

Daily Round Up

Spotlight: Why Billy Bob Thornton is “Excited Again” for FX’s Fargo & TV’s New Golden Age

📅 15 Apr 2014 By [Zorianna Kit](#)



There isn't much that Billy Bob Thornton has failed to achieve in Hollywood. He's worked on big-budget action films (*Armageddon*), cult indies (*Bad Santa*), and animated movies (*Puss in Boots*); He's recorded several albums and published a book. His 1996 indie, *Sling Blade*, which he wrote, produced, directed and starred in, won him a Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar.

Now the multi-tasking actor stars in the 10-part television series *Fargo* for cable network FX. The drama, which debuts Tuesday, is an adaptation of Joel and Ethan Coen's Academy Award-winning feature of the same name. It follows a new murder case with all new characters, featuring a cast that includes Thornton, Martin Freeman, Bob Odenkirk, Colin Hanks, Oliver Platt, Kate Walsh, Joey King, and Adam Goldberg.

Thornton, 58, spoke to SSN about his new role, why he decided to return to television, and how both the film and television industries have changed since he started working.

SSN: You haven't been on a television series since the CBS sitcom *Hearts Afire* in the early '90s. Were you looking to return to the medium?

Thornton: I was offered the part [in *Fargo*], read the script, and thought it was amazing. I wasn't opposed to doing television, I just wasn't actively pursuing [it].

SSN: What made you chose this project? Thornton: I wasn't dying to get on to a show that might last six or seven years, even though I know the immediate future of great dramatic stories for adults is in television. The [producers] said it's only 10 episodes and it's over, so I thought, 'perfect, why wouldn't I do this?' Having shot the whole thing now, it felt like doing a 10-hour independent film. I couldn't say enough about what a great creative experience it was.

SSN: The Coen Brothers are executive producers, even though they're not involved in the writing and development. You worked with them on *The Man Who Wasn't There* and *Bad Santa*. Did you speak to them about the show before coming on board?

Thornton: I knew the Coens gave it their blessing and that was enough. I talked to Ethan a month or two ago just to check in, but we didn't talk about the show much. I didn't want to open that up and say, 'what do you guys think?', because if they had anything to say about it that wasn't positive, it might have colored my thinking. But it turns out they're all for it.

SSN: How does the TV show compare to the feature film?

Thornton: It's totally different characters. If you loved the movie, imagine what might have happened in that area of the country, with those type of people, after the movie ended. (Writer) Noah Hawley stayed very true to the tone of the Coens, but it's a whole new animal.

SSN: How would you describe your character, Lorne Malvo, the mysterious stranger who happens to also be a cold blooded killer?

Thornton: He has no conscience but he is interested in people and their weaknesses. He's a loner, so his only human contact is with his victims. That's his social life, his recreation—screwing with these people. Most criminals want to get in, get the job done, and get out before they get caught. If he sees an ugly suit on a guy, he'll stand there for an extra 10 minutes and talk to the guy about how ugly that suit is.

I got a second wind a couple years ago and I feel like I'm starting all over again. All of a sudden I'm excited again and have as many dreams now as I did in 1981. – Billy Bob Thornton

SSN: Do you connect with him on any level, even just a basic one?

Thornton: He has a dark sense of humor and I have a dark sense of humor and that's what's fun about playing that character. I really didn't have to do much homework in terms of who he is because Malvo has no history with these people. You don't think of Malvo as having a backstory, you think of him more as a ghost who's been here since time began.

SSN: So now that you've shot the 10 episodes, your time is done?

Thornton: I think the idea is if they do another 10, they'll start with a new story. I still want to keep doing movies. I shot three films before *Fargo* and have a couple more coming out over the next year. But something like this 10-episode series, or like what Kevin Costner did with

Hatfields & McCoy's (a three part mini-series on the History Channel) appeals to me. The experience on *Fargo* even got me thinking that maybe I can write something for TV.



SSN: The way film and television have evolved, do you think if you tried making *Sling Blade* today, it would likely be a TV movie on a high-profile cable network instead of a feature film?

Thornton: I do. A lot of movies I've done would not make it these days to the screen; The kinds of movies I write are obsolete for movie theaters now. TV is doing what we used to do in movies in a certain area—bigger-budget independent films and medium-budget studio films that don't exist as much anymore. When I was coming up, if you were on TV, that meant things were over for you or you were just on your way up. Now it's like, 'how do I get on a great television series?'

SSN: How did you grow and change personally and career-wise since winning your Oscar? Studios are making fewer movies; social media is all the rage. How do you adapt?

Thornton: I went through a period where I was like, 'well I've done it all and maybe I'm not as on fire as I was and I don't have as many dreams.' Then I got a second wind a couple years ago and I feel like I'm starting all over again. All of a sudden I'm excited again and have as many dreams now as I did in 1981.

SSN: Why do you think you went through this period? Thornton: I was disillusioned of where the movie business was going and my role in it. You get older, new actors are coming in; I thought, 'maybe I'm obsolete.' Then there are people on blogs [who] slam everybody constantly, and [are] so nasty and awful to each other. That affected me for a minute, but then I thought, 'I never cared before, so why let people affect me that way?' I'm going keep doing what I do. I don't want to hide in a cave anymore. I'm not going let these people chase me inside.

SSN: Was there a project that really lit a fire under you and got you raring to go?

Thornton: Doing *Fargo* revitalized me. [I realized] there's a place to take quality stuff. If the movie business won't give me \$3 million to make a movie I want to make, and wants me to cast 10 stars so they can get their foreign value, I'll do it on television. I see alternatives and I see new avenues to realize my dreams.