

The Big Lebowski

By J.M. Tyree & Ben Walters

In 1996, writer-directors Joel and Ethan Coen won their first Oscar, for the screenplay of *Fargo*. That film was a dark comedy with a simple story and palpable heart – seemingly a step change from the strange commixture of fastidious genre pastiche and outré zaniness that had marked the Coens' earlier features, "Blood Simple," "Raising Arizona," "Miller's Crossing," "Barton Fink" and "The Hudsucker Proxy." It seemed that, with this snowbound morality tale, the willfully weird brothers were about to come in from the cold.

Then they made "The Big Lebowski," which at first glance seemed to be nothing but pastiche and zaniness. Its labyrinthine story, in which a down-to-earth detective pinballs his way through various strata of Los Angeles' human wildlife while investigating a bizarre kidnap-ransom plot, was clearly a riff on the noir classic "The Big Sleep" – in particular, Howard Hawks's genre-mocking 1946 filmed adaptation rather than Raymond Chandler's 1939 novel. But instead of the gritty nous of Bogart's Philip Marlowe, we got Jeff Bridges as Jeffrey Lebowski, or the Dude, an amiably hapless stoner who really just wants to go bowling. This whole thing unfolds as a fever dream of free associations, a jigsaw jumble of diverse genres of film, music, architecture, character and philosophy. The L.A. of "The Big Lebowski" was truly a land of confusion.

On the film's release in 1998, most critics were flummoxed. Some appreciated the treasury of Hollywood references, some hailed Bridges' brilliantly spaced-out performance, some found the whole thing very funny. But many more thought it was a laughable mess, or lacking heart, or a bunch of clever ideas in search of a movie. Audiences weren't convinced either: the film just about broke even on an estimated budget of \$15 million. It had fans – when we saw it as students at the local multiplex, we were instantly smitten with its mixtape aesthetic, its radical indifference to worldly notions of success and masculinity, its riotous humor, and the Dude's quiet heroism – but this was a minority position.

Over the next few years, a strange thing happened. Legions of dedicated fans turned "The Big Lebowski"



The Dude (Jeff Bridges), Donny (Steve Buscemi) and Walter (John Goodman) contemplate life and their favorite pastime : bowling.

into a cult phenomenon and a hipster bible, quoting chapter and verse from its dialogue and dressing up like its characters at parties, screenings, and conventions, many of which were held in bowling alleys. (To Achievers, as these devotees are known, the mere utterance of certain words affirms mutual initiation in a worldwide secret society: "leads"; "Creedence"; "paraquat".) The picture began to take on the status of scripture, with the Dude as a down-at-heel Zen master for a debased postmodern age. The critical consensus shifted too. When, a decade after its release, we pitched a critical study of "The Big Lebowski" to the British Film Institute's publishing wing, some still wondered whether "Fargo" wouldn't be a more suitable choice, but they didn't need too much convincing. By then, the movie was already well on its way to recognition not just as a cult classic but as a high-water mark for comedy in the 1990s.

A decade on from writing that book, our main theory about "The Big Lebowski" – that it's really, really funny – still seems as self-evident as it did then. The Coens are surely unmatched in their ability to mix brilliant wordplay ("I am the walrus"), broad slapstick (cue the marmot), deft satire (nailing social snobbery one scene and armchair bellicosity the next) and witty nods to cinema history (from Busby Berkeley to Bugs Bunny via Fritz Lang's "Scarlet Street," Robert Altman's "The Long Goodbye," Roman Polanski's "Chinatown," and Ivan Passer's "Cutter's Way"). And their selection of collaborators is flawless, comprising a crew including cinematographer Roger Deakins, costumier Mary Zophres and musical coordinator Carter Burwell, and a note-perfect cast including John Goodman, Julianne Moore, Steve Buscemi and the late Philip Seymour Hoffman.

Perhaps these factors help account for the remarkable durability of the film's comedy and its ability to sustain almost endless re-viewing, getting funnier and funnier over the years. This is no small thing. From Edison and Chaplin onward, laughter has always been one of the primary drivers of popular entertainment, as well as an underappreciated benison in its own right. Good comedy matters, especially good comedy that is ultimately rooted in the embrace of friendship and simple pleasures and the rejection of ego and acquisition, as is the case with as "The Big Lebowski." By championing "Lebowski," we hoped to call into question self-serious, supposedly highbrow criticism that relegates comedy to background noise in cinema history. To follow the religion of laughter, as Laurence Sterne believed when he wrote "Tristram Shandy," is to draw on a deep wellspring of wisdom and humility as well as joy and fellow-feeling. No wonder the cult of "Lebowski" abides.

Since 1998, the Coens have kept up an astonishing pace of moviemaking, spanning the marvelously silly, the deliciously frightening and the subtly introspective in features such as "O Brother Where Art Thou?," "No Country for Old Men," "A Serious Man," "Inside Llewyn Davis" and "Hail, Caesar!" Their place among Hollywood royalty is firmly assured. Writing in 2016, it's no longer going out on a limb to compare the Coens' cultural and aesthetic significance to that of Billy Wilder or Preston Sturges. In late middle age, as one of their middle-period movies itself turns 20, they're now approaching the territory of Hawks and Hitchcock. And all this by taking a rather similar path of refusing to take anything seriously: Hollywood, genre conventions, received ideas about narrative or characterization, or themselves. Being seriously un-serious about human fate when the whole world has gone crazy – adding psychedelic dream sequences, one featuring a magic carpet and music by Bob

Dylan, for instance – is not categorically different to what Chaplin and Hawks did during World War II or what Hitchcock did under the shadow of a mushroom cloud.

One of the film's many cultural resonances involves its demolition work on certain American mythologies involving the success ethos and the marginalization of losers, flakes, and outsiders who cannot seem to make it within the parameters of the American gospel of prosperity. "Your revolution's over!" crows the Big Lebowski himself (played by the late, great David Huddleston) when the Dude, whose name he happens to share, visits his pretentious Pasadena mansion. "Condolences! The bums lost!" The scene hilariously combines a representative of the 1960s ethos of hippie burnout with a synecdoche of the unwarranted arrogance of 1980s and 1990s triumphalism about the march of capitalism to The End of History. In the shadow of the Great Recession, when yet another generation feels lost, the comforts and pleasures of "The Big Lebowski" remain vital. "I'm a Lebowski, you're a Lebowski," mutters the phony tycoon who denies the brotherhood of man but turns out to subsist on a handout from a strong and competent woman. In the diverse and homey bowling alley of the film's credit sequence, by contrast, the lowbrow entertainment of cheap play brings together Americans from all backgrounds and classes. How like Hollywood movies at their best.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

J. M. Tyree and Ben Walters are the co-authors of BFI Film Classics: The Big Lebowski. Tyree is the author of Vanishing Streets: Journeys in London, and teaches at VCUarts. Walters is the author of BFI Television Classics: The Office, and a biography of Orson Welles.