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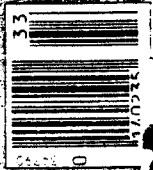
Rolling Stone



JOHN TRAVOLTA

Sex and the Single Star

LINDA RONSTADT: SMOKE WHITE
GOES TO SOUTH AFRICA
The Alarm • Eddy Grant



Sex and the Single Star

John Travolta by Nancy Collins

In 1977, twenty-three-year-old John Travolta strutted down a Brooklyn street and into superstardom. The vehicle, of course, was a film called *Saturday Night Fever*, a movie that earned Travolta his first Oscar nomination and turned white suits into mandatory disco gear. Last month, Travolta, with the help of director-producer Sylvester Stallone, brought Tony Manero back to the screen in the sequel, *Staying Alive*, which has opened to less than glowing reviews. The six years between the two films have been tumultuous ones for the twenty-nine-year-old actor. In 1977, Diana Hyland, Travolta's forty-one-year-old lover, died of cancer. Eighteen months later, his mother succumbed to the same disease. Professionally, things were equally rocky. Although Travolta followed *Saturday Night Fever* with *Grease*—thus making him the star of two of the highest-grossing films of all time—his third film, *Moment by Moment*, with Lily Tomlin, was a well-ballyhooed flop. With *Urban Cowboy* in 1980, Travolta redeemed himself. His next film, *Blow Out*, in 1981, was not a big success at the box office, although it was critically acclaimed.

In the spring of 1982, Travolta parted company with his longtime manager and mentor, Bob LeMond, for the more high-powered Creative Artists Agency. It marked a major career change, for Travolta had signed with LeMond when he was sixteen and doing supper theater in New Jersey. He was born in Englewood, New Jersey, the youngest of six children. His mother, a great influence on his acting career, was a former actress who once established a long-distance record for swimming the Hudson River. His father, who at one time played semiprofessional football as a quarterback, ran the Travolta Tire Exchange. Encouraged by his parents, Travolta dropped out of high school at sixteen to pursue theater. His first big break came when he landed a spot in the national touring company of *Grease*. He made his opening debut on Broadway in *Over Here* before heading to California to portray Vinnie Barbarino, a charming, if dull-witted, high-school student in the ABC sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter*. The series made him a preteen sex symbol. In 1976, Travolta

got his first major screen role, in Brian De Palma's *Carrie*, which he soon followed with *Saturday Night Fever*.

Travolta's love life has been erratic at best. Diana Hyland still remains his most serious love affair—even though he and actress Marilu Henner, whom he met while touring with *Grease*, remain a tightly knit, off-again-on-again couple. Currently, they are on. ("We met on November 28th, 1972, and became lovers on July 15th, 1973—at a Travelodge in San Francisco," Henner recalls of their relationship.) In between, Travolta has been linked with anyone from Debra Winger to Brooke Shields.

Travolta lives alone on a Santa Barbara ranch, a five-bedroom, Spanish-style hacienda set in the middle of seventeen acres of prime California real estate. His garage is filled with cars: a Mercedes, a Jag, a '55 Cadillac. There is, as one might expect, a pool and tennis courts, as well as a screening room Travolta had built. The house, which had already been decorated in a Spanish motif when he bought it, is oddly devoid of person-

al touches, except for a sketch of the actor by Montana artist Paul Jasmin. But then, as Travolta admits, he is rarely there. Most of his time is spent on the move, piloting himself in his own Cessna 414 to visit friends like Brian De Palma or French actor Gerard Depardieu.

John Travolta is highly likable and far wittier than his macho but vulnerable screen persona would indicate. But above all else, he is professional. Once committed to an interview, he is there for the duration, unaccompanied by publicists and willing to answer any question put to him. He is, in fact, decidedly more mature than his role in *Staying Alive* would lead one to believe. But then, as longtime friend Henner explains it, "John's work is two years behind where he is as a person."

After you finished 'Saturday Night Fever,' you said you had nothing more to say about the Tony Manero character. What changed your mind?

I grew up and so did he. That's all. And in

were so extraordinary. The gay rumor about male stars is such a classic that it didn't surprise me to hear it about me, because I'd heard it about the others. All I thought was, "Oh, I see the game now."

So, would you like to set the record straight right here?

Sure, if you'd like.

Are you gay?

No.

You once mentioned that your personal style has been highly influenced by blacks. What did you mean by that?

All the qualities that make me uniquely appealing to the masses are the black qualities I have as a person—my sense of humor, my dancing, my openness, sexually, with my movements.

Where did you pick up those sensibilities?

It started in the fifth grade, when I transferred from a Catholic school to a public school that was predominantly black. Right away, I loved the black people, and they loved me because I could dance and was funny to them. The white kids never laughed at me, only the black kids. So it was the first time I was accepted by the masses. Like the blacks, I simply called things as they were.

How did they influence your sexuality?

As I said earlier, I was always attracted to women with an open sexuality, and it was the same with blacks. I sensed their strong sexuality, and it made me feel comfortable. They'd always say, "Hey, Travolta. Get your fine ass over here. You wanna fuck me?" It was always real open. And when you danced with a black girl, you could grind and get down without necessarily meaning you were going to have sex with her. It simply meant you could move seductively and enjoy it. So I felt very safe with them expressing myself verbally and physically. In fact, the first girl I ever kissed was a black girl.

How old were you?

Twelve, and she was sixteen. She introduced me to reefer. She said, "Did you ever soul-kiss?" And I said, "No, I don't think so." And she said, "Well, come on over here and let me try it with you." So we kissed. I loved her because she was so complimentary; she thought I was fine, and I thought she was fine, too. I loved talking with my black friends about sex. They'd go into vivid descriptions without any shame at all. I loved it because it satisfied my voyeurism. Actually, I wish now I could talk as freely about sex with white people as I do with blacks. See, I love talking about sex in detail—I like talking about what I like to look at, what I like to feel, what I like to experience—but I find I always edit myself around white people.

How old were you when you first had sex?

Thirteen.

A black girl?

No. But I don't think I better say her name.

Being Catholic, were you guilty about it afterward?

It was more Irish guilt than Catholic. My father was very open about sex, but my mother, who was Irish, was more reserved.

Did your parents have a good marriage?

'With love, there's always another fish in the sea.'

They really adored each other. My father thought my mother [a drama coach and actress] was the living end, that she was the best actress, the best director and had the most style, presence and personality of anyone he had ever known. They had a very hot relationship. Even after they'd been married twenty-seven years, you could walk into their bedroom in the morning—like I sometimes did as a kid—and there they'd be, nestled in each other's arms, their bodies totally locked together. They were really into each other.

Pretty exciting after twenty-seven years. Don't you want that with someone thirty years from now, too?

Sure.

Evidently, you got into trying drugs early. Do you use any today?

No. From sixteen to eighteen, I did marijuana, but it always made me sick—physically ill. Then, when I was eighteen or nineteen, I had trouble sleeping for six weeks and took some Seconals, but that was short-lived. I tried cocaine, too, when I was about seventeen, but it didn't take either. I know I have this image of being antidrug, and I am if it hurts you, but really, I don't care what other people do. It's none of my business. The reason I don't do drugs is because I don't have good physical reactions to them. It's the same with drinking. I'll drink once a month, and then it's just to get high or drunk.

Are you still involved with Scientology?

I haven't had any auditing for about a year and a half; auditing is a technique where you have a trained listener, an auditor, prepare questions for you, and you sit opposite and answer them. Every answer is registered by the E-meter, which reacts according to the energy masses in your body. The questions are designed to give you relief about whatever subjects are bothering you.

Then, despite all the negative publicity about Scientology, you still believe?

Yes. I think it's pretty brilliant. I try to separate the material and the organization, because I don't agree with the way the organization is being run. I believe that the material is more worthy than the individuals who are handling it.

How much money have you put into Scientology over the years?

I don't see it as giving money; you're exchanging for services.

Ten thousand dollars? Twenty thousand?

Maybe in that ballpark, yeah.

Scientology uses your name a lot in promoting its cause. Do you feel it has used your celebrity for its own purposes?

I've been something of an ostrich about how it's used me, because I haven't investigated exactly what the organization's done. One part of me says that if somebody gets

some good out of it, maybe it's all right. The other part of me says that I hope it uses some taste and discretion. I wish I could defend Scientology better, but I don't think it even deserves to be defended, in a sense.

What is the biggest misconception about John Travolta?

That I'm insecure and uncertain. I think people misinterpret my sensitivity or perceptiveness as insecurity and indecisiveness. I'm given less credit for being a strong individual than I deserve. No one could've gotten to the place I am and survived it this long without being strong.

What drives you?

A lot of it is my family—especially my mother when she was alive. If I didn't have my family to motivate me, then it'd probably be my friends. You're always driving yourself because you get all the rewards, but secondarily, it's for people you love. Beyond that, my driving force is maintenance—maintenance of a career. [Laughs] It's called *Staying Alive*.

Your last few movies—'Blow Out,' 'Urban Cowboy' and certainly 'Moment by Moment'—weren't in the category of 'Saturday Night Fever' and 'Grease.' People in the business seem to think you need another blockbuster in order to get your career back on track.

The truth is, I don't need another blockbuster for my career. *Urban Cowboy* did \$100 million. Now, what's wrong with that? If it had been my first movie, I'd have been a big movie star. It keeps on being compared to the first two movies, which are so mega that if I had only done one of them, I'd still be okay. I was offered *An Officer and a Gentleman*, which I turned down, basically because I felt the girl had the best part and because I'd just finished *Blow Out* and wasn't ready to go right back to work. Anyway, after the movie came out, I said to Warren Beatty, "Do you think I should have done *An Officer and a Gentleman*?" And he said, "Why?" And I said, "Because it was a commercial success." He said, "You have two of the biggest movies in movie history. Why do you need another one? Just do good movies, John." And Warren, who I happen to think represents the ultimate show-business viewpoint, was right. In the list of the ten top-grossing movies of all time, I was the only actor the public came to see as an actor. The rest of the top grossers were all special-effects films—*E.T.*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Jaws*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I may be the only actor the public went to see instead of a shark.

In retrospect, are you sorry you made 'Moment by Moment'?

Only because I get asked about it so much.

Did you ever see the film?

Only once. I didn't like it, but I didn't mind my performance.

Why didn't the film work for you?

I didn't feel Lily and I had good chemistry. As people, we had incredible chemistry, but onscreen it didn't work. I learned from that one—that you have to have chemistry as well as the script. I can't understand why it's still getting reshaped. I almost feel I need something like it again so the attention gets off it.

You mean you need a new bomb?

[Laughs] Right.

'Blow Out' was not a commercial success.

I never expected it to be. It was a success to me. I thought it was a clever movie with a good role, directed by Brian De Palma, whom I love. The character in *Blow Out* was most like my own personality, whereas *Fever* and *Grease* were total creations. In *Blow Out*, I could be interested instead of being interesting.

How did you and Sly Stallone end up working together on 'Staying Alive'?

I'd seen *Rocky III* and said I'd ever did a sequel to *Saturday Night Fever*. I wanted it to have that kind of pacing and excitement. The first script for *Staying Alive* was written four years ago but was antedance, which I didn't like. Then, two years ago, Norman Wexler [screenwriter of *Saturday Night Fever*] did another script, which also didn't appeal to me because it wasn't totally a show-business story. Finally, last year, my agent put me together with Stallone, and we were instantly in sync about the story line. We both wanted *Staying Alive* to be all about show business, the story of a kid who goes to New York, becomes a jazz-dance teacher, wants to make it on Broadway, gets rejected and finally does make it.

'Rocky' in ballet slippers, huh? How did you like working with Stallone?

I miss his energy right now. He has so much unique survival energy in him that he makes everything matter. In my life, I tend to make things matter and not matter, in order to keep a balance. If things work out fine. If not, I'm not disappointed. With Sly, everything matters. It's fun to be around someone who creates that illusion—you know, "This is going to be a great movie." "This is going to be a great dance number." "We're going to get you in great shape." It's very exciting to have someone other than yourself care about you. A lot of times, that kid in you wants to think that someone will take responsibility for you. Sly always makes you think you're responsible for yourself but is still there to give you the kind of energy a parent does.

Speaking of getting into great shape, he certainly helped you there. How long did the Stallonization of John Travolta take?

About seven months, five of which were prior to the film. Every day, I did two and a half hours of weight lifting and anywhere from three to eight hours of dancing. Now that the film's done, I'll probably maintain with an hour of weight lifting three to four times a week, plus an hour of cardiovascular—running, dancing, walking.

When you see yourself up there on the screen, do you think you're attractive?

I know what to do to be attractive, and I have confidence in my appeal. Sometimes when I see myself onscreen, [Cont. on 62]