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Goodfellas: The Copacabana Long Take

Goodfellas (1990), directed by Martin Scorsese, stands as my favorite work by him and remains as my absolute top gangster film to this day. The film is filled with iconic scenes, brilliant storytelling, and incredible acting, but the long take at the Copacabana easily stands out. This single scene captures the essence of the entire film: luxury, wealth, and class, but has to be done through the back door, a perfect metaphor for the "wise guy" lifestyle.

The scene opens with Henry Hill entering the restaurant through the back and weaving his way up to the main area, symbolizing his rise from the streets to the upper level of New York's mafia. Champagne is sent to his table, representing the perks of his new status, and the shot ends with him seated, watching a comedian on stage. I believe this moment subtly foreshadows how Henry's life will one day become entertainment for others (us) as a result of crime and consequences.

This isn't just a regular night out; it's Henry's first proper date with Karen. From the start, Karen is both intrigued and perplexed by Henry's world. Instead of parking the car or using a valet, he casually hands it off to a random guy which signals that he lives outside the norm. They enter through the back entrance and move through a crowded kitchen, and the camera captures every detail of the organized chaos, immersing us in the intensity of a professional kitchen. At one point, Henry even greets the manager, which is the only brief moment the camera leaves his side, before focusing on a table that is particularly set for them at the front of the club.

As Henry and Karen settle in, the entire room acknowledges him, and a few guys even approach to shake his hand. Champagne arrives, which piques Karen's interest in Henry's profession, resulting in this classic exchange:

Karen: "What do you do?"

Henry: "I'm in construction."

Karen feels Henry's smooth hand and says, "They don't feel like you're in construction."

Henry: "Umm, I'm a union delegate." **drumroll**

Karen is visibly shocked by Henry's generosity as he hands \$20 bills to various staff members. The finance major in me had to check: \$20 in 1965 would be worth around \$200 (!!!) in 2024, which is a day's pay or even more for many people. Henry learned this generous tipping habit from Jimmy, who demonstrated the same gesture at the beginning of the film.

On my fifteenth (or so) rewatch of this scene, I noticed they actually take a circular path through the kitchen; they could have simply gone from the stairs directly to the restaurant. Henry chose this elaborate route to show Karen the extent of his influence and connections.

The soundtrack, "Then He Kissed Me" by The Crystals, adds another layer to the scene. Scorsese's direction and the cinematography here are remarkable and every sharp camera turn, and detailed movement contributes to this three-minute scene's flawless flow.

The first half of *Goodfellas* captures us in the glamour of mob life, with smooth transitions, nostalgic happy tunes, and a carefree feeling. In contrast, the second half, particularly the scene where Henry is frantically preparing dinner, hiding guns, and getting a package ready, becomes fragmented and chaotic which is accompanied by rock music. It's as if the first half represents the decadent, champagne-fueled high, while the second half displays the severe hangover. Scorsese's brilliance is on full display in scenes like the Copacabana long take, which will likely go down as one of cinema's most iconic moments.