

OPINION

The movie star and the mobster

LAW 'n
HISTORY

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

Married eight times to seven men, Lana Turner epitomized the fast lane of show business. When she wasn't married, she was having affairs with many of Hollywood's leading men. The high life included partying, drugs, alcohol, abortions and an attempted suicide.

It also included murder.

Lana Turner defined the meaning of "movie star." The platinum-crowned, sophisticated debutante sported garments perfectly tailored, fingernails impeccably manicured, and make-up flawlessly applied. Her soft, angelic, graceful features pleasantly complemented her voluptuous figure and sensuous voice. Her many sparkling jewels bedazzled.

Behind the scenes where she worked, at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, or MGM for short, things were not

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always as smooth as they appeared.

Lana was notoriously promiscuous, having had romances with celebrities such as Clark Gable, Frank Sinatra, Mickey Rooney, Tyrone Power and a host of others. Her exploits caused the publicity-conscious studio heartache and cover-up.

Lana Turner was born Julia Jean Turner on Feb. 8, 1921, in a small mining town in Wallace, Idaho, to a young mother and a wayward father who ultimately was murdered.

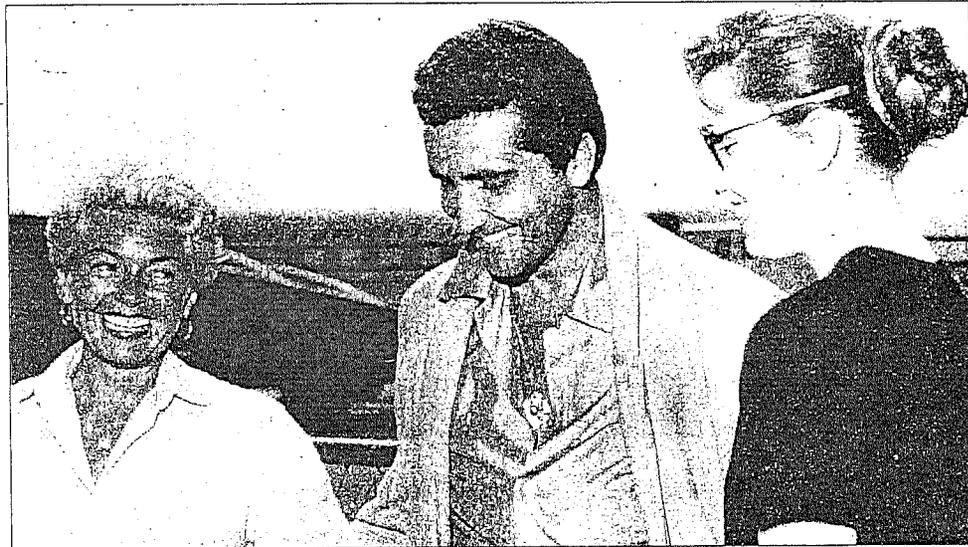
The widow and her daughter wound up in Los Angeles, where Lana, dreaming of becoming a dress designer, attended Hollywood High School.

A month into the school year, Lana decided to skip classes. Enjoying a soda at the Top Hat Café (not Schwab's Pharmacy as is the myth), she was noticed by an influential newspaperman who quickly became mesmerized by her looks. Beauty, innocence, youth, provocation. A chance encounter at a soda bar. A career was launched.

On Feb. 20, 1938, Lana signed with MGM, the No. 1 movie studio in America. Her sexy looks in the close-fitting tops she favored soon earned her the title "The Sweater Girl."

Since the company strove to exemplify a pure, all-American way of life, it went to great lengths to conceal Lana's excessive drinking, cigarette smoking and daily nightclub carousing.

Lana ran through husbands as quickly as she completed movies. She gave birth to her only child, Cheryl, in 1943 with husband No. 2, Joseph Stephen Crane. A few years later, she turned in her greatest movie performance, that of Cora Smith in "The Postman Al-



AP PHOTO

Actress Lana Turner (left) and underworld figure Johnny Stompanato are greeted at Los Angeles International Airport on March 19, 1958, by Turner's 14-year-old daughter, Cheryl (right).

ways Rings Twice," playing a sexy, unhappy wife trapped in a loveless marriage and life.

In 1957, she was nominated for an Academy Award for best actress in "Peyton Place," a film about small-town America and its many hypocrisies. She also, after divorcing husband No. 4, met an ardent, handsome, mysterious suitor, John Steele. Little did she know then that he was highly jealous with a violent temper, nor — not at first, anyway — that his real name was Johnny Stompanato and that he worked for feared Los Angeles mobster Mickey Cohen. Because MGM did not want a mobster sharing the limelight, the couple was forbidden from attending the Academy Awards.

The pair's many arguments escalated into physical violence. Afraid that Stompanato would carry out

his threats to have her mother and daughter killed, Lana refrained from notifying the authorities.

The tempestuous relationship incinerated on April 4 when Stompanato picked another meaningless fight, fueled by jealousy. Lana told him to leave and never return, which further infuriated the con.

Meanwhile, 14-year-old Cheryl, hearing the escalating ruckus and fearful for her mother's safety, took a knife from the kitchen and waited outside the bedroom door. Suddenly it flung open, Lana ordering Stompanato to leave. He walked out — and into the knife Cheryl was wielding.

There was a single wound. Stompanato collapsed to the ground, dead.

Cheryl explained to the police, who arrived after attorney Jerry Geisler, that she was trying to pro-

tect her mother. Some thought she was protecting Lana by taking the rap. Regardless, the jury agreed with the defense put forward. The verdict: justifiable homicide.

Epilogue

Gangster Mickey Cohen, disgusted with the criminal justice system, exclaimed that it was the first time in his life he had ever seen a dead man convicted of his own murder.

As for Lana, her next movies, thanks to the publicity, did well at the box office. She married three more times and starred in additional films and on television before retiring in 1983. She died a dozen years later.

Cheryl, meanwhile, met the love of her life, Jocelyn "Joshi" LeRoy, whom Lana treated as a beloved second daughter. **MLW**