



A-HOLDS: ΣNDGAMES

ALMOST A DECADE AFTER THE FIRST FILM TRANSFORMED THE SUPERHERO LANDSCAPE, GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY VOL. 3 IS FINALLY HERE. AS DIRECTOR JAMES GUNN AND HIS CAST TELL US, GETTING THIS ONE TOGETHER HAS BEEN, WELL, EMOTIONAL. ARE THEY READY TO LET GO?

WORDS
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Left: Gamora (Zoë Saldana) with a not-so-welcoming committee for Nebula (Karen Gillan) and Peter Quill (Chris Pratt). **Top to bottom:** A grown-up Groot (Vin Diesel); Rocket (Bradley Cooper) is in the driving seat; Director James Gunn filming on set.

he found a way back too. They've been through the wringer.

So why were the Guardians crying at Comic-Con? Speaking now to *Empire*, James Gunn tries to articulate it. "Well, this third movie is much, much more emotional," he says. "But then we have this other story, of this group of people who made each other's careers at the same time." (He's referring to the *Guardians* cast and crew.) "We grew up together in that respect. None of us were big stars when it started out. Zoë [Saldana] was the biggest." He stops for breath. "And *then*, we went through this journey where we went into the belly of the beast, and I was thrown out — and the people that I gave

life to by hiring, saved me and brought *me* back into the fold. They pulled *me* onto the life raft. And now we're able to finish all of this together. So when they see this footage, they're reminded of this whole emotional journey we've all been on."

In real life and in fiction, the superhero team which counts a kleptomaniac raccoon, a talking tree, and an alien with "famously huge turds" among its number has taken a surprisingly touching, poignant trip to reach this final curtain call. Made all the more poignant, of course, by the fact that it very nearly didn't happen.



On 19 July 2018, James Gunn's galaxy imploded. That morning, he checked his social media, as he did most days. Almost immediately, he saw that he was trending on

Twitter. It was not for good reasons. Tweets of his from years earlier, back in his provocateur days, had resurfaced: bad-taste jokes, ones that by Gunn's own admission were childish and offensive. It didn't particularly matter that they had only re-emerged due to a bad-faith campaign from some unsavoury alt-right conservative personalities, seemingly in response to Gunn's outspoken anti-Trump stance. Disney's hand seemed forced. "The offensive attitudes and statements discovered on James' Twitter feed are indefensible and inconsistent with our studio's values," Walt Disney Studios' then chairman Alan Horn said in a statement the following day, "and we have severed our business relationship with him."

Later that day, Gunn put out a graceful, conciliatory statement of his own. "I understand and accept the business decisions taken today," he wrote. "All I can do now, beyond offering my sincere and heartfelt regret, is to be the best human being I can be: accepting, understanding, committed to equality." He halted work on his script for *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 3* (which by that point had been percolating for over a year), cancelled a planned appearance at Comic-Con promoting the superhero horror he had produced, *Brightburn*, logged out of social media, and took stock of an uncertain future.

"I was bummed," Gunn says now. "It was traumatic in certain ways. There were things about that time that were scary and sad, because of all of the noise happening around me." It certainly wasn't quiet. Gunn's firing sparked a furious online debate about justice and fairness. In the immediate aftermath, he received vocal support from collaborators and colleagues in the industry, including Glenn Close, Sylvester Stallone, Selma Blair and Michelle Yeoh. An online petition calling for Gunn's reinstatement earned over 400,000 signatures. Thinkpieces were written. Memes were forged. From here to Xandar, the debate raged about whether it was right for the Gunn to be fired, so to speak. And behind the scenes, the Guardians rallied together.



THE GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY ARE CRYING.

IT IS 23 JULY 2022, AND IN HALL H OF THE San Diego Convention Centre, the cast of Marvel's most subversive superhero team take to the Comic-Con stage, having just debuted the first trailer for *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 3* — which, among other things, teases the emotional origin story of Rocket Raccoon. It's the first footage anyone has seen of the film, including the cast themselves. They're visibly overwhelmed. "We're all kind of having a moment here," Chris Pratt (aka the Guardians' self-appointed captain Peter Quill, aka Star-Lord) tells the audience. He gives his friend, writer-director James Gunn, a hug. "It's very moving. We love you, buddy." The crowd applauds.

How did it come to this? How did Marvel's most irreverent A-holes end up so heartfelt and sincere? When *Guardians Of The Galaxy* was first released back in 2014, they were the underdogs, the plucky, eccentric punk kids of the still-fledgling Marvel Cinematic Universe. It marked

a bold new direction for the MCU: cosmic enough to feature aliens and 'Celestials'; cheeky enough to make jokes about jizz under a blacklight and "dick messages"; cool enough to have Bowie and The Runaways on the soundtrack. It was based on an obscure comic that even some comic fans hadn't heard of, starred a sitcom actor and an ex-wrestler, and was directed by a guy better known for superhero parodies (2010's *Super*) than actual superhero movies.

A lot has changed in the near-decade since that first adventure. Films featuring the team — two *Guardians* movies, two *Avengers* movies and a quick *Thor* cameo — have grossed several billion dollars. On screen, the gang have survived the deaths of two founding members (Groot and Gamora, though both found a way back), two father figures (including a planet-sized one), and the temporary loss of half of all living things. Off screen, more significantly, they have survived the very public loss of their director. Although

“We couldn’t imagine a third *Guardians* directed by anyone else,” recalls Pom Klementieff, who plays alien empath Mantis. “It didn’t make sense at all. I mean, James changed my life. I’ll be grateful for him forever.” Zoë Saldña — aka green-skinned Gamora — felt solidarity, too. “When you love and respect someone, you feel the highs and you feel the lows with them,” she says. Dave Bautista was so incensed, he threatened to exit the franchise. Clearly, something had to give. “We talked to each other as a cast,” Karen Gillan, who plays Gamora’s cyborg sister Nebula, tells *Empire*, “and formed a plan. All of us were on the same page: we didn’t really want to do it without him.”

Ten days after Gunn was fired, epitomising the spirit of the phrase “We are Groot”, a collective statement was released by the cast. “In casting each of us to help him tell the story of misfits who find redemption, [Gunn] changed our lives forever,” it read. “We believe the theme of redemption has never been more relevant than now. Each of us looks forward to working with our friend James again in the future. His story isn’t over — not by a long shot.” It was signed by Pratt, Saldña, Bautista, Gillan, Klementieff, Bradley Cooper (who voices Rocket), Vin Diesel (who voices Groot), Sean Gunn (who plays Kraglin) and Michael Rooker (who plays Yondu).

A billion-dollar galactic franchise was left adrift in space. Yet, in typically gracious form, Gunn’s memories from that unhappy period are of kindness. “It was hard,” he says. “But the things I think of from that time are the love that I got from my family and friends. I think of how Zoë Saldña and her husband came over to fix me a meal the night after it happened. How Karen Gillan and Pom Klementieff came over to just hang out with me, to be my friend.”

The support for Gunn soon became deafening. “What happened was I got fired and it didn’t just go away,” he says. “Maybe if it just went away, it wouldn’t have been on people’s minds. But the fans didn’t let it go. The press didn’t let it go. The cast didn’t let it go. It made it hard to ignore.” Rumours soon began swirling of secret negotiations between Gunn, Marvel and Disney. Marvel Studios CEO Kevin Feige was “on my side the whole time”, Gunn says, and he had heard from others that Disney’s Alan Horn “was struggling with it, ethically. Alan Horn is a good man. And he couldn’t sleep at night.”

On 15 March 2019, eight months after being fired, it was announced that James Gunn was to be reinstated as director of *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 3*. The galaxy breathed a collective sigh of relief. “Honestly, it’s wild the way things work out,” says Pratt now. “It was painful. But it takes serious wisdom to understand in that painful moment what a blessing something can be.” He’s not wrong: those unemployed wilderness months led to DC hiring Gunn, which led to the filmmaker helming 2021’s *The Suicide Squad* — and later led to a rather plum gig as co-CEO of DC Studios, reshaping and rebooting the flailing studio in his image. Plus, after all that, he got *Vol. 3* back too, albeit somewhat delayed, to allow for

The Suicide Squad and its TV spin-off *Peacemaker* to film first.

And yet, it was never a foregone conclusion that Gunn would even want to return to Marvel. “I was not definitely going to come back,” he says. “I had to really ruminate over whether that was what I was going to do.” You can hardly blame him. Why bother reopening old wounds?

“At the end of the day,” Gunn says earnestly, “the reason I came back was because I needed to finish Rocket’s story.”

Recently, while in the edit suite for *Vol. 3*, James Gunn texted Kevin Feige: “You do realise we’ve just spent hundreds of millions of dollars on a trilogy that explains the origins of a talking raccoon?” Gunn laughs recalling it. It is undeniably bizarre. “But my whole thing in life is being able to take something that seems inconsequential, and allow it to be consequential.” For him, Rocket is the best character in the whole team, the special sauce, “the secret protagonist of the entire *Guardians* franchise. And I knew that from the very beginning.”



Top right: Ayesha (Elizabeth Debicki) with her new creation Adam Warlock (Will Poulter). **Right:** Sister act: Nebula (Karen Gillan) with Gamora; Drax (David Bautista) chats to Mantis (Pom Klementieff).



You can see the seeds of Rocket’s arc from day one. In the original *Guardians*, there’s a moment where Quill notices some strange metal, mechanical markings on Rocket’s body. Neither character exchanges a word about it. But — as Blue Swede’s ‘Hooked On A Feeling’ blasts on the soundtrack — it hangs heavy with meaning. This furious little furball clearly has a dark history. “That is one of my favourite small moments in any of the *Guardians* movies,” says Sean Gunn, the first part of the Rocket performance pipeline that includes Gunn’s on-set ‘motion reference’, Bradley Cooper’s voice, and an army of VFX artists. “It’s so brief, but it gives us so much. Quill takes it in and understands that this is a lonely creature. That’s the joining factor of all the Guardians — that they’re all orphans, in a way.”

So *Vol. 3* is, as James Gunn explains, “not about saving the universe — it’s about the Guardians saving themselves.” It will see the gang unearth Rocket’s tragic past: to discover how he was the product of a gruesome experiment by evil cosmic scientist the High Evolutionary, who created a menagerie of hybrid creatures on a planet known as Counter-Earth, a suburban facsimile of Earth. “The High Evolutionary is one of my favourite Marvel villains,” says Gunn. “I’ve always been a big fan of [1932 film] *Island Of Lost Souls*. He’s like a space Doctor Moreau. He’s a detestable character, frankly.”

Played here by *The Suicide Squad* and *Peacemaker* alumnus Chukwudi Iwuji, the High Evolutionary exudes an almost Shakespearean villainy — a natural fit for Iwuji, who is an Associate Artist for the Royal Shakespeare

Company. The Nigerian-British actor found something “very Lear-esque” about the character, he says, in “that descent to a sort of personal madness. I was also influenced by an amazing speech that Henry IV gives when he can’t sleep, because he has the burdens of England on him: ‘O sleep, O gentle sleep, Nature’s soft nurse, how have I frightened thee.’ I was like, ‘This guy doesn’t sleep. Because if he does, there are only nightmares of what he has done.’”

The High Evolutionary is also instrumental in the origin story of another character: one Adam Warlock. First teased in *Vol. 2*’s post-credits sting, being created by Elizabeth Debicki’s snooty gold-skinned Sovereign leader Ayesha, Adam Warlock is an incredibly powerful artificial super-being, and in this film a “supporting character”, Gunn says, with a “very specific connection to the High Evolutionary”. But he’s set to be a significant player in the MCU’s future, if the comics are any guide.

Will Poulter, who makes his MCU debut here as the character, only realises at the end of his Zoom chat with *Empire* that he is surrounded by Warlockian gold furnishings (“How cringe is this? I’m at my mum’s house! I can’t do Zooms here — people will think I’m a wanker”). He was, he says, excited to explore the character’s “inherent ambiguity”. “James and I discussed the idea of playing him, at least in this initial phase, in his infancy,” Poulter explains. “As a young person entering the world, trying to develop his moral compass. There was a lot of comedy in that, but also some genuine pathos, some dramatic meat on the bone.”

THE BLURP BLURP



JAMES GUNN SPILLS THE BEANS ON VOL. 3’S SCENE-STEALING FURRY ALIEN PET

ILLUSTRATION BILL McCONKEY



Who is Blorp? What can you tell us about Blorp? Tell us everything you can about Blorp.

That’s a good question. I will say, Blorp begins as a pet of one of the Ravagers in the movie. He carries him around. Blorp is what’s known as a furry F’saki. In the very first movie, if you remember, there was that Orloni table that they were betting on, with that beast that was eating the animals. The bigger thing was eating the smaller things. That thing was a non-furry F’saki. Blorp is a furry F’saki. So that’s what he is. He’s a pet. Boy, I went into a lot of detail with that!

This is the ideal amount of detail. There are pockets of the internet already getting very excited about Blorp.

I am incredibly excited about Blorp as well. He’s a great character and offers a lot to the Guardians universe. [Deadpan] Probably the most important character to the Marvel Universe going forward is Blorp.

When do the Blorp plushies go on sale? [Laughs] We’ll find out.

Well, this is very exciting. Your cover story should just be Blorp.

Yes. We’ll do multiple covers. Just of Blorp. That’s right. In different poses.



Amid an already giant ensemble, the film will find room for more new characters, more typically weird alien insanity. There are the hybrid residents of Counter-Earth, which Gunn claims involved “more practical applications [of prosthetic make-up] than any movie has ever had in the history of film”. There’s Lylla, an anthropomorphic otter also created by the High Evolutionary, who is an early friend of Rocket. There’s Cosmo the Space-dog, previously only a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it canine cameo, now upgraded to an all-talking, all-telekinetic featured player, voiced by *Borat 2*’s Maria Bakalova. There’s furry four-eared critter and instant fan-favourite Blurp (see sidebar, page 53).

And then there’s the original line-up, “on a mission to save their friend”, as Pratt puts it. We find Star-Lord, he says, in a “state of depression. He’s living in a world where Gamora has no idea who he is (*due to Avengers: Endgame’s time-travelling shenanigans, this Gamora is from a different timeline*). The love of his life is

gone. That has caused him to drink a lot. He’s not the best leader.” Which sets up, it seems, an attraction to Nebula.

For Karen Gillan — working on a decade-long job but originally only contracted for eight days — it’s the completion of a character arc that has taken Nebula from tortured villain to misunderstood anti-hero to card-carrying Guardian. “She’s been through a journey that I find extremely compelling,” says Gillan. “Gradually, we’ve been able to understand why she is the way that she is. She is one of the biggest victims of Thanos. With this movie, she’s starting to heal.”

At the end of this film, Gunn promises, years-long narratives will be resolved. Even if not everyone will make it out unscathed. “It is a trilogy,” he says. “The first movie is about the mother, the second movie is about the father and the third movie is about the self. That is the overall story.” And like all good stories, it has to come to an end.



he Guardians Of The Galaxy are crying.

It is 7 May 2022, and *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 3* has just wrapped filming.

For many people on the set at Trilith Studios in Atlanta, this could be their last-ever day’s work for Marvel. Goodbye speeches are given. Hugs are exchanged. Eyes are leaking. “Yeah, that was emotional,” affirms James Gunn. “It was a huge relief to have finished it. There were a lot of speeches happening. Zoë Saldaña’s was the one that took me by surprise. I just lost it. I was sobbing.” Pratt gave a speech, too. “There were some tears,” he says now. “Everyone in the beginning said that we were destined to be the first Marvel film to fail. I said we should be very proud. We defied expectations.”

So is this the end, then? Certainly for this iteration of the team, it feels like it. Pratt “wouldn’t want to rule it out”, he says of



Far left: Shakespearean villainy in the form of The High Evolutionary (Chukwudi Iwuji, right). **Left:** Director James Gunn with his Guardians family: Drax, Peter, Gamora, Kraglin (Sean Gunn), Nebula and Mantis.



Top to bottom: Kraglin gets to the point; Space-dog: the adorable Cosmo (Maria Bakalova); When the going gets tough, Nebula, Mantis and Drax stick together.

returning, but feels “really comfortable with the way it’s wrapped up if I never came back”. Dave Bautista has definitively said he’s done with Drax, calling *Vol. 3* the “perfect exit”. Pom Klementieff is “not against” returning at some point. “But every word that I said as Mantis was written by James Gunn. So, we’ll see.” Karen Gillan says, “It feels like we’re closing a chapter.” Zoë Saldaña — who, lest we forget, has already survived one death — simply says: “Never say never.” Sean Gunn, who acknowledges that performing on his hands and knees “is a lot harder when approaching 50 than when approaching 40”, calls this film “my swan song as Rocket”.

One key player is almost definitely done, at least for now: James Gunn’s Marvel contract runs out in May. “I mean, who knows what the future is,” he says, “but I’m definitely at DC for the next few years, running a studio.”

Which is not to say it’s the end of the Guardians’ story. Gunn gives his blessing to any surviving members hoping to continue without him. “It would absolutely not be disloyal of them to me to continue on in the Marvel Universe,” he says. “I would love to see any characters that remain [at the end of the film] get solo movies, or join the Avengers, or a new version of the *Guardians*, or whatever.”

Could they even appear in what might have previously seemed until even recently unthinkable: a Marvel-DC crossover? With Gunn a major player in both studios, surely that’s more possible than ever now? “I’m certain that’s more likely now that I’m in charge [at DC],” Gunn acknowledges. “Who knows? That’s many years away, though. I think we have to establish what we’re doing [at DC] first. I would be lying to say that we haven’t discussed it. But all discussions have been very, very light and fun.”

The prospect of a Guardians reunion a little way down the line, seeing Star-Lord rubbing shoulders with Peacemaker, while Spidey enjoys a shawarma with Superman, is the stuff of pure nerd nirvana. For now, though, the Guardians Of The Galaxy are bowing out doing something good, something bad, maybe a bit of both. So long, A-holes. ●

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY VOL. 3 IS IN CINEMAS FROM 3 MAY

