

## Interview: Film Critic Leonard Maltin on State of the Art

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CHICAGO – If a “Mount Rushmore” of American film critics was ever considered, one of the men that would be a strong candidate is Leonard Maltin. An influential film essayist, critic and historian since the 1960s, Maltin also wrote the go-to directory for film buffs prior to the internet, “Leonard Maltin’s Movie Guide.”

Maltin’s love of film began in his childhood in Teaneck, New Jersey. He turned that love into self publication at the age of 15, distributing “Film Fan Monthly,” a fanzine dedicated to films from the golden age of Hollywood. This publication led to the next phase in his life, which he relates in a story below. The “Leonard Maltin Movie Guide” became the bible for film lovers – again before the internet – solving many a movie dispute and leading to the phrase “let’s look it up in Maltin.”



Leonard Maltin Poses with Mitzi Gaynor, Before They Introduced ‘South Pacific’ for TCM in Chicago, March 19th  
*Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com*

An accomplished author, he had written 12 books besides his famous movie guide, including a biography of Carole Lombard, “Of Mice and Magic: A History of the American Animated Cartoons” and “Leonard Maltin’s Movie Crazy.” He broadcasts as a reviewer on “Entertainment Tonight,” the Starz network and the ReelzChannel. His reach has permeated pop culture, with references and appearances on “South Park,” “Mystery Science Theater 3000,” and “The Simpsons.” He is also listed in the Guinness Book of Records for the shortest film review of all time, a one word riposte to the 1948 film “Isn’t it Romantic?” The review...“No.”

HollywoodChicago interviewed Leonard Maltin as part of the Turner Class Movies “Road to Hollywood,” which included 1950s actress Mitzi Gaynor and he introducing “South Pacific” at the Music Box Theatre in Chicago. The Road to Hollywood is part of the celebration leading up to the TCM Classic Film Festival, taking place in Hollywood April 25-28th.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** From your early years as just a film lover, which genre proved to be the most durable for you over the years as you became a critic, and how were you ultimately able to honor it in your writings?

**Leonard Maltin:** Well, I always loved comedy, because I think as a kid what first turned me on to movie history was seeing Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin and the silent film comedians, because they showed it a lot on television in those days. That is what won my heart. That plus Disney, all things Disney, seeing Walt Disney host his weekly television show. Those were the two categories that have touched me the most and stayed with me all these years. I written extensively on both those topics, and have never lost my love for them.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Before the internet, your movie guide was one of the easiest quick references for stopping many an argument about certain films. Where did the idea for it come about when it began in 1969, did it stem from a movie disagreement?

**Maltin:** No, it did not. I was in my Senior Year at Teaneck High School in Teaneck, New Jersey. I had been publishing my fanzine, 'Film Fan Monthly,' since I was 15 years old. An English teacher in my school liked what I was doing, and she told me she had a friend who was an editor at Signet Books in New York, and she thought we'd hit it off. She arranged for me to call him and meet him.

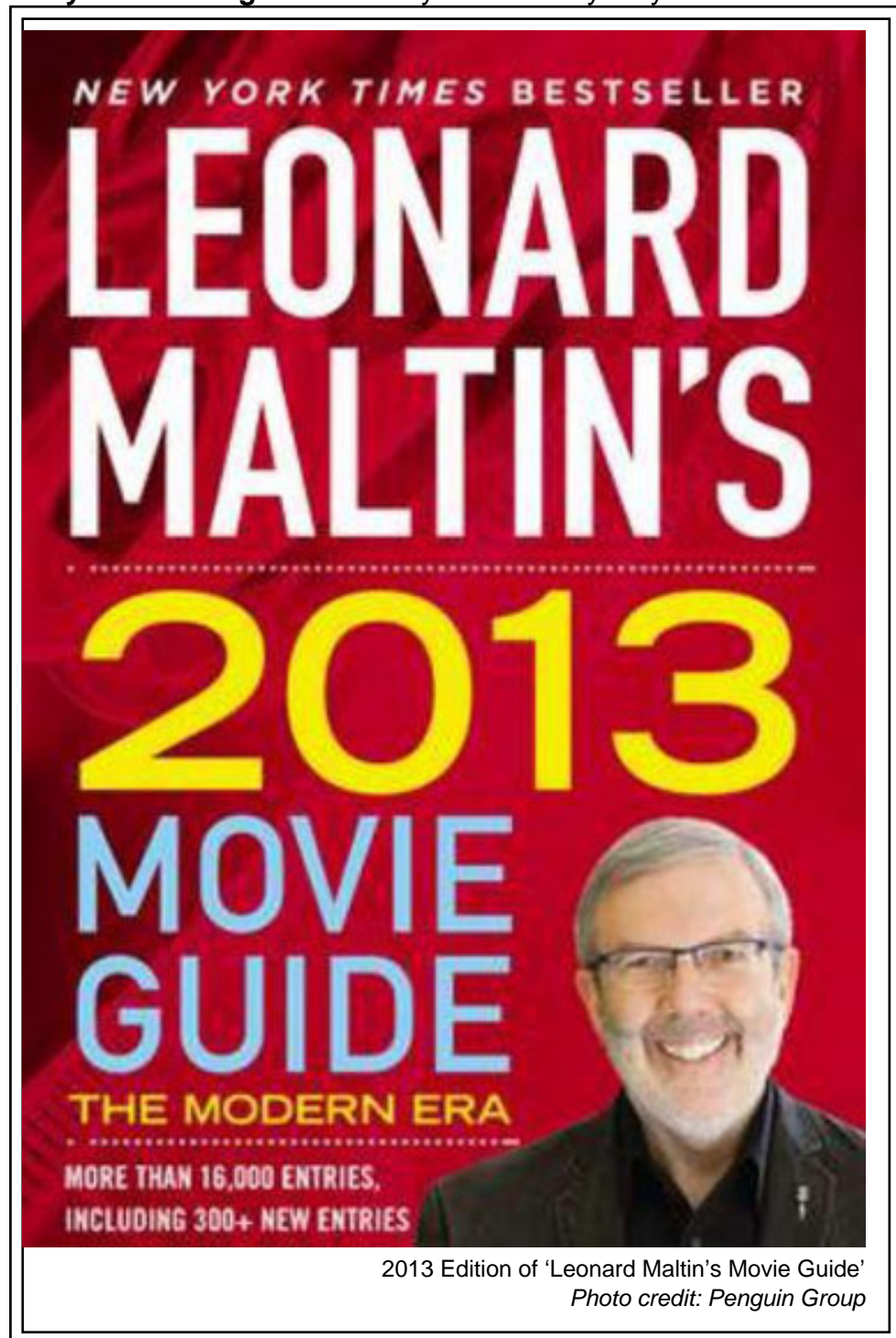
I made an appointment, and brought a stack of the magazines I'd published, not knowing that he'd already seen them. So when we met, here I am 17 years old, and he asked me what I had brought him. When I told him it was the magazine I published for movies, he said, 'I love your magazine.'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** That must have been surprising.

**Maltin:** It sure was. I said 'You know it?' and he said 'Sure.' Then he asked me if I knew the book 'Movies on TV' by Steven Scheuer. I said I did, because at the time it was the only guide, and I used it everyday. The Signet editor then asked me what I thought of it, and I told him it was fine as far as it goes. And then he asked the significant question, 'what would you do differently?'

I knew the Scheuer book inside and out, so I started with putting more cast names, he only listed a couple. I'd put the director's name, whether it was color or black-and-white and the running time. In those days, TV stations used to cut films to smithereens. I rattled off all these things, because I really used this book all the time. And then the editor said, 'How would you like to do it?'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** And you were only 17 years old.



**Maltin:** My first reaction was, 'Do what?' He told me he had been looking for someone to do a rival book. After wondering what was going on, I said, 'Yeah, I guess so?' He hired me that day. One month later, I graduated high school.

Before I left the meeting he asked me what I was doing in the fall. I told him I was accepted into New York University. He then said why are you going to college, I just hired you to write a book. [laughs] Because I'm suppose to go to college, my mother wants me to? That's how it came about.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since the Guide was so comprehensive and massive, was there any typos or errors that lasted through too many



years, and who finally caught it?

**Maltin:** I'm still astonished that I will get an email, and it used to be snail mail, that will point out an error that had been sitting in the book for 35 years. It does happen. The great satisfaction of revising the book, starting from day one, was fixing the mistakes, making the book better and more accurate. It's not 1865, it's 1885, and it's not the brother, it's the brother-in-law. Year by year, we fixed those things, but still I get emails pointing out things that have been there forever, and was never noticed before.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Finally, so many more film critics exist now because of the internet. Do you think that maybe this is the last generation where pure film criticism will get any attention, or do you think the future will continue to allow for notable film analysis?

**Maltin:** Well, I hope that anything of quality, whether it's a movie, stage musical production or good piece of film writing will have a place in our crumbling society. The internet has empowered everyone – everyone's a critic, a musician, a filmmaker – and that's fine on one level. But why should I listen to your music or watch your film? Is it any good? Does it show any signs of talent? It's the same with writing, do you have something to say? Whatever media it's in, quality will still make it's way to the top. That's my optimistic answer.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I'm glad you're optimistic.

**Maltin:** I didn't say I was, I said that's my optimistic answer. [laughs]

*The Turner Class Movie "Road to Hollywood" continues in Ann Arbor, San Francisco and Albuquerque. [Click here](#) [14] for details. The TCM Classic Film Festival will take place in Hollywood, April 25-28th. [Click here](#) [15] for more information.*



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