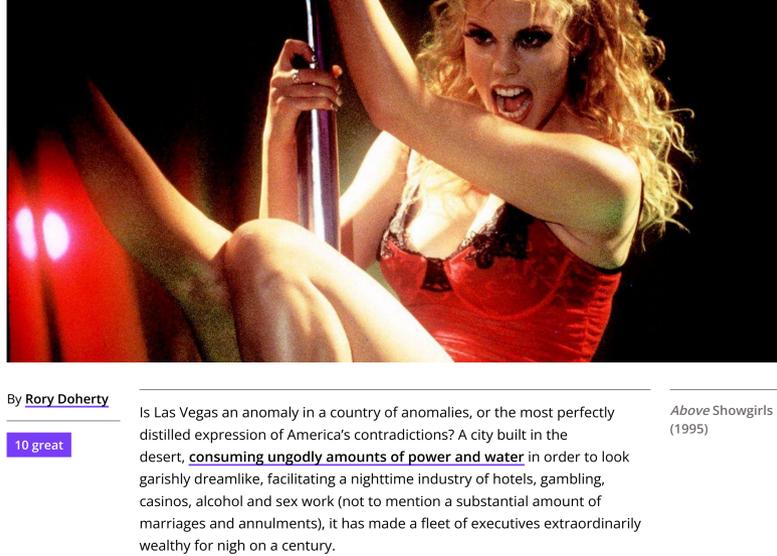


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10 great films set in Las Vegas

Every story is a gamble in these 10 films capturing the glitz and grit of Sin City – celebrating 30 years since Paul Verhoeven’s notorious backstage satire *Showgirls*.

5 June 2025



By [Rory Doherty](#)

10 great

Is Las Vegas an anomaly in a country of anomalies, or the most perfectly distilled expression of America’s contradictions? A city built in the desert, **consuming ungodly amounts of power and water** in order to look garishly dreamlike, facilitating a nighttime industry of hotels, gambling, casinos, alcohol and sex work (not to mention a substantial amount of marriages and annulments), it has made a fleet of executives extraordinarily wealthy for nigh on a century.

Las Vegas society has been rigidly stratified for so many years that you can find stories from the basin of the Mojave desert throughout most of cinema’s history; Vegas and Hollywood aren’t just twinned in how they project vibrant, sensual pleasure, their political and cultural legacy were cemented in tandem.

Exaggerated to the point of delirium (even by the standards of Paul Verhoeven), *Showgirls* (1995) captures the Vegas pleasure industry like no other film. The cutthroat ‘fame monster’ melodrama – now back in cinemas for its 30th anniversary – is an apt dramatic framework to depict Vegas ambition, but the city is too vast and complex a cultural entity to be restricted to a single genre. Gangsters, hard-boiled detectives, scorned lovers, romantic artists and dejected workers fill the canon of Las Vegas cinema – always involved in some fraught and implacable relationship with the city itself.

To toast *Showgirls* back on the big screen, here are 10 key films about the vibrant and vacuous life on the Strip.

The Lady Gambles (1949)

Director: Michael Gordon

The Lady Gambles (1949)

This 1940s noir stars Barbara Stanwyck as an ordinary wife hooked on a dangerous gambling spree, and the melodrama gives way to a punishing portrait of addiction. The *Lady Gambles* announces its simplistic dramatic arc in the title: a respectable woman falls into vulgar and destructive habits. Director Michael Gordon leans into the hazy, seductive power of Vegas’ sophisticated bars and private salons, bringing out the danger lurking underneath the moral tale.

As Joan Boothe, Stanwyck has an expert ability to draw out the tension and desperation of losing control, balancing the titillation and shame of her character’s loss of control and showing a completely different type of vulnerability with each of her scene partners: her domineering older sister (Edith Barrett), her fair but drab husband (Robert Preston), and her delicious criminal tempter (Stephen McNally). We’re always conscious of Joan’s instability.

Viva Las Vegas (1964)

Director: George Sidney

Viva Las Vegas (1964)

Elvis Presley starred in 31 musical films, although unless you’re a diehard fan not many of them stand up well today – *Viva Las Vegas* is one of the rare gems. Lucky Jackson (Elvis) is deadset on entering the Vegas Grand Prix, but he’s short of an engine; he’s also intent on hooking up with a hotel swimming instructor (Ann-Margaret), but she keeps scorning his advances.

Like any Elvis film, the dramatic problems are solved with rock’n’roll numbers of varying quality, but the staggering screen presence of Ann-Margaret lights up a great deal of this modest singing-and-dancing romp. Her contributions to Elvis’s electric performances of ‘C’mon Everybody’ and ‘Viva Las Vegas’ make the numbers highlights in the Elvis movie canon. The opening credits, with the title track played over aerial shots of the Strip at night, is the most concentrated dose of Vegas glitz and glamor we get in the whole film.

The Night Stalker (1972)

Director: John Llewellyn Moxey

The Night Stalker (1972)

The intrepid and bothersome wire service reporter Carl Kolchak debuted in this TV film, which was successful enough to spawn a sequel and a 20-episode detective series. Darren McGavin plays the renegade veteran reporter working an unglamorous gig in Las Vegas. He becomes convinced that the series of blood-drained corpses cropping up on the Strip is the work of a vampire, or at least a murderer who thinks he’s a vampire.

Most of the 74-minute runtime is spent with Kolchak pushing up against bureaucracy trying to control the official narrative – a welcome cynical edge from screenwriter Richard Matheson. As a consequence, Kolchak gets a close-up look into the strict control of information in Vegas, where the money needs to be always flowing and the town’s image carefully controlled. But director John Llewellyn Moxey captures with scuzzy, lo-fi photography the dingy streets where the bleeding, fear-soaked Vegas really lives.

One from the Heart (1981)

Director: Francis Ford Coppola

One from the Heart (1981)

Francis Ford Coppola’s most significant commercial disappointment was a musical romance set across a single night in Vegas. Upon release, it became a disaster for independent production company American Zoetrope, which loomed over Coppola until he disavowed Hollywood after 1997’s *The Rainmaker*.

Like *Showgirls*, *One from the Heart* has been reclaimed (although perhaps not as enthusiastically) in the years since its release. It’s an unconventional modern-inflected romance about a dysfunctional Vegas couple (Frederic Forrester and Teri Garr) who break up on the night of their anniversary and each pursue a night’s worth of romantic fantasy (in the form of a tantalising Raul Julia and Nastassja Kinski). Helstered by Tom Waits’ singing and a fleet of fluorescent lights, *One from the Heart* may come closest to capturing the attraction of Vegas – yes, a place of artificiality, but isn’t the artificial an attempt to bring human desire into reality?

Queen of Diamonds (1991)

Director: Nina Menkes

Queen of Diamonds (1991)

A film paced and designed like no other on this list, Nina Menkes’s elliptical drama hones in on Firdaus (Tinka Menkes), an alienated blackjack dealer living on the fringes of Vegas who spends her days (and the sub-80 minute runtime) tending to a bedbound elderly man, eavesdropping on the screaming matches of her motel neighbours, and navigating the sparse landscape outside of the Strip, watching burning trees, train tracks and still expanses of water.

Menkes favours industrial film-style observational shots (complete with deliberate zooms), a style that only emphasises how inaccessible Firdaus’s inner world is to an undiscerning viewer. There’s something aggressive about the mundanity of the centrepiece casino sequence – a lengthy dialogue-free montage of blackjack under a pristine, cavern-like ceiling of mirrors and colourful lightbulbs. Here, *Queen of Diamonds*’ thesis appears, mirage-like in its conflicting detail and abstractness: in a medium of cause-and-effect image-making, pursuing meaninglessness has a sobering effect.

Casino (1995)

Director: Martin Scorsese

Casino (1995)

Accusations that Martin Scorsese’s *Casino* is a mere retread of his memorable and aggressive *Goodfellas* (1990) style are unfounded – Scorsese uses the tail end of the American mob’s reign over Vegas as an excuse to push his choreographed visual style to its very limits, reminding us with camera tricks and editing of the narcotic-like effect of being immersed in uncapped power and money.

Robert De Niro gives a typically gripping performance as Sam ‘Ace’ Rothstein, the pit boss and gambling guru whose petty and territorial impulses estrange and endanger his wife (Sharon Stone) and lifelong friend Nicky Santoro (Joe Pesci). Like many Scorsese crime epics, *Casino* is a black comedy that lets Rothstein wax mournfully about Vegas losing its character when Wall Street brokers (think Jordan Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street*) swiftly replace his noble class of criminals and thugs. Rothstein pines for reputation and legitimacy, buying into the same fantasy – that Vegas will transform your life – that he’s selling to his gamblers.

Showgirls (1995)

Director: Paul Verhoeven

Showgirls (1995)

After the huge success of *Basic Instinct* (1992), Paul Verhoeven and screenwriter Joe Esterhaz reunited for a riff on *All About Eve* (1950) set in the garish theatres and mansions of Las Vegas’s showgirl industry. They ended up with a film that critics and audiences found so noxious that its stink followed both director and screenwriter until they more or less retired from American movies a few years later. Nomi (Elizabeth Berkley) is hopelessly green to the cut-throat, hermetically sealed hierarchy of Vegas showgirls, but the rookie sets herself apart with a hardwired desire to get to the top and some staggeringly strange dance moves.

Showgirls is a completely coherent satire that paints America’s worship of sex and entertainment as fundamentally sexless but limitlessly tacky, where relationships are charged with the promise of reward and violence at the same time. In its worship of commerce, Vegas reduced the erotic to rhinestones and leg sweeps.

[Watch Showgirls on BFI Player](#)

Hard Eight (1996)

Director: Paul Thomas Anderson

Hard Eight (1996)

Paul Thomas Anderson’s unassuming debut hooks you from its first images: vagrant John (John C. Reilly) is approached by a put-together Sydney (Philip Baker Hall) outside a diner, who offers him a cup of coffee and a cigarette and an implicit warning not to screw up this opportunity. As ground-level as a Vegas crime flick gets, *Hard Eight* traces the modest highs and, crucially, the self-sustaining humdrum of these Vegas casino cons, who prosper as surrogate father and son off the back of loopholes in the casino design.

The instability of their livelihoods (and specifically Sydney’s authority) is inevitably exposed with the arrival of samuels, with dynamite supporting performances from Gwyneth Paltrow, Samuel L. Jackson, and briefly, a memorable Philip Seymour Hoffman. *Hard Eight* kicked off Anderson’s career by establishing the melancholic and sturdy relationship between character and geography.

The Cooler (2003)

Director: Wayne Kramer

The Cooler (2003)

The Cooler is not the most dazzling drama to tackle Las Vegas’s transition from mob hegemony to the calculated capitalist oversight, but its peculiarity elevates it from being a modest, slight look at malaise taking over a city of American promise and myth.

Bernie Lootz (William H. Macy) is a ‘cooler’, a casino employee who lingers around gamblers in an attempt to throw off their winning streaks with their unappealing vibe. For writer-director Wayne Kramer, this old-fashioned superstition becomes a perfect metaphor for oppressive noir dynamics – Bernie is paying off a debt to his boss Shelly (Alec Baldwin) who keeps Bernie in a stable state of miserably apathy to maintain order in the casino. As Bernie’s love for a cocktail waitress (Maria Bello) and the increased presence of a modern financial advisor (Ron Livingston) threaten Shelly’s seat, *The Cooler* emphasises the fatalistic irony of noir, making luck an almost supernatural force that Bernie must wrangle to set himself free.

Behind the Candelabra (2013)

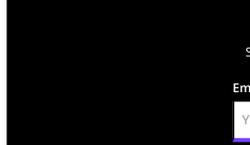
Director: Steven Soderbergh

Behind the Candelabra (2013)

This biopic telling of the fraught relationship between glamorous pianist Liberace (Michael Douglas) and his younger lover Scott Thorson (Matt Damon) is probably only the fourth most significant Steven Soderbergh film set in Las Vegas, but the yellow-tinted interiors and minimalist blocking creates an aptly stale mood that’s only occasionally broken by Douglas dazzling on the keys. When Scott replaces another protégé in Liberace’s home, he realises the intensity of his partner’s narcissism – on Liberace’s request, Thorson underwent cosmetic surgery to resemble the pianist.

Ultimately, the painful, wounded heart of *Behind the Candelabra* emerges – Liberace’s queerness was complicated by a homophobic and image-conscious industry, and he projected onto Scott his conflicted desires for youthful, sexual vitality and for becoming a kind, giving father. The film ends on tense deposition rooms and a dreamlike Liberace stage number – the quintessential contradiction of Vegas, summed up by two spaces that shouldn’t coexist but are actually fused together.

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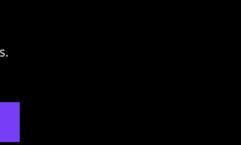
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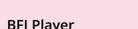
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