

## **Pulp Gangsters and the Evil Villains who Love Them.**

By Bob Murch of Pulp Figures

It seems you can't swing a dead cat these days without hitting yet another batch of new gangster figs. Gats, molls and long black sedans are all the rage, and I've sculpted my share of tough guys in snap-brim fedoras, admittedly. With the proliferation of all things 'hoodlum' I feel the uncontrollable itch to toss in my two bits and enlighten you birds as to some of the other uses one might make of these sporty, gangland minis – besides yet another skirmish between poor Mr. Capone's harried crew and that high-hat drip Ness, (not that I'm taking sides).

Now, down to brass tacks; Gangsters were the primary, generic 'bad guys' of the pulps, those cheap magazines of yesteryear with lurid covers and even more lurid contents. Sinister foreigners, either from the far-east or central Europe claim a close second in that role but without a doubt, when a pulp writer was casting for villains to wreak havoc in his story, mostly he cooked up a bunch of American tough guys with a Brooklyn accent and a faulty moral compass. The real life counterparts were still, very much, daily news so the gangster was natural grist for the pop-culture mill.

Those of you who have read the exploits of Doc Savage, The Shadow, The Spider or, with heart palpitating, watched the old movie serials, will know that the boys in dapper pinstripe and accessorized tommygun, didn't just spend their time battling in prohibition turf wars. Sometimes they hired out to a varied assortment of weird villains intent upon loftier goals – like world domination. Heck, why risk being ventilated by some cheap mug just to settle who gets to sell beer on the east side when you can sign on with a twisted genius who, if things pan out, can make you boss of, say, Australia. No nickel and dime jobs when working for the weird villain mastermind. These guys think big.

In the pulp magazines there was a never-ending parade of over-the-top criminal crazies. Names like Doctor Death, The Green Bell, Mox, or The Voodoo Master were commonplace. Let's make some wide generalizations for the sake of game definitions and then elaborate on the various types of villainous pulpster. After-all, they foot the bill for our thugs and give our heroes something to do besides pestering the soda jerk down at Beasley's drug store.

Foremost on this list of anti-social geniuses is the Hooded Mastermind. This secretive fellow is often a prominent citizen with an unsavoury double life who prefers to conceal his identity beneath a mask or hood in order to further his agenda of mayhem. There's no better way for a pillar of the community to avoid a public relations disaster than by wearing a hood, I always say! Nobody tends to know who this guy really is, or if they find out they don't last for long. To add a touch of drama (and these guys love drama), our hooded mastermind usually goes by a creative moniker such as The Crimson Scorpion. To maintain his secrecy, he usually operates from a secret location such as an underground lair hidden in the warehouse district or perhaps a converted mausoleum in

the city cemetery. From here he communicates to his minions, often by radio signal, hidden microphone or occasionally even that marvellous new invention, television. The lair is usually protected by booby traps. I'm particularly partial to the electrified steel floor. Zap. The hooded mastermind will generally employ the denizens of gangland in significant numbers though failure is not lightly tolerated so the risk is great. But thugs are dumb and they don't worry about this downside too much.

Next comes a perennial favourite, the Mad Scientist. This guy is usually too egotistical to bother concealing his identity. When you're operating from a hollow volcano and your bodyguard is a 12ft killer robot, you really don't need to keep your identity all that hushed up anyway. All this does not mean you won't have a bunch of gangster thugs on your payroll though. I've often marvelled at how, even on a desert island infested with dinosaurs, Doc Savage might still have to duke it out with a group of guys with names like Bugsy and Babyface. The serious mad scientist always requires minions and in the days before they wore colour co-ordinated overalls -ala James Bond- the bulk of the minions were usually gangsters. Killer robots tend to attract a bit too much attention when our Mad Scientist needs to rob the 1<sup>st</sup> Bank of Manhattan during his yearly fund raising drive.

Also prominent in the role-call of sinister weirdoes, is the Otherworld Menace. I'm not sure just how many secret civilizations there are hidden beneath Boise Idaho, but one thing is for sure; when the high commander of the mole people needs a front for his operation to destroy the surface dwellers, he usually turns to gangland for help. Remember Al Capone's vault? It was really a secret entrance to the underwater kingdom beneath Lake Michigan. Why would our south-side thugs not sign up with the mole-men? Hell, their money is green too ain't it? In the serials, the Otherworld Menace is often led by some sallow complexioned fellow wearing what looks like Joan Crawford's old dressing gown with a silver lightning bolt sewn on the front for good measure. Only the studio prop guy could tell us for sure.

These are the three primary categories boiled down from the vast army of villains who emerged from the pulps and the serials and who came in a dizzy array of bizarre guises. Aside from the Lone Creeps, those crazed, anti-social twerps who slunk through the sewers clutching silk strangling cords and muttering incoherently to themselves, proper evil masterminds needed foot soldiers to implement their nefarious schemes. To this purpose there was an inexhaustible supply of hell's kitchen tough guys for them to draw on.

Now for a snapshot of the typical gangster types who worked for the evil masterminds. Whereas the top villain was, according to the conventions of the day, required to be an extremely individual character, the crooked henchmen tended to fit into a pretty consistent pattern.

The top hood, a guy with a name like Big Jim, was the only thug who actually got to talk to the mysterious leader most of the time. He was often at the other end of those secretive radio or TV broadcasts, perhaps using a receiver disguised as a juke-box

in some seedy diner. Upon receiving his instructions, Big Jim then had the responsibility of mustering his mob for the job at hand. Jim is usually an extra large and extra tough hood with more than just the usual low intelligence of the other gangsters in his crew. At his elbow, Big Jim usually has a small, rat faced toady whose prime function seems to be to parrot his boss's words in a high pitched snicker.

Big Jim: "I warned you to keep yer nose outa my business, now looks like I gotta take you fer a ride."

Toady: "He, he. Ya, you're goin fer a ride! He, he!"

The Toady doesn't seem to serve any other purpose than to provide a touch of twisted character and occasionally scurry around behind the action in order to flick off the lights at a critical moment. His mother must have been proud.

Next are the soldiers. There are numerous gangsters in Big Jim's mob but most of them don't have speaking parts. Their job is to drive cars and shoot at the good guys- usually with marginal accuracy. In a game you want plenty of these guys so they give you something to shoot at. Aside from these birds, there tend to be a couple of slightly more prominent hoodlums who have a bit more to say. Lets call them Patsy and Butch. While not particularly bright, these two seem to end up with having to implement all the critical parts of the mastermind's onerous plan. These jobs are typically things like kidnapping the mayor's beautiful daughter or planting a bomb in the hero's car. Whatever the task, Patsy and Butch set about it with gleeful enthusiasm, accompanied by a continuous patter of tough guy slang;

"When da Shadow gets this present, he ain't goina feel like laughin any more!"

"Ya, he'll get a bang outa it Butch!"

Needless to say, something always goes awry for this duo of dupes. But give them credit, persistence is their virtue. No matter how many times they find themselves face first into a brick wall, Patsy and Butch are always willing to have another kick at the can, at least up until the hero finally plugs them. In the serial, Commando Cody and the Radar Men From The Moon, Patsy and Butch (I can't recall their real names and it doesn't matter anyway), are the guys the Moon Men give their Death Ray to. The mugs then drive it around the countryside in the back of a rented truck, sabotaging troop trains and light aircraft. It never occurs to these bums that the U.S. government might have paid them top dollar for this piece of alien technology.

Besides, Patsy and Butch, there are usually one or two specialists called in. The tall, skinny safe cracker whose job it is to rifle the government patent office for those top-secret submarine blueprints. The seductive femme-fatale, called upon to get close to the hero and distract him sufficiently for the rest of the plot to succeed. There is the psychotic/erratic killer who specialises in using an ice-pick. Oh, and don't forget the punch-drunk ex-boxer who is always handy when it comes to breaking doors....or legs.

All in all, every old pulp stereotype should be exploited to the fullest extent. I'm sure I've missed plenty but then the books and serials are still available so feel free to dig a little yourself. I've been finding the serial DVDs in a bargain bin at the grocery store! As well, the books can still be had, either by scouring the local used book stores or you can order lovely reprints from Adventure House Publishing, [www.adventurehouse.com](http://www.adventurehouse.com).

How does all this translate in game terms? Obviously we are not talking a faithful, historical recreation of Borodino here. This is skirmish level stuff with an emphasis on role play and silly fun. For rules, the options are growing. The Pulp Figures web site has our free download of Pulp Figures' Rugged Adventures by Kurt (pass d'nitro) Hummitzsch. Howard (lil'4 eyes) Whitehouse has cooked up his set called Mad Dogs with Guns-published in this humble journal, and Richard Johnson of Rattrap Publishing has produced .45 Adventure. All of these very Pulp oriented rules sets will give you plenty of scope for re-creating the wild and implausible scenarios featuring menacing weirdo villains, their mob henchmen and the almost equally bizarre heroes who once strove to foil their nefarious schemes.

The main point I'm trying to drive home, is that Gangsters are not just for Valentines Day anymore. Drop them into the jungles of Panama, buy them a ticket on the Graf Zeppelin or send them to the moon. These guys are looking for trouble and they don't care how far they have to go to find it. After all, there's always a Menacing Mastermind with plans to rule the world and a 'help wanted' advert in the Times.