

# GALACTIC GUN GUY



According to several top critics, Michael Rooker (as Yondu Udonta) was the real star of this summer's blockbuster, *Guardians of the Galaxy 2*. (MARVEL/DISNEY)

**From early roles to recent stardom on screens big and small, Michael Rooker – today's ultimate anti-hero – has become a favorite of directors, fans and fellow cast members by staying true to himself.**

STORY BY CRAIG HODGKINS

A few years ago, Michael Rooker was doing something he loves almost as much as performing: driving his four-wheel-drive truck across the wide-open spaces of New Mexico and Arizona. It was a dark, rainy night, the sort of atmospheric setting that has provided the backdrop for some of his most memorable character turns. But along this particular stretch of highway, the actor didn't have mayhem, revenge or even survival on his mind. He was simply headed home.

But for the man who has most recently mesmerized audiences with such nuanced and complicated characters as Merle Dixon in *The Walking Dead* and Yondu Udonta in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise, the word "simply" acquires a whole new layer of meaning.

At one point on his journey westward, he'd gotten in close behind

a convoy of long-haul truckers so he could use them as oversized pace cars for his drive back to Los Angeles. It wasn't long before the big-rig drivers noticed, a fact the actor knew right away.

"I'm probably one of the only actors in Hollywood that still has a CB [citizen's band radio]," Rooker, 62, told me with a laugh recently. "I was tailing 'em because they were hauling ass across these two states, and I was not going to let 'em leave me behind. I was tagging along, and they were like, 'Hey, look at that. We still have that little four-wheeler behind us.' And I hollered up, 'You sure as hell do, boy. Just keep on rollin.' And they're like, 'Oh, my God, what's your handle [nickname]?' And I'm like, 'I don't even have a handle, man.' And he said 'We've got your handle; we're going to be calling you Tagalong from now on,' and so it stuck."

With the newly christened actor and his undersized vehicle now an official member of the procession, things got even more interesting.

"Then they found out who I was," Rooker added. "One guy recognized my voice, and he knew my cousins, the other Rookers, who used to work on trailers down in Florida and Alabama and Mississippi. He said, 'I know you're blah blah's cousin, Michael Rooker, the actor.' I said, 'Yep, I sure as hell am.' And so after that, we were talking and yakking all the way across these two states, and the time just flew. It was a great experience."

That chance encounter may provide everything you need to know about Michael Rooker's approach to his life and career. Like those truckers he fell in with so easily, he is committed to the long haul, and no matter what the job entails, he keeps moving forward and always delivers

Rooker's turn as the mercurial Merle Dixon in AMC's *The Walking Dead* won him a whole new legion of fans. (AMC)



the goods.

Perhaps more importantly, even in the most solitary of environments, whether along a lonely highway or in a darkened movie theater, Rooker always finds a way to connect with people.

### ONE OF HIS EARLIEST

road trips took a 13-year-old Rooker from his birthplace of Jasper, Alabama, to Chicago, where his mother moved him and his siblings following her divorce. But instead of sending him spiraling out of control with teenaged angst, the move seemed to cement a life focus that continues to drive him today.

"I was meant to be this actor that I am," he told the *Chicago Tribune* in 2014. "Even growing up as a little hillbilly kid in Chicago in my neighborhood, Division and Ashland, which was not the nicest neighborhood when I was growing up, I always knew inside my heart that I was meant for something else. I

was not meant to be on the streets of Chicago. I was not meant to be in a gang. I was not meant to do drugs. I had that belief all through my life."

While seeking a way to express himself, Rooker discovered acting.

"I got involved with some theater people and enjoyed what they did," he said. "I thought, 'I could probably do this.' I ended up auditioning for a theater school [DePaul University's Goodman School of Drama], got accepted and the rest is history."

From his earliest star turn as the title character in *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986), Rooker has worked in productions of all sizes and budgets. In fact, audiences who know him only from his recent success may be surprised to learn that he had important roles in some of the most popular pictures of the '80s and '90s, including *Eight Men Out*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Sea of Love*, *Days of Thunder*, *JFK*, *Cliffhanger* and *Tombstone*.

That also means that he has acted

alongside some of Hollywood's biggest names, from Al Pacino, Gene Hackman and Tom Cruise to Kevin Costner, Sylvester Stallone and Kurt Russell (he recently worked with the latter two again in *Guardians 2*).

In a town with a reputation for short-term memory loss for who's on top and who's not – sometimes on a week-to-week basis – Rooker just keeps moving forward. Those seeking a secret formula to his long-term success, however, will be disappointed.

"You just keep working, dude," he told me, "That's all. In this business, there are always ups and downs. The last couple of years I've been on a pretty good high, starting with *The Walking Dead*. Getting involved with that series was like a gamble in the beginning. Who the hell knew that shooting zombies' heads off would become a popular way of releasing stress, and being an escape from normal, everyday life? We always knew there were zombie fans out



When the camera is not rolling, Rooker is all fun and games. Here, he shares a lighter moment with *Guardians* director James Gunn. (MARVEL/DISNEY)

there, because I started out in horror, so all of us horror guys and gals always knew that it's a popular area, ever since George Romero did his first movie [*Night of the Living Dead*, 1964], but we didn't know whether or not society had caught up with us. Apparently society has caught up with our sick minds, and they are into it as well."

#### **ON THE WALKING DEAD,**

Merle Dixon may have carried a 1911, an M16 and two knives, but Rooker's had several other roles where the prop man placed a gun in his hand every day.

"That was from the beginning," he said. "You know; here's yours and here's yours and here's yours, back in

the day when they didn't even give you training. Nowadays we're much more attuned to like making sure everybody's properly instructed on the handling and the safety of these firearms that we're using on set."

But unlike many of today's actors portraying gun-toting characters, Rooker doesn't need much instruction. He already knows a thing or three about firearms.

"I kept getting these roles where I had to handle weapons," he said. "(But) I was a little ahead of the game since I knew how to shoot already. I really got into *Tombstone* and the armor. It was Western-style, single-shot shooting, and I ended up really enjoying the old-style Colt single-action pistols. We went shooting

every day; we trained every day to get ready for our scenes. I walked away from the movie after it was over and wanted to continue shooting"

The armorer on that picture was none other than Thell Reed, who was dubbed "The Fastest Gun Alive" when he was still a teen. Even if you have never heard of Reed (and that would be a pity), you may recall a famous photograph of 1960s fast-draw experts Ray Chapman, Eldon Carl, Jeff Cooper and Jack Weaver pointing their gun barrels directly at the camera. If you know the photo, that's Thell Reed standing (and pointing) dead center.

Not only was Reed important to Rooker's skill development on *Tombstone*, the two still work



No matter what his role may be, Rooker has an undeniable presence on the screen. (DISNEY/MARVEL)

together.

“Thell is my sensei, my teacher, and my first gun coach,” he said. “We hung out together and shot together before the movie, during the movie

and after the movie. And we still talk and communicate and shoot together. We actors learn different things on all these movies that we do, and this is one thing that I learned

from *Tombstone* that I’ve actually kept up, and have actually improved upon the way I was back then.”

**EVEN WITH HIS FREE TIME**

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Rooker's *Guardians* costar Chris Pratt calls the frequent screen villain "one of the good ones." (MARVEL/DISNEY)

increasingly limited, Rooker still finds the opportunity to get some shots downrange. In fact, the actor's house is nearly a home on the range, since it is just a couple of minutes from the Angeles Shooting Range

north of Los Angeles. Rooker even owns stock in the popular training and practice destination, one of the biggest shooting facilities in L.A. County. He also trains with his friend, competition shooter

Taran Butler, whenever he has the chance. But no matter where or when he shoots, he keeps his practice "routine" less than routine.

"I like to shoot different styles," he said. "I like long distance; I like



short pistol work. I like shooting little targets, so I shoot far distances because the target gets smaller as you go out. But if I don't have a long range to do that, I'll shoot the 6-inch targets, the little poppers. I shoot those about a hundred yards out with my pistol."

"If I'm short in or really close, I'll find a Michael Rooker action figure and I'll bring it out and shoot his hands off and stuff like that – just silly stuff. One of my favorite things to do at the range is just bring out a big load of used cans and toss them out there all over the place and just go at it shooting the cans, plinking. I'm basically a plinker."

Rooker also enjoys shooting smoothbores and guns with bit more firepower.

"I've got a couple Benellis that I've been shooting lately," he said, "and I have my M1 that I really love to shoot with. I like shooting shotguns and doing skeet; sporting clays is really a lot of fun. I like to rationalize the fact that I'm going to the range because

I've got to make sure that I keep my skills sharp for the next movie."

An obvious question from gun enthusiasts may be how Rooker's "fun-loving, gun-loving" ways fit into an industry town with a reputation of being (ahem) less than supportive of Second Amendment rights.

"I think it's very obvious that everybody knows (about my love of guns and shooting)," he explained. "I don't preach it, and I don't go around spewing my political agendas. I just like to shoot. I see it as a sport."

"There are all sorts of people in this business of Hollywood and acting," he added. "I think we've learned from early on, that if you're a professional actor, you don't tell somebody else what to do. You gotta let people do their own thing. I really don't worry about it."

The acceptance he receives has much to do with the affable star's personality and attitude. His *Guardians* costar, Chris Pratt, has said, "Rooker has a very unique voice. Not only the way he talks,

but what he has to say. There's not many gun-loving, country-boy ninjas in Hollywood. He's one of the good ones."

#### IT IS ALWAYS BENEFICIAL

to be held in high esteem by your coworkers. But in an era where social media and live events such as Comic-Con have forever altered the connection between audiences and performers, an actor can't afford to forget about the people who buy the tickets and hover their thumbs over the television remote either. Fortunately, Rooker excels at establishing and nurturing relationships with his legion of fans.

"It's a positive," he said about his burgeoning "meet and greet" responsibilities. "(It) used to be a quirky thing that actors would do from a B-list movie – going to a horror convention or a little sci-fi convention and doing autographs and taking pictures and stuff like that for the fans. Now it's become a major deal ... The market is

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saturated with Comic-Cons. It's a great opportunity for the fans to meet actors that are going there specifically to meet them. It should be a great experience for both parties, for the actor as well as for the fan. I tend to have a good time doing it, and I think everybody that comes to my table and meets me, or comes to my Q&As or the photo ops or whatever we are doing on that day are hopefully having a good time."

In this increasingly participatory age, fans often do more than just line up for a photo or a signature.

"People come dressed as Yondu," he said. "The cosplays are big. Some people have their own idea of what they want to do when they meet you. They have some questions that have been in their mind for the last few days on the way over to the event, and [he laughs] sometimes you just blow their minds a little bit when they don't expect to get the answer they're thinking they're

Despite the growth of blue screens and CGI special effects, Rooker always remembers that an actor's one job is his or her take on the script. (DISNEY/MARVEL)



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going to get, or sometimes they get all nervous and they don't even remember the question."

Some of his *Walking Dead* fans were credited with extending and expanding his role from a minor to a major one. Three different fan clubs joined in a Twitter campaign specifically designed to get Rooker's Merle Dixon more screen time on the runaway AMC hit. Rooker experienced a similar situation this summer, when his role in *Guardians of the Galaxy 2* grew exponentially over the original release, leading a number of critics to proclaim him the real star of the picture.

Legend says that when William Shakespeare was writing *Romeo and Juliet*, the Bard of Avon had to kill off Mercutio midway through the proceedings because he was threatening to take over the play. If the *Guardians* franchise continues for several more installments, conspiracy theorists of the cinematic variety may be saying the same thing about – spoiler alert! – Rooker's

Yondu in the not-too-distant future.

**DESPITE HIS GIFT FOR** winning over the general public in person, it is on the screen that Rooker truly shines, often in "villain" roles that a lesser actor may struggle to make anything more than a two-dimensional cliché. Rooker, on the other hand, always finds a way to make his character the most interesting one in any scene, and he does that by not "acting" like a villain at all.

"I don't approach a role by saying I'll be unsavory or unlikable," he said. "I think all the roles I've done have been very passionate people who go to absolute extremes to make their points."

It also helps that Rooker has performed not just on the stage and on film, but as a voice actor, where performers aren't able to lean on any visual props or crutches.

"That's where it starts," he said, "(with) your interpretation. Your take on the script is not your take on the

action, or your take on the (special effects). That's not even your job. Your job is your take on the script. That's it. How you choose how you're going to say it ... is all up to you. I, in particular, don't necessarily choose how I'm going to say something. I like to keep it open and sincere and honest, and so whatever happens on the day on the set in the moment is what happens."

And what is happening next for Rooker?

"I've got a movie that's in the can that's called *Team Bolden*," he told me, "and it's about the birthing of jazz. It's a period piece, a very cool piece. I'm (also) working with developing a project from American gothic writer Flannery O'Connor called *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. My buddy has had the rights to that for a long time. It's early on. We're getting money, getting investors and going to make it, so that's always fun. It's not a big studio movie, so it's going to be our own movie. It'll be one of those things, like a labor



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of love. Then I'm also looking into projects that people are coming to me with. My payday has increased, and I always look for something that's going to be beneficial in that regard and also be challenging for me as an artist."

**WHEN I MENTIONED THAT**

we seem to be living in the age of the anti-hero, Rooker let out another a huge laugh.

"We're in the Rooker Age, then," he said, "because I'm your quintessential anti-hero. When you think about it, that really ends up being my forte."

"I'm one of these 35-year overnight successes," he adds. "Me and my friends talk about it and laugh about it. They've been – and I've been – working for a long time in this business. Actors, you know, what we really do in between gigs is we work at working. I just keep going; I just keep working, and work to get to work. Sometimes it's a big movie; sometimes it's a little movie. Right

now, the big ones are still coming down the chute. If it gets on my plate and I like it and it looks good, I'll do it, you know?"

These days, it's more likely that he'll do projects as a featured performer than as a "tag-along."

"It's like when you're driving down the highway," he concludes. "I would much prefer to drive than to fly. Like (when) we were hauling ass with those truckers. They would just go on and on and on and on and on and on. There's no stopping for a milkshake, stopping for a snack. I bring my snacks and my drinks all with me in a cooler. And if



The busy actor still finds some free time to get some shots downrange. (MICHAEL ROOKER)

I need a snack or a drink, I get it and I move on down the road. If I have to stop for a break, I'll stop for a break, and then I'll hop back on the highway and keep going. I'm a four-wheeling kind of driver. I can keep up with the best of them." ★

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