

The Hot List: Joaquin Phoenix

Published October 6, 2005

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Life ain't easy for a boy named Sue, but it's not much easier for a boy named Joaquin. Long before Joaquin Phoenix adopted Johnny Cash's sonorous bass for the biopic "Walk the Line," his own voice was made famous by a high-pitched, wrenching call to 911. He placed it on Halloween 1993 after his twenty-three-year-old brother, actor River Phoenix, overdosed on heroin in front of a Los Angeles nightclub. The recording played on an endless loop in newscasts for weeks. It's a legacy that follows Joaquin – and irritates him – to this day.

Now the press is after him again, as his performance in Walk the Line (opening in November) is already being compared to Jamie Foxx's Academy Award-winning turn in Ray, making Phoenix, who turns thirty-one on October 28th, one of the odds-on favorites to take home this year's Oscar for Best Actor. Phoenix, who morphs into Cash so seamlessly that it's difficult to discern where one artist ends and the other begins, meticulously researches every role he takes on.

In this case, however, investigating Cash's abuse of amphetamines and alcohol forced the actor to examine his own life.

"I started reading about addiction and common traits of alcoholism," he says, "and I thought, 'Wow, some of this sounds familiar. I don't want to end up there in ten years.' John was an inspiration because I think he did his best work prior to his addiction."

Phoenix is discussing all this over orange juice and cigarettes. It's a hot L.A. morning at the Chateau Marmont, and he's folded into a rattan chair, his outstretched legs dressed casually in jeans and hiking boots with the laces undone. It's the kind of morning that begs for a mimosa, but the actor hasn't had a drink since checking himself into rehab for alcoholism in April.

"It sounds very dramatic to go into rehab," he says. "Maybe my being wealthy had something to do with it, but, for me, rehab was a country club where I played bridge."

Like Phoenix, Cash lost his older brother at a young age, a fact that the gossip columnists jumped on immediately: During filming, tabloids reported that Phoenix had a breakdown shooting a scene related to the death of Cash's brother, Jack, who was killed in a wood-sawing accident when Johnny was twelve.

Phoenix dismisses the claim, saying that he was merely acting. "I could sense the people were like, 'Oh, Joaquin's brother died and John's brother died!'" he says. "But that's

pretty naïve, because there's a vast difference between losing someone at age twelve and losing someone at age nineteen. It's a different dynamic, so it wouldn't even be helpful for me to draw on my personal experience."

He pauses, then adds, "It bothers me that all of that work turns into 'I lost my brother and John lost his brother,' because the work was so much more than that. While I don't know if John ever really came to terms with his brother's death, I have. I don't walk around carrying that the way John did."

Despite his success, Phoenix is what you'd call a "reluctant actor." His aversion to the press is well-known, although one can hardly blame him for resenting the medium that put his 911 call into heavy rotation as a form of entertainment. He's the kind of actor who terrifies reports who (rightfully) fear that asking the wrong question could lead him to walk out on the interview.

He claims to read none of his press, nor does he watch himself onscreen; he says he makes films purely for the experience rather than for the finished product.

To prepare himself for *Walk to Line*, Phoenix spent five months training with vocal and instrument coaches. He perfected Cash's whiskey-soaked inflections and did all his own singing in the film, recording twenty-six tracks from Cash's albums.

"I can't even do it anymore!" he says with a laugh, trying to deepen his voice but barely making it past baritone. "It's all in the throat muscles. You strengthen them with these exercises that are just humiliating."

He also learned how to play guitar the Johnny Cash way, with his arm wrapped around the back of the instrument rather than the side.

"He did his own variation on the country strum that was wildly inconsistent," Phoenix says, "so you couldn't break it down technically. First I had to learn that, and then I had to learn it with my arm wrapped clear around the back, which was really uncomfortable."

Co-star Reese Witherspoon mastered the autoharp and the rockabilly twang of Cash's wife, singer June Carter, generating Oscar buzz in her own right.

Though there were rumors that the onscreen couple didn't get along on the set, Phoenix credits Witherspoon with calming his fears over portraying such an iconic figure.

"I always had this feeling of anxiety, like, 'Will I be able to pull this off?'" he says. "But sharing in the experience with Reese, who had her own doubts and concerns, was enormously comforting."

Phoenix is the rare Hollywood star whose own life is just as interesting as the characters that he plays onscreen. Maybe more so. Born in Puerto Rico in 1974, he was the middle child of five siblings including brother River and sisters Rain, Summer and Liberty (at the age of four, Joaquin changed his name to the earthier-sounding Leaf, switching it back in his late teens).

His parents, then missionaries in the notorious Children of God commune, assumed the surname Phoenix to signify new beginnings.

After relocating to Los Angeles, his mother took a job at NBC, which helped the children break into acting. Following well-received performances in *Space Camp* and *Parenthood*, Joaquin took a five-year break from Hollywood, returning in 1995 to play a love-struck teen in the Nicole Kidman vehicle *To Die For*. More critically acclaimed performances followed with *Inventing the Abbotts*, *Quills* and *Gladiator*, which earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor.

"I never go into a movie thinking, 'Yeah, I got it!'" he says. "More than likely, I think it'll be terrible." Perhaps if Phoenix watched his movies he wouldn't be so hard on himself, but that seems unlikely to happen any time soon.

At this point, he doesn't even like discussing his films; the only topic he dislikes more is himself. When too many personal questions have been asked, something changes behind his eyes and the mood turns. The question "What would your fans be surprised to learn about you?" is greeted with silence.

"It sucks when you spend four months prepping for something and it's reduced to this shit," he says finally, stubbing out his cigarette in an ashtray. "The press always looks for an angle. Well, fuck, man. I think the angle is that Reese and I spent fucking four months prepping for a fucking movie and we learned to sing and play instruments. If that's not enough for the fucking story, then I don't know what you need me to do – shoot myself on the fucking set? What is going to satisfy people's need for sensationalism?"

When asked why he hates interviews, Phoenix sighs, "It really taints what's beautiful about acting and makes me lose interest in working. I don't have the desire to be the subject of conversation."

Suddenly he stands up, draining his glass of juice. "I quit."

And the interview is over.