

Blu-Ray Review: John Cassavetes Dazzles in ‘Machine Gun McCain’

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on August 31, 2010 - 8:51am

- [Blu-ray Review](#) [2]
- [Blue Underground](#) [3]
- [Ennio Morricone](#) [4]
- [Gena Rowlands](#) [5]
- [Giuliano Montaldo](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [John Cassavetes](#) [8]
- [Machine Gun McCain](#) [9]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [10]
- [Peter Falk](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

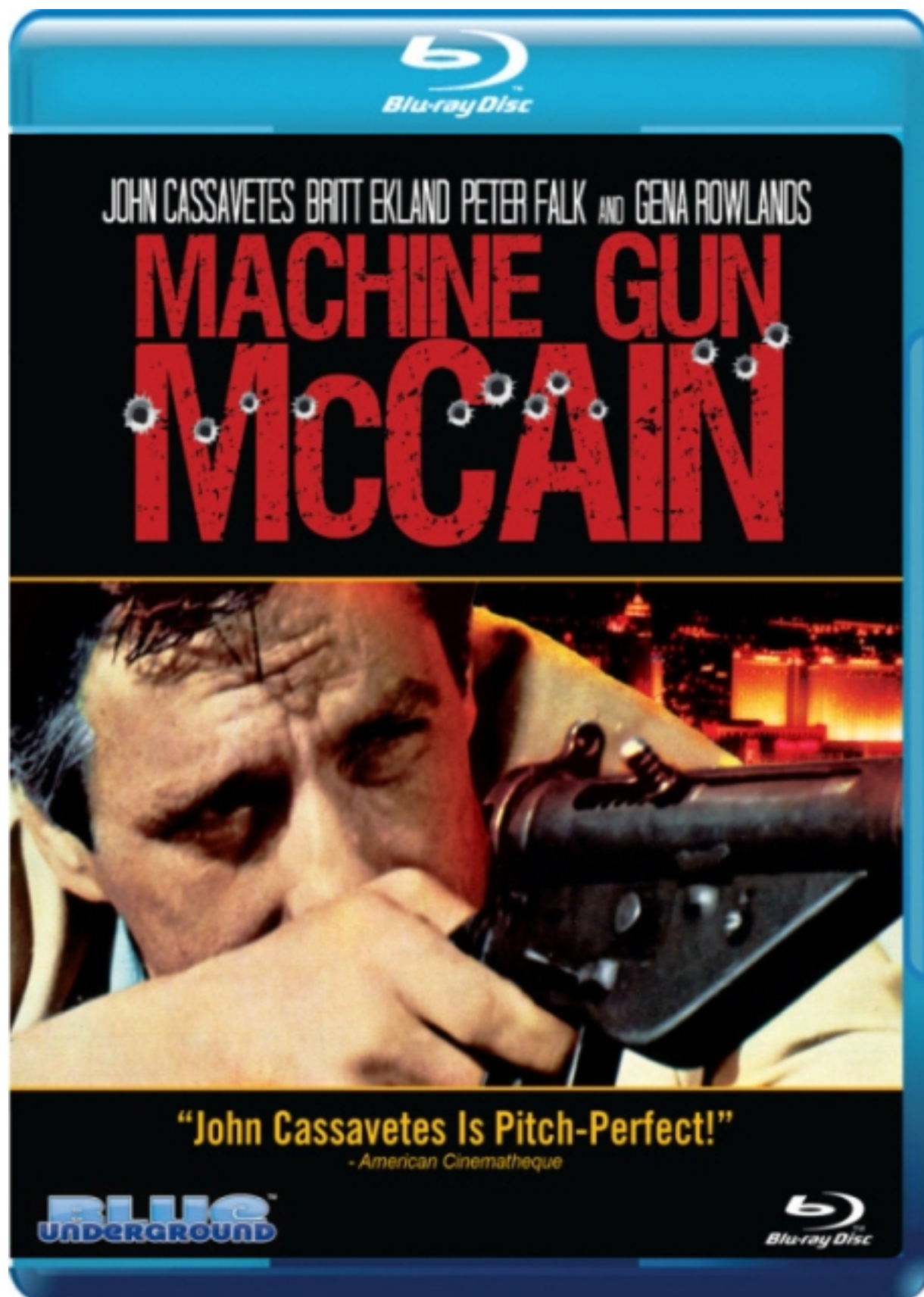
CHICAGO – It’s pretty hard for contemporary audiences to look at a title like “Machine Gun McCain,” and not immediately make a political joke out of it. The most obvious one would be, “What’s the sequel called, “Pistol-Packing Palin’?” Of course, this minor cult classic came out long before the 2008 election, and was playing in theaters at the same time John McCain was being held as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam.

The film stars legendary independent filmmaker John Cassavetes, five years after he memorably punched Ronald Reagan in “The Killers.” Cassavetes took acting roles primarily so he could fund his own projects, which were groundbreaking, audacious, uncompromising and fueled entirely by the passion and invention of their cast and crew. That same tireless passion is apparent in several of Cassavetes’s performances, even the ones he was supposedly phoning in. His work in “Machine Gun McCain” single-handedly elevates the material from standard B-movie fodder to a far more complex and engaging character study. The picture is certainly no masterpiece, but it’s a lost gem sure to fascinate cinephiles, especially fans of Cassavetes’s “The Killing of a Chinese Bookie,” which clearly took inspiration from key sequences in “McCain.”



Blu-Ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Preceding “The Godfather” by a mere three years, this 1969 crime drama aimed to portray the ruthless dynamics and expertly feigned civility of the mafia community. It opens with several suited mafia dons quietly voting on the fate of a family member, who is fatally struck by a car in the very next scene, immediately after dropping his kids at school. An awkwardly placed narrator explains that a rebellion is brewing between a mafia don and “the newly elected boss of West Coast operations,” Charlie Adamo (Peter Falk, with a temper to match Tommy DeVito’s), who has his eyes set on a new casino, despite the fact that the don has ordered it off-limits. A pawn in Charlie’s scheme is Hank McCain (Cassavetes), a gangster who just served 12 years on an armed robbery charge. On the ride back from prison, McCain deflects his adult son’s various attempts at conversation, finally lashing out at him by exclaiming, “Don’t call me dad. I only saw you twice in my life.” After startling his son into ashen-faced silence, McCain finally decides to let out a boisterous laugh and warm up to the kid. It’s a classic Cassavetes moment, since the actor/filmmaker always proved a master at capturing the uncomfortable awkwardness of human behavior. He often seemed to enjoy being the only person laughing in a room.



Machine Gun McCain was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Aug. 24, 2010.

Photo credit: Blue Underground

Director Giuliano Montaldo based the film off of Ovid Demaris's novel, "Candyleg," which follows a profoundly familiar trajectory, as its titular antihero scores a temporary triumph before quickly deteriorating into a hunted man. The film's strongest sequence centers on McCain's master plan to rob a casino, the details of which are revealed gradually through Franco Fraticelli's editing and Montaldo's superbly tense pacing. The final act is somewhat of a disappointment, since it plays like a checklist of every clichéd crime dénouement in the book. Even the film's Ennio Morricone score sounds like a cliché, complete with a hokey ballad guaranteed to be branded into viewers' heads. Yet Cassavetes becomes more riveting as the film progresses, particularly when he allows his repressed emotions to pierce through his coldly calculating eyes. He gradually displays affection toward his young, hopelessly naive wife (Britt Ekland), and his old flame (Gena Rowlands), who was once the Bonnie to McCain's Clyde. Both Rowlands and Falk are excellent in their respective roles, which they wouldn't have approached, had Cassavetes not been cast (he reportedly spent much of the production convincing Falk to star in his next film, "Husbands"). This entire project may have proved forgettable with a less imaginative actor in the lead role, but thankfully, McCain was played by nothing less than a true maverick.

"Machine Gun McCain" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), which restores the gritty images with a pristine clarity that is just remarkable, particularly during night scenes set in the gaudily lit Vegas. It's a bit of a letdown that the disc doesn't include an Italian audio track that would've allowed viewers to hear the Italian actors speak in their own voices. That leaves the viewer with an English dubbed track that is a constant distraction whenever Italian actors are onscreen (the dubbed voice for McCain's son is laughably earnest). Only the disc's Italian trailer offers a clue to what that alternate version would've sounded like, complete with a ridiculously dubbed Cassavetes. The Italian version ran an additional 22 minutes, and was given the decidedly overused title, "The Untouchables."

Though the disc includes only one real extra, it's a darn good one. Director Montaldo sits down for a brand new, thoroughly charming 23-minute interview, in which he discusses how the famed filmmaker Carlo Lizzani plucked him out of obscurity while he was still a student in Genoa, and gave him a role in 1951's "Attention! Bandit!", opposite Gina Lollobrigida. "McCain" was Montaldo's second American film, made on the heels of 1967's "Grand Slam," which the filmmaker admits was basically "Rififi" set in a Rio carnival." With "McCain," Montaldo wanted to portray the mafia as a financial dynasty integrated into society, mirroring the cruelty of capitalism. He found Cassavetes initially difficult to work with, and couldn't understand why the actor kept pestering him about what lens size he was using (not taking into account that such a detail has a considerable impact on the actor's performance). Yet they eventually became good collaborators, with

Cassavetes reverting to the role of producer in order to help Montaldo find methods to shoot the film on a shoestring budget. While "Bullitt" was shooting its classic car chase in the same area over a two week period, Montaldo and Cassavetes shot their film's central chase sequence in a mere couple of days, armed with "two Hertz cars and no permits." Yet when Cassavetes offered Montaldo a role in his next film, the homesick Italian respectfully refused, saying, "You're too mean!"

'Machine Gun McCain' is released by Blue Underground and stars John Cassavetes, Britt Ekland, Peter Falk, Gabriele Ferzetti, Pierluigi Apra, Luigi Pistilli, Margherita Guzzinati, Florinda Bolkan, Tony Kendall, Salvo Randone and Gena Rowlands. It was written by Giuliano Montaldo and Mino Roli and directed by Giuliano Montaldo. It was released on Aug. 24th, 2010. It is not rated.



[13]

By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.commatt@hollywoodchicago.com [13]**Source URL (retrieved on Mar 28 2024 - 7:25pm):**<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/11667/blu-ray-review-john-cassavetes-dazzles-in-machine-gun-mccain>**Links:**

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/mattmovieman>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/blu-ray-review>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/blue-underground>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/ennio-morricone>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/gena-rowlands>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/giuliano-montaldo>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/john-cassavetes>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/machine-gun-mccain>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/matt-fagerholm>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/peter-falk>
- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/dvd-theater-tv-news>
- [13] <mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com>
- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#MATT>