

= Mystery Train (film) =

Mystery Train is a 1989 independent anthology film written and directed by Jim Jarmusch and set in Memphis , Tennessee . The film comprises a triptych of stories involving foreign protagonists unfolding over the course of the same night . " Far From Yokohama " features a Japanese couple (played by Youki Kudoh and Masatoshi Nagase) on a blues pilgrimage , " A Ghost " focuses on an Italian widow (Nicoletta Braschi) stranded in the city overnight , and " Lost in Space " follows the misadventure of a newly single and unemployed Englishman (Joe Strummer) and his companions (Rick Aviles and Steve Buscemi) . They are linked by a run @-@ down flophouse overseen by a night clerk (played by Screamin ' Jay Hawkins) and his dishevelled bellboy (Cinqué Lee) , a scene featuring Elvis Presley 's " Blue Moon " , and a gunshot .

The starting point for the script was the ensemble cast of friends and previous collaborators Jarmusch had conceived characters for , while the tripartite formal structure of the film was inspired by his study of literary forms . Cinematographer Robby Müller and musician John Lurie were among the many contributors who had been involved in earlier Jarmusch projects and returned to work on the film . Mystery Train 's US \$ 2 @. @ 8 million budget (financed by Japanese conglomerate JVC) was considerable compared to what the director had enjoyed before , and allowed him the freedom to rehearse many unscripted background scenes . It was the first of Jarmusch 's feature films to depart from his trademark black @-@ and @-@ white photography , though the use of color was tightly controlled to conform with the director 's intuitive sense of the film 's aesthetic .

Mystery Train was released theatrically by Orion Classics under a restricted rating in the United States , where it grossed over \$ 1 @. @ 5 million . It enjoyed critical acclaim on the film festival circuit , and like the director 's earlier films premiered at the New York Film Festival and was shown in competition at Cannes , where Jarmusch was awarded the Best Artistic Achievement Award . The film was also shown in the Edinburgh , London , Midnight Sun , Telluride , and Toronto film festivals , and was nominated in six categories at the Independent Spirit Awards . Critical reaction was overwhelmingly positive , with reviewers praising the structure , humor , and characters of the film , though there were discontented rumblings that the director had not been sufficiently adventurous .

= = Plot = =

The film consists of three stories that take place on the same night in downtown Memphis . The three stories are linked together by the Arcade Hotel , a run @-@ down flophouse presided over by the night clerk (Screamin ' Jay Hawkins) and bellboy (Cinqué Lee) , where the principal characters in each story spend a part of the night . Every room in the hotel is adorned with a portrait of Elvis Presley .

The first story , " Far From Yokohama " , features Mitsuko (Youki Kudoh) and Jun (Masatoshi Nagase) , a teenage couple from Yokohama making a pilgrimage to Memphis during a trip across America . Mitsuko is obsessed with Elvis to the point where she believes that there is a mystical connection between Elvis , Madonna and the Statue of Liberty . The film follows the couple as they travel from the train station , through downtown Memphis and an exhausting tour of Sun Records , to the Arcade hotel .

The second story , " A Ghost " , is about an Italian widow , Luisa (Nicoletta Braschi) , who is stranded in Memphis while escorting her husband 's coffin back to Italy . Luisa , who has been conned twice and stuck with armfuls of magazines , is forced to share a room at the hotel with Dee Dee (Elizabeth Bracco) , a young woman who has just left her boyfriend (Johnny from the final story) and who plans to leave the city in the morning . Luisa is kept awake by Dee Dee 's constant talking , and when the young woman finally does go to sleep , she is visited by an apparition of Memphis ' most famous icon ? Elvis Presley .

The final story , " Lost in Space " , introduces Johnny (Joe Strummer) . Upset after losing his job and his girlfriend (Dee Dee) , Johnny ? known , much to his chagrin , as Elvis ? drunkenly brandishes a gun in a bar before leaving with his friend Will Robinson (Rick Aviles) and his ex @-@ girlfriend 's brother Charlie (Steve Buscemi) , who believes Johnny to be his brother @-@ in

@-@ law . They stop at a liquor store , which Johnny robs using the gun and severely wounds the owner in the process . Fearing the consequences of the incident , Johnny , Will and Charlie retire to the hotel to hide out for the night ; there , Johnny gets further drunk . Charlie realizes that Will shares the same name as the character Will Robinson from the television show Lost in Space , which Johnny has never heard of . Charlie and Will proceed to tell him about the show , and Will comments that that is how he feels then with Charlie and Johnny : lost in space . The next morning , Charlie discovers that Johnny isn 't really his brother @-@ in @-@ law , which angers him because of what they 've been through . Johnny attempts to shoot himself , and while struggling to prevent him , Charlie is shot in the leg . Leaving the hotel , the three rush to escape a police car that isn 't even looking for them . The closing credits show the train , the airport and the final views of the characters from the first two stories .

= = Cast = =

= = = " Far From Yokohama " = = =

= = = " A Ghost " = = =

= = = " Lost in Space " = = =

= = Production = =

= = = Script and casting = = =

Jarmusch wrote the script for the film under the working title " One Night in Memphis " , without ever having been to the southern city . The idea for " Far From Yokohama " , the first segment , he took from a one @-@ act play he had been writing before filming Down by Law (1986) . The play ? unrelated to Elvis or Memphis ? concerned a constantly argumentative young couple , one of whom gradually comes to realize that their fighting is a unifying force in the relationship . The interconnected stories were inspired by Jarmusch 's dwelling on literary forms , and specifically the work of Chaucer , Italian episodic films and Japanese ghost story cinema . As with his other films , Jarmusch 's starting point for writing Mystery Train was the actors and characters he had foremost in mind . The great number of these collaborators contributed to it being " the most complicated film to write and execute " according to the director .

The role of Johnny was written by Jarmusch specifically for Joe Strummer , who had been the frontman of The Clash , the director 's favorite 1980s rock band . Jarmusch had conceived the part a few years previously while the two were together in Spain , and although the musician had been in a period of depression at the time following the collapse of the band , he was drawn by the Memphis setting of the film . Unlike the jovial Steve Buscemi , Strummer did not stay on set to joke with the veteran actors between shots , but instead preferred to keep his own company , focusing intensively on orienting himself to the role .

Jarmusch had met blues singer Screamin ' Jay Hawkins after featuring his music prominently in his breakthrough feature film debut Stranger Than Paradise (1984) . Although reticent about acting , Hawkins responded favorably to the director 's offer to appear . The part of Luisa was also written by the director with the star ? actress Nicoletta Braschi ? in mind ; the two had previously collaborated on Down by Law (1986) . Cinqué Lee is the younger brother of director Spike Lee , a longtime friend of Jarmusch from their days at New York University 's film school , while Youki Kudoh was cast after the director saw her performance in S?go Ishii 's The Crazy Family (1984) while

promoting *Down by Law* in Japan . Repeat Jarmusch collaborators who worked on the film included John Lurie who provided the original music , cinematographer Robby Müller , and singer Tom Waits , who in a voice appearance reprised his role of radio DJ Lee Baby Sims from *Down by Law* . Other cameos include Jarmusch 's long @-@ time girlfriend Sara Driver as an airport clerk , Rufus Thomas as the man in the train station who greets the Japanese couple , Rockets Redglare as the clerk of the liquor store , Vondie Curtis @-@ Hall as Ed , Sy Richardson as the news vendor , and Richard Boes and Tom Noonan as diner patrons .

= = = Filming = = =

Mystery Train was filmed in Memphis in the summer of 1988 . After arriving in the city during a snowstorm to scout for shooting locations , Jarmusch drove around without direction before coming to the intersection of a disused train station , the Arcade Luncheonette diner , and the dilapidated Arcade Hotel that would become the film 's core setting . He would later recount the experience in a March 1990 interview in *Spin* : " Man , ... this crossroad is filled with so many ghosts . You know Robert Johnson walked down that street , you know Muddy Waters was in that train station . " The locale of the intersection was one of the film 's primary formal elements ; the effect of Jarmusch returning to the setting with different characters under different circumstances was one of variations on a theme .

The film was shot in bright , primary colors rather than the black @-@ and @-@ white of the director 's previous features , but it retained his usual languid pacing . Jarmusch characterized the color choice as " intuitive " . He deliberately chose a cool color palette , eschewing yellows and oranges and using only sporadic dashes of red (as in the Japanese couple 's ubiquitous suitcase) . This motif of flashes of red was later described by Suzanne Scott of *Reverse Shot* as " giving the impression of a failed attempt to grab a bit of Elvis 's glamor and try it on for size , only to inevitably discover that it looks cartoonish out of context " . Stills from the film as well as on @-@ location shots of the actors and the film crew by photographer Masayoshi Sukita were published to accompany the film as the photo collection *Mystery Train : A Film by Jim Jarmusch* .

Mystery Train was the first American independent film to be financed by Japanese conglomerate JVC , and was produced on a budget ? \$ 2 @. @ 8 million ? that was considerable by Jarmusch 's modest standards . The company was enthusiastic about underwriting the film despite the director insisting on retaining full creative control , and went on to fund his next three features . The substantial budget and time available gave Jarmusch the opportunity to shoot in color and to rehearse with the actors many scenes not in the script , including several from the courtship of Mitsuko and Jun. At a Memphis nightclub with the Japanese actors during production , the director had Masatoshi Nagase ? who spoke little English but was an accomplished mimic ? try chat @-@ up lines on the female clientele as an acting exercise . Jarmusch took advantage of the production to make the second installment of his *Coffee and Cigarettes* series , a collection of short vignettes featuring acquaintances of the director sitting about drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes . The " Memphis Version " , titled *Twins* , starred bickering twins Cinqué and Joie Lee alongside Steve Buscemi as an obtuse waiter who expounds his theory of Elvis having an evil twin to a hostile reception .

= = Release = =

The film had its domestic premiere at the 27th New York Film Festival in 1989 , thereby emulating the director 's previous features *Stranger Than Paradise* in 1984 , and *Down by Law* in 1986 . The *Miami Herald* declared it the " quiet triumph " of the festival . The film was picked up for theatrical distribution by Orion Classics in the United States , where it was released under an R @-@ rating due to scenes featuring brief nudity and mild profanity . Its total domestic gross was \$ 1 @, @ 541 @, @ 218 , making it the 153rd highest @-@ grossing film of 1989 , and the 70th highest R @-@ rated film of the year . Internationally , it was first shown in competition at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival on May 13 and 14 , 1989 , and subsequently featured in the Edinburgh , London , Midnight

Sun , Telluride and Toronto film festivals .

Mystery Train was released on DVD on March 28 , 2000 with an aspect ratio of 1 .33 : 1 and Dolby Digital 5 .1 / 2 surround sound . The DVD release was criticized by Anna Lazowski of allmovie who awarded it two stars out of five compared to four for the film itself , citing the paltry special features of 24 scene selections and a collectible behind the scenes booklet . A Criterion Collection DVD and Blu ray were released on June 15 , 2010 , utilizing a new restored high definition digital transfer .

= = Critical reception = =

Like Jarmusch 's previous films , Mystery Train enjoyed a warm reception from critics . This was particularly evident at Cannes , where the film was nominated for the Palme d 'Or and Jarmusch was commended for the festival 's Best Artistic Achievement . It was nominated in six categories at the 1989 Independent Spirit Awards : Best Picture , Best Screenplay (Jim Jarmusch) , Best Director (Jim Jarmusch) , Best Cinematography (Robby Müller) , Best Actress (Youki Kudoh) , and Best Supporting Actor (Steve Buscemi and Screamin ' Jay Hawkins) .

Entertainment Weekly reviewer Ira Robbins gave the film a B + rating , complimenting it as " conceptually ambitious " and concluding that its " offbeat characters , fine cinematography , and novel structure make for entertaining viewing " . Robert Fulford of The National Post hailed it as " eccentric and deliriously funny " , while Rolling Stone 's Phil Whitman remarked that the director 's " bracing , original comedy may be mostly smoke and air , but it 's not insubstantial " . In The New York Times , Vincent Canby called it " thoroughly fascinating , a delight " and the director 's best effort to date , drawing note to its retention of the " same kind of dour , discordant charm " exhibited by Stranger Than Paradise . He praised Jarmusch 's development as a screenwriter ? citing the restrained dialogue , humor and subtlety of the narrative and the careful construction of the plot ? and the performances he elicited from the ensemble cast . John Hartl , in The Seattle Times , also drew a comparison with Stranger Than Paradise , judging Mystery Train to be the more accessible work while retaining the dry wit of its predecessor .

Hal Hinson of The Washington Post was unimpressed with the film , calling it Jarmusch 's " least engaging , and the first in which his bohemian posturing actually becomes an irritant " . Of the film 's characters , critic Jonathan Rosenbaum of the Chicago Reader wrote that some were " beautifully imagined and realized , while others seem drawn from a more familiar stockpile , designed for reuse rather than discovery " . David Denby , concluding a mixed review of the film for New York Magazine , mused that " one feels Jarmusch has pushed hipsterism and cool about as far as they can go , and that isn 't nearly far enough . " This reproach was echoed by other reviewers who found that the film 's style did not stray far from that of the director 's earlier work ? a critical backlash that would be amplified two years later following the release of Night On Earth (1991) .

Postmodern cultural critic bell hooks cited the interaction in the Memphis train station between Thomas and the Japanese couple as one of the few examples of nuanced , deconstructive and subversive treatment of blackness in American film . The Chicago Sun @-@ Times ' Roger Ebert proclaimed that " [t] he best thing about Mystery Train is that it takes you to an America you feel you ought to be able to find for yourself , if you only knew where to look . " In an April 2000 retrospective of Jarmusch 's work for Sight & Sound , Shawn Levy concluded that the film was " as much a valentine to the allure of the American way of pop culture as it is a cheeky bit of structural legerdemain without terribly much resonating significance " .