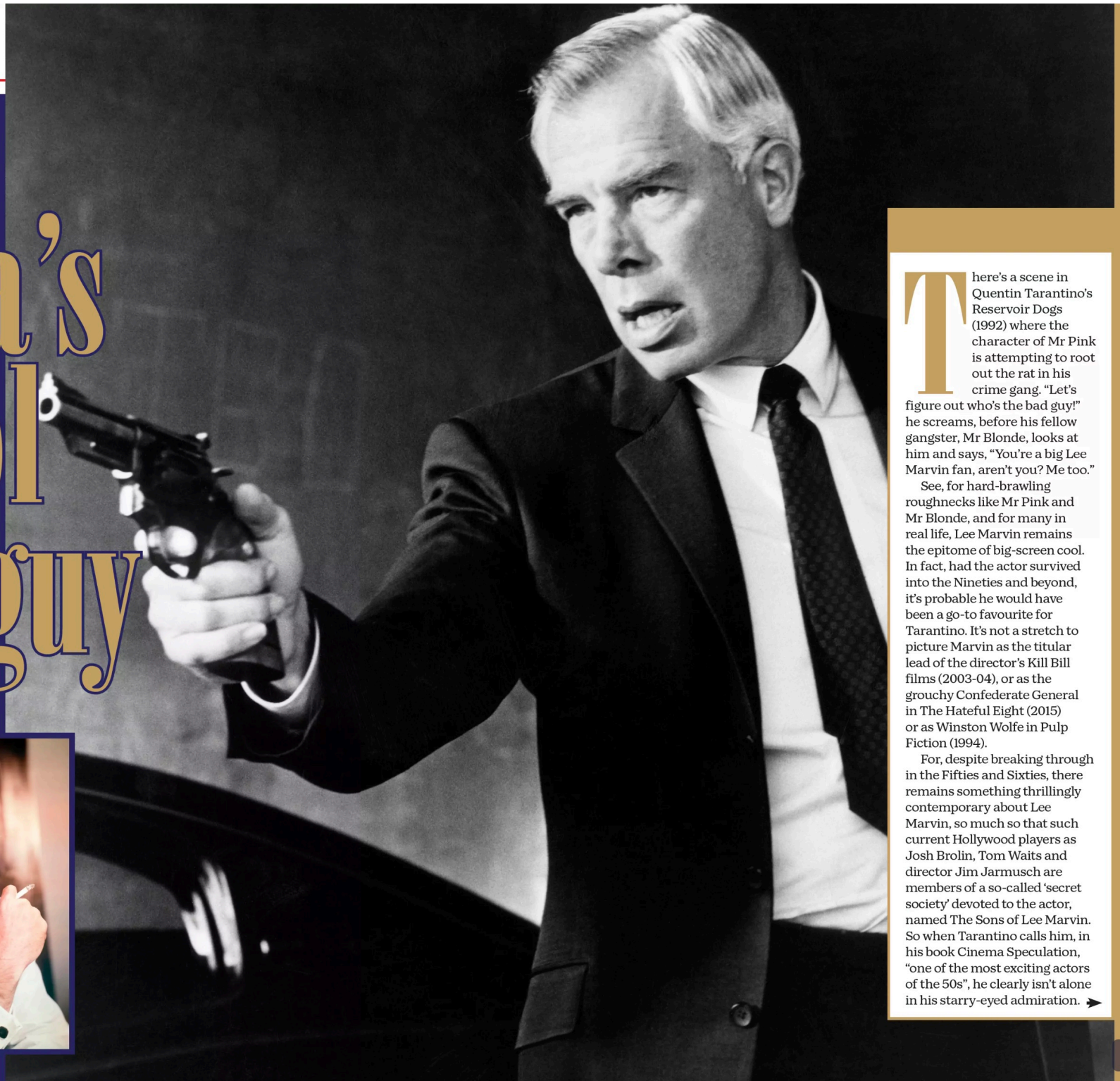


# Lee Marvin Cinema's ice cool tough guy

Few actors portrayed on-screen thuggery with the poise of Lee Marvin. On the 100th anniversary of his birth, Steve O'Brien looks back at this icon of cinematic cool...



**T**here's a scene in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) where the character of Mr Pink is attempting to root out the rat in his crime gang. "Let's figure out who's the bad guy!" he screams, before his fellow gangster, Mr Blonde, looks at him and says, "You're a big Lee Marvin fan, aren't you? Me too."

See, for hard-brawling roughnecks like Mr Pink and Mr Blonde, and for many in real life, Lee Marvin remains the epitome of big-screen cool. In fact, had the actor survived into the Nineties and beyond, it's probable he would have been a go-to favourite for Tarantino. It's not a stretch to picture Marvin as the titular lead of the director's *Kill Bill* films (2003-04), or as the grouchy Confederate General in *The Hateful Eight* (2015) or as Winston Wolfe in *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

For, despite breaking through in the Fifties and Sixties, there remains something thrillingly contemporary about Lee Marvin, so much so that such current Hollywood players as Josh Brolin, Tom Waits and director Jim Jarmusch are members of a so-called 'secret society' devoted to the actor, named *The Sons of Lee Marvin*. So when Tarantino calls him, in his book *Cinema Speculation*, "one of the most exciting actors of the 50s", he clearly isn't alone in his starry-eyed admiration. ➤

**DID YOU KNOW?** Lee's biggest small-screen success was as the lead in the NBC crime series *M Squad*, which ran for 117 episodes between 1957 and 1960

When Lee Marvin died in 1987, he was just 63 – that's younger than Kevin Bacon, James Spader and Tim Robbins are today. But look at those actors and you see men who have barely lived lives outside the movies. Marvin, by contrast, was part of a generation of actors that had lived through war, who had stared death in the face and who knew what real violence looked like. By the time these people became actors, or returned to the day job after VJ Day, they were men, not boys. "It was the Marines who taught me how to act," the actor confided to *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1969. "After that, pretending to be rough wasn't so hard."

**ARMED AND DANGEROUS**

Marvin spent his career – and his life – playing the ultimate hard man. Pick a clip from any of his most famous flicks, from *The Dirty Dozen* to *Point Blank* (both 1967) to *The Killers* (1964), and invariably he's there with a gun in his hand and a psychotic, haunted look on his face.

Of course, guns weren't as alien and exotic to actors born in the Twenties as they are to the pampered thespians of today. And when it comes to being shot on screen, few actors of 2024 know what it's like to have a bullet

puncture your body. But Lee Marvin did... intimately.

As wartime injuries go, getting shot in the backside isn't the one most soldiers would choose. But that's what happened to Lee Marvin of the 24th Marines, 4th Marine Division on June 18, 1944 during the Battle of Saipan when a machine gun fired a round of bullets into the young soldier's butt cheeks, severing his sciatic nerve. The actor would later recount the story of being "shot in the ass" on various chat shows, including our own *Wogan* where he joked, "Yes, I got hit in a very

vulnerable place, which doesn't give me much to talk about, eh, Terry?"

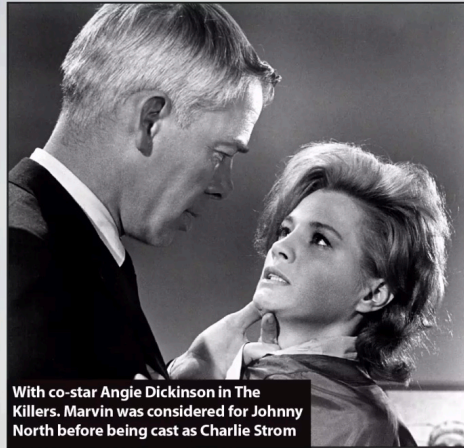
Lee spent over a year recuperating and finished his war with a raft of decorations including the prestigious Purple Heart. But his experiences in the field left him, like it left most of its survivors, permanently scarred.

"Lee had been brutalised by his war experiences in the Pacific," recalled the director John Boorman. "He was 18 years old, killing Japanese, and was completely dehumanised by the experience, as so many were. Acting for him was

a way of recovering his humanity, and exploring different parts was his way of re-entering the world."

Lee slid into acting after he found himself working as a plumber's assistant at a local theatre in upstate New York shortly after the war. An actor had fallen ill and the director, sensing something in the guy fixing the building's toilets, asked Lee if he was free to fill in. He loved it, and they loved him, offering the 20-something Marvin a job at the theatre with a weekly salary of \$7.

Invariably Lee found himself cast as thugs and hoodlums, his heavy-set eyes seemingly made for characters with rage simmering somewhere below the surface, forever ready to erupt. In 1953's *The Big Heat*, he disfigures Gloria Grahame's character by throwing scalding coffee in her face. In *The Killers*, he dangles Angie Dickinson out of an apartment window. In *Point Blank*, in what's possibly his most acclaimed role, he's a hard-nosed criminal bent on revenge. Watching this film now, he didn't even need to use a gun or his fists to look intimidating. The film's most famous scene is simply him walking purposefully



With co-star Angie Dickinson in *The Killers*, Marvin was considered for Johnny North before being cast as Charlie Strom



Marvin provided *The Dirty Dozen* director Robert Aldrich technical assistance with uniforms and weapons to create realistic portrayals of combat



Starring alongside Gloria Grahame and Glenn Ford in *The Big Heat* (1953)

down a corridor, dead intent evident from every move of his body. "It was extraordinary the power he got into that walk," the film's director John Boorman recalled.

**THE DEMON DRINK**

As magnetic as he was on screen, however, Marvin had a questionable reputation on film sets. He'd always been a heavy drinker, but as the Sixties wore on, his intake ballooned, so much so he was often incapable of performing. On 1967's *The Dirty Dozen*, which was shooting in the UK, director Robert Aldrich was scheduled to film a scene with Marvin and co-star Charles Bronson. Except when it came to it, Lee was nowhere to be found, with producer Kenneth Hyman finally tracking down the actor to a pub in Belgravia. "Lee was hanging on at the end of the bar apparently as drunk as a skunk," Hyman remembered.

When Lee arrived on set, he tumbled out of the car, enraging Bronson who yelled at Marvin, "I'm going to f\*\*\*\*ng kill you, Lee!" Hyman then had to forcibly stop Bronson from launching himself at his inebriated co-star.



Marvin was apparently drunk nearly every day of filming *Paint Your Wagon* (left), but won an Academy Award for his dual role in *Cat Ballou* (right)

Nine years later, Roger Moore too saw how Marvin's alcoholism was hindering his work, when they starred together in the movie *Shout at the Devil* (1976). "Twice on the film, he went on a bender," remembered Moore, "and there was a sequence where his daughter on the film has had a baby, and my character was the father. He came in and he was really well gone, and he had this scene where he had to

pick up the baby. He wasn't holding it well and he was shaking, so I thought he was going to drop it. I was petrified he was going to drop this baby. The baby was screaming but when he took hold of it, it went dead quiet. I think he'd breathed on it, and his breath was 99 per cent pure alcohol."

Marvin excelled at bad guy roles, but it wasn't just cold-eyed killers he specialised in. He's electrifying

as the pugnacious leader of the motorcycle gang The Beetles (yes, Lennon and McCartney were indeed watching) in *The Wild One* (1953), and as an ageing cowboy in the elegiac western *Monte Walsh* (1970). And it was actually for his most atypical role that he won his only Oscar, or at least earned 50 per cent of it. In the 1965 comedy-western *Cat Ballou*, Marvin was cast in dual roles – as the black-clad gunman Tim Shrawn and as the shambolic, alcohol-soaked Kid Shelleen

While the straighter part was more obviously Marvin-shaped, it was as the accident-prone Shelleen that Lee stole the picture. OK, it doesn't have the emotional depth of a Charlie Strom (*The Killers*) or a Rico Fardan (*The Professionals*, 1966), but the part only served to illustrate how versatile Marvin was, and demonstrate how one of cinema's most ice-cool presences could, when he wanted to, show off a lighter side.

**A NATURAL FIT**

The success of *Cat Ballou* opened more screen possibilities for Marvin. He appeared alongside a similarly against-type Clint Eastwood in the musical western *Paint Your Wagon* (1969) and headlined as the charismatic salesman Theodore 'Hickey' Hickman in the 1973 film version of Eugene O'Neill's play *The Iceman Cometh*.

One of his richest, and most acclaimed, roles came in 1968's war drama *Hell in the Pacific*. Reuniting him with his *Point Blank* director John Boorman, it's essentially the Second World War acted out in miniature, as Marvin's unnamed US Air Force pilot finds himself marooned on a desert island with a Japanese grunt (played by Toshiro Mifune, also a real-life war veteran). It's a chef's kiss of a movie and one of Marvin's best, yet despite rave reviews, it bombed at the box office.

Lee's final movie was not his best. *The Delta Force* (1986) was a cheap action thriller from bargain-

basement schlock-merchants Cannon Pictures – a far cry from the stellar, critically love-bombed work he'd done with John Ford, Fritz Lang and John Boorman. Sadly, he died a year after its release, of a heart attack, aged just 63.

**SENSITIVE SOUL**

What made Lee Marvin such a fascinating and enduring actor was that, beyond the tough guy posturing, there was a deep tenderness and vulnerability. Off screen, he liked to hunt, but also to paint. He was a man who had experienced violence up-close, and could be violent himself, but believed cinema had a responsibility to depict the subject honestly. "If you make it realistic enough, it becomes so revolting that no viewer would want any part of it," he once remarked. "But most violence on the screen looks so easy and so harmless that it's like an invitation to try it. I say make it so brutal that a man thinks twice before he does anything like that."

It's these contradictions that make Lee Marvin so much more than a poster boy for cinematic tuggery. There are plenty of actors who could have played *Point Blank*'s lead character, but he becomes so much richer than simply a wronged tough guy in Marvin's hands. The character, Walker, is broken, morally and spiritually, and that's all there, in the actor's eyes, in his entire body language.

When Lee passed, *The New York Times*' headline read 'Lee Marvin, Movie Tough Guy, Dies'. Yet he was always more than that. By the time of his death, big-screen tough guys looked like Jean-Claude Van Damme and Arnold Schwarzenegger, gym-honed hardnuts who had never been within an inch of a real gun. They didn't have the snarl or the grit or the soul of Lee Marvin, an actor who lived as hard and fast as the characters he played. And 37 years after his death, he's still the byword for inscrutable cinematic cool.

**I know the face...**

**CECIL KELLAWAY**



**Born:** August 27, 1890,

Cape Town, South Africa

**Died:** February 28, 1973,

Los Angeles, California

**Screen debut:** *The Hayseeds*

(1933) (first credited)

**Screen credits:** 148

**Best known for:** After working in Australian theatre and film, Cecil tried his luck in Hollywood but was frustrated by the small roles offered by RKO in films such as *Double Danger*, *Tarnished Angel* (both 1938) and *Gunga Din* (1939). He returned to Australia but was tempted back to the US by William Wyler with the offer of the part of Cathy's father in *Wuthering Heights* (1939) and never looked back.

He secured two Supporting Actor nominations for *The Luck of the Irish* (1948) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). He was Nick Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and Dr Chumley in *Harvey* (1950) but he turned down the role of Santa Claus in *Miracle on 34th Street*, which went instead to his cousin Edmund Gwenn. On TV he guest starred in *Rawhide* (1959-65), *Bewitched* (1964-72) and *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64).

**Trading blows**

Rumours spread that Marvin's drinking was such an issue on *Shout at the Devil* that he and Roger Moore came to blows, a story the British actor always denied. In his autobiography, however, Moore admitted Lee was "a great liability", explaining how in the fictional punch-up between their two characters, Marvin was so drunk he thought "he was in a real fight. I moved damned fast to get out of the way of his fists," Moore wrote.

He also described how mercurial Lee was on set, writing of how when Marvin was sober he would wrap his arms around one of the many black actors, treating him like an old friend, "though as soon as Lee had a drink that very same person would become the enemy and he'd push them out of his way."

