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## 'Guardians': Raccoons And Space Opera

BY GINA MCINTYRE

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BURBANK, Calif. — About midway through Marvel's new interstellar adventure "Guardians of the Galaxy," David Bowie's "Moonage Daydream" plays over a shot of a ramshackle spaceship traveling toward a mining colony called Knowhere. The planet is actually the severed head of a fallen titan (or deity) where workers of alien races, some with candy-colored skin, collect valuable bones and fluids to ship to the outer reaches of the cosmos.

The sequence could have been cribbed from the imagination of surrealist trickster Alejandro Jodorowsky, perhaps as part of his unrealized cinematic adaptation of Frank Herbert's sci-fi novel "Dune." Yet it's far from the only over-thetop landscape in the film, which arrives in theaters Friday as Marvel's riskiest venture.

Based on a fairly obscure comics series, "Guardians of the Galaxy" is the first major studio film to be directed by James Gunn, a subversive stalwart who cut his movie teeth at New York's low-fi cinema factory Troma Entertainment. It introduces audiences to a new team of heroes led by Chris Pratt's sarcastic Peter Quill, also known as Star-Lord; the group includes a green alien assassin, a hulking tattooed warrior and two wholly CG characters: a machinegun wielding raccoon and a sentient tree.

There's also a soundtrack littered with 1970s favorites and a Walkman, a device that will surely be unknown to many younger viewers, plays an integral part in the storyline.

"I can't believe they let me do all this stuff," Gunn said in mid-July on Disney's Burbank lot. "It's really sinking in for the first time. For the past two years, all I've been doing is driving forward, making this movie. Now I'm done and I'm standing outside of it, and I'm going, 'How did you guys let me get away with all that?"

From its inception, "Guardians" was designed to be something different from the other comic book blockbusters Marvel has produced since 2008's "Iron Man," most of which take place on Earth and feature recognizably human characters.

The \$170-million movie is the studio's 10th release but the first wholly "cosmic" adventure — bringing to the screen a corner of the Marvel universe that has long been fertile creative ground for comic-book writers and artists but had been only briefly referenced in earlier hits, including "The Avengers."



MARVEL/MCT

Marvel's "Guardians Of The Galaxy" are, from left, Chris Pratt as Star-Lord/Peter Quill, Vin Diesel as Groot, Bradley Cooper as the voice of Rocket Raccoon, Dave Bautista as Drax the Destroyer, and Zoe Saldana as Gamora.

The story, rooted in a 2008 series written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, follows scofflaw Quill, who finds himself hunted by an aristocratic outer-space bad guy named Ronan the Accuser (Lee Pace) after he comes into possession of a mysterious orb. Before long, he befriends misfits that include Zoe Saldana's assassin Gamora, Dave Bautista's Drax the Destroyer, along with raccoon Rocket and his pal Groot, voiced in the movie by Bradley Cooper and Vin Diesel, respectively, who ultimately join forces to stop Ronan from launching a genocidal attack.

In shaping the film, Gunn said he took inspiration from science-fiction classics including "Alien" and "Blade Runner," but with its soaring action set pieces, outre environments and inventive creature design, "Guardians" seems far closer to an updated riff on "Star Wars," albeit one with a decidedly bratty sense of humor and a sweetly retro spirit.

"All of us at Marvel wanted to do a big space movie for a long time — we grew up on those kinds of movies," said Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige, who closely oversees each of the projects in the company's stable.

"All of the soul of the movie is 100 percent James," Feige said. "It very much is a James Gunn film and a James Gunn vision. ... He's got a great voice, he's got great ideas."

It's not on a distant planet but

on Earth that "Guardians" begins, depicting an important childhood moment that sets young Peter on the path toward interplanetary adventure. Gunn's own cosmic journey dates to his youth in Manchester, Mo., where as the oldest in a family of six children he often escaped into a world of imagination captured in the drawings of John Byrne and John Romita Sr. and Steve Ditko.

"I had a lot of emotional problems as a kid, so I just didn't fit in when I was young and I would stay home from school all the time," said Gunn, 43, earlier this summer, when he was editing "Guardians." "My parents sent me to a psychiatrist ... and I think the psychiatrist said to my dad, 'You need to form more of a bond with your son."

more of a bond with your son."

That led to a visit to a comic-book convention in Chicago, which Gunn said "is probably still to this day the greatest two days of my life." Soon after, Gunn's father bought him an extensive collection of comics that another teenager enthusiast was selling for \$8,000 or

'It was everything. It was every single 'Fantastic Four,' No. 9 on, every single 'Amazing Spider-Man' from No. 4 on, every 'Tomb of Dracula,' every 'Avengers' from 2 on," Gunn said. "I think it was meant to bring me back into the world, but it didn't really work because I just stayed home more and just read

comic books for a year." He also developed an interest in making home movies, starring his brothers, which eventually led to Gunn moving to New York to study creative writing at Columbia. It was during that time he began working for Troma, penning the script for the raunchy Shakespearean send-up "Tromeo and Juliet." (He also wrote a cult novel titled "The Toy Collector," about a hospital orderly named James Gunn who steals drugs to buy collectibles.)

drugs to buy collectibles.)

His screenwriting career began to gain traction with films including two "Scooby-Doo" movies and Zack Snyder's remake of George Romero's zombie classic "Dawn of the Dead." His first feature as a writer-director was the 2006 horror comedy "Slither," which he followed with the boundary-pushing black comedy "Super," featuring Rainn Wilson as a disturbed man who creates his own superhero persona, the Crimson Bolt.

Despite his affection for comic heroes, Gunn said he was initially reluctant to take on "Guardians," fearing that Marvel would be in the market for a film without the rough edges and sharp corners he prefers. But after meeting with executives, he was surprised by the attachment he felt to a saga centered on outsiders.

"The whole thing hit me, and I felt like not only was it the movie that I wanted to do and have wanted to do my entire life but it was a movie that I felt — and this is the arrogant part — needed me, otherwise it could become a trav-

esty," he said. "I didn't feel that there was anybody who loves Marvel Comics and raccoons and space operas as much as I do."

When he sat down to revise the film's script, co-credited to Nicole Perlman, Rocket's presence presented a central challenge.

"To be able to take a character like that and say, 'If there was a talking raccoon, how could he exist?,' it led me to a pretty sad place," he said. "In this movie, he's a lower life form that was experimented on and turned into something much different than what he was supposed to be. ... I felt like by grounding him as much as possible that extended outward to all the other characters."

Gunn was initially resistant to casting Pratt, widely known for playing disheveled underachievers such as Andy Dwyer on NBC's comedy "Parks and Recreation," but was eventually won over by his facility with comedy and his easy charm.

The role required Pratt to spend six months reshaping his physique, and he would work out for hours in his home gym while listening to the songs from the film — one of the few connections Quill has to his past is a mix tape his mother made for him as a boy that includes Blue Swede's "Hooked on a Feeling" and Redbone's "Come and Get Your Love." (Gunn chose the songs.)

Pratt credits Gunn with helping him strike the right balance between comedy and drama on the British set of the film last year. "When it came to the little beats that define the characters, like Peter Quill caring so much about this mix tape and thinking he owns these songs, that was trusting that it would work," Pratt said. "James walked me through that and kind of held my hand in some of those moments because it didn't all come easy."

Despite its oddball trappings, "Guardians" now appears likely to become the first film in a new franchise. Feige confirmed that Gunn would direct a sequel should Marvel plan to move forward with one, and Gunn said he's already begun thinking about further adventures for the team.

He believes the film succeeds largely because lurking beneath its action movie trappings is a heartfelt sincerity.

"In today's world, it's very cool to not care," Gunn said. "This is about a bunch of characters who do not care and over the course of the movie they find themselves backed into a corner where they discover who they really are — creatures and people who care."