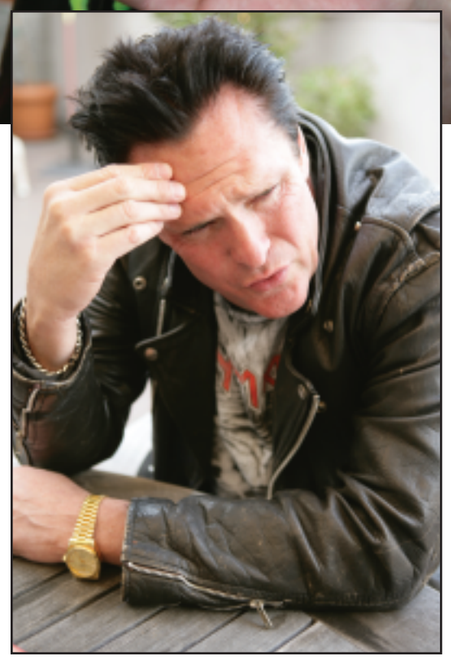
Michael Madsen: One Helluva Ride

Big-Screen Bad Guy Unloads



Michael Madsen has been cast as a likable tough guy in everything from *Reservoir Dogs* and *Donnie Brasco* to *Kill Bill: Volume 1* and *Volume 2*. The Chicago native stopped by HUSTLER to discuss working with director Quentin Tarentino, why he's not Tom Sizemore and his new film *Hell Ride*.

HUSTLER: Are there any questions I can ask that will make you douse me with gasoline and cut off my ear?

MICHAEL MADSEN: No. I'm not likely to do that. Can I ask you a question? Can anyone in the universe tell me why Ryan Seacrest has a star on Hollywood Boulevard? What has Ryan Seacrest ever done? Even if it's just a popularity contest, he's just a hired stooge.

I don't want to sound hostile, but maybe I've been around for 17 years, and I'm just starting to get disgusted by this town. You wonder if there was a global nuclear war and Britney Spears shaved her head again, what would be the top news story. Why am I even talking about her? People for some reason like train wrecks. They want to be around to witness the horror of somebody's downfall.

Has playing scary tough guys worked to your advantage?

The films I've done that have been successful feature me with a gun and a cigarette. I don't want to be 75 years old with a gun and a cigarette. *Donnie Brasco*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Kill Bill*, *The Getaway* and things like that didn't do much to change the image people have of me. I've made a couple of pictures lately that I was a producer on that might help change my image a little bit. I did a cop thing with Daryl Hannah called *Vice*. The film is the story of redemption. I also just played an Irish prizefighter in *Strength and Honour*, which is about as far away from what I'm known for as anything. It's a real tearjerker.

Are you trying to change your image?

I don't know if appearing in HUSTLER will give me the image of a family man. I play so many nefarious characters that I've been tagged by Hollywood as the bad guy gun for hire. It's really kind of ironic because I'm just about anything but that. I have six sons.

Do you regret doing *Free Willy*?

No. I was really surprised when I got the *Free Willy* script and [was] happy to do it. Films like that balance things out a little bit. I don't regret it all. The ironic thing about that film is that they made this big movie about a whale being set free, but in reality, when they tried to set Willy free, the damn thing didn't like the idea. They towed him behind some barge up in Iceland somewhere and let him go, but he turned around and said fuck it and came back. He would rather be fed buckets of fish by scantily clad girls than go out to sea and hunt for himself. (*Laughs.*)

What is working with Quentin Tarantino like?

It is stress-free. Funny thing about Quentin is that he hasn't really changed at all since the first time I met him—even before *Reservoir Dogs*. He's got bigger toys to play with, but he's still the same old guy. He's really excited about making movies. One of the things he says on the set sometimes is, "Let's do another take just 'cause we love it." Not because we have to.

Quentin knows what I'm going to do before I do it and understands me. I pretty much know what he's looking for. We don't have to have too much conversation about it. If I go too far, he'll just reel me in—or vice versa. The best part is he lets me fool around a little bit and usually keeps it in. A lot of directors are afraid to do that.

If you're an actor with an opinion, a lot of studios and directors find you a threat. They would rather employ puppets. There are a lot of them in the movies nowadays. The system being the way it is, Hollywood could have done away with Quentin a long time ago if they could have. Fortunately, his movies do too well, so they can't get rid of him. Thank God for that. He's writing a World War II thing for us now called *The Glorious Bastards*.

PHOTOS BY LADI VON JANSKY

Do people often mistake you for fellow actor Tom Sizemore?

I think that would probably be a lot more beneficial for Tom than it would be for me. I have never been able to figure out the comparison. I don't get it or understand it. I guess we have been in the same kind of movies, but we're not the same kind of actor by any stretch of the imagination. I don't think we resemble each other. I haven't seen Tommy in a couple of years and don't know what he's up to.

No chance you'll also do a drug-fueled porn video?

Is that what he did?! (*Laughs.*) That's terrible. That's really sad. I'm not here to say anything bad about anybody, especially somebody who is in trouble. I hope he can find his way out. I would be precluded from that kind of thing because I got kids and responsibilities. I think sometimes people get really lost and desperate. The Hollywood system has a way of chewing people up and spitting them out. I think Tommy should have stayed off the talk shows when he first got in trouble. It only made it worse.

How did you get your start in the business?

Growing up, I always was into Humphrey Bogart and Bob Mitchum. I understood Bogart. Years later, when he made the transition from playing the bad guy to the good guy, I understood that. I guess I had this ridiculous fantasy in my head that I could be like them.

Do you hope to follow in Bogart's footsteps?

I'm a leading man trapped in a bad guy's body and have been trying to make the transition for a long time. I thought the film *Strength and Honour* would do that for me. It did very well at the Boston Film Festival. I thought there might be some Oscar consideration. But it's a low-budget movie and you can forget getting your movie looked at unless you have an Academy campaign. I'm not saying I wouldn't play any more heavies, but I'd like to be able to diversify every once in a while. I'd like to ride off into the sunset with a woman after saving everyone in the town.

Which of your costars would you most like to do?

I just did a *(continued on page 110)*

(continued from page 81) picture called *Boarding Gate* with Asia Argento. I'm a stockbroker, and she's a dominatrix, so it's not a wholesome relationship. I did get to kiss the girl in that one. Asia is very good. When I first met her on set, she was sitting there in her robe with a can of beer in her hand with a napkin around it and a straw. I don't know why, but the straw is what did it for me. Any girl that's gonna drink a can of beer with a straw is pretty sexy.

When are you going to do *Sin City 2*?

The whole *Sin City* thing was kind of an accident. I had read the script early on and wanted to play Marv, but I didn't know that Robert Rodriguez [co-director with Frank Miller] was pretty stuck on Mickey [Rourke] for the part—for good reason, because Mickey was fantastic. I think Mickey and I are the only two guys in the world that could have played Marv. So when I finally met Robert at the afterparty of *Kill Bill*, he was starting *Sin City*, and I said, "Man, how come I'm not in the movie?"

"You want to be in it?" he asked. "But you probably want to play Marv, but Mickey is going to do that."

Robert then offered me the role of Bob. I said, "There's nothing in here for me to do." Then he reminded me that I would get to shoot Bruce Willis. He said if the film worked out and the film made any money, he'd give me a bigger role in the sequel. I don't really know what's going to happen.

Tell us about *Hell Ride*?

It took us four years to get this movie made. It was written and directed by Larry Bishop, son of late Rat Packer Joey Bishop, and it is a bitchin', badass motorcycle movie. It's meant to be a trilogy. Quentin Tarantino is presenting the movie, and he cut the film. I'm a pretty harsh critic of myself as well as other people, and I think for my money it's pretty good. David Carradine and Dennis Hopper are in it. I drive a badass red chopper. My character's name is The Gent. I ride around in a tuxedo. One of the better experiences I've ever had.

Are you political?

I think actors should keep their nose out of politics. I find it kind of bizarre when actors get such a high opinion of themselves, they actually believe that their opinions of political matters mean something. It's pompous to me. Besides that, I'm a convicted felon, so I can't vote.

What would you be doing if you weren't an actor?

I'd be racing cars, or I'd be in jail. I had this same conversation with Dennis Hopper not too long ago. We were sitting there talking about acting. I'm droning on about what a rough life it is and about how disappointing it can be. I said, "I don't know, Dennis. Maybe I should have been a carpenter."

And he goes, "Ha-ha! Jesus was a carpenter and look what happened to him, man." I guess it's true that whatever you decide to do in this life, it's not going to be okay every day.

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