



## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

# O Brother, Where Art Thou?

### O Brother, Where Art Thou?

*Directed by:* Joel Coen  
*Presented by:* Universal Pictures, Touchstone Pictures  
*In association with:* StudioCanal  
*Production Companies:* Working Title Films, Blind Bard Pictures  
*Executive Producers:* Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner  
*Produced by:* Ethan Coen  
*Co-producer:* John Cameron  
*Associate Producer:* Robert Graf  
*Production Supervisor:* Gilly Ruben  
*Production Accountant:* Barbara Ann Stein  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Karen Ruth Getchell  
*Unit Production Manager:* John Cameron  
*Location Manager:* Michael Riley  
*Post-production Provost:* Neil A. Stelzner  
*Post-production Supervisor:* David Diliberto  
*1st Assistant Director:* Betsy Magruder  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Jonathan McGarry  
*2nd 2nd Assistant Director:* Donald Murphy  
*Script Supervisor:* Thomas Johnston  
*Casting:* Ellen Chenoweth  
*Local Casting:* Sandy Dawes  
*Additional Casting:* Kathleen Chopin  
*Voice Casting:* Sondra James  
*Screenplay:* Ethan Coen, Joel Coen  
*Based upon 'The Odyssey' by:* Homer  
*Director of Photography:* Roger Deakins  
*Camera Operator:* Clint Dougherty  
*1st Assistant Camera:* Andy Harris  
*2nd Assistant Camera:* Adam Gilmore  
*Steadicam Operators:* Kyle Rudolph, Mark O'Kane  
*Still Photographer:* Melinda Sue Gordon  
*Special Visual Effects/Digital Animation:* Digital Domain  
*Graphic Art Director:* Ted Haigh  
*Editors:* Roderick Jaynes [i.e., Joel Coen, Ethan Coen], Tricia Cooke  
*Associate Film Editor:* David Diliberto  
*1st Assistant Editor:* Ian Silverstein  
*2nd Assistant Editor:* Karyn Anonia  
*Production Designer:* Dennis Gassner  
*Art Director:* Richard Johnson  
*Assistant Art Director:* Marco Rubeo  
*Set Designer:* Thomas Minton  
*Set Consultant:* Jonathan Short  
*Set Decorator:* Nancy Haigh  
*Storyboard Artist:* J. Todd Anderson  
*Property Master:* Ritchie Kremer  
*Construction Co-ordinators:* Bill Bradford, Jeff Passanante  
*Costume Designer:* Mary Zophres  
*Assistant Costume Designer:* Danielle Valenciano  
*Make-up Supervisor:* Jean Black  
*Key Make-up:* Amy Schmiederer  
*Head Hairstylist:* Paul LeBlanc  
*Key Hairstylists:* Roy Bryson, Barbara Sanders, Karyn Huston  
*Mr George Clooney's Hairstylist:* Waldo Sanchez  
*Title Design and Other Cool Stuff:* Balsmeyer & Everett Inc  
*Digital Intermediate:* Cinesite, Inc  
*Music by:* T-Bone Burnett  
*Additional Music by:* Carter Burwell  
*Yodelling:* Pat Enright  
*Music Co-ordinator:* Lee Olsen  
*Music Producer:* T-Bone Burnett  
*Music Producer:* Denise Stitt  
*Associate Music Producer:* Gillian Welch  
*Music Production Co-ordinator:* Valerie Pack

One of the earliest gags thrown out (and apparently away) by the Brothers Coen is their po-faced title-credit claim that *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is based on the *Odyssey*. Aha, you think, typical smart-alecky college-boy spoofery... and then darn it if the Homeric parallels don't start coming thick and fast. A hero called Ulysses heading back home to see off the suitors for his wife Penny/Penelope; a one-eyed and hence suitably Cyclopean bad guy in the corpulent form of John Goodman, crooked Bible salesman and KKK goon Big Dan Teague; a trio of exquisitely sexy sirens, who coax our crew, three escapees from a chain gang on the trail of a cache of buried money, to the river and oblivion with sweet song and spiked hooch, and even manage to turn one of them – or so his superstitious pals believe – into a frog; blind men prophesying signs and wonders and a guy called Homer.

None of which would appear to have very much point, other than in adding a certain quality of bookish gamesomeness to the proceedings for those in the know, just as a movie buff's knowledge of the film's undeclared source, Preston Sturges' 1941 comedy *Sullivan's Travels* (in which the idealistic director played by Joel McCrea yearns to make a socially conscious epic entitled *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*), will give a little extra relish to the scene in which a chain gang is marched into the local cinema for their weekly dose of motion entertainment. Disparate as they otherwise are, though, the two classic sources of Sturges' *Travels* and Homer's *Odyssey* do have at least one thing in common: they share the basic structure of the episodic adventure journey – a form which can have the virtue of mating a reasonably strong narrative drive with a pleasingly wide and promiscuous range of subject matter.

The better part of a century ago, both James Joyce and Ezra Pound twigged to the usefulness of the *Odyssey* as a clothes line for hanging your obsessions on; though the Coens are neither as universally compendious as Joyce nor as nastily deranged as Pound, their film is also a bit of an encyclopaedic rag-bag or cabinet of curiosities, stuffed to bursting point with the minutiae of American popular culture and folk memory. At one point or another, their film invokes more or less directly all of the following and more: the satanic legend of blues guitarist Robert Johnson, the career of Louisiana governor Huey Long, *The Wizard of Oz*, the modernising and devastating activities of the Tennessee Valley Authority, bank robbers Bonnie and Clyde, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Southern novelist Flannery O'Connor's religious zealots and hucksters, writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans' account of the Depression years *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and the Lord alone knows what else.

Above all, it's a compendium of American musical styles of the period, from blues and gospel to bluegrass and back again, comparable in spirit and sheer enjoyment value to Harry Smith's celebrated anthology of American folk music of the '20s and '30s, re-issued on CDs a couple of years ago to ecstatic reviews and brisk sales. Simply, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* has one of the richest and most satisfying soundtracks I've heard in years: hats off to T-Bone Burnett, who arranged and produced it, as well as recruiting a lot of the performers.

Music Editor: Sean Garnhart  
 Music Recorded by: Mike Piersante  
 Choreographers: Jacqui Landrum, Bill Landrum  
 Sound Designer: Eugene Gearty  
 Production Sound Mixer: Peter Kurland  
 Boom Operator: Steve Bowerman  
 Re-recording Mixers: Skip Lievsay, Michael Barry,  
 Sean Garnhart, Greg Orloff  
 Supervising Sound Editor: Skip Lievsay  
 Dialogue Editors: Fred Rosenberg,  
 Philip Stockton  
 Effects Editors: Glenfield Payne, Paul Urmsion  
 ADR Editor: Kenton Jakub  
 Supervisor Foley: Ben Cheah  
 Foley Artists: Marko Costanzo, Jay Peck  
 Foley Editors: Kam Chan, Frank Kern,  
 Jennifer Ralston  
 Stunt Co-ordinator: Jerry Hewitt  
 Animal Handlers: Birds & Animals  
 Animal Co-ordinator: Jennifer Henderson  
 Unit Publicist: Louise A. Spencer  
 Cast:  
 George Clooney (*Everett Ulysses McGill*)  
 John Turturro (*Pete*)  
 Tim Blake Nelson (*Delmar*)  
 Charles Durning (*Pappy O'Daniel*)  
 John Goodman (*Big Dan Teague*)  
 Michael Badalucco (*George Nelson*)  
 Holly Hunter (*Penny*)  
 Stephen Root (*radio station man*)  
 Chris Thomas King (*Tommy Johnson*)  
 Wayne Duvall (*Homer Stokes*)  
 Daniel Von Bargen (*Sheriff Cooley*)  
 J.R. Horne, Brian Reddy (*Pappy's staffs*)  
 Frank Collison (*Wash Hogwallop*)  
 Del Pentecost (*Junior O'Daniel*)  
 Ed Gale (*the little man*)  
 Ray McKinnon (*Vernon T. Waldrip*)  
 Royce D. Applegate (*man with bullhorn*)  
 Quinn Gasaway (*Bog Hogwallop*)  
 Lee Weaver (*blind seer*)  
 Milford Fortenberry (*pomade vendor*)  
 John Locke (*Mr French*)  
 Gillian Welch (*soggy bottom customer*)  
 A. Ray Ratliff (*record store clerk*)  
 Mia Tate, Musetta Vander, Christy Taylor (*sirens*)  
 April Hardcastle (*waitress*)  
 Michael W. Finnell (*interrogator*)  
 Georgia Rae Rainer, Marianna Breland,  
 Lindsey Miller, Natalie Shedd (*Mharvey gals*)  
 John McConnell (*Woolworths manager*)  
 Isaac Freeman, Wilson Waters Jr.,  
 Robert Hamlett (*gravediggers*)  
 Willard Cox, Evelyn Cox, Suzanne Cox,  
 Sidhey Cox (*Cox family members*)  
 Buck White, Sharon White, Sheryl White (*White  
 family members*)  
 Ed Snodderly, David Holt (*village idiots*)  
 USA/France/UK 2000©  
 107 mins  
 Digital

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**SIGHT  
AND  
SOUND**

So much for the encyclopaedic rag-bag. As for the narrative clothes line: well, *O Brother* certainly isn't as funny as one of the top-flight Preston Sturges movies – no shame there, since almost nothing is – but it's more than funny enough, and sometimes unexpectedly charming into the bargain. George Clooney, who's been made into a strikingly good ringer for Clark Gable, is agreeably relaxed and understated in the slightly image-tarnishing role of Everett Ulysses McGill, a bit of a blue-collar fop who is almost pathologically concerned with the state of his hair (there is much play with nocturnal hairnets and cans of a gentlemen's pomade by the name of 'Dapper Dan'), a bit of a pompous and sesquipedalian word spinner, a bit of a coward and a bit of a cad. Clooney also does a terrific job of lip-synching to 'I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow', the song that unknowingly catapults him and his fellow escapees, in the guise of a hillbilly outfit called the Soggy Bottom Boys, to the top of the redneck hit parade.

Clooney's character holds the film together as much as such a digressive narrative can be held together, and few viewers are going to be much bothered by the implausibilities and grandstanding vignettes which threaten to pull it apart from time to time. As you'd expect from the Coens, *O Brother* is rich in visual jokes, from very simple slapstick stunts (chained together, the convicts try to jump on to a train one after another; Everett goes first, only to be yanked back into the dust by his less athletic peers) to less readily encapsulated effects, such as the neatly shot moment in which the siren-drugged cons wake up and see that nothing is left of their friend Pete (John Turturro) but a carefully laid-out set of clothes. The torch-lit Klan rally, which the gang eavesdrop, is a particularly strange piece of virtuoso staging, which manages to be at once camp and authentically sinister.

Time to raise and, if possible, lance the old objection levelled against the Coens by unbelievers: yes, they are clever, very clever, too clever by half, but where is the substance, the warmth, the passion? One answer, this time around, is that it is obviously possible to love some of the things you mock (to mock them partly because you love them), and that the treatment of American music in *O Brother*, even silly yodelling American music, is in the end far more loving than mocking, just as it was in Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975).

And what is true of the music is true of the culture which produced that music: it would be hard for filmmakers with no real attachment to Americana to produce a movie so besotted with the bric-a-brac of their nation's half-forgotten folk ways. It was always clear that the Coens were film-fed boys, but less clear how reverent they felt to their pop-cultural roots. Maybe, like Ulysses or Odysseus, they've finally come home to Ithaca. In any event, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a finely wrought entertainment film, one which any con might be pleased to see on his afternoon away from the chain gang.

Kevin Jackson, *Sight and Sound*, October 2000