



## TCM BREAKFAST CLUB SCREENING

### The Long Goodbye | 1973

Directed by Robert Altman

**With characteristic fearlessness, director Robert Altman dared to offend the purists with his 1970s interpretation of the Raymond Chandler classic *The Long Goodbye* (1973). It turned out to be a triumph for both him and its star, Elliott Gould. TCM writer David Humphrey assesses the film and describes it as a fine tribute to Altman, who died on November 20 at the age of 81.**

Raymond Chandler devotees were perhaps entitled to feel nervous at the news that Elliot Gould had been cast as Philip Marlowe in the 1973 movie *The Long Goodbye*. Bogart may have been dead for 16 years, but many believed – and still do – that his Marlowe was the definitive one. Anyone else taking the role of the LA gumshoe would be like Rumpole without Leo McKern, they reasoned, or Flash Gordon without Buster Crabbe. They had not banked on two crucial components: Robert Altman being in the director's chair, and Gould on the top of his not inconsiderable form. Bringing the story right up to date – i.e., the fag-end of the hippy era – Altman teamed up with screenwriter Leigh Brackett to adapt Chandler's last-but-one novel to the

screen, and plainly gave priority to injecting comedy into the persona of Chandler's sardonic, hardbitten private detective. For Brackett it was a return to familiar territory, as he had co-written the script for Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1946) with Bogie as Marlowe, 27 years earlier. The tale is satisfyingly labyrinthine in the Chandler tradition: chain-smoking private eye Marlowe drives a friend from Los Angeles South to the Tijuana border and on returning finds his apartment swarming with LAPD's finest, who duly announce that he's under arrest for abetting the murder of his friend's wife. We know Marlowe won't be a guest of the police for long and he's duly released after the reported suicide in Mexico of his friend. Chandler couldn't resist a

beautiful woman, and one (portrayed by the beautiful Nina van Pallandt) duly enters the plot at this point when she hires Marlowe to find her alcoholic husband. Marlowe is next visited by a mobster who sinisterly informs him he owes \$350,000 which his dead buddy had taken to Mexico. Marlowe responds by tailing the villain, watching as he goes into the house of the woman who'd hired him to trace her husband. What's going on? Marlowe's mission is to find out, if only for the sake of his own curiosity...and we all know what that did to the cat. Which leads us to some of the defining characteristics of Altman's post-modern Marlowe. Here, he is still very much the loner of the novels, but rather dozy and prone to mumbling. We spend all of ten minutes, for example, watching him go out to buy food for his cat. This downbeat passage, telling us that Marlowe is just like the rest of us, has echoes of Richard Burton's Alec Lemas going into his corner shop to buy booze in *The Spy Who Came In from The Cold* (Martin Ritt; 1964). Reassuringly for the purists however he's still surrounded by a familiar gallery of Chandler-esque characters – clapped-out cops, cynical celebs, dime-a-dozen hoodlums, dodgy doctors – and the city of angels comes over as bizarrely as it did three decades earlier in the noir originals. Altman also has fun with his knowing references to the Hollywood clichés and conventions he loathed: at one point Marlowe says to the cops: "Is this where I'm supposed to say 'What's all this about?'" and he says 'Shut up, I ask the questions?' The movie has a sad dedication to Dan 'Hoss' Blocker, one of the stars of long-running TV series *Bonanza*, episodes of which Altman had directed. He and Altman became friends during the series and the director cast the 6ft 4 in actor in the role of Roger

Wade, but he died before filming began and it went instead to Sterling Hayden (Altman had his misgivings about the veteran tough-guy actor, but was eventually won over by his performance). Look out too for an uncredited appearance by Arnold Schwarzenegger as a bodyguard. Ever the perfectionist, Altman instructed the cast and crew to try to get into Chandler's mind by reading a little-known letter the author had written, as well as his essay collection *Raymond Chandler Speaking*. But this is definitely a Marlowe for the 1970s, as we can tell from one nasty little moment when a gangster assaults his moll with a soda bottle and then turns to Marlowe saying: "Now that's someone I love. Think what could happen to you." On a technical level, Vilmos Zsigmond's photography justifiably won an award for its inventiveness: he constructed shots by means of mirrors and panes of glass, superimposing characters to hint at their connection. Another innovation is the way John Williams' title song gets performed throughout the film in a variety of different styles. Altman brought it all together with his trademark dash and verve, and the result is a classy, workmanlike picture from a director who was not afraid to tear up any rule book nor defy any convention to deliver the film he wanted us to see.

Further reading: Robert Altman: *Hollywood Survivor* by Daniel O'Brien (Continuum).

*The Raymond Chandler Papers: Selected Letters and Nonfiction 1909-1959* by Raymond Chandler, Tom Hiney, and Frank MacShane (Grove Press).

## ESCAPE TO A WORLD OF FILM THIS JANUARY WITH TCM.

TCM launches into the new year with a month brimming with comedies, classics, tributes and celebrations, including the UK TV premiere of the TCM original production, **Edge of Outside** (2006) as part of **Hollywood Directors Week** from 15th - 21st January. **Classic Comedy Weekend** will bring laughter into the New Year on 6th and 7th January, with a selection of belly-aching films including **Blazing Saddles** (1974) and **Caddyshack** (1980).

**The King is Born** from 7th - 13th January on **TCM 2**, marking the 72nd anniversary of Elvis Presley's birth with a week of films that confirmed him as the undisputed king of Rock 'n' Roll. Including **Jailhouse Rock** (1957), **Viva Las Vegas** (1964) and 1970s documentary **Elvis: That's The Way It Is**.