

Franchise man

Vin Diesel is nothing like his macho alter ego Dom in the Fast & Furious franchise, writes Harold von Kursk. The real Diesel is a jovial, kind-hearted man who laughs easily and dotes on his children

There may be a disconnect between the man and actor, but Vin Diesel is not complaining. His volatile, grim-faced portrayal of Dominic Toretto has turned him into a Hollywood legend and propelled the Furious films to over \$6 billion in global box-office receipts. That figure includes the \$800 million raked in last summer by the latest installment, *F9*, which outperformed expectations despite the absence of former franchise co-star Dwayne Johnson and reduced theatre attendance due to the pandemic. The film’s success was further proof of how Diesel has carved out a niche as a massively popular action star known for his fierce screen persona, basso profundo voice, and heavily muscled physique. “I’m very proud that the fans still love the Fast Saga,” as Diesel puts it. “They embrace how the characters evolve... Dom’s (now) a father, and I think that’s part of what makes it special. Also, you’re able to watch the *Fast and Furious* movies from anywhere in the world, and feel as though you belong in Toretto’s backyard at that barbecue table.” The Furious films have stood the test of time after two decades. Diesel has also confirmed that *F10* is currently in development and expected to be released in 2023, followed by one more installment that will bring an end to Dom’s story arc.

“I love the fact that I get to play Dom Toretto again [but] every good story needs a finale [just like] every book you’ve read has a last chapter - that’s the nature of storytelling,” Diesel said. “I’m sure there are people who would love for Fast to continue on and on and on and on. And there’ll clearly be different iterations of stories and different story lines that are played out within the future. But in terms of this mythology, I think we owe it to the fans – even though I suspect it’ll feel bittersweet to a lot of people – to give them the finale.” The film that launched the franchise – *The Fast and the Furious* – was released in October, 2001 to little advance publicity. No one in the industry expected the unheralded action flick to do anything more than modest business. Instead, it turned out to be an instant blockbuster that captivated audiences with its high octane illegal street races and superbly choreographed carjacking scenes. But its underlying appeal lay in the combustible chemistry between Diesel’s sullen car thief and co-star Paul Walker’s earnest undercover FBI agent. “This whole franchise has been a [built] on brotherhood...,” Diesel explains. “I never imagined that behind everything that went into the making of the franchise there would be this deep bond between

Paul and I. The whole idea behind *Fast & Furious* is the idea that brotherhood can be created by bonding and not necessarily by blood. That was what Paul and I had – the brotherhood of bonds.” Walker would go on to appear in four more Furious films until his tragic death at the age of 40 in November 2013 after sustaining fatal injuries in a high speed auto crash in Los Angeles (a race car driver friend was at the wheel). Diesel and Walker had become close friends over the years and his passing left a deep scar on his heart. One of his fondest memories of their time together is a conversation they had while waiting at an airport gate in Mexico City in April, 2001. “The (first) movie hadn’t come out yet... Paul and I were sitting on the floor with our bags at our sides, and we were about to board a commercial flight back home. We had flown down there for *MTV Spring Break*,” he recalled. “I remember him leaning over to me and saying, ‘Take all of this in.’ I said, ‘What?’ He said, ‘Take

Right: **Vin Diesel in 2013 at the Hollywood premiere of *Fast & Furious 6* – the edition that featured Jason Statham**

in the fact that people are walking over our legs and almost kicking our bags, and not paying any attention to us.’ I said, ‘Why?’ He said, ‘After this film comes out, there will go our anonymity.’ “I think that was [revealing] of this journey we were about to go on. My memories aren’t just the ones you see on screen, because everything behind the scenes contributes to what you see in the films.” Despite the buzz that followed the release of the first Fast film, Diesel turned down a reported \$25 million to appear in the 2003 sequel, *2 Fast 2 Furious*, a sum that represented several times more than his entire previous career earnings combined. Why? It was a matter of principle to Diesel who felt that the script “wasn’t right” and he couldn’t in good conscience be part of it. That turned out to be the right decision because the sequel failed to match the original’s earnings while the third installment, Tokyo Drift, which saw Diesel make a small cameo appearance, was an outright flop. It was the end of the Fast Saga, or so it seemed. But then Vin decided to take matters into his own hands and resurrect the franchise according to his own vision of the story. ➤

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"It came to me: why don't I be the producer?" Diesel said

"Why don't I oversee the work and write and create what I want for this film...? I knew what made the concept work and I knew what we needed to do to recapture the kind of spirit that everyone loved about the original film."

He reached a deal with Universal Pictures that saw him produce and star in 2009's *Fast and the Furious 4*. He also persuaded original cast members Michelle Rodriguez, and Jordana Brewster to return for the reboot as well as Paul Walker.

"I didn't waste a second in calling Paul [Walker]," Diesel recalled. "I told him, 'You've

got to be in *Fast Four*.' He then says to me, 'I walked away from the franchise.' And I said, 'I'm producing.' And he says, 'I'm in.'"

F4 earned a formidable \$340 million and paved the way for Diesel to become one of the highest paid actors in the business. Over the course of the last five *Furious* films he has earned a base salary of \$25 million with an additional \$20 million per movie in producer's fees and backend pay. And he's worth every penny. Those movies have brought in an average of \$1 billion worldwide including *Furious 7*, which earned \$1.5 billion and ranks as the 9th highest grossing film of all time.

Another key decision made by Diesel was hiring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson to join the *Fast* family. At the time, Johnson was still struggling to escape

his wrestling past and was best known for roles in *Tooth Fairy* and *Gridiron Gang*. But his action star future was assured after playing badass federal agent Luke Hobbs in *Fast Five* whose character was tasked with bringing Dom and his crew down. Hobbs proved the perfect foil to Dom and audiences loved the rivalry between their characters. It was the ultimate clash of egos.

Born Mark Sinclair in Northern California, Diesel grew up in New York City after his astrologer/

psychologist mother Delora married his stepfather, Irving Vincent, an acting coach and theatre manager in Greenwich Village. Unable to gain traction as an aspiring actor, he kickstarted his career when he wrote, directed and starred in *Multi-Facial*, a 1995 short film about a multiracial actor struggling to get hired in Hollywood.

Steven Spielberg saw the film and cast Diesel as Private Caparzo in 1998's *Saving Private Ryan* which marked his Hollywood breakthrough. Soon Diesel would find himself starring in three consecutive action movies: *Pitch Black* (as Riddick), *The Fast and the Furious*, and *xxX* (as Xander Cage). Propelled by Diesel's laconic manner and signature scowl, all three projects would find extended life as highly profitable franchises. ➤

Above: Vin Diesel with his star at a Hollywood Walk of Fame Ceremony, Hollywood in 2013

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Vin's V-shaped torso and bulging biceps have also factored heavily into his success. Standing just under six feet, he credits bodybuilding with giving him both a more intimidating presence and some badly needed self-esteem before he began working as a bouncer at at the legendary Tunnel and Mars nightclubs in New York City in the late 80s. He had more than his fair share of fights and developed a fearsome reputation for demolishing anyone who got in his face. Intensive workouts at the gym and a simmering obsession for turning his body into a battering ram is what gave him his edge. Diesel admits that becoming a father in 2008 helped him get in touch with his kinder, gentler side. For the past 14 years he has lived in Los Angeles with his girlfriend Paloma Jiménez, 38, a former model who grew up in Mexico.

Right: *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* premiere with Hania and Vincent **Below:** Co-stars Katee Sackhoff, Michelle Rodriguez and Jordana Brewster (l-r)



"MY CHILDREN ALWAYS TELL ME THAT UNCLE PAUL IS WITH YOU DAD, ALWAYS... AND I KNOW IN MY HEART THAT THEY ARE RIGHT. MISS YOU PABLO..."

VIN DIESEL

"She's everything," he said. "She's the perfect mother. She's just so wonderful in so many ways. She's so stunningly beautiful, but the thing people don't realise is she's my rock, so she's so stunningly beautiful on the inside."

They have three children together, daughter Hania, 13, 11-year-old son Vincent (named after his stepfather), and younger daughter Pauline, aged 6, whom Diesel named after Paul Walker.

In November, Diesel marked the eighth anniversary of Walker's passing by posting a moving tribute to him on his Instagram page where his 77 million followers could share his memories of his friend. Diesel's daughter Hania served as maid of honour at the October wedding of Walker's daughter, Meadow, and Diesel posted a photo of the two of them standing side by side followed by a message he addressed directly to Walker:

"It's been eight years today... and not a day goes by that I don't reflect on the brotherhood we were blessed to have... but you know that... Tragedies in life are always followed by life's blessings if you just stay open and have faith."

He concluded by saying: "My children always tell me that uncle Paul is with you dad, always... and I know in my heart that they are right. Miss you Pablo..." ■

