

Reeves is walking in big Mel's footsteps

There's more than a passing resemblance to Lethal Weapon in Keanu Reeves' new film, Street Kings. Phillip McCarthy reports.

WHO BETTER to follow in the footsteps of Mel Gibson as a rogue Los Angeles cop with decidedly homicidal tendencies than that action hero for a more laid-back generation, Keanu Reeves? After 20 years, it certainly qualifies as a generational shift.

In Lethal Weapon (1987), Gibson's slightly unhinged Martin Riggs, distraught after the untimely (and off-camera) death of his wife, efficiently turns pesky departmental rules on due process into shrapnel in his quest to make Los Angeles a criminal-free zone. His more by-the-book partner, Danny Glover, got dragged along for the ride in four very profitable instalments between 1987 and 1998.

In Street Kings, Reeves plays loner Tom Ludlow, a loose cannon fighting crime with crime. He also has a tacit exemption, courtesy of his vice squad boss Wander (Forest Whitaker), to ignore all the constricting legalese about due process and the unfairness of on-the-spot executions.

Ludlow arrives on screen from the same despairing departure point as Riggs. We learn his dream marriage to his sweetheart has just come to a tragic, violent end (also off-camera).

The procession of damaged, psychotic widowers makes you wonder about post-traumatic stress counselling in the Los Angeles police department.

"I liked Lethal Weapon a lot," says Reeves, far too laid-back in real life to bother faking his way through an interview. "But I hadn't thought about that kind of similar plot point that's there. In our's, though, it sort of happens off-screen."

"The focus of the picture is more in the situation, the bind this guy finds himself in now. He's caught up both because of what's happened to him and the role that's been carved out for him as a cop over the years."

With his spacey facial set and halting speaking style, Reeves can still pull off his most recurring screen personality: the earnest, slightly clueless new kid in town who is probably way out of his depth.

Over two decades, in comedies as well as action flicks, they've become his signature parts. There's Neo, unknowingly hooked

up to The Matrix's grid. There's Jack, the cop suddenly forced to help Sandra Bullock drive Speed's out-of-control bus. There's Johnny Utah, the surfer-as-undercover-agent barely keeping it together in Point Break.

And then there were his two Bill & Ted slacker comedies. Reeves was Ted, a well-meaning buffoon whose brain function seemed badly affected by a haze of reefer smoke. The effect of Ted's broad-brush persona elicits a rare personal admission: "I worried for a while that they would put 'He played Ted' in my obituary."

But the first Bill & Ted comedy was in 1989. Since then, Reeves has earned more at the box office than action stars such as Kevin Costner and Pierce Brosnan. He was paid more than \$US150 million (\$162 million) for his work on the Matrix trilogy (his pay included a cut of the box-office earnings) and got his star on Hollywood's Walk Of Fame.

Street Kings' Ludlow adds a new type to Reeves's repertoire. The cop may be innocent of the corruption that surrounds him but has no problem with killing.

"But do I like the guy I play?" Reeves asks. "I don't know. He is sort of a good guy, his heart is in the right place - [just] don't get on the wrong side of him."

For Ludlow, collateral damage is not so much an excuse to cover mistakes as a mantra to live by. We first meet him in his car in a seedy part of town. He tools around the city swilling little bottles of vodka. Minutes later, the enforcer is blowing away operatives in what turns out to be an Asian sex-slave cartel.

"I wanted him to have some density to him and I didn't want to look like he came from the gym," Reeves says. "I wanted him to look like a guy who drinks but who obviously trains for his job. I wanted him to be this mixture of broken but ready, to look like a guy who you wouldn't want to mess with."

"Playing Tom Ludlow was something very different for me. On the set the director [David Ayer] would call me this hippie and ask me how a hippie would feel killing eight people. So that's a good role to play; obviously quite a stretch for a hippie."

Whitaker says of his character: "Wander's view is that a muscular police response not only makes him look good on



ACTION HERO: Actor Keanu Reeves attends the Australian premiere of Street Kings in Sydney last month.

PICTURE: Reuters

the police food chain, where he aims to be police commissioner sooner rather than later. It also makes it easier to fix the evidence, get rid of the witnesses who could undermine things, collect the pay-offs and generally take care of the business side of policing."

It's a pretty unflattering portrait of Los Angeles police culture by a bunch of people who mostly live in and drive around the city.

Aren't they worried about payback from the police the movie paints as

institutionally corrupt and readily on the take?

"Not really," Whitaker says. "Have you looked at the screenwriting credit on the movie? It's for James Ellroy, the novelist and the brain behind LA Confidential and White Jazz. I had hoped to meet him when I signed on for this. Unfortunately I kept missing him."

"But the police in this town love Ellroy. Even when he is pillorying corruption he's saying the individual cop is basically good."

Perhaps a little unhinged, too, but basically an okay sort of guy. It might help, though, if Hollywood got its head around some statistics. The vast majority of marriages among officers of the LAPD aged 20 to 55 end in divorce. Marriages in that demographic ending as a result of the death of a partner total just 12 per cent.

But, after all, this is popcorn-fuelled Hollywood fare. Just don't expect Ludlow to be any more balanced in Street Kings 2.

□ Street Kings is now screening

TOP RATERS


» SINGLES

For the week ended April 27

- 1 (1) **No Air**, Jordin Sparks feat. Chris Brown
- 2 (2) **Love In This Club**, Usher feat. Young Jeezy
- 3 (4) **4 Minutes**, Madonna feat. Justin Timberlake
- 4 (3) **Touch My Body**, Mariah Carey
- 5 (8) **American Boy**, Estelle feat. Kanye West
- 6 (10) **Better In Time**, Leona Lewis
- 7 (9) **Mercy**, Duffy
- 8 (6) **Low**, Flo Rida feat. T-Pain
- 9 (5) **Shawty Get Loose**, Lil Mama feat. Chris Brown
- 10 (18) **Elevator**, Flo Rida feat. Timbaland

» ALBUMS


For the week ended April 27

- 1 (-) **Beautiful Machine**, Shihad
- 2 (-) **Flight Of The Conchords**, Flight Of The Conchords 
- 3 (1) **Rockferry**, Duffy
- 4 (3) **Back To Black: Deluxe Edition**, Amy Winehouse
- 5 (2) **Believe**, Geoff Sewell
- 6 (5) **Dreaming Out Loud**, OneRepublic
- 7 (4) **Step Up 2: The Streets OST**, Various
- 8 (8) **Second Hand Planet**, OpShop
- 9 (6) **Unbreakable: 2008 NZ Tour Edition**, Westlife
- 10 (-) **EMC2**, Mariah Carey

Supplied by the Recording Industry Association, with last week's position in brackets.

» FILMS

For the week ended April 30

- 1 (1) **Dr Seuss' Horton Hears a Who** 
- 2 (-) **Super hero Movie**
- 3 (2) **The Spiderwick Chronicles**
- 4 (4) **Nim's Island**
- 5 (5) **St Trinian's**

» DVDS TO RENT

For the week ended April 27

- 1 (1) **Hitman**
- 2 (11) **Gabriel**
- 3 (-) **Aliens vs. Predators 2**
- 4 (3) **1408**
- 5 (2) **Beowulf**

Compiled from video stores throughout New Zealand by the Video Association, with last week's position in brackets.

ALBUM REVIEWS

Willie Nelson
Moment of Forever (Lost Highway)

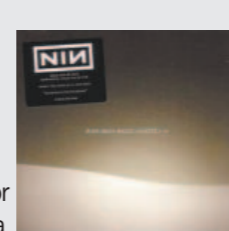


Willie Nelson's been around seemingly forever, and this latest release is one of his better moments of late. Fans left underwhelmed by his last album, 2006's Ryan Adams-produced Songbird, should take heart there's life left yet in Nashville's greatest pot-smoking - if not musical - living legend. Moment of Forever is curious matching of Nelson and Kenny Chesney (perhaps best known to many of us as Renee Zellweger's hubby for all of four months) but comes off well with its eclectic mix of covers and new material. The fact the title track is a Kris Kristofferson number suggests Nelson's songwriting plays second fiddle to his singing in this latest offering, and that's underlined by great interpretations of Randy Newman's Louisiana and Bob Dylan's Gotta Serve Somebody. Conversely there's little to get excited about in his take on Dave Matthews' dark Gravedigger or in his turn-about vocals with Chesney (who co-produces with Buddy Cannon) in the honky tonk Chesney track Worry B Gone. Moment of Forever has been variously described as Nelson's best album in 20 years, or since 1982's multi-platinum Always on My Mind. That may be being overly charitable to the old, but this is one septuagenarian whose laidback vocals have lost nothing to the passage of time.

★★★★

ALAN THORLEY

Nine Inch Nails
Ghosts I-IV (Universal)



What sort of perfect drug is Nine Inch Nails mastermind Trent Reznor on? It wasn't that long ago that a new album from NIN was a rare and precious gem, something to be savoured. These days we get the best of both worlds, with Reznor proving you can have both quantity and quality, thanks to the recent release of concept studio album Year Zero, its follow-up remix album, and now Ghosts I-IV, a 36-track instrumental collection Reznor quickly threw together with a bunch of musical mates. Best enjoyed with a pair of headphones in a darkened room, Ghosts brilliantly showcases all facets of Reznor's songwriting capabilities. From the funereal piano of Ghosts II:4, to the more traditional NIN sounds on Ghosts I:4, which mixes mangled guitar strums with fuzz-drenched distortion, to the electro loops of Ghosts III:1 to the otherworldly soundscape of Ghosts IV: 6, this is everything including the kitchen sink, the dishwasher, and the spare dryer. A double CD-set of instrumental music which is at turns wildly frantic, eerily sparse and occasionally claustrophobic may be too much to take in for many people. But the beauty of Ghosts I-IV is it can be easily digested in smaller sittings, if needed. While there's nothing on Ghosts to individually match the sheer brilliance of the instrumental material found on NIN's sorely under-rated 1999 masterpiece The Fragile, the album as a whole goes very, very close - for those that aren't put off by the lack of vocals, and have the patience to give each track the time it deserves.

★★★★

REON SUDDABY

Chris Walla
Field Manual (Barsuk Records/Rhythmmethod)

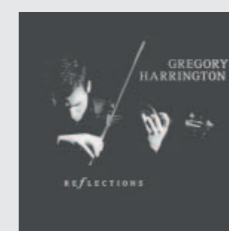


Field Manual is the debut album from Death Cab for Cutie guitarist/producer, and notable indie producer, Chris Walla. It sees Walla assuming production duties, and playing all instruments save for the drums. Much early talk about the album has focused on the political content of the lyrics, found on Archer V. Light most notably, directed as it is against an errant Senator. At times though, Walla's vocals can seem a bit dreamy to convey the political message which the lyrics invoke. However when Walla hits his stride on the uptempo The Score and Geometry & C, things really hum. It is over the later tracks on Field Manual, when Walla's spacious and clean production allows his voice to find its mark over suitably sparse arrangements, as on the reflective It's Unsustainable. Debut album from British band Jamie Scott & The Town who cite James Taylor and Cat Stevens as influences, aiming for a cross between Jeff Buckley and Stevie Wonder, Park Bench Theories finds acoustic guitar and piano at the fore, backed by chiming electric guitar, swelling strings and on Love Song To Remember gospel backing vocals. Atop of which, Scott paints tales of a wounded heart, wistfully stating "still got shades of your heart left in my soul" on Runaway Train. At times, it feels as though Jamie Scott & The Town are a little too faithful to their influences. However on the Hammond drenched Hey You, and closer Lady West the band stretch out complete with brass and piano solos to show a looser and more soulful side.

★★★★ (both releases)

ANDREW GUDSELL

Gregory Harrington
Reflections (Estile Records)



Dublin-born, American-based Harrington performed in the Waikato University Lunchtime Recital Series in mid-March. He brings a gentle, poignant sound which you might initially like in the background, but it is far too good to stay there. It gently floats and curls into your heart strings. Before you know it you are aching with him as he explores traditional and new themes. To a pensive Czardas from Vittorio Monti, Harrington combines velvet smoothness with intricate passion, followed by the almost-treacle Deep River, which is tackled quietly. He is an exponent of cross-over classical and popular and feels to be on the brink of something quite special. He certainly sits astride the classical, blues, modern genres effortlessly. From Danny Boy, arranged by Fritz Kreisler, he fronts up to Prokofiev and Shostakovich, and then adds the theme from Schindler's List. His mother died of cancer, he fundraises for the Cancer Society, and that may be the trigger for his melancholy. But within the poignancy is hope. He elicits tenderness emerging from the melancholy. This player nets you gently, and you will find you have listened to every note. It doesn't get much better than that.

★★★★

JUNE JOYCE

Gnarls Barkley
The Odd Couple (Warner Music)



There have been few bigger hits in recent years than Gnarls Barkley's anthemic Crazy, the lead single from 2006's St Elsewhere. A collaboration between short and tubby vocalist Cee Lo and tall and skinny producer Danger Mouse, the musical result is a bizarre soul-pollination of electronica, digital soul, Motown and softer almost ballad-like numbers. Several tunes - Run, Going On and Surprise - are reminiscent of Smiley Faces, one of the highlights of the first record. Elsewhere, She Knows has an almost drum and bass feel, while Blind Mary could be a reworking of some old Martha and the Vandellas tune. Neighbors is a wafy downtempo number not unlike Massive Attack, while A Little Better, the closing tune, is one of the highlights. Danger Mouse's grooves are from the top drawer, but the problem is Cee Lo's voice: in small doses, it's fine, but over 13 tunes it gets pretty grating - think back to Crazy, and how sick you were of hearing it after the first couple of weeks. Still, I've heard worse albums this year and it does seem to be one of the records you might return to every now and then and think "crikey, that's not too bad, actually".

★★★½

JEFF NEEMS