



[Home](#) > [Search Results](#) > [More Search Results](#) > [The Newton Boys](#)

http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print_review&reviewid=VE1117467277&categoryid=31

To print this page, select "PRINT" from the File Menu of your browser.

Posted: Fri., Mar. 13, 1998

The Newton Boys

(Period crime drama -- Color)

A 20th Century Fox presentation of a Detour Films production. Produced by Anne Walker-McBay. Executive producer, John Sloss. Co-producer, Clark Lee Walker. Directed by Richard Linklater. Screenplay, Linklater, Claude Stanush, Clark Lee Walker, based on Stanush's book.

Willis Newton - Matthew McConaughey
Joe Newton - Skeet Ulrich
Jess Newton - Ethan Hawke
Doc Newton - Vincent D'Onofrio
Louise Brown - Julianna Margulies
Brentwood Glasscock - Dwight Yoakam
Slim - Charles Gunning
Lewis - Becket Gremmels
Ma Newton - Gail Cronauer
Avis Glasscock - Chloe Webb

By [EMANUEL LEVY](#)

A radical departure from the director's previous youth-angst movies, Richard Linklater's "The Newton Boys" is a chronicle of four real-life siblings who entered collective mythology as among the most famous bank robbers in American history. An extremely handsome production that meticulously evokes the 1920s, and a likable male-dominated cast, headed by Matthew McConaughey in his best screen performance to date, only partially compensate for a story that's too diffuse and lacks a discernible point of view that would make it dramatically engaging. Fox should expect modest returns domestically (and

weaker ones overseas) for a period film that doesn't have the erotic appeal of such classic crime sagas as "Bonnie and Clyde," nor the pull of capers like "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" or "The Sting."

A large-scale production that boasts the helmer's biggest budget to date, pic represents a welcome departure for Texas indie Linklater, arguably the most eloquent cinematic spokesperson of Gen X in such films as "Slacker," "Dazed and Confused" and "Before Sunrise." Contrasted with the director's disappointingly stagy "subUrbia," which was entirely, claustrophobically set in a parking lot, "The Newton Boys" is an outdoor saga that combines elements of both the Western and gangster genres in telling a quintessential American crime story.

Spanning five years, 1919-24, script by Linklater, Claude Stanush and Clark Lee Walker immediately establishes the context of a post-WWI rural society on the verge of dramatic change, catapulted by forces of technology, urbanization and industrialization. At the outset, the Newtons are poor, struggling farmers with a chip on their shoulders. It's also implied that Willis (McConaughey), the eldest and dominant brother, was falsely convicted and served some time in prison.

Realizing that there is no future in the bleak cotton fields, Willis is determined to improve the family lot by becoming a "businessman," with one minor alteration: a businessman whose line of work is bank robbing. The rationale he provides to his mom (Gail Cronauer) and brothers is rather simple: Robbing banks is not a major crime, because the banks are insured, and, after all, insurance companies are society's biggest crooks. At first, there's some objection on moral grounds from the youngest brother, Joe (Skeet Ulrich), but after a while, he too becomes convinced that there's not much wrong in "little thieves stealing from the big thieves."

The film is effective in portraying the Newtons as Texas gentlemen who just happened to become wild outlaws. Throughout, the brothers intend just to make enough money to launch more legit endeavors, such as oil, and adhere to a code of ethics composed of three basic rules: They don't kill anybody, they don't steal from women and children and they don't rat.

Divided into chronological chapters, assisted with title cards that signal the precise whereabouts of the gang, the yarn goes on to record one robbery after another. Despite fastidious attention to detail -- there's a gripping demonstration of how easy it was to rob banks in those days -- first half is too amorphous and not particularly involving. Supplementing the heists are the boys' amorous affairs, particularly the one between Willis and Louise (Julianna Margulies), a young, widowed mother who works at a cigar stand and later joins Willis in his escapades.

Pic gains considerable momentum once it reaches 1924 and the execution of the greatest train robbery in American history, a \$3 million mail-train heist outside Chicago. All goes well, until Joe accidentally shoots his brother Doc (Vincent D'Onofrio), the last to join the gang upon release from prison. Placing family loyalty above all other concerns, the siblings take the risk of arranging for Doc to be treated by a physician.

Last reel is particularly poignant in its enactment of the court trial in which the Newtons and their criminal partners were convicted and sent to prison. These sequences present thematic elements that will become prominent in American culture of future decades: corrupt policemen and law officers, obsession of the news media with celeb criminals, an inherently faulty justice system that discriminates against culprits in an arbitrary manner.

Though working with an appealing cast, Linklater seldom succeeds in making the brothers sympathetic figures. The richly detailed story has a good sense of time and place, but no interesting characters at the center. To be fair, the siblings are distinguishable, but some of them, particularly Jess (Ethan Hawke) and Doc, have no clear roles to play. Same applies to the few female characters, including Louise and Avis (Chloe Webb), the pragmatic wife of the Newtons' crime accomplice.

After a couple of disappointing performances ("Contact," "Amistad"), McConaughey finally gets a role that integrates his handsome looks, authentic Texan dialect and easygoing style. Of the other brothers, Ulrich brings commanding intensity to the role of the young, initially naive Joe. Hawke has a wonderful scene in court in which he charms the judges, but the always reliable D'Onofrio is totally wasted.

Under these circumstances, viewers can still marvel at the beautifully mounted production, with strong contributions from lenser Peter James, editor Sandra Adair and especially production designer Catherine Hardwicke and costumer Shelley Komarov.

Pic comes to an unexpectedly exciting crescendo during the end credits, when Linklater inserts documentary footage of the real-life siblings. A 1980 "Tonight Show," in which Johnny Carson talked to the still-feisty Willis, and a recorded interview with the aging but lucid Joe suggest what a great film "The Newton Boys" could have been if it were based on stronger and more nuanced characterization.

Camera (Deluxe color, Panavision widescreen), Peter James; editor, Sandra Adair; music, Bad Livers; original score, Edward D. Barnes; production design, Catherine

Hardwicke; art direction, Andrea Dopaso, John Frick; set decoration, Jeanette Scott; costume design, Shelley Komarov; sound (Dolby), John Pritchett; visual effects produced by Matte World; digital effects, Title/Mirage; associate producer, Keith Fletcher; assistant director, Gregory Jacobs; casting, Don Phillips. Reviewed at 20th Century Fox Studios, L.A., March 11, 1998. MPAA Rating: PG-13. Running time: 122 min.

Read the full article at:

<http://www.variety.com/story.asp?l=story&r=VE1117467277&c=31>

Like this article? Variety.com has over 100,000 articles, 35,000 reviews and 10,000 pages of charts. Subscribe today!

<http://www.variety.com/emailfriend>

or call (866) MY-VARIETY.

Can't commit? Sign up for a free 14-day trial!

<http://www.variety.com/emailfriend>

© 2004 Reed Business Information © 2004 Variety, Inc.
Use of this Website is subject to [Terms of Use](#). [Privacy Policy](#)