



# Johnny Staccato



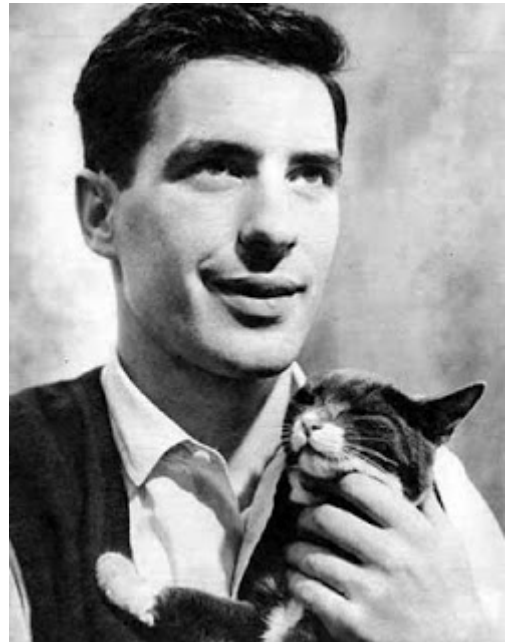
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Johnny Staccato és un pianista de jazz frustrat criat a Little Italy, bressol de la màfia italoamericana de Nova York. Es guanya la vida exercint de detectiu privat, però no té oficina. Rep els seus clients al Waldo's, un club de jazz del Greenwich Village, habitual centre de reunió de la Beat Generation i de la bohèmia novaaiorquesa de finals dels cinquanta i començaments dels seixanta. Sèrie realitzada el 1959-60, Johnny Staccato està protagonitzada pel llegendari John Cassavetes, director de cinc capítols.

Combina la bona música, violència i intrigues policiaques en un còctel únic, tractat sense embuts temàtiques tant agosarades (per a l'època) com el sexe, la religió, les drogues, el tràfic d'infants o l'anticomunisme. La sèrie va plegar després de 27 capítols, alguns judicats "massa controvertits" per la productora.

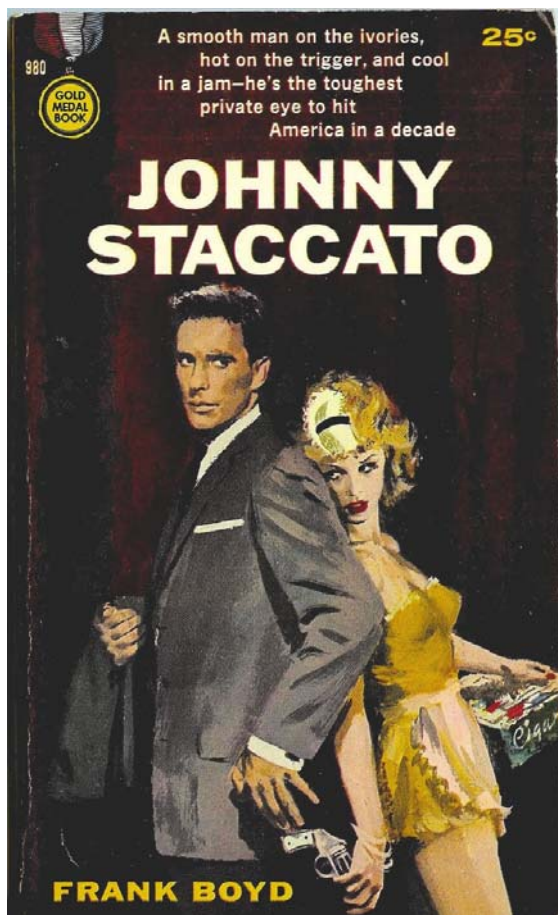
Ara, per primera vegada a Espanya es pot veure la única temporada completa d'aquesta sèrie d'alta qualitat tècnica, artística i narrativa, amb actors de la talla de John Cassavetes, Elisha Cook Jr., Cloris Leachman, Gena Rowlands, Elizabeth Montgomery, Michael Landon i Dean Stockwell, i dirigida per respectats directors com John Cassavetes, Boris Sagal, John Brahm, Robert Parrish o Joseph Pevney.



## John Cassavetes

John Cassavetes nace el 9 de diciembre de 1929 en Nueva York, en una familia de origen griego. A principio de los años cincuenta ingresa en la *Academy of Dramatic Arts* en Nueva York, fuertemente influida por el estilo del *Actor's Studio*. En marzo de 1954 se casa con una joven actriz, Gena Rowlands, que le acompañará toda su vida. Tras numerosos pequeños papeles en telefilmes y películas de segunda fila rueda en 1956 sus dos primeras películas como protagonista, *Crime in the Streets*, de Don Siegel y *Edge of the City*, de Martin Ritt. Ese mismo año funda un taller teatral, el *Variety Arts Studio*. A punto de convertirse en estrella, comienza en 1957 el rodaje de *Shadows*. Termina una primera versión de la película que se proyecta a finales del 58. Jonas Mekas y los independientes neoyorquinos lo reciben como uno de los suyos. En 1959 firma un contrato providencial con la NBC para la famosa serie *Johnny Staccato*, que le permite cubrir los veinte mil dólares de deudas de *Shadows*. Dirige cinco episodios de la serie. La Paramount lo contrata para rodar *Too Late Blues*, un fracaso comercial, y lo cede a *United Artists* para *Angeles sin paraíso*, pero Stanley Kramer, productor de la película, le aparta de la película en el montaje. Se cancelan sus contratos y abandona Hollywood. Tras aceptar el papel de un campeón de karts convertido en gangster en *The Killers*, emprende la gran aventura de *Faces*, rodada y montada en su propia casa. Para financiar el proyecto actúa en películas como *The Dirty Dozen* y, sobre todo, *Rosemary's Baby*. En el momento de su estreno, *Faces* es nominada a los oscars al mejor guión y tiene un relativo éxito comercial. Adquiere esa independencia tan deseada que le permite encadenar *Husbands*, *Minnie & Moskowitz* y *A Woman Under the Influence*, rodados con su mujer y sus amigos (Ben Gazzara, Peter Falk, Seymour Cassel). Por amistad incluso codirige con Peter Falk un episodio de *Columbo*. *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* marca el final de este fasto periodo. Es un fracaso comercial, mientras que *Opening Night* no llegará siquiera a estrenarse.

Una vez más Hollywood le soluciona la vida financiera, pues Columbia le propone rodar un guión que les había vendido. Será *Gloria*, en 1980. Paralelamente a su actividad cinematográfica, Cassavetes se entrega en ocasiones a la puesta en escena teatral. En 1981 produce tres obras a la vez, una de ellas se convertirá en *Love Streams*, su última película. Ya enfermo acepta sustituir a Andrew Bergman en *Big Trouble*, una comedia interpretada por Peter Falk. Entre sus películas como actor hay que citar también *Micky and Nicky*, de Elaine May, *Fury*, de Brian de Palma y *The Tempest*, de Paul Mazursky en 1982 (con Gena Rowlands). Rodeado de numerosos proyectos, John Cassavetes fallece el 3 de febrero de 1989.



**Antes estaban todos aquellos grandes investigadores de los viejos tiempos: Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, el detective de los detectives Johnny Staccato, apunta Sportello, ahora lo único que vemos son polis, la tele está saturada de mierdosas series de polis, que parecen tipos normales, que sólo quieren hacer su trabajo.**

*Vicio propio, Thomas Pynchon*

## 'Johnny Staccato' A Detective on the Downbeat

MICHAEL BARRETT

Johnny Staccato has been something of a holy grail among hepcats of TV crime, and now this one-season wonder from 1959-60 finds its way onto DVD looking sharp as a fresh fedora. Starring John Cassavetes when he was just setting out to conquer the world, it has all the hallmarks of the era of jazzy private eyes like Peter Gunn and Richard Diamond. Now that we can finally get a look at it, the best episodes are very good and the routine ones at least have a noirish atmosphere provided by New York location shooting and the hard-driving music of Elmer Bernstein.

Johnny Staccato is a handsome little bantam who plays piano in a jazz club called Waldo's on MacDougall Street in Greenwich Village. He's handy with the ladies, who are always stacked and glamorous. He also works as a private eye who packs a revolver. It's a good thing he's got the night job, because the people he helps are rarely paying clients. They're more likely to be friends or even strangers into whose business he's meddling.

Most of the early episodes are predictable plotwise as Johnny runs around chasing bad guys and finishing the job with a gunfight or two-fisted dust-up. Some stories have holes, like a guy held prisoner in a room with a phone. The prime attractions are the jazz atmosphere of Waldo's and the many linking shots of Johnny trudging around New York locales, riding the subway, dodging traffic. This is one of the show's chief parallels with *M Squad*, which was also made by Revue Studios and shares some of the creative personnel.

After several episodes, the show gets distinctly moodier and more downbeat. Stories become based on character in a way that dictates the flow of the plot rather than pushes the figures through it. Episodes dwell on character turns sometimes only tangential to the story, and this has the effect of strengthening the story.

One example of character is Episode 9, "Fly Baby, Fly!" scripted by Philip S. Goodman and directed by Robert B. Sinclair. The "special guest star" is Gena Rowlands, Cassavetes' wife; they were already working on his first directorial feature, *Shadows*. She shows up halfway through the story, after Johnny is acting as a courier on an airplane.

The audience knows he's carrying a bomb that's supposed to go off in-flight. This is the Alfred Hitchcock theory of suspense, and it works like gangbusters during the lengthy perorations from a comically boring passenger (Howard Freeman) and bits of business where they mix up their suitcases. By the way, this is an example of how the series often creates irony by telling the audience something that Johnny doesn't know, even though he's dropping bits of narration on our ears now and again. He may be telling it, but he doesn't know all of it.

Another example of character is the very next episode, "Tempted", in which an old friend (Elizabeth Montgomery, already bewitching) shows up with an expensive necklace that gets stolen. After a turn of events, Johnny has to make a decision between a fortune or doing the right thing.

The story takes a few surprising turns, and one of the reasons we can get surprised is that we're paying more attention to Johnny's quandary, which is more important than the plot. Sinclair directs again; the show's most frequent writer, Richard Carr, co-scripted with Alfred Hitchcock most frequent writer, Richard Carr, co-scripted with Alfred Hitchcock Presents veteran Francis Cockrell.

Cassavetes himself directs five episodes, which are marked by a tendency to highlight the actors in close-up while they spill their guts in dramatic arias. Maybe the show should be called *Belcanto*. His first episode as director is Episode 2, "Murder for Credit", which allows over-the-top bouts from a loudmouth star (Charles McGraw), a washed-up canary (Marilyn Clark) and an aspiring songwriter (Martin Landau). It's scripted by Carr and Laurence Mascott.

Then Cassavetes directs Episode 7, "Evil", which marks the point where the show starts to hit stride. Carr's almost too-rich script is about Brother Max (Alexander Scourby), a thundering preacher and con artist, and the sad, lonely people he fleeces, all of whom get their vivid moments in the spotlight. The show opens with a *Twilight Zone* moment as his glowering face looks into the camera and declaims "Evil attacks you through your television sets." He's not actually a televangelist but might as well be.

Veteran noir character Elisha Cook Jr. shows up as an alky who perpetually confesses his sins. There's a remarkable setpiece where an old lady (Elizabeth Patterson) surrounded by birds in cages declares that she's lived her whole life without doing anything important. Her implication is that even if she's been rooked, it doesn't matter as long as she believes she's done something positive by giving her money away. With considerations like this and scenes about the manipulation of the crowd, "Evil" goes beyond mundane questions of law and feels like a serious examination of its title quality.

Next Cassavetes helms Episode 13, "A Piece of Paradise" by Robert L. Jacks. This whodunit opens with the fetishized murder of a pair of shapely gams in glittery high heels. They're throttled, or rather their owner is. The rest of the show alternates between sweaty close-ups of an unpleasant bull-headed cop who's mighty keen to pin the murder on someone else, and sweaty close-ups of the pathetic little gimp who loved the dance-hall floozie. We eventually realize the ironic kinship between pursuer and pursued, but this isn't pushed heavily. It's another vehicle for actors without too much detection involved.

The star's next outing as director is Episode 19, "Night of Jeopardy", a highpoint of noir nightmarishness as Johnny finds himself in a desperate situation he doesn't understand, abandoned by the authorities and endangering his friends, while he navigates a night world of vivid, crazy characters. There's an uncredited stoolie named Lazarus ("a guy upstairs") in thick tiny specs. He emerges from the shadows in the middle of a loud party, whispers something unknown, and vanishes. There's an unusually violent and provocative African-American gentleman (Morris Buchanan), evidently high, who plays an ambiguous role on Johnny's journey. This is a tense, breathless, disorienting episode that spends a lot of time framing people in dark stairwells. It's scripted by Carr and producer Everett Chambers.

Finally, Cassavetes directs Episode 22, "Solomon", a remarkable outing written by Stanford Whitmore and possibly the show's finest half hour. Elisha Cook Jr. shows up again, in a role 180 degrees from the pathetic drunk of "Evil". He's the self-proclaimed "world's greatest defense attorney" representing accused murderess Cloris Leachman! She gets a hell of a reveal. It's a stark, expressionistic, almost abstract chamber drama with heightened performances, virtually a Brechtian examination of ideas one doesn't run across in detective shows.

Leachman's character makes a statement about her husband that will, to echo the odd supporting character here and there, totally flip the lids of any squares. The line, given a startling reading, is "We laughed. Peter was gay. He gave me a moment to recuperate." Just as the viewer assumes this must be an example of the older standard usage, since nobody talked about homosexuals this way on TV in 1960, the rest of the dialogue makes it clear that, in fact, we really are supposed to attach the later meaning as well. Were they bypassing the censors with hip code that a mainstream audience might not grasp? Wigsville, man.

John Brahm, a veteran director of '40s noir who moved into TV (including *M Squad*), helms "Collector's Item", scripted by Carr and Whitmore. This episode is unusual for having an all-black guest cast. Juano Hernandez, a remarkable and underused actor who only took non-stereotyped roles, plays an Ellingtonian pianist at Basin Street East, a real-life swank club. He's being blackmailed over a singer's death. Johnny gets to knock one guy out and shoot another, thus proving that he's prepared to treat the races equally. For the record, Brahm also directs "An Act of Terror", a nutty-ventriloquist tale by Carr and Bernard C. Schoenfeld (Oscar nominee for *Caged*).

After “Collector’s Item” and “Solomon”, Whitmore’s third and final script is “A Nice Little Town”, directed by actor Paul Henreid (Casablanca). It’s the bleakest, angriest episode, a suburban tale about the murder of an alleged communist. It ends with tragedy, speechifying, and a total lack of wrap-up. It’s the last of several episodes striking the minor motif of the legacy of the Korean War, of which Johnny is a veteran.

Another of these episodes, “The Return”, is either a late addition to stories of returning-vet syndrome (the decorated soldier has been in an asylum for five years), or an early glimpse of the psycho-vet story that would really flourish after Vietnam. Today the theme would be called post-traumatic stress. Johnny talks to the guy about what nobody else understands. It’s one of the episodes to give Johnny an implied doppelganger for the road not taken and the grace of God, etc. This strand reaches its culmination in “Double Feature”, where Cassavetes guests on his own show as a hired killer, leading to merry mix-ups (an idea also used in M Squad).

The series is decorated with cartoon beatniks. “Man, you are so frantic, you’re starting to panic. You know you’re starting to bug me?” says Shad (Frank London), a shady cat who shows up in several episodes peddling information. One beatnik adventure, “The Poet’s Touch”, has fun with a poetry recital presided over by a goateed figure who vaguely resembles Allen Ginsberg. That episode is directed by a distinguished Hollywood vet, Robert Parrish. It’s scripted by Robert Hector and Hollis Alpert, their only listing on IMDB. I don’t know who Hector could be, but Alpert was a well-known writer who started the National Society of Film Critics in his living room, so it’s interesting that he has one screen credit somewhere.

What the show lacks in credible beatniks, it makes up on the jazz references. Many guest characters are supposedly musicians on their way up or down, usually the latter. One is about a post-breakdown sax man who’s supposedly playing lousy but his crowd doesn’t notice. Another show has a down-and-out old-timer who dislikes new trends and opines “Oh, those bopsters. They flat their fifths. We drink ours.”

The band at Waldo’s has varying personnel. Credited early are trumpeter Pete Candoli (a later episode names his character Pete Millikan), second pianist Johnny Williams (yes, the Star Wars composer), guitarist Barney Kessel, drummer Shelly Manne, bassist Red Mitchell, and vibes player Red Norvo (though vibes aren’t common on the show). Some of these seem steady throughout the series but others appear as well and, alas, the show stops crediting the musicians after the first four episodes.

About halfway through the run, the title changes from Staccato, with an opening that shows him playing piano amid a design of keys that looks like something created by Saul Bass, to Johnny Staccato with an opening where he runs down expressionistic stairways and alleys, firing his gun into the camera and breaking a window. The producers must have decided to brand the thing aggressively as an action-packed crime show instead of a music show. This is a noticeably violent series, by the way, from an era when brutality was common on TV; within a few years, violence on the tube would be investigated by Congress.

Although many of the strongest episodes are from this latter half, strong and weak episodes are scattered throughout. This show demonstrates that there are four kinds of ending in TV drama. Some endings resolve things happily and some are downbeat, but that makes no difference in value. The difference lies in whether the ending, no matter its tone, feels natural or forced. It’s just as possible for a “serious” ending to be as contrived and phony as some happy endings. All four combinations are here: natural upbeat or downbeat, and contrived happy or downbeat. We’ve mentioned the best, so it’s fair to call attention to the other types.

An Angry Young Man” is an example of the contrived happy ending so familiar from TV shows, with its story of a misguided delinquent who’s a trial to his cuddly immigrant parents. Those seeking gritty realism will roll their eyeballs at this one. However, the series finale, about another pair of adorable foreigners, is marred by an equally contrived and far-fetched grimmess as nobody in Waldo’s seems concerned about a gunfight in the street except for one character who foolishly rushes toward death for our gratuitous ending. Indeed, the whole shoot-out reminds us of network TV’s bag for tired conventions in action shows. It’s a pity; that episode’s mixture of classical and jazz music had been going so well.

Johnny has several contacts on the police force. Seen most often is Sgt. Sullivan, called Sully (Garry Walberg), with a couple of episodes each assigned to Sgt. Lou Bacus (J. Pat O’Malley), Sgt. Sam Baker (Wally Brown), Sgt. Jack Thomas (Jimmy Joyce), and the unpleasant Sgt. Joe Gillen (Bert Freed).

The most regular character besides Waldo (Eduardo Ciannelli) is his bartender Dennis (Dennis Sallas), although he’s only credited once. Seen frequently is the buxom blonde hatcheck girl and sometime cigarette vendor, who’s called Hatcheck and never receives a credit. She has a certain arch look to her eye, as if mentally chewing gum. She’s not the same hatcheck girl as the first episode (who’s a little older) or the second (a brunette) but she appears the most often.

IMDB falsely claimed that the hatcheck in the first episode was an uncredited Monica Lewis. Lewis was a singer with quite a visible career; she wouldn’t do a walk-on as an extra. In fact, she guests in an episode called “The List of Death”, where she sings. It’s not the same woman. To prove this, Monica Lewis, now in her late 80s, has a website from which she’s selling her memoirs! I contacted her and she confirmed that she was only in the one episode and never played a hatcheck girl.

Meanwhile, there’s a website called Classic Television Archives (CTVA) put together by fans who comb through old TV listings, including the UK and Canada. Guides sometimes listed actors who weren’t billed on screen; the info came from the studio’s publicity. At one time they listed a Jane Burgess as Hatcheck for a later episode (“The Only Witness”), but they no longer list any cast for this episode. If I hadn’t chanced to copy that unofficial info a few years ago, I wouldn’t have it now. But is it true?

According to IMDB, Burgess had a run of TV shots in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s with character names like “Blonde”. More significantly, she had a small role as a cigarette girl named Sheila in a Twilight Zone called “The Prime Mover” with Buddy Ebsen. Popping that episode in the player, I declare that she looks for all the world like the same actress who plays Hatcheck in most of Staccato. I’m persuaded to my own satisfaction if I couldn’t stake my Pulitzer on it. This is one reason why it’s important for these old shows to be available. The standard reference books are still full of contradictions and omissions on shows that haven’t been seen in decades.

Among the guests, besides those already mentioned, are Michael Landon (as a pop singer), Shirley Knight (a pregnant wife), Susan Oliver (a songbird), Dean Stockwell (an uptight young nut), Mary Tyler Moore (a beauty contestant), and Jack Weston (a department store Santa in the Xmas episode where Johnny wishes the viewers a merry Christmas). Other familiar faces include Robert Harris, Ruta Lee, Nick Cravat, John Hoyt, Nobu McCarthy, Vladimir Sokoloff, Lloyd Corrigan, Mike Kellin, Harry Guardino, Len Lesser, Walter Burke, Marc Lawrence, Nita Talbot, Norman Fell, Geraldine Brooks, Frank DeKova, John Marley, Paul Stewart, Maxine Stuart, Sig Ruman, Arthur Batanides, Vito Scotti, Bert Remsen, George Voskovec, and Celia Lovsky.

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