



*Hating life as a teen idol, Johnny Depp found stardom playing some very odd individuals, only to become an icon. GABRIELLE DONNELLY meets the sexiest ever Mad Hatter*

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**H**elena Bonham Carter once explained to me the basis of the friendship between her husband Tim Burton and Johnny Depp. 'They're both complete originals who love creating things and are amazingly talented at it,' she said. 'They have a real respect for each other and a sincere love, too. And they

both have a childlike quality, in that they both seem to be around the same mental age and share the same sense of humour.' She paused, thinking for a moment. 'They both really love poo jokes,' she concluded helpfully.

Scatological humour notwithstanding, the creative partnership between the two men has proved a powerful one. It started back in 1990, when spooky *Edward Scissorhands* propelled a handsome young TV actor to Hollywood fame; continued four years later with *Ed Wood*, the cult favourite about a tragically untalented director of B movies; made a sweep of *Sleepy Hollow* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; and ended up with *Sweeney Todd* a couple of years ago. Next year the duo will burst back onto the screen with Burton's vision of *Alice in Wonderland*, including the almost-too-perfect casting of Depp as the Mad Hatter, with curly red hair and eyes sunk deep into reddened sockets.

Quite a leap, as anyone will agree, from his role this year of John Dillinger, swashbuckling antihero of the Michael Mann blockbuster *Public*

*Enemies*. But when I meet Depp himself in Chicago, where he is to attend the premiere of that film, he says, firmly, that he relishes the change of pace involved in playing eccentric characters.

'I've been very lucky to be able to keep being who I am,' he admits. 'I think it's more difficult to be an individual these days than it used to be. I think in the 1920s and 30s, and even maybe through to the 50s, there was more opportunity for people to be different from each other, and then in the 60s and 70s, that started to decrease for some reason. I wouldn't say that I've particularly set out to be unusual in my career. I've never, ever sat down and made a conscious career choice or thought: This role will move my career forward, so I'll take it... I wouldn't even know how to do that. I've always just kind of done what I've done, and done what felt natural to me.'

He did not set out to be an actor at all, but a musician. The son of a civil engineer father and a waitress mother – 'She's a tough bird,' he says approvingly today of Betty Sue, his mother – he had a troubled and somewhat lonely childhood, with his family moving often in search of work, and a background of constant fighting between his parents, who at last divorced when he was 15. When he was 12, Betty Sue, thinking to help him through a particularly rough patch, gave him a guitar.

'It was a magical moment for me,' he says now. 'I took that guitar and I basically locked myself away in a room and I didn't come out until I was 15. I don't remember anything that happened around that time. I don't remember



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puberty. I don’t remember anything. I just remember learning to play the guitar. Oh, and before I went into the room, I went into a music store and lifted a book of guitar chords, which now that I look back on it was actually a criminal activity, but the book did teach me how to play.’

When he was 16, he dropped out of school to become a rock musician. ‘I joined a band called The Kids and I thought that was it for me for life, but life didn’t work out like that.

And in some ways I miss those days, but oddly enough, I’m glad things worked out the way they did, because I still love to play the guitar. I do it every day and I love it just as much as I did when I was 12. I think if I were still doing that as a profession, then some of that love might have been lost along the way, you know? The relationship might have grown a little rusty or something. As it is, it’s something I do just for pleasure, and it’s an incredibly important part of my life and a great source of joy for me.’

The Kids moved to Los Angeles to find fame, but split up before they signed a record deal. Meanwhile, Depp had discovered acting. In the 1980s, he was cast as a baby-faced cop masquerading as a high-school kid on the TV show *21 Jump Street* and immediately found himself a teen idol, a period of his life he has admitted he found profoundly uncomfortable. It was *Edward Scissorhands* that rescued him from the teen scene, and he quickly built up a résumé of off-beat films in which he played eccentric and often lonely characters, such as the sweet misfit Sam of *Benny and Joon*, the wandering gypsy of *Chocolat*, the openly unheroic Ichabod Crane of *Sleepy Hollow*.

Fine films all, but as he himself once wryly commented, ‘they made about \$3.75 at the box office’. When he was contacted by blockbuster producer Jerry Bruckheimer to star in a movie based on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disneyland, he has joked that he thought they had reached the wrong telephone number. As it turned out, a folk hero was born, and for Depp, a whole new level of Hollywood success.

‘It falls into the category of a strange job for a grown man!’ he admits, a little uncertain of his sudden rise to mainstream fame. ‘But it’s a very strange thing that happened to me with the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise. I’m meeting this amazing cross-section of people who come up to me and say: “I really like Captain Jack Sparrow,” and that’s very nice, of course. But then they’ve gone on and said: “And I also really liked *Benny and Joon*, too.” So it’s given a whole new lease of life to the other earlier films I’ve made. So it’s been a strange ride. A nice ride but an odd one.’

He admits that he finds the constant pressure of being in the public eye a little daunting at times. ‘You never get used to it,’ he says frankly. ‘If you did, you’d be insane. The definition of “normal” for me has just gone. I mean, I understand what the recognition is all about, and I appreciate it on a very profound level, but there’s only so much that one human being can deal with. And I’m not even at the highest level of it. There’s the Brad and Angelina

thing, and what Michael Jackson went through – now, that *would* be a lot to chew on. I don’t know how those people live with it or deal with it. As it is, I’m tempted not to leave my house!’

His anchor, he has said firmly and often, is his family: his longtime love, French singer Vanessa Paradis, whom he describes, besottedly, as ‘my girl’, and their two ‘kiddies’, Lily Rose, 10, and Jack, seven. He says proudly that his children are growing up into strong characters, and that they seem unaffected by their father’s public image. ‘They have a super-normal life, you know? They have rules at home, they go to school, they play with their friends. They’re infinitely smarter than I am and they’ve sussed out how to get along in society way better than I have yet. I go to school functions and I watch how they get along with the other kids, and I’m blown away every time by them. Someone asked me the other day what I teach them, and the answer is, I don’t think there’s anything I can teach them – they teach me!’

When he is not working, the family divide their time between homes in Los Angeles, Paris and the small deserted Caribbean island that he purchased a few years ago, where they go as often as they can to retreat from the glare of fame, and where, he says delightedly, ‘we do absolutely nothing but walk on the beach and pick shells – no toys or anything, and it’s just perfect’.

Their main home is Plan-de-la-Tour, just north of Saint-Tropez, where Depp lounges in the sun and chats with the locals, and every so often goes to check on his vineyard. He is famously fond of French wine. ‘My favourite is a Bordeaux called Calon-Ségur, which is the most amazing wine in terms of a reasonably priced wine you can have all the time and never get sick of. That’s for everyday, but if you want to get hoity-toity, there are some amazing other French wines there. There’s Petrus, which is really something, and Cheval Blanc. Those are all Bordeaux, but there’s also a Burgundy called Romanée-Conti, which is just unbelievable. If you can get your hands on that, it’s like finding Nirvana, really.’