

The story behind...

# PULP FICTION

No one thought Quentin Tarantino could match *Reservoir Dogs*, let alone beat it. Then the motormouthed genius arrived in Cannes packing a masterpiece...

By Andy Lowe





Men in black: Vincent and Jules take care of business; (right) Tarantino's unexpected Palme D'Or triumph.



**A**t Cannes '94, European purists had never seen a stronger dead-cert for the Palme D'Or. Krzysztof Kieslowski's superb *Three Colours: Red* was the third and final tale in his acclaimed trilogy. By announcing his retirement from filmmaking, Kieslowski also looked set to snag the sentimental vote.

The *Pulp Fiction* contingent had enjoyed a fine festival, camped out at the shiny Hotel du Cap. The film had gone down well and Tarantino – a long-standing festival junkie – had been repeatedly singled out and mobbed, despite having John Travolta and Bruce Willis in tow (“It was my first real rock-star moment”).

At the closing ceremony, the awards came and went, and, with only the Palme D'Or remaining, the entourage prepared their noble response to Kieslowski's moment of glory. Then jury chairman Clint Eastwood announced the winner: *Pulp Fiction*. It was the fourth American film to take the Palme D'Or in six years. A dazed Tarantino and crew leapt up to receive the award – to a loud chorus of boos and catcalls from one section of the crowd. Earlier, Tarantino had done

little to endear himself to the festival's arthouse-lovers when he addressed a press conference:

“Who liked *Reservoir Dogs*?” (Applause).

“Who liked *True Romance*?” (Applause).

“Who liked *The Remains Of The Day*?” (Light applause).

“Get the fuck out of this theatre!”

On the podium, with the Palme D'Or in hand, Tarantino focused on the general direction of the jeers and held out an unpermitted fist. Then he flipped the middle finger...

**I**n March 1992, Tarantino decamped to Amsterdam as a European base to promote *Reservoir Dogs*. Holed up in a flat without a phone, the banana-chinned helmer hung out in hash bars by night and gorged on obscure French gangster films by day. He'd been offered

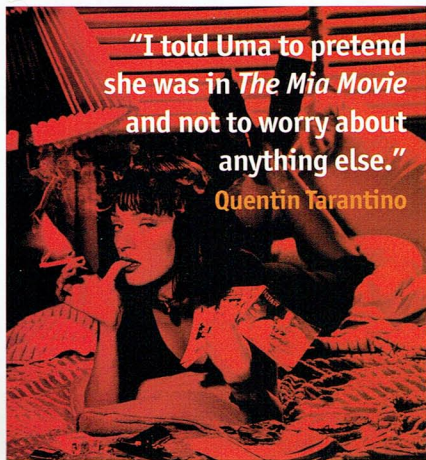
a million dollars by Jersey Films (Danny DeVito's production company) to produce a follow-up to *Reservoir Dogs*. “The plan was to write a crime anthology,” says Tarantino. “But when I sat down, I saw there was much more gold there. It would be neat to have three separate stories, but have the same characters floating in and out.”

The result was, indeed, “neat”. Three stories which evolve, loop and paste together: two shambling heavies, Vincent and Jules (John Travolta and Samuel L Jackson) collect a mysterious briefcase for their fearsome boss Marsellus (Ving Rhames); a washed-up boxer (Bruce Willis) defies Marsellus' instructions to throw his last fight; and Vincent is charged with taking out (in the date sense) Marsellus' wife, the playful and vampy Mia (Uma Thurman).

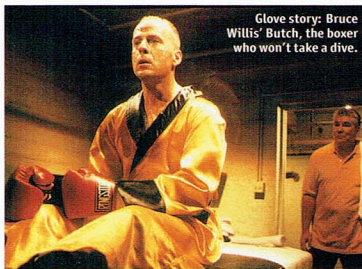
The script was a masterpiece: vivid, brutal, funny, with a wonderfully skewed narrative structure. As ever, Tarantino gave life to unlikeable characters by humanising them with frothy, smart-mouthed dialogue, with lengthy discussions on European cultural quirks, TV conventions and the dubious sensual nature of foot massage. “I read it straight through, which normally I don't do,” says Jackson. “And then I



Robbin' hoods: Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer) and Pumpkin (Tim Roth) in *Pulp Fiction*'s explosive opening.



**"I told Uma to pretend she was in *The Mia Movie* and not to worry about anything else."**  
**Quentin Tarantino**



Glove story: Bruce Willis' Butch, the boxer who won't take a dive.

## HOLiest OF HOLIES

Much froth has been lathered over the sex and violence but we think you'll find *Pulp Fiction* a very spiritual film. Unconvinced? Eyes down, unbelievers.

† Jules interprets the survived shooting as an act of God and is inspired to quit "the life." Vincent scoffs. Later, Vincent is pumped full of lead. Jules isn't.



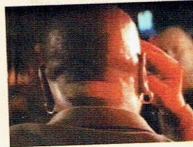
† Each storyline ends with a kind of redemption, with many characters being "saved" from the brink (Butch, Marsellus, Mia, Jules).

† The Bible plays a part in all the stories: Butch the avenging angel who kills the unbeliever Vincent and later rides off on a motorcycle called Grace; Maynard and Zed are punished for sodomy; and only seven (the holy number) people die in the whole film.



† Not only does Eric Stoltz's Lance look like Jesus (the hair, the beard, the sandals) – he also pulls a Lazarus and "resurrects" Mia from the brain-numbing depths of a heroin OD.

† Oh, and let's get something straight. It's clearly meant to be Marsellus' soul in the briefcase. He's got a bandage on the back of his head (where the Devil sucked out his soul, of course) and the case combination is "666".



† Then again, it could just be a really good film about some gangster shit.

took a breath and I read it again – which I never do. Just to make sure it was true. It was the best script I'd ever read."

Producer Danny DeVito was equally enthused, if not a little shell-shocked: "When I read it, I was laughing my head off, thinking: 'Either this is brilliant, or I'm the sickest man you ever met in your life!'"

After the *Reservoir Dogs* buzz, everyone wanted to work with Tarantino – particularly actors hungry for some meatier dialogue. Quentin's grand plan was to assemble a high-profile ensemble cast so he got busy milking the connections which could make it happen. Many of the roles were specifically written with actors in mind: Pumpkin and Honey Bunny for Tim Roth and Amanda Plummer, The Wolf for

Harvey Keitel, and Jules for Samuel L Jackson (who nearly lost the part after under-performing at his audition, thinking it was just a low-key read-through).

Bruce Willis, a fan of *Reservoir Dogs*, was drawn in by his friend Harvey Keitel, and, after taking a look at Holly Hunter, Meg Tilly and Meg Ryan, Tarantino went to dinner with Uma Thurman. She reportedly clinched the Mia gig by virtue of her lovely feet – pretty crucial given Jules' foot massage spiel.

The biggest problem was junkie partner Vincent Vega, a part written for Michael Madsen, who dropped out to do, er, *Wyatt Earp*. Tarantino briefly considered Daniel Day-Lewis, but then started to think about one of his favourite actors – John Travolta. Travolta's career had nosedived to a point

where he'd just finished the third in the *Look Who's Talking...* series. "As much as I love Travolta, I couldn't bring myself to watch some fucking talking baby movie," snorts Tarantino. "But, after meeting him, I sent thinking about him when I was writing. I sent him a script and asked him to look at Vincent. But John has a lot of baggage.

"When I mentioned his name to people, they were like: 'What?'" Producer Lawrence Bender was one of them. He later elaborated to Tarantino: "You can get anyone in the world. Why do you want John Travolta?"

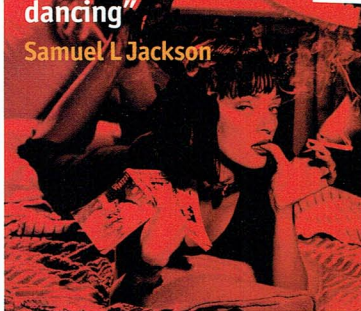
Travolta came to Tarantino's LA apartment – coincidentally, the very same apartment he had moved into when he first came to Hollywood in 1974. They bonded by playing the *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease* boardgames (Travolta: "He →



Fabulous Vega boy: Tarantino faced stiff opposition over his casting of Travolta, (far right) the director with his "bonded" cast.

"Tarantino would have a night where everybody goes dancing"

Samuel L Jackson



→ insisted that I autograph them"). Distributors TriStar had the deepest reservations about Travolta, but Tarantino stuck to his choice, threatening to walk off the movie if he didn't get his way ("I cast John because he's a terrific actor, not some trash icon."). Travolta was so keen, he took a fee which didn't even cover his expenses.

More seriously, TriStar couldn't stomach the scene where Vincent injects heroin. Tarantino told them to relax ("It's going to be funny!"). TriStar didn't see the ha-ha! side and pulled out. Enter Miramax, who swaggered in with a co-finance pact with Jersey Films. Soon after, Miramax were taken over by Disney, giving Tarantino the distinction of making the one and only Disney film to feature anal sex.

**T**arantino brought in his trusted *Reservoir Dogs* crew, using familiar locations in the less salubrious areas of L.A. Because the film was such a broad ensemble – with no major stand-out "star" characters – Tarantino encouraged the actors to think of the movie as revolving solely around their part. "I like the idea that all these characters could be stars of their own movie," he says. "As far as I'm concerned, they are. When Pumpkin and Honey Bunny

come on at the beginning, it's their movie. I told Uma to pretend that she was in *The Mia Movie* and not to worry about anything else."

According to Samuel L Jackson, Tarantino was passionate about the cast working as one big team, a huge bonding boost on a shoot complicated by the ego and commitment logistics of 12 major actors: "We'd have dinner gatherings. He'd have a big dancing night where everybody goes dancing together. Every week he has a big screening of some B-movie he's chosen."

But Tarantino's greatest challenge was creating his two-and-a-half-hour movie with an \$5 million budget: "I wanted it to look like a \$20

million movie. I wanted it to look epic – in invention, in tension, in ambition, in length. Everything except the price tag." While the actors took major pay-cuts (Willis' fee for the forthcoming *Die Hard With A Vengeance* was more than the entire *Pulp Fiction* budget), expense came from more unpredictable areas. Set decorator Sandy Reynolds-Wasco had the job of turning Tarantino's highly specific descriptions into props: "The box where Lance (Eric Stoltz) keeps his drugs – it started as a request from Quentin and then went into research. A set designer drew it up and a master carpenter made the box. A scenic artist painted it and eventually it went to an old-time prop maker who added the final touches – including the scent of patchouli. So, when Lance opens it, it really is a character in itself."

That said, one of *Pulp Fiction*'s most weirdly appropriate and memorable props – Jackson's jheri-curl wig – was a cheap and happy accident. Says QT: "I love afros. I talked to Sam about Jules having an afro and he was up for it. Because the make-up woman didn't know the difference, she brought back some afros and the jheri-curl wig. Sam put it on and it was perfect. It was Jules." →



Sole survivor: Uma Thurman won the role of Mia because of her beautiful feet.

→ The biggest extravagance was Vincent and Mia's date at kitschy '50s themed restaurant Jack Rabbit Slim's. After an initial estimate of \$500,000, the flimsy but functional set was eventually knocked up for around \$150,000.

Being inexperienced, Tarantino relied on his movie geek memory to communicate his precise requirements. Reynolds-Wasco: "He'd say: 'Please go and look at Howard Hawks' *Red Line 7000*, which has a club in it, and this Elvis Presley movie, *Speedway*, which also has a club scene in it. It had car cut in half with little tables in them. *That's* how I want this to look."

One of the funniest scenes in the movie is when Vincent and Mia cast off their nervous tension and cut loose with a kookie one-on-one dance-off to Chuck Berry's *You Never Can Tell*. With Travolta something of an iconic mover, Tarantino could have sat back and watched the improvisational footwork, but Travolta insisted on strong direction: "I told Quentin to guide me. I told him that I could do anything with my body, but he'd have to guide me. He did two things that are typical of him. He showed me a dance in a Godard film, then he himself got up and danced this terrific, tight-fisted little dance. You know what? He's a great little dancer!"

**P**ulp Fiction wrapped in November, 1993. Made for \$8 million, it eventually raked in more than \$100 million in America alone. It reinvented a genre, rewrote a few rules and reheated at least one career.

For the broadsheet dinosaurs, it was too much of a shock ("Souped-up trailer-park trash," sniffed *The Daily Telegraph*; "Hollywood's sleaziest filmmaker," harumphed *The Sunday Times*). Audiences adored it. Tarantino nabbed a Best Original Screenplay gong at the BAFTAs, the Golden Globes and the Oscars.

Although, laughably, *Forrest Gump* beat it to Best Picture, *Pulp Fiction* was easily the movie of 1994 – and the decade. Tarantino had fulfilled his promise. And he was particularly proud of the image projected by the Cannes success...

"The Palme D'Or win? That's a big shield. When people are throwing bricks at me because my films are violent, the Palme win is something that says: 'You're misunderstanding me. I'm not not just about that.'"

*Pulp Fiction* is released on Collector's Edition DVD on 30 September and is reviewed on page 148.

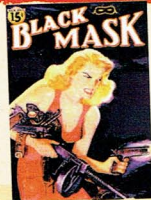
## INFLUENCES & LEGACIES

What it stole and what it started: *Pulp Fiction*'s deep impact.

### INFLUENCES

#### BLACK MASK '20s to '70s

Seminal pulp crime mag featuring hard-boiled genre tales from the likes of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Tarantino's original title for *Pulp Fiction*.

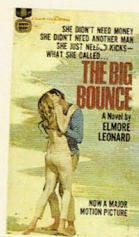


#### BLACK SABBATH 1964

Trashy, Roger Corman-like ensemble of three separate Gothic horror yarns – all linked by Boris Karloff. Tarantino loved it and saw the potential of taking three short stories and fusing them into one film.

#### PULP CRIME NOVELS '50s onwards

"You put it in your back pocket, the pages start coming out but who gives a fuck?" For Tarantino, pulp fiction's biggest pull was the way its likeable, low-life genre characters were forced into believably dangerous situations. Particularly influential: Charles Willeford, who toyed with elastic narrative structures and Elmore Leonard, whose smartmouthed dialogue left an indelible mark.



#### JD SALINGER'S GLASS FAMILY SERIES 1948 onwards

Tarantino loved the way Salinger drifted his characters in and out of each other's stories. A lot like *Pulp Fiction* and a bit like Tarantino's overall movie career (*Reservoir Dogs*' Mr Blonde is Vic Vega, *Pulp Fiction* Vincent's brother; the recurring Seymour Scagnetti; the reference to *True Romance*'s Alabama in *Reservoir Dogs*).

## LEGACIES

### TARANTINO'S ACTING CAREER

Tarantino insisted on playing Jules' friend Jimmie (complete with the arse-puckering "dead nigger storage" line). And lo, an astonishingly mediocre acting career was born (*Desperado*, the truly horrible *Destiny Turns On The Radio*). Critical savaging for his part in Broadway turkey *Wait Until Dark* a dignity-bludgeoning low.

#### "TARANTINO-ESQUE"

The over-used adjective for any post-*Pulp* movie that blends comedy and violence. Most forgot to make the story or characters interesting. Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* nailed it (the doughnut shop scene is Tarantino-by-numbers).



#### ECCLECTIC SOUNDTRACKS

Stirs in surf-rock, Dusty Springfield, kitsch-pop and soul. All this is glued together with between-song snatches of rent-a-quote dialogue. Now a standard with all self-respecting films – particularly anything involving Steven Soderbergh and David Holmes.

#### RETURN OF THE KING

Pre-*Pulp*, Travolta was way off the radar. Then he was suddenly "hot" again. Good news? He gave us *Get Shorty* and *Face/Off*. Bad news? *Battlefield Stinkin' Earth*...

