

ON THE EDGE

With acting, writing and directing,
Billy Bob Thornton is a true triple threat

REBEL. COWBOY. WILD MAN. WACKO. BILLY BOB THORNTON HAS BEEN TAGGED with all of these labels over the years, and so it's with some apprehension that I approach the gate of his Beverly Hills mansion. After all, this is a guy rumored to have more quirks and oddities than Michael Jackson. What if he serves up a plate of pumpkin-colored food? What if he invites me to sign his guest book in blood?

Fortunately, it turns out I've just been reading too many back issues of *The Star*. The scene that greets me is bordering on the mundane. A tall, blonde assistant ushers me into a cavernous entertainment room, where Thornton is scrunched down into a plush sofa, eyes fixed on a TV screen the size of Texas. He's watching his beloved St. Louis Cardinals battle the Detroit Tigers in the 1968 World Series on ESPN Classic. I fight off the temptation to ditch the interview and talk baseball, impressed by the image of Billy Bob as a regular guy, a 'couch p'tater,' as his character in *Sling Blade* might've put it. In fact, Thornton's fondness for a 24-hour cable sports channel that revels in the glories of the past turns out to be perfectly in sync with his throwback tastes. He wears hippie-era clothing. His favorite movie is *High Noon*. He recently purchased a 1967 Chevelle. And even after five failed marriages, he still believes in the possibilities of that much-maligned social institution.

He doesn't, however, believe in the Hollywood scene. "I've been in the public eye for nine, ten years," says Thornton. "After awhile, the magic wears off." Pause. "It was never magic to me," he concludes.

Apparently, Thornton doesn't see how living in an 11,000-square-foot mansion in the heart of one of the world's most celebrity-studded neighborhoods might contradict that sentiment. "When I'm inside, I could be in Denver. I don't feel like I'm in Los Angeles," he says. This is a man who prefers hanging in to hanging out, and whose idea of a perfect night is "when you look at the *TV Guide* and you just know you're in luck for the whole evening." Like many celebrities, Thornton has created a self-contained oasis. Steps from the couch is a pool table, a foos-

ball table, and a jukebox. Outside are basketball and tennis courts, and the requisite L.A. swimming pool. But it's the basement recording studio, dubbed The Cave, that most attracted Thornton to this Spanish-style oasis; a studio that was installed by the previous tenant, Guns 'N' Roses guitarist Slash — and, most poignantly, the place where Warren Zevon (assisted by Thornton, among others, on vocals) recorded "Knocking on Heaven's Door" for his final album, just before his death this past summer.

In case you haven't heard, Billy Bob can rock. Sure, you say, so can Dennis Quaid, Kevin Bacon, and Russell Crowe. But none of them has released two critically acclaimed CDs. Thornton's latest, *The Edge of the World* (called "gothic alternative country" by the New York Daily News), is dedicated to his brother Jimmy Don, who died in 1988 (A liner note from Billy Bob reads, "It should've been me.") Thornton writes or co-writes a dozen songs, sings muscular lead vocals throughout, and proudly describes it as a concept album. "It's about a broken man on his way to healing," says Thornton. "He starts out blaming everyone else for the circumstances of his life, becomes destitute, then comes out the other side realizing he's got to point the finger at himself."

Pretty introspective stuff for a guy celebrated as much for his off-screen tabloid life as for his on-screen characters. There are the well-documented phobias, most of them urban legends: the "orange-colored-food-only" diet (not true), the drinking blood in his dungeon (not true), the fear of flying (not true, although Thornton does admit to avoiding it for three years when his children were young), and the fear of European antique furniture (true).

The phobias, of course, pale in comparison to the often lurid reports from

By Graham Flashner
Photographed by Greg Gorman

his three-year marriage to Angelina Jolie. But Thornton regrets none of it, not even over-the-top gestures like the pact he signed — in his own blood — promising that he'd never leave her. "We meant it," Thornton says simply. "I don't feel silly about that stuff at all."

That's the kind of emotional honesty that informs Thornton's best film work. In his two Oscar-nominated roles, for *A Simple Plan* (1998) and *Sling Blade* (1996), he made heroes out of misfits, society outcasts anchored by a strong moral courage. Even when he stepped outside of himself, playing against type in movies like *Armageddon* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, he was always accessible, a working-class hero with old-school values.

Upcoming is the Christmas comedy *Bad Santa*, directed by Terry Zwigoff (*Ghost World*), and starring Thornton and Bernie Mac as con men who pose as department store Santas. In the film, the two men get their just desserts — and a lesson in the true meaning of Christmas, natch — from an 8-year-old kid, for whom Thornton becomes a replacement father.

Those who want a history lesson — Disney-style — can look forward to *The Alamo*, starring Thornton as Davy Crockett, in a film that Thornton says is "an epic battle movie, but also a character movie that tells both sides (Mexicans and Texans) of the story." He also has supporting roles in the Coen brothers' *Intolerable Cruelty*, starring George Clooney and Catherine Zeta-Jones, and in *Love, Actually*, a British ensemble piece starring Hugh Grant and directed by writer Richard Curtis (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*).

Unlike many A-list stars trapped by audience expectations, Thornton has the luxury of being able to reinvent himself from film to film. "I don't want to go over the same ground again," Thornton says. "It's only fair to the audience; if you're playing the same thing in a movie, after awhile, it's like, 'there's that guy again.' I was fortunate to have become a movie star by playing a character that audiences weren't expecting to see every time."

That character, of course, was Karl Childers, the retarded but thoughtful protagonist of *Sling Blade*. The movie changed Thornton's life, not to mention the grammatical habits of thousands of moviegoers, who suddenly felt the need to add "mmm-hmmm" to the end of their sentences.

And just how did a mentally- (and wardrobe-) challenged murderer become one of the most iconic characters in American movies? "Karl's the lovable monster. He represents a type of justice that people believe in," says Thornton. "It was a movie that appealed

to both the intellectual crowd and the regular person."

It's also a movie that Thornton may never top for sheer originality. As he tells it, the voice came to him while he was on location for a forgettable TV movie. "I was looking in the mirror, feeling down on myself, and I started talking like that character," he recalls. "I did the whole opening monologue in my trailer at lunch." The character evolved into a one-man show, a short film and then, in 1996, into the independent feature film that earned Thornton a screenwriting Oscar, put him on the map as a director, and vaulted him to leading man status. None of which Thornton swears he ever thought would happen.

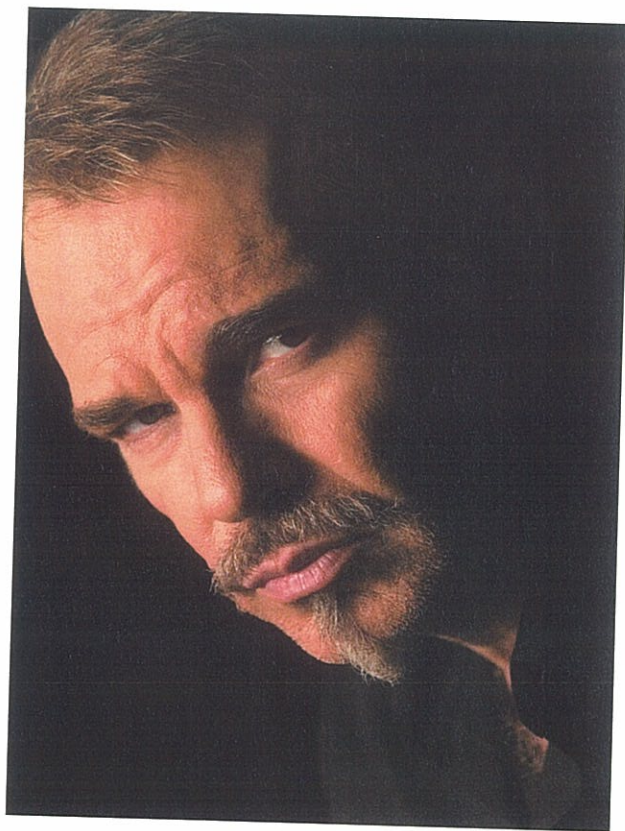
"This may sound like bullshit, but I never considered the possibility of being a movie star," he recalls. "I just wanted to be popular enough to work all the time. It's great that it happened. I can take care of my kids, and I'm able to get movies out in a way that people can see them, so I'm not knocking it." But Thornton bristles at a common misconception that equates the actor with some of the roles he's played. "People get the idea I'm some Southern good ol' boy," he says with a hint of scorn. "If I had a nickel for every time I read an article on me with the title 'Beverly Hillsbilly,' I'd be a billionaire."

Thornton's rise from poor kid in the rural town of Malvern, Arkansas, to Hollywood Hyphenate renews one's faith in the American dream: how he grew up in a house where running water and electricity were in short supply, how his dreams of a baseball career ended when his collarbone was shattered by an errant throw during a tryout

with the Kansas City Royals, how he originally set out to be a rock star, touring as the drummer with a ZZ Top cover band.

"Music came first in my life," says Thornton. "You couldn't be an actor in Malvern, there wasn't that availability." In 1981, Thornton headed for California at the urging of his friend and writing partner, Tom Epperson. "I was shoveling asphalt for the Arkansas highway department and playing music on the weekends, but it's not like we had a big contract or anything," Thornton remembers.

Once in Los Angeles, Thornton put music aside ("too many bands, too little money; you couldn't make any kind of living," he recalls), and turned his focus to acting. He enrolled in a class, joined a theater group, and finally, in 1989, made his TV series debut on the Fox show *The Outsiders*, where he was ecstatic to be earning what seemed to him the ungodly sum of \$2,500 per week. "Later, I realized that probably wasn't a lot for a prime-time





TV series," Thornton says with a laugh. "But it was the first time I was making enough money to keep up." In 1992, Thornton and Epperson broke through with their script for *One False Move*, an unusually complex — and under-appreciated — crime drama that also starred Thornton as a violent drug dealer with co-dependency issues.

Though the screenwriting duo have continued their fruitful collaboration with films like *The Gift* and *A Family Thing*, it's acting that remains Thornton's preference. "Writing is harder, you start with nothing," he says. And Thornton's most recent directing experience, when he locked horns creatively with Miramax over the length of the 2000 film *All The Pretty Horses*, was unduly stressful.

Acting, on the other hand, has allowed Thornton to work through unresolved issues, such as the distant relationship he had with his father, a hard-nosed Irish football coach, who died when Thornton was 18. "My relationship with my Dad was sad more than anything else," Thornton says, his soft drawl growing even softer. "He was trapped in an environment he couldn't get out of, and I think it tore him up."

While most filmgoers who saw *Monsters Ball* remember the super-charged sex scenes between Thornton and Halle Berry, equally intense was the relationship between Thornton's racist prison guard and the son he drives to suicide (played by Heath Ledger). "Exactly how much I became like my father in that movie, I never realized until I saw it," Thornton says. "I didn't set out to do it, but I was talking and walking just like him. It brought back all that sadness."

Some of that melancholy seems to linger on in Thornton's personal life. Perhaps it's the fallout from several high-profile relationships: Right before Jolie, there was the broken engagement to Laura Dern. "I've always loved people, and I get attached easily," says Thornton. "Lately, I find myself being more solitary, reflective." A self-proclaimed romantic, he doubts (for now) he'll ever marry again. "I can't fall in love with three, four people a year like I was doing," he says. It's easier for me to just see people without getting attached."

Thornton has no such commitment issues when it comes to his work. He's co-writing a screenplay entitled "*The Rabbit Factory*" with novelist Larry Brown, based on the life of Hank Williams, Jr. He has several other projects in the works through his production company, Meathouse. And he's completed his third album and plans a European tour in the spring of 2004.

Tonight, however, Thornton is focused on what's really important: the gang of friends coming over to watch the Cubs-Marlins playoff game on his big screen. Simple pleasures for a man who's anything but. **B**

STYLISTS: TUNNEY & LEAL FOR ARTISTS BY TIMOTHY PRIANO
GROOMING: LYNN EAGEN
SHIRT BY JOHN VARVATOS. COAT BY SPENCER HART. JEANS BY
HELMUT LANG. BLACK BOOTS BY SERGIO ROSSI.