



ROBERT MITCHUM

Nobody ever seemed to know exactly what set Robert Mitchum apart from the other actors of Hollywood's Golden Age. He was grizzled, seen-it-all, slobbish, and thuggish, but also charming, funny, urbane, and cultured. 'The embodiment of film noir' was how Roger Ebert pegged him, but Mitchum's co-star Deborah Kerr had him differently: 'An extremely sensitive, poetic, extraordinarily interesting man.' Only Mitchum seemed to think Mitchum was straightforward. 'The only difference between me and my fellow actors,' he once explained in his sleepy New England accent, 'is that I've spent more time in jail.'

Robert Charles Durman Mitchum was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut on 6 August 1917. His sea captain father died in a railway accident when Mitchum was two and his subsequent childhood took strange turns. At age 7 he wrote poetry. The following year the family moved to a farm in Delaware, where Mitchum set about hospitalising the local bullies. The family then moved to Hell's Kitchen. Mitchum and his brother John became involved in running battles with the New York gangs. Robert left home for good at age 15, heading off to California in hope of Jack London-esque adventures. He was arrested multiple times en route.

The first arrest came in Savannah, Georgia, where he was accused of robbing a shoe store. His defence was that it couldn't have been him because the store had been robbed on a Wednesday, and Mitchum had been in jail since the previous Sunday. Mitchum still ended up on a chain gang, an indeterminate sentence for vagrancy intended to straighten him out. Mitchum later recalled fleeing the sentence while wardens shot at him.

After years of odd jobs (one of which temporarily rendered him medically blind from sheer hatred for the work), Mitchum finally settled in Long Beach, California in 1937. Once there, he was encouraged by his older sister Annette to take up acting in a bid to curb his wildness, which had by now swollen to heavy drinking and the first stirrings of a lifelong pot habit. After scrubbing through a series of low budget films, Mitchum began to be pushed by Howard Hughes's RKO production company in 1944, which saw in his hard-drinking everyman persona the makings of a new kind of anti-hero for the post-Second World War audiences. An Oscar nomination came for his work as Lt Walker in *The Story of GI Joe* and further plaudits began to accrue before the run was interrupted by compulsory military service in 1945: punishment for breaking a policeman's nose in a fight. Mitchum was forced to work on the medical wards of Fort MacArthur. 'I was a