

the pack's back

'Ocean's Eleven', the remake of the legendary Rat Pack heist movie, is finally here. In this Esquire guide to all things swinging, we've got Clooney, we've got Julia. But first, who are those guys with Frank?

WORDS *Phillip Watson*

THE 1960 VERSION of *Ocean's Eleven* is like a Rat Pack home movie. Filmed in Las Vegas and at Warner Bros studios by beleaguered director Lewis Milestone (who previously made the epic anti-war film *All Quiet on the Western Front*), the flick was firmly in the grip of Frank Sinatra, who played Danny Ocean. Whatever the director and his studio might have thought, Frank was the boss; he had assembled the cast and cut the deals.

Milestone's major problem was getting the Pack to turn up; filming was more an afterthought than a *raison d'être*. Half-cut and only a quarter serious, Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr, Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop were playing to packed houses at the Sands most nights they were in Vegas. They were like adolescent fortysomethings (Sinatra was then 44), staying up all night drinking, gambling and bedding broads.

Mostly, they didn't give a damn, especially the Chairman of the Bored. Sinatra either ignored the script or tore it up. Requests for scenes to be reshot were casually dismissed: "I've only got one take in me," Sinatra used to say. According to Shawn Levy's excellent book *Rat Pack Confidential*, "They worked on the picture 25 days in Vegas; Frank showed up nine." Lewis Milestone got to shoot with the whole Pack only once. When they did appear, they mostly horsed around.

Predictably, the resulting film was tedious, lazy and way too long. Somewhere within the vanity and chaos was a script that had Sinatra leading a gang of war veterans in a plan to crack five casino safes simultaneously. But along the way the plot meandered into senseless dead ends. Martin and Davis Jr performed incongruous musical numbers, and other scenes were woefully improvised.

As a result, the pleasures are chiefly incidental. There are the narrow black ties, Sinatra's cardigan collection, Dean Martin's tan, the manicured masculinity, the buddy moments, the hipsters' way with a cigarette and a Martini. Shirley MacLaine is great as

a sloshed party girl and Angie Dickinson is pretty as Tess Ocean, Danny's wife (although, in stark contrast to the remake, she adores Danny and longs for him).

The whole point was that it was a goof, a wisecrack that took the party to the people. *Ocean's Eleven* was a PR event that took \$1m in advance bookings and was expressly designed to bolster the fortunes of its cast and its backdrop. The premiere in Vegas was a glitzy showbiz event rivalled by no other that year. Said one showbiz columnist after seeing the film: "It was like eavesdropping on a stag party with binoculars." 📷



it's frank's world...

In the Fifties and Sixties, they were the guys: Dino, Sammy, Joey, Peter and Frank. From Hollywood to Vegas and beyond, women loved them and men wanted to be them – and still do. Spread the news with Esquire's ultimate guide to the Rat Pack

WORDS *Tom Williams*

IT ALL STARTED WITH...

... the original high-rolling hell-raisers who lived in the Holmby Hills area of LA in the mid-Fifties: Humphrey Bogart, David Niven, literary agent and professional wit Swifty Lazar, songsmith Jimmy van Heusen and Sid Luft (known only as Mr Judy Garland, Mark III), with starlets Angie Dickinson and Kay Thompson in tow. And Frank Sinatra.

This wise-cracking, screw-'em-all group of dissolutes got its name when they turned up after a five-day bender in Las Vegas to be confronted by a salty Lauren Bacall, who sneered: "You look like a goddam rat pack." The guys fell about. They had a moniker, even if Frank never cared for it, even when

it was carried over to the group he pulled around him after Bogie's death in '57. This Rat Pack, the one we remember, thrived for six years (with a few belated encores). Frank preferred The Clan, but the name stuck.

HEY, WHO'S THE GUY WITH FRANK?

As in all gangs, there was a pecking order. Sinatra was the Mount Everest of singers and swingers, whose iconic slopes are littered with would-be conquerors ill prepared for the ascent (hey, isn't that Robbie Williams frozen in the snow just outside base camp?). When he wasn't the more benign Ol' Blue Eyes, Frank was Chairman of the Board or, more succinctly, the Leader.

Golden boys

This page, the Rat Pack outside the Sands, Las Vegas, circa 1965. Sinatra, Martin and Davis were part owners of the casino, along with the Mob. Opposite, Sinatra with his wife, Ava Gardner, in New York, 1952



making waves

Steven Soderbergh's slick, stylish remake of signature Rat Pack movie 'Ocean's Eleven' confirms the director as Hollywood's hottest talent

WORDS *Philip Watson*

STEVEN SODERBERGH IS THE GUY who came in from the cold. Five years ago, the US director seemed like an also-ran. Having won plaudits and the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1989 for his deft, original debut, *sex, lies and videotape*, he went on to make a series of low-budget, experimental films, mostly dark in subject matter, which failed to make an impact. One was about growing up in the Great Depression; another starred Jeremy Irons as Kafka. They were films of groundbreaking skill and ambition, but Soderbergh had reached critical and commercial rock bottom.

"I'd made five films in a row that no one wanted to see – 1997 was the apex of my low point," he jokes. "Making movies with the likes of Brad Pitt or Julia Roberts seemed so very, very, very far away. Like in another universe."

Then came his slick and sexy Elmore Leonard adaptation, *Out of Sight*, with George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez, and Hollywood started to glance his way. *Erin Brockovich* made them look up and take notice, and not just for the way Julia Roberts was squeezed into those fantastically low-cut tops; this surprise hit took \$250 million around the world.

Then *Traffic*, Soderbergh's complex, clever and gripping study of the US war on drugs, stylishly shot by the director himself on hand-held cameras, made him.

In 2000, he became the first director ever to have two films nominated for Best Picture and Best Director Oscars in the same year;

he won Best Director for *Traffic*. Suddenly, aged 38, he was the hottest director in Hollywood, the *ne plus ultra* of intelligent but popular US cinema. Everyone wanted to work with him, especially actors, who were impressed by his rigorous yet relaxed directorial style. "Working with Steven is like being on vacation, but where the vacation is climbing [Alaska's] Mount McKinley," said Julia Roberts.

This month sees his latest release, *Ocean's Eleven*. Taking a half-baked 1960 original which, as Soderbergh says, is "fondly remembered by all who haven't seen it", the director has refashioned the film into a sleek and swinging heist movie for our times.

Set in Las Vegas, the film charts the endeavours of charming ex-con Danny Ocean to recruit a team to pull off a \$150m robbery

from three casinos on the night of a title fight featuring Lennox Lewis. It is also Ocean's way of winning back his ex-wife Tess, a beautiful but all too fleeting performance by Julia Roberts.



Danny's boys
George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Matt Damon; Elliott Gould and Don Cheadle in 'Ocean's Eleven'.
Below, Soderbergh on set



"In contrast to my previous two films, this piece is just fun – it's a film of no social value whatsoever"

Danny is played commandingly by a devilish Clooney, who establishes himself here as a bona fide movie star in the old-fashioned debonair tradition. Yet *Ocean's Eleven* is an ensemble piece, and much of its wit and joy comes from the camaraderie generated by its cast. Reports tell of Soderbergh's men hitting the town and its blackjack tables most nights, mimicking the larks the Rat Pack had making the original.

"The thing that people do remember from the original is the fun of watching the interaction between Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr and the Pack," says Soderbergh. "They looked like they were having a good time, and it was infectious, and I wanted to keep that. At the same time, I didn't want it to be a lads' movie filled with testosterone and guys being competitive

or marking territory. I wanted to make sure the emotional side of the movie came through."

Soderbergh has assembled the sort of cast (also including Brad Pitt, Matt Damon and Andy Garcia) other directors would kill for – especially as they all took a pay cut to work with him. Almost stealing the movie, however, are two veteran actors. Carl Reiner shines as a dyspeptic old hood enticed back for one last job, while Elliott Gould is mesmerising as blustering gay Jewish gangster Ruben Tischkoff, a deposed Vegas mogul who underwrites the caper.

Yet it is Soderbergh's playful virtuosity that really keeps the film in the air. The heist is so elegantly complicated as to make *Mission: Impossible* seem like a beginners' guide to taking candy from babies. The film has a vibrant sheen to it, a split-screen Seventies feel that is greatly aided by David Holmes's loungey soundtrack. It's almost as if *Ocean's Eleven* captures the sheer pleasure and shiny artifice of Vegas itself.

"In contrast to my previous two films, this piece is just fun – it's a film of no social value whatsoever," says Soderbergh. "It's widescreen, a dolly movie, much more designed and glossy, and I wanted audiences to just go, 'Oh, this is going to be a nice evening.' It's the cinema equivalent of a party girl in a great dress." 📍
'Ocean's Eleven' opens on 15 February

