By Stuart Kemp and Scott Roxborough

BERLIN — The aging gun-toting action hero is being taken down by a stealthy, fragrant-fresh adversary as adult-themed movies, particularly those designed to reach social media-savvy women, clamor for market attention.

The European Film Market here has plenty to offer buyers looking to shore up distribution slates with movies targeting grown-ups as the box-office appeal wanes for more macho action fare.

Adult dramas have been beating projections both in the U.S. and internationally, while old-school action pics — once the bread and butter of markets — have been in a dogfight to secure audiences.

While Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *The Last Stand* and Sylvester Stallone’s *Bullet to the Head* try to recapture the success of *The Expendables*, movies such as *The Best Mari-gold Hotel*, *Silver Linings Playbook* and *Hyde Park on Hudson* set the bar for what buyers are expecting in terms of cast, quality and bankability.

“Making a modestly budgeted action picture isn’t a guaranteed formula anymore, which is good for us,” said Marc Butan, head of Megan Ellison’s sales outfit Panorama.

Panorama’s big EFM title is Jake Gyllenhaal-Ben Mendelsohn road-trip drama *Mississippi Grind*, helmed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck. “If you program for older audiences, they will go,” said Lisa Wilson, who sold *Arbitrage* overseas via her sales and finance banner The Solution Entertainment Group. “Now, with all the technology, older moviegoers are more likely to go.” *Arbitrage* over-indexed in a number of markets, including Russia, Australia and Latin America.
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For one sales vet, Berlin is "an interesting market because everything comes together so late" because of November's AFM, then the Christmas break and then Sundance.

The days leading up to the EFM were a case in point with a slew of high-profile projects announced on the eve of Berlin, a good deal later than usual for scripts to go out to buyers. "For the bigger movies coming from the independents, it is becoming more difficult to put together budgets and cast," said Lionsgate Motion Picture Group co-chairman Patrick Wachsberger. "It looks like a much weaker market this year," said Helge Sasse, CEO of German indie distributor Senator Film. "There is very little in the way of quality films on offer."

But come to Berlin armed with the right blend of cast and projected potential, and plenty of business can be done. "The appetite is there," said Sierra/Affinity CEO and president Nick Meyer, who is in town for presales on the Sam Worthington thriller For the Dogs, helmed by Phillip Noyce.

Some of the hot projects generating market buzz as the EFM kicks off include Good Universe’s supernatural thriller The Unholy, starring Joseph Fiennes; Lionsgate’s Russian child-murder drama Child 44, with Tom Hardy and Noomi Rapace; and Focus Features’ Jeremy Renner starrer Kill the Messenger, about a black-listed journalist.

Pamela McClintock and Clarence Tsui contributed to this report.

ALTERED IMAGE, EGO LI TEAM ON BOWIE-POP PIC

By Scott Roxborough

BERLIN — Brit producers Altered Image have joined forces with Berlin-based Egoli Tossell Film to co-produce Lust for Life, a biopic about the legendary collaboration between pop stars David Bowie and Iggy Pop in 1970s West Berlin. Gabriel Range (Death of a President) is attached to direct Lust from a screenplay by Robin French, a writer for BBC comedy series Cuckoo. Range will co-produce through his Altered Image shingle together with Egoli Tossell’s Jens Meurer.

Pop and Bowie relocated to West Berlin in the late ’70s and began a creative collaboration that would lead to three albums — Pop’s Idiot and Lust for Life and Bowie’s Low — that are widely regarded as some of the two artists’ best work.

"[Lust for Life] is not a traditional rock biopic, for no one dies at the end," Egoli Tossell said in a statement, adding that the central character of the film will be the divided city of West Berlin, which in the 1970s became a magnet for artists, hedonists and political activists of all stripes.

Bowie’s Berlin period is back in focus following the Jan. 8 release of “Where Are We Now?,” his first single in years. In the song, Bowie takes a wistful look back at his time in the German capital, with lyrics sign-posting several of his favorite Berlin hangouts including KaDeWe and Potsdamer Platz.

French has based his screenplay on several sources, including the biographies Starman: David Bowie and Open Up and Bleed: Iggy Pop from writer and former Mojo editor Paul Trynka.

Lust started life as a project at the European Film Market’s co-production meetings in Berlin last year. The film has received development funding from the German National Filmboard and Creative England in the U.K. The producers will be pitching the film to international buyers at the European Film Market in Berlin this week.

ANISTON, DULPASS, KINGSLEY BOXED FOR CONVENTION

By Scott Roxborough

BERLIN — Jennifer Aniston, Mark Duplass and Ben Kingsley have joined the cast of Convention, a science-themed comedy from commercials director Justin Reardon.

Duplass, onscreen in Oscar-nominated Zero Dark Thirty, stars as Paul, a mild-mannered inventor who, together with his feisty sister Abby (Aniston), sets out to change the world of box storage with a new, five-sided box. Kingsley will play Bobby Schroedinger, a maniacal box magnate determined to foil their plans.

Christopher Painter (The Adventures of Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius) penned the script to Convention, which Paul Schiff and Tai Duncan of Schiff Productions will produce. Reardon, who attracted attention with his Budweiser commercials, just wrapped production on his first feature, A Many Splintered Thing, which stars Chris Evans and Michelle Monaghan.

“Convention is a wildly original and funny screenplay,” said Schiff. "Justin Reardon’s approach to the material is bold, inventive and bursting with imagination. We could not be more thrilled to have such a gifted group of actors on board to bring this film to life."

K5 International will handle international sales on the project and will be shilling Convention to buyers at the European Film Market in Berlin. CAA and ICM Partners co-represent the film for North America.

The sales deal was negotiated by Schiff and Duncan and K5’s Daniel Baur and Lawrence Kopeikin.

Aniston is repped by CAA and Brillstein Entertainment Partners, Duplass by ICM Partners and Kingsley by CAA/Independent Talent Group. Reardon is repped by Verve and the Arlook Group and Painter by Kaplan/Perrone.
Grandmaster’s Wong
Talks HK Cinema

By Clarence Tsui

Seated in a hotel suite off Place Vendome in Paris, Wong Kar-wai is in fine spirits. You would never know he had just flown in overnight from Bangkok, where he was working around the clock to finish the international cut of his latest release, the martial-arts epic The Grandmaster. The new version that opens the Berlinale is about 13 minutes shorter and also went through a small change in structure.

Grandmaster has already been released in China to positive reviews and generated nearly $45 million at the box office, giving Wong his first bona fide blockbuster. The pic, which makes its international premiere tonight at the Berlinale Palast, is an account of how legendary martial arts masters Ip Man (Tony Leung Chiu-wai), Gong Er (Zhang Ziyi), her father Gang Baotian (Wang Qingxiang), The Razor (Chang Chen) and Ma San (Zhang Jin) navigate their account of this background, you won’t be able to understand the difficulties he goes through.

Among the Chinese, and especially among martial arts practitioners or artists, there is this very important notion of passing the torch. It’s about realizing how one doesn’t own what one’s learned. Receiving inherited wisdom from the generation of forefathers means there’s also a responsibility to pass it on. This is the burden a grandmaster has to bear.

THR: Why did you decide to make an international version of the film?

Wong: The version released in Asia has elements which Chinese audiences will be familiar with but which will not be that familiar to foreign audiences. There’s so much information that people could easily become confused.

For example, during Ip Man’s opening voice-over about his own background, he talks about his family having a business on Bonham Strand West, a traditional hub of import-export trade in downtown Hong Kong. Hong Kong audiences will know what that means, but to foreigners it doesn’t mean anything. So we just changed it to how he was running a family business which exports goods to Hong Kong. We made adjustments like this so that international audiences know what it is about.

THR: The film has gone through quite a long period of gestation and production. How different is the final product from the original idea?

Wong: I started out wanting simply to look at Ip Man the person. Later on, however, I discovered what I really wanted to examine is the whole martial arts landscape. I think the biggest question for me was, “What made Ip Man so remarkable?” Some would say it’s because he had a disciple called Bruce Lee, but that would be ignoring something that is crucial — the circumstances which shaped Ip Man’s life. His life is a microcosm of contemporary Chinese history. He lived through the Qing dynasty, the early republican years, the northern conquest [by the government against warlords], the fight against the Japanese [during WWII] and finally the exodus to Hong Kong [during and after the Chinese civil war between 1945 and 1949].

If you don’t give a proper account of this background, you won’t be able to understand the difficulties he goes through.

THR: How does it feel now to be a Hong Kong filmmaker working on the mainland?

Wong: My cinema is something that belongs to the Chinese people as a whole, and it shouldn’t be limited to just a certain geographical territory in a certain historical era. It’s not like I have to make a film with mainland audiences in mind when we have mainland money in it — and in fact, there’s quite a bit of money from elsewhere as well.

Click here for more news and reviews from the Berlin Film Festival.
Layoffs Ahead at DreamWorks Animation

By Matthew Belloni

DreamWorks Animation will lay off staff in the wake of the weaker-than-expected performance of the studio's Rise of the Guardians and its announcement Tuesday that it will release two films in 2013 rather than three, sources told The Hollywood Reporter.

The layoffs, which have been rumored for weeks, are expected to hit the Glendale-based animation studio's production, technology and overhead functions. Sources said no single film project in development will be targeted, though DreamWorks Animation CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg said in a statement Tuesday that the Kate Hudson-Josh Gad-voiced Me & My Shadow, which had been slated for release by Fox in March 2014, is being taken off the schedule indefinitely. Mr. Peabody & Sherman, which was set for a Nov. 1 release, now shifts to the March 7, 2014, slot.

"The move of Mr. Peabody & Sherman means that we will now release two films in 2013, and we are adjusting our operating infrastructure costs accordingly," Katzenberg said in a statement.

A DreamWorks Animation spokesperson declined to comment on whether layoffs will happen. But sources said plans for an unspecified reduction of the company's 2,000 or so employees are afoot and should begin before the publicly traded studio reports earnings Feb. 26.

Guardians, released in the U.S. in November, grossed nearly $300 million worldwide in theaters but was considered a box-office disappointment due to its high production and marketing costs. Lazard Capital Markets analyst Barton Crockett predicted in January that the studio will be forced to write down as much as $96 million in Guardians losses. DWA stock consequently has been pummeled by investors.

The trouble comes as DWA in August entered a five-year distribution deal with Fox, which will release its films globally beginning with The Croods on March 22. Turbo will follow on July 19, then Mr. Peabody & Sherman, How to Train Your Dragon 2 on June 20, 2014, and Happy Smekday! on Nov. 26, 2014.

Kim Masters contributed to this report.

BUSY McCARTHY BOOKS 3 MOVIES

By Borys Kit

Just days before the opening of her comedy Identity Thief, Melissa McCarthy and her husband/partner Ben Falcone are unveiling three new film projects to be developed via The Heat, which pairs her with Sandra Bullock for her Bridesmaids helmer Paul Feig. Heat recently was moved to a summer release date.

McCarthy and Falcone will take a pass on writing the Just Do It pic, and McCarthy is attached to play a role.

"We've been writing together for longer than we've been married," McCarthy and Falcone told The Hollywood Reporter in a joint statement. "To be able to produce our own work and other people's work that we are so passionate about is really a dream come true."

McCarthy, who stars on CBS' Mike & Molly, became a Hollywood player with her breakout performance in Universal's 2011 comedy Bridesmaids. (Falcone had a minor role in the pic as well.) She quickly followed that up by landing starring roles in a pair of big studio comedies: Universal's Identity Thief, which pairs her with Jason Bateman and is directed by Seth Gordon, and Fox's Heat, helmer Paul Feig.

Falcone will next appear in Nicole Holofcener's untitled project and recently wrapped Bateman's directorial debut, the comedy Bad Words. He also is working on a pilot for TV Land.

McCarthy and Falcone are repped by CAA and managers Christian Donatelli and Courtney Kivowitz of the Schiff Co.
Former Uni Exec Sues Over LAPD Beating

By Matthew Belloni

A former top executive at Universal Pictures has filed a $20 million lawsuit against the city of Los Angeles claiming that rogue LAPD officers who were under investigation for assaulting civilians beat him senseless during a bizarre altercation last year that made national headlines.

Brian Mulligan, who was co-chair of Universal in the 1990s and most recently served as a managing director of Deutsche Bank’s Los Angeles entertainment practice, filed suit Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles claiming he sustained a broken shoulder blade and facial fractures requiring several surgeries at the hands of police officers after they stopped him in the city’s Highland Park neighborhood and forced him to check into a local motel and stay there against his will. When he left the hotel, Mulligan claims he was attacked by the officers and hit in the face with a baton.

“Brian Mulligan was brutally beaten by a predator wearing a badge and a uniform,” Mulligan’s attorney Skip Miller of Miller Barondess told The Hollywood Reporter. “Then he was attacked and vilified in the press. He’s been absolutely devastated in his life. We look forward to having our day in court.”

Former Universal executive Brian Mulligan, whose involvement with bath salts made headlines, claims he was brutally attacked by two officers.

A rep for the LAPD declined to comment on the lawsuit.

The lawsuit targets the city, the LAPD, the Los Angeles Police Protective League and two officers, James Nichols and John Miller, whom Mulligan claims violated his civil rights by beating him and falsely imprisoning him in the motel. In January, the Los Angeles Times reported that Nichols is under investigation for allegedly luring women to unmarked cars and forcing them to perform sex acts. The story, based on court documents, claimed that LAPD internal affairs investigators believe Nichols and another officer used the threat of jail to drive women to secluded areas where one of the officers demanded sex while the other kept watch.

The circumstances described in the Times report are similar to those detailed in the Mulligan complaint, minus the sex. Mulligan was arrested May 16 in Highland Park as he allegedly was on his way to a medical marijuana dispensary to pick up THC pills to help him sleep on a business trip. He then was detained by Nichols and Miller, who discovered $3,000 in his car. According to the lawsuit, the officers then took Mulligan to the Highland Park Motel and made him rent a room.

“Nichols told Mulligan he’d be dead if he left the room,” the lawsuit alleges. “But unlike Nichols’ previous victims, Mulligan didn’t comply. He left the motel, and when he did, Nichols found him and beat him within an inch of his life.”

The lawsuit refers to Nichols as a “serial predator” and claims that the “LAPD was warned about Nichols but did nothing to stop him, and as a consequence his assaults continued, including the brutal beating of ... Brian Mulligan.”

The Mulligan case received national press attention because of his Hollywood and corporate credentials and because of his involvement with bath salts, a controversial drug that can cause hallucinations and violent behavior. In an encounter with police days before the Highland Park altercation, police said Mulligan was delusional. “I know this is gonna sound crazy, but I feel like there are people following me,” Mulligan is reported to have told police. “I feel like there was a chopper — do you hear a chopper?”

Mulligan claims in the suit that the LAPD and the Police Protective League and its president, Tyler Izen, conspired to smear Mulligan in the media, issuing a press release that called him a “dangerous, delusional drug addict.” Audio of the incident appeared online. Mulligan’s bloody and battered face appeared on TMZ, and his involvement with bath salts was widely reported.

In August, Mulligan filed a $50 million claim against the city accusing officers of beating and illegally detaining him. The move was the first step in suing the city over the circumstances surrounding his arrest May 15 at about 1 a.m. for interfering with a police officer.

The suit, which alleges actions of police officers causing action for violation of civil rights, assault and battery, false imprisonment, police negligence and negligent supervision, was filed against the city of L.A., the L.A. Police Protective League, Nichols, Miller and Izen.
Why Even DVR Won’t Save Smash Ratings

By Michael O’Connell

In this brave new world of evolving TV viewing habits, the DVR can be a series’ savior. It cannot perform miracles.

And that is just what Smash needs. NBC’s glossy musical drama returned Tuesday night with a new showrunner (Josh Safran), an A-list infusion to the cast (Jennifer Hudson) and a 71 percent drop in ratings from its series premiere in February 2012.

Nielsen’s Fast National returns give the two-hour opener a 1.1 rating among the targeted adults 18-49 and a shade under 4.5 million viewers. It might seem unfair to compare the series to its 2012 bow, so greatly boosted by Super Bowl promotions and a juggernaut lead-in with The Voice, yet it remains a death knell for any scripted Big Four drama.

But for the sake of argument, what sort of DVR growth would be required to push Smash into more desirable territory?

During its freshman run, the series averaged a 2.3 rating with adults 18-49 in Live+Same Day ratings. A healthy boost of 43.5 percent moved it up a full point to a 3.3 rating in the demo. A steady 43.5 percent improvement for this first outing would only push Smash to a 1.6 rating in the demo — in other words, just a tenth of a point more than the overnight returns for ABC’s ill-fated 666 Park Avenue. (That show garnered a 2.4 rating in Live+Seven,)

To match last season’s same-day returns, Smash would need to post 110 percent growth. And to match last season’s seven days of time-shifted viewing, Smash would need to leap 200 percent. Both of those numbers seem so far removed from the realm of possibility that they’re barely worth acknowledging.

According to the most recent Live+Seven stats, updated through Jan. 20, the current season’s top two percentage growers are ABC’s Private Practice and NBC’s Grimm. They see respective gains of 85 and 81 percent, the highest ever for network series — and one of the pair (Practice) just wrapped for good.

So what hope is there, if any, for Smash?

The series remains a high priority for the network. NBC Entertainment chairman Robert Greenblatt brought it over with him from Showtime, where he originally developed it in 2009. And the latest season has seen no shortage of aggressive marketing to promote the big changes.

Fans and skeptics also can make a case for inevitable improvement with a better lead-in than Tuesday’s birthday celebration for Betty White. That pulled a 1.5 rating in the key demo and 6 million viewers in total. Smash’s new regular lead-in, The New Normal, most recently earned just a 1.1 in the demo and 3 million viewers.

The Feb. 12 pre-emption for the State of the Union address means the Smash ratings debate can be put on hold for another two weeks — but NBC likely is eyeing a bit farther down the line to March 25, when Voice again gives Tuesday an infusion to the 8 p.m. hour.
HURT, HUNTER JOIN LIFETIME’S BONNIE AND CLYDE

By Lesley Goldberg

Lifetime’s Bonnie and Clyde has found two of its four leads.

William Hurt and Holly Hunter, who starred together in the 1987 feature Broadcast News, have been tapped to co-star in the miniseries from Smash’s Craig Zadan and Neil Meron, The Hollywood Reporter has learned.

Hurt will play Frank Hamer, a Texas Ranger known for his involvement in tracking and killing 1930s outlaws Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. He’s a tough cop who was involved in nearly 100 gunfights throughout his career and was wounded and left for dead multiple times.

Hunter will play Emma Parker, the mother of Bonnie and her two siblings. Emma’s husband died when Bonnie was 4, leaving the mother to move the children to a Dallas suburb where she found work as seamstress.

The title roles, played by Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty in the 1967 film Bonnie and Clyde, have not yet been cast. Miley Cyrus was attached to play Bonnie in the project but dropped out.

The Lifetime/History project, the first of its kind to air on both AETN networks, is being produced by Smash executive producers Meron and Zadan, who are set up at Sony Pictures Television.

Hurt, whose credits include features The Host, The Incredible Hulk, Into the Wild and TV’s Damages, is repped by ICM Partners. He earned a best actor Oscar for Kiss of the Spider Woman.

An Oscar winner for The Piano, Hunter’s most recent small-screen credits include Saving Grace and Sundance Channel’s upcoming Top of the Lake. She’s with ICM Partners, Management 360 and Ziffren Brittenham.

CORBETT SET TO STAR IN CBS’ NCIS: LA SPINOFF

By Lesley Goldberg

John Corbett is on the case for CBS.

The Parenthood and United States of Tara actor has signed on to star in the network’s potential NCIS: Los Angeles spinoff, The Hollywood Reporter has learned.

NCIS: Red revolves around a mobile team of agents who are forced to live and work together as they crisscross the country solving crimes. The back-door pilot will air in the spring as an episode of NCIS: LA.

Corbett will play analyst Roy Quaid, a former NCIS special agent forced to retire from active service who now works as an analyst. While no longer an active agent, he’s the most experienced investigator working for Red Team, a fact that is not lost on any other agents.

NCIS: LA’s Miguel Ferrer will reprise his role in the potential spinoff as NCIS assistant director Owen Granger, while Red Dawn’s Edwin Hodge will play Special Agent Kai, a computer expert and transport coordinator from South Central L.A. who was raised by his grandmother.

Corbett, whose credits also include Sex and the City and My Big Fat Greek Wedding, starred in cop drama Widow Detective for CBS last fall. The drama from CSI’s Carol Mendelsohn did not move forward. He’s repped by Gersh and Lovett Management.

DENMAN ENLISTS IN CBS’ COP PILOT

By Lesley Goldberg

The Office’s David Denman is heading to Beverly Hills.

The actor has been tapped to co-star in CBS’ hourlong update of the 1980s Beverly Hills Cop films starring Eddie Murphy, The Hollywood Reporter has learned.

Described as a continuation of the movie franchise, the drama pilot — from The Shield’s Shawn Ryan — centers on Aaron (Brandon T. Jackson), the police-office son of Axel Foley (Murphy), who takes down the criminal elements of the rich and famous in Beverly Hills while working to escape his famous father’s shadow. Murphy will reprise his role as the wise-cracking detective in the pilot and could recur should the project go to series.

Denman will play Brad Fullmer, a Beverly Hills detective described as strong, loyal and socially awkward but a good guy to have on your side. He’s the Judge Reinhold of the potential series and the partner of the yet-to-be-cast Leila.

He joins the recently cast Kevin Pollak in the pilot, which is described as an hourlong crime procedural with comedic elements, with Ryan (Last Resort) on board to pen the Sony Pictures Television script and executive produce along with his MiddKid Productions partner Marney Hochman and Murphy.

Denman, who recurs as Roy Anderson on The Office, is repped by UTA. His credits also include the upcoming jOBS and 2009’s Fanboys.

LOGUE ADDED TO BBC AMERICA’S DRAMA COPPER

By Michael O’Connell

Copper is adding some new blood during its second season.

The BBC America original, which recently resumed production, has added Donal Logue (Terriers) as a series regular. The actor will play Sixth Ward boss and Civil War general Brendan Donovan in the period drama.

Also joining the series is Thomas Kelly. Previously serving as writer and supervising producer on CBS’ Blue Bloods, Kelly joins Fontana and Barry Levinson as executive producer.

Logue, who recently has done arcs on Sons of Anarchy, Royal Pains and upcoming History drama Vikings, is repped by UTA.
Bieber Scores His Fifth No. 1 Album

By Keith Caulfield, Billboard

Justin Bieber notched his fifth No. 1 album on the Billboard 200 chart as Believe Acoustic debuted atop the list with 211,000 sold, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

With the arrival of his latest disc, he becomes the only artist to have achieved five No. 1 albums before turning 19 years old (he turns 19 on March 1.) Bieber was previously tied with Miley Cyrus, who had also claimed four leaders before 19.

Bieber’s new album also gives him a No. 1 album in four consecutive years — something only nine earlier acts have done in the nearly 57-year history of the Billboard 200 chart.

Believe Acoustic performed strongly with digital retailers, as 75 percent of its sales were generated by downloads. Acoustic also includes three new recordings: “Yellow Raincoat,” “I Would” and “Nothing Like Us.”

Bieber previously collected No. 1 albums with My World 2.0 (2010), Never Say Never: The Remixes (2011), Under the Mistletoe (2011) and last year’s Believe.

Bieber led a debut-filled top four on the Billboard 200 this week, as Andrea Bocelli, Tegan and Sara and Charlie Wilson also checked in at Nos. 2-4, respectively.

Bocelli earned his seventh Top 10 set with Passione, shifting 94,000 copies at No. 2. He’s yet to score a No. 1 album, though he’s now notched a pair of No. 2 sets. His earlier runner-up title was 2009’s My Christmas, which spent five consecutive weeks stuck at No. 2.

The new Bocelli album is also available in Spanish, titled Pasión, and charted separately. It debuted at No. 59 with 7,000 sold and also bowed atop the Latin Albums chart. On the latter tally, it is Bocelli’s second No. 1, following 2009’s Mi Navidad, which was the Spanish version of My Christmas.

Alternative pop/rock duo Tegan and Sara charged in at No. 3 with the new album Heartthrob, moving a career-high 49,000 copies. That’s almost two times their previous best sales week, when Sainthood bowed at No. 21 in 2009 with 24,000 units.

Heartthrob also started at No. 1 on the Rock Albums chart, where the duo has collected two previous top 10s with 2007’s The Con and 2009’s Sainthood.

Heartthrob saw 71 percent of its debut-week sales come from downloads, and it also debuted at No. 2 on the Digital Albums chart. Bieber’s Acoustic bowed atop that list.

Rounding out the four debuts in the top 10 on the Billboard 200 this week is R&B veteran Charlie Wilson, who entered at No. 4 with Love, Charlie (44,000). It concurrently started at No. 1 on the R&B/Hip-Hop Albums chart.

This marks the third solo Top 10 set on the Billboard 200 for the former Gap Band frontman, who previously claimed Top 10s with Charlie, Last Name Wilson (No. 10 in 2005) and Uncle Charlie (No. 2 in 2009). His latest album is his fourth consecutive effort to include his first name in the title. His last, Just Charlie, was released in 2010 and debuted and peaked at No. 19.

While downloads made up a significant portion of the debuts for Tegan and Sara, and Bieber, they comprised quite little of Wilson and Bocelli’s Top 10 arrivals. Digital sales represented just 17 percent and 10 percent of Wilson and Bocelli’s first-week sales, respectively. The digital-to-physical imbalance isn’t surprising, as both artists’ core audiences are generally older, and likely prefer CDs over downloads.

As for the rest of the top 10: The Pitch Perfect soundtrack fell from No. 3 to No. 5 (37,000; down 16 percent), Bruno Mars’ Unorthodox Jukebox climbed from No. 8 from No. 6 (just under 37,000; up 2 percent) and Mumford & Sons’ Babel dipped from No. 6 to No. 7 (36,000; down 6 percent). Last week’s No. 1, Gary Allan’s Set You Free, tumbled to No. 8 with 34,000 (down 34 percent), while the Lumineers slipped from No. 2 to No. 9 with their self-titled album (32,000; down 30 percent). Taylor Swift’s Red closes out the top 10, moving down one notch to No. 10 (29,000; down 15 percent).

Overall album sales in this past chart week (ending Feb. 3) totaled 5.24 million units, up 7 percent compared with the sum last week (4.92 million) and down 10 percent compared with the comparable sales week of 2012 (5.81 million). Year-to-date album sales stand at 26.49 million, down 2 percent compared to the same total at this point last year (27.16 million).
By Clarence Tsui
Prior to The Grandmaster’s barnstorming pre-credits fighting sequence, the film’s main protagonist, Ip Man (Tony Leung Chiu-wai), is heard expounding his own view toward martial arts to an unseen friend. “Don’t tell me how good your skills are, how brilliant your master is and how profound your school is,” he says. “Kung fu: two words. One horizontal, one vertical — if you’re wrong, you’ll be left lying down. If you’re right, you’re left standing — and only the ones who stand have the right to talk.”

It’s a line that sums up Wong Kar-wai’s much-anticipated historical martial arts epic. It is an action-packed spectacle for sure — indeed, the film contains some of the most dazzling fights ever seen on screen, courtesy of the action choreography of Yuen Woo-ping (The Matrix; Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon) — but the Hong Kong auteur is seemingly more preoccupied with the introspective verbal exchanges between his battle-hardened warriors.

While martial arts aficionados will find fulfillment with the fights — complete with more-than-explicit primers from some of the fighters themselves about the specialties of the art they practice — Wong’s art house fan base also will find much to savor, with the leading characters oozing the kind of longing that defines the filmmaker’s oeuvre. The suppressed affections between Ip and the young, headstrong northeastern fighter Gong Er (Zhang Ziyi) doubtless will mesmerize festival audiences converted to Wong’s aesthetics through In the Mood for Love.

And beyond yearning of the romantic kind, Grandmaster also is an evocation of the yearning for home from drifting individuals, with Hong Kong becoming a haven for fighters living out their last years after their forced departure from a politically tumultuous China. (It’s hardly coincidental that the idea of the film was conceived as the director was putting final touches on Happy Together, his 1998 film about two Hong Kongers living in self-exile in Buenos Aires just around the time of the former colony’s transition to Chinese sovereignty).

The film’s first half-hour is definitely Ip’s (and Leung’s), though. Set in Foshan, the film’s first section lays down Ip’s backstory, with his narration about his childhood and his marriage juxtaposed with images of a young Ip being initiated into martial arts by his teacher Chen Heshun (choreographer Yuen) and then intimate sequences of Ip’s contented domestic life with his wife Zhang Yongcheng (Korean actress Song Hye-kyo). Ip’s voice then leads the viewer to the Golden Pavilion, a lavishly appointed establishment, and brothel, which serves as a 1930s version of the tavern in old-school martial arts films.

Ip is contracted into a duel with Gong Yutian (Wang Qingxiang), a martial-arts master from northeastern China looking for a last fight (and a consolidation of the supremacy of his school over its southern rivals) before he retires. When Ip emerges victorious, Gong’s daughter, Gong Er, challenges Ip to a fight to restore her clan’s reputation. She satisfies her hunger for a win but also finds herself subjected to another craving: With her and her opponent’s limbs winding up all entangled (and some parts of the fight shot beautifully in slow motion), their yearnings begin.

At this point, Ip recedes into the background and Gong Er is allowed to take over. Shifting to her hometown in Japanese-occupied northeastern China in the late 1930s, the story kicks into play again as Gong Yutian dies after a confrontation with Ma San (Zhang Jin), his estranged ex-protege. Gong Er vows to avenge her father’s murder in the face of much disparagement from her misogynist elders, who tells her to let things lie and get married.

In one of their last meetings, Gong admits to having once harbored amorous feelings for Ip. But it’s a confession that leads to nothing. Just as significantly, she also tells Ip about what her main regret in life is — that she has yet to see life as it is, and asks Ip to do so on her behalf.

Ip has survived all to tell the tale, albeit in a solitude shared by many of Wong’s forlorn protagonists in previous films. Putting Ip in a suit and tie in one of the film’s final scenes, it can be said that Wong might be evoking Chau Mo-wan, the fictional 1960s martial arts novelist whom Leung plays in Mood for Love.

While Zhang Ziyi’s Gong Er is more or less complete and coherent, the same can’t be said of some of the other characters, such as Chang Chen’s Razor, an expert of the Bagua school who is supposed to be another of the grandmasters. Song’s Madam Ip has only a cursory presence and is basically rendered invisible in the film’s second half. It’s a situation brought about reportedly by the long gestation of the film — rumors are that the Korean actress couldn’t fit additional filming into her schedule — but it also undermines Wong’s efforts to provide a fully realized, nuanced account of Ip’s emotional torment.

**Venue:** Berlin International Film Festival (opening film).

**Production:** Jet Tone Films and Sil-Metropole Organization.

**Cast:** Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Zhang Ziyi, Chang Chen, Wang Qingxiang, Zhang Jin, Zhao Ben-shan, Song Hye-kyo.

**Director:** Wong Kar-wai.

Rated PG-13, 130 minutes.
SIDE EFFECTS
By Todd McCarthy
In what he maintains is his final big-screen feature film, at least for the foreseeable future, Steven Soderbergh employs his dramatic know-how and superior craftsmanship to initially lure you into a story that you ultimately can’t buy into at all in Side Effects. Screenwriter Scott Z. Burns’ story of a young wife whose well-being and behavior are seemingly impaired by a succession of prescription drugs has the veneer of a serious exposé of a perceived epidemic of doctor-approved drug use (Burns also wrote Soderbergh’s recent mass-infection thriller Contagion). But in trying to merge this alarmist theme with an old-fashioned murder mystery, the filmmakers throw at least one plot-twist sucker-punch too many, leaving the viewer with an “Oh, come on” reaction to the entire film. Despite the classy pedigree and fine cast, Open Road likely will drum up only limited business for this nicely wrapped package in specialized release.

Depending upon exactly how you count, Soderbergh has directed about 27 feature films in the 24 years since he burst on the scene with sex, lies & videotape, a remarkable output given the two or three years it takes most major directors to develop and finish a project. He still has the HBO Liberace biopic Behind the Candelabra in store for later this year, but if anyone deserves a vacation, it’s fair to say he does.

And all the better if it will serve to spare him minor projects such as this, which more than anything represents an exercise in strategic withholding and disclosure of information to the audience. When the surprises are sprung, there might be momentary gaps of surprise, but the impact is nothing compared to the resentment that stems from being blindsided by major information so carefully held back.

Emily Taylor (Rooney Mara) has spent four years in New York waiting for her husband Martin (Channing Tatum) to be released from prison; he was convicted of insider trading, their lush life ruined in the process. She’s been on antidepressants and, after an apparent suicide attempt, is put on a new drug by well-meaning shrink Jonathan Banks (Jude Law), who consults her former doctor Victoria Siebert (Catherine Zeta-Jones) about his new patient’s condition and background.

Martin has assured Emily: “I can get us back to where we were.” But upon his release, something doesn’t feel quite right between them — and, quite out of the blue at the 35-minute mark, one of the main characters does a Janet Leigh in Psycho and gets the blade.

At the ensuing trial, issues relating to memory loss, irresponsible medical treatment and possible insanity come into play. Jonathan’s professional standing takes a big hit, as does his marriage to a beautiful wife (Vinessa Shaw) no one would want to lose. There’s a lot of trade talk about the benefits and side effects of various drugs that might prove fascinating to those interested in such matters and boring to those who are not. But a good deal of the second half is devoted to Jonathan’s downward spiral due to his involvement in this unsavory case, with the uncommonly attractive actors providing by far the paramount reason for any sustained interest.

If the main parts were played by nonentities or common-looking performers, few viewers would stick with this, given the story’s unappealing underpinnings. Mara’s moodiness has an allure and, in a very different sort of role from The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo, she remains intriguing to watch at all times. Law, who stood out in Contagion, also commands attention, but it’s sometimes hard to watch his character so selflessly digging himself deeper into a hole from which it will be very hard to emerge. Tatum, who shone in Soderbergh’s summer hit Magic Mike, is solid, while Zeta-Jones, in her third film for the director, effectively wears her don’t-mess-with-me-or-you’ll-regret-it face.

The movie’s final twist feels borderline over-the-top risible, though one thing is certain: It never would have been possible in the old Hollywood, which otherwise seems to be a source for the sort of twisty storytelling attempted.

Opens: Friday (Open Road).
Production: Di Bonaventura Pictures.
Cast: Jude Law, Rooney Mara, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Channing Tatum, Vinessa Shaw, Ann Dowd.
Director: Steven Soderbergh.
Rated R, 106 minutes.