

STEVE COOGAN

Comic genius. Party animal. A-list star?
The prickly Manc begrudgingly explains how
Tropic Thunder fits into his plans to conquer
Hollywood on his terms... WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

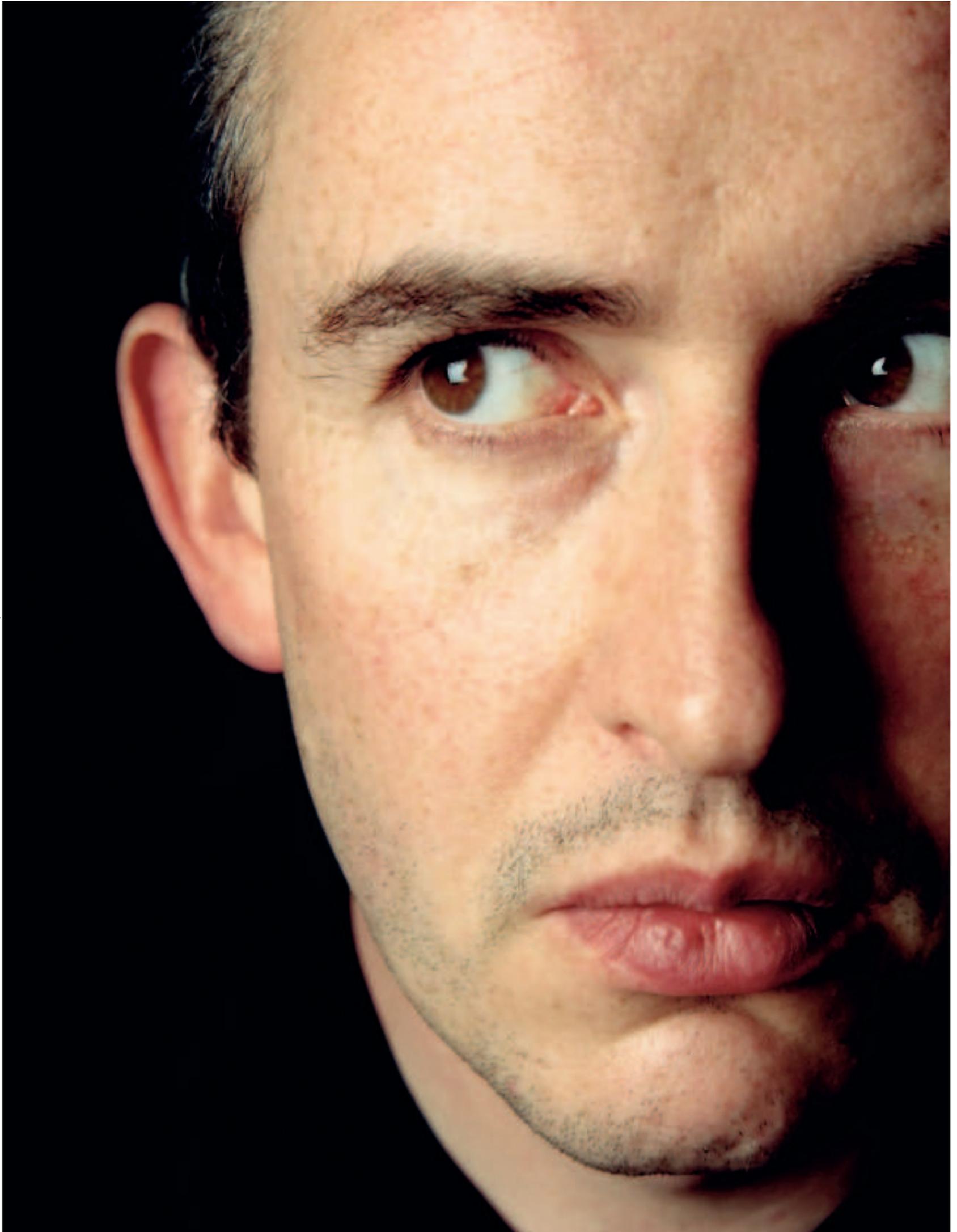
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TEVE COOGAN SWEEPS INTO THE SUITE at LA's Four Seasons Hotel trailed by two publicists, one of whom is taking his order for morning tea. "Do you want milk or sugar?" "Just milk — only the tiniest splash possible," says Coogan, signifying with an infinitesimal gap between his thumb and forefinger.

Bustling, brisk, distracted, he perfunctorily shakes *Total Film's* hand, fidgets around, goes to grab a bottle of juice from the mini-bar, then whirls back round to sit down perpendicular to us in a chair. Staring straight ahead, out the window into a hazy LA morning, he glances briefly to his right to give us the once over then diverts his gaze back outside, where it stays fixed for the first half of the interview. His expression isn't exactly a frown, but there's no danger of a smile wandering onto his face (in

fact, he only cracks a grin two or three times and each one looks like it might injure him).

First impressions? Meeting Coogan is like stumbling into the presence of a grumpy, darting-eyed Cape Buffalo feeling paranoid that a pack of famished lions are closing in. Only we're not entirely sure if we aren't the buffalo and Coogan the lions in this scenario. Coogan is not a charming man. He doesn't do fake-friendly. He doesn't give a blind toss whether you like him or not, so doesn't bother wasting energy trying to be endearing. Just before, Ben Stiller had told us, "What I admire about Steve is that he doesn't care about making a character likeable or not — he just wants to do the funniest version of the guy. You look at that Partridge stuff — I don't think there's anything funnier out there." >>



What starts as a chilly tête-à-tête soon warms up as the 42-year-old actor/comedian/writer/producer gets over his early morning edginess. He doesn't mind what you lob at him – he won't discuss his personal life but he talks honestly about his Hollywood aspirations, the damp squibs of *The Parole Officer* and *Around The World In 80 Days* and his tabloid-baited, alley-cat image. Often, Coogan's life has appeared to conform to the cliché that comedians operate best when they're screwing up their personal lives or wallowing in substance abuse – behaving like self-destructive, self-loathing fuck-ups. But he's behind some of the UK's most searing comedy creations of all time, from tactless East Anglian DJ Alan Partridge to ex-roadie pest-control agent Tommy Saxondale.

What sets Coogan apart is the stunning, obsessive attention to detail that he funnels into every one of his characters, up to and including the harried, vain, preening filmmaker he plays in *Tropic Thunder*, who's caught in a vice between his ball-cracking studio paymaster (Tom Cruise) and the bickering, A-list prima donnas threatening to torpedo his career.

Despite outstanding performances in Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People* and *A Cock And Bull Story* (in which he played a jealous, venal spin on himself), to date, Coogan's forays into Hollywood haven't yielded exceptional results: bit parts in *Marie Antoinette*, *Night At The Museum* (and the upcoming sequel) and playing Phileas Fogg in that pallid remake of *Around The World In 80 Days*. But he's determined to crack America and splits his life between Brighton and LA, spending about a third of his year in the beating heart of the film industry. Steve Coogan may not want to be liked but he does want to be hailed as "one of the funniest guys around" (as Stiller calls him) by a much broader swathe of the global population than see him that way now...

You and Ben Stiller go back quite a way now. How did you get involved in *Tropic Thunder*?

This was just something he had in mind that we talked about. He spoke to me about other movies, too – we had lots of conversations on the phone, met up several times. A few years ago, he came to London and tracked me down 'cos he'd seen my stuff and said that he liked it. That was very nice – I was very flattered. He said he just wanted to work with me. Every now and again he puts something my way. So when he asked me to play Damien in *Tropic Thunder*, it was a no-brainer.

Didn't you two discuss doing a remake of *The Persuaders* at one point?

We did. That's one of those things that got stuck in development hell. But there's other things we've talked about, too. I don't think this is the last – well, I'm doing *Night At The Museum 2* but I don't think that will be the last thing we do together.



Is *The Persuaders* dead in the water?

No, it's hovering around. I had a conversation about it the other day. Sometimes you have to give these things a kick in the arse and then they get their own momentum again. But there's so many things – I think most people work on the basis of simultaneously pursuing a bunch of things until one of them comes to fruition.

Is anything going to happen soon?

I don't think so. But we're always talking about stuff. I'm doing something with [Tropic Thunder co-screenwriter] Justin Theroux soon. We're writing something together. I can't say what it is until it's announced but I'm definitely going to be working with him on something that Ben will be a producer on [Stiller later reveals it's a comedy series for HBO]. I do my own things in England or I do small films in America and then occasionally when Ben Stiller has a big film, he gives me a small part in it.

Is your experience of working with actors that they're insecure, ignorant people with no self-esteem, as *Tropic Thunder* paints?

Well of course, anyone who's in the industry is neurotic. If you write and perform comedy, you're not trying to say, "Hey, look at these guys, they're all jerks but I'm not like that." Most comics say, "This is what we're making fun of

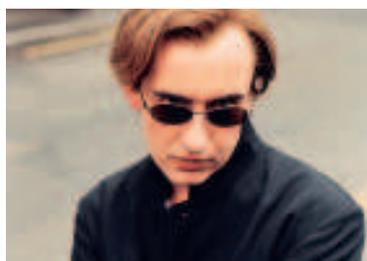
In too deep: (above) Coogan's exasperated Brit director Damien Cockburn confronts his egotistical actors in *Tropic Thunder*.



and we're a bit like that, too." The fact is, yes, there's a lot of neurosis and a lot of pretension and a lot of bad behaviour.

Who was the most neurotic on *Tropic Thunder*?

Oh, I'd say Stiller — and me. Ben by his own admission. He co-wrote the screenplay with Justin Theroux and there's no doubt about it — a lot of the things that Ben's thrown into his character are things that he recognises in himself. And he's put them in there because it's his way of exorcising them. Any good comic writer/creator always uses aspects of themselves. On set, he's quite a specific taskmaster and will make sure he keeps doing it again and again until he gets it exactly the way he wants. There's a scene where I jump up and down with a monitor — I think I jumped up and down five days straight. It almost became a joke.



'I'm in no rush to go and do something super-intense and dramatic. You have to play to your strengths'

who you think you will work well with. And that often dovetails with people who you like. It's not a cynical self-interest thing. I just worked with Pam Brady and Andy Fleming [co-screenwriter and co-writer/director of *Hamlet 2*] and Pam's someone I both admire — she co-wrote *Team America* and *South Park* — which I like. When we hang out, we make each other laugh so you have these social relationships that also become working relationships... I'm very proud of *Hamlet 2*. I like having the opportunity to work on big movies but it's nice to have my own gig.

Do you get recognised when you go out in LA?

Very rarely. If I go to Amoeba Records or somewhere like that in LA, then I get recognised 'cos the people who go in there are those kind of cool, trendy people. They're the >>

"What are you doing today?"... "Jumping up and down for Ben Stiller, like I did yesterday and the day before."

The concept of an ineffectual British director unable to cope with A-list stars seems to fit your sensibilities. Did you see it that way?

It's a very clear character. It's not social realism, this film, it's escapism, but the notion of a British film director who's out of his depth with a big-budget movie is something that's not beyond the realms of possibility.

Did you use anyone for inspiration?

Not really. There are lots of pretentious Brit directors around. Throw a stick in Hollywood and you'll hit three.

Ben says you came up with most of the character, improv-ing a lot...

He's quite clever with the people he casts because he knows they're going to bring something to the party. It lifts the whole movie.

You spend a big chunk of your year in LA now. Do you socialise mostly with fellow actors and comedians?

The people I know tend to be people I've met through the industry because, of course, that's my connection with this town. So my friends here tend to be industry people — but people who I have a personal connection with. That's sort of inevitable.

It's easy to have the impression that US comedy is very incestuous, with everyone socialising on weekends...

There is certainly that. You find people, you gravitate towards people

FILMOGRAPHY



THE PAROLE OFFICER (2001)
Hapless PO Simon Garden goes on the run as Coogan breaks the big screen. Overlooked and underloved.
★★★



COFFEE AND CIGARETTES (2003)
Coogan plays his monstrously egotistical 'self' while dissing long lost cousin Alfred Molina... "Are you gay?"
★★★



AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS (2004)
Bumbling, foppish Phileas Fogg owes everything to Alan Partridge. Aha!
★★



A COCK AND BULL STORY (2005)
Hot chestnuts, Al Pacino impressions and another hilarious self-parody as a bit of a shit.
★★★★



NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM (2006)
Pants movie, brilliant cameo: Coogan's miniature Roman general Octavius is the only wax that works.
★★



MARIE ANTOINETTE (2006)
Whispering in the ear of the queen: Coogan's ambassador quietly impresses in this punk period piece.
★★★★

MUST SEE

Steve is mad in Madchester. Hollywood watches...



24 HOUR PARTY PEOPLE

(2002)

Do we care that Steve Coogan looks nothing like Tony Wilson? Or that he turns the head honcho of "Madchester" label Factory Records into a second cousin of Alan Partridge, all pompous self-importance and the odd hissy fit? Of course not, because as Wilson said, for every "damn lie" in *24 Hour Party People* there's at least two "profound truths".

Starting with the Granada TV presenter watching the Sex Pistols in a sticky-floored Manchester club, Michael Winterbottom's digitally-shot docudrama/biopic/nostalgia trip sizzles with punk energy and bangin' tunes. It ticks off every major moment in British music circa 1976-1992: the Pistols giving way to Joy Division, Ian Curtis' loss of control giving way to rave culture as smiley faces and disco biscuits brought Happy Mondays to the wage slaves of Generation X (tasy).

Coogan is in virtually every scene, mannered foppishness and cringe-inducing verbosity turning Wilson into a complete cock... in the nicest possible way. No wide-eyed, luvved-up tribute to a lost era (a spot-on recreation of *The Hacienda* aside), *24 Hour Party People* knocks down the Madchester myths as quickly as it builds them up. The fourth wall's constantly bulldozed by Coogan's straight-to-camera asides ("This scene is missing. I'm sure it'll be on the DVD") and priggish swipes at his character's own legend ("I'm a minor player in my own life story").

The star's thesping skill is so polished it's almost invisible. This isn't a parody, more a chameleon-like mirroring of someone real. "It's the work I'm most proud of," Coogan said in a 2007 obituary for Wilson. It was also the movie that opened the doors to Hollywood. "Most Yanks don't know him at all, but we will after this," wrote Peter Travers in *Rolling Stone*. Forget Partridge, it's Wilson who put Steve Coogan on the map. **Jamie Russell**

people who recognise me. Average Joe Middle America doesn't know who the fuck I am but the cool, edgy guys, emo kids, people who wear eyeliner... they know who I am.

Why doesn't the UK have its version of America's film-comedy Frat Pack?

That's to do with the British film industry and the fact that there isn't much of one. But there is a coterie of actors who work together in television. Baby Cow [the production company set up by Coogan and comedian Henry Normal] makes a lot of TV shows and the same faces crop up. You don't try to make it an exclusive club because you're always looking for new talent, but there is a cross-fertilisation. Ruth Jones played my girlfriend in *Saxondale* and she co-wrote *Gavin & Stacey* for Baby Cow with James Corden. So the same thing happens in Britain, just on a smaller scale and mostly in television.

When you wrote and starred in *The Parole Officer*, were you trying to create a Hollywood calling card?

[Deep sigh] Yeah, I have very mixed feelings about that movie. It wasn't the movie I wanted to make. I thought it was too soft; it ended up being too squidgy. I wanted to make something that was edgier and that's not what came out for various reasons. But it was a learning curve for me. I've been approached by people who want to remake it in the US. Not with me. I'd rather they do it with someone else. But the DNA of the movie is pretty strong.

You've mulled over projecting Alan Partridge onto the big screen. Is that something that still might happen?

It may but I find that it defines me so much that I have to be careful. I need to change the record in people's imaginations before I go back to that and I still feel I'm trying to make my mark in movies. I'm hoping it happens with *Hamlet 2* [comedy musical] because that, I think, will switch people's minds a bit. I mean, over here it's actually easier for me because people in the industry see me in a slightly different way. Whereas in the UK, I tend to be seen as that character almost entirely. So my opportunities over here are more interesting than the ones I get in the UK. I don't want to neglect the UK or the US 'cos I have opportunities in both places. It makes sense for me to pursue them all.

Has Sacha Baron Cohen's success helped open up more doors for you in Hollywood?

I think any British comic that does well here, like Simon Pegg, Sacha, to some extent Ricky Gervais, it's all helpful because the US has an ear open for people like me who are creative. To some extent, it's more to do with who you collaborate with in the US and how people in the industry view you.

Has Judd Apatow come calling yet?

I know that those guys all know my stuff because you hear through the grapevine. I've got quite a lot of respect from people in the industry here, but that's not enough in itself. You need a combination of creative people liking you and

then studios and financiers thinking you're an interesting person to put in movies.

What kind of comedy do you like to watch?

I've got quite popular tastes. Years ago, I used to like *Spinal Tap* and Christopher Guest's films. I've also been a big admirer of this sort of new wave of comedy that's emerged over the last few years; starring some of the people I've already been lucky enough to work with, like Owen Wilson and Ben. And I admire people like Will Ferrell and Judd Apatow. I like comedies that are accessible but have good, detailed performances.

Are you actively looking for a big crossover vehicle, something to take you to the level of Will Ferrell?

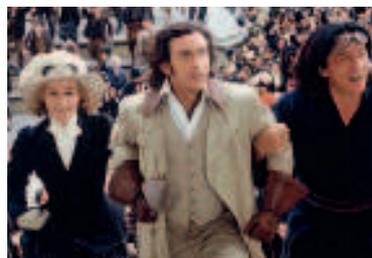
Of course it would be great to do that and I would love that to happen. But I'm trying to have that happen with as much control as I can have — on my own terms. I'm lucky that I have a pretty solid career in the UK so if things don't really happen for me here in a very commercial way, it doesn't matter because I don't especially need it. I'd like it to happen but I don't need it. All I do is just keep moving forward, trying to do stuff that I instinctively think is good. I think I'm getting better at not making decisions based on what might be determined as a good move. I'm very suspicious of making any kind of decision that goes against your gut instinct, simply because it might be seen as a smart career move for you.

Was playing Phileas Fogg in 2004's *Around the World in 80 Days* one of those "smart" career moves?

Yes. I don't think that was great for me to do. Although I loved working with the director and I enjoyed the whole experience, I don't think it played to my strengths.

Did you always embrace the conceit of playing a shallow, venal version of yourself in *A Cock and Bull Story*?

Yes, I did. I'd done something slightly similar in Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee And Cigarettes* before that and Michael [Winterbottom] just liked the idea. He ran it by me and it sounded such an odd, unusual idea — I wouldn't have done it with any other director; I trusted him to do something adventurous. It slightly concerned me but I also feel that you have to scare yourself to do interesting stuff. And I'm someone who doesn't care about using any aspect of myself in a project. I'm not paranoid or overprotective of trying to project a certain, perfect image of myself. I don't really give a damn about that. As long as I can do interesting work, I'll throw anything in there. I don't care.



'I'm getting better at not making decisions based on what's determined as a good career move'

STEVE PYKE/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES



So you didn't mind if anyone came out of *A Cock and Bull Story* thinking, "That's the real Steve Coogan"?

No, I don't mind if people go, "Oh, maybe he's really like that..." The people in my real life know what kind of person I am and if it makes the filmgoing experience interesting, then that's good. If you play yourself, you have to be very careful you're not going, "Hey, get a load of me laughing at myself. Aren't I cool?" I want to avoid that. That's why I like to tread that line of comedy where it might actually start to not be funny and be slightly uncomfortable. I like that. The only thing I don't want to be on screen is dull.

Would you like to be offered more dramatic parts, like Tony Wilson in *24 Hour Party People*?

I've just done a TV series with the BBC that was quite dramatic and intense [*Sunshine, in which Coogan plays a gambling addict*] so I'm able to satisfy my dramatic urges and still pursue the comedy thing here. I'm in no rush to go and do something super-intense and dramatic. You have to play to your strengths and I like doing comedy.

How has the bad publicity that you endured last year [Courtney Love accused him of leading Owen Wilson down a dark path before his suicide attempt] affected you?

[Raising voice] Of course it concerns me when stories come out that are not true and have no truth in them from a

totally discredited source. But people who know me know that it's horseshit. But of course there's concern that people in the industry might give it a moment's credence and that might affect my career. And I think that was probably the intention of those comments – to try and throw a little grenade in my career path. But fortunately it didn't gain traction... Very soon, the credibility of that story sank. Unfortunately it still floats around on the internet, but it was discredited long ago.

And what about the wild, party-animal we hear about? Do you hold the opinion that pursuing life's pleasures to an extreme degree is useful for your comic edge?

No I don't. And that's been overstated. I've certainly made huge errors of judgment. But I just want my work to speak for itself. I'm not a politician, I don't go around proclaiming family values, I don't go around pretending to be the bastion of morality. So that stuff is none of your... no one's fucking business, frankly. If I was a politician it would be legitimate for people to probe. But I'm not – I'm a comic. If you think my movies stink, then feel free to say so. But what happens in my personal life is my business. **TF**

Tropic Thunder opens on 19 September and is reviewed on page 42. *Hamlet 2* opens on 28 November and will be reviewed in a future issue of *Total Film*.

Bull's eye: (above) Coogan with Rob Brydon in Michael Winterbottom's *A Cock and Bull Story*.