

**J**ason Statham still has the gift of the gab. He proves it by pretending to sell me a fake Cartier watch – his day job before becoming an action-hero movie star. Holding up an imaginary piece of jewellery, he banters effortlessly. ‘Ave you heard of Cartier, madam?’ he says in his sandpapery voice, the kind you have to strain to hear. ‘That’s how I’d go, and that would insinuate I’m holding a Cartier watch. But we’re not saying it is one, we’re just asking if you’ve heard of a Cartier watch.’

Seven years ago, the 33-year-old flogged dodgy jewellery out of a suitcase on the West End streets while honing his acting skills. Today he is in Hollywood, but he’s not overly impressed with the place.

‘I used to be a conman and this whole town is built on cons and promises,’ he offers in his gritty, south London accent. ‘You know, I’m never going to be duped by these people.’

It was in 1998 that the Sydenham lad first came to national attention in director Guy Ritchie’s gangster hit *Lock, Stock And Two Smoking Barrels*. He resurfaced as tough-talking illegal fight arranger Turkish, opposite Brad Pitt, in Ritchie’s follow-up, *Snatch*. It wasn’t long before Hollywood came calling, luring Statham, along with his then girlfriend, glamour model Kelly Brook, to Los Angeles to try his luck.

There was a period when Statham was better known for being Brook’s boyfriend than an actor. All that’s changed, though – not least because last September Brook finished their six-year romance following a whirlwind affair with actor Billy Zane, now her fiancé. She met Zane in the Bahamas on the set of a thriller ironically titled *Three*.

It’s a scorching hot day in Beverly Hills when I meet Statham to talk about his latest white-knuckle action flick, *Transporter 2*, in which he reprises his role as mercenary hero Frank Martin. The film raked in a cool \$42 million (£24 million) and soared to number one at the US box office on its opening weekend last month. I find Statham sprawled on a charcoal leather sofa in his swanky Four Seasons Hotel suite, as if he were at home. Casually decked out in a chocolate brown linen shirt, faded denims and tan leather sandals, he’s in high spirits.

Described as a mean combo of Bruce Lee grace and Steve McQueen attitude, Statham’s on-screen persona is that of a rough-edged tough guy with balletic charm. He may not possess quintessential matinee idol looks – his nose looks as if it’s been broken a few times and the hairline is receding – but he’s undoubtedly sexy. He’s more loveable rogue than bad boy. The kind who would punch the lights out of a guy who makes a pass at his girlfriend.

‘If people want to put me in the same sentence as Steve McQueen, they must have had too many vodkas – he’s as cool as you can ever get,’ he says, a smile creeping across his face.

So, he doesn’t consider himself cool then? ▶



# PLAYING IT



# COOL

Seven years ago Jason Statham was a South London con artist flogging fake watches. Now he's the star of Hollywood's biggest blockbuster. He tells Tiffany Rose about his brash new LA high life, what Madonna's really like – and why Guy Ritchie owes him money



Shaking his head, Statham guffaws. 'I'm a bit more sssy, aren't I? I'm not cool. It's the character on the screen that makes people think I'm cool.'

He balks at reports that he recently bought a £1.5 million Hollywood Hills mansion, with glass walls, a swimming pool and enough chrome to require sunscreens at all times.

Due to a roar of laughter. 'A mansion it's not. It's a very humble abode. It's a f\*\*\*in' bungalow. It's on one level floor!'

However many square feet he may or may not possess, Statham fully appreciates he's living the life of a millionaire. 'I'm out here in California, I'm making money and I'm having fun,' he says. 'I'm doing what I love. I've got cool friends who come and see me and I go back home to London whenever I want. It doesn't get better than that, does it?'

He still can't fathom his own good fortune, though. 'I'm a big believer in fate,' he says. 'And it's a lot to do with being in the right place at the right time.' So, what should he be doing had fame not dealt him a hand? 'I don't know,' he frowns. 'Probably getting up to no good.'

Reaching across the antique oak coffee table for a can of Coke, he points out: 'Look, I'm still the same old me. Let's not get it out of perspective - I mean it's not like I'm bleedin' Tom Cruise and have to wear a disguise to go out in public. There's a small admiration that goes around for my films, but it's not huge.'

He credits his London friends' taunting for keeping his ego under control. 'Tease me? Of course, they're mercenary!' he snorts. 'On a daily basis they say, "How do you get a job?" But that's the British sense of humour. If you have any success they want to pull you apart, but I love them. I'd rather have someone take a p\*\*\* than pat me on the back, because there are enough back-patters out here.'

As a member of Hollywood's 'Brit Pack', Jason Statham hangs out with Guy Ritchie and Vinnie Jones and Jason Flemyng (who plays a Russian scientist in *Transporter 2*) among his all-time good mates.

Vinnie is in town to do *X-Men 3*. We sat around the pool here yesterday, cracking jokes as usual. He's not angry. Jay [Flemyng] is coming over to stay with me next weekend, so yeah, I see them all,' he says.

My favourite scenes in *Transporter 2* are chasing my buddy, Jay. You try chasing your friend seriously. He's the funniest guy on the planet! He cracks up.

I ask whether Brad Pitt, who played Irish gipsy Mickey O'Neill in *Snatch*, gave him any pointers on preparing for the big league.

'Nah, we never spoke about stuff like that,' he ruffs. 'We were more interested in playing games of cards. Lads talk about silly things. I'm not going to say anything like, "How should I prepare myself, in case I become as famous as you, Brad?"'

In between sips of Coke, he recalls meeting Ritchie's wife for the first time. 'I didn't go, "Oh no, what am I going to say to Madonna?"' he booms. 'But you know when she's in the room. She has an amazing presence. She's a lovely, warm human being, but it's not like she's singing a song every five minutes when you meet her. She's just normal, like the rest of us.'

Having worked with Ritchie on three collaborations, including the recent *Revolver*, Statham considers him one of his closest pals. 'He's a big martial arts fan and we go strangling one another,' he grins.

'I played more chess with Guy on that set than I've ever played in my life. He owes me a lot of money, cause he lost so many bleedin' times. And I need it more than he does!'

Statham suddenly becomes remarkably tight-lipped,



though, when the subject turns to Brook, whom he met in a bar on the Greek island of Santorini in 1998.

'I won't speak about it. It's private,' he states with a slight trace of irritation. 'If she wants to speak about it, then that's her business, but I've never been one to throw any light on how it happened, why it happened or how it's left me.'

He won't even say if he's still in touch with her. 'I'm absolutely fine,' he says cheerily. 'It's over a year ago. It's old news now. You take it on the chin and you move on.'

Despite most of his friends settling into family life, Jason says he's still not sure if he wants to have a family of his own one day.

'I don't have a little perfect image of what the goal of life is. I'm very happy at the moment, whether I'm single or not,' he muses. 'I'm ping-ponging around the world, so I would think a marriage with kids and stuff.'

Jason Statham in Los Angeles (above) and on the red carpet with former girlfriend Kelly Brook (right)



**'If Kelly wants to talk about us, that's her business. I've taken it on the chin and moved on. I wouldn't have been able to sustain a marriage with kids anyway'**

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would be difficult to sustain.' In the same breath, he adds, 'But who knows what's around the corner?'

When it comes to the women in his life, he admits he's having fun and claims there isn't anyone special. However, he does have a good giggle reading that he's been dating Pamela Anderson and Denise Van Outen.

'I've never even said hello to Pam,' he says. 'The closest I got to her was being in the same room at a *Vanity Fair* party one year when she was having a jolly good time drinking with Liz Hurley. And then I hear about me and Denise at some Indian restaurant in southeast London. It must be my double! He's not getting any work doing the stunts for me, so he must be getting a bit of work filling in with the ladies.'

Statham was born into a somewhat showbizzy family. His father, Barry, is a cabaret singer who performs Tom Jones and Frank Sinatra hits at a hotel piano bar in the Canary Islands, while his mother, Eileen, a former dancer, puts on the backing tapes.

'He sings for old grannies and they throw their underwear at him,' he jokes. His older brother Lee, 47, still works in the markets.

At 15, Statham left school to sell cheap jewellery on the streets while training as a high-board diver. He went on to represent England in the Commonwealth Games and came 12th in the 1992 world championships. He dabbled in modelling with his mates; he had a small turn in Tom Cruise's *Collateral* and in the thriller *Cellular*, starring Kim Basinger. And then came the lead in *The Transporter*, which established him as an action star. Other projects now in the offing include a supporting role in the re-make of *The Pink Panther*, with Steve Martin and Beyoncé Knowles, and shooting *The Brazilian Job* early next year.

Statham's acting training has been predominantly in front of the camera. He was Handsome Rob in the remake of *The Italian Job* (a name, he groans, which made him an object of ridicule with his mates); he had a small turn in Tom Cruise's *Collateral* and in the thriller *Cellular*, starring Kim Basinger. And then came the lead in *The Transporter*, which established him as an action star. Other projects now in the offing include a supporting role in the re-make of *The Pink Panther*, with Steve Martin and Beyoncé Knowles, and shooting *The Brazilian Job* early next year.

'I'm too busy acting to take any classes,' he says. 'Right now, I'm learning how not to do it.'

Statham performs most of his own stunts in *Transporter 2*. The part of Frank Martin was originally created for him by French action auteur Luc Besson. Directed by Louis Leterrier, the new film copies the formula that worked the first time around. Martin is hired to drive a powerful politician's son to and from school. The boy's mother, played by former supermodel Amber Valletta, is separated from her husband (Matthew Modine). Cue evil villain, in this case, Jean-Claude Van Damme look-alike Alessandro Gassman, who kidnaps the child and infects him with a deadly virus that he will pass on to others.

Statham eschewed the use of a stuntman even for the film's most intense action scenes, including a jet-ski-to-bus jump which he admits was 'maybe a little too stupid'.

'I had to jump a ramp with a girl on the back and my adrenaline was really pumping,' he explains, impersonating the noise of jet-ski while sounding more like a six-year-old boy.

'Once you put your foot on the accelerator, there's no brake, which means that there's no turning back. So you're in front of the ramp, you've hit speed and you can't bail out. It's a one take deal. She's hanging on for dear life and you think to yourself, "S\*\*\*, it's really happening."

It seems like an appropriate metaphor for the meteoric rise of the geezer from south London. ■ *Transporter 2* opens in the UK on November 25.

## → JASON'S STAR TURNS



Jason Statham set out on the road to Hollywood when he starred in (from the top) Guy Ritchie's 1998 gangster film *Lock, Stock And Two Smoking Barrels* (he is second left). Ritchie then cast him in 2000's *Snatch*, pictured with Brad Pitt. In 2003 Statham was in *The Transporter*, with Shu Qi, and the remake of *The Italian Job* with Charlize Theron. This year he was seen in Guy Ritchie's crime caper *Revolver*.

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