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Old Hollywood: Tough Guys and Mad Dames

Rich Johnson

Week 2

ROBERT MITCHUM: HOLLYWOOD REBEL

Robert Mitchum (August 6, 1917 – July 1, 1997) was known primarily for his powerhouse performances and crafting the antihero persona that became a trademark of Hollywood during the post-war period. So, over the years, it was of no surprise that he would often present characters that ranged from the roguish hero to the down right malevolent. His range and stature was not one that would have been associated with the majority of actors of that period and, therefore, with the likes of Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster, presented a *new* breed of stoic movie stars that paved the way for what would eventually become the action heroes of the 1980s. Mitchum was not one to be underestimated and often became the strong beating heart of his movies, whether out to save you or *bury* you. His volatility and controversies off screen only add to his persona and reputation.

Please refer to the reading list for a full reference of films.

Main:

Out of the Past (1947)

Director(s): Jacques Tourneur

Studio(s): RKO Pictures

The Night of the Hunter (1955)

Director(s): Charles Laughton

Studio(s): Paul Gregory Productions (distributed by United Artists)

Heaven Knows, Mr. Alison (1957)

Director(s): John Huston

Studio(s): Twentieth Century Fox

References to:

The Human Comedy (1943)

Director(s): Clarence Brown

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer



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Gung Ho! (1943)

Director(s): Ray Enright

Studio(s): Universal Pictures

Story of G.I. Joe (1945)

Director(s): William A. Wellman

Studio(s): Lester Cowan Productions (distributed by United Artists)

Track of the Cat (1954)

Director(s): William Wellman

Studio(s): Wayne/Fellows Productions
(distributed by Warner Bros.)

Cape Fear (1962)

Director(s): J. Lee Thompson

Studio(s): Universal Pictures

Ryan's Daughter (1970)

Director(s): David Lean

Studio(s): Faraway Productions (distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

The Friends of Eddie Coyle (1973)

Director(s): Peter Yates

Studio(s): Paramount Pictures

The Yakuza (1974)

Director(s): Sydney Pollack

Studio(s): Warner Bros.

Farewell, My Lovely (1975)

Director(s): Dick Richards

Studio(s): Warner Bros.

Tombstone (1993)

Director(s): George P. Cosmatos

Studio(s): Hollywood Pictures / Cinergi Pictures

Notes:

“No matter what you do, do your best at it. If your going to be a bum, be the best bum there is.” —
Robert Mitchum

Young Mitch



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Robert Charles Durman Mitchum on August 6, 1917 in Bridgeport, Connecticut into a working class household. Mitchum had Scots-Irish, Native American on his father's side (James Thomas Mitchum) and Norwegian blood from his mother, Ann Harriet Gunderson. His father was crushed to death in a work accident in 1919 while his mother was still pregnant with his younger brother.

He had an elder sister Annette (1914-2003) became an actress first under the name Julie Mitchum. You may recognise her from *The House on Haunted Hill* (1959). He also had a half sister from when his mother remarried.

John Wayne and Robert Mitchum standing behind their mothers on the set of the 1966 film *El Dorado*.

Problem child

Mitchum was a problem child and would often play pranks that landed him in trouble. He was expelled from school and ran away from home when he was 11. In 1929, he and his younger brother were sent to Philadelphia to live with their older sister who had just started her career in vaudeville. The following year the rest of the family moved in with Julie in New York sharing an apartment in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen with her and her husband. Mitchum attended school while there but was expelled again.

He left home at 14 and, as a lot people did back then hoping to find work, traveled across the country on freight trains. He was a ditch-digger and a professional boxer during this time and in the Summer of 1933 was arrested for vagrancy in Savannah, Georgia and put in a local chain gang. By his account, he escaped and hitchhiked to Rising Sun, Delaware, where his family had moved. That Autumn he met his future wife, and quickly went back on the road riding the rails to California.

Mitchum married Dorothy in Dover, Delaware, on March 16, 1940. As childhood sweethearts, they met when he was 16 and she was 14 and, despite reported affairs over the years they remained together until his death in 1997. In his 2004 biography, *Mitchum: In His Own Words*, he is quoted as saying: "Not as though there has been anyone else in my life except Dorothy. There's not one of 'em—and I've met the best of 'em—worth lighting a candle for alongside her." (p. 168-169). The couple had three children: two sons a daughter.

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As a rebel of Hollywood he was known for the odd outburst and was also arrested in September 1948 along with Lila Leeds, Vicki Evans and Robin Ford for possessing marijuana. He was sentenced to one year in the county jail, although the judge placed him on probation for two years on condition that he spend 60 days in jail.

Other than his affairs, it was a while before any other documented incident, which came in 1982 premiere for *That Championship Season*. Drunk, he assaulted a female reporter and threw a basketball that he was holding (a prop from the film) at a female photographer from *Time* magazine, causing a neck injury and knocking out two of her teeth. She sued him for \$30 million in damages costing him his salary for the film.



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First appearances

His first appearance on the big screen was uncredited as a soldier in the 1943 film *The Human Comedy*, starring Mickey Rooney.

His first official credit came in 1943 as a Marine private in *Gung Ho!* Starring Randolph Scott. After this he signed a seven-year contract with RKO Radio Pictures.

Lent him out to United Artists, Mitchum had a supporting role in *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945). Shot during WWII, most war movies of this era were considered moral boosters and particularly patriotic. Nominated for four Academy Awards – including Robert Mitchum's only Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor – the film could be seen as jingoistic but, for its time is a great example of war movies of the period that doesn't quite fall into the romanticised aspects of war that would follow during the 1950s, due to its semi-documentarian approach.

Mitchum was drafted into the Army at the time, serving as a medic at Fort MacArthur, California. Because he was married with two sons he was given a Dependency Discharge after eight months of service.

Reliable narrator

“You can never help anything, can you? You're like a leaf that the wind blows from one gutter to another.” — Jeff Bailey

A seminal film noir of the 1940s, *Out of the Past* (1947) tells the story of a private investigator, Jeff Bailey, who runs a gas station in a small town to escape his past. As with most films of this ilk, Jeff's past catches up with him and he must now return to the big city and a world of danger, corruption, double crosses, and a duplicitous femme fatale.

Directed by Jacques Tourneur – an RKO regular – known for *Cat People* (1942); a seminal horror movie that was the first step away from the Universal horror monsters that had become popular throughout the 1930s. Producer Val Lewton and director Jacques Tourneur were instrumental in creating a film that relied on psychological terror.

Both Mitchum and Greer light the screen up, many shots showing off Tourneur's impeccable framing and use of shadow and silhouette which was so iconic of horror and noir.

Actress Jane Greer was one of many actresses to work alongside Mitchum. Known for his laconic attitude, Mitchum projected such an equally cavalier attitude on the set of the film that Greer had the impression that he came to the set unprepared. Whatever his approach, it would often lead to a more spontaneous performance. In one scene he walked on smoking, Kirk Douglas' line offering him a cigarette – Mitchum, off the cuff, responding, “Smoking.” It was kept in the film.

Maniacal Mitch



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“*Would you like me to tell you the little story of right-hand/left-hand?*” — (Reverend?!) Harry Powell

After his experience during the '50s directing for the stage, British movie star Charles Laughton directed his only feature film – the classic Gothic noir *Night of the Hunter* (1955). Despite lauded by cinephiles over the years and often held in high regard, the film was a commercial failure that had such an impact on Laughton's self esteem, he never directed another movie. A real loss as, by the skill alone in *one* film, it was of Hitchcock level in its execution. Robert Mitchum's performance is one of the most terrifying and iconic movie villains alone, then there is the incredible direction and mood throughout.

This is an extremely dark story for its time in which a serial killer Harry Powell (Mitchum) poses as a Peacher after he discovers that \$10,000 has been hidden by his cellmate. Upon release he tracks down his cellmate's family after he is hung and attempts to gain the trust of his children who know the whereabouts of the money.

Combines the style of Film Noir elements with those of Gothic romance literature. It replaces the typical 'femme fatale' by placing the female in the lead and is often a victim. Gothic Noir tend to blur the lines between crime fiction and horror. This style also feeds off another trope of American art and literature called 'American Gothic'.

Often defined by Grant Wood's 1930 painting *American Gothic* this specific style is very much rooted in the late 18th century once the War of Independence separated the colonials from the British Empire. The iconic spaces of Gothic castles replaced with the rural expanse of the frontier and those huge forests that house both ancient pasts and puritan beliefs of witchcraft and the damned. As a homegrown genre set in uniquely American settings — the frontier and eventually suburbia — it also explores the darker elements of the nation's culture and its historical sins, such as slavery, genocide and the destruction of the wilderness. Washington Irving's short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" from 1820 is, perhaps, the most well known and certainly set the template for the American Gothic.

Edgar Allan helped to define the American Gothic most notably in his short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" from 1839.

There are endless amounts of artwork from earlier publishing of Poe's work including British Illustrator Arthur Rackham's whose work was frequent in the late 19th and early 20th century, including famous renditions of *Alice in Wonderland*.

Night of the Hunter feels illustrated in the way it is so meticulously designed such as the eerie underwater grave of a central character, ripped right from a whistful American Gothic-inspired work of art.

Laughton's shots are often reminiscent in modern movies from David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980) to Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018).



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Studying the stills alone – those perfect shots – only highlights what an incredible eye Laughton had as a director. Take note of his silhouetted, expressionistic, noir-laden tones in herent from the '40s-inspired works.

His framing was also impeccable, reminiscent of John Ford's use of the interior/exterior, echoing the expanse of America and what potential threats lie beyond. In this instance, the very role that should lead by example... a wolf in sheep's clothing as a murderer masquerades as a man of God. The sequence with Powell riding a horse in the distance was actually a dwarf on a pony, filmed in false perspective.

Although Mitchum rarely watched his films – acting very much a job to him – he said that Charles Laughton was his favorite director he had worked with and that *The Night of the Hunter* was his favourite performance. According to IMDb, when he auditioned for the part, a moment that particularly impressed Laughton was when he described the character as "a diabolical shit". Mitchum promptly answered, "Present!"

Of course, Mitchum would return to his darker roles, most notably as the fearsom rapist, Max Cady. More on this film when we discuss Gregory Peck's career.

Roguish charm

"I've never loved anyone or anybody before... I've never even lived before." — Corporal Alison

The Oscar nominated *Heaven Knows, Mr. Alison* (1957) is a WWII romantic adventure movie. It tells the story of a marine, Corporal Alison (Mitchum) and a nun, Sister Angela (Deborah Kerr) who fall in love while confined to a Pacific island as they avoid capture by the Japanese.

Made on a 3 million dollar budget which is around 80 million today. Directed by John Huston who directed a number of classics - *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) – he was a filmmaker whose life was notorious offset; a real life cowboy who sought the adventure and, in the words of one biographer was labelled a "compulsive satyr". His exploits were legendary.

Apparently, when filming began, Mitchum was concerned that Deborah Kerr would not come across strong enough onscreen – that she was too prim and proper, but showed much resilience standing up to herself on set against Huston, who she swore at a number of times, gaining Mitchum's respect as a tough female.

Their chemistry is incredible, so no surprise this was the first of four movies they made together, the two stars having an enduring friendship which lasted until Mitchum's death in 1997.

Mitchum is perhaps at his most heroic in the film

Although a love story, the film is ultimately about survival and a quest for victory and displays a genuine respect between a man and a woman amongst the backdrop of WWII.



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Around this time Mitchum dabbled in some music with the album *Calypso – is like so ...* in March 1957. Like Kirk Douglas, he also enjoyed writing poetry. A hangover from his early days as a ghost writer.

Some overlooked classics include: *Pursued* (1947), *Angel Face* (1952), *River of no Return* (1954) and *Thunder Road* (1958). Worth keeping an eye out for *Track of the Cat* (1954) which is a real rarity.

David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter* (1970) is another brilliant performance, casting Mitchum as a widowed Irish schoolmaster.

Other '70s classics include: Peter Yates' *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1973), Sydney Pollack's *The Yakuza* (1974) and his return to noir in Dick Richards' *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975). He would return to the role of Private eye Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (1978), a role made famous by Humphrey Bogart in the 1946 version of Raymond Chandler's 1939 novel.

Final words

His reliable voice was used as the opener for the Western *Tombstone* (1993) and he made a brief (but memorable) appearance in Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995).

His final appearance on screen was in the TV movie *James Dean: Live Fast, Die Young* (1997) starring his daughter Carrie Mitchum who was married to the lead Casper Van Dien at the time and divorced upon the film's release.

Last interview 1996 by Carole Langer, at his home in Santa Barbara, June 1996 shows Mitchum at his most laconic when asked about what his first choice of one of his selected films would be. "I haven't a clue... Dear heart, I haven't seen them. They don't pay you to look at 'em. Come six o'clock, you clock out."

Robert Mitchum passed away in his sleep on July 1, 1997, at his home in Santa Barbara, California, from complications of lung cancer.