

Let There Be Light (1946), John Huston's documentary about traumatized World War II veterans, and Lionel Rogosin's semiscripted *On the Bowery* (1956), which depicted severe alcoholism on Manhattan's Skid Row. He found his most pivotal inspirations, however, in the animal kingdom. "A stray dog that's skin and bones and has a limp and is wandering the streets—that's Freddie," Phoenix says. "The key was thinking about him as an animal, just pure id."

This key is turned to spectacular effect when Freddie whips himself into a tornado of rage inside a jail cell. "If you've seen video of a deer or a bear that finds its way into suburbia and the cops have to tranquilize it, it seems as if the brain stops working. If they're cornered, they'll slam into walls, or one leg tries to go left while the other is going right," Phoenix says. "It's complete fear and chaos. They can't control themselves at all."

CHANNELING AN INJURED ANIMAL FOR the cameras day in and day out is uniquely draining, as Phoenix's co-star Amy Adams, who plays Dodd's wholesome but waspish wife, observed. "I felt a lot of empathy for him, because Freddie is a lot to take home with you—that kind of longing and pain," she says. "Although he would laugh at me for saying that." Adams also appears with Phoenix in Spike Jonze's forthcoming *Her*, in which Phoenix falls in love with the voice on his computer's operating system. (Phoenix has also wrapped James Gray's *Nightingale*, an Ellis Island period piece co-starring Marion Cotillard and Jeremy Renner.) "We play best friends in Spike's movie, so the way Joaquin's process works, we sort of became best friends in life," Adams says. Phoenix, she adds, "wants everything to be real."

"With Joaq, it's 'Is that real or unreal or what is that?'" says James Mangold, director of the Johnny Cash biopic *Walk the Line* (2005), for which Phoenix received his second Oscar nomination. (His first was for the callow, sulfurous villain in 2000's *Gladiator*.) "The boundary between real life and acting is hard to find. Working with him day to day, you really feel for him, because he's either hitting it out of the park or struggling to find the ball. Another actor can be having a bad day, but he can reach into his bag of tricks and fake his way through. Joaq can never fake his way through."

'If you're bringing that much intensity to a part, you can't just line up four pictures a year.'

—DIRECTOR JAMES MANGOLD



Case in point: the *Walk the Line* scene in which Cash, ravaged by alcoholism and prescription-med addiction and rejected by June Carter, trashes his dressing room. Filming in a Memphis public school, Phoenix was asked to smash a guitar, pop a pill, drink a beer and sit down. "We start rolling," Mangold recalls, "and Joaq smashes the guitar to smithereens, grabs the sink in both hands and pulls it off the wall, water spraying everywhere, then pops his pill and drinks his beer and sits down. Camera operator and focus puller stayed with him the whole time. There's no question of doing another take—which was fine, this one was perfect—because he ripped the f---ing sink out of the wall. Not a movie sink. A real sink."

This story may help explain why it's been a while since you've seen a Joaquin Phoenix movie. "If you're bringing that much physical and emotional intensity to a part, you can't just line up four pictures a year," Mangold says. "If Joaq has seemed ambivalent about acting at times, I think it's because it's just so taxing."

Gotta serve somebody Hoffman, right, plays the founder of a Scientology-like cult, while Phoenix portrays his loyal but often unhinged follower

PHOENIX'S EARLY LIFE, LIKE HIS ACTING, was marked by adventure, improvisation and a total lack of a safety net. He was born in Puerto Rico in 1974, the third of five children of Arlyn and John Bottom, who were missionaries for the hippie cult Children of God. After transferring to Caracas, his parents broke ties with the cult and faced crushing poverty. "We stayed in a tiny room off a tiny house where my parents took care of this woman and she allowed us to live there in return," Phoenix says. "At a moment of real desperation—because we were straight-up dirt poor, we had nothing—we went into the woman's house to take food, and she caught us." He shudders at the memory. "I remember that fear so well, that terror, because we loved her. She was the only person looking out for us—we would have been homeless without her."

The family eventually stowed away on a cargo ship to Florida and later relocated yet again, to Los Angeles. They took on a new surname, Phoenix, to signify their new start. Arlyn Phoenix found a secretarial job at NBC and sought out auditions for her older children, who were already seasoned street performers. River, the eldest, booked a swath of commercials and TV appearances, which led

to movie roles; one of Joaquin's earliest gigs, at age 9, was playing River's younger brother in an *ABC Afterschool Special*.

Phoenix loved being a child actor. "On the first job I ever did, there was a fight scene. I was 8, and though I knew it wasn't real and they were actors, I was emotionally affected by it. I felt the adrenaline race through my body. There are kids who get on a BMX bike when they're 8 and they go, 'Whoa, this is incredible,' and grow up to do extreme sports. It's the same for me with acting."

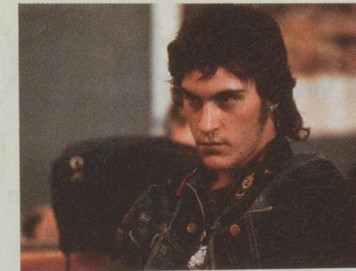
Yet, after playing Dianne Wiest's puberty-addled son in Ron Howard's *Parenthood* (1989), Phoenix withdrew from acting for most of his teens. He spent part of that time living with his father and sisters in Oaxaca, Mexico. "It was an incredibly idyllic experience, waking up every day at sunrise and catching a horse bareback," he says. "I built thatched huts on a farm with other kids my age, and later I worked in a bar. There were natives, Americans, Italians, all different cultures living together. Some of my friends in the States were experiencing a lot of fear and conflict with their parents as teenagers, and that just didn't exist down there."

Back in the U.S., he began acting again, breaking out at age 20 as the stoner henchman to Nicole Kidman's perky sociopath in Gus Van Sant's black comedy *To Die For* (1995). Van Sant had also directed River as a lovesick gay hustler in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991)—the fragile pinnacle of a brief and brilliant acting career.

River Phoenix, who earned an Oscar nomination at age 18 and died of a drug overdose five years later in 1993, is a secular saint of Generation X popular culture, a romantic icon of lost potential. His younger brother's *I'm Still Here* period raised the same specter of wasted promise, especially for those onlookers who weren't in on the joke. But to watch the film today, knowing that Phoenix is now doing the best work of his career, it's much easier to see *I'm Still Here*—indifferently received on its release—as a mordant, sometimes explosively funny riff on the Celebrity Entitlement Complex, anchored by a recklessly committed provocateur. Affleck, whom Phoenix met on the set of *To Die For*, has said the film is a work of performance art. Phoenix simply calls it a comedy.

"We thought, what if we could do the hardest-core version of *Curb Your*

Keeping It Real. Like the actor himself, Phoenix's movies blur the line between art and life



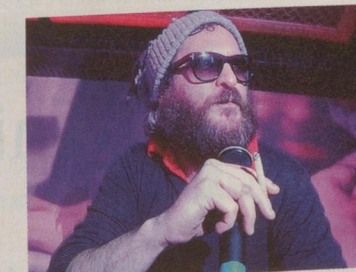
TO DIE FOR (1995)

Phoenix played a teen burnout seduced into murder in this acrid comedy loosely based on the Pamela Smart case



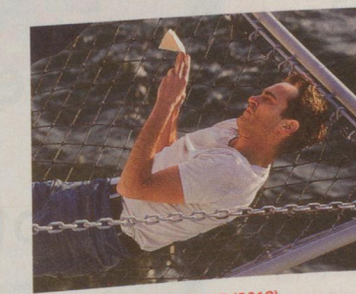
WALK THE LINE (2005)

For the biopic drawn from Johnny Cash's memoirs, Phoenix did so much voice training that his range significantly deepened



I'M STILL HERE (2010)

In this deadpan mockumentary, Phoenix's druggy alter ego JP retires from acting to attempt a hip-hop career



THE MASTER (2012)

Phoenix's troubled war veteran enters the fold of a guru who strongly evokes Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard

Enthusiasm?" Phoenix says. "*Seinfeld*, *The Sarah Silverman Program*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*—everybody plays themselves. I mean, *Ellen* was called *Ellen*. But it's not them; it's a distorted version of them." Celebrity reality shows were also a touchstone, particularly *Celebrity Rehab*. "It's so obvious that it's manipulated and such total bulls---, and yet there's something so terribly exciting about that, so dangerous and ugly and scary and fantastic!"

Phoenix went to elaborate lengths to achieve the very thing that celebrities employ armies of agents, publicists and stylists to avoid: making himself look stupid. "Once I became a total buffoon, it was so liberating," he says. "Part of why I was frustrated with acting was because I took it so seriously. I want it to be so good that I get in my own way. It's like love: when you fall in love, you're not yourself anymore. You lose control of being natural and showing the beautiful parts of yourself, and all somebody recognizes is this"—Phoenix bugs out his eyes, lets his jaw go slack and reaches his hands out in supplication—"total desperation. And that's very unattractive."

FREDDIE QUELL IS NOT THE WORK OF AN actor desperate to be loved. He's too catastrophically unsuited to a conventional redemptive arc. Freddie is a true misfit—not a cuddly Hollywood-movie misfit but someone we'd turn away from in real life, afraid that his off-ness might contaminate us. "Freddie has these brief moments when he sees himself as what he is, as others see him, and it's terrifying to him," Phoenix says. "He feels a real remorse for what he is."

Yet Phoenix does not refer to *The Master* as a tragedy or even a drama. "I thought it was a comedy. I laughed the entire time I was watching it," he says. "I think discomfort is funny—partly because I experience discomfort a lot, and it's a way of laughing at it and getting a release."

That discomfort is essential to Phoenix's uncompromising discipline, which is ferocious enough to sometimes appear as its opposite. Freddie can conform to no Cause, but Phoenix has recommitted to his. Making *The Master*, he says, "Paul called me Bubbles on the set. Bubbles was Michael Jackson's pet monkey, and I was Paul's pet monkey." And that was O.K. with you, Joaquin? "I didn't mind it at all. I love having a master." ■