

TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE 7: MS. JACKIE BROWN

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In October of 1992, an indie movie called Reservoir Dogs landed in theaters. It was the first film by an unknown writer and director named Quentin Tarantino. He was just 29.

RESERVOIR DOGS CLIP: We're going to be using aliases on this job. Mr. Brown, Mr. White.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Reservoir Dogs was bold. The dialogue showy and confident

RESERVOIR DOGS CLIP: Mr. Pink. Why am I Mr. Pink? Why can't we pick our own colors? Tried it once, didn't work. You get four guys all fighting over who gets to be Mr. Black.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam went to see it. In one scene, four gangsters are driving down an LA street. One of them says a familiar name....

RESERVOIR DOGS CLIP: What's the name of the chick that played Christy Love? Pam Grier. No that wasn't Pam Grier. Pam Grier was the other one, Pam Grier did the film. Christy Love was like Pam Grier TV show without Pam Grier.

PAM GRIER: I was in a theater in Manhattan, and he mentioned my name and the whole theater went crazy.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam was surprised Tarantino knew who she was. A few months later, she learned he was casting a new film, also set in LA's criminal underworld. It was called Pulp Fiction.

PULP FICTION CLIP: What happened here was a miracle, and I want you to fucking acknowledge it. Alright, it was a miracle. Can we go now?

PAM GRIER: Then I get all of a sudden an invitation to interview, audition for Pulp Fiction. And they said, You got to go. Quentin loves you. He has all of your posters in his office.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: So Pam came in there and she came walking in and I'm acting like a geek. Over here is Queen Greer, all right, has just entered the building. All hail the queen.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Quentin Tarantino.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: And Pam had some of the best posters, so there was like a ton of Pam Grier posters all over the office.

PAM GRIER: And it was impressive and daunting to see five or six huge, very expensive posters on his wall.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: She goes, okay, so tell me. Did you put all these posters up because you knew I was coming in? And I go, Actually, I almost took them down because I knew you were coming.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam auditioned. Quentin told her she wasn't quite right for the role.

PAM GRIER: But we talked, he said, you know, everything works. But you know what? Maybe I should just work with you at another time. I said, that's fine.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam took it in stride. And she figured this was the last time she'd ever hear from Quentin Tarantino. Here's Quentin on the Charlie Rose show in 1997.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: One of the worst things that happens in Hollywood is the uncreativity that happens with casting. And part of that is you basically have the same names on this list that the studio makes. I have a good memory, alright? I have a much longer list. And the only thing you need to be on that list is a good actor.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Quentin's list was full of talented people. But many were a gamble when it came to ticket sales. A big gamble. That didn't matter to him. His list was personal. And Pam Grier? She was right at the top.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I'm your host, Ben Mankiewicz. You're listening to season four of The Plot Thickens, a podcast from Turner Classic Movies.

This season – Pam Grier. And how she rose to become the queen of Blaxploitation films and Hollywood's first female action hero.

This is Episode Seven: Ms. Jackie Brown.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The years leading up to that Pulp Fiction audition weren't great for Pam.

JACQUELINE STEWART: She has fewer roles because of the way that these Blaxploitation films tapered off.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Jacqueline Stewart, a TCM host and director of the Academy Museum. It was the 1980s. Ronald Reagan was president, telling us the 70s were over, it was morning in America. It was a decade of excess, of a culture that proclaimed greed is good. And Hollywood fell in love with the blockbuster.

JACQUELINE STEWART: When blockbusters like Jaws and the Star Wars series kind of get Hollywood back on its feet, then it moves back toward focusing on so-called mainstream audiences. And it becomes really, really difficult for black creatives to find footing in Hollywood for a long time

PAM GRIER: I didn't get a lot of the opportunities because I'm too tall, I'm too dark, my boobs are too big or my butt's too big or it's not flat enough. So for whatever reason.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam did have a guest role on the ultimate 1980s show, Miami Vice.

MIAMI VICE CLIP: What was I supposed to do Rico, turn her in for murder?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She played a cop avenging the murder of her sister. Sound familiar? As hard as Pam tried, she kept getting cast in the same types of roles. So Pam switched it up. She did some theater.

PAM GRIER: Piano Lesson, Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune, Fool for Love, the one at the New Negro Ensemble in New Jersey in Newark.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam was determined to keep her career going. Then in 1986 a movie called *She's Gotta Have It* hit theaters. It was the first film from a young writer and director named Spike Lee.

SHE'S GOTTA HAVE IT CLIP: It's time for you to grow up. Grow up?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: *She's Gotta Have It* broke new ground, inspiring a new era of independent cinema, and an era of Black independent cinema. But Pam wouldn't get the chance to be a part of that. It was the summer of 1988. Pam went to the gynecologist for her annual checkup.

PAM GRIER: And they found, you know, some cells and did a biopsy and said, okay, we're going to have surgery in three weeks because we found some topical cancer cells on your cervix. And I'm going, oh, wow, okay.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The diagnosis was cervical cancer. Pam was 39 years old. And incredibly healthy. She exercised every day. Ate good food. Barely drank. Pam always believed in being prepared. It was how she dealt with the messiness of life, the things she can't control. She was not prepared for cancer.

PAM GRIER: It was daunting because it's something you didn't see. You didn't see symptoms. You didn't have pain. It just snuck up on you. That's a kind of stealth. That's the quietest, you know, upcoming impending death. And I had to prepare myself mentally.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam called her mom, who was still working as a nurse.

PAM GRIER: And she, after she got off the phone, I heard that she was sobbing. And then when she flew to California to meet with my doctors, a team of, you know, my gynecologist, my oncologist. And she knew exactly what they were saying. And she had this quiet mood, vibe about her, of complete "This is danger. This is not good." And so we had the surgery and they decided to do a 360 biopsy of the surrounding area, and they found more cancer. And they said, Well, you're supposed to heal first. But in this case, it's extreme that we remove every area that has cells.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Three weeks later Pam had another surgery to remove her uterus, which meant she would never be able to get pregnant.

PAM GRIER: That is a very special love to grow a child in your body. And feel that and know you're responsible for their development. And I think about it. I said, Wow. I mean, I think about it, I would say, every month, how wonderful it would have felt to have created a human in my body. But I did

harvest my eggs. Adoption was an option. But I needed to have a partner while I'm working, a Mr. Mom, raising the child or children.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After the surgery, Pam put all of that aside. She had to.

PAM GRIER: So I knew that I had to focus on just surviving. But I had my moments where I was so sick, you just, you know, so much had been removed from my body. The doctor said, you're not going to die of cancer. You'll die of infection.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: As soon as she could travel, Pam left Los Angeles and moved back to Denver.

PAM GRIER: And I remember going home and having the driver help me out to my mom's house. I was still pretty sore. And I've got to recuperate and start my life over in Colorado.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When do you stop worrying about it? Is there a moment when you're like, I think I'm okay. I can think about the future.

PAM GRIER: There is a moment when you've had your last exam and your biopsy and your MRIs. Has spread to your bones, has spread to your bone marrow, your organs? And they say it hasn't spread. That's a good sign. It's not in your bone marrow. That's even a better sign. And they're giving you the results of your tests that give you that confidence that you may you may see the finish line.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam spent her recovery focusing on what was right in front of her. She didn't think about Hollywood.

PAM GRIER: And every day my eyes opened and there's a blue sky, birds outside, maybe some snow, like four feet of it. And you know what? The first snowfall that I experienced when I was, you know, in within maybe the 18th month, not even then. I went outside in my pajamas and I just fell in the snow. And it felt so good that I'm alive. This feels really good. What can I do from here?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That was a good day. Eventually, there would be more good days than bad. Soon she would face life after illness. And rebuild her acting career as a woman in her early 40s. That was not going to be easy.

Pam started taking the occasional audition, like the one for Pulp Fiction. She did a walk-on part here and there.

PAM GRIER: There was so much going on and treatment and therapy and diet and setbacks and bloodwork and this and that. I didn't know if I'd have the memory to memorize dialog or remember my craft.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: By 1994, Pam started accepting roles. Twenty years after the heyday of Blaxploitation films, a movie called Original Gangstas was in the works in Hollywood. It starred legends of the Blaxploitation era: Fred Williamson, Richard Roundtree, and, of course, Pam Grier.

ORIGINAL GANGSTERS CLIP: What are we going to do with this little punk? We can't shoot him in a community rec center. Besides, we gotta make it look like it's an accident.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam also landed two smaller roles with famous Hollywood directors. In Tim Burton's Mars Attacks...

MARS ATTACKS CLIP: Byron, there are martians everywhere!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: ... and in John Carpenter's cult classic Escape from LA. As for Quentin Tarantino, well, Pulp Fiction wasn't just a hit. It was a defining film of the decade.

NEWS REPORT: When they added up the 10 Best Lists compiled by hundreds of American film critics, the fiction film that placed highest was Pulp Fiction."

PULP FICTION CLIP: Check out the big brain on Brad!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It cost \$8.5 million to make and grossed \$100 million in North America alone. It won the Palme d'Or, the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994.

ACADEMY AWARDS CLIP: And the Oscar goes to Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And Quentin won the Oscar for best screenplay. By the spring, Quentin was working on his next project. A screenplay based on the novel Rum Punch, a book written by a master of hardboiled crime fiction, Elmore Leonard. Rum Punch is about a blonde flight attendant named Jackie Burke who smuggles cash for a gunrunner in Florida. Quentin thought about all the actors who could play Jackie.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: And then I started asking myself what the movie needed and who Jackie was. And I go, well, she's an absolute knockout, but she's on a late side of her forties, and she looks like it,

but in a good way. And she's the smartest person in the story. Absolutely. And she can handle anything. And then I just said out loud to myself, I just said – that sounds like Pam Grier.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Quentin kept writing with Pam in mind. Then, they ran into each other in the summer of 1994.

PAM GRIER: I bumped into him on a street in Hollywood somewhere, and I'm driving and I'm with another producer, and the producer says, hey, that's Quentin Tarantino. And so my friend leans out the window and he says, Hey, Quentin, come over here. It's Pam Grier over here. And he goes, Oh! So he jogs down to the car.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: I go, Hey, look, I got this thing that I'm writing for you, I think it's going to be really exciting for you, think you're going to find it really special. She said well, I'm doing good stuff now. I've got a good part in Mars Attacks, I've got a good part in Escape from LA. I'm working with John Carpenter, Tim Burton, and I'm just like... Fuck all that shit. That ain't shit. Wait till you see what I got for you. She said Okay, we'll see.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Once again, Pam was skeptical. Quentin finished the screenplay and instead of Rum Punch, he titled it Jackie Brown. A nod to Foxy Brown, Pam's most famous role. He wanted the movie to be an homage to Blaxploitation films.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: But not coming from a 1972, 73, 74 Blaxploitation feeling, but coming from a real person situation. This is the 90s and this is real and the music can be wah wah funkadee funkadee. And my bad guy can be flamboyant and everything, but this takes place in a real world. And I even like the idea of even Jackie Brown, look she's not Coffy, but the idea that like a Coffy or a Foxy Brown, she's lived a life and the life she's lived has led her to this. And now we're picking up the story 20 years later.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Quentin sent the script to Pam, who was staying in New York at the time.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: I didn't even send it Federal Express. I sent it like with stamps and drop it in a mailbox.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But he didn't put enough stamps on it. There was postage due.

PAM GRIER: And it was \$0.44 due and New York ain't given up nothin unless you leave some money at the post office. So I had the money, I taped it to the notice, handed it to the postman. He handed me a manila envelope. It was from Q. Tarantino. And I went, Oh, my God, this is the script he sent me. So I open it and there is Jackie Brown.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: I was anxiously waiting because I've been, you know, this have been this little private present that I've been writing for Pam for like three or four months. And so It was present day and she was going to open it up and I'm just going to hear what she had to say.

PAM GRIER: And so I read it. It was awesome. It was absolutely brilliant.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: I call her up like three days later or something like that. And she goes, okay, so what part are you thinking about me for? Who do you think? You mean Jackie Brown?

PAM GRIER: But I just didn't think it was for me. What I really didn't believe is like, okay, I'm Jackie Brown. And then he started mentioning and Sam Jackson and Michael Keaton and Robert DeNiro and I was like, really? They've come aboard. Really? He says, Yeah.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam was stunned. Twenty years after Foxy Brown, Pam wondered if this was finally her big break.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Coming up on The Plot Thickens...

QUENTIN TARANTINO: That was the interesting thing. I cast her for her persona and her iconic aspect and then proceeded to tear it down.

-----AD BREAK-----

QUENTIN TARANTINO ON SET: Ok, ready guys? Here you go, so you're starting off pretty provocative with this little tidbit, ok? Action.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Well before shooting began, Pam learned Quentin Tarantino liked to rehearse.

PAM GRIER: And he said, I want everybody off book by the time we start filming. And I said, okay, I can do that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Off book means the actor no longer needs the script, all their lines are memorized.

PAM GRIER: I was ready off book on every damn page And so he could call me at any time and say, We ready to go? We ready to go.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: No easy feat for a Quentin Tarantino movie. He's known for writing long stretches of dialogue. This is actor Sam Jackson from a documentary about the making of Jackie Brown.

SAMUEL L. JACKSON: There's a very distinctive style, not only that all of his scripts have words in them. There aren't fourteen pages of descriptives.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: This gun is advertised as the most popular gun in American crime. Can you believe that shit?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Quentin also rehearsed all the long shots he wanted in the movie. There are several of them. He walked Pam through the marks she'd have to hit.

PAM GRIER: It's 15 minutes long, so I don't want to cut. So every take has to be 15 minutes long rehearsed. You hit the light, you hit the point, you turn the light up, turn the light down. You hit the refrigerator. Get the glass at the end. Don't miss it.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: You got some booze? I got some vodka in the freezer. You got some OJ? Well why don't you be a good hostess and hook a brother up with a screwdriver.

PAM GRIER: And like how many takes we're going to do on this, Quentin? I can only do a couple. And he would look at me like, well, you're going to do as many as I want. I said, Oh, okay, well, this is going to be a duel here

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam's Jackie Brown is a flight attendant for a second rate airline. She makes extra money smuggling cash for gunrunner and sociopath Ordell Robbie. Played by Sam Jackson. Two ATF agents nab her early in the film, but they really want Ordell and his gun running operation.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: Who in Mexico gave you this money and who in America were you bringing it to? I'm not saying another goddamn word.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Jackie comes up with a plan to outsmart the cops and Ordell. But she needs to keep Ordell from killing her. Here's Sam Jackson.

SAMUEL L. JACKSON: I've watched Pam for a long time. I guess the first time I was rehearsing with her and I had my hands on her throat I was like, I'm about to kill Coffy, this is kinda chilling and kind of exciting in the same breath. And it's kinda hard not to fall in love with her when you're standing there looking at her.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: How you doing Ms. Jackie? Come on in.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: I was really into the realism of Jackie Brown. And so one of the things that was important to me that even when we found the apartment that Jackie Brown lived in, I knew how much Jackie Brown made a year. So Jackie had to be able to afford that apartment or I wouldn't have shot there. And so to find an apartment she could afford, that would be big enough to actually put a crew in there was not easy, but we did.

PAM GRIER: Quentin had literally painted that apartment several times to be the right color paint. For my uniform or for my skin color and for the drama, for the effect.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Quentin had framed photographs put on the wall in Jackie's apartment.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Those look like Pam Grier family photos, are they?

PAM GRIER: Yes, they are. My grandfather and grandmother. My mom. My brother. When we were in Denver or somewhere. Yeah. They were my family pictures, which gave me, you know, a little bit of grounding.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: Hey Candy. Hey Max. Picking up Brown, Jackie. Okay, no problem, you armed? You bet I am.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Quentin also cast the actor Robert Forester as Max Cherry, a bail bondsman who helps Jackie scheme. He also falls in love with her.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: I'm Max Cherry, your bail bondsman. I can give you a ride home if you'd like.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I love the scene with you and Robert Forster at the kitchen table.

PAM GRIER: I did also. And the first take was brilliant where the crew applauded. They loved that scene so much.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: Would you like some coffee?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The scene takes place in the morning. Max Cherry has come to Jackie's apartment to check on her. She puts a Delfonics record on her stereo and pours some coffee. Jackie asks Max how he feels about getting older.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: I look in the mirror, looks like me. Yeah, but it's different for men. You know, I can't really feel sorry for you in this department. I bet with the exception of an afro, you look exactly the way you did at 29. Well, my ass ain't the same. Bigger? Yeah. Ain't nothing wrong with that. Something else worry you? I always feel like I'm starting over.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I've thought about this scene often over the years. How vulnerable the characters are with each other. How authentic and natural Pam and Robert Forster are together. How the dialogue might resonate on a personal level with these two middle aged actors.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: Well, I've flown over 7 million miles and I've been waiting on people for 20 years. And after my bust, the best job I could get was with Cabo air which is the worst job you can get in this industry. I make 16,000 a year plus retirement benefits that aint worth a damn. And with this arrest hanging over my head, Max, I'm scared. If I lose this job I got to start all over again and I ain't got nothing to start over with. I'll be stuck with whatever I can get. And that shit is more scary than Ordell.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: While filming the scene at the kitchen table, Pam's instincts led her to cry as she opened up to Max Cherry. Pam thought she nailed it. The crew applauded. But Quentin wanted another take.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: She was happy because the emotion took her there and she had it and she went with it, and I wouldn't want her to stop that. That's a take and everything. But that's just not right for the scene.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And why didn't that work for Jackie?

QUENTIN TARANTINO: She's in trouble, but she's not full of self-pity. She's getting cornered. Like a feral animal. She's getting cornered, but she's not saying, woe is me.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This made me wonder how Quentin directed Pam. What kinds of notes he gave her.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: Frankly, at the end of the day, I think it's just slow down. Slow down, we got time. We got time. We got time to do the scene right. You don't have to rush. We're fine. Just take your time. Okay. Let's try it this way. Let's try it that way. Don't worry about trying to get to it too fast.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam went to the Jackie Brown set as much as she could, even on the days she didn't have scenes. Just like she did in the Philippines with Jack Hill.

PAM GRIER: I'm a student. When you go behind the camera and you can shadow people, you can see what goes on from another perspective, and that goes in my book of what I want to do.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: She was tickled pink. Oh, can I go home early? No, she didn't want to go home early. She didn't want this thing to ever fucking end, alright? She was having a ball. And she knew to lead. There is there's a thing about a lead actor. They need to lead. They need to lead by example. They are the lead of the film. They kind, you know, they're sort of like the director a little bit.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: What they do matters.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: What they do really matters. And they need to kind of help lead this production. They need to give it a true north

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On the last day of shooting for Jackie Brown, a crew member called it a wrap. Pam was still wearing her flight attendant costume. Champagne bottles were passed around. And then almost immediately, the cast and crew started chanting.

JACKIE BROWN BEHIND-THE-SCENES: Pam! Pam! Pam! Pam! Pam!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She felt an incredible sense of accomplishment.

PAM GRIER: You know, I made sure I did my homework and it paid off, and it's exhausting. But it's wonderful.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam hadn't been the lead actor in a movie since 1975. 22 years. This time, though, the stakes felt higher. Like there might not be another chance like this. Now she had to wait until Christmas Day, when Jackie Brown would arrive in theaters.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Coming up on The Plot Thickens, Jackie Brown is out. And Pam hopes for the best.

-----AD BREAK-----

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Anyone going to the movies that Christmas in 1997 would have realized something from the opening moments of Jackie Brown. This was Pam Grier's movie. The first shot is a long one. Pam's in profile. She's wearing a flight attendant uniform. She's on a people mover at LAX, the Los Angeles airport.

The music is Bobby Womack's Across 110th Street – an anthem of the Blaxploitation era. And a nod to Pam's life before movies, singing backup for Womack. The credits pop up in the same yellow bubble font that was used for Foxy Brown.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: I want it to sound like a Pam Grier movie. I want it to have a Pam Grier opening credits sequence. I want the poster to reflect a Pam Grier poster.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: There are little nods to Blaxploitation films throughout Jackie Brown. When Jackie is arrested and has to spend time in jail, Pam's rendition of Long Time Woman plays. When she goes to her bond hearing, her old 1970s costar Sid Haig is the judge.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: Charge is possession of narcotics with the intent to distribute. How does your client plead?

QUENTIN TARANTINO: And so she's in the court, she's like dressed in her jumpsuit and everything. And the minute Sid came walking out in the judge's outfit, she's like, Oh, my God. She goes, This is the greatest thing ever!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Jackie goes to Ordell's apartment building, she has to get buzzed in. There's a close up of Pam's finger moving down the list of residents. She passes over an S. Haig and a J. Hill. Shoutouts to Sid Haig and Jack Hill.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: What? Jackie Brown.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: These little easter eggs were for the fans of Blaxploitation films. I should admit here that Jackie Brown is one of my favorite movies. I could watch those characters talk to each other all day. There are pieces of acting in Jackie Brown that I think are some of the best in modern cinema. After spending hours talking to Pam, I was curious, maybe even a bit nervous, to hear how she felt about the movie.

PAM GRIER: And when I saw it for my craft, I said, okay. I did okay. I did all right. I'm good. I'm good.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: You were proud of yourself?

PAM GRIER: Very proud. And even more so today as I look back and see the work and what it took to be disciplined to work with him.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: For the most part, audiences and critics also liked Jackie Brown.

NEWS REPORT: Jackie Brown is on dozens of 1997 Ten Best lists.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Some complained it was too long. The one thing they all seemed to like though was Pam.

NEWS REPORT: Evoked by stunningly good performances from B-movie icon of the '70s Pam Grier...

NEWS REPORT: There's a real center to it. Pam Grier as a central character is marvelous.

ROGER EBERT: It's a real good performance because Pam Grier is much more glamorous in real life than she is in this movie and more energetic, too.

JACQUELINE STEWART: We get to see her as a thinking, planning, self-directed person. So I think that it was a revelation to a lot of people about what she was capable of doing as an actor.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In 1997, Pam was on The Charlie Rose Show to promote Jackie Brown. He asked her what she hoped the movie would achieve.

PAM GRIER: And if the audience enjoys it and they feel what I felt and I have given depth, and texture and color and pain and all kinds of emotionality to Jackie and people can feel it. At the end of the day all I wanted to do was a good job.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It didn't take long for the awards chatter to start. Pam was nominated for a Golden Globe and a Screen Actors Guild Award. Which meant she had momentum for the Oscars. On February 10th 1998, the Academy announced its nominees.

ACADEMY AWARD NOMINATIONS: For Best Performance by an Actress in a leading role, the nominees are Julie Christie in Afterglow...

DAVE KARGER: The best actress race for the early 1998 season was stacked.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's TCM Host Dave Karger. He is also the awards correspondent for Entertainment Weekly and The Today Show.

DAVE KARGER: And it was Judi Dench, Helena Bonham Carter, Kate Winslet, Helen Hunt and Julie Christie.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: All very good actors, who gave fine performances that year. But so did Pam.

PAM GRIER: I didn't get into a race or do Jackie Brown to win an Oscar. I did it to do the work.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam had very little interest in talking about this. But I think the context matters here. If Pam had been nominated, she would have been only the seventh Black woman nominated for best actress in 70 years. And she would have been the first Black actress to win.

DAVE KARGER: So I think this was back in the time when the Academy was not as diverse as it is now. And I don't think it's a coincidence that the five women who were nominated over Pam Grier are white and that 1, 2, 3, 4 of them are British. That was the M.O. of the Academy, by and large, at that time. I think in another year and quite frankly, in a more recent year, a performance like that from Pam Grier would have been nominated.

ACADEMY AWARDS CLIP: And the Oscar goes to Helen Hunt in As Good As It Gets.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Helen Hunt ended up winning in 1998 for her role in *As Good As It Gets*. We can only speculate about what an Oscar nomination or win would have done for Pam's career.

DAVE KARGER: On one hand, it would have given her an instant credibility beyond anything she had ever done in the classic, iconic films that she did. On the other hand, you often hear stories like from Halle Berry, who became the first black actress to win that category. She talks very openly about how even winning didn't really do much for her career. Even then, we're talking in the early 2000s now, even then, there were not the roles existing for black actresses.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Most artists work for decades to become an icon. Pam made a few movies in the 1970s, in quick succession, and suddenly she was iconic. It took decades after that, a lot of roles and a ton of work, to finally get mainstream praise. Columbia film professor Racquel Gates.

RACQUEL GATES: The humanity, the complexity, the fragility, the vulnerability was always there, and it was always there if you looked for it. But it's more highlighted. It's more made the focus and the central aspect of a film like *Jackie Brown*. It's about that character's, her sort of reemergence from the margins, but it's also about the reestablishment of Pam Grier as a Hollywood icon.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After *Jackie Brown*, Pam worked often. She got supporting roles, like in Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke*, and she played Eddie Murphy's mother in *The Adventures of Pluto Nash*. In 2002, Showtime was considering a groundbreaking but risky series.

ILENE CHAIKEN: When we first set out to make this show, I was told, you're going to make a little show about lesbians. You know, you're not going to cast any stars. People will be afraid of this.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Ilene Chaiken, creator of *The L Word*, a show about a group of lesbian friends living in the West Hollywood neighborhood of Los Angeles. Ilene was working on the show's pilot and had one role left to cast.

ILENE CHAIKEN: The old sea captain was this old school lesbian from back in the day. We were looking to really nail it with this last role and cast somebody meaningful. Somebody that would be arresting, would get everyone's attention.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Ilene met with the head of Showtime, who gave her some advice.

ILENE CHAIKEN: You know what's going to get your show on the air? Casting Pam Grier.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam became the Sea Captain, and they shot a pilot. But after reviewing the episode, it was clear the character wasn't working. Ilene didn't want to lose Pam, so she created a new role. She recast Pam as Kit, the straight sister to the show's lead, Jennifer Beals. Kit was a mom, a musician and a recovering alcoholic.

PAM GRIER: I went out as a musician, fell in love, had a son and, you know, on the road rocker, background singer, you know, partying. Now it's time to chill out, come home, see my sister and have my sister pretty much try to rehabilitate me.

L WORD CLIP: I was having a drink the other night when David called and I haven't had one since. It's been two days. I'm gonna try.

ILENE CHAIKEN: The way ultimately that she portrayed that character was so powerful, struggling with her demons, overcoming them, slipping and backsliding.

L WORD CLIP: You shouldn't be drinking, Kit. And who do I have to blame for that?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Female friendships are rare in many of Pam's films. In those 70s movies, other women were generally her enemies. They were there for mud fights and bar brawls. The L Word was different. It was made by women, women who understand the value of friendship.

PAM GRIER: And I was like the den mother to all these women, young women and girls who had come from different places. They were Punjabi, Hindi, you know, Muslim, gay women and different classes economically. We but we had fun, you know, being in this fantasy that we had, we shared.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: You know, Pam's triumph has been to some degree outliving her super cool, super sexy blaxploitation persona and has just become this fantastic actress that has had a 40-year career, if not longer.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Throughout the 80s and 90s, Pam dated here and there. She had a couple of serious relationships. But in the end, they didn't work out.

PAM GRIER: I didn't fit a mold for all of them. That's why I didn't, it didn't last because I made the decision to love me more, grow more, not grow because someone tells me when to grow or how to grow.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That feels especially true when she looks back on the men in her life during the 1970s.

PAM GRIER: I didn't chase Kareem, I didn't chase Richard, I didn't chase Freddie. None of them who I really love, but I loved a part of them. I didn't love them completely because they didn't have good habits. I can't marry you because you're going to mess up my life, so I'm going to choose family and myself.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: There were times when that choice wasn't easy. Times when Pam got lonely. Or when she felt others were judging her.

PAM GRIER: When women said, I know I'm validated if I'm married. But if you're not married, you're not worthy. I was single and very successful and doing everything the men did that my grandfather told me to do.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It's not clear to me that Pam ever really wanted to get married. Or maybe the marriage she wanted just didn't seem possible. One where her career mattered just as much as her partner's. Where her fame wouldn't be an issue. Where she could travel at the last minute to a movie set and be gone for three or four months.

PAM GRIER: And there are many times I thought of just, okay, I'm done, you know, I'm good to go. I want to go home and just have the farm and goats and kids and raise them and take them to the mountains to ski and then take them to the beach so they can surf and, you know, just do everything, be a well-rounded, you know, human being. I thought of that many, many times and I really would have enjoyed that. I really would have. But I don't find it a tragedy because I think there's, you know, maybe a fatalist, but there is a reason for everything. And sometimes you can't find the answers.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam doesn't say much about her current relationship, except that she's taking it slow.

PAM GRIER: C'mon now! You know, I just — I'm just going to let the truth and the trust develop first, you know, that's really important.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And Pam keeps working. She had a role in a movie shot over the summer. And in a TV series on Amazon. She's busy. At 73, her world has not gotten small.

It's tempting to think what it would be like if 20-year-old Pam and her Aunt Mignonne drove from Denver to Hollywood today.

RACQUEL GATES: If Pam Grier were up and coming right now, I think that she would have a wider range of filmmakers to work with, that would be my hope, who would be able to see the talent in the complexity that she brings to her movie roles, as well as her physicality, because I don't want to sort of take that off the table. I think that she would find herself in a climate where she was allowed to be more fully human and whole in her film roles, as opposed to having to sort of fight to bring that herself into her parts. She is a symbol of a pretty glorious past in terms of Black representation, but also a symbol of what Black representation could still be.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I see the mountains to my right, to our left, plains.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was last February when we started working on this podcast. I remember driving down a highway in Santa Fe, New Mexico with a small crew.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: We woke up this morning, I woke up at 6:30. And then again at 6:51. To get out here to see Pam Grier on her ranch by 8:00.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: We were trying to get to Pam's ranch in time to feed her horses.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And I think that's her place up ahead, yeah?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: We found Pam's house on twelve acres of flat land. A farm windmill on one side, a barn on the other.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It's beautiful. This is beautiful. And that is Pam Grier dancing to our right.

PAM GRIER: All right, now, you're here. This is the place.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Hello, Pam.

PAM GRIER: Good morning.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam was dancing next to a small SUV with the doors wide open. The stereo blaring the Talking Heads. She was wearing a cowboy hat and aviator sunglasses.

PAM GRIER: Come on now. That's how I greet everybody.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When we pulled up, I couldn't hear the music. And so I didn't know you were dancing to actual music.

PAM GRIER: Absolutely. I meet everybody here with my environment. My animals are like, Oh shit, we gonna rock today. Momma is here.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: We managed to get the horses fed. And inspect Pam's well.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I'd help you, but I have no idea what I'm doing.

PAM GRIER: It's okay, it's okay.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I didn't know then what horses meant to Pam. That they had always made her feel less alone in the world.

That was the first of three days of interviews with Pam. Days of laughing and a lot of talking. She wasn't always easy to follow, but she and I would always find a way to connect again. She'd sing. And when she told stories, you felt her history unfolding. Rooms you weren't in came to life.

Those three days feel like a long time ago now. But among the things I'll remember forever, will be that arrival. Pam danced in silhouette during the opening credits of Foxy Brown. Imagine the joy of finding Pam Grier, 48 years later, dancing in the early morning hours under a desert sky.

PAM GRIER: I wake up and say, I'm alive. Geez, I'm alive. I can't believe it. That's a milestone for me. In our crazy world, it really is.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Angela Carone is our Director of Podcasts. Story Editors are Joanne Faryon and Shari Okeke. Audio Editing and Sound Design by Mike Voulgaris. Scriptwriting by Yacov Freedman, Rachel Pilgrim, Angela Carone and me. Yacov Freedman is our Senior Producer. James Sheridan is our Researcher and Fact Checker. Mixing by Glenn Matullo and Tim Pelletier. Production support from Julie Bitton, Mario Rials, Susana Zepeda, Liz Winter, Allison Firor, Phil Richards and Reid Hall. Web support by Betsy Gooch.

Thanks to David Byrne, Taryn Jacobs, Caroline Wigmore, Dexter Fedor, Marci Sacco, Genevieve McGillicuddy and Mark Wynns, and the entire TCM Marketing team.

Original music in the podcast comes from the band [Cadillac Jones](#). Believe it or not, their bass player is also our lawyer, John Renaud. Thanks to John, Kristen Hassell, and Tseleng Molton.

Thomas Avery of Tunewelders composed our theme music.

Our executive producer is Charlie Tabesh.

TCM's general manager is Pola Changnon.

Check out our website at tcm.com/theplotthickens. It has info about each episode and photos from throughout Pam's life. Again, that's tcm.com/theplotthickens.

Stay tuned for bonus episodes featuring some of my favorite interviews from the season.

This has been Season 4 of The Plot Thickens, a podcast from TCM. I'm Ben Mankiewicz. All of us at TCM are so glad you listened.