From the moment we hear the first strains of the Scott Walker-esque English version of the original DJANGO theme song, lifted wholesale from Sergio Corbucci’s cult 1966 oater, set to images of a battered chain gang of soul-broken slaves, we know we are in the hands of a master. And make no mistake, Quentin Tarantino is a master.

A master of quoting the familiar, and brazenly sculpting movies that are entirely maverick in spirit, using pulp-trash culture as an accessible vehicle to trot out original tales of human eccentricity. It has been his beat from the beginning, and with every film, Tarantino improves on that language, expanding his running times, mining history both real and reel and creating breathless art that functions just fine as commercial crowd-pleasers. Yes, a master. And yes, DJANGO UNCHAINED is a certifiable masterpiece.

But the question here is, is DJANGO UNCHAINED a horror film? Sometimes it is. The film

currently graces the cover of FANGORIA #319, for reasons that are deeper than just the wanton gore that saturates a good deal of the picture. The original DJANGO was arch and Gothic and, like the films of Sergio Leone, a violent sidebar to the European horror and fantasy films that were leaking out of Italy and elsewhere ad nauseam in the 1960s and ’70s. The scores were interchangeable (hello, Ennio Morricone and Bruno Nicolai!), the casts and directors flitted freely between genres and that violent, leering, yet romanticized and outrageously operatic aesthetic pounded its chest, be it in a saloon or a spook house.

And of course, Tarantino loves horror films and Westerns as much as he loves ever “low” genre, and all make their ways in and out of his works. DJANGO UNCHAINED is his fevered salute to the films of Corbucci and Sam Peckinpah, blaxploitation gems like SHAFT et al. and the myriad unofficial DJANGO sequels. Make no mistake, however: This film is definitively its own beast. And a beautiful, wooly, untamed one at that.

Back to that beginning, with the gaggle of tragic black slaves being dragged across the scorching South while jagged, blood-red, retro-Western fonts blast around the sweating, hirsute visage of our hero Django, played with steely, rage-wired cool by Jamie Foxx, an anchoring turn that is deceptively simple. Opening-credits sequences are a dying art, but Tarantino has done much in his career to keep that art alive. No quickie title-card blast here; coupled with that gloriously silly theme, DJANGO UNCHAINED’s titles drag you in, making you smile at the sheer energy of the overture.

When the film proper begins, a travelling dentist named Dr. King Schultz (INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS’ Christoph Waltz in a magnetic performance, and an apologetic inversion of that previous film’s thoroughly black-hearted Landa) charmingly liberates Django and his brethren from the degenerate masters. Schultz enlists Django to help him find the elusive Brittle Brothers, a troika of sibling slave traders who have high prices on their heads. Schultz is, in fact, a bounty hunter, and the rescued Django becomes his more-than-willing sidekick, happily exacting his own personal revenge against the endless landscape of sneering, white-skinned monsters and forging a partnership with his liberator to help him track his wife Broomhilda (the delicious Kerry Washington), who was tortured and torn from him and is now lost somewhere deep within the Southern plantation hell.

The duo’s moody, often violent and very often funny quest (how nice it is to see MIAMI VICE legend Don Johnson having a blast as a bumbling dandy master named Big Daddy; more Johnson on screen please, the man has always been a great presence) leads them to the stifling, repugnant lair of the preening Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio), where the duo masquerade as “Mandingo fighting” moguls looking for new stock. Without spoiling the

dynamite, serpentine second half of DJANGO UNCHAINED, let’s just say that DiCaprio is top-drawer as a reptilian man-child villain who may or may not be shagging his sister, and Samuel L. Jackson is electrifying as an evil Uncle Tom, whose shuck-and-jive shtick masks his true role as family puppetmaster, and there’s enough jaw-dropping splatter to fill 10 horror films.

Running almost three hours, DJANGO UNCHAINED never once feels strained, and if you take to its rollercoaster rhythm, you might—like this critic—be left wanting more. The devil is in Tarantino’s details, including his typically deft use of existing and, in this case, often fresh pop tunes to elicit emotion out of imagery that otherwise might not pack such punches. My favorite is the soul-lifting use of a gentle, rambling Jim Croce classic “I’ve Got a Name” over a winter riding montage lifted straight out of Corbucci’s THE GREAT SILENCE by way of Peckinpah’s PAT GARRETT AND BILLY THE KID and even Ang Lee’s BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN. Plus, Tarantino’s patented employment of vintage Ennio Morricone music adds melodramatic heft. And of course, at its core is that bouncy Tarantino dialogue, which is just music in itself anyway—swaggering exchanges that dance out of his actors’ mouths like abstract notes…like jazz.

The bottom line is that DJANGO UNCHAINED is f**king bad-ass, a thrilling epic of gonzo entertainment that aims to please all audiences, mainstream and fanboy alike, and succeeds better than any other film this year. Watching Django obliterate his enemies is indeed a wet, red blast, and it is a testament to Tarantino’s talent and virtuoso voodoo that underneath its crowd-pleasing beats, lurks a legitimate glimpse into the horrors of America’s past, and a stark reminder of just how vulgar a cocktail ignorance, wealth and power are when left, well, unchained.

I cannot wait to see this film again. And again. And…