



Episode 91 – Billy Jack (movie profile) | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Hey there everybody, were back for another episode of whistlekick martial arts radio and this time it's episode 91, closing in on a hundred. And today were to talk about that classic martial arts movie Billy Jack. I'm the founder here whistlekick but I'm better known as your host Jeremy Lesniak. whistlekick, if you didn't know, makes the world's best sparring gear and excellent apparel and accessories for practitioners and fans of traditional martial arts. I'd like to welcome our new listeners and thank all of you that are listening again. If you're not familiar with our products you can learn more or by over at whistlekick.com all of our past podcast episodes, show notes, and a lot more on a different site and that's whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. Now, from either site you can sign up for newsletter and you really should because we offer exclusive contents to subscribers and it's the only place to find out about upcoming guests for the show.

So let's talk about the movie Billy Jack. The films come up a lot on the show we've had guests mention it as their favorite or one of their favorite martial arts films and it really has an interesting place in the martial arts film landscape because at the time it was filmed, and we're gonna talk about a lot of these details as we go through today, there wasn't anything like it. It wasn't someone from China or from Japan starring in the movie doing martial arts and if we look at the movies through the 70s that's really all we had. That's where Bruce Lee came in to popularity, there was some credibility there. Because in America, people saw the martial arts as being in Asian pursuit and so to have someone even on the forefront of that time period who was not Asian starring in a movie like this was pretty interesting, pretty unique, and I think that that may be part of why this film holds such a place for so many people not only because it was early but because it was so different in the way it was presented.

So the movie was released in 1971 but it was actually a sequel and a lot of people don't know that. The original movie in the series there are four movies in the Billy Jack series, the first one being the born losers from 1968 which really doesn't have any martial arts it's about the same character Billy Jack taking on a motorcycle gang that was modeled after the Hells Angels. And he did that because he was trying to get the Billy Jack screenplay produced but people were interested in at the time. And so motorcycle gang violence was really popular in culture at that time so he made the born losers and took the money from that to get the screenplay and the influence that he needed for getting Billy Jack done. There is even talk of a TV series for Billy Jack but of course that never happened and there were some other Billy Jack films that we'll talk about as we get further in the never came out, strange titles, strange plots. And the common theme through all of them was of course Tom Laughlin who was a star and the writer, cowriter of all of these films and he has some pretty strong political views and antiwar sentiments and of course you can see those themes in Billy Jack and throughout the movies the idea of someone using violence to achieve peace and of course, you know that's a bit of a contradiction and that was a contradiction that the critics saw as well and some of them did not respond to that contradiction. Now part of the reason that Laughlin wanted to get Billy Jack produced and part of the reason that he had such trouble back in 1954 when he started that process, was at that the focal point of the movie was around the way Native Americans were being treated during the civil rights movement and it was exposing something that some people didn't really want to have out there and you know it



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was not a good thing that was happening to be not articulate, the studios were just generally scared of the theme. Now his wife, Tom Laughlin's wife grew up on a reservation and a lot of his dedication to that cause of exposing that and preventing the violence or trying to have a hand in stopping that was because of the stories that she told him, the things that she saw while she was there and really became a mission for him.

Filming on the movie started in 1969 it was shot in California, Arizona and New Mexico but there were three different production houses that got involved with the financing in the distribution and it just became a mess. It wasn't released until 1971 and when it was it was only a test run. They didn't have in a ton of theaters it didn't build any momentum and by their definition it flopped abroad in \$6 million and that was enough to get a full national release solely pull the movie. Tom Laughlin felt really strongly about the movie he thought it would do very well with a big release and so he sued the studio and put in the money basically that he had received from the first piece got the distribution rights back and oversaw a national release on his own and of course it was incredibly successful at that point in 1973 and it earned over \$60 million at that time. The total box office take at least according to IMDB now is almost \$100 million. If we take that 60 million we adjusted for inflation, its actually the 53rd highest grossing film of all time and even unadjusted at \$60 million it beats out some films that we think of as being martial arts box office successes here, the forbidden kingdom, and plenty of others. Of course you know you can make an argument that it's not a martial arts film, I think it is. A lot of people they mention on the show of course think it is because it is you know it presents martial arts as a focal point to the story but if you look at a lot of lists of martial arts films are not gonna see Billy Jack on there.

The character Billy Jack is a veteran half Navajo who learned hapkido during his time in Vietnam of course played by Tom Laughlin who did have some martial arts experience and he had a pretty solid film and movie career and he was acting for more than 30 years. His final film the return of Billy Jack which would've been the fifth in the series was never finished because he suffered a head injury during filming and that movie had kind of an interesting plot still with Billy Jack in the center trying to save people. He would've been 55 during filming but it was about Billy Jack going to New York and taking on a ring of child pornographers. There's a little bit of footage circulating on the Internet but nothing in full for people and it looks like plenty people have tried to get the footage for that film released but it hasn't happened. Unfortunately Laughlin died of pneumonia in 2013 he was 82 and he had actually run for president three different times in 1992, 2004 and 2008 and he'd run as both Republican and Democrat. Now the female lead in Billy Jack display by Tom Laughlin's wife Dolores, she played Jean and she was actually really reluctant to get on screen but she did it because the original actress quit and she must've done a really good job or we know she did a good job but even in at least some critics eyes because Marlon Brando while watching movie stood up in a crowded theater after the scene where Jean told Cindy about Bernard attacking her and he said this is a quote, this performance is the yardstick by which all actors should judge themselves. Of course Marlon Brando being a rather accomplished actor in his own right so that's quite the compliment. Brandon wasn't the only celebrity that love the film, Elvis watched it nine different times. When we think about iconic scenes from the movie the one that comes



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to my mind and a lot of people is a scene where Billy Jack kicks the sheriff in the head and he says the really famous line I'm going to take this right foot, and I'm going to wop you on that side of your face. Now while Tom Laughlin had a great deal martial arts training and that was really important to him he wanted to make sure that the character Billy Jack was authentic if he was going to portray martial arts he wanted to do it right, that he didn't have the skill to actually pull off that kick without injuring the actor so they run somebody else Laughlin's hapkido instructor Master Bong-Soo Han who, if you don't know that name is often referred to as the father of hapkido here in America and were going to put a link to him in the show notes because he is actually quite an iconic person in the history of Korean martial arts.

I said before that unfinished for film the return of Billy Jack as Tom Laughlin tried to get funding for Trying for about a decade through the 90s, to try and get that film produced he kept renaming it and some of these names got kinda silly so we'll go through them. So of course to start it off, the return of Billy Jack but then it became Billy Jack's crusade to end the war in Iraq and restore America to its moral purpose and after that it was Billy Jack's moral revolution: Billy Jack for president, that's 1 title and then finally Billy Jack and Jean. Now according to Laughlin he intended the picture to be new genre of film that's a quote and he really wanted to focus on social commentary bringing in politics, religion, psychology and the movie was going to culminate in a debate between Billy Jack and then-President George W. Bush and no they weren't and bring present on as an actor, they were gonna do all that through computer manipulation of speeches that had been in video. In 2009 Laughlin released some scenes and plot details of the film on his website and despite a significant amount of effort I cannot find that footage. If anyone out there has it, please let us know really want to link that sounds great.

So do you think the movie if you haven't seen it you've got to go see it. You've gotta get it it's available there are online places to rent it and stream it. It's a tremendous movie and if I'm to be really blunt if you consider yourself a martial artist this is one of a handful of films that you've just got to see. Yeah it's kind of hokey especially by today's standards, but it's hokey in a really different way from other martial arts films. There's an actual plot here, it is and always delivered well, the acting isn't always great but rather than there being no attempt at making a cohesive movie and just kinda having some fight scenes strung together with some poor dubbing over it which was typical of the martial arts films the time this was an attempt to and I would say is really the first American martial arts film. So check it out and let us know what you think, what's your opinion on the movie? How many times have you seen it? Are you a fan are you an anti-fan. Whatever your thoughts get to us on social media, we're on Facebook Twitter Pinterest and Instagram always with the username whistlekick or you can leave a comment on the website whistlekickmartialartsradio.com or you can leave us coming on YouTube. Now if there's someone you really think should hear this episode may be a fan of the movie or somebody that you think really needs to check out please go ahead share it with them, you guys have been doing a great job helping us out spreading the show and were growing that's because of you and really, really appreciate it. Now if you want to be a guest on the show or maybe you have an idea for a Thursday show topic, go ahead reach out to us, fill up the form of the website, email us info@whistlekick.com, whatever works



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