and getting away with it."

The fourth and youngest brother, Joe Newton, is played by Skeet Ulrich, perhaps best known for his role in horror hit *Scream*. Early on Joe is depicted as being somewhat naïve, but he becomes tougher after each robbery. "Joe has a sense of morality," says Ulrich. "He doesn't age very much in years, but, he really ages a lot in terms of maturity and understanding. Looking at some photos of Joe through the years, I noticed he was very youthful in the beginning-but he got old quickly."

Rounding out the Newton Gang is nitroglycerin expert Brent Glasscock, who taught Willis about blowing up safes and vaults. The role is taken on by actor/musician Dwight Yoakam, who received considerable notice for his role as an abusive husband in *Sling Blade*. Like his cast mates, Yoakam appreciates the story's historical roots. "I love the idea that these were real-life characters, and that their exploits were faithfully re-created."

"Glasscock is the professional of the group," continues Yoakam. "He has spent a lot of time in prison, and I don't think he ever wanted to go back to that life. He and his wife, Avis, played by Chloe Webb, realized that Willis could help them in their quest for the American Dream."

While the exploits of The Newton Boys and their relationships among one another are central to the story, the film also balances the action with a powerful romance between Willis and a strong-willed single mother, Louise, portrayed by Julianna Margulies of *ER* fame.

Margulies was impressed with the powerful feelings the two had for each other. "What is truly wonderful about Willis and Louis is you see how passionate they are for one another," she points out. "Louise allows the audience a softer perspective on Willis. She stands by her man but holds her grounds at the same time. Her relationship with Willis ultimately was about mutual respect. Plus, she's got moxy!"

Like most period pieces, *The Newton Boys* came with some formidable and inherent production challenges. "The Newtons made million robbing banks," explains Walker-McBay. "They wore the finest clothes, drove the newest cars and stayed in the finest hotels. They spent lots of money. Recreating that kind of period wealth wasn't easy."

In addition to capturing the period and the Newtons' impressive wealth, the filmmakers worked to ensure the authenticity of the various locations. Production designer Catherine Hardwicke recreated entire towns based on pictorial records she discovered in history books. "We also scouted for two to three months looking at all of the towns within an hour and a half drive from Austin and San Antonio,"

Hardwicke recalls. "The story required many different types of sets, including Western towns, Midwestern banks, elegant hotels, ballrooms, Chicago speakeasies, trains and oil rigs."

Linklater readily acknowledges the enormity of the work undertaken by Hardwicke and her team. "It has been fun to completely recreate an era in American history and Catherine and her crew deserve endless credit. A lot of period films restrict the action to a handful of sets. We had 81 locations to shoot in 56 days." Linklater adds, with a laugh, "Bank robbers don't usually make a habit of returning to the same place."

Given the story's setting and the actors' and filmmakers' ties to the region, it is certainly not surprising that the Lone Star State became an important character in its own right. Confirms Linklater: "We never really considered any other place to shoot. Texas even stands in for the scenes that are set outside the state. There is a wide variety of looks in central Texas, both rural and urban, and several of the towns in which we filmed still look a lot like they did seventy years ago."

Director of photography Peter James used several methods to capture the varied Texas looks. "For the early western period," he remarks, "we built the set in a type of 'bowl' to give us a western prairie feel." For the bank robbery scenes, James softened the image, using more pastels. As the Newtons accumulate more money, cars and clothes, the look of the film was brightened. But when things begin to fall apart for them, the look, according to James "gets harder, with much more contrast-it's more *film noir*."

The striving for historical authenticity can also be seen in the costumes. Costume director Shelly Komarov spent months preparing the clothing for this film, contacting over 20 private sources. "We tried to get as close to the period as possible," she says. "The Levi-Strauss Co. made us original Levis from patterns dating back almost 100 years. Justin boots and Stetson hats also made items from original patterns."

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of screenings and discussions with significant creative figures in film, television, and digital media, as supported with a generous grant from The Pinewood Foundation.

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