

Oh Dad!

A Search for

Robert Mitchum

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Take 1

The moon slouches over the city and the air is hot. Restlessness jumps to the down jazz of heavy goods wagons travelling the tracks, their notes and tones clang and shudder the lines – not so much a serenade as a trembling jungle-drum threat, punctuated by an occasional air horn or maintenance gang working the night. The rapid thrust of the intercity express slowing its approach along the last few miles before reaching its stop and the staff in the tea room, the drunks on the platform and the junkies in rest-rooms shooting up, passing out and not waking up. Discovered cold and stiff on the morning tiles; hamstrung by an unusually pure batch, their corpses prodded by mops before the cops are called to sort things out.

My apartment stands on the site of a goods yard and overlooks, from the south side, the tracks which underline

much of the dock city. And Rover Bridge, the rivets of which threaten to leave their clinch if the thump and rumble does not desist. It does not desist. Nor does it prevent the blackberries from crowding the cutting banks or the bats from blackening the navy-blue night before the 4am gulls demand it back. What the steel squeal and weighted back-beat does to nocturnal ears. Ultrasonic attack. It is the resonance of travel, of action, of distance. It demands my attention as I try to sleep; as I try to keep still, rest, lie, and hide in my pad.

I must leave. The trains have woken in me something deep. They threaten my foundations. The need to travel; the need to escape. The speed of my journey is of no importance, but I must depart with haste. Method unknown and irrelevant – train, plane, hitch.... It demands I turn to the greater world. To be part of it. Mitchum would understand this.

‘Tell me what trail to follow, I’ll find it.’

R M, *Second Chance*

From a young age, Robert Mitchum had a strong link with the railways – American railways built with technology developed in the Gwent valleys of Wales.

As a fourteen year old – his head full of poetry and the words and world of Irish-American author Jim Tully and Welsh author W H Davies – he fell for the adventure of the hobo trail. Fare unpaid and with the ambition to be a bum – a bum who had seen something of the world – he boarded a train in his hometown of Bridgeport,

Connecticut, and decided to head west. He travelled across the States nine times. To California, via Georgia in the south-east so he could go see the Okefenokee Swamp he had read so much about.

It was not the first time he left home. Aged four, he walked out and kept walking, only to be found at the city limits. He just ‘wanted to see what was out there’, he would claim. A concerned woman handed him over to the police – his first, but not last, experience of their hospitality. Aged seven, he ran away again, this time to Hartford – a full forty miles up the line. He returned home and began telling tales of his travel time. As a teenage hobo, a ‘road kid’, he smoked wild grass when it still grew wild and legal alongside the tracks, while riding on curiously-named ‘reefer’ refrigeration wagons. Woke to find a fellow hobo, feeling the cold, had set fire to the trousers Mitchum wore – so he sat shivering and half-bare in the cold night, alighted and stole clothes off a washing line; jumped off at Savannah, Georgia, in the search for food, only to be arrested as a vagrant and prosecuted for a robbery he did not commit. He proved his innocence, but was still sent down to the prison farm. He just wanted to go see the swamp, that’s all.

Previously, while Mitchum was still a babe in arms, his army father was crushed between the couplings of box cars which rammed together, irrespective of his internal organs getting in the way. His father – a strong fighter and drinker of Celtic and Blackfoot descent – hung on to life as long as he could but died from his wounds, in his wife’s arms, skewered on steel and dead spent.

Mitchum escaped from Georgia, bullets whistling past his ears as he ran from the chain-gang through Pipemaker Swamp and made his way, eventually, to California via Baltimore, Delaware, New York; at twenty years of age, he found himself conned by his family into auditioning for a role with the Long Beach Players' Guild. He had a natural presence on stage, by all accounts.

Along the way to LA, he was held captive by bootleggers up in the Alabama hills; lived off the ransoms paid for kidnapped pets; came close to having a leg amputated; met his future wife – his only wife – stealing her from under his brother's nose and scaring off all the other boys who came sniffing about; sent a poem to his mother back home:

*Trouble lies in sullen pools along the road I've taken
Sightless windows stare the empty street
No love beckons me save that which I've forsaken
The anguish of my solitude is sweet.*

I wish I'd written that. The loner was not yet the macho hunk his screen image suggested, but neither was he scared of trouble and his quiet sensitivity was already alluring to girls. But with a grasp of what was needed to aid his survival, he kept from the masculine world his poetic persuasions and sensitive voice.

A far cry from Mitchum the big film star. Mitchum the man men wanted to be, and their women agreed. Mitchum the smouldering hero. Anti-hero. The real deal. The ex-con

with a record for drugs and vagrancy. The barrel-chested anarchist. The self-proclaimed 'poontang hunter'. The Howard Hughes fantasy. The man always caught up in bar room brawls, 'accidentally'. The man who claimed he could tell any strain of US weed, blindfolded. The drowsy-eyed, somnambulistic actor who dismissed the film industry as peddling horse shit. The actor's actor who never won an Oscar®. The one who prepared the way for Brando and James Dean. The influence on Pacino, De Niro, Jeff Bridges. The one who stood up for the inexperienced. The star, the storyteller, the out-and-out liar. The tall tales, the bullshit. The life and soul of the party. The foul-mouthed, scatological saxophonist who loved to mix it. The boozier. The jazz hound. The cynic. The small-town ferret-faced kid who wrote poetry.

Where the hell did you go, Mitch, you son of a mother? And don't you go telling me 'six foot under', more like 'forty leagues' – I know your bad ass was scattered at sea. But you still better look over your shoulder, baby, cos I'm coming to get thee.

'You're not gonna find a thing, except yourself.'

R M, *His Kind of Woman*



Take 2

So let's open the file on this cat.

Robert Mitchum's reputation goes before him. Always has. Sometimes deserved, sometimes not. He had 'an easy way of looking as if he knew where the bodies were buried' and admitted when he smiled he looked 'like a fox in a hen-house'.

He's been described as: antagonist and ignorer of authority, rebel, maverick, stray cannon, iconoclast, thrill-seeker, cynic who didn't give a damn about anything, least of all acting... 'the Hipster John Wayne', 'a wild son of a bitch', hemp-headed Hemingway-man... tough, virile, indifferent... a rugged individualist, 'a skeptical and sarcastic cat', 'a taciturn grump and profane crank', a 'study in contradiction'... bloody-minded, cantankerous, deadpan, sardonic... 'Mr Bad Taste', 'Trouble Himself',

'The Man with the Immoral Face'... a roughneck, a beef-cake, a scatological lout... uncouth and overbearing... a thief, con-man and saboteur who 'never backed off from anyone'... head-fucker, game-player, micky-taker, smart-ass... 'roverboy', a dirty dog, 'catnip for women'... the 'embodiment of film noir'... an outlaw, flawed to the core... an 'existentialist hero'... I could go on. OK, let's run with it: he was anarchist; button-pusher; cage-rattler and cruel Casanova; druggy, drunkard and devil's advocate; experimenter and escapee from authority; foul-mouthed fucker; groper; hep-talkin' hophead; inflammatory icon; jazz-hound and jerk; knob-head and knave; Lothario and libertine; muff-magnet; obscene offender-in-chief at every opportunity; pugilist; quoteable, quaffing, quarrelling Quixote; rebellious roustabout and raunchy ratbag; shit-stirrer supreme; thunderous thug and tarnished tartar; an utterly unorthodox, unadulterated adulterer; a violent vulgarian; wildcat and wrongdoer; X-rated extremist; yahoo and yardbird; a zoot-suited zoomorphic zinger... (give me more letters, I don't have to return James Ellroy's thesaurus just yet).

Tales of his antics are legion: expulsion from school; running with street gangs; shooting friends; in and out of prison, coming close to amputation; dognapping and rolling drunks for money; bar brawls, fighting off marines and heavy-weight boxers; drug busts and smuggling; loose-living; wannabee actresses 'throwing' themselves at him; bloody-minded escapades to get what he wanted; getting fired from movies; hanging a film producer from a lamp-post and chucking a press officer in the bay; convincing a

'journalist' he spent his spare time 'poontang' hunting, as if it were a wild animal... Mitch, *you* were the animal, you dirty fucker. Oh and he acted too, when he could be bothered.

Robert Mitchum – 'movie star'. Big deal. What's one less actor in the world? One less fat, over-paid, demanding drama queen? Shit, no great loss to anyone except his family.

'That great has-been.'

Susan Hayward, *The Lusty Men*

In an age when cinema was at the heart of entertainment and Hollywood actors were *the* great heroes, Mitchum publicly considered himself a movie star rather than an actor.

'There are actors and there are movie stars. Basically, that's it. And the assumed rewards and returns and claims of a movie star are the goal of the actors.'

R M

So which was he? Talented screen performer or celebrity hunk? Those in the business knew there was no question: Mitchum was among the very best movie actors of the twentieth century, who never failed to stand out amongst his peers and has served as a role model ever since. But the critics and public have consistently found it hard to be certain. Even today, whether or not he deserves his praise is still a moot point.

'People can't make up their minds whether I'm the greatest actor in the world or the worst. Matter of fact, neither can I. It's been said that I underplay so much I could have stayed home, but I must be good at my job or they wouldn't haul me around the world at these prices.'

R M

If by your friends shall ye be known, then by their co-stars and directors shall an actor. Mitchum worked with renowned directors Edward Dmytryk, John Farrow, Henry Hathaway, Howard Hawks, John Huston, Jim Jarmusch, Elia Kazan, David Lean, Mervyn LeRoy, Vincente Minnelli, Robert Parrish, Sydney Pollack, Otto Preminger, Nicholas Ray, Martin Scorsese, Josef von Sternberg, J Lee Thompson, Jaques Tourneur, Raoul Walsh, William A Wellman and Daryl F Zanuck. If Mitchum wasn't a great actor, then that's a hell of a lot of experienced directors making the same mistake.

'Mitchum is... of the caliber of Olivier, Burton and Brando. In other words, the very best in the field... he is capable of playing King Lear.'

John Huston

'He has the greatest natural sense of timing a line of anybody I have seen work before the cameras. He does naturally what most actors and actresses strive for years to attain without success.'

Lloyd Bacon

'I adore Robert Mitchum.'

Martin Scorsese

It's tempting to think Mitchum never really appeared in a 'great' movie. Lots of footage, not much substance. And yet he starred with some of the finest, most famous and endearing names in cinema history: Lauren Bacall, Yul Brynner, Richard Burton, James Coburn, Tony Curtis, Olivia DeHavilland, Robert De Niro, Johnny Depp, Kirk Douglas, Henry Fonda, Ava Gardner, Cary Grant, Rita Hayworth, Katherine Hepburn, Charlton Heston, Rock Hudson, John Hurt, Gene Kelly, Deborah Kerr, Burt Lancaster, Laurel and Hardy, Jack Lemmon, Dean Martin, Lee Marvin, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Newman, Jack Nicholson, Gregory Peck, Edward G Robinson, Jane Russell, Frank Sinatra, James Stewart, Elizabeth Taylor, Spencer Tracy, Peter Ustinov, John Wayne and numerous others.

For my money, Mitchum was a damn fine actor who wanted to be an artist, but the industry wouldn't let him. Yes, he could've forced his intentions but then he would've risked appearing precious or pretentious. More to the point, he would've risked the income needed to support his extended family. Any intention of producing art was beaten out of him by gorilla scripts so, realising his artistic desires would not be met within the movie industry, he quickly became cynical of the business. He sussed the lie of the land: churn 'em out kid, churn 'em out. And churn he did.

'I gave up being serious about making pictures years ago – around the time I made a film with Greer Garson and she took 125 takes to say "no".'

R M

It's hardly surprising when you consider the greater details. The film was *Desire Me*, the year 1947. It was one of three movies Mitchum was making simultaneously, for RKO and MGM. Director George Cukor was replaced by Jack Conway. Jack Conway was replaced by Mervyn LeRoy. Mervyn LeRoy was replaced by Victor Saville. Co-star Robert Montgomery left to work on another film, Mitchum took his part and Richard Hart took Mitchum's. The script went through so many rewrites that many elements of the story got lost in the fog. What a way to make a film. What a way to make a living.

'I think there were five directors on the film. That was a real mess. You wouldn't believe the dialogue in that script. George Cukor and Mervyn LeRoy are both exemplary directors in their own right. But together they don't spell mother.'

R M

So what happened to Mitchum's motivation and purpose? His artistic integrity and reward? Did he: offer himself up to a role, only to discover he wasn't that talented, or wasn't that appreciated, so stepped back; refuse to offer himself up out of fear or disinterest, satisfying himself with the pay-check and fame; offer himself up but claim he didn't so as to side-step criticism, failure and pain? All of

the above; none of the above; something else?

'He may say he doesn't take acting seriously, but he was totally professional. He resented it when others weren't.'

Jacqueline DeWitt, co-star, *The Gentle Approach*

There's plenty of evidence as to his professionalism – however drunk he was the night before, he almost always showed up the next morning, clean-shaven and sober enough to work, having memorised not only his own lines, but everyone else's.

'Mitch could drink... could drink most of the night but it never seemed to affect him. At seven o'clock the next morning he was there, in makeup, wardrobe and on the set, on time. And he always knew his lines.'

Stanley Rubin, producer, *River of No Return*

Whether that sobriety lasted the day depended on the quality of the movie. On those occasions when he felt frustrated or let down by the quality of script, performance or production, he would allow his emotions to get the better of him and any pretensions to professionalism. But however righteously angry he felt, he was always willing to apologise if he realised he was wrong. Or when he sobered up.

'Mitchum took to drink. Who could blame him? Bob put much more violence into the action... the stunt men went flying... he went on a rampage.... there was nothing I could do except

stand there and watch and hope the fury would finally drain out of him. It didn't. It went on and on.... I started into my prepared speech... "You're a bully and a..." but Bob interrupted. "Look," he said, "I'm sorry about what happened. I apologize. What more can I say?".... "Bob," I said, "you're a son of a bitch." "I know.""

Richard Fleischer, uncredited director, *His Kind of Woman*

Wouldn't it be great to go to work and let rip like that, and still be employed the next morning?

'Wouldn't it be fun to be a real movie star and get to act like one... get shitfaced snockered? Wow! Just like Robert Mitchum. That'd be something else friends, that'd be something else.'

Peter Boyle, co-star, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*

Those stories always find their way into print. What's often ignored is the evidence proving his good behaviour and total involvement in a role, if he thought it deserved the effort.

'[Mitchum] doesn't want anyone to realise it, but he cares deeply.'

Edward Dmytryk, director, *Anzio, Crossfire, Till the End of Time*

'Often they embarrass me by saying, "We think it's fine." If they say to me, "It stinks but let's make it," then I'm with them. I ain't here because I'm displaying any facility or versatility.'

R M

So he responded to how he was treated. If they gave him a film worthy of an actor, he put in his all. If they gave him a dud deserving of a studio mule, he kicked and chewed his way through it.

‘[Mitchum] simply walks through most of his pictures with his eyes half open because that’s all that’s called for.’

John Huston

The great shame is not that he didn’t put his full effort into every role, but that his disregard for certain films has been used to camouflage his great subtlety on screen.

What made Mitchum’s portrayals so unappetising to many was that he brought realism to the screen before anyone wanted it. In the forties and fifties, when a cinema audience settled in with their popcorn, they wanted to see ‘a performance’. And Mitchum looked like he wasn’t performing. He didn’t ‘act’ as such so, in a time of ham-dramatics and over-acting, his subtlety was often misunderstood. Besides, how can such a troublemaker, a roustabout, a drug fiend, a demon, a beast, be subtle? Once a man is tagged as a bull in a china-shop there is little he can do except try to remember to be himself – whichever version he might be that day.

Mitchum could do things on screen no one else mastered. Free of the ego-driven ambition to be the only ‘star’ that mattered, he made standing in the background an art-form; he made waiting for someone to answer a masterclass in acting – in not acting, or not appearing to act.

One of the great ironies is the ease with which critics

became lazy, in writing about how they perceived Mitchum to be lazy. They often dismissed his performances with yet another ‘Mitchum sleepwalks through the picture’ swipe, whether he was engaged and at his most remarkably subtle or just going through the motions, frustratedly awaiting a pay-check. Once his style was misconstrued, he was damned for ever.

So Mitchum’s subtlety in a not-too-subtle age, a subtlety which contradicted his persona, was often misinterpreted as ‘doing nothing’. And sometimes it was true. Mitchum would go through his scripts marking whole passages ‘NAR’ – ‘No Acting Required’. Was this laziness? A lack of enthusiasm? Mitchum laughing all the way to the bank? He was the first to admit to all of these, just as he was always willing to put himself down, as an actor. Perhaps, just perhaps, it wasn’t acting that was required, but naturalism; reality; a man, not a pretence. Marking scenes ‘NAR’ could mean ‘no effort’ or it could mean ‘be normal’, authentic. Acting is easy, compared with being. You watch how Mitchum does nothing on screen. He confounds movie-goers because he doesn’t act like an actor; he acts like a normal guy, or as normal a guy as the role will allow.

[Mitchum] was born with what we call film-style acting. A really fine film actor does not give a performance, he creates a person and is that person. Mitchum was one of the very best at that. He knew people, common people – I think that’s one thing that endears him to people. He gives that feeling.’

Edward Dmytryk

These days, movie audiences expect a subtle approach from actors and overblown reactions can make us cringe. So although we can now see Mitchum's skills for what they are, we've also become blasé. But it mustn't be forgotten: this man was doing it before the contemporaries. Without Mitchum, the best movie acting wouldn't be what it is today.

Opinions of Mitchum have always been fuelled by what he said of himself. He was always willing to supply a self-deprecating remark which some critics took as confirmation of their own opinions. He didn't help his own case.

'I have two acting styles: with and without a horse.'

R M

He claimed he had only three expressions – 'looking left, looking right and looking straight ahead'; that the only difference between him and other actors was that he had 'spent more time in jail'; that he was highly sought after because he was cheap. Perhaps Mitchum was just getting the first punch in. He shared with Spencer Tracy a simple philosophy towards the craft: 'learn your lines and don't bump into the furniture'. He did the basics well, kept things simple and that simplicity gave room for texture and dynamic to emerge in his performance.

For me, it's Mitchum's absolute ability to be subtle, often in unsubtle roles, which really reveals his talent. Whereas most actors would approach a macho role by being loud and obvious, Mitchum underplayed, which gave his characters far greater authenticity and menace, if menace was required.

'I was trying to get a close-up of [Mitchum] reacting... and nothing happened. So I cut and said, "You're supposed to react." "I did react." "Well, I didn't see it!" He said, "Well, it's the best I can do." I thought, "Jesus, he's pretty snotty." We run the dailies the next day and by God you look at the screen and he is reacting. It's on the screen and I couldn't see it.'

Richard Fleischer, director, *His Kind of Woman* and *Bandido*

Mitchum made sense because he was believable and because he wasn't like all the rest. Sometimes he just *was* and that was enough. Mind, you watch enough Mitchum movies and you soon get fed up with the sigh he developed and stuck to again and again.

Mitchum never claimed to have any great insight into the art or craft of acting and wasn't the kind of man to show enthusiasm for learned techniques or schools of thought. He considered actors to be 'narcissistic bastards' and was frequently frustrated with the likes of Peppard and De Niro who insisted on following 'The Method' or Actors' Studio techniques, or needed hours to get into character. Famously, when asked if he followed the Stanislavski method he replied, 'I follow the Smirnoff method'.

'Brando can spend three minutes saying hello.'

R M

'[Young actors] only want to talk about acting method and motivation. In my day, all we talked about was screwing and overtime.'

R M

While filming *Secret Ceremony* he was so detached from the cast's process that he skipped set and found his way to the home of Bob Parrish, his director on *Fire Down Below* and *The Wonderful Country*.

'It was early in the morning. He asked for some tequila... and told us he had snuck out on [Joseph] Losey and Liz Taylor and Mia [Farrow]. They didn't even know he had left. He said they were arguing over their motivation for the next scene. They needed to know what was the character's grandmother's maiden name. In other words, he was decrying that kind of acting. He drank some more tequila and decided he better get going... he said, "I'll go back and hit my mark."'

Kathie Parrish

Mitchum relied on his depth and humanity, on his understanding of people and the psychology of men. Real people who shit and fart. He was one of them. A man of his time, Mitchum wasn't alone in his opinions.

'Method actors give you a photograph, real actors give you an oil painting.'

Charles Laughton, actor and director

Equally considered was John Huston's reply to a USC film student who questioned whether he should follow the three-act formula for movie-making: 'I think you need to get yourself down to Mexico and fuck some whores.' Stop analysing process and get out there and live.

These were the opinions of actors and directors who

had first grabbed life by the throat and survived a range of experience before portraying it on screen.

Mitchum was *the* man of his generation. On screen and in life. Respected by his peers, loved by his audience, feared by his rivals. He was the original screen rebel. He didn't just act the part, he lived it, and then merely presented a version of himself on screen. Although, as a young man, Mitchum found in stage-acting a level of pleasure, enthusiasm and group expression he'd never before encountered, he shared with Humphrey Bogart and Spencer Tracy the belief that movie acting was an embarrassing thing for a 'real' man to do. In a 'man's' world, acting isn't a real job and isn't something a 'real man' should be caught doing. Next thing you know, he'll be joining a dance troupe and writing poems, prancing along the flouncy outer-limits of masculinity. Sensitivity equals weakness and lower status as 'man'. I'd love to claim these beliefs have vanished.

'One feels that way. Should be out building a bridge or digging a ditch or jacking up a tyre or something. Stealing a car or something. Not making faces; getting all painted up and making faces, pretending to be someone else.'

R M

'I like getting up at 5am and having my head painted for the cameras. What real man doesn't?'

R M

But it wasn't only the questions he himself cast upon his

masculinity which made Mitchum uncomfortable with his role as movie star.

'I'm ashamed of being an actor because people accord you the respect and fame and attention you don't merit.... A lady who teaches blind children wrote me, "My pupils believe that when you say something on the screen, whatever it is, it must be true. Your voice has the ring of honesty and sincerity in it." Stuff like that bothers the hell out of me. It's embarrassing because I'm only a survivor of the Stone Age of American middle-class culture. I'm no hero or paragon.'

R M

At least, as actors, Mitchum and Bogart played tough-man roles that remained in the public's consciousness, even when they were off set. God forbid the world discover Mitchum wasn't reliant upon acting for his artistic satisfaction. God forbid the world discover that for artistic satisfaction the big man, the all man, the man's man – Robert Mitchum – turned to poetry.

Whatever your opinions on Mitchum as an actor, there's no doubting he appearing in some great movies. *The Story of GI Joe* (1945), *Crossfire* (1947), *Heaven Knows, Mr Allison* (1957), *The Sundowners* (1960), *The Longest Day* (1962) and *Ryan's Daughter* (1970) all deserved their Oscar® wins and nominations. Others, like *Pursued* (1947), *Out of the Past* (1947), *The Lusty Men* (1952), *Night of the Hunter* (1955), *Cape Fear* (1962) and *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1973) never received the awards, rewards or credit they deserved.

Post-World War II, Mitchum was huge in both physical and celluloid frame; in both presence and star value. In a time when people were shorter and movie careers easy to come by and easy to lose. Actors of lesser stature tried to upstage him but the audience's attention remained on him.

At over six foot he was not to be messed with, and directors presumed he could take any punishment. He often had to do his own stunts – falling downstairs, wrestling giant sea turtles, steering a raft down the rapids. An aspect of the job which, over the years, would ruin his knees, his ankles, and anything else that hurt.

Mitchum wasn't only man's man, he was lady's man, also. Physically broad and strong (though not so toned as life went on), Mitchum's rugged, masculine frame sent women wild.

'Mitchum was really physically imposing and kept himself in great shape – he always worked out and was always quite gorgeous to look at.'

Polly Bergen, co-star, *Cape Fear*

But he also had something else – his drowsy eyes fronting a suggestion of subterranean brutality wrapped in an electric sexual presence. He was danger, he was risk, he was animal.

'Of all the post-war actors – Douglas, Lancaster, Widmark – only Mitchum figured out how to be a man's man and a woman's man at the same time.'

Carrie Rickey, film critic

'Mitchum... is MAN!'

Frances Nuyen, co-star
Last Time I Saw Archie, Man in the Middle

So potently did Mitchum's real-life activities substantiate his bad-boy image and reputation as a dangerous force; such was his standing as the sexually-alluring anti-hero; so clearly did he stand out; so attractive was he to the fantasies of acceptable society and a role model to the loner and outcast, that even a career-threatening court case for possession of illegal narcotics did nothing but aid his development, his fame, his importance, the respect his fans held for him. The women looked up to him as all man, as dangerous man; the men were threatened by him, saw him as one of their own, or looked up to him as the epitome of what they wanted to be.

'Bob... is amazingly tolerant of the fawning adulation of hysterical women, and is invariably picked on by men who are jealous of his success. He is very slow to move to retaliate, though...'

Deborah Kerr, co-star, *Heaven Knows, Mister Allison*, etc

He was seen as the bad boy both on- and off-screen. His fan club, the 'Bob Mitchum Droolettes', grew in number – all bobby-socks and young pussies eager for the screen giant to provide them with the 'real' man of their dreams; good girls wanting to escape their fathers into the arms of a bad boy. These were the days before Marlon Brando, before James Dean, before the modern-day two-bit pretenders

who are desperate for us to believe they are dangerous desperados. Before Mitchum, there was no ‘great American screen anti-hero’; no rough and ready character who was just trying to survive. Mitchum invented it. He lived it. He brought to roles something genuine which has since been the goal of numerous outsiders, oddballs and loveable fuck-ups, pseudo or otherwise. They owe him their careers, their demand and their infamy. Mitchum didn’t fit the niche, he created it. You go look at that niche, you go look at Brando and James Dean and all those misfits and anti-heroes and you’ll see, you’ll see they’re just trying to fill a Mitchum-shaped crater, unsuccessfully.

‘[Mitchum] was cool before cool became common.’

Stanley Rubin, producer, *River of no Return*

Before him there were tough guys, sure, but they were of a different mould: Bogart, Cagney, Edward G Robinson – greats all, as either heroes or villains – but audiences didn’t associate with them so easily; found it harder to see themselves in the actors on screen. Mitchum was human.

‘You know what the average Robert Mitchum fan is? He’s full of warts and dandruff and he’s probably got a hernia, too. But he sees me up there on the screen and thinks, “If that bum can make it, I can become president.” I bring a ray of hope to the great unwashed.’

R M

Many of his B-movies were pot-boilers just making up the

production figures, or opportunities for Mitchum to rid himself of contractual obligations, but have since taken on a new value as classic examples of style or as markers of the period.

When Strangers Marry (re-released as *Betrayed*) has been dubbed ‘unquestionably the finest B-film’ (Don Miller, movie historian) and ‘the model of a budget thriller’ (Alvin H Marrill, *Robert Mitchum on the Screen*), and resulted in Mitchum being offered a contract by RKO. Several of Mitchum’s RKO pictures can now be viewed as great examples of film noir.

‘Mitchum was film noir.’

Martin Scorsese

In hindsight, noir seems the perfect vehicle for the real Mitchum, who led a raging existence of black and white yet was a great appreciator and explorer of grey areas.

Out of the Past has been heralded as the best film noir ever, whereas *Crossfire* and *The Lusty Men* are amongst the best the studio ever produced. Even *His Kind of Woman* and *Macao*, although structurally and technically rough-and-ready, remain entertaining opportunities to see Mitchum and Jane Russell bounce off each other.

Some Mitchum movies were unique, original, or the best of their genre: *The Locket* (1946) was the most flashback-obsessed movie Hollywood had ever produced; *Crossfire* (1947) was ahead of its time, in dealing with anti-Semitism in post-war America; *Pursued* was the first ever psychological western; *The Lusty Men* was the greatest-ever

rodeo picture; *Thunder Road* (1958) was the forerunner, and greatest, of the moonshine-runner flicks; *The Longest Day* (1962) was the most ambitious war movie ever made and a major influence on *Saving Private Ryan*; *Night of the Hunter* (1955) and *Cape Fear* (1962) were complex and sophisticated dramas in which Mitchum gave brilliant presentations of psycho-sexual villains.

Whereas many of the pictures released under the bizarre leadership of Howard Hughes can be seen to have ruined RKO (including Mitchum's own films, according to the man himself), another Mitchum film saved 20th Century-Fox from disappearing up its own box office. Having overspent massively on the production of the grandiose and extravagant Burton/Taylor flick *Cleopatra*, the studio found itself in huge trouble. There was no way the studio could afford to make another film, least of all a huge star-studded project like *The Longest Day*, but so determined was studio head Darryl F Zanuck to go ahead with the project that he funded it himself. Not only did it prove to be a great war film and an Oscar® winner, it also saved the studio.

Unfortunately not all Mitchum's movies were so monumental. He sure appeared in some real stinkers, he was the first to admit it. They may've paid the mortgage but movies like *Matilda* (1978), *Breakthrough* (1982) and *Believed Violent* (1990) should never have seen the light of day. Even *The Red Pony* (1948), for which John Steinbeck wrote the screen adaptation of his own book, was a tedious disappointment. As for *James Dean: Race with Destiny* (1997), it's best to remember Mitchum was near to death

and was probably trying to make some money for his family, before passing. But even when you consider the duds, the big cheques for poor product, the shambolic vomiting of scripts dumped on studios by conniving agents; even when you consider the dross and the contract-fillers, the walk-on parts and the war-time propaganda flicks, the scales are still most firmly weighted in Mitchum's favour – none of the bad films are so bad as to detract from his finest moments; the mean is still magnificent.

'I became very conscious of waste. I mean, why? Why would they [make] a film that had so little chance, and why would they do it so badly? I was very conscious of the waste of time. I suppose it kept people employed – that's the only possible excuse.... I always felt they could do much better and I was very disappointed. For instance, during the war you could put a sign on a marquee that said "Closed" and people would queue up for four blocks to see "Closed" and at that time they could've... made some advances but instead of that they reached down to the bottom of a drawer and they took out all the dreck that they'd been gathering for years, that agents had palmed off on them, and they made it and people were subjected to it, and I don't believe that's fair, really. Truly, I think that the people deserve something for their attention.'

R M

Still, the general consensus seems to be: if only Mitchum appeared in more quality films, rather than often being the one glimmer of quality in a couple of reels of mediocrity,

appreciation of his talents would be far greater. Well, let's break this down. Mitchum broke into Hollywood in 1943, at a time when pictures were churned out en masse, many taking only a week or two to film. It was normal for actors to work on more than one film in a day. Are they technically superior? Do they have the rapid-cut pazazz of contemporary movies? Of course not. They offer a slower, more textural pleasure. But pleasure and entertainment are still there. If you consider many of the movies Mitchum appeared in, they're either genuine markers in the development of cinema or deserve to be re-evaluated as great examples of period style. If you look at Mitchum's output, decade by decade, quality and value are consistent:

1940s – the 'Hopalong Cassidy' movies; *When Strangers Marry*; *The Story of GI Joe*; *Till the End of Time*; *Crossfire*; *Pursued*; *Out of the Past*; *The Big Steal*.

1950s – *Where Danger Lives*; *His Kind of Woman*; *The Lusty Men*; *Angel Face*; *Second Chance*; *Track of the Cat*; *Night of the Hunter*; *Man with the Gun*; *Foreign Intrigue*; *Heaven Knows, Mr Allison*; *The Enemy Below*; *Thunder Road*; *The Wonderful Country*.

1960s – *Home from the Hill*; *The Sundowners*; *Cape Fear*; *The Longest Day*; *Two for the Seesaw*; *Secret Ceremony*.

1970s – *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*; *The Yakuza*; *Farewell, My Lovely*.

1980s – *Maria's Lovers*; *Mr North*; even *Scrooged*.

1990s – the remake of *Cape Fear*; *Tombstone*; *Dead Man*.

That's one hell of a lot of damn fine cinema. Who else has starred in so many good films, over such a wide period

and in so many styles? Compare this list to the output, to the average quality of product, from an actor like, say, Tom Cruise....

'Mitchum delivered a body of work that now looks timeless and enduring when compared with other American screen actors.'

David Gritten, *The Daily Telegraph*

With so much respect from his peers, he must've had a shelf full of Oscars®, right? Wrong. He never received one. He was nominated once and many in the business lobbied the Academy to award him a lifetime achievement award before he died, but neither went his way.

Mitchum was nominated for the Best Supporting Actor award in 1945, for his role in *The Story of GI Joe*. Afterwards he quipped, 'You notice the Academy hasn't messed with me since.'

'When he passed away I was a little miffed that here was a guy who should've got an Academy Award or a nomination at least for a dozen different films... when we knew that he was sick we did a little push to try and get him the Life Achievement Award. Virtually ever actor he ever worked with sent in letters to the board of directors... Martin Sheen wrote him a letter, De Niro, Eastwood, Selleck, Nicholson... my father was overlooked again. Of course he wasn't around for the next one. The next one Jack Nicholson got an Oscar® and dedicated [it] to my father. The actors knew who was a good actor.'

Chris Mitchum, son

It's commonly believed that there was really only one reason why Mitchum never received an Oscar® and that was his refusal to toe the line. He wasn't pliable, he wasn't controllable. If they put him on the stage in front of a worldwide audience, who knows what he might do or say? If you award the rebels, the individuals, what message does that send out to everyone else? If the troublemakers win awards, why should anyone else behave? Mitchum could never win; could never be seen to win. That's the nature of the game, and he knew it.

Mitchum wasn't willing to perpetuate the myth of Hollywood spendour. He may've been a movie star as a job, but he didn't subscribe to the full package – his brain, his thinking, remained that of a blue-collar man who had been forged in the fire of the real world, and wasn't willing to lose sight of that amongst the glitter and glamour.

'I don't think he really understood Hollywood and all the glamour and glitz, and I think that's why he was Hollywood's first bad boy, because he never really played that game. He would be the guy who would stand up for himself and not worry if his nose got broken. He was a guy's guy.'

Bentley Mitchum, grandson

OK, we get the message. Regardless of awards and the acknowledgement from authority, his status as an actor stands. Those in the know, knew. Mitchum was the real deal. Now I gotta go figure what this cat means to me. I gotta figure out why he wrapped up the poet in the man's man guise; why he couldn't get away with being all of

himself; why he *presumed* he couldn't get away with being all of himself; why being an actor or a poet was such a threat to his perceived masculinity; and why so little has changed. Good god, I need to go find this man 'cos I need to learn from him.

'Alright, he was the best, but he's dead.'

R M, *White Witch Doctor*

That fact ain't gonna stop me. I despised him as a kid but now, as a boy approaching forty, I need myself a role model, a guide, a surrogate. I'm going for a beer.

Take 3

Mitchum's regular film career began as an extra in the 'Hopalong Cassidy' cowboy movies, starring William Boyd in the title role. Boyd had been sinking into the swamp of alcoholism before the Hoppy's came along and resurrected his career in the mid-1930s. Mitchum, like Boyd, was chosen because he was available, and cheap.

My father liked Hopalong Cassidy. As a child growing up in post-World War II Cardiff, he'd be there, Saturday mornings in some flea-pit cinema, whooping at the screen with the other kids. He had his photo taken wearing a Roy Rogers T-shirt. Later, as a grown man, he never shook off the disappointment he felt that it was Rogers and not Cassidy emblazoned on his chest.

For all his childish inability to shake off childhood disappointment, when it came to horse operas he had

good taste – there are few better ways to laze away an hour or a day than with a big spliff, a comfy settee and a good-versus-bad black and white ‘Hoppy’ flick. Or several. And there *were* several – thirty-five in all, of which Mitchum appeared in seven, usually playing an unshaven heavy, long-legged and slim. He described these early roles as ‘very little dialogue, a lot of beard’.

As with most of Mitchum’s life, the story of how he came to get his first break has variations: the official version claims he was working as an extra when agent Paul Wilkins wangled a chance for Mitchum to meet ‘Hoppy’ producer, Harry ‘Pop’ Sherman; another version claims Mitchum was involved with Sherman’s daughter, Teddy, and got his introduction through her; another that he wasn’t *involved* with Teddy, but that she was driving along Sunset Boulevard when she spotted Mitchum thumbing a ride. She stopped and when he found out she was on her way to the studios he asked if she could get him in. She got him in and introduced him to her father. This was May 1942 and Mitchum was working at a shoe-shop on Wilshire Boulevard. Or maybe he wasn’t. One version says he had already been fired, for screaming ‘Beaver!’ at an annoying customer. I’m tempted not to believe this but I used to flick the V’s at customers when I worked for W H Smith, so who am I to throw a dim light. Another version claims he screamed ‘Beaver!’ whenever a female entered the store.

Peter Falk: *‘Look, a guy can sell shoes for forty years, I live more in one day. I see more and I feel more. I taste more, I think more, I’m more. Understand? I’m more. You know,*

there's more to living than just breathing. Capisce?'

R M: 'Capisce.'

Anzio

Mitchum went to meet Sherman wearing a borrowed suit held together with sticky tape. Sherman sized him up, liked the look of him (if not his suit) and told him not to shave.

The one constant throughout many versions of this story is *why* Mitchum was needed in the first place: Charlie Murphy – a regular in the 'Hoppy' movies – had his skull crushed when he fell off a stage coach during filming. Mitchum was to take his place. When he arrived, the costumer scrapped the blood off Murphy's hat and gave it to Mitchum. Yep, he made his screen debut in a dead man's hat, and you don't get any more cowboy than that.

But cowboy he ain't; *wasn't*. He may've been a regular in the saddle, but not on the back of a horse. It wasn't until later in life that Mitchum became a horse-man, breeding them at his Maryland ranch, including a World's Champion, Don Guerro.

He had 'owned' a horse as a kid, but only because it had broken loose in search of somewhere to die. Mitchum locked it in a barn where its corpse soon stank to high heaven. But as a Hollywood cowboy he was green, so when he bluffed about his riding skills to the experienced 'Hoppy' crew they sensed he was covering his tracks and put him on a dangerous horse.

Hoss. He tried to mount but it threw him off. Sensing his new job and wage were at stake, and a potential loss of face, he punched the horse full on the nose. It didn't throw

him again. 'I had to stick on because Dorothy was pregnant again,' he said, 'money was scarce.'

The horse operas were good to Mitchum – as well as a decent wage they also provided all the manure he could sell. For the rest of his life he would refer to his job as 'horse-shit salesman', 'movie *actress*' or 'RKO's mule'.

'It was kinda my road-game... if I didn't have another job I could always get a job on a Hopalong Cassidy because they made them endlessly, you know. I think they made two pictures every three weeks. They'd do the interiors of one and then the exteriors of both and then the interiors of the second... it was a good healthy outdoor life for a hundred dollars a week, all the horse manure I could carry home, playing cowboys and Indians, picnicing in the grass, it was OK.'

R M

Six years later, his career on an impressive rise, Mitchum's infamous answer to the question 'What is your profession?' was '*former actor*'.

Picture this: 1 September 1948 – a warm night. LAPD narcotics officers raid 8334 Ridpath Drive on LA's hip, happening Laurel Canyon....

Loaded on Scotch and sat smoking grass are Mitchum and his buddy Robin Ford. Mitchum has been under surveillance for some time and Ford is well-known to the Narc Squad who are desperate for a big-name collar. Mitchum and Ford are visiting twenty-year-old Lana Turner lookalike Lila Leeds and twenty-five-year-old dancer Vicki

Evans. Mitchum sparks a joint and throws a pack of them on the table. He doesn't want to be there; feels antsy; thinks he sees a face at the window. The police creep around the bungalow and pretend to be Evans' dogs, scratching at the back door. Evans lets them in. The police introduce themselves in their inimitable manner. Mitchum drops his joint and puts out his wrists to receive the cuffs to which he is already accustomed. Amongst the drugs found are marijuana and amphetamine. The press have a field-day; his wife goes bananas. It looks like his days are numbered.

'I figured I'd go quietly. Not like I was a virgin – it was trip number eleven for me [for] various infractions of statutes: walking against the lines, stepping on the grass, sassing the cops – jazz like that.'

R M

Mitchum had already appeared in an incredible thirty-five movies in five years, including successful war pictures and noir classics *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, *The Story of GI Joe*, *Undercurrent*, *Crossfire* and *Out of the Past*, but he had just become the first major Hollywood star of the talking-movie age to get arrested for narcotics.

It's important to appreciate to what extent Mitchum's star was in the ascendancy. In 1948 he was receiving more fan-mail than any other Hollywood star except Ginger Rogers – around 1,500 letter a week. In the previous few years, he had his first star billing (*Nevada*); had been nominated for an Oscar® (*The Story of GI Joe*); worked with legendary directors William A Wellman, Raoul Walsh,

Mervyn LeRoy, Jacques Tourneur, Vincente Minnelli and Edward Dmytryk; had starred in the superb *Pursued*, *Crossfire* and *Out of the Past*; had appeared with established stars such as Burgess Meredith and Katherine Hepburn; had made his network radio debut; and still had his range and creative freedom unrestricted by behavioural expectation and image. Who could tell in what roles he would best be employed. Would he be hero, villain, paternal/fraternal/avuncular rock, fall guy, comedian, lover, rat? Much was expected of him. He had a future. There was a growing momentum to a future of fame and success.

These days, the possession of marijuana is hardly headline-grabbing news, and it shouldn't have been then – 1948 was a busy year. Mud was being slung before the House Un-American Activities Committee; the US was testing new atomic weapons in the Marshall Islands; the Supreme Court ordered the state of Oklahoma to admit a black girl to law school; Communists seized power in Czechoslovakia; North Korea formed a Soviet people's republic; over two thousand people were killed in six weeks, as Arabs and Jews fought over land known as Israel or Palestine; Britain signed an alliance with Iraq, and warned Argentina to remove their forces from the Falkland Islands; 'Mahatma' Ghandi was assassinated; 'Babe' Ruth and Kurt Schwitters died. On the day of Mitchum's arrest, China announced the creation of a North China People's Government. But Hollywood stars were news, so who cared what was happening in the world. Besides, the US Government and media were keen to promote the perception of weed as the insanity-inducing devil's daisy since

possession was made illegal in the thirties.

Such an arrest as Mitchum's would surely signal the scuppering of even the hardest of movie careers – no studio would want to be associated with someone so socially unappealing; so immoral and illegal; so bound for the asylum. The climate was such that even the Oscar®-winning Ingrid Bergman (who many presumed was as much a saint in real life as on screen and stage) would soon be ostracised for becoming pregnant as a result of her affair with Roberto Rossellini, while still married.

Mitchum's spell of success seemed certain to be aborted. He was thirty-one, earning \$3,000 a week as a movie star and was trying to convince his wife to come back to him after she had gone back east, taking the children with her because he had 'gone Hollywood and was hanging out with undesirables'. (What did *their* wives think of them hanging out with *him*?)

Once in custody, he was asked if he had a criminal record. Yes he did. He admitted speeding, drunkenness and disorderly conduct. He also had a record for vagrancy – including a five-day spell in solitary, in Texas, which wasn't mentioned.

The next morning, Mitchum had been due to speak on the steps of City Hall as a positive role model, to celebrate 'National Youth Day'. Instead, he was in jail.

The police asked Mitchum who would bail him out. He replied, 'Who knows? I've got two bosses – David O Selznick and RKO. Have you ever listened to [them] when they're peeved? I'd just as soon stay in jail.'

Once the news broke, RKO's share price dropped and

the studio began worrying about what to do with the millions of dollars' worth of unreleased Mitchum pictures. Far more interested in defending his investment than defending the man, Selznick – powerful head of Vanguard and co-owner of Mitchum's contract (along with RKO loony Howard Hughes) – described the star as a 'very sick man' who would 'come out of his trouble a finer man'. Sick or not, under the pressure of losing his career, his good name and – most important to him – the respect of his wife and his mother too, Mitchum became belligerent; angry, hostile and foul-mouthed. He had arrived in California in the 1930s, on the back of a freight train with only a dollar and chapel-change and was prepared to leave the same way.

Howard Hughes decided to stick with his boy and hired lawyer-to-the-stars Jerry Giesler, who had a rep for getting Hollywood names off the hook, having successfully defended Errol Flynn against a rape charge and Charlie Chaplin against a paternity suit.

Mitchum and the others were released, awaiting trial. His wife returned to face the press with him. She was furious with the intrusion.

'Everybody ought to be able to see that Bob is a sick man, otherwise he'd never be mixed up in a situation like this.... I'm indignant, though, that not only Bob but our whole family should have to suffer because he is a motion picture star. Otherwise I don't think all this fuss would have been made just because a man may have got mixed up with bad company.'

Dorothy Mitchum

Although the Hollywood press were relatively gentle with Mitchum, the same couldn't be said of those in the Midwest who saw the scandal as a great opportunity to attack the whole film industry. As far as they were concerned, Mitchum was now showing the *real* face of the Hollywood devil. And the police were happy to stoke the fires, claiming Mitchum's arrest should 'serve as a warning' and that they had other stars under surveillance. Arresting officer Alva Barr claimed, 'We are going to clean the dope and the narcotic sellers out of Hollywood and we don't care whom we have to arrest.'

Awaiting his trial, now scheduled for September, RKO decided to go ahead and release *Rachel and the Stranger*, figuring they had nothing to lose. And they didn't. In many theatres across the States, Mitchum's appearance on screen led to cheers, applause and standing ovations. Box office takings shot up. It looked like Mitchum's career could continue although, in his own words, he would have to 'resign from the local scout troupe'.

Sensing a prime opportunity, RKO rush-released *Blood on the Moon* to cash in on their boy's notoriety. In this, his first 'A' western, Mitchum plays a cattle-hand caught up between two warring groups of ranchers. He narrowly escapes getting trampled by stampeding cattle; gets offered an ultimatum by gun-toting cowboys; gets shot at by a cowgirl; delivers a message to the womenfolk only to be shot at again, for his trouble; and gets told to get out – all within the first twelve minutes.

When he reaches town, he meets up with an old friend (played by Robert Preston) who explains the situation. They join forces but, realising his friend is in the wrong,

Mitchum – Garry – makes a moral choice and swaps sides. The friendship ends in a bar fight.

‘We tried to do something for the first time in a western: a bar-room fight that was at least realistic. We said, let’s have these men go at it all the way, as hard as they can, and let’s have them exhausted at the end, which they would be.... Mitchum and Preston liked the idea very much.’

Robert Wise, director, *Blood on the Moon*

There are similarities between the relationship of the two ‘friends’ and that of Mitchum’s and Kirk Douglas’s characters in *Out of the Past*. Once again, Mitchum is the accidental hero trying to do something vaguely resembling the right thing, the other smiles and says the right things but really wants Mitchum to do as *he* wants. Neither succeeds, entirely.

‘You and me together coulda licked ’em, but you always had a conscience breathing down your neck.’

Robert Preston, *Blood on the Moon*

Blood on the Moon is moody and dramatically shot. Just as *Out of the Past* takes noir from city to small town, so *Blood on the Moon* proves the classic, urban stylistic signatures of noir work just as well out on the range. It’s still ‘just’ a cowboy film as far as plot is concerned, but it is a beautiful and impressive interpretation of the genre.

In the real world, things still weren’t tickety-boo: Mitchum would have to wait until the following year to

discover his fate. Further delays to the trial were incurred when lawyer Giesler was, inconveniently (some would say conveniently), involved in a minor car accident. Mitchum would not be sentenced until the following February. With the sword of Damocles, Mitchum cleaned his nails.

On 9 February 1949, Robert Mitchum was sentenced to a year in the county jail (suspended) and two years on probation – the first sixty days to be spent in the bucket with time off for good behaviour. Leeds and Ford received the same sentence, but Evans – who arranged the shindig and opened the door to the fuzz – was never convicted.

Mitchum was taken down and became prisoner No. 912345. He hadn't even brought a toothbrush.

He didn't complain about his time inside; didn't play the big star and got on OK with the other inmates. 'Oh, we just talk about our lives of crime,' he joked with the press, 'mostly the other fellows don't bother me too much... they have their own troubles.'

Mitchum was transferred to the Wayside Honor Farm where he served the rest of his fifty days (ten days off – he *did* behave). He worked hard making cement blocks, asked no favours, lost weight, slept well for the first time in years, but had to watch out for those who wanted to gain favour with the authorities by setting him up, sneaking joints and contraband under his pillow in the hope of a search. Mitchum played it safe and kept straight; flushed the grass down the pan or gave it over to the guards.

Howard Hughes would be a regular, if secretive, visitor, bringing vitamin pills and candy bars. His loyalty towards

Mitchum had a profound effect on the star. Hughes could've dumped him there and then under the morality clause in the actor's contract, but decided to keep hold of his troublesome asset. Although Mitchum moaned about his boss on a regular basis, they got on well, Mitchum referring to the secretive and elusive multi-millionaire as 'The Thin Man' or 'The Phantom'.

'[Hughes] summoned me once to his hotel in Vegas. I walked into his room and he said, "Wait a minute, Bob, I have to make a phone call first." He walked into the next room, and that's the last I ever saw of him. Strange fellow.'

R M

In 1951 Hughes – then the richest man in America – bought Selznick's share of Mitchum's contract and the actor became RKO's mule.

'They had drawers and vaults filled with unsung or time-wasting scripts... so they... put them on some mule like me. Every studio had its own donkey and I was RKO's.'

R M

'I went to the studio... and they said, "Bob, look. Every time we make a deal with someone it comes with another script we've got to buy for fifty grand, so we have a whole drawer full of horseshit. Every studio has a horseshit salesman. Paramount has Alan Ladd; Warners has Bogart. You want more money, you let us know. But you're our horseshit salesman.'"

R M

Hughes hired a private detective to tail Mitchum, get him out of any trouble which may occur, and to report back. He also went out of his way to make things as easy as possible for his star, lending him money to cover his legal expenses and to buy a new house.

Although Mitchum resented being spied on and resented having to appear in any crap film RKO threw at him, he chose to repay Hughes' loyalty and stuck with him even though RKO was not the studio best suited to his development as an actor or his career. But Mitchum didn't really care about career, preferring to stick with the guy who stuck with him when the chips were down. For many critics, this is the decision which had the greatest effect on Mitchum's film output; the decision which kept Mitchum in second-rate movies for far too long and which, possibly, broke his optimism and ambitions as an actor.

Mitchum was no fan of the movies, of Hollywood, or of his own output. He tried to get out of appearing in several movies but contractual obligations kept him in place. He hated 'having' to do anything anyone else told him to; the obligation; the lack of escape; handing control of his own activities over to someone else. But as a family man he was aware of his responsibilities and needed the security of a long-term contract.

'I am not a person, I'm just a paragraph in a contract.'

R M

RKO continued filming *The Big Steal* while Mitchum was in jail, using his stand-in for the long shots and saving the

close-ups for his release. They hoped his change in weight and newly acquired sun-tan wouldn't show up too much when they cut between takes.

In custody, Mitchum found some space to recover and regroup his energies. He had somewhere to hide, and an excuse for hiding. He couldn't be talked into anyone else's projects or plans other than the farm baseball team; couldn't be talked into giving of himself; he had no other obligations than to the prison rules, his own back and keeping his cell clean. I can see how this can provide a man with a positive opportunity to restore himself; an opportunity to take a rest from life, for a little while, before the walls start closing in.

After his release, Mitchum would comment on his stint inside: 'I've been happy in jail because I've had privacy. Nobody envied me. Nobody wanted anything.... Everyone in Hollywood is demanding – it's "gimme, gimme"... my jail term has been one of the happiest periods of my life.'

Treats for the inmates were few and far between so after his release he donated to the prison a range of vending machines. (Years later, Mitchum would arrive at a drug dealer's house and be dismayed that – against his strict instructions – there was another customer already there. The dealer had tried to get rid of him but once he heard Mitchum was due to arrive, he refused to leave. The other customer wasn't interested in meeting the 'star'; he was an ex-inmate at the farm and just wanted to thank Mitchum for the snack machines.)

What a palaver for a fist full of joints. According to the police chemist's report, it wasn't even good grass.

Following the 1951 district attorney's investigation, Mitchum was exonerated and the drugs charge expunged from his record, but nobody seemed interested anymore – the die had already been cast.

Even in 1949 the whole thing smelled of a set-up.

'The minute I walked in I went sniff-sniff, and the place was hot, man. I walked over to pick up the phone and somebody said, "Where you going?" I said, "Ah-hah, a lotta heat in this joint"... Down come the door and I went, "Uh-oh". One of the cops yelled, "Mitchum is raising his arm in a threatening manner". I said, "Hang me up, boys – I been had". Slightly yentzed. Roundly fucked.'

R M

The signals pointed to Evans being in bed with the police, who were conveniently in position and knew who they were getting. The lack of a conviction reeks of her pay-off. But then Mitchum seemed to have been more suspicious of Ford's role. Mitchum had wanted to go home that evening to read a script, but Ford insisted they call in to see Leeds and Evans.

'I'd like to know the answer to some pertinent questions. Why were the newspapers tipped off, before I even arrived at the Leeds house, that a big-name movie star was going to be picked up on a marijuana charge that night? Why did Robin Ford stop off to make so many phone calls that night? Why didn't the police raid the Leeds house earlier, since they testified they had seen Leeds smoking long before I arrived?

Why did Vicki Evans go to the kitchen door just before the police broke in, and why was she the only one of us who was never convicted? Why did half a dozen other movie stars come up to me later and thank me, saying they had been invited to a party at that house that night, but when they arrived it was already surrounded by police cars, lights flashing, so they took off.'

R M

In later years, Mitchum came to believe he had been set up as an act of revenge. In the mid-forties, Mitchum had parted company with his business manager and best friend, Paul Behrmann, because Behrmann embezzled Mitchum's savings. Behrmann claimed Mitchum must have spent it. Mitchum called this a 'monstrous falsity'.

Having been raking in the cash as a rising star, to find he was once again penniless left Mitchum feeling completely betrayed, but he refused to prosecute. His family thought he was mad and insisted he see a psychiatrist.

Perhaps his unwillingness to go to court was down to two factors: one, Behrmann had been a friend, so perhaps the actor was caught between old feelings of loyalty and new feelings of betrayal; two, he didn't want to turn to 'the man' to fight his battles. Instead, Behrmann was taken to court for ripping off another client. Mitchum and his wife were subpoenaed and testified. Behrmann was sent down.

'The guy who set me up was my ex-business manager. I wasn't even tried, you know, and in 1951 the jury apologized. But all people remember is that photo of me coming out of the

cell. What they don't know is how close I came to killing the son of a bitch....'

R M

During Behrmann's reign as Mitchum's business manager, the Mitchums received only \$30 a week while Behrmann built up their (his) nest-egg to almost \$100,000 – an even more significant amount in the forties. When he was eventually taken to court he threatened revenge and to 'do away with' Mitchum's wife, Dorothy. Behrmann seemed to be the answer to Mitchum's many questions about the Laurel Canyon bust.

What concerned him was how the whole episode confirmed the world's perception of him. 'After all the heat died down... it [the charge] was wiped out. Nobody cared about that, that I was innocent.'

But let's face it, *bad boy*, you weren't innocent, they just caught you illegally; you still had a lit spliff in your hand and lungs full of grass smoke – and good on you *daddio*, I'll take to that – but don't go giving me that 'innocent' bullshit, you were as guilty as sin.