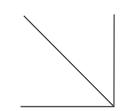


1000 WORDS  
MOMENTS THAT CHANGED CINEMA FOREVER

# KISS KISS BANG

James Stewart, *Winchester '73* and  
the start of the star system

When James Stewart rode out alone as an independent contractor taking a percentage of the box office receipts for *Winchester '73* he changed the way movies were made. SCOTT JORDAN HARRIS discusses a revolutionary film deal.



Ask an expert on matters cinematic to list James Stewart's best films and it may be a while before he or she names *Winchester '73* – but ask that expert to list Stewart's most significant films and you should hear the title immediately. What occurs in *Winchester '73*'s scenes is unlikely to see the film called a true turning point for cinema, but what occurred behind them means it should forever be acknowledged as one.

I am also not suggesting that, judged solely by the impact of its content, *Winchester '73* is historically insignificant. The film established several minor milestones. It was the first of director Anthony Mann's eight influential collaborations with Stewart. It rejuvenated the previously waning Western genre and led to a number of grittier 'adult Westerns' (a phrase that most certainly did not imply in the 1950s what it would imply today). And its success in cinemas did much to push Stewart towards the status he would soon enjoy as America's top box office

I don't intend to imply by this that *Winchester '73* is a poor film. It is a very good one. Lean and yet intricately plotted, it is involving, thrilling and frightening. It's impressively photographed (by William H. Daniels) and features several memorable performances, the best of them by Stewart, who cleverly positions the amiable charm of his classic character below an assumed surface of anger and intensity. The result is a far

LEFT  
JAMES STEWART TAKES AIM  
ABOVE  
A CONTEMPLATIVE POSE



LEFT  
JAMES STEWART IN *HARVEY*  
BELOW  
LEW 'POPE OF HOLLYWOOD' WASSERMAN  
OPPOSITE  
JACK NICHOLSON IN *BATMAN*



**Wasserman and Stewart agreed that Stewart would accept no money for appearing in *Winchester '73* or *Harvey*, provided he was given a percentage of each film's takings. The move was brave and, of course, experimental...**

draw. These, though, are just footnotes in film history; the contract Stewart secured for appearing as Lin McAdam is a chapter from its main narrative.

In Hollywood's Golden Age the 'studio system' was dominant. Each of the big stars belonged to one of the big studios and, barring loan deals and the like, worked exclusively for it. For example, MGM, which was the biggest studio of all in the 1930s, sold itself as having 'more stars than there are in heaven', and kept Clark Gable, Greta Garbo, Judy Garland, Joan Crawford and Jimmy Stewart under contract. Film stars did not – as, under the 'star system', they do now – make one movie for MGM, one for 20th Century Fox, one for Warner Brothers and then another for MGM

depending upon the individual scripts and individual pay packets on offer. They were held to exclusive deals.

By the 1950s the studio system was in serious decline, and so it would be an enormous exaggeration to suggest that the contract Stewart signed to make *Winchester '73* – and another film, Henry Koster's comforting classic *Harvey* – for Universal in 1950 caused its collapse. But the deal did severely damage what remained of the studio system – and it was decisive in determining the system that would replace it.

When Stewart returned to Hollywood in 1945, following his distinguished service in the Second World War, he did not re-sign with MGM. Instead, he signed with the MCA talent agency run by Lew Wasserman, the visionary agent known as 'The Pope



of Hollywood'. As such, he became one of film's first independent contractors.

A few years later, Universal asked Stewart to star in its upcoming productions *Winchester '73* and *Harvey* but couldn't, or wouldn't, pay the \$200,000 he asked in return. Next came Wasserman and Stewart's masterstroke.

They agreed that Stewart would accept no money for appearing in *Winchester '73* or *Harvey*, provided he was given a percentage of each film's takings. (Wasserman also had Stewart established as a corporation, allowing him to avoid enormous sums in income tax.) The move was brave and, of course, experimental: had *Winchester '73* bombed at the box office, the end of the studio system, the beginning of the star system and, as such, the history of Hollywood may have been drastically different.

But *Winchester '73* did not bomb at the box office. Famously, the film took so much in ticket sales that Stewart's percentage earned him \$600,000 – three times the amount he had originally been willing to accept for his work in both it and *Harvey*. Stewart wasn't the first Hollywood freelancer, and he wasn't even the first to agree a deal in which a performer took a percentage of a film's takings. But, as ever with the history of Hollywood, the moment that most matters is

not the first time someone did something, but the first time someone did something that was massively successful.

*Winchester '73*'s success put Stewart in an unprecedented position, of which every other major American movie star was naturally envious. Other major names negotiated similar deals for subsequent films and soon such contracts were common. (Wasserman, incidentally, did rather well in his career, too, and had further dealings with Universal – when he bought it.) Nowadays percentage deals are standard – they are simply the way major movies with major stars are made – and there have been many legendary agreements of the kind (Alec Guinness's percentage of the earnings from *Star Wars*, for example, earned him colossal amounts, and Jack Nicholson's percentage deal for Tim Burton's *Batman* brought him 100 times the amount Stewart earned from *Winchester '73*.) None, though, is as legendary as Stewart's.

*Winchester '73* fired the shot that finished off the studio system, and was the starting gun for the star-centric model of moviemaking that followed it – and that still exists well-over half a century later. As such, the moment when James Stewart signed a contract to appear in a Western for which he might not get paid was truly a moment that changed film forever. **[tbp]**

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