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# Rolling Stone

BY DAVE MARSH

BY TOM BURKE

LES  
ROLLING  
STONE

BY DON HENLEY  
AND GLENN FREY

BY JOE KLEIN

# 267

Cover photograph by Annie Leibovitz

## Nobody home at the White House

By Patrick J. Buchanan 13

You might well wonder why a man who was recently described in these very pages as someone who spent "ten years of his life writing angry, self-righteous speeches for Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew" would have a byline in these pages. It's because we believe in freedom of speech.

## Humor: Eagles 15, Rolling Stone?

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Other than that softball score, humor is suspended for this issue.

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This year's superstar, John Travolta, is just like any other dedicated Scientologist actor who happens to strike it rich.

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Marsh went home to Motor City to talk over with Bob Seger why the latter is an "overnight success" after fifteen years of trying.



## Irving Azoff: roaring thunder five foot three

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Cameron, who's over six feet tall but still a fun-loving kid at heart, went to watch five-foot-three Azoff demonstrate why he's the roaring lion of rock managers. He discovered that Azoff really likes terrorizing an entire industry. "He's still short, though," Cameron reported. How short? "He's so short he has to roll down his socks to take a s\*\*\*. He's so short he—" Get outta here. Shut up.

## A tale of two ethnocentrism

By Joe Klein 78

The mess in the Middle East usually comes to us as statistics: PLO stronghold shelled, five dead; guerrillas slay three in Israeli settlement. Joe Klein went behind both lines—such lines as exist in guerrilla warfare—to see what it all meant in human terms.

## Rock & roll

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Look for a final album from Lynyrd Skynyrd; weirded-out British rocker Ian Dury becomes a pirate king; the city of Boston loses its two best music clubs; Hot Tuna didn't know what to call it, so they called it quins; Bob Marley leads a peace concert in Jamaica; a Teamsters strike may keep you from getting some upcoming albums; and

the movie "FM" takes it on the chin.

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*Make No Mistake,  
John Travolta Is  
Beholden to No One*

# Struttin' His Stuff

By  
Tom Burke

**I**t's clear  
the instant

John Travolta lopes into the Imperial Gardens on Sunset Strip—clearer even than during his stunning opening *Saturday Night Fever* walk—he will be revered forever, in the manner of Elvis, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and for the same reasons. No one ever really felt they would know Elvis, Marilyn, Dean, or that they *should*: certain personalities seem born for the remoteness of the movie screen, not the vulgar, ersatz intimacy of television. Actually having such mythical creatures in one's living room would destroy the lush, intricate fantasies they permit you in the dark of the movie house.

Contributing editor TOM BURKE is the author of *Burke's Steerage* (Putnam's 1976).

Travolta's personal impact has nothing to do with what he says, sitting next to me in the restaurant, which is "Hi." He barely needs to speak; the grin does, as do the eyes, which glow perpetually in otherworldly blue, like Amy Irving's and Andrew Stevens' eyes in the last reel of *The Fury*. Neither is his real-life walk especially remarkable. Currently, journalists assert that he always walks as he did in *Fever's* opening, his weight in his hips, shifting them like gears, but that's ludicrous. That was acting. Actually, he lopes, hunching a bit, vaguely simian, as are his features. But his force is physical, not-quite-accessibly sexual; he burns a hotter temperature than the human mean, as animals do.

This, more than anything else, explains his swift TV-to-cinema progression. Television could not contain him. Those who enter the republic's rumpus rooms via the Chromacolor window on the world aren't really supposed to burn hotter temperatures than the middle American norm. The medium was *meant* to embrace, say, Mary Tyler Moore, Goldie Hawn and Lily Tomlin have made the transition, but consider the *men* who've done more than moonlight a picture and then, if lucky, fade back into regular TV pay: the fate, probably, of Henry Winkler, who, sadly, just doesn't burn hotter.

Not that you're supposed to bring up these matters with Travolta. Waiting in the expensive, crowded



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

Imperial Gardens with his publicist, Michele—his *Welcome Back, Kotter* taping has run overtime again, he'll be late for dinner—I suggest that it will be interesting to know what John observed about the rather opulent sexuality of *Saturday Night Fever*'s actual Brooklyn dispothiles; and Michele, more efficient than foxy, expresses alarm in her proper British accent.

"Um, you're not really going to ask John that?" Michele gasps courteously. "I don't know. I think that would... embarrass John."

Possibly Michele is right. In addition to, and working in tandem with, his sexuality is a marked ingenueness, an almost callow vulnerability. If I were kinder, I would call this a genuine sweetness, a less-than-casual interest in pleasing others. Michele exits as soon as John enters, and I find myself aiding him, conversationally: though eager to ingratiate, he seems unsure how, or of what to say. First, he simply smiles. The subject of cowboy boots is introduced: we are both wearing them. "I almost always do," John offers, grinning. I tell him of the night I got stuck in a boot and had to summon friends to pull it off, mostly to watch him listening, which he does intently—not, I sense, to ingratiate, but because he is sharply curious. As I speak, he continually visualizes what is described, construing messages in his visions. At the story's end, he says, "Well, that certainly was a... boot story," stating a fact, nothing more, as is his habit.

Another of his habits is to question. "If you write," he begins abruptly, "you have to wait awhile for the reaction to your work, right? Whereas I'm judged instantly, by my peers." Judged? "Sure. That's what it is, isn't it? How do you see it?" But which is more important: how his peers feel about his work, or how he feels? "Well... which is more important to you?"

And he grins at what is obviously his way of handling interviews. Actually, if he didn't act he would be rather good at interviewing, because his interest is clearly sincere. "I know, I'm the one who's supposed to talk. Okay. I know that if I don't feel right about my work, I'm discontent, no matter how much praise or money is involved. If I haven't done it to my own satisfaction, nothing will convince me it's any good. But if I'm really pleased with it, and it doesn't please others, it's still okay." Oddly, his inflection is becoming Vinnie Barbarino's, yet he concludes with, "I must say, it's myself I must please," a decidedly British phrasing. "Pleasing myself and the audience—that's optimum. Though the audience is the one it's all for." He seems to doubt that; he's frowning, abstracted, speaking sotto voce. "I'm not easy to please, with my own work, not at all. I'm very hard on myself that way."

The Oriental waitress executes a mini *Nô* play, "What's Your Order?" John requests tempura and a Coke, and politely awaits a question. I remind myself that he is an exceptionally good actor, and since the dawn of New Journalism, actors have become adept at flattering writers. Why is it so inviting to mistrust him? Because he looks too good and made it too big too fast? Because he must know full well how seductive his presence is? Ask him about that, and he grins and blushes; he is probably not yet accomplished enough as an artist to blush on cue. He is rising to the occasion. Why has he talked so little to the press? I don't ask that now, however, for he's suddenly discussing *Grease*.

"...It was fun, on one level. Nowhere near as complicated as *Saturday Night Fever*, but it still wasn't easy because I'd never had to play a *Fifties* dude on the screen before. Even though it's a musical and looks simple. I felt that I had to think a lot about how a guy's behavior would have differed twenty-five years ago or so, before I was born. I mean, *movement* had to be different. There hadn't been the drug thing, or the awareness of blacks, so none of those styles of moving or talking had happened yet. Behavior, even for guys like Danny Zuko, who I play, had to have been much more... foursquare, you know? *Posture* was different: it was *better*. Also, there wasn't the urban sense of style or behavior that kids everywhere get from TV today. There had to be an innocence that nobody was really aware of, because they didn't have the sophistication to compare it with. Am I saying that right?"

Yes, but dutifully: Travolta does not have that much to say about *Grease*, which is not surprising. There is not that much to say about it. It's pleasant enough.

Olivia Newton-John is pleasant enough in it; it is there. He ought to discuss it, he knows, but there is still so much to be said about the giant: even now, months after its unveiling, *Saturday Night Fever* still creates lines wherever it plays. In its first sixteen weeks and four days, it grossed a staggering \$81,241,000, about eleven times its break-even figure, and that's only for domestic release. They're going to love it in Italy, France, the U.K., Tanganyika. The TV sale will not preclude endless neighborhood-theater revivals: it's already spawned the four-part TV series *Joe and Valerie*, which is such a flagrant rip-off you wonder that Robert Stigwood doesn't sue. And as early as last January, word was out that the movie version of *Grease* was less than stupendous, but no one around Paramount or RSO was wearing Scotch tape, at night, between the eyebrows, to erase worry furrows. *Grease*, after all, has The Man.

"That's what they called me when I went to the 2001 Odyssey disco in Brooklyn to start working on *Fever—The Man*," John grins at that; it pleases him in an uncomplicated way. As he eats tempura, he wipes his fingers methodically between each bite. "They said that because of Barbarino, naturally." It's important to note that during *Welcome Back, Kotter*'s genesis, Travolta was in no way meant to be the show's star. "Reading the *Kotter* scripts, I saw right away that Vinnie Barbarino was written as a dumb punk. I knew I'd have to work all the time to give him humanity. I saw him as really a naive kid, you know?"

Actually, in all his roles so far, Travolta has had to work with considerable imagination to flesh out the characters, from the cretinous punk in *Kotter* to the sadistic punk in *Carrie* to the chauvinistic punk in *Fever* to the libidinous punk in *Grease*. And shouldn't his most persistent concern, doing these, have been the matter of being typed as an actor? He stops eating at that, looking concerned, though more at the question than what it's about.

"Sure I did, especially with *Fever*, and I'll get to that, if you want, but first look at the positive side of it: the TV show was the first break, the first of the punks, and I knew even then I was a good enough actor to find ways to elevate Vinnie that weren't in the script. *Carrie*? A first movie break. The guy is a punk, but I wanted to work with Brian De Palma: I knew the picture itself would be interesting, attract a lot of attention. And it was a small part; I didn't think I'd get much noticed in it. Which I didn't. Danny Zuko in *Grease*—by then, I wasn't quite worried about typing, but sure, it is hard to turn things down, still. And I already knew that after it, I would be doing a picture with Lily Tomlin. *Moment by Moment*, which I can't talk about yet, but is, take my word for it, a completely different guy than anything I've played so far. Also, as I said, Danny's a *Fifties* dude, and ultimately sympathetic, and the picture is not realistic, it's stylized, a musical, a parody of the *Fifties* almost. There aren't that many musicals around to do—who knows when I'll ever do another?—and I thought it a good move for me. Brando did a musical, *Guys and Dolls*, very early in his career."

These considerations John has sketched gently in the air with his heavy hands; his physicality is such that his whole body gets involved in his explanations. His whole mind and doubtless his heart are involved in his career. It's well known around the Polo Lounge, Beverly Hills, and Elaine's restaurant (the Polo Lounge East) that Travolta is beholden to no one—no, not even Stigwood—when it comes to his career decisions: that he is Svengali to his own Trilby; that he chooses his roles; that while he's close to his longtime manager Bob LeMond, it's John who says yea or nay to everything, right down to which of his publicity stunts are used and where and when he makes personal appearances. The interviews he does are dispensed like pieces of the True Cross. He is not being aloof, only selective; he cares. At ABC West, they still discuss John's realization that, as Barbarino, he was receiving 10,000 fan letters a week. He felt: they all ought to be answered and set about finding a means to do that. He had his people methodically research fan mail answering services, but found the least expensive one charges twenty-five cents per answer, or \$17,500 a week, or \$910,000 a year—high even at his Barbarino salary.

But back to *Saturday Night Fever*. First he read the magazine article on which the scenario was based.

*Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night*; he signed for the role before a script was ready. "Now, Danny Zuko in *Grease*, no matter what else he may or may not be, he's not difficult to grasp, you can see immediately how to act him. But Tony Manero—I was in the middle of the TV show, I was too close to Barbarino, and all! Tony looked like to me was an extension of him, okay?"

For months, flacks at Paramount, ABC and RSO have warned that John Travolta Jr. doesn't discuss the late Diana Hyland, and yet he just brings her up. When he says her name, his eyes become even more luminous, as they did when she won last year's best-TV-performance Emmy posthumously, and John accepted it for her, shouting, "Here's to you, Diana, wherever you are!" They met in 1976, when Hyland, a Broadway and TV veteran, was cast in John's made-for-TV-movie vehicle, *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*, about a young man born without natural immunities to disease and forced to live sealed in a germ-free artificial environment, as he watched other teenagers from his window, coveting, sexually and otherwise. Diana Hyland played his mother.

Diana Hyland was forty, Travolta was twenty-two. He had never been involved with any woman as deeply as he became involved with her and the magnitude of their affair stunned him daily. Last spring, when she died in his arms of cancer, friends doubted he'd recover.

"You knew her?" He's ecstatic. I explained that Diana was a casual friend in her New York theater days. "Then you know how...unbelievable she was! Diana gave me the confidence."

## The packed restaurant's

attention is now on him: all heads have swung slowly to his booth. Like nodding radar scanners. Everybody is sidling up to him, from Henry Edwards, who wrote the script for the Stigwood Organisation's movie *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, to the usual tourists who always ask for autographs for their kids and never have pens or paper. Abruptly, John looks at Kris Kristofferson did when one asked him about Janis Joplin. Kris murmured, "I don't like talkin' 'bout Janis now, it's like grave robbin'." John doesn't say that, but as he's spoken of his dead lady, another presence has, curiously, overtaken and possessed his own. His voice has coarsened with the inflections of South Brooklyn or North Philadelphia, and his heavy jaw, hard, inverted parenthesis of a mouth, and his nose, subtly humped at the bridge, have arranged themselves into a sort of defensive arrogance. The young Brando had these features, and would arrange them thus when he wished pain not to show (when he did, it did, sharply).

John Travolta, however, seems almost to catch himself doing that, and he smiles in a publicly pleasant way again. For the tourists, he avoids signing autographs; instead, he asks them about themselves, and listens to their answers. A weary frown appears between his brows, as if someone had pressed a dull knife there, and he wants to leave. His Mercedes 450 SL coupe is brought up to the door. Though Travolta drives it with concentration and professional care, once, at a corner of Sunset Strip, he executes a fast, rakish turn, as though it had occurred to him that he was being taciturn and unglamorous, and wished to intercept a colorful moment. Perhaps he worries that he bores people. I ask him that, and he grins and nods.

"Besides this, I drive a 1955 Thunderbird," he offers. "a collector's item, a classic. Okay? When I come to the auto shop now, they triple the bill. Had the T-Bird in there for months, the bill was unbelievable, way beyond what it would have been if... They aren't even subtle about it anymore."

And why should they be? It's common knowledge that following *Fever*, John can ask \$1 million a movie. "Well, but I'm no millionaire, man." That he almost snaps, and he stresses it again.

"It sounds like I make a lot," Travolta insists quietly.

"but I'm in the fifty-percent tax bracket. Everyone seems to get a piece of the action. You might be surprised at how little cash I actually have, okay?"

Oh, come off it. Ultimately, he'll be loaded. "Well, I don't like talking about money. Or thinking about it. Okay? Because of money, I almost didn't come west at all for the *Kotter* audition, 'cause in New York I'd gotten offered a Broadway part in *The Ritz*, and the salary was \$750 a week! I had never made that kind of money. My manager advised me to come—ultimately." (One of his habits is to appropriate a word of yours he's liked, and drop it into his own phrases.) "And I never thought I would get *Kotter*. It was never a sure thing. I was sure they'd say, like they do in TV, 'You could act the part, but there's this other guy who is the part.' Mostly, they cast that way, but this time they went for the acting, which I really respect." Grin. "Naturally. Okay, so I got it. Yeah, more than \$750 a week. And I thought, 'John, you now deserve to buy yourself something.'"

So he bought a DC-3. "That was the first true air-

## Interviews he does are dispensed like pieces of the True Cross



**T**he slow dancer at work in *Grease*: — he'd love to leave Gabe Kotter's classroom.

liner," he explains. "I, uh, bought one of these. A real one. Actually, I have another plane now, too, a single-engine Air Coupe, really a little plane. As a kid in New Jersey, I'd lie awake nights listening to planes flying in and out of LaGuardia airport, heading west, and I'd have dreams about the people in them, who were going places. It was a very romantic vision to me, okay?"

It had to be, Englewood, New Jersey, where he grew up, though green and affluent, was, in John's words, "hardly any place at all." His father, an ex-star athlete, ran the Travolta Tire Exchange there. John does not attempt to portray his childhood as drab or deprived. His parents were the town's "hot" couple: his mother was an actress who coached acting, and his three sisters and two brothers all made stabs at show business. When I ask John to recall his growing up, the memories seem to begin at age twelve, when Actors Studio, the New York thespians' school attended by, among others, Brando, Al Pacino and Robert De Niro, held workshops in Englewood. "My mother got me in as an observer, but she didn't have to urge me. Man, nobody pushed me into show business. I was aching for it! And those rehearsals knocked me out!"

"The first time I visited class, I came in when some of the studio people, the advanced students from New York, were in the middle of doing a scene. After a couple of minutes they, like, broke character to ask the director a question, and I was stunned. I mean, I didn't know

they'd been acting—that's how believable they were!"

Of course he joined the group; he was good enough early enough to be cast in the juvenile lead in a Studio production of *Who! Save the Plowboy?* that same year, but he didn't go on studying acting at any length. "I could sort of duplicate what I saw those people do in class as soon as I saw it. I don't mean imitate them—I mean I always did have this ability to observe people, watch them awhile, and very quickly absorb their... essence and then reproduce it. Nobody told me to do that. I just always stored things up about people, and when I had a character to create, I found I had this whole reserve of behavior and mannerisms to draw on. You remember the guys you knew who are like the guy you're playing, you build a character that way. The last thing you do is, you add your own emotions to the script. That part's the most important of all: it's like, inside a character's facade, I live. I really come alive when I'm doing that."

Not that he'd have to wait long to do that professionally. One of his sisters was cast in a road company of *Gypsy*, and during summer vacation he toured with her, hanging out backstage, learning all the show's songs and dances. "And New York, and all the shows playing, that was like wonderland to me then!" He'd come to Manhattan with his brothers and sisters, "also because, back then, Greenwich Village was still the only place you could buy good bell-bottom pants." The day he was sixteen, he asked his parents if he could quit school and get on with his acting career; they were eminently willing. "So I was in New York on my own. It was not instantaneous success." Saying that, though, he can't help but smile. It almost was. Oh, he paid very brief dues, living in a Lower West Side cold-water flat in a condemned, heatless building, but in no time at all he was doing TV commercials, then a road company of *Grease* (he did not play the lead) and a small singing/dancing role in *Over Here*, the show that provided the remains of the Andrews Sisters with a Broadway debut.

"... So it wasn't as though nothing was happening to me in the East," Travolta says. It's late now, he has to get up in the morning for *Kotter*, he would like to shut up and crash, but he stifles yawns, because he has assigned himself this talking. "I took the chance on going west, because, sure, I really wanted the Barbarino role. I knew what a TV series could do for an actor... and I saw that Vinnie could be a 'hot' role, one I could really flash in. Okay?" If John is honest about his ambition, he's also careful to emphasize what he's done for art's sake. As soon as *Kotter* hit, and John, as Barbarino, hit bigger, he cut two record albums for Midson. The first, predictably titled *John Travolta*, begot a hit single, "Let Her In," and *Billboard's* award for new pop male vocalist of the year; the second was called *Can't Let You Go*, and John's "Slow Dancing" single from it was also charted, but the cuts' wide demographic appeal had little to do with John's voice or style, which are acceptable, not startling. "When the record albums came out, I was really pressured to do personal appearance tours promoting them. The money to do this would have been tremendous—like, \$25,000 per appearance, the total

was up in six figures. Just to sign autographs, which I don't like doing. I'll talk to people, but just signing your name on something, what's the point? Anyway, I said no and opted to do a tour of the play *Bus Stop* during our hiatus for almost no bread. I wanted to act, and the guy in the play's this very naive cowboy; it was a chance to fight that typing thing, play a Western dude instead of all these urban types. I could add to my craft the range doing that guy would give me, okay? The record promotion people just wanted to go with the heat of the moment, with the Vinnie Barbarino fame. They weren't interested in my skills or talents. And I care about product, not PR."

Now he can't suppress the yawns, nor his need to reach verbal conclusions. "Doing that play at that moment was a good choice. When you are hot, you've got to make very careful career choices. Hmmin?" I ask if the audience yelled when he stepped onstage in *Bus Stop*, and if so, what? "Yeah, they did. They yelled the usual: 'Travolta' and 'Barbarino' and 'My Man.'"

The next morning is inexplicably cold, the L.A. sun is metallic. It is the sort of southern California day that broods cloudlessly, during which one is beset with ill-defined apprehensions and forbodings, and if you lie by a swimming pool, or anywhere on cement, you can feel one of the 543 yearly movements of the San Andreas Fault. These are always more distinctly felt in depleted North Hollywood, where the American Broadcasting facilities are surrounded by prison-mesh fencing for the same reason that Travolta lives in a high-security building. At ABC, he is figuratively imprisoned; this he refuses to discuss, but everyone knows he'd now love to leave Gabe Kotter's classroom.

Besides the picture with Lily Tomlin, he's set to do *American Gigolo* for Paramount ("It's about a guy who is obsessed with giving sexual pleasure to women; he doesn't understand the concept of receiving the pleasure himself at all"). Paramount also has plans to star him in another *Godfather* continuation (he'd play the son of Michael Corleone, Al Pacino's role). And he's just signed his own production company for a two-picture deal (at a million a movie) with Orion, the independent production company that Jon Peters, Streisand's friend, is making big negotiations with. He hardly needs ABC anymore, but they need him, and they're not about to let him out of his *Kotter* contract, which could explain his sober restlessness, here on the *Kotter* lot, his ceaseless pacing of his dressing room, which is not grand, sparsely furnished and temporal—a space he could vacate rapidly, without looking back.

**A**ctually, John hasn't much wanted to talk again today; he guards his press encounters closely, and one must battle and bargain for

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN PAPPE

every minute spent with him. Two of the three reasons for this he'll admit and discuss: first, he works nonstop, hasn't much time, values his leisure time highly, and reserves weekends for flying and tending his airplanes. Clearly, he's thought out what he's going to say publicly long before one confronts him, and when he does, he's done. No hanging out, philosophizing, during the smoking of funny things. (He does not smoke cigarettes, or drink, and asserts he never smokes anything funny, anyway.) And what about the reporters who've turned up so far? "They've been all right," John offers unhesitatingly. "except they seem to sit there staring, waiting for me to say something like, 'Far-er out,' or 'Gee,' as though that's all I could say. They haven't been very interested in... the real me, you know? They actually expected me to be, in person, these guys I have acted. I just couldn't believe that—that they knew so little about acting."

Finally, there is this possibility: that although he is anything but dumb, he genuinely fears being thought so. Like a lot of high school dropouts, he's reached the age at which he's apprehensive about his lack of book learning. Even certain TV and movie people have read Chaucer and Baudelaire, and in Hollywood, if they haven't, they drop the names anyway. John's been heavily exposed to this, of course, and sometimes, when you query him intricately, his eyes seem to glaze, as though he fears the question contains a trick. I do not ask him about this last, however; in a way, I've begun to guard him from his own vulnerability. Partly, this is again his presence, which calls up something parental. Partly, it's because he is, quite simply, an earnest young man who does try. You sense, by now, that he is not so much callow as unformed: that Diana Hyland's death jarred him profoundly and began the shaping of his character; that, given time, he'll touch depths within himself that will dazzle movie cameras, provided he goes on finding directors and cinematographers as respectful, and loving, as *Saturday Night Fever*'s.

Oddly, it's the mention of Hyland's name that restores his good mood now. "I got the *Fever* script. I read it that night, frowning all through it. I wondered if I could give it enough dimension. Diana took it into the other room, and in about an hour she burst back in. 'Baby,' she shouted, 'you are going to be great in this! This Tony, he's got all the colors! First, he's angry about something; he hates the trap that Brooklyn and his dumb job are! There's a whole glamorous world out there waiting which he feels only when he dances. And he grows; he gets out of Brooklyn!' She went on like that a long time. 'He's miles from what you've played, and what isn't in the script, you're going to put there!' I said, 'He's also king of the disco. I'm not that good a dancer.' Diana said, 'Baby, you're going to learn!'"

John started dance practice the next day with a member of the Dancing Machine, a top disco group, and he began physical workouts with the trainer Sylvester Stallone used for *Rocky*. "I ran miles and miles, dropped twenty pounds, got a whole new body out of it." Still, he was dubious. In New York, he began his sorties to the 2001 Odyssey disco in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, with *Fever*'s scenarist Norman Wexler, to observe the tribal rites. "The first time, I tried... disguises, you know? A hat, dark glasses." This seems to embarrass him. "Well, it didn't work, and it's not the right way for me, anyway. I had to do my observing as myself, see how they'd react to me. The Odyssey's manager would admit him through a side door, he'd sit in the back, in the shadows. "It would be an hour before anyone saw me, and during that time I concentrated on every detail of their behavior I could. Their whole way of dancing, moving, conversing, relating to their girls, was ritualistic. It had its set rules."

When he was spotted, he claims, no one yelled. "It's Barbarino!" In her review of the movie, critic Pauline Kael wrote of the Odyssey patrons: "These boys are part of the post-Watergate, working-class generation with no heroes except in TV-showbiz lands; they have a historical span of twenty-three weeks, with repeats at

## When he stepped onstage in Bus Stop, the audience yelled 'My man!'

Christmas. Yet John asserts that when they recognized him, they'd say, 'Hey, man! Hey, it's fuckin' Travolta!' without any marked surprise that he was present. After all, every Thursday night, he entered their living rooms.

"A couple of guys would be talking to me, their girlfriends would come up, they'd say, 'Hey, stay away from him, don't bug Travolta. Don't bother me. I'm talking to The Man!' And they'd actually push the girls away. Tony Manero's whole male chauvinist thing. I got it from watching those guys in the disco."

When filming in the Odyssey began, director John Badham decided to use some of the Brooklyn kids as extras; several asked Travolta home for dinner to meet their families, "and a lotta the stuff in the scenes at home, at the dinner table, and the ones with my brother in the picture, who's leaving the priesthood—I got the feet of those moments from those Brooklyn dinners. Yeah, I was raised Catholic, but it never had the huge importance in our house that it has in those Italian families in Bay Ridge."

When he talks of the Bay Ridge boys, he unconsciously begins imitating them, or rather, them imitating him imitating them, as he did performing Tony Manero. The infection coarsens again, but it's not Vinny Barbarino's time. Here you recall what happened in *Saturday Night Fever*: obviously director Badham, shooting more or less in sequence, rehearsed extensively but did few retakes of scenes, allowing John to grow in his performance as the story progressed, and the character of Tony Manero to grow with him.

"Right: that did happen. I never really find a lot of things about a character when I'm reading a script, and that was doubly true with Tony. Even after Diana talked to me, I still saw the negatives in him; he read flat to me, and not sympathetic, the way he treats women, and so on. I had to find his vulnerability, so you cared about him, so that I cared about him." No, he did not ask for script changes. "I felt it was up to me, to incorporate in him some line of integrity: his caring about the girl's dream to get to Manhattan, even though she's bitchy to him."

So rehearsals were vital, not just dance rehearsals, to allow John Badham to accomplish his very long, unbroken takes of the disco dances. "I can't create a lot until I'm actually rehearsing with the actors I'm going to be working with—I don't know what they're going to do in a scene, or what I'll get from them to react to. My response to what another actor gives me may be a million times better than a choice I've made four months before we start working together." And though his character's pretty much set, before shooting starts, "I like to leave at least half of my creating until the camera's rolling. That way, the work doesn't have a set, acted look, it's spontaneous, it... flows. In *Fever*, I'd suddenly add things, during takes, then ask John Badham if he liked that, and especially Norman Wexler, because he wrote it. I mean, to me, the writer of a script is source...."

It's a word Scientologists use a lot, and disciples of L. Ron Hubbard will drop it into a conversation in order to proselytize. Not Travolta. He has to be asked about it. "Yeah, I discovered Scientology a few years ago. I'd get

very depressed, for no reason. Psychoanalysis wasn't for me, but Scientology made sense to me right away, because it seemed like a means of self-help. A meter shows you when you're responding to a bad experience in your past, you find the source of pain, acknowledge it, deal with it. That seemed to me very logical, and I was right. I get answers, that way. Okay?"

Definitely okay; more than enough said. He's restless now, because he's talked a lot again, or because in a moment, he'll have to go back to the set and be Barbarino, or both. Bring up Bay Ridge's curious sexuality, and he doesn't blush, but he doesn't grin. "Oh yeah. That. Well, I mean, it was in the script. The guys having the girls... blow them, instead of the usual. No, I didn't, um, research that. You think I should have? Maybe that's a lack in me. Also, it could be simple birth control, very important. Remember, the girl who wants to make out with Tony, she says, 'I don't have any protection.' Tony says something like, 'Forget it, I'm not gonna have you get me to get you pregnant, you're not going to stick me with that problem.' See what I'm saying? Tony's only intention in that scene was... to get his rocks off."

John is not trying to be funny; he doesn't smile. Clearly he wishes he hadn't said it. "I remember one thing about those kids more than anything. The guys who'd gather around me—I don't know how many of them said to me, very respectfully, 'Wow, man, I wish I was you.' I've thought a lot about that."

So Pauline Kael was right? John's assistant had given me her review to read. "I think so. I guess there're no more heroes, except what TV and movies provide. I don't mean I'm playing heroes, I'm not. I don't want to. I mean I'm a hero to them which is weird to me. Maybe a whole generation is... materialistic, and not much else. They were so awed by fame. Money. They thought it was the best possible world, to be in my position. That seemed sad to me, you know? I'm not saying to you, it isn't good, that I don't enjoy it or appreciate it. I'm glad every day for it. That Oscar nomination, I was high on that for weeks, the recognition of work that it is—just the nomination. But when you start thinking this is all there is, then you're just swallowed up in a lot of bad values. Star time, you know? It's why I've got to get away weekends, get into the sky alone. Those Brooklyn kids, they were so excited by their idea of being me. I didn't want to lay the reality on them. That it is very hard work, very uncertain, to get big in this business very quickly. Why spoil it for them, talking about the choices you've got to make—that they are very tough, and if you make the wrong ones, you blow it all, and you've got to make them by yourself. You got to think 'work' all the time."

When he walks away, to work, he's hunched again; from the rear, he appears slightly weary and unwilling. Why do I regret seeing him go? He's been informative, but not enthralling; pleasant, but hardly intimate. There's been no suggestion that we're going to be friends, yet that's what I wanted. Which is, again, what stars do: if only you knew him. His charisma is, finally, like a good movie. You don't want it to end.

**T**ravolta and his auto-shop cronies in a semi-reflective moment from *Grease*: word was that the movie was less than stupendous, but it does, after all, have *The Man*.