



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Big Wednesday

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Near the conclusion of *Big Wednesday*, an awed young surfer stares out at a fearsome swell – waves like crumbling tower blocks. ‘It’s outrageous,’ he says. Next to him, Bear (Sam Melville), the old timer guru, sets him straight. ‘That’s just the lemon next to the pie. It’s nothing, it’s going to get bigger.’ These words have entered into surfing folklore, words to be rolled around the tongue and savoured as a communal mantra.

The first time we heard them outside of *Big Wednesday* was on a beach in deepest Cornwall, while taking a crash course in the art of surfing as preparation for writing our film, *Blue Juice*. It didn’t matter that we were wearing chafing wet suits, apparently salvaged from a World War Two diving mission, that our cumbersome boards had all the glamour of a Morris Marina, or even that the surf was barely two feet high. The young surf instructor simply wanted to hear the words, to get the call and response answer from his colleague. That was when we realised that *Big Wednesday* was more than a portrayal of the surfing culture: it had become part of it.

So what is it about this tale of the golden youth of California that can so affect their pale brethren across the Atlantic so long after its original 1978 release? For a start it is unashamedly epic in scale and heroic in tone. Constructed almost as a modern-day Greek legend, its voiceover immediately delights in introducing us not only to its young heroes but also to a quasi-mythical world in which nature has a godlike power. We could be setting sail with the Argonauts, but instead we are in early 60s California: the young surfers, with their statuesque physiques, enter their arena, the beach, through crumbling temple-like columns.

The score is shamelessly epic, all military brass and kettledrums, sweeping crescendos and pounding new Wagnerian overtures. It’s easy to see the connection between director John Milius’ contribution here and to his work as scriptwriter of *Apocalypse Now* – the helicopter attack set to *Ride of the Valkyries* that leads to Robert Duvall’s line, ‘Charlie don’t surf.’ There is also the classic image in the title sequence, the same as that used on the original poster. A man stands on the foreshore clutching an upright board that must reach 16 feet into the sky. The camera pulls back to reveal the waves he faces: waves that dwarf the massive board and leave us to wonder at the foolhardy courage it takes to ride those turbulent waters.

It’s a tale of male bonding and camaraderie. The idea that ‘there’s nothing more important than your friends’ runs like a spine through the film. The female characters remain peripheral to the action, waiting on the sideline as the ‘battles’ are fought. The young men, Jack Barlow (William Katt), Matt Johnson (Jan-Michael Vincent) and Leroy ‘The Masochist’ Smith (Gary Busey) learn lessons from the ‘wise man’, Bear, as they progress towards manhood. They move towards their inevitable date with destiny, the big day that Bear prophesies will come, when the three friends will be able to ‘distinguish themselves’.

While the film's central concerns (and what still endears it to the worldwide wave-riding community) may be what it takes to be a man – and a heroic surfer man at that – *Big Wednesday* does not ignore the world outside beach culture. Since the film covers a turbulent decade in American history, the characters' lives are inevitably affected. But it clings to the idea of the constancy of the unchanging waves at its core. Almost from the beginning, the outside world is portrayed as a dangerous place where the certainties of the ocean no longer apply.

When gatecrashers invade a surfers' party, the violence that ensues is almost comic book in nature. Despite the flurry of blows, you never believe that anyone is actually hurt. This contrasts starkly with the next sequence, when the three friends head off down Mexico way and start a barroom brawl that explodes into real and fatal violence.

Inevitably, Vietnam, the defining event for the protagonists' generation, intrudes upon their lives. There is a very funny sequence where the surfers attempt to avoid the draft, but there is also a sense of foreboding as the straight-laced Jack volunteers, and their wastrel friend Waxer is called up. The world outside the beach has taken two of their number and Waxer is never to return.

Matt Johnson becomes a pitiable drunk. Bear succumbs to the 'American dream', his board-making shack transformed into a corporate high street venture. The certainty and simplicity of the waves are forgotten for a time and there can be no happiness without them. The voiceover tells us, 'But now it all seemed behind us. The change wasn't in the beach, or the rocks, or the waves. It was in the people.'

Eventually, of course, it does all come back to the sea. The prophesied epic swell comes and when Matt walks through those crumbling columns onto the beach, his two boyhood friends are waiting to 'draw the line' with him. The final surfing sequence remains the touchstone that all other surfing movies are measured against. The waves are literal monsters: monsters the three friends must meet to assert their manhood. And here is the core idea that explains *Big Wednesday's* continued appeal to the very community it portrays, the spine-tingling knowledge that one day there may come a wave that will prove the ultimate test. It not only explains their lifestyle, but validates it.

As one surfing merchandising slogan boasts, 'only a surfer knows the feeling.' But this film can take you into the sub-culture, help you understand the joy found in uncertain harmony with nature and even inspire you to plunge into the cold Atlantic, in the thrilling search for your first unsteady upright ride.

But handle it carefully. *Big Wednesday* has found its way into a lot of people's blood, even changing lives. How many movies can claim that? I know of at least one ex-London cabbie who never came back, who now sits peering out to sea, mouthing the mantra: 'That's just the lemon next to the pie.'

**Peter Salmi and Carl Prechezer, *Sight and Sound*, November 1996**

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## **BIG WEDNESDAY**

*Director:* John Milius  
*©/Production Company:* Warner Bros.  
*Production Company:* A-Team Productions  
*Executive Producers:* Alex Rose, Tamara Asseyev  
*Producer:* Buzz Feitshans  
*Surfing Sequence Producer:* Greg MacGillivray  
*Unit Production Manager:* John G. Wilson  
*Water Unit Liaison:* Fred Hemmings  
*Land 2nd Unit Director:* Terry J. Leonard  
*Assistant Director:* Richard Hashimoto  
*2nd Assistant Directors:* Bill Scott, Victor Hsu, Carol Jackson  
*Casting:* Karen Grossman  
*Screenplay:* John Milius, Dennis Aaberg  
*Director of Photography:* Bruce Surtees  
*Photography (Surfing Sequences):* Greg MacGillivray  
*Photography (Special Water Unit):* George Greenough, Dan Merkel  
*Surfing Photography Consultants:* Spyder Wills, Roger Brown, Bud Browne  
*Camera Operators:* Garrett Graham, Tom Del Ruth  
*Camera Assistant:* Brad May  
*Key Grip:* Ken Adams  
*Stills Photography:* Gemma La Mana  
*Wipeouts:* Bruce Raymond  
*Matte Artist:* P.S. Ellenshaw  
*Special Effects:* Joe Unsinn  
*Editor:* Robert L. Wolfe  
*Also Edited by:* Tim O'Meara  
*Production Designer:* Charles Rosen  
*Art Director:* Dean Mitzner  
*Set Decorator:* Ira Bates  
*Women's Wardrobe:* Ann Lambert  
*Men's Wardrobe:* Bill Milton Jr.  
*Make-up:* Jack Young  
*Main Title Design:* Rocklen/Metter Productions  
*Opticals:* Pacific Title  
*Music:* Basil Poledouris  
*Guitarists:* Keola Beamer, Kapono Beamer  
*Orchestrations:* Greig McRitchie  
*Sound Recording:* Harlan Riggs  
*Additional Sound Editor:* Ross Taylor  
*Sound Effects Editors:* Joe von Stroheim, Marvin I. Kosberg  
*Surfing Masters:* Ian Cairns, Peter Townend, Bill Hamilton, Gerry Lopez, J. Riddle, Jackie Dunn

## **Cast**

Jan-Michael Vincent (*Matt Johnson*)  
William Katt (*Jack Barlow*)  
Gary Busey (*Leroy 'The Masochist' Smith*)  
Patti D'Arbanville (*Sally Johnson*)  
Lee Purcell (*Peggy Gordon*)  
Darrell Fetty (*Jim 'Waxer' King*)  
Sam Melville (*'The Bear'*)  
Gerry Lopez (*himself*)  
Hank Warden (*'Shopping Cart'*)  
Joe Spinell (*psychologist*)  
Steve Kanaly (*Sally's husband*)  
Barbara Hale (*Mrs Barlow*)  
Fran Ryan (*Lucy*)  
Dennis Aaberg (*'Slick'*)  
Reb Brown (*'Enforcer'*)  
Robert Englund (*'Fly'*)  
Keith Davis (*'Ostrich'*)  
Johnny Fain (*'Breathman'*)  
Richard Dano (*'Panhead'*)  
Michael Talbott (*'Hog'*)  
Geoff Parks (*'Crusher'*)  
Ivar Arai (*'Boogie'*)  
Titus Napoleon (*'Chubby'*)  
Frank McRae (*sergeant*)  
Perry Lang (*tall kid*)  
Mike Raden (*Denny*)  
Pat Beckwith (*Flea*)  
Kathy McCullen, Charlene Tilton, Terry Bolo, Kevan Dignam, Sherry Lee Marks, Cindy Daly, Lynn Theel, Janet Johnson (*party girls*)  
Lorie Busk (*Melissa as a child*)  
Jack Bernardi (*tailor*)  
Gray Frederickson (*doctor*)  
Arthur Rosenberg (*official*)  
Stephen Mendillo (*orderly*)  
Aesop Aquarian (*hippy*)  
Guy Larry Finley, Richard O'Bryan, Todd Lookinland, Gary Boyle, Sasha Jensen, Kevin Schultz (*surfers*)  
Christopher Woods (*lifeguard*)  
Jimmy Bracken (*kid surfer*)  
Stacy Keach Sr (*old man*)  
Iris Korn (*old woman*)  
Ollie O'Toole (*minister*)  
Celia Kaye (*The Bear's bride*)  
Keola Beamer, Kapono Beamer (*slack-key guitarists*)  
Brain Damage Vincent (*Matt's dog*)  
Clete Roberts \*  
Herb Voland \*  
John Milius \*

USA 1978©

119 mins

\* Uncredited

A BFI National Archive print

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## **BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

### **Thelma and Louise**

Sun 1 Aug 18:00; Sat 14 Aug 20:35; Sat 28 Aug 20:20

### **Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice**

Mon 2 Aug 20:40; Fri 13 Aug 20:45; Wed 18 Aug 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by Julie Lobalzo Wright, University of Warwick); Mon 23 Aug 14:30

### **Bright Star**

Tue 3 Aug 20:30; Fri 27 Aug 17:50; Mon 30 Aug 18:10

### **Boyz N the Hood**

Wed 4 Aug 17:45 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic Leila Latif);  
Mon 9 Aug 20:50

### **Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (The Young Ladies of Rochefort)**

Thu 5 Aug 17:50; Thu 26 Aug 17:40

### **The Big Lebowski**

Fri 6 Aug 20:45; Mon 16 Aug 20:50; Wed 25 Aug 14:15

### **Only Angels Have Wings**

Sat 7 Aug 12:00; Tue 24 Aug 14:15; Tue 31 Aug 20:30

### **A Farewell to Arms**

Sun 8 Aug 12:20; Fri 20 Aug 14:30; Wed 25 Aug 18:00  
(+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-large)

### **Matewan**

Tue 10 Aug 14:15; Sun 15 Aug 18:20; Sat 21 Aug 12:20

### **Cutter's Way**

Wed 11 Aug 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-large); Tue 17 Aug 14:30; Fri 20 Aug 20:50; Fri 27 Aug 20:50

### **The New World**

Thu 12 Aug 14:30; Sun 22 Aug 12:00

### **Big Wednesday**

Thu 19 Aug 17:50; Sun 29 Aug 18:10