

Man Friday on Cornet

PETE KELLY'S BLUES

(Warner Bros.)

JAZZ enthusiasts will have their own reasons for wanting to see this movie, which harks back to the hot two-beat tempo of the Twenties, includes a handful of songs by Peggy Lee and Ella Fitzgerald, and music (at various points, generally out of camera range) by such practitioners as Joe Venuti, Dick Cathcart, Matty Matlock and others whose names mean a lot more to the aficionado than they do to me.

I was interested mainly to see how Jack Webb ("My name's Friday; I'm a cop") would shape, as director and star, in a new milieu. As things turn out, the milieu isn't so different after all—in Prohibition America crime seems to have kept breaking through whatever environment you picked — and *Pete Kelly's Blues*, though its title would suggest something specifically musical to jazz addicts (if not to our higher critics), is more a period thriller than the simple story of a speakeasy combo.

Perhaps because I have been mildly infected by the current nostalgia for the racket years in which I grew up, I enjoyed Mr.

BAROMETER

FAIR: "Pete Kelly's Blues."
FAIR: "The Mill on the River."
FAIR: "The Bride Couldn't Wait."

Webb's evocation of place and period, but to suggest that my enjoyment was exclusively subjective would be to deny the director credit for a good deal of painstaking work. The passion for accurate reconstruction which he has carried over from his *Dragnet* investigations ("This story is true; only the names have been changed to protect the innocent") has filled the background with authentic detail. His speakeasy shots have an atmosphere which practically exhales the pungent aroma of bootleg hooch, the costuming (even of the women) is rigidly accurate, and the music, of course, is in large measure the music of the time.

I could have wished, however, that Pete Kelly himself had looked a little less like Joe Friday; that Mr. Webb, in short, was a little less deadpan in his acting, a little more lively in his vocal delivery. Not that Pete Kelly hadn't grounds for a restrained cyni-



JACK WEBB

cism—it must have been occupational for band-leaders paying protection to gangsters—but the creation of a new character isn't helped by the retention of old tricks.

Jack Webb as director interested me more. Indeed, I found myself enduring, in a milder degree, the same alternations of pleasure and frustration which I had experienced during the screening of *The Night of the Hunter*. I don't think Mr. Webb has quite the intellectual resources of Charles Laughton, but I had the impression of a determined and by no means negligible intelligence at work. A good head, you might say, but one which had not yet quite found its feet in the new medium. The opening shots—in a prologue more than a shade too long—were superb, and the juxtaposition of Mississippi stern-wheeler and Negro funeral (complete with band) would have made an admirable frontispiece for any History of Jazz. The final sequence, too, with gangster chief and band-leader shooting it out in a deserted dance-hall, to the frantic music of a jazz orchestration, had its moments—though it reminded me of a somewhat similar (and better) finale to one of Orson Welles's thrillers. In between, however, the film seemed too often to have been shot through the slot in the speakeasy door.

THE MILL ON THE RIVER

(Lux Films)

ITALIAN films, as a general rule, seem to take some time to reach these parts, and the two I saw this week were no exceptions. *The Mill on the River*, from the novel of almost the same title by Riccardo Baccelli, was made in 1950

(directed by Alberto Lattuada, with Carlo Ponti as producer). But it's still a good film, in which social and emotional conflicts generate more than enough power to break through the barrier of language. The story is of agrarian unrest in the Po Valley of the 1870's, of the rise of *il Socialismo*, of landlord against peasantry (a conflict not yet resolved in many parts of Italy), and of divided households and divided loyalties. Pictorially and dramatically the film is frequently impressive, and there are several passages of almost classic quality—notably one in which a battalion of infantry is used in an attempt to quell the peasants. To the Anglo-Saxon eye, however, there are times when the drama seems in danger of developing the overblown proportions of grand opera.

THE BRIDE COULDN'T WAIT

(Archway)

IN spite of a title which suggests one of the more leery Aldwych farces, this unpretentious comedy manages to combine warmth, compassion for human frailty and a robust humour. The good-natured Anselmo, who stops en route to his own wedding to save a young woman from drowning, finds himself with an unmarried mother and a flock of consequential problems on his hands. After all, as he says, you can't treat a human being like a package, to be dumped just anywhere. Of course, Anselmo's bride is kept waiting an unconscionable time, and, of course, there are the obvious misunderstandings, but the spectacle of Anselmo's conscience working overtime is the principal attraction. Most of the credit for a pleasant film goes here to Gino Cervi (and, of course, to Zavattini for the script), but Odile Versois and Lollobrigida (as the bride) help, too.

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