Design's good, but 'Dead Men' wears thin

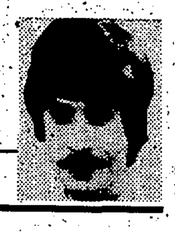
AS DETECTIVE RIGBY, Steve Martin, left, and Field Marshall VonKluck (Carl Reiner) argue over who gets to reveal the plot of their new film, "Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid."

"DEAD MEN DON'T WEAR PLAID" — Cast: Steve Martin, Rachel Ward, Reni Santoni, Carl Reiner, Alan Ladd, Humphrey Bogart, Ray Milland, Lana Turner, James Cagney, Joan Crawford, Jeff Corey, William Conrad, Brian Donlevy, Edmond O'Brien, Ava Gardner, Burt Lancaster, Cary Grant, Ingrid Bergman, Kirk Douglas, Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck, Veronica Lake, Bette Davis, Edward Arnold and Vincent Price. Written by Carl Reiner, Steve Martin and George Gipe. Produced by David V. Picker and William E. McEuen. Directed by Carl Reiner. A Universal Pictures release. Rated PG. ★★½

Two years ago at a lunch, Carl Reiner, Steve Martin and George Gipe were banging around an idea for a movie when an intellectual thunderbolt hit them. "Why not make a whole movie using old film clips?"

So, the three whipped together a movie script using segments from *film noir* classics. Martin's starring role as a hard-boiled detective was written around the dialogue and actions of the clips.

Martin talking to Humphrey Bogart, being shot at by Alan Ladd, hugged by



Dann Gire

Film critic

Fred MacMurray and meeting up with other stars of yesteryear is an idea worthy of a solid half hour of fun and surprises — but as a 90-minute feature-length motion picture, it's a thin and drawn-out undertaking.

MARTIN PLAYS private eye Rigby Reardon, a tough guy who lives by the rigid rules of his profession, most of which have been written down by his mentor, another gumshoe named Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart), who drops in occasionally to get yelled at for not wearing a tie.

Then that one fateful day in his office, a knock at the door changes his life. The beautiful daughter of a scientist and famed cheesemaker is at the door and faints in Reardon's arms.

He's mesmerized by her (Rachel Ward, whose velvet voice and luscious lips starred opposite Burt Reynolds in "Sharky's Machine"), but isn't sure if she's real or only a dream.

"There's only one way to find out," he reasons. The woman wakes up aghast at what he's doing to her. He nonchalantly explains that when she fainted, her breasts "shifted all out of whack."

The plot, which has more holes than a piece of Ward's father's Swiss cheese, concerns a "simple" investigation that unravels a larger mystery involving an international conspiracy. (Are there any other kinds of investigations?)

THE FUN OF "Dead Men" isn't supposed to be the denouement itself, but traveling to it as Reardon pretends to be James Cagney's mother and Fred MacMurray's lover and fights off a succession of famous girlfriends.

Some of the cross-cutting of old and new film segments ("Dead Men" was filmed in black and white) works extremely well. (A bit gleaned from "This Gun for Hire" with Alan provides some chuckles as does Kirk Douglas from "I Walk Alone" ordering his cronies to rough up the detective.) Some trumped-up interactions are dull and wasted, particularly when they involve only Martin and Joan Crawford or another actress speaking on the telephone.

Martin's own peculiar brand of jolting non sequitur humor suffers from the same inconsistency. We wonder where Martin comes up with some of his lines and bits, then we're not quite sure we believe what we've just seen or heard.

The few clever and funny segments are sandwiched between lots of dull and lackluster segments obviously thrown in to stretch the movie.

"Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid" is too much of an adequate thing.

Satanic records or balderdash: Just what the devil's going on?

by Yardena Arar

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Is the Led Zeppelin classic "Stairway to Heaven" really a coded invitation to hell? Did the rock band Styx secretly pay homage to the devil in a song which criticizes drug use?

Are a group of rock musicians in league with Satan trying to corrupt the minds of youth through messages that can only be deciphered when their records are played backward?

California Assemblyman Phil Wyman isn't sure, but he is convinced "backward masking" — the recording of messages backward onto records and tapes — exists.

And Wyman, a Republican, has proposed a state law that would require any records containing messages discernable when played backward to be labeled accordingly.

"I DON'T CARE, as a legislator, what the message is," Wyman said. "What the bill would require is a warning, and this is what (it) would say: 'Warning: This record contains backward masking which may be perceptible at a subliminal level when the record is played forward.' "

Wyman's bill is dead for the current assembly session, but he expects backward masking to be explored more thoroughly at hearings next fall that will focus on the issue of subliminal advertising.

Meanwhile, hundreds of people have been fiddling with their stereo equipment to try to duplicate Wyman's much-publicized presentation at an Assembly Consumer Protection and Toxic Materials Committee hearing in Sacramento last month.

When Styx's "Snowblind" — a cut from the group's best-selling "Paradise Theater" album — was played backward, Wyman said he heard the words "O Satan move in our voices." On ELO's "El Dorado," the alleged backward message is "Christ, you're the nasty one, you're inferno."

BUT NO.1 IN the top 10 of backward masking is the 1971 Led Zeppelin tune "Stairway to Heaven," a lengthy and melodic heavy metal opus that has long been a staple of FM rock radio stations. Wyman said it contains nine examples of backward masking, including: "Here's to my sweet Satan," which is repeated twice, and "I sing because I live with Satan."

Modern multitrack recording equipment allows an artist to record a sound in one direction and then splice it in backward. The Beatles pioneered that kind of sound montage experimentation on records like the White Album. Music buffs have long traded tales about backward messages of a noncontroversial nature on records by groups such as Pink Floyd and ELO.

The music industry's response to suggestions about Satanic messages has ranged from laughter and incredulity to outrage.

"Our turntables only play in one direction," Led Zeppelin's record company, Swangsong, said in a statement read to callers with questions about backward masking.

HOWARD MYLETT, AUTHOR of two books on the group, said in a telephone interview from Sussex, England, that Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page, who has a great interest in the occult, did have a saying by the late occultist Aleister Crowley etched on the vinyl of one of the band's albums.

But when asked about "Stairway to Heaven," Mylett said, "I've never heard a thing about it. I've honestly tried to hear it (the backward masks) and I've not yet been able to hear a thing."

At Jet Records, ELO's label, Larry Ross dismissed the allegations as unfounded, and James Young of Styx said: "The idea is rubbish."

Wyman's star witness at the hearing, self-described "neuroscientific researcher" William Yarroll of Aurora, Colo., says he believes the backward messages are deciphered by the brain's right or "creative" hemisphere. He said this same thought process makes it easier to make a good handwritten copy of a mirror image of a drawing or signature, as opposed to the original.

"PROFESSIONAL FORGERS HAVE known this since 1950," Yarroll says.

But Dr. Donald Lewis, chairman of the University of Southern California's psychology department, says there is no research to support Yarroll's claim.

"I think it's sheer balderdash," Lewis said. He said that since the 1950s, when subliminal advertising was popularized in books like Vance Packard's "The Hidden Persuaders," there have been several studies showing "if there's any effect at all, it's minimal."

Wyman said the idea for his bill came from a constituent who saw a UHF television show on the subject by the Orange County-based Trinity Broadcasting Network.

However, Paul Crouch Jr., who made the televised presentation, says he now has some doubts.

"I've learned since then that Led Zeppelin wrote the words to 'Stairway to Heaven' in half an hour, and if that's true I don't see how they could have put those messages in to make sense forward and backward," he said. "I think there needs to be more research done on it."

A number of Christian media figures who have criticized rock music's values find concern over backward masking misplaced.

"It may be a Satanic plot, but it's a plot to divert people's minds from the real danger, which is obvious if you play the records forward," said John Styll, publisher of Contemporary Christian Music Magazine.

Wyman and Yarroll emphasize that they are "not out to get rock stars," or even to stop them from putting backward masks on records.

"We're not saying they can't do it, only that they need give notice to the public if they choose to do so," Wyman said. "I compare it to the warning on a cigarette package: 'This may be harmful to your health.' "

'Polo' clothes make it to museum

NEW YORK — Movie costumes have landed in museums, but seldom have costumes from TV. Not so the creations from the Italian-made miniseries "Marco Polo," which recently debuted on NBC-TV. Thirty of the costumes have already been exhibited at the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.

Designer Enrico Sabbatini spent three years creating 4,000 costumes for the series. The $2 million cost included a trip to China for silks, cottons, cashmeres and furs. Just one gold-embroidered robe cost $7,000 to make.

Costumes for Italian characters include papal and Venetian ceremonial robes and floral-woven ladies' gowns. The Oriental clothes show the Mongolian influence of the court of Kubla Khan, with jade belts and exotic headgear.

Orientalism has already become an ethnic fashion influence, and these costumes should give it another boost.

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WRONG IS RIGHT (R) 2:10, 4:40, 7:10, 9:40
THE SWORD AND THE SORCERER (R) 2:00, 4:00, 6:00, 8:00, 10:00
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DEAD MEN DON'T WEAR PLAID (PG) 2:00, 4:00, 6:00, 8:00, 10:00
PORKY'S (R) 2:15, 4:15, 6:15, 8:15, 10:15
Hawthorn 1 2 3 4 Vernon Hills 367-6250
WRONG IS RIGHT (R) 6:00
FIGHTING BACK (R) 6:00 & 8:00
STRIPES (No rating) 8:15
PORKY'S (R) 6:15, 8:15
DEAD MEN DON'T WEAR PLAID (PG) 6:00, 8:00
Spring Hill 1 2 3 4 Rt. 31 & Huntley Rd., Carpentersville 426-4151
FIGHTING BACK (R) 6:00, 8:00
PORKY'S (R) 6:15, 8:15
PARASITE IN 3-D (PG) 6:15, 8:15
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