



THE COEN BROTHERS FAQ

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As you go through this document, you may notice several sections (in particular, the Coens' most recent films) lacking in information. This FAQ is by no means complete and is considered a constant work in progress. I will try and update it on a semi-regular basis.

I must thank Paul for inspiring this FAQ and hosting it on his site. It would have not been possible without his involvement and support.

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THE COENS



1. When and where were the Coen brothers born?

Joel was born on November 29, 1954 and Ethan was born on September 21, 1957 in the St. Louis Park suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota.

2. Who are their parents?

Their father, Edward, was an economics professor at the University of Minnesota. Their mother, Rena, was a professor of fine arts at St. Cloud University.

3. Do they have any siblings?

Yes. One sister—Debbie who became a doctor and moved to Israel.

4. What kinds of movies did they watch as kids?

Joel: "A movie like *Boeing Boeing* was big with us. And we were into movies like *That Touch of Mink*, *A Global Affair*, Bob Hope movies, Jerry Lewis movies, anything with Tony Curtis, *Pillow Talk*. We tried to see everything with Doris Day. Those were important movies for us. I saw *Pillow Talk* again recently. It's incredibly surreal." (1)

5. When did the Coens start making movies?

When they were kids, Joel saved up enough money from mowing lawns to buy a Vivitar Super-8 camera and together they remade movies they saw on television with a neighborhood kid, Mark Zimering (a.k.a. Zeimers), as the star. For example, Cornell Wilde's *The Naked Prey* (1966) became *Zeimers in Zambia*, which also featured Ethan as a native with a spear.

Joel: "We had very weird special effects in that film. We actually had a parachute drop—a shot of an airplane going overhead, then a miniature, then cut to a close-up of the guy against a white sheet hitting the ground."

Ethan: "It was hell waiting for the airplane to fly by. We were nowhere near a flight path." (2)

They also made original films, like *Henry Kissinger—Man on the Go*, *Ed...A Dog*, *The Banana Film*, and *Lumberjacks of the North*.

Joel: "At the time, we didn't really understand the most basic concepts of filmmaking—we didn't know that you could physically edit film—so we'd run around with the camera, editing it all in the camera." (3)

6. Where did the Coens go to school?

After graduating from Simon's Rock in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Joel spent four years in the undergraduate film program at New York University where he made a 30-minute thesis film called, *Soundings*. The film depicted a woman engaged in sex with her deaf boyfriend while verbally fantasizing about having sex with her boyfriend's best friend who is listening in the next room. After also graduating from Simon's Rock, Ethan went to school at Princeton and earned an

undergraduate degree in philosophy. His senior thesis was a 39-page essay entitled, "Two Views of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy."

7. How did the Coens meet Sam Raimi?

After graduating from NYU, Joel worked as a production assistant on a variety of industrial films and music videos. He developed a talent for film editing and met Raimi, who was looking for an assistant editor on his first feature film, *The Evil Dead* (1981). Sam remembers his first visit to New York City:

"I'd never driven into New York before and I knew there'd be all sorts of hoodlums and bad characters about. When I pulled up to the building where the cutting room was, this guy came up to the car with long scraggly hair down to his chest, looking undernourished. I thought he was trying to rip us off. That was my first meeting with Joel." (4)

8. What kind of screenplays did the Coens initially write?

The first one was a screwball comedy called *Coast to Coast*. Ethan remembers that "it had 28 Einsteins in it. The Red Chinese were cloning Albert Einstein." (5) They also wrote a script entitled *Suburbicon*.

9. Who does what?

Officially, Joel is credited as the director and Ethan as the producer while both are listed as the screenwriters and editors (under the alias Roderick Jaynes), however, it is not that clear cut. On the set of their films, both brothers are known to share both directing and producing duties.

10. When did Joel Coen and Frances McDormand become a couple?

While filming *Blood Simple*. After the film was released in 1984, they got married.

11. Has Ethan done any writing outside of the movies?

Ethan began writing short stories that were published in *Playboy*, *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*. He subsequently published a collection of his stories in a book entitled, *Gates of Eden*, in November 1998. Since then, he has also written and published a collection of poetry entitled, *The Drunken Driver has the Right of Way*.

12. Have the Coens adapted any books into screenplays?

They adapted Elmore Leonard's novel, *Cuba Libre*, for Universal but did not direct it. To date, it has not been made into a movie.

They also wrote an adaptation of James Dickey's novel, *To the White Sea*, about Muldrow, a B29 gunner shot down while on a bombing mission over Tokyo during World War II. He is forced to use his survival skills to stay alive on the

desolate island of Hokkaido off the northern coast of Japan. Reportedly, the only dialogue in the screenplay takes place in the first five minutes. Brad Pitt was attached to star as the gunner with a proposed budget of \$60 million, but financing fell through.

13. Why are the Coens obsessed with kidnapping plots?

Kidnapping sub-plots appear prominently in three of their films: *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*.

Ethan: "I guess it's that it's a pregnant plot thing, an ongoing criminal enterprise that seems to suggest all kinds of promising plot opportunities. It's easy for things to spin out of control, to have them go progressively wrong." (6)

14. What's up with the re-occurring motif of inept duos in their movies?

The Coens favour two characters that are not too smart and are doomed to fail. There is Gale and Evelle, the escaped cons in *Raising Arizona*, the two gangsters who take Tom and Bernie out to the forest to whack Bernie in *Miller's Crossing*, the two cops who come to arrest Charlie Meadows in *Barton Fink*, and the two dumb crooks who kidnap Jerry's wife in *Fargo*. There are two lunkheads who mistake the Dude for the other Lebowski in *The Big Lebowski*. The Coens would get even more ambitious with *O' Brother, Where Art Thou?* with a trio of inept escaped convicts. *Intolerable Cruelty* also features an inept duo of Miles Massey and Wrigley. Finally, *The Ladykillers* features a team of bungling men led by Professor G.H. Dorr.

15. How come there is so much vomiting in their movies?

According to a childhood friend, Ron Neter, "they really had an affinity with vomit in their films." (7) Marty vomits three times in *Blood Simple* (first, when he's kicked in the groin by Abby after he attacks her, again after Visser shows him photos of his "dead" wife with her lover, and finally in a dream sequence when Abby confronts Marty, he spews quite a bit of blood). Tom pukes twice in *Miller's Crossing* (once after a post-poker game hangover and then, with fear after being led to *Miller's Crossing* thinking he's going to be killed). W.P. Mayhew throws up in a toilet in a public bathroom in *Barton Fink* (later on, Charlie Meadows hurls after seeing the blood-drenched corpse of Audrey in Barton's bed). In *The Hudsucker Proxy*, Norville pukes off-screen after carrying the "swooning" Amy Archer up the fire stairs of Hudsucker Industries. Marge almost throws up in *Fargo* due to morning sickness.

16. What are some of the Coen's unrealized projects?

They worked on a screenplay about Bob Crane, the star of the long-running American situation comedy, *Hogan's Heroes*, and who also enjoyed watching and appearing in porn movies. He was viciously and mysteriously murdered. Ethan said, "I think it would be an interesting cautionary tale about Hollywood, sort of a companion piece of *Barton Fink*." (8) However, the film ended up getting

made without the Coens involvement and was called *Auto Focus* (2002). It was directed by Paul Schrader and starred Greg Kinnear and Willem Dafoe.

They also worked on a screenplay called Adolph “Terry” Hitler about a young Hitler growing up, becoming a big Hollywood agent nicknamed Terry and running the Adolph Hitler Agency or AHA for short. Ethan described it in an interview as “If the Hitler family had moved to Pasadena...” to which Joel concluded, “...at the turn of the century, and Hitler had grown up around Hollywood.” (9)

17. What is the shakycam?

It's a device borrowed from Sam Raimi (who learned it from cinematographer / director, Caleb Deschanel) that consists of a twelve foot-long pole (or piece of wood) with a camera mounted in the middle and two people on either end running as fast as they can.

FRIENDS & REGULAR COLLABORATORS



1. Who is Sam Raimi?

Born in Royal Oak, Michigan in 1960, Sam Raimi was the fourth of five children. He grew up in Franklin, Michigan and his dad ran a furniture and appliance store (just like Nathan Arizona who also had five kids in *Raising Arizona*). He made Super-8 movies with his junior-high classmate, Bruce Campbell. Sam and his brother, Ted, formed a student filmmaker's society with their other brother, Ivan, while studying at Michigan State University. Along with friend, Robert Tapert, they raised enough money independently to make their feature film debut, *The Evil Dead*. Raimi's next batch of movies, *Crimewave* (1985), *Evil Dead 2* (1987), *Darkman* (1990) and *Army of Darkness* (1993) would showcase his obsession with comic books, horror films and The Three Stooges. He has since become a major Hollywood player with his successful direction of *Spider-Man* (2002).

The Coens and Raimi have been friends over the years, helping each other out. The Coens made uncredited contributions to the screenplay for *Darkman* (for example, one of their lines was when Frances McDormand tells someone, “If you're not going to kill me, I have things to do.”) and Raimi acted and helped direct second unit footage on *The Hudsucker Proxy*. Longtime Raimi actor, Bruce

Campbell has even appeared in the aforementioned film and has a small cameo in *Fargo*.

2. Who is Barry Sonnenfeld?

He was born in New York in 1953 and raised in Washington Heights. He met Joel at an alumni party at NYU and they quickly became friends. Joel and Ethan asked Sonnenfeld to shoot the trailer for *Blood Simple* for \$100. He was a graduate of NYU's prestigious Institute of Film and Television. He subsequently served as cinematographer on *Raising Arizona* and *Miller's Crossing* before becoming the successful director of *The Addams Family* (1991), *Get Shorty* (1995) and *Men in Black* (1997).

3. Who is Frances McDormand?

Born in 1958 to a preacher from Canada, her family traveled extensively through the United States before finally settling down in Pennsylvania. She developed a love for acting after playing Lady Macbeth in a high school play. She went on to study at the Yale School of Drama. Before McDormand starred in *Blood Simple*, she had a small, continuing role in the television cop drama, *Hill Street Blues*.

4. Who is William Preston Robertson?

An old friend of the Coens who helped them with re-shoots on *Blood Simple* and provided the voice of the radio evangelist. He is listed in the credits as the "Rev. William Preston Robertson." He went on to write the excellent *The Making of The Big Lebowski* book with Tricia Cooke.

5. Who is Roderick Jaynes?

He is the editor on many of the Coens' films. In actuality, he is an alias that Joel and Ethan created for *Blood Simple* so that their names wouldn't appear too many times in the credits. Jaynes would also write a scathing preface to the book that collected the screenplays of *Miller's Crossing* and *Barton Fink*. As Joel said in an interview, "we sort of imagined him, just for the purpose of the introduction, as a bitter old English guy. Some television station in Sussex tried to look him up." (1) In his preface, Jaynes claims to be the editor on *Beyond Mombassa* (1956), a jungle film starring Cornel Wilde and Donna Reed, and *Operation Fort Petticoat*.

6. How did the Coens meet Carter Burwell?

Blood Simple's sound editor, Skip Lievsay, had a friend, Burwell, who moonlighted as a keyboard player in different bands. He met the Coens who screened a reel of their film for him. Burwell went home and wrote some music for the movie, the Coens liked it and he ended up scoring the rest of the movie. He has scored every subsequent one of their films.

7. Who is Tricia Cooke?

She was hired to help edit *Miller's Crossing* and ended up falling in love with Ethan. They married in 1992 and she helped edit all of their films since. She also co-wrote *The Making of the Big Lebowski* with William Preston Robertson.

8. Who is Roger Deakins?

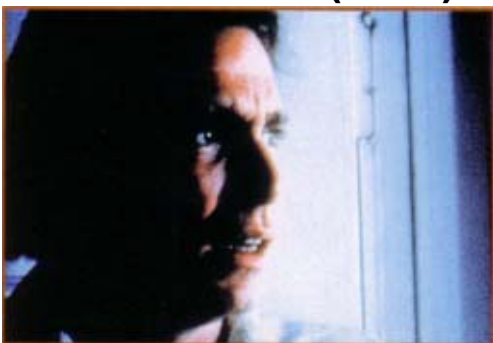
Born in England, he was originally a painter before he worked on documentaries. He acquired a reputation as a skilled cinematographer on films like *1984* (1984) and *Sid and Nancy* (1986). Deakins was coming off a bad experience with *Air America* (1990) and his agent told him not to do *Baron Fink* but he wanted to work on a smaller project. He met the Coens and they found that they shared a lot of the same views on filmmaking. The Coens picked him because, according to Joel, "we loved the night images and interiors in *Stormy Monday*, *Sid and Nancy* and *Pascal's Island*." (2)

Joel describes the process of working with Deakins:

"We always involve Roger very early. After we finish the script we sit down with him and talk in general terms about how we were thinking about it from a visual point of view. Then, in specific terms, we do a draft of the storyboards with Roger, then refine those ideas scene by scene. Frequently storyboards can be tossed out of the window when we get on set and the three of us see something we'd prefer to do, give the location or whatever." (3)

Deakins has been the director of photography on every Coen brothers film since *Barton Fink*.

BLOOD SIMPLE (1984)



1. What is the film about?

Blood Simple is a twisted tale of passion and guilt—as one critic described it, "equal parts film noir and Texas gothic." The husband, Marty (Dan Hedaya) owns a seedy roadhouse, his wife Abby (Frances McDormand) decides to leave him, and becomes involved with one of her husband's bartenders, Ray (John Getz). When the two consummate their relationship in a nearby motel, a sleazy private

detective named Visser (M. Emmet Walsh) captures the sordid affair on film, shows the incriminating evidence to Marty, and in the process sets the wheels in motion for the inevitable conflict.

2. How did the Coens get financing for *Blood Simple*?

Producer Robert Tapert, of *The Evil Dead* fame, suggested that they film a trailer to show potential investors. Their good friend, Sam Raimi, had done the same thing and so they made a two-minute trailer during the President's Day long-weekend in 1981. The Coens enlisted Barry Sonnenfeld, who Joel had met at NYU, to be the cinematographer. They shot it on 35mm but ended up transferring it to 16mm so that it was easier to show to potential backers. The trailer showed gunshots piercing a wall and light filtered through the holes. There was also footage of a man being buried alive.

Joel went to Minnesota and met with a fundraiser for Hadassah, the Jewish organization that raises millions of dollars a year. They gave him a list of the 100 wealthiest Jews in Minnesota and Joel proceeded to contact each one in order to secure money for the film.

3. What was Ethan doing at this time?

He stayed in New York City and worked as a statistical typist at Macy's department store and at the New York State Power Authority to support him and Joel.

4. What was the film's budget?

They raised \$750,000 through Hadassah and \$550,000 from 68 investors.

5. What are some of the literary influences on the movie?

Blood Simple's lethal love triangle of husband-wife-lover is one of the staples of the crime fiction of James M. Cain. However, the film's title comes from Dashiell Hammett's novel, *Red Harvest*.

Ethan: "It's a phrase Dashiell Hammet used in *Red Harvest* to describe what happens to the main character. The narrator, in a sense, goes crazy through his own fault and all these murders that take place through the story. It seemed like an evocative title." (1)

Joel: "It's an expression he used to describe what happens to somebody psychologically once they've committed murder. They go 'blood simple' in the slang sense of 'simple' meaning crazy." (2)

Sam Raimi even references the title in *Evil Dead 2* when a character claims, "Crazy buck's gone blood simple."

6. What are some of the cinematic influences on the movie?

Joel: "*The Conformist* is one of the movies we went with Barry to see before we started shooting in terms of deciding what we wanted the visual style of the movie to be, the lighting and all that. Also, we went to see *The Third Man*." (3)

Joel also cites Chuck Jones, director of many *Looney Tunes* animated shorts as a visual influence: "On the other hand, his Roadrunner inspired us for *Blood Simple*, for the long scene where Ray tries to kill Julian Marty, then bury him. There's Hitchcockian side, but there's also Chuck Jones." (4)

7. Where was the movie shot?

In Austin, Texas and nearby Hutto.

8. Why was the movie made in Texas?

Joel had lived there for nine months when he went to graduate film school. He was quoted as saying that he loved the "gothic, mythic, overblown, overheated" atmosphere of Texas. (5)

9. Was the role of Visser, the private detective, written for anyone specific in mind?

Yes. The Coens saw M. Emmet Walsh in a Dustin Hoffman movie, *Straight Time* (1978), and were fans of his work. They wrote the role with him in mind.

10. Who was originally cast in the role of Abby?

The Coens met Holly Hunter when she was performing on Broadway in *Crimes of the Heart*. She originally auditioned for the role of Abby but was unable to do it because of a schedule conflict. She encouraged her roommate, Frances McDormand, to try out for the role and she got it. Hunter did manage to sneak into the film as the uncredited voice on Meurice's answering machine.

11. How long did it take to film?

Shooting began on October 4, 1982 and lasted eight weeks.

12. When was the film released?

After playing the film festival circuit, *Blood Simple* opened in selected US theatres in January, 1985.

13. Did the Coens have any trouble finding a distributor?

All the major studios and many smaller ones passed on the film. Joel remembers, "That was very frustrating for us, because at the same time we were being turned down, we were watching it at festivals with large audiences and knew that it worked, that audiences liked it." (6)

After a successful screening at the Toronto Film Festival, several distributors were interested and the Coens went with Circle Films. Ben Barenholtz of Circle Films said, "I've seen a lot of first films and there was something about this first film that was so good and natural. The only first film that impressed me as much was *Eraserhead*." (7)

13. How did *Blood Simple* do at the box office?

It made \$3 million.

14. What happened to the Coens after they made *Blood Simple*?

They were so broke that they stayed with Sam Raimi. He remembers that "they crashed on the floor. For some reason, Joel and Fran got the bedroom and Ethan and I ended up crashing on the floor. After the Coens moved out, Fran's friend Holly Hunter moved in." (8)

THE XYZ MURDERS (1985)



1. What are the film's origins?

Around the time of *The Evil Dead*, the Coens became such good friends with Sam Raimi that they ended up writing the screenplay for *The XYZ Murders* together before they wrote *Blood Simple*.

2. Is this first film to feature the word "Hudsucker?"

Yes. A car-full of nuns drive to Hudsucker State Penitentiary at the beginning of the movie. "Hudsucker" would appear again briefly in *Raising Arizona* and, of course, in *The Hudsucker Proxy*.

3. What went wrong with *The XYZ Murders*?

Robert Tapert, Raimi and Bruce Campbell showed the script to independent producer, Edward Pressman (he produced the likes of *Badlands* and *Conan the Barbarian*). Pressman liked the script and took it to Embassy Pictures. They agreed to distribute and finance the movie but only for the right to final cut. Raimi agreed to these conditions and after the film was made, Embassy was not pleased with the finished product. They took the film away from Raimi, re-edited it and changed the title to *Broken Hearts and Noses* and then to *Crimewave*. This experience made the Coens wary of dealing with any studio from that point on.

4. Do any Coens regulars appear in the movie?

Frances McDormand has a cameo as a nun, Bruce Campbell plays a significant role, and the Coens themselves appear briefly as photographers (see picture above).

RAISING ARIZONA (1987)



1. What is the film about?

Raising Arizona follows the misadventures of H.I. McDunnough (Nicolas Cage), an inept ex-con, and his wife Edwina (Holly Hunter), an ex-cop, who decide to steal one of the famed Arizona quintuplets when the couple learn that they cannot have one of their own.

This act begins a mock epic adventure that has the two baby snatchers cross paths with an odd assortment of characters. There is Gale and Evelle (John Goodman and William Forsythe), two dim-witted escaped convicts who decide to rob banks until they are caught or become millionaires. From H.I.'s nightmares emerges Leonard "Lenny" Smalls (Randall "Tex" Cobb), a vicious mercenary who is determined to retrieve the lost baby and eliminate those responsible. The film also includes a host of other bizarre southern caricatures that provide many truly funny moments.

2. What are some of the literary references on the movie?

Critic, Rodney Hill, cites John Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men*. The biker from hell is named Leonard Smalls and the big, mentally slow man in Steinbeck's novel is also named Lennie Small. William Faulkner wrote a series of stories about the Snopes family and the brothers who break out of prison in the film are Gale and Evelle Snopes.

The works of Flannery O'Connor have also been cited as an influence on *Raising Arizona*. Joel even said in an interview that "the term 'warthog from hell,' " comes from a short story of hers, entitled, "Revelation." (1) Furthermore, Ethan has said, "she has a true knowledge of Southern psychology that you don't find with many other writers. She also has a great sense of eccentric character." (2)

3. What are some of the cinematic influences on *Raising Arizona*?

The biker from hell's look is reminiscent of Mel Gibson's Mad Max character in *The Road Warrior* (1981).

Ethan: "the only movie I remember looking at technically for *Raising Arizona* was the second Mad Max movie. We wanted to see how they staged the fight at the end." (3)

The "P.O.E."/"O.P.E." graffiti on a bathroom door is a reference to the launch codes in *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964).

Perhaps the biggest influence on the film, stylistically, was Sam Raimi. One only has to look at all the shaky cam shots (especially in the Huggies chase sequence) to see how influential Raimi was on the Coens at the time.

4. What was the budget for the movie?

\$6 million. Three million from Circle Films and three million from 20th Century Fox.

5. Did the Coens write the role of Edwina for Holly Hunter?

Sort of. At first they didn't but as the screenplay progressed, the character of Ed "wasn't a reflection of who Holly is so much as a part it'd be fun to see her play," Ethan remembered in an interview. (4)

6. How were John Goodman and William Forsythe cast in the film?

Forsythe came in first and read for the part of Gale but thought he was better suited for the Evelle part. When Goodman came in to read next, the Coens asked Forsythe to stay so that he could read with Goodman and they tested well together.

7. How long did pre-production last?

The Coens spent ten weeks rehearsing with actors and running through scenes on various locations.

8. How long did it take shoot the movie?

Ten weeks in Phoenix, Arizona at and around Carefree Studios.

9. How did the Coens do some of the amazing sequences in the movie?

The film's pre-title sequence with a shot of the sun setting over the desert took 40 minutes to shoot with motionless stand-ins for H.I. and Ed with the camera clicking a frame every three seconds.

The dream sequence with the camera racing up a ladder into Nathan Arizona's house, through a window and into Mrs. Arizona's mouth was achieved with fiber-optic lights around the camera's lens illuminating the actor, Lynne Dumin Kitei's tonsils before pulling away.

After Gale and Evelle realize they left Nathan, Jr. behind and race back in their car, stopping just inches away from the baby. So they started the car near the baby and had the driver move backwards, reversing the shot for the movie.

10. How do the Coens view the character of H.I.?

Ethan: "He is a thinker. He struggles with the grand issues. He just has an irrepressible urge to hold up convenience stores." (5)

Joel: "The character is caught in an internal struggle. He's being torn in two directions. On the one side is his desire to settle down and have a family. On the other side is his inclination to respond to the call of the wild." (6)

11. How did Holly Hunter view her character, Edwina?

"She comes from a long line of police officers and takes pride in the militaristic discipline that cops have. In that way, it makes perfect sense that she'd fall in love with Hi because, even though he's an ex-con, he doesn't play game. . . She also has an incredible maternal instinct—a desperate, abnormal, compulsive desire to have a child. It's bigger than anything she's confronted in her life." (7)

12. How did the film do at the box office?

It made \$22 million.

13. After *Raising Arizona* what film were they offered next?

The financial success of the movie prompted Warner Brothers to offer them *Batman* (1989) but they turned the studio down and made *Miller's Crossing* instead.

MILLER'S CROSSING (1990)



1. What is the film about?

Set during the Prohibition era in an unnamed northeastern city, *Miller's Crossing* weaves a complex web as two warring gangs face off against each other. Leo O'Bannion (Albert Finney), a headstrong Irishman, is the gangster who controls the town, but his power is in danger of being usurped by a rival gang headed by the ambitiously violent Italian, Johnny Caspar (Jon Polito) and his silent but malevolently evil henchman, Eddie Dane (J.E. Freeman). Caught between the two warring sides is Tom Reagan (Gabriel Byrne), a brooding thinker and right hand man to Leo. Tom's only hope for survival rests in his ability to play off both men until only one side emerges victoriously.

2. What are some of the literary influences on the movie?

The idea of a town on the take came from Dashiell Hammett's novel, *Red Harvest*, but most of the characters, some lines of dialogue and the hat imagery came from Hammett's *The Glass Key*. The book's protagonist even had a bad gambling problem like Tom's.

3. What are some of the cinematic influences on the movie?

The opening sequence with Johnny Caspar and Leo O'Bannion evokes the beginning of *The Godfather* (1972). The climatic forest scene references Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970). The film's final scene partially quotes the ending of *The Third Man* (1949) and *The Long Goodbye* (1973).

4. What was the working title for *Miller's Crossing*?

The Bighead. This was the Coens' nickname for Tom.

5. Did the Coens have any problems writing the screenplay?

Yes. They got lost in the intricate plottings of the story and went to stay with William Preston Robertson in St. Paul, Minnesota, hoping that a change of scenery might help. One night, they went and saw *Baby Boom* (1987), returned to New York City and wrote *Barton Fink* in three weeks before returning to the *Miller's Crossing* screenplay.

6. What was the budget for the movie?

Industry magazines reported \$14 million but the Coens claimed only \$10 million.

7. Who was originally cast in the role of Leo?

Trey Wilson, who played Nathan Arizona in *Raising Arizona*, was supposed to play the gangster boss but two days before the first day of principal photography he tragically died from a brain hemorrhage. Albert Finney was subsequently cast in the role.

8. Where was *Miller's Crossing* filmed?

New Orleans. The Coens were attracted to the look of the city, as Ethan commented in an interview:

"There are whole neighborhoods here of nothing but 1929 architecture. New Orleans is sort of a depressed city; it hasn't been gentrified. There's a lot of architecture that hasn't been touched, store-front windows that haven't been replaced in the last sixty years." (1)

9. How did Gabriel Byrne contribute to the film's soundtrack?

He suggested a number of traditional Irish songs, including the main theme which is based on an old ballad.

10. What was the first image that the Coens conceived of for the movie?

The first image they conceived was that of a black hat coming to rest in a forest clearing, then, a gust of wind lifts it into the air sending it flying down an avenue of trees.

11. What is the significance of the hat imagery?

Ethan: "I mean, the whole hat thing, the fact that it's all hats, is good, because even if it doesn't mean anything, it adds a little thread running through the whole thing that's the same little thread."

Furthermore, Ethan has said that "the hat doesn't 'represent' anything, it's just a hat blown by the wind." Joel continued, "It's an image that came to us, that we liked, and it just implanted itself." (2)

The Coens were interested in making “a film with people who were dressed in a certain manner, hats, long coats, and put them in an unusual context like a forest.” (3)

Costume designer Richard Hornung commented, “The characters in this movie don’t open up, don’t reveal themselves at any point, so the Coens wanted brims very broad and down over people’s eyes, often shadowing them.” (4)

12. What are the Coens' take on the character of Tom Reagan?

Joel: "He's the quintessential Hammett guy. You're not let in on how much he knows and what exactly he's up to. He tests the other characters to see what they want and uses that to his advantage. (5)

13. What is the turning point for Tom in the film?

Gabriel Byrne: "All through the picture, Tom is battling with the idea of love and the idea of giving himself to another person. The turning point for Tom is at Miller's Crossing. Bernie gets through to his heart and he lets go. From then on everything goes haywire, and he determines never again to be ruled by his heart." (6)

BARTON FINK (1991)



1. What is the film about?

Set in the 1940's, Barton Fink (John Turturro) is a successful up-and-coming New York City playwright who dreams of one day creating "a theatre of, about, and for the Common Man." Naturally, he is enlisted by Hollywood to crank out scripts for genre pictures with his first assignment being a Wallace Beery wrestling film that must have, as blustering studio head Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner) so eloquently puts it, "that Barton Fink feeling." Barton takes up residence in the unusually vacant and rather ominous Hotel Earle.

Barton sets out to orient himself, write his script and promptly suffers a bout of writer's block. While dealing with this problem, he meets an odd assortment of characters, or rather caricatures, as the Coens play with the stereotypes of Hollywood: the sniveling

toady, the overbearing studiohead, and the alcoholic writer. However, these stereotypes are given unique twists as they become parodies of actual people, from Jack Lipnick, a hilarious nod to real life mogul Louis B. Meyer, to writer Bill Mayhew (John Mahoney), a thinly veiled version of William Faulkner—a famous writer lured to Hollywood to prostitute his talents. Even Barton himself is the spitting image of leftist playwright, Clifford Odets, a sensitive artist, who like Fink, was chewed up and spit out by the Hollywood system.

2. What book did the Coens read that sparked the idea for Barton Fink?

They had read *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood* in the 1940s by Otto Friedrich about the history of moviemaking in the '30s and '40s in Hollywood with an emphasis on German expatriates in Los Angeles.

3. What was the first image that the Coens conceived of for the movie?

Actors John Goodman and John Turturro sitting on a hotel bed in their underwear.

Joel: "First we wanted to work again with John Turturro—who we know well—and to create a character he could play. Then, the idea of a huge, neglected old hotel, which preceded even our decision to set the story in Hollywood." (1)

4. Did the Coens write any roles specifically for certain actors?

Yes. They approached both Goodman and Turturro and told them they were writing roles with them in mind.

5. Who was Barton Fink based on?

Clifford Odets was a Jewish-American playwright, author of leftist plays like, *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!* He went to Hollywood to write movies.

Joel: "Both wrote the same type of plays on proletarian heroes but their personalities are very different. Odets was much more open to the external world, a very sociable guy even for Hollywood, which isn't the case with Barton Fink!" (2)

6. Where did the Coens get the idea for Barton to write a wrestling picture?

They had read a book called *City of Nets*. It mentions that William Faulkner had worked on wrestling movies.

7. What are some of the cinematic influences on the movie?

First and foremost, the Roman Polanski films, *Repulsion* (1965) and *The Tenant* (1976). As Joel said in an interview, "*Barton Fink* doesn't belong to any genre, but, if it has a lineage, it's obviously one that begins with Polanski." (3)

A writer going crazy references *The Shining* (1980). The creepy soundscape of the hotel and Barton's frizzy pompadour from *Eraserhead* (1977).

Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) is cited as an influence on Barton Fink. In the film, movie director John L. Sullivan, wants to make a picture entitled, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and gives this impassioned speech: "I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions. The problems that confront the average man..." These words echo Barton's speech about the theatre: "We have an opportunity to forge something real out of everyday experience, create a theater for the masses that's based on a few simple truths...The hopes and dreams of the common man." (4)

Another influence may have been the 1946 film noir, *Deadline at Dawn*, that features a sailor on shore leave in New York City who wakes up to find the woman he was with the night before murdered and believes must have been killed when he was passed out cold. The film was written by Clifford Odets. He also wrote a melodramatic critique of the Hollywood film industry in the form of a screenplay that was made into *The Big Knife* (1949).

It has been said that the last scene between Barton and the girl on the beach evokes the ending of Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) when Marcello encounters an innocent young girl after a night of orgies. She too shouts something to him as the girl in *Barton Fink* does and it is also lost in the crash of the surf.

8. Who was the character of W.P. Mayhew based on?

Writer William Faulkner who, like Odets, went to Hollywood to write for the movies. Faulkner actually worked, uncredited, on a Wallace Beery wrestling picture called *Flesh* (1932).

9. Where does the name "Karl Mundt" also appear in a Coen brothers movie?

The Newsreel Announcer in *The Hudsucker Proxy* is credited as "Karl Mundt" and was actually the voiced by John Goodman.

10. What was the budget for Barton Fink?

\$ 9 million.

11. When did the film begin shooting?

Principal photography began on June 27, 1990 in Los Angeles and lasted for 45 days. The New York bar and restaurant was shot on the ocean liner, the Queen Mary and the last scene was shot near Zuma Beach.

12. Which studio owner was Jack Lipnick based on?

Partly on Jack Warner. The scene where Lipnick is wearing a military officer's uniform was taken from an incident in Warner's life. The fast and foul language comes from Harry Cohn. Actor Michael Lerner even watched several Preston Sturges films to help him with his rapid fire delivery of Lipnick's dialogue.

13. Why is the Hotel Earle nearly deserted?

Joel: "We thought of a hotel where only old people, eccentrics, and the physically handicapped resided, because all the others would've left for the war." (5)

Joel: "The hotel had to be organically linked to the movie—it had to be the externalisation of the character played by John Goodman. Sweat falls from his brow like wallpaper falls from the walls. At the end, when Goodman says he's a prisoner of his own mental state, that it's like a hell, the hotel has already taken on that infernal appearance." (6)

14. What is the significance of the picture of the woman on the beach in Barton's room?

Joel said in an interview that "we wanted the only opening onto the external world to be that image. It seemed important to create a feeling of isolation." (7) Ethan also said that "the image of the beach had to inspire a feeling of comfort." (8)

Ethan further elaborates:

"We wanted the only opening on the outside world to be this image. It was important to create a feeling of isolation. Our strategy was to immediately establish the protagonist's state of dislocation. The image on the beach gives a sense of relief. Perhaps it contrasts with the oppression of the room or accentuates it. We like the idea of the woman in the picture. In a weird kind of way it's emotional, evocative, rather than having a specific kind of meaning." (9)

15. What is the significance of the words, "Slave Ship," written on the door of W.P. Mayhew's bungalow in the Writer's Building?

Besides being an ironic description of his position at the studio, it is also the title of a 1937 movie on which William Faulkner (on whom Mayhew is based) was one of four writers credited. It also starred Wallace Beery as one of the leaders of the slave ship rebellion.

16. Why do the Coens have Barton working on a wrestling movie?

Ethan: "Wrestling pictures were a weird sub-genre. There were all sorts of reasons in seeing two guys in their underwear grappling with one another. The whole sort of queasy homoerotic thing. The weird connection between the characters. Barton is a self-important figure, wrestling with his problems, reduced to writing a vulgar genre movie." (10)

17. Who killed Audrey Taylor?

Joel: "You don't know who killed Audrey Taylor. We didn't want to exclude the possibility that it was him, though he proclaims his innocence repeatedly. It's one of the classic conventions of crime movies to create false trails for the audience for as long as possible. With that said, we wanted to remain ambiguous until the end. But what's suggested is that the crime has been committed by Charlie, the neighbour in the room next door." (11)

18. What's the deal with the two cops at the end of the movie?

Joel: "If you watch it, one's kind of German and the other...well, we just wanted them to be representative of the Axis world powers at the time." (12)

19. Why is Barton Fink sometimes referred to as "the wallpaper movie?"

Particular attention was paid to the wallpaper on several sets. For example, an English William Morris style was used for the tenement setting of Barton's New York play. A grey damask for the commissary at Capitol Pictures. Rotting banana leaves print was used for the hallway of the Hotel Earle. The "bile green" wallpaper of Barton's room would get the most focus of attention. (13) The ooze that mysteriously appears underneath the wallpaper was dubbed "goopus" by the crew.

20. Wasn't there a reference to Barton Fink in Miller's Crossing?

Tom lives in a building called the "Barton Arms."

21. What did the Coens think of John Turturro's performance?

Joel: "You could describe Barton as a kind of phony writer who comes to L.A., but that wouldn't do justice to the character really, and to what John has done with it. Because he hasn't condescended to the character. You're aware of all the bad parts of Barton, all the things that are not really attractive about him, and John makes them both more horrible and more human at the same time—it makes your feelings about the character weirdly ambivalent. It's definitely a very complicated performance." (14)

22. Why is Barton so unlikable?

Admittedly, this observation is all in the eye of the beholder as the Coens commented in an interview:

"People get very uncomfortable when the main character in the movie is not sympathetic in a Hollywood formula way. And what's irritating about that is the implication that the only stories you can tell are stories about sympathetic characters, which is an absurd idea." (15)

23. What was the significance about the editor on *Barton Fink*?

For the first time since *Blood Simple*, the Coens edited the film themselves using the Roderick Jaynes moniker.

24. What happened to the movie at the 1991 Cannes Film Festival?

Roman Polanski headed the Jury that year and awarded the film an unprecedented hat trick of the Palme d'Or for Best Film, Best Director (Joel) and Best Actor (Turturro). No film before or since has won all three awards. Some critics cried foul at this because Polanski's films were cited as major influences by Joel and this may have swayed Polanski to some degree.

THE HUDSUCKER PROXY (1994)



1. What is the film about?

The year is 1958 and recent Muncie School of Business Administration graduate, Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins) arrives in New York City to make it big. He eventually lands a mediocre job in the mailroom at Hudsucker Industries just as the company's founder and CEO, Waring Hudsucker (Charles Durning) takes a swan dive off the 44th floor to his death. Fearing that the leaderless company will have to go public, the board of directors, led by the ruthless Sidney J. Mussberger (Paul Newman) decide to find a proxy to fill the vacant position left by the recently departed Hudsucker, and drive the company into the ground so that they can buy back the stock at a cheaper rate. As luck would have it, Norville becomes the patsy and is soon blundering his way to success thanks to a little invention called the hula hoop. And with the catchy slogan, "You know, for kids," Norville's invention becomes all the rage but spells potential disaster for Mussberger and his cronies. As if Norville's problems are not enough, Amy Archer (Jennifer Jason Leigh), a determined newspaper reporter for the *Manhattan Argus* is thrown into the mix as she tries to uncover the real story at Hudsucker Industries.

2. What are some of the cinematic influences on the movie?

The films of Preston Sturges, such as *Christmas in July* (1940) and the Hollywood satire, *Sullivan's Travels*. The sometimes sentimental tone and decent, ordinary men as heroes was influenced by films of Frank Capra, like *Mr.*

Deeds Goes to Town (1940), *Meet John Doe* (1941), *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) with the fast and furious dialogue in Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday* (1940).

Ethan: "The script, which contains a lot of traditional genre elements, was marked by a kind of heartwarming fantasy element out of Frank Capra. It also had a lot of verbal comedy, the kind you see in films by Preston Sturges or Howard Hawks, with dialogue delivered in a rapid-fire, machine-gun style. But it was bigger and broader, with physical comedy sequences and a lot of oddball action." (1)

One film critic described the numerous influences this way:

"From his infelicitous name to his physical clumsiness, Norville Barnes is a Preston Sturges hero trapped in a Frank Capra story, and never should that twain meet, especially not in a world that seems to have been created by Fritz Lang—the mechanistic monstrousness of the mailroom contrasted with the Bauhaus gigantism of the corporate offices perfectly matches the boss-labour split in *Metropolis*." (2)

3. How did Sam Raimi describe the movie?

He saw it as a "big-business comedy. It's a return to the very large love-story comedies they used to make in the forties and early fifties." (3)

4. When was the screenplay written?

While trying to sell *Blood Simple* after making it, the Coens shared a house with Sam Raimi and ended up writing *The Hudsucker Proxy*. It took them two to three months to write the screenplay. As early as 1985, the Coens were quoted as saying that an upcoming project "takes place in the late Fifties in a skyscraper and is about big business. The characters talk fast and wear sharp clothes." (4)

4. What was the first image the Coens conceived of for the film?

The hero, Norville Barnes, about to jump from the window of a skyscraper and then they had to figure out how he got there and how to save him.

5. Why did the Coens make *The Hudsucker Proxy* at that time as opposed to back in the mid-'80s?

The Coens liked the script but knew it needed a big budget in order to be made. Joel commented in an interview:

"The script was written with Raimi before most of the technology that we used existed. We don't really think of how we're going to do it in a technical sense when we're writing. We were lucky that we couldn't get the money to do it at the time because the sequences would have been a lot cruder if we had shot it then eight or nine years before." (5)

So, they approached uber-Hollywood producer, Joel Silver, who had made a ton of money making big budget action films and was interested in working with real artists. The Coens wanted to make a movie that would get seen by a lot of people. Silver's only input was that he convinced the Coens not to shoot the film in black and white. Silver pitched the film to Warner Brothers by saying that they would get a film that the critics would like (the Coens) and that everybody would want to see (Silver). The studio agreed but only if the Coens cast big stars in the main roles. However, Silver had promised to protect the Coens from the studio and convinced the studio to give them final cut.

6. Why the large budget?

The Coens wanted to build large sets and use elaborate special effects. They had screened *Blade Runner* (1982) before making *The Hudsucker Proxy*, which also used elaborate sets and a large, detailed cityscape. Twenty-seven craftsmen spent three months building a '50s New York skyline, constructing fourteen skyscrapers. The movie's skyline was based on photographs from a book that Dennis Gassner found called, *New York in the Forties* and the scale after *Citizen Kane* (1941).

7. What actual buildings provided the inspiration for the Hudsucker building?

Primarily the Woolworth building in New York City and the former Standard Oil building in Chicago.

8. Why the hula hoop?

Joel: "We had to come up with something that this guy was going to invent that on the face of it was ridiculous. Something that would seem, by any sort of rational measure, to be doomed to failure, but something that on the other hand the audience already knew was going to be a phenomenal success."

Ethan: "The whole circle motif was built into the design of the movie, and that just made it seem more appropriate."

Joel: "What grew out of that was the design element which drives the movie. The tension between vertical lines and circles; you have these tall buildings, then these circles everywhere which are echoed in the plot...in the structure of the movie itself. It starts with the end and circles back to the beginning, with a big flashback." (6)

8. Why did the Coens cast Charles Durning in the role of Waring Hudsucker?

Joel: "We cast Durning on the idea that a fat person falling 40 floors is a lot funnier than a thin person falling 40 floors. Charles actually used to be a dancer, and all that stuff he does at the beginning where he gets up and digs his heel and

shakes the tension out of his body was all Charles. He choreographed all his movements." (7)

Durning would also incorporate some dance moves in *O' Brother, Where Art Thou?*

9. Where was the film shot?

On soundstages at Carolco Studios in Wilmington, North Carolina.

10. When did the shoot begin?

December 1993.

11. Who did the Coens pick to be the film's second unit director?

Their old friend, Sam Raimi. He shot the spectacular hula hoop sequence and the scene where Waring Hudsucker crashes through a window.

12. What was the budget for the movie?

\$25 million. Although, some trade papers reported that it increased to \$40 million.

13. Did the studio try to exert any influence on the Coens?

Yes. As is common with studio films, they held test screenings for the movie. Audience comments were varied. The studio suggested re-shoots. The Coens obliged because they were very nervous working with their biggest budget to date and were eager for mainstream success. They added some footage that had been cut, shot some additional footage and added to the ending. Variety magazine claimed that the re-shoots were done to try and save the film because it was going to be a flop.

Joel addressed the issue of re-shoots for the movie:

"First of all, they weren't reshoots. They were a little bit of additional footage. We wanted to shoot a fight scene at the end of the movie. It was the product of something we discovered editing the movie, not previewing it." (8)

14. Where and when did the film premiere?

In January 1994 at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City. The film opened on March 11 in five select cities before a wide release two weeks later.

15. How did the film do at the box office?

\$6 million.

16. What did the Coens think of the negative critical reaction to their movie?

Ethan: "In the case of this movie there was a lot of press here about how it was sort of a homage to these earlier movies, screwball comedies of the Thirties and Forties. And if you weren't familiar with all those movies you'd be missing something, you wouldn't 'get' the movie in some sense, which is definitely not the case. It does sort of use the conventions of those movies, but it's not like anything could possibly be over anyone's head." (9)

FARGO (1996)



1. What is the film about?

Fargo introduces jittery car salesman, Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy)—a man deep in debt. So, to remedy the situation he decides to hire two thugs (Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare) to kidnap his wife and have her rich father pay the ransom whereby Jerry can then collect. Sounds simple right? Well, as in any Coen brothers film, nothing is what it seems and what was supposed to be a simple job goes sour when the two men end up killing a State trooper and two eye-witnesses in the small town of Brainerd. This brings in the local Sheriff, a very pregnant Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) who begins to put the pieces together. This only adds to Jerry's woes as his plans begin to go horribly awry.

2. Is the movie really based on a true story?

Sort of. Despite claims at the beginning of the movie, a Minnesota newspaper investigated and found no such incident had ever been reported. In Ethan's introduction to the film's screenplay he says:

"The story that follows is about Minnesota. It evokes the abstract landscape of our childhood—a bleak, windswept tundra, resembling Siberia except for its Ford dealerships and Hardee's restaurants. It aims to be both homey and exotic; and pretends to be true." (1)

In an interview, Joel further elaborates, "By telling the public that we took our inspiration from reality, we knew they wouldn't see the movie as just an ordinary thriller." (2)

However, Ethan admitted in an interview:

"The film is based on a real event, but the details of the story and the characters are pure invention. What didn't interest us was to make a documentary film so we didn't have to do any research on the nature of the murder. By informing the public that it was based on fact, we prepared them not to see the film as an ordinary thriller. But there was a kidnapping of a wife in Minnesota in 1987. (3)

3. Are any elements of the movie based on actual fact?

Sort of. The Coens had read a newspaper account in 1987 of a man in Connecticut who had put his wife in a woodchipper. Also, the character of Jerry Luundegard was based, in part, from a real salesman Ethan had dealt with while buying a car. He also claimed that the argument between Jerry and a couple about TruCoat was almost taken verbatim from his encounter.

4. Why is Marge pregnant?

Joel: "We wanted her as far away as possible from the cliché cop. Marge and Jerry are both very banal, like the interiors and the landscape. But she is banal in a good way, a good person where he is evil. We wanted to give them everyday concerns. Being pregnant: you can't more ordinary." (4)

5. Would a pregnant cop really do all of the active police-work Marge does in the movie?

Frances McDormand: "In St. Paul, I met Officer Nancy, who was seven months pregnant and still working. She was on the vice squad doing search and seizure. She was going to go into the office and do a desk job in the middle of her eighth month, but until then, she was still out there doing it." (5)

6. What was the point of the scene with Mike Yanagita?

Joel: "We wanted to give another point of view of Frances' character without it being related to the police inquiry." (6)

7. What's up with all the food in the movie?

Joel: "In Minnesota you have all these smorgasbords. These Swedish-style eat-all-you-can deals were very much part of our childhood. Marge is pregnant, so she's eating for a reason, but it is also that peculiarly Middle-American thing about mounds of food. She wants to catch the killer, but nothing gets in the way of lunch." (7)

8. Where did the film's title come from?

The title originates from the name of the town in North Dakota where Jerry hires Carl and Graere.

9. What roles were written for specific actors?

Marge was written for Frances McDormand. Carl Showalter and his partner in crime Graere were written for Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare, respectively.

10. How did the Coens get the unique Minnesota dialect for the movie?

They used a book by Howard Mohr called *How to Talk Minnesotan* while writing the screenplay. They gave copies to the actors to help them get the speech patterns right.

11. How long did it take for the Coens to write the screenplay?

Three months to write it and three months after that they started shooting the film.

12. What was the budget for Fargo?

\$6.5 million.

13. When did principal photography on the movie begin?

January 23, 1995.

14. What kind of look were the Coens looking for on Fargo?

Joel: "The key thing about the exteriors was that we couldn't see the line between the sky and the snow. Up angles would be very similar to down angles; we wanted to have this void, blank, featureless look in which we put in certain graphic details." (8)

Joel also went into even more detail in the following interview:

"First of all, we were trying to reflect the bleak aspect of living in that area in the wintertime—what the light and this sort of landscape does to one psychologically. We talked early on with Roger Deakins about shooting landscapes where you couldn't really see the horizon line—so that the snow-covered ground would be the same color as the sky—on these sort of slight gray or white out days that you get in Minnesota." (9)

Roger Deakins said that, "On *Fargo* they talked about making it like a documentary. The camera is an observer...We used longer lenses." (10)

15. What was the biggest problem the Coens faced while making the movie?

The winter of 1995 was one of the mildest in Minnesota history. The crew had to manufacture snow until finally they had to finish exterior shooting in Grand Forks area of North Dakota. Joel remembers in an interview:

"We went to Minneapolis in the winter hoping for snow. As a rule, the winter is ridiculously cold and snowy. But predictably, since we were going there to shoot a movie and looking for snow, it turned out to be warm. The second warmest winter in a hundred years. And very dry. We ended up shooting about two weeks in North Dakota." (11)

16. What was Frances McDormand's take on her character?

"She has an inner life that is not immediately evident but which keeps revealing itself. There's something scary about Marge that's hard to articulate. She's simple and on-the-surface, but she's not naïve, and she's not innocent, because she's good at her job, which gives her contact with crime and murder. But she has absolutely no understanding of why people do the terrible things they do." (12)

17. What was William H. Macy's take on Jerry Lundergaard?

"The thing I loved most about Jerry is the fact that he never gives up. He sets the plan, he is sure it will work, and despite all information to the contrary, he never deviates from it. Up to the very last scene in the movie, he's still fighting to make it work. You've just gotta love somebody that has this kind of faith. On the other hand, he's as dumb as a bag of rocks, and I liked that too." (13)

18. How did Jerry get in debt?

Ethan: "At the same time we didn't want to be too specific, for instance, concerning the nature of the debt contracted by Jerry. It was sufficient to understand that that character was trapped by engaging in something which turned out badly." (14)

19. How come there is no name beside the credit for Victim in the Field?

This was a sly in-joke by the Coens. They put in the logo for the famous Minneapolis musician formerly known as Prince at the time but the role was actually played by the film's storyboard artist, J. Todd Anderson.

20. How many Academy Award nominations did the movie receive?

Seven. Best Picture, Best Director (Joel), Best Original Screenplay (Joel and Ethan), Best Actress (Frances McDormand), Best Supporting Actor (William H. Macy), Best Cinematography (Roger Deakins), and Best Editor (Roderick Jaynes).

21. How many Academy Awards did Fargo win?

Two. Best Actress and Best Original Screenplay.

22. How did the movie do at the box office?

\$25 million in the U.S.

23. How was the film received in Minnesota?

Ethan said in an interview that “The locals who liked it saw in it something specific that could not have been made by someone who does not or has not lived there. But there were others who were deeply insulted. It’s hard to make something without somebody misunderstanding it.” **(15)**

24. Wasn't there a Fargo spin-off T.V. show?

Yes. Ethan explains, “Someone had the idea that it could be turned into a series of one-hour shows and that Marge could solve a different case each episode.” **(16)** Polygram Television sold the idea to NBC but when they changed their minds it was moved to CBS. Joel and Ethan agreed to be consultants on the show. Edie Falco of *The Sopranos* fame was cast as Marge and actor Kathy Bates directed the pilot episode. Filming took place in April 1991 in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The show did not get picked up and only the pilot was made.

THE BIG LEBOWSKI (1998)



1. When was the screenplay for the film written?

After the critical and commercial failure of *The Hudsucker Proxy*, the Coens wrote *The Big Lebowski* and decided that Jeff Bridges was the perfect actor to play The Dude. However, he was working on Walter Hill’s western, *Wild Bill* (1995), and so they had to wait for his schedule to free up. In the meantime, they wrote and made *Fargo*.

2. What is the literary influence on the film?

Raymond Chandler's novel, *The Big Sleep* is the primary influence on the screenplay. The Big Lebowski (David Huddleston) in his wheelchair is reminiscent of General Sternwood in the book. Bunny (Tara Reid) and Maude (Julianne Moore) allude to Sternwood's daughters, Vivian and Carmen.

Joel: "We wanted to do a Chandler kind of story in terms of how it moves, episodically in terms of the characters, unraveling a mystery. And also about it being about Los Angeles in terms of the way Chandler's stories are." (1)

3. What is the cinematic influence on the movie?

Robert Altman's radical reworking of Chandler's novel, *The Long Goodbye*. Like Altman's film, the Coens created a protagonist clearly out of step with contemporary society and surrounded by an oddball cast of characters. Both film parody L.A. culture and feature a character fiercely devoted to Judaism.

4. Who is The Dude based on?

According to William Preston Robertson's *The Making of The Big Lebowski* book, he was based partly on the Coens' Uncle Peter, a bitter Vietnam veteran who tell the brothers about how the rug in his living room "tied the room together" and how he once had his rug stolen. (2)

The Dude is mostly based on Jeff "The Dude" Dowd, whom the Coens met on one of their first trips to L.A. in the 1970s. He called himself the Pope of Dope and had been a member of an activist group known as the Seattle Seven during the Vietnam War years.

5. What is Jeff Bridges' take on his character?

"The Dude is not the kind of guy to be doing a lot of sit-ups, and he gets most of his nutrition from kahlua, vodka and milk, so he doesn't mind looking the way he does with a pot belly. He eats pretty much whenever and whatever he wants. And I drew on myself a lot from back in the Sixties and Seventies. I lived in a little place like that and did drugs, although I think I was a little more creative than the Dude. But then maybe the Dude went through a creative period and just grew out of it." (3)

Joel adds: "The Dude has so little ambition that he's not a failure. There is a laid-back subculture in L.A. that draws on the surfing lifestyle. It's partly the weather that makes that kind of stone culture possible." (4)

6. Who is Walter Sobchak based on?

Uncle Peter also told the Coens a story about a friend of his, another vet, whose car was stolen by a kid who left his homework in it with his address. Pete and Walter went to the kid's house and confronted him. Walter was also based on

John Milius who directed such films as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) and *Red Dawn* (1984), and wrote early drafts of *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

Ethan: "We met John Milius when we were in L.A. making *Barton Fink*. He's a really funny guy, a really good storyteller. He was never actually in the military, although he wears a lot of military paraphernalia. He's a gun enthusiast and survivalist type." (5)

The Coens wrote the role of Walter specifically for John Goodman but had to wait until he was done with the *Roseanne* TV show before making *The Big Lebowski*.

7. Who is Maude based on?

Joel: "Maude has for her blueprints the Sixties New York Fluxus artists like Yoko Ono before she met John Lennon, or Carol Schneeman, who literally threw herself into her projects for physical support." (6)

8. Why do the characters bowl?

Originally, the Coens thought that The Dude and his friends would be part of an amateur softball league.

Ethan: "The guy who the Walter character is based on is an avid member of, and consequently obsessed with, an amateur softball league team in L.A. But we changed it to bowling, because it's more interesting, visually. All of the stuff associated with bowling—y'know, the architecture, the machines, it's all sort of retro the Fifties and Sixties. Classic bowling design era." (7)

Joel: "It's the kind of sport you can do when you're drinking and smoking. And it's also very retro, just as the characters seem to be from an earlier time." (8)

9. Where did the character of Jesus Quintana come from?

Joel had seen John Turturro play a pederast in a play at the Public Theater in New York City called *Ma Puta Vita*. Joel remembers:

"Well, maybe that's taking it a little too far, saying he was a pederast, but he had a scene where there was this little boy on his lap and he was kind of bouncing him up and down and there was a kind of lewd section with weird overtones. I was very impressed by it. So we thought, let's make Turturro a pederast. It'll be something he can really run with." (9)

10. What is the deal with The Stranger, played by Sam Elliot?

Joel: "The Stranger is a little bit of an audience substitute. In the movie adaptation of Chandler it's the main character that speaks offscreen, but we didn't want to reproduce that though it obviously has echoes. It's as if someone was commenting on the plot from an all-seeing point of view. And at the same time rediscovering the old earthiness of a Mark Twain." (10)

11. What inspired the Dude's dream sequences?

The Coens were clearly influenced by the elaborate dance sequences found in Busby Berkeley musicals.

Joel: "We always wanted to pay tribute to him, he's one of our heroes. He was an incredible choreographer who never worried about justifying his extravagance. His audacity and sense of freedom fascinate us." (11)

Joel further elaborates on the Dude's dreams: "The dreamlike sequences echo in one sense the hallucinations of the private eye in Chandler's novels. It's also to do with the marijuana consumption of the hero! For me that corresponds to Los Angeles, which is a more surreal place than New York. There's an Oriental side, a *1001 Arabian Nights* aspect to that city." (12)

12. What is the significance of the stars motif?

The film's production designer Rick Heinrichs said in an interview:

"Both dream sequences involve star patterns and are about lines radiating to a point. In the first dream sequence, the Dude gets knocked out and you see stars and they all coalesce into the overhead nightscape of L.A. The second dream sequence is an astral environment with a backdrop of stars. The name of the bowling alley is the Hollywood Star Lanes. Stars were a Fifties thing, as well as being appropriate to L.A." (13)

13. What role does music play in the movie?

Joel: "The original music, as with other elements of the movie, had to echo the retro sounds of the Sixties and early Seventies."

Ethan: "In that case, it's the music that defines the character. It's the same for cowboy played Sam Elliot. Dylan's "The Man in Me" was chosen at the time of writing. As was "Lujon" by Henri Mancini for Ben Gazzara's character...The German nihilists are accompanied by techno-pop and Jeff Bridges by Creedance [Clearwater Revival]. So there's a musical signature for each of them." (14)

14. What was the budget for the movie?

\$15 million.

15. How long did it take to shoot the movie?

Eleven weeks in and around Los Angeles.

16. How did the movie do at the box office?

\$10 million.

O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU? (2000)



1. Where does the film's title come from?

There is a Preston Sturges film, *Sullivan's Travels*, where a Hollywood director of entertaining fluff decides to make a serious "message" film about the Depression, entitled, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

2. What are the literary influences on the film?

Homer's *The Odyssey*. Joel remarked in an interview, "We didn't start out to do an adaptation of *The Odyssey*. It just sort of occurred to us after we'd gotten into it somewhat that it was a story about someone going home, and sort of episodic in nature and it kind of evolved into that. It's very loosely and very sort of unseriously based on *The Odyssey*." (1)

Furthermore, Joel added, "Part of what was attractive about basing it on *The Odyssey*, or at least sort of saying it was based on *The Odyssey*, was the idea of telling the story in such a way that was very removed from reality, or sort of larger than life in the way that myths are." (2)

Penny (Holly Hunter), Ulysses' (George Clooney) love interest is based on Penelope from *The Odyssey*. Like in Homer's tale, Ulysses is the hero who must return home to win her back. Big Dan Teague (John Goodman) is a one-eyed giant who stands in our heroes' way and is an obvious reference to the mighty Cyclops in *The Odyssey*. The sirens that tempt Ulysses, Delmar and Pete also references the sirens in Homer's epic tale.

3. When did the idea for the film first materialize?

The film's music producer, T-Bone Burnett recalls that around the time they were making *The Big Lebowski*, "they were talking about a movie they wanted to do that was sort of the story of roots music, but maybe it wasn't formulated at the time." (3) Joel remembers that, "At a certain point, the movie just kind of crossed over into this territory where we realized we were making almost a quasi-musical, and everything kind of followed from that." (4)

4. Where and when was the movie shot?

Rural Mississippi in June 1999.

5. What was the film's budget?

\$26 million.

6. Did any of the actors sing their songs themselves?

Most of the actors lip-synched to pre-recorded music but Tim Blake Nelson turned out to be such a naturally good singer that he performed his song, "In the Jailhouse Now," live in the film. Chris Thomas King who plays Tommy Johnson is an actual musician and performed all of his music himself.

7. What did the Coens think of George Clooney's take on his character?

Ethan: "Clooney really got into the idea that his character liked to fancy himself as charming as a B-movie matinee idol of the era." (5)

8. What did John Turturro think of his character?

"They [the Coens] saw a picture of a guy with really bad teeth, and so I had these bottom teeth made that made my jaw bigger. They were kind of obsessed with my teeth the whole film. When in doubt, they'd just say, 'Give us some of those teeth.'" (6)

9. How did the Coens achieve the unique look of the movie?

Joel explains:

"The movie was entirely color-timed in a computer. All those bright yellows that you see in the movie were actually deep emerald green. We were shooting in Mississippi with very bold blue skies and green everywhere, and it just seemed very garish in the wrong way, especially for a period film. So Roger experimented with ways of selectively muting or de-saturating or changing colors in the lab before we started shooting, and realized that the logical way of doing it was in a computer." (7)

10. How did the Coens achieve the period detail for the movie?

The bulk of the credit goes to their long-time production designer Dennis Gassner. Joel elaborates: "It doesn't have much to do with slavish research or conforming with what the reality was. It's all derived from our ideas about what the deep South was like in the '30s, and that's as much derived from movies and novels as any real sort of documentary research." (8)

11. Was the character of Tommy Johnson based on blues legend, Robert Johnson?

No. T-Bone Burnett explains:

“There was a Tommy Johnson whose family thought he sold his soul to the devil because he didn’t know how to play guitar, then he went away for a little while, and when he came back he was a muthafucka guitar player. I’m not sure, but I think that legend may have gotten attached to Robert Johnson later.” (9)

THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE (2001)



1. What is the literary influence on the movie?

James M. Cain. Ethan elaborates, “when you think about it, Cain’s stories nearly always had as their heroes schlubs—losers, guys who were involved in rather dreary and banal existences—as the protagonist. Cain was interested in people’s workaday lives and what they did for a living: he wrote about guys who worked as insurance salesmen, or in banks, or building bridges.” (1)

2. What are some of the cinematic influences on the movie?

The movie is set in the town of Santa Rosa, also the setting of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943).

3. Where did the idea for the film come from?

Joel recalls that while they were making *The Hudsucker Proxy*, “We filmed a scene in a barbershop, and there was a poster on the wall showing all the different 1940s-style haircuts. It was a fixture on the set, and we were always looking at it. So we started thinking about the guy who actually did the haircuts, and the story began to take shape. (2)

4. When was the film supposed to be made?

The Coens prepped for production on the movie after completing *The Big Lebowski*, but when George Clooney suddenly became available to work with

them on *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, they temporarily shelved their barber movie.

5. How is the movie different most film noirs?

Most noirs usually take place in the criminal underworld (i.e. *The Killers*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, etc.). As Ethan points out, their movie “is really about ordinary Middle-American people who get into a situation that spirals out of control. The crime element here is sort of inadvertent. The hero sort of stumbles into it.” (3)

6. What were some of the working titles for the movie?

The Barber Movie, *Untitled Barber Project*, and *Untitled Barber Movie*.

7. What is the Coens’ take on the character of Ed Crane?

Joel: “The character of Ed Crane is very passive. He mostly reacts, and that’s a very difficult thing for an actor to do. He’s mostly ruminating and reacting. The character has a lot of voiceover dialogue in the film but doesn’t have very many lines.” (4)

8. How did Billy Bob Thornton prepare for his role?

“Ethan and Joel were trying to stay true to the spirit of the 1940s, and I was, too. In every movie, I try to look different because I want people to know the character and not the actor. Ed is kind of an observer of life, he’s a guy who’s just waiting to see what happens next. He’s very much of his time. I looked at pictures of actors from the 1940s and appropriated parts of their looks: Raymond Burr, Humphrey Bogart, even Frank Sinatra.” (5)

9. Who did the Coens write Doris Crane for?

Frances McDormand. “Doris is fascinating. I don’t have much in common with her. I don’t have the style she has. She’s disenchanted with life...Doris isn’t exactly a femme fatale...she’s a bit too old for that. I call her ‘the bitch’—a lovable bitch.” (6)

10. How did the Coens cast James Gandolfini?

He had just finished making *The Mexican* (2001) and was about to return to *The Sopranos* when the Coens convinced him to take on the role of Big Dave.

11. What was his take on Big Dave?

“He’s kind of a big lug, a bit of a loudmouth, and clotheshorse kind of guy. When he gets blackmailed, he goes berserk. Then, when he finds out who’s responsible, it really becomes more than he can handle.” (7)

12. Why did the Coens shoot the movie in black and white?

Joel: "For a lot of intangible reasons that aren't easy to explain, it seemed as if black and white was appropriate for this story. It's a period movie, and black and white helps with the feeling for the period. Black and white is evocative in ways for a story like this that color photography isn't." (8)

13. What films did Roger Deakins look at for this movie?

He studied two Alan Ladd films, *This Gun for Hire* (1942) and *Blue Dahlia* (1946). "The photography is particularly evocative. I'm particularly fond of the big climax of *This Gun for Hire*, which takes place in the fog. The fog softens everything and adds to the ambiance." (9)

14. What was the budget of the film?

\$20 million.

15. When did the film begin shooting?

On June 26, 2000 on location in Los Angeles and lasted for ten weeks. The prison scenes were shot at the Lincoln Heights Jail. The courtroom sequences were filmed at the Don Carlos stages in L.A. Hollywood steakhouse, Musso and Frank's doubled as the Santa Rosa eatery where Ed meets defense attorney Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub). The wedding reception sequence was shot in the community of Thousand Oaks, an hour outside of L.A. The bingo hall scenes were shot in a Presbyterian Church on Wilshire Boulevard in L.A. The interiors of Nirdlingers department store were filmed in an abandoned furniture store in Glendale. The exteriors of the Crane house were shot in Pasadena in the historic neighbourhood known as "Bungalow Heaven."

16. Where did it premiere?

It debuted at the Cannes International Film Festival on May 13, 2001.

17. Did it win any awards there?

Yes. In a tie, Joel was awarded the Best Director prize.

INTOLERABLE CRUELTY (2003)



1. Who was originally cast as Miles Massey and Marilyn?

Richard Gere and Julia Roberts.

THE LADYKILLERS (2004)



COEN BROTHERS LINKS ON THE INTERNET

“You Know, For Kids!”: the movies of the Coen brothers

<http://www.youknowforkids.co.uk>

This is *the* premiere site for all things Coen...and it hosts this FAQ.

Coenesque: The Films of the Coen Brothers – Joel and Ethan

<http://www.coenbrothers.net/>

This is a really good site as well. Good graphics and fairly up-to-date.

The Gods of Filmmaking – Joel and Ethan Coen

http://www.ambidextrouspics.com/html/joel_and_ethan_coen.html

A nice overview of the Coens movies up to and including *The Ladykillers*.

Senses of Cinema: Joel and Ethan Coen

<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/coens.html>

An extremely detailed and well-written essay on their films. A good start for newbies.

Optimus Prime Films – Directors – Coen Brothers

<http://www.optimusfilms.20m.com/directors/cb/>

Not a bad site, with pictures and sounds from many of their movies.

Miller's Crossing: Home Page

<http://www.geocities.com/mikemckiernan/mcfrontpage.html>

This is a top notch site dedicated to this film with stills from deleted scenes, the screenplay, production notes, trivia and much more.

Fargo – “It was a movie, duh!”

<http://www.brainerddispatch.com/fargo/>

A site dedicated on the movie from the good folks in Brainerd!

Jackie Treehorn Productions

<http://logjammin.org/>

This is a really good site on *The Big Lebowski*, complete with soundbites and screen captures from the film.

Lebowski Fest

<http://www.lebowskifest.com/>

This is a great site that has expanded greatly since it first started and covers all the various *Big Lebowski* get-togethers that are happening all over the United States. The Dude abides!

The Big Lebowski: The Dude's House

<http://www.thedudeshouse.com/>

This was a great site dedicated to *The Big Lebowski* but sadly it is under construction.

“Sometimes, there's a man...”

<http://www.dymphna.net/lebowski/quotes.html>

A snazzy random quote generator from *The Big Lebowski*.

The Big Lebowski: The Making of a Coen Brothers Film

<http://members.aol.com/WPRob/lebowskibook.html>

This is William Preston Robertson's website promoting his excellent book. Check it out. You can even email him!

The Big Lebowski

<http://www.eng.buffalo.edu/~hulme/lebowski.html>

Some nice screen captures and soundbites from the movie.

The Big Lebowski Sound Board

<http://www.unrealisticexpectations.com/soundboards/lebowski.asp>

Click on a quote from the movie and hear it play on your computer!

Which Big Lebowski Character Are You?

<http://www.alansmind.com/lebowskiquiz.php>

Take this amusing quiz and find out who you are from the movie.

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