



Alston Purvis

Guidance from the G-Man's Son

CFA Prof Alston Purvis helped Christian Bale play his father

IN 1973, ALSTON PURVIS was on a transatlantic flight to the Netherlands when *Dillinger*, starring Warren Oates and Ben Johnson, came on the screen. As Johnson appeared, Purvis turned to the man sitting next to him and said, "That man is playing my father." Purvis, a College of Fine Arts associate professor of art, recalls the neighboring passenger shaking his head and saying, "Yeah, and my dad's Napoleon."

In the glamorized gangster era of the 1930s, Melvin Purvis became the personification of the good guys, the FBI agent who led manhunts for infamous outlaws like John Dillinger, "Baby Face" Nelson, and "Pretty Boy" Floyd. He gained star status, dating Jean Harlow, becoming pals with Clark Gable, and getting his own Parker Brothers board game, Melvin Purvis' "G"-Men Detective Game, in 1937. But his celebrity was a threat to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who blocked appointments and promotions for Purvis, resulting in his resignation from the bureau in 1935. Their relationship is chronicled in Alston Purvis's book *The Vendetta: FBI Hero Melvin Purvis's War Against Crime, and J. Edgar Hoover's War Against Him* (PublicAffairs, 2005).

"J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI for fifty years, said in a memo one time that he wanted to erase Melvin Purvis's name from history — and he did, for a while," Purvis says. "But the FBI has been totally supportive of me now."

Almost fifty years after Melvin Purvis's death, the story came to life again in *Public Enemies*, last summer's blockbuster starring Johnny Depp as John Dillinger, Billy Crudup as J. Edgar Hoover, and Christian Bale as Purvis. To fully inhabit the part, Bale made a recording of Alston Purvis

reading all of his father's lines and modeled his own accent and cadence after Purvis's. He also wore a replica of Melvin Purvis's ring and had a picture of Alston Purvis's grandfather on the bookshelf in his office in the film.

"When Christian and I met, it was around 9:30 on the morning of February 29, 2008. I shook his hand forty-eight years to the minute after my father died," says Purvis. "And we didn't plan this. We just were silent for a minute. One of my friends said, 'Alston, that was probably what we'd call a 'nod from God.'"

Although *Public Enemies* was based on a book — not Purvis's — that Purvis thought attacked his father, he says Bale's performance was a pleasure to watch.

"It was very important to him that I liked what he did," he says. "And I did." KC



MELVIN PURVIS, (left, with Hoover) the FBI agent played by Christian Bale in the film *Public Enemies*, was the father of CFA Associate Professor Alston Purvis. Purvis (above) helped Bale prepare for the role.

ALSTON PURVIS PHOTO BY KALMAN ZABARSKY