

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Gunn's Guardians return for swan song

By T. Rob Brown

Critics and many fans agree, the Marvel Cinematic Universe's rollercoaster ride since *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) hit numerous lows and fewer highs. We saw *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) as one of those few bright spots among the less-than-stellar offerings from Kevin Feige's stable during this period.

When director James Gunn's long-awaited *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* debuted at cinemas on May 4, a day long associated with another famous sci-fi franchise also owned by the House of Mouse, most fans touted the film as either the best MCU film since the last Spidey entry or even the best one since *Endgame*.

Yes, the team is back at the helm of their newest ship, *The Bowie*, to try to save the galaxy against one of the most nefarious villains in MCU history: the High Evolutionary, played expertly by Chukwudi Iwuji. You just have to hate a guy who abuses animals, right?

Despite numerous praises on online venues, the film is not without criticism. Yet it does something most other MCU films cannot and it did so at a time when the MCU seems to be waning, as I

mentioned in a previous column. Gunn set out not only to give us the laughs we've come to expect from his distinctive style of humor, but to give us a great, yet sad, story.

In its infancy, the MCU began as not just a series of superhero films. Each film fit into its own genre crossbred with superhero tropes. Examples: *Iron Man* (2008) was a futurist film about technology and the dangers of it falling into the wrong hands—which happened to feature a superhero; *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) was a war picture that happened to feature a superhero; *Thor* (2011) was a fantasy film laden with mythology and blended with a coming-of-age story—something true to many mythological works; *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) was a *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*-influenced film about the potential rage contained within us all—let's just hope we don't turn into angry green giants; and *Marvel's the Avengers* (2012) was a story about the importance of teamwork, also known as an ensemble picture.

While the entire *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise films are ensemble pictures, they're definitely set in the sci-fi genre. It's not a coincidence that Gunn and the MCU chose May 4—Star Wars Day—to unveil his Guardians' swan song.

Before the Thursday evening release showings began, Gunn took to Twitter saying, "11 years ago I had a meeting with Marvel Studios about the possibility of doing a *Guardians of the Galaxy* movie. I remember driving home & thinking I didn't want to make a movie LIKE *Star Wars*, but a movie that made people FEEL like *Star Wars* made me feel as a kid. Outlandish characters, extraordinary locations, a space opera with a touch of magic filled with heart. Thank you, *Star Wars*, for inspiring me, & how appropriate that the third part of our trilogy is playing in theaters all across the world tonight on May the 4th."

Though some might argue that since the original *Star Wars* film didn't open until 1977, that it might owe a slight bit of its success to the original *Guardians of the Galaxy*—not the film, but the comic book line that began in January 1969. Though few of those original Guardians team members are recognizable to modern moviegoers, with the exception of Yondu Udonta, played by Michael Rooker in the films. To a lesser degree, Michael Rosenbaum took on the role of original Guardians member Martinex T'Naga in *Vol. 2* and *Vol. 3*, while Ving Rhames played Captain Charlie-27 briefly in *Vol. 2*. These original comic book Guardians became Ravager leaders in Gunn's rendition.

Stakar Ogord—portrayed by Sylvester Stallone in *Vol. 2* and *Vol. 3*—would later join the Guardians in the comic book line in 1975. Another later addition to the team, who would end up in the films, included 1991's Aleta Ogord, played by Michelle Yeoh in *Vol. 2*. While there were many other members added or removed from the comic book line along the way, Mainframe joined the Guardians team in 1992 and would later be voiced by an uncredited Miley Cyrus in *Vol. 2* and Tara Strong in *Vol. 3*. The final classic Guardians member, Krugarr—basically a Sorcerer Supreme like Doctor Strange, joined the team in 1991. In *Vol. 2* and *Vol. 3*, he has an unspoken role and was entirely created in CGI.

Basically, in Gunn's Guardians, the Ravagers teams are where the old Guardians are sent to retire. Zoe Saldaña—only sometimes properly credited with the tilde—told *Wired* she is $\frac{3}{4}$ Dominican and $\frac{1}{4}$ Puerto Rican and is bilingual in Spanish, with English as her second language; she grew up in Queens, New York City. It makes sense that in *Vol. 3* we see her character, Gamora, who is the alternate 2014 timeline version of Gamora who also left the Guardians at the end of *Endgame*, hanging out with the Ravagers.

During the filming of *Vol. 2*, Gunn knew that Saldaña wanted to finish her time at the Guardians due to numerous other film projects—such as the new James Cameron *Avatar* sequels—and wanted the character to die in the MCU.

“... Gamora almost died in *Vol. 2*,” Gunn told *ComicBook.com* in April. “I knew from the beginning Zoe only wanted to play the character for so many years, and she’s been very honest saying that she’s done [after this]. And so I was going to have her die.”

He originally planned for her to sacrifice herself, instead of Yondu, to save Star-Lord/Peter Quill, played by Chris Pratt, and the rest of the team in *Vol. 2*.

“... Quill was going to learn about himself, as opposed to in the second movie, and I thought different of it,” Gunn continued telling *ComicBook.com*. “I was kind of talked out of it by Kevin [Feige] and Lou [D’Esposito], and then it just didn’t work that well. It didn’t feel right, it felt much more right to go where we go in that movie. That seemed what was correct for the story. I think at the time, I was afraid of killing Michael Rooker because he’s my friend.”

Remember how I mentioned in past columns about directors having favorite actors to work with? Rooker, along with Nathan Fillion, are some of the actors Gunn likes to collaborate with on a regular basis. Since 2006, Rooker and Gunn worked on five films together, while Gunn and Fillion worked on four together. Fillion and Rooker both appeared in Gunn’s *Suicide Squad* (2021), both had at least a voice role in the original *Guardians of the Galaxy*—Fillion voices the monstrous convict who threatens Rocket until Groot puts him in his place—and both had at least a cameo in *Vol. 3*. I suspect those collaborations will continue into the new DC Universe, where Gunn serves as co-CEO, along with Peter Safran, for DC Studios. On a side note: Pete Davidson of *Saturday Night Live* fame, who had a small part in *Suicide Squad*, has a voice cameo in *Vol. 3*.

The story of Gamora changed with the Russo Brothers’ storyline in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) when Thanos sacrificed her on Vormir to attain the Soul Stone. Everyone questioned, how would Gunn proceed with *Vol. 3* now that Gamora’s gone? But then in 2019’s *Endgame*, she returned—well, sort of. We got a 2014 version of Gamora from an alternate timeline, who has no memory of the character’s time with Quill and the rest of the Guardians—she only remembers her sister Nebula, played by Karen Gillan. This plays a big part in *Vol. 3*.

While the Russos affected Gunn’s storyline, he previously had affected theirs too. Back in 2014, Gunn needed to briefly explain to filmgoers what these Infinity Stones were and where they came from. Their origin story in the films is different than that of the comics.

“I wrote that scene in about an hour and a half,” Gunn recalled while speaking with Pratt and then laughing during a video Cast Quiz with *Comicbook.com* during the press tour for *Vol. 3*, “it just like came up with what the Infinity Stones were ... and [the entire MCU’s] based on that ... They were like, ‘You know, we’re thinking about putting the Power Stone in.’ I was like, ‘That’s cool. The Power Stone. The Collector has the Power Stone ...’ And I just made up this bullsh-t!”

In the original film, the Collector, played by Benecio del Toro, explains the backstory of the stones to the Guardians before revealing the Orb’s true hidden nature as the Power Stone held within.

Getting back to the present, without revealing too much of the story and plot of *Vol. 3* to avoid spoilers, we have a film that splendidly wraps up a trilogy filled with humor, action, romance, betrayal, incarcerations, subterfuge, a talking racoon, a sentient tree, a talking telekinetic canine, a love for animals and a hatred for those who would harm them or children, love lost, genocide, and a small group of heroes—well, a group who when asked if they will choose to do something good, something bad, or a bit of both, will choose the latter.

In tune with that, Pratt acknowledged making MCU history with its first F-bomb—one of the reasons this film hit the language top of what's possible in a PG-13 film without going R.

"I make history in this movie," Pratt told *The Hollywood Reporter* in a video interview. "I drop the first F-bomb, no big deal. I don't know. It's the only time I've ever made history in my life, so I assumed that's what you were alluding to. Yeah, it's a moment, it's a special moment."

No offense intended to Pratt, but is it "no big deal" or is it "a special moment"? To Star-Lord's defense, this F-bomb happens quite naturally in an intense scene.

This was Gunn's final Guardians film, but that doesn't mean the Guardians won't return under another director. Certain actors have bowed out from continuing their roles in the future—at least for now. Pratt is slated to return at the Legendary Star-Lord in future MCU films, even if the rest of the team does not.

Directed by Gunn, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* (2023), Rated PG-13, stars Pratt, Saldaña, Iwuji, Bradley Cooper, Pom Klementieff, Dave Bautista, Gillan, Vin Diesel, Sean Gunn, and Will Poulter. It runs for 2 hours and 30 minutes—the longest runtime of any Guardians film. It received a certified fresh 81% on the Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer and a 95% audience score, plus an 8.3/10 on the International Movie Database. I give it two thumbs up.

"The show must go on."