

Screen tests

Using Las Vegas as a backdrop for film productions is a risky manoeuvre, owing to the city's proclivity for upstaging nearly every actor who tries to stand in front of it. Practically everyone knows what the town looks like, not to mention what kind of story to expect when a movie opens, as so many have, with an aerial shot of the Strip.

Perhaps because of Las Vegas's star quality, the city's grand mythos is slowly being whittled down to a handful of visual clichés: lines of showgirls mid-kick, slot machines disgorging fountains of coins, disembodied hands sweeping cards off blackjack tables.

Made in 1960, **Ocean's 11** defined Vegas as metonymic of a particular cultural epoch. Its five Rat Packers are practically golden as they hustle their way through a five-casino heist without breaking a sweat or creasing their single-breasted suits. The effect that the film had on every heist movie that followed is indisputable, but it also started a long and fruitful cinematic streak for Vegas.

Some Sin City films, such as Elvis Presley's **Viva Las Vegas** (1963) were vehicles for performers. Others placed unlikely characters in the Vegas mix, such as Sean Connery's ageing Bond in **Diamonds Are Forever** (1971). The latter, a lesser chapter in Connery's Bond tenure but one of the best Vegas films, played fast and loose with Howard Hughes (named 'Willard Whyte' for the film) while also presenting the town in a glamorous light that hasn't dimmed in the three decades since.

Martin Scorsese's **Casino** (1995) manages to perfectly evoke the same period in Vegas's history. It's a fictionalised account of the life of Frank 'Lefty' Rosenthal (Sam 'Ace' Rothstein in the film), one of the most colourful Vegas figures alleged to have been involved in organised crime. Rosenthal's attorney, a man who also represented Tony 'The Ant' Spilotro and Meyer Lansky, was asked by Scorsese to reprise his role for the film. The attorney, one Oscar Goodman, readily agreed; five years on, he became mayor Goodman, which he remains today.

Las Vegas's most famous cinematic wipeout is Paul Verhoeven's deathless **Showgirls** (1995). Filmed in part at Cheetahs (see



p221), though the interiors were shot at the San Diego branch of the club, the movie is the anti-*Ocean's 11*; if the Sinatra film is Vegas in a sharp suit, *Showgirls* is the city in a filthy raincoat. Yet even the Vegas of *Showgirls* has a strange cinematic appeal; the film has developed a cult following in recent times.

Other movies have approached Vegas in more general terms. Tim Burton managed to get some spectacular footage in **Mars Attacks!** (1996), including the real-life destruction of the saucer-topped Landmark Hotel. **Honeymoon in Vegas** (1992), while only mildly funny, did offer viewers the Flying Elvis troupe, performing a heroic parachute drop in front of Bally's. Three years later, star Nicolas Cage returned to the city in **Leaving Las Vegas** and, playing failed screenwriter Ben Sanderson, proceeded to drink himself to death. Doug Liman's **Swingers** (1996) almost single-handedly revived swing music and Vegas culture; even people who haven't seen the movie have been known to utter its rallying cry: 'Vegas, baby. Vegas!' And in 1998, Terry Gilliam's funny, fever-dream interpretation of Hunter S Thompson's **Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas** had its own kind of swing, the kind one gets after chasing Elvis-sized fistfuls of painkillers with a swig of rum.

But perhaps most significant was Steven Soderbergh's 2001 re-creation of **Ocean's Eleven**. Opening with thrilling aerial shots of the city and closing with a dialogue-free sequence set against the Bellagio fountains, the film expresses the romance that Las Vegas effuses on its best days. You truly believe that somehow you could win your way into the kind of life you've seen in the movies.