



## CAST

Eldon Perry **KURT RUSSELL**  
Bobby Keough **SCOTT SPEEDMAN**  
Beth Williamson **MICHAEL MICHELE**  
Jack Van Meter **BRENDAN GLEESON**  
Arthur Holland **VING RHAMES**  
Darryl Orchard **KURUPT**  
Gary Sidwell **DASH MIHOK**  
James Barcomb **JONATHAN BANKS**  
Sally Perry **LOLITA DAVIDOVICH**

## CREW

Directed by **RON SHELTON**  
Produced by **JAMES JACKS, SEAN DANIEL, CALDECOT CHUBB, DAVID BLOCKER**  
Story by **JAMES ELLROY**  
Screenplay by **DAVID AYER**  
Director of Photography **BARRY PETERSON**  
Edited by **PAUL SEYDOR A.C.E.**  
Music by **TERENCE BLANCHARD**







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# BAD COP, WORSE COP

## DARK BLUE AND THE DAYS OF RAGE

by James Oliver

Ever since it was founded by the *conquistadors*, Los Angeles has done a convincing impersonation of paradise. Next to the Pacific and well served by sunshine, no wonder it's drawn so many over the years.

But all that sunshine makes for hard shadows. Paradise has quite the dark side, a history of graft and chicanery by leading citizens that's shaped the city, not least by entrenching segregation along racial lines, with Latinos and African Americans shunted into districts – ghettos, effectively – away from their white counterparts.<sup>1</sup> This deliberate policy of apartheid, and the brutal police tactics that it bred, have caused huge problems over the years, never more so than the fallout from beating of black motorist Rodney King, events which form the backdrop for *Dark Blue*.

Even by the toxic racial politics of Los Angeles, this was a particularly low moment: officers were caught on camera beating King but what seemed a clear-cut case of police brutality went unpunished when those responsible were acquitted at their trial in 1992.

The fury amongst African American Angelenos – who thought that the endemic racism of the Los Angeles Police Department had finally been exposed, and was finally going to be accounted for – boiled over into some of the worst disturbances in the city's history (...in the *country's* history...), six days and nights of rioting that left over a billion dollars-worth of physical damage, quite apart from the profound scars it left on the city's psyche.

*Dark Blue*, then, was picking at a painful scab, all the more so for tackling the underlying causes – which is to say the attitudes of the LAPD – full-on. Made only ten years after it all went down, it portrayed the LAPD as being every bit as corrupt and thuggish as their most

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<sup>1</sup> - *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (2003) by Josh Sides is a good primer for this.







severe critics might allege. But this isn't just cop-bashing; the strength of the film is that it struggles to understand these men, and the culture that formed them.

It began life, in a very different form, as a screenplay by James Ellroy. The self-styled 'Demon Dog of American Literature' is more often a novelist but after one of his books, *L.A. Confidential* (first published in 1990), had been successfully adapted for the screen (*L.A. Confidential*, Curtis Hanson, 1997), he was sufficiently tempted to try his hand at an original script. This he called *Plague Season*.

Ellroy is Los Angeles born and bred, and obsessed with the city's secret history. Most especially, he's preoccupied with the period from the Second World War and the mid-1960s when it saw its greatest expansion; his best work excavates the darkness behind that economic boom, re-imagining matters of public record (murders, politics, entertainment even) as parts of a new mythology of vice and iniquity.

*Plague Season* certainly conformed to this, zeroing in on another infamous chapter in the history of Los Angeles, the Watts riots of 1965. These were earlier race riots, inflamed in large measure by – what a surprise – resentment at police brutality. Over this, Ellroy laid a typically labyrinthine plot that addressed his preferred subject: “bad white men doing bad things in the name of authority.”<sup>2</sup>

But making films is very different to writing books. Whereas authors enjoy the luxury of doing as they please, filmmakers have to work within constraints. For a start, there is the budget: recreating the Los Angeles of 1965 would cost any production rather more to put it on the screen than it did for the author to put it on the page. It was for those reasons of economy that Ellroy was asked to bring his story forward to the conflagration of 1992. (Incidentally, that Los Angeles can offer a choice of race riots is one of the most damning examples of the city's problems.)

This change went beyond the merely cosmetic. While the LAPD that reacted to the Rodney King riots hadn't changed enough from the one that faced the uprisings in Watts, there had been small but significant improvements: in 1965, the department didn't even pretend to care about liberal sensibilities. Their equivalents in 1992 were, by necessity, just a little more self-aware; Ellroy's 'bad white men' were (a little) more embattled now, their license to do bad things ever so slightly curtailed.

Other changes, then, would be necessary but Ellroy excused himself from the project; he had book deadlines to meet and, what's more, felt he had little new to contribute as the

story proceeded in its new direction. Still, his mark remains on the film, especially in the character of Jack Van Meter. The avuncular copper with a sideline in serious crime is an echo of the Demon Dog's recurrent villain Dudley Smith, Irish *eminence grise* of the LAPD who hides his own criminal networks behind a facade of agreeable Irish blarney. That an Irishman (Brendan Gleeson) was cast as Van Meter only strengthens the connections, especially since the actor's native accent keeps emerging from behind the American twang he here adopts.

Elsewhere, though, *Plague Season* was extensively re-worked. David Ayer, now a leading player in Hollywood (director of *Suicide Squad* [2016] and *Bright* [2017]), was then just starting out as a screenwriter and was hired to renovate *Plague Season* on the strength of a script he'd written called *Training Day* (Antoine Fuqua, 2001), itself about corruption in the LAPD, and he'd point things in a very different direction.

“[Ellroy] had the basic story there, but it felt very novelistic,” said Ayer later. “It was very dense, lots of storylines and my task was to narrow it down and make it more of a movie and pick the stories to focus on.”<sup>3</sup> The tone would change too, with Ellroy's baroque stylings replaced by something more rooted in reality.

Much of this, of course, would come from the director, Ron Shelton. Shelton was not an obvious choice to handle a film about police corruption. A one-time professional Baseball player, he was best known for sports movies, like *Bull Durham* (1989) and *White Men Can't Jump* (1992, released only a few weeks before the riots its director would depict in *Dark Blue*). But it's not so very far from the locker room to the police station: both environments stink of machismo, after all. Eldon Perry's attitude here is very much of a piece with that of characters from Shelton's earlier movies, cocky, confrontational and oh-so-Alpha.

Shelton is fascinated by the internal dynamics of closed groups, and the Los Angeles Police Department gives him one of his best subjects. Throughout *Dark Blue*, he and Ayer interrogate the culture of the LAPD, exploring how it is facilitated and sustained through tradition, hierarchies and personal loyalties: Perry (Kurt Russell) is a good team player, happy to do what he's told by Jack Van Meter, even if it means letting off the actual culprits and murdering patsies in their place (after all, those guys are guilty of *something*, right?).

What's more, all this is institutionalised. While there are the occasional do-gooders like Arthur Holland (Ving Rhames) who want to shake things up, most officers know how things are meant to operate. If the Shooting Board at the start of the movie seems at first to take the accusations seriously, we later learn that it's essentially theatre – well-rehearsed,

2 - Ellroy, interviews *passim*

3 - Screenwriter's *Monthly Magazine*, April 2003.





well-staged and, above all, well-performed. Later on, we even see that officers are even allowed re-takes when giving a statement, just in case they accidentally reveal the truth first time out.

This is a police department that hasn't come so very far from its Wild West origins (Perry comes from a long line of Los Angeles law enforcement officials, going right back to the days when they chased cattle rustlers), with a morality to match – they are the 'good guys' chasing 'bad guys', labels which suggest a chronic lack of introspection. Stressed throughout is that the department is family, sometimes literally – Perry's young partner Bobby (Scott Speedman) is Van Meter's nephew and Perry himself was bred for it, learning what was expected of him at his father's side.

(There are hints the film meant to develop this father-son theme more thoroughly – Van Meter, after all, is a surrogate father to Perry, which makes the betrayal all the more painful. It's undermined, though, because we don't get to see Perry's own son until the climactic ceremony; any previous moments they shared were deleted during the editing. Still, the chain is broken at the end: Perry Jr. will not be following in his father's footsteps.)

Perry gives Kurt Russell one of his very finest roles. Indeed, he's one of the very few contemporary actors who could carry off both Perry's arrogant swagger and the subsequent hurt when his entire worldview comes crashing down. More impressive still, Russell doesn't flinch from playing the character's less attractive side; he is, after all, clearly established as a racist, and one who likes abusing the power his badge gives him: even if he subsequently invites 'Maniac' (Master P) to join him for a burger, that offer comes after harassment and a beating.

It would be easy enough to have made Perry irredeemable, most especially after the horrific scene where he urges Bobby to shoot yet another unarmed man. Shelton and Ayer's great achievement is, if not to absolve him of his sins, then at least to humanise him. Like most of the characters we meet here, Perry operates on instinct but we're shown enough of him to realise just how complicated he actually is, a prisoner of his own past (his dad took him out into the Watts riots, to blood him) and his loyalty to the department. It's only after Bobby is killed (and his own life endangered) that Perry confronts Van Meter (ironically, this is one of the few times that we see him actually resolving something without resorting to violence).

Whatever else can be said about Perry, he is a good investigator – smart enough to piece the clues together and sharp enough to stay alive to take down Van Meter. In another age, he might even have been heroic, but as the film shows, his time is over. The ending of *Dark Blue* is hardly optimistic – Los Angeles has a lot of burning to do first – but it does suggest that change was on its way.

And so it was, albeit slowly. In real life, Daryl Gates, long term chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, finally left his post in the middle of July 1992 (he'd actually resigned the year before after severe criticism of his leadership but took his own sweet time actually leaving). He was replaced by Willie L. Williams, the first African American to head the department who, soon enough, would face a *cause célèbre* all his own as the perfect storm of the OJ Simpson murder case hit. It was widely believed that there would be further riots if Simpson was convicted; that he wasn't owed much to the Jury's perception that the LAPD was racist, and that Simpson's freedom would be payback for Rodney King.

Both those cases convinced the LAPD they had to change and, to their credit, they have made determined efforts to improve. In the rest of the USA, though, a different story can be told – minority groups have become more emboldened to protest unfair treatment by police, and recent years have thrown up too many opportunities to do so, from the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri (after police shot an unarmed man, Michael Brown) to the death of Eric Garner, killed in a chokehold by New York's finest.

Even though *Dark Blue* is set well over two decades ago, it remains horribly relevant today: its exploration of America's racial fault line and bad cop culture resonate all too loudly in the age of Black Lives Matter.

*James Oliver is a film critic and historian; he has written for Reader's Digest, The New European and MovieMail.*









## ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*Dark Blue* is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with 5.1 surround sound audio. The film was transferred in High Definition and supplied to Arrow Films by IM Global.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

**Disc and Booklet Produced by** Francesco Simeoni

**Associate Producer** Liane Cunje

**Executive Producer** Kevin Lambert

**Technical Producer** James White

**QC Manager** Nora Mehenni

**Blu-ray Authoring and Subtitling** Silversun Media Group

**Artist** Tracie Ching

**Design** Obviously Creative

## SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Michael Dwyer, Sigrid Larsen, Laura Lee, IM Global, Tony Koch, Leroy Moore





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