
The Blacklisting of Michael Parks: How a Hollywood Star Was Quietly Shunned

In 1970 Michael Parks was one of the most popular and idolised faces on American television. After years of appearing in minor roles, he finally hit the big time as the motorcycle riding protagonist of the hit TV series *Bronson*, which was seen by millions of viewers on a weekly basis. His appeal was widespread and his chiselled good looks made him a symbol of both masculinity and femininity, appealing to both male and female viewers.

However, for Parks, the immense popularity he gained during this time would disappear just as quickly as it came. After making some less than complementary comments about the Hollywood system and making moral judgements regarding the content of *Bronson*, he was quietly blacklisted by the major film studios and TV networks, hindering his career for several decades.



Hollywood's blacklisting of actors was no new occurrence; with the most infamous case being the 'Hollywood ten' incident of the 1950s in which ten film making personnel were persecuted by the United States congress for refusing to clarify their stance on communist ideology. However, a less publicised blacklisting happened to Park in the early 70s, and it would hinder his career for decades to follow.

The Hollywood system was not new to having their actors accept their place as performers, being little more than mouthpieces for the studio, just looking good for the cameras and generally shying away from views that might go against the views of middle America. But Parks is a man of an outspoken nature, and made no secret of his contempt for *Bronson's* producers deciding to make the character more aggressive, and to raise the levels of violence on the show. At this time, American homes were receiving nightly footage of the ongoing bloody and nationally divisive Vietnam War, and studio's felt they needed more aggressive protagonists' on television to reflect support for the increasingly unpopular war effort.

Once he made his view felt, both publically and privately, the wrath of Hollywood executives was, according to parks, quiet yet vitriolic. The actor quickly went from being one of the most sought after actors in the industry to not finding acting work for four years after Bronson's abrupt cancellation. Parks claimed: "If you don't play the game, you don't work". During the 70s and 80s, he could only muster sporadic appearances in independent films.

Hollywood's blacklist didn't stop Parks from being creative outside of the acting world though. He continued the singing career he began before

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for the 1976 Olympic Games in Canada, but to no avail.

Parks acknowledged how the only avenue for finding acting work during this time was with directors who worked outside the Hollywood sphere of influence. These were filmmakers that admired Parks' work and intentionally sought him out, like Earl Bellamy, who cast him in the low-key movie 'Sidewinder One' in 1977.

The 'New Hollywood' movement of the 70s that offered alternative views to the excessive cold war morals that were synonymous with previous filmmaking gave rise to new outspoken film making personnel whose views did not conform to the views of the past, such as Martin Scorsese and actor Jack Nicholson. Parks might have found a home in this film making style, but his reputation was damaged too early to have been established with this movement.

However, there is some concern regarding the veracity of the version of events that Parks tells. In a 1977 interview he made remarks that reveal a different side to the blacklisted performer views, admitting he could be a challenging performer when making movies: "sure I had a reputation for being difficult on the set [...] I have my own ideas of how a role should be played". Comments like this suggest there might have been a deeper reasoning behind the blacklist, as his tendency to question authority could be at least part of the dismissal he received.

Parks' finding work through director's that feel a personal admiration for him has been a great help to his returning to prominence. He slowly broke back into the mainstream with supporting roles, including a memorable role

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greatest living actor”.

Parks could have been one of the biggest names in movie and television. He

had the charm, talent and charisma to be a superstar, but he will forever be known and remembered as a cult figure instead. Now aged 73, he occasionally mentions his past. In a podcast to promote the 2011 movie *Red State* by Kevin Smith (another director who admires him), he didn’t express any regret or even show resentment for how his career has turned out. Even at the height of his blacklisting, Parks simply remarked, “I’m just paying the price for living by my own values”.

So was he just an actor ahead of his time? In today’s filmmaking world, a rebellious artist is usually admired and praised by Hollywood studios. There are probably hundreds of promising careers that were flattened by the steam roller of Hollywood values and rules, but Parks is a survivor and proof that you can stand up to the Hollywood beast and still have a strong career. His supporting roles in recent Oscar-winning films like *Argo* and *Django Unchained* has certainly proved this.

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