

GUITAR HERO!

Edgar Wright's first Hollywood film could have been *The Crazies*, *The Green Hornet* or, er, *Failure To Launch*. Instead, he chose *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*, a rom-com musical with epic battles. Empire discovers why the strangest option was the best

Words: Nick de Semlyen

Casting couch: Edgar Wright, Michael Cera and Mark Webber.

The two sides of Scott Pilgrim (Michael Cera): musicy and fisty.

TAKE A MARTINI GLASS. POUR TWO SHOTS OF REPOSADO TEQUILA. ADD A SPLASH OF PATRON XO CAFÉ AND A SINGLE ESPRESSO. TOP WITH A DASH OF

agave syrup. Shake over ice. Strain.

Congratulations. You've just made your first Edgar Wrightini.

The cocktail was created last year by London bartender Will Foster in honour of the British director. But be careful: it's potent stuff. Tequila aside, the Edgar Wrightini is pumped so full of caffeine, it's a wonder it doesn't jitter-shake its way off the bar.

"It's well named, because I *am* teeny," laughs Wright. "I haven't actually tried one — I feel like I can't make my own cocktail — but hopefully I'll get one eventually. Though it sounds like it'll give someone a heart attack!"

Perhaps, but it surely won't be him. After all, Wright's prodigious coffee intake is now legendary. During a particularly taxing day on the set of his new film, *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*, he gulped down a super-human eight double espressos ("Enough to kill an elephant"). According to Hollywood lore, a certain '80s comedy star used the codeword "popcorn" when he wanted cocaine; Wright, on the other hand, requested "heroin" (in emergencies, "double heroin") when he got a jones for java. He became especially hooked on a local concoction





BRIEFING SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD

Released: August 25
Director: Edgar Wright
Starring: Michael Cera, Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Kieran Culkin, Chris Evans, Brandon Routh, Jason Schwartzman, Anna Kendrick
Based on: The comic-book series by Bryan Lee O'Malley.
The gist: Slacker Scott Pilgrim (Cera) falls for a girl called Ramona (Winstead). But, to win her heart, he must defeat her seven evil exes.

SCOTT
PILGRIM VS.
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of banana, maple syrup, cinnamon and a brain-boggling quantity of concentrated joe. Survivors say drinking one is like injecting a coffee bean into your vein. The brew's name? 'Rocket fuel'.

Which is apt. In recent years, like some kind of bearded ballistic missile, the turbo-talented 36-year-old has shot himself high into the moviemaking firmament. His Brit-com one-two of Shaun Of The Dead and Hot Fuzz has bowled over Hollywood's great and good. The directors this West Country pop-culture junkie idolised as a teenager — Quentin Tarantino, Peter Jackson, Sam Raimi, Steven Spielberg — are now friends, admirers and often colleagues. Wright himself can't quite believe it.

"I lived at Quentin's when he was writing Inglourious Basterds," he recalls, at Fresh

(a coffee shop, naturally) on Toronto's Spadina Avenue, midway through the Scott Pilgrim shoot. "Me and Joe [Cornish] were writing Tintin upstairs. Quentin would come up and say, 'Do you guys wanna hear a scene?' He'd play every part. I've seen him do Winston Churchill."

Getting to witness QT's bulldog impression is one way of knowing you've made it. Another is finding that everyone in Hollywood wants to work with you. Ever since the success of Shaun Of The Dead, a cascade of screenplays has come rushing at Wright. Among them, The Green Hornet, The Crazies and — bizarrely — Matthew McConaughey rom-com Failure To Launch. ("You get the script for that and you're thinking, 'Really? Me?'" says Wright.)

Some of the offers were almost too tempting to resist, like an invite from Raimi to direct Drag

Me To Hell. "But it was so obviously a Sam Raimi film. I told him as a fan I wanted to see him do it. When I visited the set, they were doing the graveyard scene and Sam's suit was splattered in mud. He turned to me and said, 'Edgar,

why'd you do this to me? This is all your fault!'" Wright's destiny lay not with a goat-demon, but down another path. His next film was to be an adaptation of an obscure graphic-novel series. There were no big stars with perfect abs attached, no roles for Simon Pegg or Nick Frost. It was the story of a bunch of twentysomething underachievers, set in Ontario. It was a risky next move. But, very possibly, the perfect one.

TAKE A SLACKER HERO. ADD A SNARKY GAY ROOMMATE, AN ADORING CHINESE GIRLFRIEND AND A

pushy sister. Stir in a mysterious babe from out of town and her seven diabolical ex-lovers. Fuse to outlandish, anime-inspired visuals.

Congratulations. You've just created the world's coolest comic book.

"I wanted to do a story about romance and fighting," says Bryan Lee O'Malley, the Canuck cartoonist who actually created it. "The title came first. I loved the song Scott Pilgrim by the band Plumtree and tried to come up with a world that would suit it. Something fun and over-the-top, in this sort of muted Canadian way."

There are six volumes. The final one, Scott Pilgrim's Finest Hour, comes out just weeks before the movie; the very first printed version arrives at O'Malley's LA house via FedEx during his chat with *Empire*. It was the original instalment, Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life, which was handed to Wright by producers Jared LeBoff and Adam Siegel back in 2004. "They collared me outside a screening of Shaun Of The Dead with a copy," the director remembers. "It was in my bag for eight weeks before I actually read it."

When he finally flicked it open, his eyes widened. Not just because of the ingeniously silly story, in which a guy has to confront his girlfriend's past, literally, in the shape of a League of Evil Exes. But because, with its whirligig pace, loving pop-culture references and frequent shifts into fantasy, it reminded Wright of his own work, the groundbreaking sitcom Spaced.

"The mix of naturalism and magical realism was what really appealed to me," Wright says. "It starts in a very real place, with characters who are young and directionless. And then it balloons into insane fight scenes. It's comedy on

a big, overblown, manga scale."

Two men from different continents, one deliriously geeky worldview. O'Malley is obsessed with neon-blue Nintendo sprite Mega Man; Wright has whiled away entire transatlantic flights playing Tetris. Either can talk you through the intricacies of Japanimation series Cowboy Bebop. Both adore UK indie

"IT'S COMEDY ON A BIG MANGA SCALE."

EDGAR WRIGHT

band The Bluetones. The question wasn't whether Wright was the right person to bring Scott Pilgrim to the big screen. It was how soon he could start. Even before Hot Fuzz began production, Wright and Michael Bacall (a writer who's also Inglourious Basterd PFC. Michael Zimmerman) were working on the movie adaptation, which would bear the title of the second book.

"We had this event in LA recently," says O'Malley, "where J.J. Abrams interviewed Edgar about his whole career. And watching all the clips being played, it really made it seem like this was his destiny. Everything he's done points towards this crazy film."

TAKE A WIMPY COMEDIAN. BREAK A SKATEBOARD OVER HIS HEAD. GIVE HIM A FLAMING SWORD. NOW

unleash the world's most formidable stunt team, whipping up enough Hong Kong-style carnage to give Bey Logan a chubby.

Congratulations. You've just turned Michael Cera into an action god.

"Wirework, hand-to-hand, backflips... You have to get over the jitters of it at first. Then >>

LUCAS FILMS

Lucas Lee (Chris Evans) is Evil Ex #2. He's also a Hollywood action star with the ropiest résumé this side of Steven Seagal. Before the shoot, Wright and Evans got together to shoot some fake movie posters. Here, the actor talks us through them...



"The tagline for Action Doctor is absolutely genius: 'The good news is you're going to live. The bad news is he's going to kill you!'"



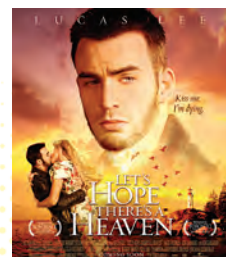
"Notice my eyebrow work. I had to go home and give my forehead a little massage. It induces headaches when you arch them that long!"



"Edgar actually showed me a couple of scenes from Seagal films. They were absolutely hilarious, so that was the direction I went in."



"This movie involves a man getting a phone call from himself, telling him he has 89 minutes to live. It's in real time. I'd pay to see it."



"Lucas' look is obnoxious facial hair and lots of black leather. He puts so little thought into his characters. He just says, 'Fuck it, I'm wearing the same stuff!'"



Cera's old *Arrested Development* flame Egg Whitman as bi-furious ex Roxy. Below right: Scott watches the girls duke it out. Hot!

it's easy," shrugs Cera on set. Like most things the Superbad star says in interviews, it's hard to know whether to take this claim seriously. The scene *Empire* is watching him do today, at any rate, looks downright hardcore. Taking place midway through the film, it's Scott's tangle with Evil Ex # 4, a lesbian named Roxy Richter (Mae Whitman) who once locked lips with his girlfriend, Ramona (Mary Elizabeth Winstead). It's fair to say that Scott is having his behind handed to him: as he's walloped around a glitzy bar, at one point he's socked so hard that he flies straight up and nearly hits the mirror ball on the ceiling. The effect is achieved by violently yanking cables attached to Cera, while blasting an industrial air cannon at his face. As the 22-year-old is lowered back onto the ground for the fourth time, his director looks on in delight: "Michael's a human *piñata* in this film!"

With a Hollywood budget at his disposal for the first time, Wright's aim wasn't just to pay tribute to his favourite martial-arts flicks — he wanted to outdo them. So he made a few key

hires. First he called up Brad Allan, the *wushu* expert who's overseen stunts on countless Jackie Chan films (and personally attacked Chan in several of them), summoning him and his crew of warriors to Toronto. Next onboard was Bill Pope, the genius cinematographer behind the wire-fu mêlées and sprawling cyber-vistas of the *Matrix* trilogy. Then Wright put his young cast, whom he wanted to perform many of their own stunts, through combat boot camp: push-ups, bamboo-sword jousts, giant-hammer fights, the usual.

"The action is huge!" beams Jason Schwartzman, who plays the final Evil Ex, record producer Gideon Graves. "I never imagined I'd get to have a massive fight scene in a summer movie, sword-fighting Michael Cera. We spent a whole month shooting this one scene and it's absolutely nuts. Edgar said to me, 'I want to do wide shots where we can see it's really you



guys. I want you to be so good you can take Michael on with one hand behind your back."

"Every fight scene has a different tone and edge to it," says Cera. "They were all equally challenging and complex to put together. Unfortunately I don't think I'll be able to apply any of the skills I've learned to real life."

Besides girls, Pilgrim cares about two things: video-games and music. Both have huge bearing on the action. "In *Spaced*, what you see on screen is a reflection of the media the characters consume," explains Wright. "Here, that idea's pushed even further. The whole movie could be taken as Scott's daydreaming: he has a mundane life, but this is how he'd like to be represented."

Brace yourself, then, for battles that adhere to the loopy logic and raging speed of a console brawler. When Scott defeats enemies, they transform into showers of gold coins, like denizens of Mario's Mushroom Kingdom. There are extra lives, brutal finishing moves, the odd pixelated weapon. Sound-effects are sampled from retro 8-bit titles like *Sonic* and *The Legend Of Zelda*. Even the aspect ratio frequently shifts (from 1.85 to 2.40), to ape »

"Rock beats... rock?" Scott and Knives Chau (Ellen Wong) haven't had the most amicable break-up.



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FINAL FANTASY

SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD

MARY ELIZABETH WINSTEAD BLOOMS AS RAMONA FLOWERS

She's played John McClane's kid (*Die Hard 4.0*), worn cheerleader kit (*Death Proof*) and manipulated technology with her mind (*Sky High*). Soon she'll star in a prequel to *The Thing*. And right now, in *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*, she's Ramona Flowers, a roller-skating hottie who glides through interdimensional portals. It's fair to say that Mary Elizabeth Winstead is every geek's dream.

"In this movie I get to wield a gigantic hammer," she tells *Empire* on the Scott Pilgrim set, not doing much to dispel that image. "Ramona is really bad-ass. I had three weeks of normal acting,

and from here on out it's pure fighting. I get to do some incredible stuff."

Ramona is the movie's dark horse, an Amazon delivery girl with a murky past who apparently dates only people with crazy fighting skills. "She's difficult to play because she's so enigmatic," says Winstead. "I have to show that she's thinking a lot of things, but never really letting on." She also changes her hair colour with the same frequency she switches boyfriends. "Blue is definitely my favourite. I've dyed my hair myself a few times, but once ended up with this creepy magenta which freaked everyone out."

After years of starring in ropery horrors, from *Final Destination 3* to *Black Christmas*, she's ecstatic to be poster girl for the summer's hippest film. "The energy is similar to when I worked with Quentin (*Tarantino*). I actually met Edgar when he screened *Hot Fuzz* at Quentin's house. Whose team would I want to be on at a movie quiz? I wouldn't want to go up against either of them!"

As for Scott Pilgrim himself, Michael Cera, the pair first crossed paths in 2007, bonding over their shared lack of interest in sport. "We have the same agent and he gets these amazing Dodgers dug-out tickets that he totally wasted on us," laughs Winstead. "There were all these die-hard fans glaring at us as Michael and I snarfed free hot dogs and nachos all day." As we say, every geek's dream.

"IN THIS MOVIE I GET TO WIELD A HUGE HAMMER."



Ramona takes on her most dastardly foe, IKEA Cabinet!

ALBERT SANCHEZ/CORBIS OUTLINE

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Above: Evil Exes Ken and Kyle Katayanagi (Shota and Keita Saito). Below: Sex Bob-omb under aural assault.



the look of in-game cut-scenes. This is Wright's hyper-kinetic paean to the Nintendo, Sega and ZX Spectrum games he and O'Malley grew up hooked on. And while Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World isn't based on a video-game, it may prove to be Generation Xbox's defining work.

Then there's the tuneage. Scott is bassist for a ramshackle band called Sex Bob-omb (another Mario reference), also comprised of friends Stephen Stills (Mark Webber) and Kim Pine (Alison Pill). Throughout the movie they face off against rival outfits The Clash At Demonhead, Crash And The Boys and the Katayanagi twins, often resulting in a literal battle of the bands.

"Music is a weapon," marvels Brandon Routh, who plays Todd Ingram, member of The Clash At Demonhead and Evil Ex #3. "Todd and Scott have a bass-off, where we use our guitars to blast each other around the room and through walls! Actually, I'm doing most of the blasting, since my musical skills are superior." Ken and Kyle Katayanagi (Shota and Keita Saito), meanwhile, are Evil Exes #5 and #6, electroheads

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**MICHAEL
CERA**

who lock amps with Sex Bob-omb in a duel that involves a *sonic yeti*.

All this has given Wright a perfect excuse to create 2010's most cutting-edge soundtrack. Alt-rock legend Beck wrote Sex Bob-omb's songs ("My brief was, 'It should be difficult to tell whether they are awful or awesome,'" laughs Wright); Canadian bands Metric and Broken Social Scene provided tracks for Clash and Crash. Moreover, super-producer Nigel Godrich (who's collaborated with Beck and Radiohead) contributes his first proper film score, while two members of Supergrass recorded a cover of a lullaby from *Zelda*. The result is such an

embarrassment of riches that it's being released on two CDs (the first is reviewed on page 158).

"The one thing we can do that you can't with a comic is hear the music," says Wright. "In the original draft of the script, it was a running joke that we never hear any of it — we always cut around what the bands sound like. But then we got all these amazing people to do the songs and it wasn't even a question anymore."

The film itself is structured like a classic musical, with ruckuses subbing for production numbers. "It's a hybrid of Jackie Chan and Bob Fosse," the director muses. "A mano-a-mano fight is like a duet. Scott taking on Gideon's henchmen is like a big dance number. And onlookers react in the same way. In *Grease*, nobody at the end of Summer Nights goes, 'Wow, why did everybody in the cafeteria just start singing? What was that about?' Here an enormous battle breaks out in a party and then people carry on talking. People have exploded into coins, but there's no criminal investigation or repercussions for Scott Pilgrim."

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST COUNTRY

THE SCOTT PILGRIM DIRECTOR ON HIS LITTLE-SEEN DEBUT

EDGAR WRIGHT may be behind this month's cover movie, but he and *Empire* haven't always been on good terms. "When my first film came out, *Empire*,

which I had collected since issue one, gave it one star," he told the LA Film Festival in June. "It was crushing — I threw out all my *Empires* except that one."

We're not talking *Shaun Of The Dead*. Wright's debut is actually DIY Spaghetti Western spoof *A Fistful Of Fingers*. It came out in 1995, screening at a single cinema for a few weeks, but 15 years on the

director still remembers banishing his back issues to the dumpster.

"In fairness, I was moving house at the time!" laughs Wright, when we delicately broach the topic. "But it's all character-building. I wasn't 100 per cent pleased with it anyway. Through no fault of the actors, who were great, but it is a bit too silly. It looks like what it is: a bunch of 20-year-olds

making a film in 20 days."

Made for just £11,000 and shot in his hometown of Wells, it boasts a cameo from no less than legendary prankster Jeremy Beadle. "I was a researcher on Beadle's *Hot Shots*, when I was 20," says Wright. "It was a pretty cool job actually. Jeremy was a good sport — he agreed to get shot

on camera."

If you want to check it out, good luck. It's a true rarity. "I don't know where my DVD is," sighs the film's own director. "I do have it on video but I don't have a VHS player in my house anymore..."



TAKE A LENGTHY PREP PERIOD, INCLUDING VISUAL-EFFECTS TESTS AND MULTIPLE SCRIPT DRAFTS. ADD

a six-month shoot. Tack on a year of intensive post-production, complete with 20-hour days, seven-day weeks and countless red-eyes across the Atlantic.

Commiserations. You still haven't broken Edgar Wright.

"I can't tell you the number of people working on this film who have hit the wall in the past four weeks," says Nira Park, Wright's long-time producer, speaking in early July. "The hardest thing has been keeping people sane. But Edgar works harder than anyone. Wherever he is in the world, when I email him he responds straight away. I'm working with two other directors at the moment, Joe Cornish (*on Attack The Block*) and Greg Mottola (*on Paul*, with Wright's old muckers Pegg and Frost), and they are so envious of his stamina. Although he did say to me today, 'I need to take a few days off before the press tour or I may die.'"

Empire meets with Wright a total of five times throughout the making of Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World. On two of those occasions he's operating on a mere four hours' sleep; when we arrange a meet in yet another mochaplex to talk through the freshly released first trailer, he's had just two and is clearly fatigued, his usually energetic patter punctuated with... long... pauses. The gigantic editing job — rendering endless effects shots; stitching together his trademark high-energy mix of snap zooms, whip pans and Dutch tilts — is taking its toll.



Scott's sweethearts: Our hero shares Second Cup take-out with Ramona (here) and an awkward moment with Knives (below left).



Given a chance to prove himself on a big budget, he's pushed himself harder than ever. Will the results be worth it? *Empire* gets its first real clue at the end of May, when Wright cues up 40 minutes of footage in a West End screening room. Even though the scenes we see are out of context and unfinished, it's dizzying stuff, the stylised set-pieces as caffeinated as the director himself, frames packed with fine-spun

detail. The jokes are sharp and multi-layered: Lucas Lee, the lunk-headed action star/Evil Ex #2, has a team of burly stunt doubles whose grunts are voiced by Chris Evans himself, while the Japanese numbers on the Katayanagis' amp go all the way up to 11. Most importantly, the characters are instantly lovable, from Cera and Winstead's lead couple on down — Ellen Wong and Kieran Culkin are particular standouts as Scott's lovelorn ex Knives Chau and ice-cool roomie Wallace Wells.

Our final meeting with the director takes place over lunch at London's members-only The Groucho Club. Elsewhere in the restaurant, UFO enthusiast and failed agony uncle Danny Dyer is loudly holding court. Wright himself, knocking back an espresso and picking at

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MADE TO AUTEUR

FROM THE CREATOR OF THE EDGAR WRIGHTINI, FOUR MORE DIRECTOR-INSPIRED COCKTAILS!

MICHAEL MANNHATTAN

Not technically a Manhattan, but like Mann's films, it's cold and blue.

2 shots Beefeater gin
20ml Luxardo Maraschino
25ml lemon juice
10ml blue Curaçao

Stir all and garnish with a cherry soaked in calvados.



MARTINI SCORSESE

A mix of Italian and American ingredients.

2oz Four Roses small-batch bourbon
3 barspoons of cherry-infused calvados
1 barspoon of demerara sugar
Dash of Antica Formula

Add ingredients in small amounts, stirring 15 times between each batch. Squeeze in an orange wedge. Garnish with a cherry soaked in calvados.



PRAWN COCKTAIL

Dedicated to District 9 director Neill Blomkamp.

3 1/2 shots Whitley Neill gin (containing bark from South African baobab tree)
Ice rinsed with dry vermouth

Strain off the ice. Stir 21 times and garnish with prawn and red chilli slices.



DAVID LYNCHBURG LEMONADE

Not for the faint-hearted. NB: contains no lemonade.

1 small pear, sliced
25ml Pernod absinthe
25ml Cointreau
Drizzle of honey
15ml lemon juice

Muddle. Add two mint sprigs. Re-muddle. Add two dashes of rhubarb bitters, shake and strain.



Will Foster is the owner and bartender of Casita, 5a Ravey Street, Shoreditch, EC2A 4QW. Empire promotes responsible drinking.



Scott enters the neon-lit Chaos Theatre to face down nemesis Gideon (Jason Schwartzman). There will be blood. Or coins.

gnocchi and rocket, is running on fumes but cheerful, having completed his sound mix in the ungodly hours of that morning. There is now just 11th-hour effects-tweaking and colour-grading to go. "I'm looking forward to a lie-in," he concedes.

There have been test screenings. Some have involved his celebrity friends: Peter Jackson, Jason Reitman and Kevin Smith all came out raving (Smith promising that, "Nobody is going to understand what the fuck just hit them"), while Tarantino delivered pages of notes, including the suggestion that Wright add an opening credits sequence. Not only was the idea adopted ("It gives a sense of occasion," says Wright), but the movie nods back at Kill Bill with its very own 'death list'. Though this one is laminated, thwarting Scott's attempts to cross off names.

The public screenings were also overwhelmingly successful, despite the bone-rattling volume of some of the fights making it hard to monitor laughs. It all proved too much, however, for a few. "We've had ones where the audiences were whooping, screaming and clapping all the way through, but they haven't all gone like that," says Park. "A while back, in Las Vegas, when the crowd knew absolutely nothing about the film, a whole row got up and left during the first fight. It was that moment where (*Evil Ex #1*) Matthew Patel (*Satya Bhabha*) breaks into song. Apparently that happened again recently in Arizona. But you're going to get that. I love that about the film, that it's one thing and then another and then another. You just hope that because it's so original and unlike anything else, people will fall in love with it. But you just don't know."



All concerned must be feeling at least a few jitters, given the disappointing box office of Kick-Ass, Universal's other comic-book adaptation that dared to be different. With its vast array of characters, largely unknown cast and busy plot, this is not the easiest of sells. So can Scott Pilgrim take on the world... and win?

"I'm really pleased with the reaction so far; hopefully it represents something different and fresh for people," says Wright, putting down his fork and preparing to zip to another meeting. "Shaun and Hot Fuzz were like valentines to their respective genres, but this is a different beast. Essentially, it's a romantic comedy with a big and crazy twist. All the fantasy and action, it's serving one central idea: how hard would you fight for someone?"

An old-fashioned love story, then, with bonus sonic Yeti?

We'll raise an Edgar Wrightini to that. nick@empiremagazine.com

Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World is out on August 25 and will be reviewed in the next issue.