

The Big Picture

Patrick Goldstein on the collision of entertainment, media and pop culture

[L.A. Times' 'The Gangster Squad' sells to WB: The inside story](#)



Having grown up watching "GoodFellas" and "The Godfather" and having worked on "The Departed" as a studio exec at Warner Bros., producer Dan Lin is a stone cold gangster movie fanatic. So he couldn't have been more excited when he grabbed a Sunday L.A. Times on his way to the airport and eyeballed the first installment in "Tales From the Gangster Squad," my colleague Paul Lieberman's recent seven-part series about the 1940s-'50s era LAPD's attempt to both stem the tide of L.A. gangland slayings

and keep East Coast mobsters out of the city.

"I was on my way to England where we're shooting a movie and there I was, in the airport lounge, reading the first part of the story, and all I could think was--this is a movie," he told me today, still sounding pretty revved up about his weeklong chase to acquire the movie rights. "I immediately e-mailed [Warners production head] Kevin McCormick and [production exec] Jon Berg and said, 'There's this incredible story in the paper, it's clearly a movie and as soon as I land in London, I want to talk to you about it.'"

He laughs. "I must've sounded like a crazy producer, but I thought--this story is so good, everyone must be chasing this guy. I didn't even wait to see if Paul had an agent or find a Times publicist. I just e-mailed him and said we had to talk."

As Lin walked me through the story, I found myself half listening to him, but half caught up in a bigger issue--this is why Hollywood needs producers. In recent years, most studios have either been drastically cutting back on their producer deals or simply avoiding them altogether, in the mistaken belief that producers are simply pests who gum up the smooth-running studio machine. At Fox, executives boast to their talent that they don't have to worry about dealing with producers, as if that was a good thing. But as Lin's case makes clear, a real producer isn't a fly in the ointment. Real producers have a nose for great material and serve as passionate advocates for movies, whether it's in the script writing, filming or marketing part of the process.

The passion comes from a personal, often an emotional involvement. For Lin, seeing the pictures of dead gangsters in The Times, sprawled across the sidewalks of Hollywood Boulevard, was like seeing the past come to life. "I used to live right off of Hollywood

Boulevard and I couldn't believe that 40 and 50 years ago there were open shootouts happening out in public, right in my old neighborhood. I often take my kids to Pasadena on weekends, so it really resonated with me when Paul told me a story about Jack (The Enforcer) Whalen in which his nephew talks about going with him to a Rose Bowl game and on the way, stopping to clobber two men unconscious--then Whalen brushes off his suit and off they go to the stadium nestled in the hills of Pasadena."

A veteran studio hand, McCormick tested Lin's enthusiasm. After all, gangster movies are a dime a dozen. With Lin pushing the studio to buy the movie rights, McCormick asked--what made this story different from "L.A. Confidential" or "Bugsy"? Being a good producer, Lin was ready with a persuasive answer. "One of my favorite movies is 'The Untouchables,' so I said to Kevin, 'What's different about this movie is that it's about the heroes--the cops. It's 'The Untouchables,' but on the streets of Los Angeles.' For me, it's a real origin story. It's about these East Coast gangsters falling in love with a girl, and the girl is Los Angeles."

The story also has a tantalizing sense of the blurring of lines between good and bad. "These cops in Paul's story, they totally operate in a gray zone, because to get these gangsters they almost had to act like gangsters themselves to take them down. So you get to ask the question--how far are you willing to go? They really are the unsung heroes. These guys grew up in the Depression, fought in World War II and then risked everything again taking on the likes of Mickey Cohen, who got better press than they did."

During his account of the pursuit of "Gangster Squad," Lin raised another intriguing issue--he couldn't imagine this whole movie sale ever happening without seeing these stories in print. "It just wouldn't have happened on the Internet," he says. Why not? Keep reading:

Lin spends most of his day online, but he acknowledges that, when it came to seeing a story come alive, the Web was no match for the old-fashioned tactile feel of newsprint. "I wanted to touch and feel this story, to have the period photos right in front of me, seeing what these gangsters looked like, seeing the charts and graphs. What can I say--I could see the movie in the newspaper. It couldn't have happened on the Internet. It's just too cluttered with too many ads and too many distractions."

He says he loved the way the series unfolded, almost like an old serialized Charles Dickens story, with new revelations and new characters showing up each day. "It just kept building momentum, which is another reason why I felt there was a movie here--it felt like a real story," he says. "I know everyone says newspapers are dying, but they're the only place that takes the time and space to investigate something and tell an in-depth story. You'd never see something like this on a blog--no other media form would spend the time to do it."

As Variety reported today, Lin is already setting up meetings with talent. "My phone has been ringing off the hook," he told me. "This story really strikes a chord with a lot of

people. We've already heard from a lot of A-list writers and directors. It's a world that really seems made for the movies."

I can't say I'm an unbiased observer here. As an old newspaper guy, it's nice to hear that stories we tell still have resonance in the culture. And that doesn't just go for movie acquisitions.

Normally if you see a crowd of people outside our downtown headquarters, you expect the worst, but for the past few days, hundreds of people have been lining up to buy extra copies of our Wednesday paper, which has become something of a prized commemorative edition for a historic event--the election of the country's first African American president. According to recent news reports, newspapers all across the country have been selling like hotcakes, with our sister publication, the Chicago Tribune, saying it has printed 600,000 extra copies since Wednesday to satisfy demand. A cadre of in-house jokesters at the Trib, armed with a pretty good sense of humor, are even offering a mock online spoof of rejected possible front pages.

After surviving a steady drumbeat of bad news--layoffs, circulation drops, attacks from untold thousands of crazed conservatives convinced we were withholding a shocking video showing Barack Obama consorting with Palestinian terrorists--a lot of my colleagues at The Times had a brisk spring in their step today.

But was this really good news? Or just a one-day story? To many, it probably sounds like I'm just blowing smoke by talking up the good work done at my paper. Fair enough. We've got lots of systemic problems that we are a long way away from solving. But the huge boost in readership, both online and in print in the wake of the presidential election, signals that newspapers still have a potent brand for people eager to feel in the know. The dilemma, of course, is how to stimulate that need-to-read desire 365 days out of the year.

Why is there such a hunger for news when big events happen? Is it really about the news itself--or just our collective desire to be a part of something universal, which is also what drives people to see a summer blockbuster or watch the final episode of a TV hit. We all want to be a part of the conversation, whether it's about a tragedy, a conflict or a Big Event like a presidential election. But the world doesn't produce such high drama every day. But what makes the story of a new president or Lieberman's tale of cops battling gangsters resonate is drama and emotion. So to put it simply--newspapers need to hit people in the gut just as often as connect with their intellect or satisfy their curiosity.

Whether I'm sitting with a screenwriter or a studio boss or a fellow journalist, we're all talking about the same things--finding a good story to tell.