MK2 FILMS PRESENTS

Il Cinema Ritrovato

SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER

A FILM BY

FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT

1960 – FRANCE – FRENCH – 80’ – 4K

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CHARLES AZNAVOUR

SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER

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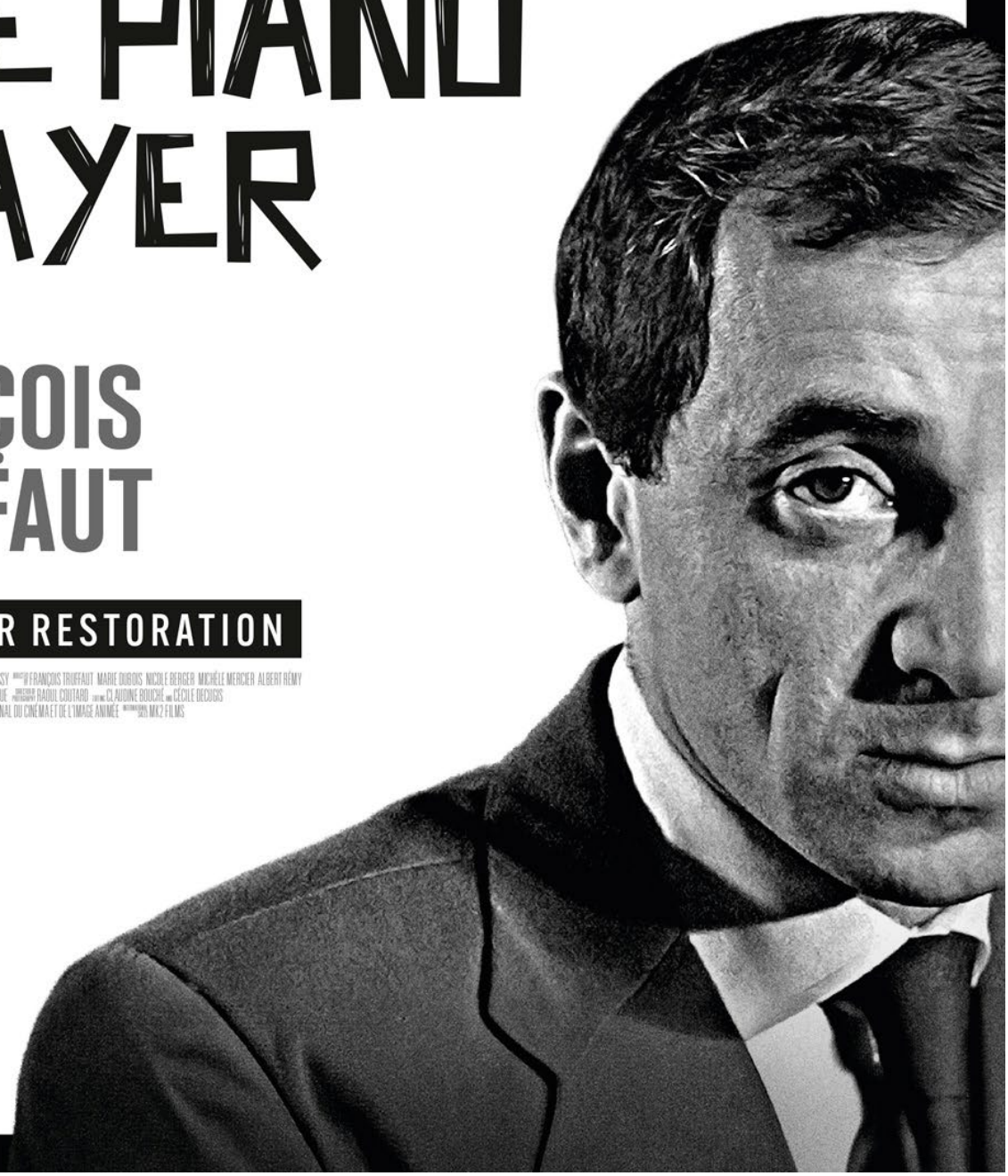
NEW 4K HDR RESTORATION



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SYNOPSIS

Based on the novel by David Goodis, *Down There* Charlie Kohler, the pianist at Plyne's Bistro, is a sad, absent-minded, secretive man. His strange brothers are in trouble with some crooks. One evening, one of them is being chased and seeks refuge with Charlie in the bistro. Léna the waitress is in love with Charlie and knows about his past. Charlie – whose real name is Edouard Saroyan – was a great pianist until his wife Thérésa committed suicide. Léna wants to help Charlie to become Edouard once more. Together they hand in their notice to Plyne, but he starts a fight, and Charlie kills him. The couple goes on the run.

This new 4K restoration by Hiventy Transperfect was made possible with support from CNC.

FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT'S "SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER": AMERICA AT HIS HEELS

François Truffaut's second feature is a riotous ode to American mythology. *Shoot the Piano Player* plays with the nightmarish framework of film noir. It has the boldness and creativity found in early works. In 2024, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of François Truffaut's death, mk2 Films is offering fans from around the world a chance of rediscovering this gem, released in 1960.

'I really want to film paroxysm, which is contradictory to my realistic nature', explained François Truffaut in 1962 in his famous series of interviews with Alfred Hitchcock. The director's narrative brilliance, focusing on inner impulses, has often overshadowed his stylistic genius. One has to delve into the dense, highly visual material of his film noirs, to appreciate the extent of it. It is especially apparent in *Shoot the Piano Player*, his 1960 adaptation of American pulp novel *Down There* by David Goodies. A year after the overwhelming success of his first feature, *The 400 Blows*, which won Best Director at Cannes, and after *Breathless*, for which he co-wrote the screenplay with Jean-Luc Godard and Claude Chabrol, the 28-year-old former editor of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, took a step in a different direction. He was expected to embrace the emerging naturalism of the New Wave. Instead, he opted for genre films. He did this to pay tribute to American cinema which he so admired (he watched the entire Golden Age of Hollywood at the Cinémathèque library in the 40s), and out of a love for risk (*'I was free as a bird, so I chose constraint to avoid going mad'*). Hidden behind its criminal intrigue, just like any classic film noir, *Shoot the Piano Player* uncovers the story of a disillusioned hero trapped in tragedy. The hero is Édouard Saroyan (Charles Aznavour), a former world-famous pianist who has changed his name to Charlie. Since his wife's suicide, he's been dragging his melancholy to a local bar where he plays popular tunes on a tack piano. Charlie sees the ghosts of the past resurface when his missing brother Chico (Albert Rémy), reappears with two gangsters on his tail (Claude Mansard and Daniel Boulanger). Truffaut grafts his own obsessions - the complexity of desire, the volatile nature of happiness - onto the backbones of an American B-movie, where melodrama and manhunt intertwine, and finds a playground for his unfulfilled extravagances.

OMINOUS MOTIF

François Truffaut said it himself: *'I hate gangsters'*. So, what led the filmmaker to adapt a crime novel full of thugs? Undoubtedly the fascination for watching a man's inevitable downfall. In *Le Film Noir* (published by La Matinière, 1996), Patrick Brion points out that 'film noir', an expression first used by the French critic Nino Frank, refers to Hollywood productions that *'depict a tragic moral: whatever direction you take, fate will eventually catch up with you'.* From the opening, this curse hangs over *Shoot the Piano Player*. As Georges Delerue's mournful score plays, the internal mechanism of a piano, with its hammers and strings, echo into the void. It is as if the main hero had already vanished, swallowed by his own misfortune. With the layered structure of his narrative, Truffaut reinforces the sense of inevitability. The film is built around a long flashback, in which details from the past are dredged up to underline their terrible impact on the present: any given moment leads to the death of a woman. The main character is a fly trapped in a spider's web, as is often the case in film noir. Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* springs to mind.

Truffaut chose Charles Aznavour to play this anti-hero, the archetypal ‘weak guy’ of the noir genre. He loved his earlier performance in Georges Franju's *The Keepers*. Both men share hidden similarities. A frail demeanor, a feverish gaze lit by a quiet violence, a sense of vulnerability *(‘I'm scared, damn it, I'm scared’* he says in one of the film's most beautiful sequences, brushing past the camera's gaze in what is the ultimate confession of helplessness). One can’t help but see a double for the director in this tormented artist, struck by success before falling into oblivion. The voice-over of this gloomy, painfully shy character makes him sound like Humphrey Bogart in a Joseph L. Mankiewicz film. Above all, it is an expression of Charlie’s existential side, his inability to be in the world. When he drives Léna (Marie Dubois) home for the first time, a young waitress with whom he falls in love and who then joins him on the run, he is overcome by an internal monologue. Truffaut then playfully stages a seduction scene in which words and gestures are no longer articulated. Language becomes paralyzing: *‘Your silence must seem weird. Say something to her, anything, or she'll think she's intimidating you. But really, if she's not stupid, she’ll see this silence is meaningful, it creates a romantic complicity’,* Charlie repeats to himself, while in close-up, their hands come close and miss each other.

IN THE SHADOW OF EXPRESSIONISM

The blend of an inherited crime fiction and a kind of sentimental lyricism makes for a curious paradox. *Shoot the Piano Player* is the most ‘American’ of Truffaut’s films, but also the most ‘New Wave’. Together with his DOP Raoul Coutard, Truffaut insisted on respecting the aesthetic dogmas of the New Wave: shooting on location, filming actors on the fly, exhilarating movement and an almost experimental photography. A good example of this is the first chase scene with Chico. Disheveled and chaotic, you can barely make out the character. He is engulfed by the blinding headlights of the cars. No surprise there. Raoul Coutard and François Truffaut lit the scene using only small lamps placed in the trees, without using a generator. The result is a muffled, underexposed image with moments of almost complete darkness. The final shot of the sequence, however, provides a striking contrast: perfectly in focus, Chico collapses on a wet pavement under a lamppost, surrounded by a halo of light. In a matter of seconds, Truffaut turns to an expressionist aesthetic worthy of Fritz Lang. This is the same aesthetic to which American film noir lays claim. He plays with this stylised, angular atmosphere a number of times. Low angle shots of staircases, where the lovers take refuge; sharp chiaroscuro, which breaks up the faces; sudden ellipses, threaded through the narrative to create suspense. Like Hitchcock, he uses multiple inserts, on a doorknob, a key, an empty corridor from which the unthinkable could emerge. Rarely has Truffaut filmed prosaic details and deceptively insignificant objects in such a stylised way as to capture the attention of the viewer. Each micro-event conceals an enigma, every shot creates an expectation, the outcome of which is delayed by a hypnotic tracking shot.

AMERICA, AMERICA

François Truffaut hated parody. He considered it ‘counter-artistic’ and preferred to speak of *Shoot the Piano Player* as a ‘respectful pastiche’*, with a touch of irony. But he went even further. He draws a poetic essence and a particular mood out of ‘*série noire*’. He was intent on highlighting the similarities between this Hollywood genre and its European references. *‘I thought I’d try to link the novels of the* 'série noire' *and the films of Jean Cocteau, in particular* The Eagle with Two Heads *(…). There's a lyrical side to Cocteau that you only find in American cinema, with people walking around with ice picks, going off to die in the woods’** explains the filmmaker. This unexpected kinship explodes in the spellbinding finale. Charlie and Léna take refuge in the heart of the mountains, in a small chalet similar to the one in the snow dome in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane.* Suddenly, the all-consuming darkness of the film finds

a perfect counterpoint in the glaring white of the snow-capped peaks. As if caught up in this unreal chromatic spectrum, the directing surrenders to pure fantasy: an overlay of faces express the heartbreak of parting, vaporous cross-fades convey the evanescence of a doomed love.

All of Truffaut's rare 'thrillers' are films about a wild love that grows blind, like *Mississippi Mermaid*, or vengeful, like *The Bride Wore Black*. The storyline of *Shoot the Piano Player* is an edgy, romantic thread, interwoven with detours and sentimental interludes. There are countless car sequences with Raymond Queneau-style dialogue, failing to unravel the mystery of desire and seduction. In Truffaut's own words, *'the real theme of* Shoot the Piano Player *is love. All the men talk about is women and the women, men. At the height of the fights, the settling of scores, the kidnappings, the chases, they talk about love: sexual, physical, moral, social, marital'**. This is what gives the film its informality, its strange romantic film noir allure, from which Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino draw inspiration for their Mafiosi hungry for tenderness characters. In the US, the film became an instant cult classic upon its release, playing for several weeks in a row in New York cinemas. In France, it unsettled audiences with its singular ambition, its audacious way of demystifying the noir genre in order to better reveal its unsuspected dreamlike power. Today, *Shoot the Piano Player* stands out as Truffaut had imagined it: as a great visual manifesto on love and violence.

Léa André-Sarreau, TROISCOULEURS

*François Truffaut, '*Question à l'auteur : Cinema 61*, *Jan 1971'*, p. 7-11

ABOUT FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT

FILMOGRAPHY

1982 – FINALLY SUNDAY!
1981 – THE WOMAN NEXT DOOR
1980 – THE LAST METRO
1979 – LOVE ON THE RUN
1977 – THE GREEN ROOM
1976 – THE MAN WHO LOVED WOMEN
1975 – THE STORY OF ADELE H.
1975 – SMALL CHANGES
1972 – SUCH A GORGEOUS KID LIKE ME
1971 – TWO ENGLISH GIRLS
1970 – BED AND BOARD
1970 – THE WILD CHILD
1969 – MISSISSIPPI MERMAID
1968 – STOLEN KISSES
1967 – THE BRIDE WORE BLACK
1966 – FAHRENHEIT 451
1963 – SOFT SKIN
1962 – ANTOINE ET COLETTE
1961 – JULES AND JIM
1960 – SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER
1959 – THE 400 BLOWS
1957 – THE MISCHIEF MAKERS

CAST & CREW

Directed by	**François Truffaut**
adapted by	**Marcel Moussy** and **François Truffaut**
	From the book *Down there* by David Goodis
Interpreted by	
Charlie Kohler	**Charles Aznavour**
Léna	**Marie Dubois**
Thérésa	**Nicole Berger**
Clarisse	**Michele Mercier**
Mammy	**Catherine Lutz**
Chico	**Albert Remy**
Momo	**Claude Mansard**
Ernest	**Daniel Boulanger**
Plyne	**Serge Davri**
Richard	**Jean-Jacques Aslanian**

Produced by	**Pierre Braunberger**
Dialogue	**François Truffaut**
Image	**Raoul Coutard**
Assistant Director	**Francis Cognany** and **Robert Bober**
Script	**Suzanne Schiffman**
Sound Editing	**Jacques Gallois** and **Jean Philippe**
Editing	**Cécile Decugis** and **Claudine Bouche** (assisted by **Michèle De Possel**)
Music	**Georges Delerue**
Soundtracks	**Boby Lapointe** and **Felix Leclerc**
Still photographer	**Robert Lachenay**
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