



The Dude Abides

Another look at Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski*

As an archetypal resident of L.A.'s shadier streets, the Dude abides, a latter-day California Buddha in the Holy Temple of Slackerdom, plum mystic and stoned immaculate, a knocker of pins, drinker of Caucasians. "He's the man for his time and place," says the man in the cowboy hat, his purple baritone of a voice rumbling like warm milk in your stomach. "He fits right in there." That's the Dude: an icon of that other, less epochal apocalypse, where the bastard 20th century simply whirled around and collapsed like pins in a bowling alley, barely noticed and then swept away for a brand-new set.

So I'll come clean and reveal myself to be the monkeyfucker I am (no, I don't need

to cuss so much, fuck you): Like any Coen Brothers' movie, I saw *The Big Lebowski* when it debuted in 1998, and I haven't seen it in its entirety since. It's always struck me as one of the Coens' minor efforts, a loose-limbed, bedazzled curiosity that sits like packing material between indubitable masterworks like *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing* and *Fargo*. And then, by the time I came to understand that *Lebowski* had taken permanent residence among the pomo cultural detritus of my generation — becoming perhaps the most quotable cult film of the last 30 years — it seemed too late to pretend I'd always been hip to the Dude's driftwood antics.

If, however, there's anything I've learned about Coen Brother films, it's that they not only reward a second look but also, by some inscrutable intrinsic dynamic, seem to demand it. Like the initial pass of opium through a blighted liver, a Coen movie cannot be processed the first time around; only upon the second (and third, fourth, fifth) viewing does their full genius begin to reveal itself. Nowhere is this more borne out than in *No Country for Old Men*, their Oscar-winning adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's vicious, gothic crime novel. The first time I saw the movie, it actually bored me; but then, when I gave it a second chance — and knowing every suspenseful twist and explosive outcome — I was mesmerized.

There is a moment in *The Big Lebowski* when the Dude (Jeff Bridges), realizing he's being followed in his car, attempts a fantastic feat of California-style multi-tasking: With his eyes glued to the rear view mirror to watch the progress of his pursuer, he somehow manages simultaneously to steer, drink a brewski and polish off a tiny smoldering roach. Almost. Taking one final tug on the joint, it drops burning into his lap, whereupon the Dude — screaming like a girl — upends the bottle, pouring beer into his crotch to extinguish the fire. Doing a good 15 miles per hour, the Dude loses control and crashes into a dumpster, whereupon his car does a single endo about a foot into the air. I started laughing so hard I had to stop the movie.

Wrapped, very loosely, around a weak,

relatively negligible crime-noir plot that is part Raymond Chandler and part acid flashback, *The Big Lebowski* is a *tour de force* of deadpan comedy fobbed off as a buddy action flick, and as such, the movie could never be considered a something greater than the sum of its parts. It is exactly in its constituent parts that *Lebowski* locates its *raison d'être*: Bridges, in one of his finest performances, as the personification of the Eastern principle of passive suffering, a man jerked (and jerked around) here and there by forces he is incapable of comprehending; the always excellent John Goodman as a converted Jew Vietnam vet whack job; John Turturro as the metrosexual Hispanic bowler Jesus; Steve Buscemi brilliantly barely registering; a very sexy, very funny Julianne Moore as a cold, calculating profeminist arts freak.

Thanks to the cast's complete immersion and faith in the material, combined with the Coen Bros.' technical perfectionism (as well as their seriously underrated sense of humor), *The Big Lebowski* goes aces in — and from a movie about nothing arises, all shits and giggles, a complete mythology for our dark, dangerous times.

What more could you ask from a film that features Aimee Mann playing a mumbling Nihilist who sacrifices her toe for a briefcase full of John Goodman's dirty underwear? **EW**

The Big Lebowski plays at David Minor Theater & Pub through May 9, with the annual "Big Lebowski Party" at 7:15 & 9:30pm May 3-4; davidminorthheater.com

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