



GODS AMONG US

In our regular series, we pay tribute to the towering, mega-watt stars who still roam Hollywood

The eternally charming, ever alluring king of the comebacks

JOHN TRAVOLTA

WORDS ADAM SMITH ILLUSTRATION CHRISTOPHER LEE LYONS

IT IS THE evening of 24 November 1992, and a drama worthy of a Hollywood development meeting is playing out 41,000 feet over Washington, DC. A tiny Gulfstream jet, callsign N728T, is rocketing through the sky. The cabin and cockpit are both in complete darkness. A few hours into the jet's scheduled flight, the tiny aircraft's primary electrical generator has suddenly failed. The plane has automatically switched to its secondary generator, but the resulting power surge has now knocked out that system, too.

In the cockpit, the pilot stares in alarm at the plane's rapidly dimming instruments. Thick clouds below obstruct the view of any landmarks, and with no instrumentation, he is essentially flying blind. With only a torch for illumination, a magnetic compass and a battery-powered emergency attitude indicator, the pilot begins what anyone familiar with aircraft will tell you is a risky manoeuvre: a blind rapid descent through 11,000 feet of

cloud cover. In such situations pilots are told to 'fly the instruments', to avoid the spatial disorientation that has resulted in more than one catastrophe, but the pilot of N728T doesn't have any instrumentation.

Ten minutes later the Gulfstream punches out of the clouds, barely 1,000 feet above the ground. With only limited brakes, the landing is fast and hard: all four tyres blow out almost immediately. N728T finally skids to a halt at the junction between Washington Airport's two main runways. "That was a squeaker," a safety official later told *The Washington Post*. "I thought it could have gone either way."

But then, maybe things were fated to turn out just fine in the end. If there was anyone who knew about turbulence, about negotiating tricky situations, about, well, staying alive, it was N728T's pilot: one John Travolta. He has, after all, always been a kind of walking miracle, a born survivor. Even his most ardent fans would admit that the misses outnumber the hits by some



THE BOX OFFICE

John Travolta's top five money-makers

GREASE
\$396 million

BOLT
\$310 million

LOOK WHO'S TALKING
\$297 million

AUSTIN POWERS IN GOLDMEMBER
\$297 million

WILD HOGS
\$254 million

* Global box office, according to BoxOfficeMojo.com

margin. After an incendiary early career — stratospheric TV fame with *Welcome Back, Kotter*, the decade-defining *Saturday Night Fever*, the evergreen *Grease* — he plunged into a years-long career slump. All seemed lost, before a single supporting role led to the most spectacular comeback in Hollywood history. A mere bit of unplanned ‘plummeting’ wasn’t the kind of detail that was going to derail that kind of destiny.

Through it all — the career catastrophes, unexpected revivals, personal tragedies, near airplane crashes and *Battlefield Earth* — Travolta endures, his apparently undimmed appeal more in tune with the ancient gods of Hollywood’s previous era than the Method actors who are his angsty contemporaries. More than perhaps any modern star, audiences are drawn to *him* more than they are to any character he happens to be playing. There’s something open, generous, irresistibly vulnerable about his screen presence.

Take the reaction of notoriously waspish critic Pauline Kael, who responded with protective horror when approached by aspirant

Travolta biographer Nigel Andrews. “But you wouldn’t write anything *negative* about him, would you?” Andrews reports the alarmed Kael as saying. The most acute and occasionally brutal critic of her generation had been reduced to a kind of maternal goo by the idea of any Travolta muck being raked. And the secret to all of this? Love, it turns out.



“HE DANCED IN my womb,” Nigel Andrews reports Travolta’s mother, Helen, as having once said of her youngest child. *In utero* gyrations aside, John Joseph Travolta was adored from the moment he arrived. Born in 1954 in Englewood, New Jersey, he was the youngest son, the last of a family of two brothers and three sisters. And he was a performer from the start. When he was eight his parents entered him in a twist contest at the local church. Little Johnny Travolta gyrated furiously on the stage, dazzling the crowd (30,000 strong, he implausibly later said) with precursors of the moves that would later propel him from the illuminated floors of

Saturday Night Fever — via a quick twirl with Princess Di — to *Pulp Fiction*’s Jack Rabbit Slim’s. Finally, with her youngest apparently unable to stop, Mum intervened. “The poor kid looked so trapped and exhausted,” she told *Good Housekeeping*. “I kept gesturing to him, ‘It’s okay, you can walk off.’” There was a sense, already, that he was unstoppable.

And, a little later, there were the looks. In 1977, a 23-year-old Travolta sat down with Cameron Crowe for an interview in *Playgirl*. “It’s always the ones who were gawky at school,” he told Crowe of the features that by then were driving the nation’s teenage girls into a kind of collective meltdown. “See, now I always had pretty eyes; I was an adorable child from the day I was born until about ten. Then, from ten on I had a big nose and big lips. My eyes were always blue, very pretty, but it didn’t seem to coordinate until I was about 20 years old.”

But when they did — oh boy. He was incandescent. In his first major screen role, guileless *guido* Vinnie Barbarino in teen sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter*, the piercing baby blues, the cupid lips, the jet-black bouffant locks were



Clockwise from main: The iconic *Saturday Night Fever* saw Travolta go big — though at some cost; As pig-blood bearer Billy Nolan in *Carrie*; Winning the heart of Olivia Newton-John’s Sandy — and the world — in *Grease*.

enough to ignite a conflagration of teenage lust that seemed all but impossible to douse. Replying to the mountain of fan letters to the goofy-stud-with-a-heart-of-gold cost ABC \$30,000 a week. Fans turned up in Englewood, grabbing parts of the Travolta residence, bricks, slates, bits of the fence, with which to adorn bedroom shrines to the swoonsome hoodlum. With Travolta-mania at a deafening peak, and after sudsy TV movie *The Boy In The Plastic Bubble* (1976), Travolta launched his first serious assault on the big screen. *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), a ripped-from-the-headlines (even if they turned out to be made up) tale of blue-collar kids escaping their humdrum lives for the fleeting glamour of the dancefloor, looked superficially unpromising: a repackaged ’50s dance-craze movie at best. It would, of course, turn out to be a blazing triumph. And, for John Travolta, a terrible trap.



“HE COMES ALIVE as a human being, if you’re just sitting in a room with him,” *Saturday Night Fever*’s director John Badham told *Empire* in



2018 of first meeting his star. “But that light really comes out when the camera’s on. You never get a feeling he’s acting. He brings this charm to a character who had so many negative things going for him. Mean to his parents, rebellious, sexist with women, but somehow overlain with this charm that he had. I just knew to get out of his way.”

Saturday Night Fever was perfectly calibrated as a star vehicle for Travolta. And it’s a movie that just wouldn’t have worked without him. Tony Manero, from when we first glimpse him, strutting the streets of Brooklyn, is a fleshed-out, humanised incarnation of Hollywood’s eternal Rebel: James Dean in a Persil-white suit. But even Dean, who all but invented adolescent anguish for the screen, never quite had Travolta’s aching vulnerability or dared to make his character so superficially unlikeable, arrogant and finally bewildered as Travolta did with Manero.

Grease (1978), meanwhile, was a confection, a precision-tooled Travolta-delivery-system, stripped of all the grittiness of the original stage musical, awarded a PG and spoonfed to a baying crowd of teenyboppers who couldn’t legally catch the Fever. But between them, over a period

of less than a couple of years, the two films propelled Travolta to four-quadrant global superstardom that spanned TV, movies, stage musicals and, with a 1976 album, modestly titled *John Travolta*, music.

Much is often written about the ascent of a star, less about the fall. What does it feel like? To have been universally adored, and then suddenly scorned, or worse, ignored? “How did you go bankrupt?” a character in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* asks. “Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly,” is the reply. Maybe the decline seemed like that for Travolta: a slight sense of disquiet followed by mounting panic. In 1978 he was the hottest star on the planet. By the early 1990s, his films — *The Experts* (1989), *Eyes Of An Angel* (1991), *Shout* (1991) — were playing limited runs, or more often going straight to video.

What had happened? It didn’t help that around him Hollywood was splitting into two camps, the Oscar-baiting serious thespians such as Pacino and De Niro on the one side, and the Stallones and Schwarzeneggers — cartoon action heroes built of body lotion and zingers — on the other. Travolta fitted comfortably into neither tribe. He was trapped, so soon, in a kind of



Clockwise from main: With Samuel L. Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*. Royale with cheese?; The great *Blow Out*; Donning the leg warmers again for the ill-judged *Staying Alive*; A smooth criminal alongside Rene Russo in *Get Shorty*; More jiving in *Look Who’s Talking*.



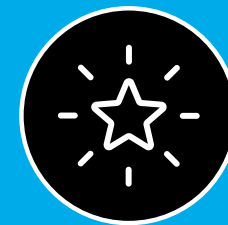
aspic, unfairly relegated in many minds to the embarrassing excesses of the disco era.

Staying Alive (1983) was an inevitable, perhaps excusable, Hollywood cash-in, but nevertheless stupendously misjudged in every respect. Director Sylvester Stallone’s transformation of Travolta’s body into a *doppelgänger* of his own (one somehow less effortlessly sexy than the one Tony Manero displays while dragging himself out of his pit to the mirror in Badham’s film) is a breathtaking display of Hollywood solipsism. And Stallone’s ruthless purging of the original film’s earthiness in favour of an ever-soaring triumphalist fanfare utterly misses the point. “Travolta still has his star presence,” wrote a disappointed Kael in *The New Yorker*. “but [Stallone] doesn’t bother much with scenes, characters or dialogue. He just covers Travolta in what looks like an oil-slick and goes for the wham-bams.”

The wham-bams were bad enough, but that Travolta’s career was in a tailspin had become depressingly evident with 1985’s *Perfect*. The screenplay seems never to have amounted to much more than a deal-memo stapled to a magazine article about *how everybody’s wearing Lycra and going to the gym these days*. Travolta is as likeable and attractive as ever, but there are limits even to his charm.

As damaging was the fact that the two films that pointed to a different, more critically respected mid-career both unfairly fizzled. *Blow Out* (1981) saw him reunite with Brian De Palma after his effective turn as the bearer of the pig’s blood, Billy Nolan, in *Carrie* (1976). The pair had remained friends, and when De Palma was looking for a lead for his paranoid thriller about a movie soundman caught up in a political assassination, he sent Travolta the script. “John is a really sweet guy,” De Palma later told director Noah Baumbach. “He’s really generous to the other actors, he’s incredibly warm and giving. And he wanted to do it.” And it’s that vital warmth, always the pulsing jugular of Travolta’s appeal, that’s at the heart of De Palma’s brilliant, chilly film. The close-ups of Travolta’s stricken face as he listens to his tapes, discovering the magnitude of the conspiracy that surrounds him, provide the humanity that perfectly complements the director’s trademark technical fireworks.

Urban Cowboy (1980) was dismissed by critics at the time as a retreat of *Saturday Night Fever*, with Houston replacing Brooklyn and the Texas two-step standing in for disco. Travolta plays Bud Davis, a thrillingly dim oil-worker who marries Sissy (a stupendously good Debra Winger) on a whim, only to find their relationship tested both by scenery-chewing marriage-buster Wes (Scott Glenn) and a competitive passion for mechanical rodeo. An easy film to mock, then, but not a bad one, and one, perhaps, with the seeds of greatness somewhere in it. Journeyman director James Bridges struggles to bring things into focus, but the performances are superb. Travolta, in the least promising of the roles, is unafraid to play Bud as, well, a bit of a dick, as



THE MOMENT

Tony struts his stuff

Saturday Night Fever (1977)



By 1977, John Travolta was already a teen sensation. But it’s the three or so minutes he spends strutting through the bustling streets of the Bronx in the opening titles of *Saturday Night Fever* that mark the moment he transforms himself from a teenybopper pin-up to a legit film star. It’s a bravura piece of filmmaking. Opening with a wide shot of the distant Manhattan skyline, John Badham’s camera first cuts tighter onto the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge (later to play a key role in the story), down to the elevated D Train, then spirals further to the streets of Brooklyn where we first see Tony Manero, resplendent in a neon-scarlet, open-necked shirt, strutting through the streets, his streets, to the rhythm of ‘Stayin’ Alive’. Place identified, plot foreshadowed and character established in under 60 seconds.

Breathtaking. But it’s Travolta who sells it — feline, cocksure, eyes darting, checking his shoes, swinging an incongruous paint can — all to the irresistible beat of that song.

Rarely has a character, a star, been introduced with such confidence and swagger. It’s a little piece of pop-art all on its own, blazingly assured, instantly mesmerising and utterly believable. A king in his little kingdom.





Clockwise from main: Facing/off with Nicolas Cage; As *Hairspray*'s Edna Turnblad alongside Nikki Blonsky; Mr. Blue makes his point in the remake of *The Taking Of Pelham 123*; As lawyer Robert Shapiro alongside David Schwimmer in *The People V. O.J. Simpson*.



MIA

The Travolta roles that never were



AMERICAN GIGOLO

According to director Paul Schrader, Travolta was uncomfortable with some of the racier material, hence exiting the existential clothes drama. More comfortable? Richard Gere.



AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN

Travolta turned down the 1982 smash as he was otherwise occupied learning to fly jets. His agent quit, the part was recast and the world's male strippers found themselves channelling their inner — yes! — Richard Gere.



SPLASH

"The role in the Hanks film called *Splash* was written for me," Travolta said in 2021. "But then, you know, we wouldn't have Tom Hanks. So let's have Tom Hanks, you see what I mean?"



PRETTY WOMAN

Travolta was in the frame for the role of corporate titan Edward Lewis in these-days-dubious romance *Pretty Woman*, but in the end demurred. As was by now required by federal statute, the role went to Richard Gere.

usual displaying that ability to register every fleeting emotion with uncanny immediacy.

Nevertheless, the damage was done and, by the late 1980s, Travolta was as cold as it is possible to get in Hollywood without turning up on *Celebrity Squares*. A new agent was acquired. Phone calls were made. A solution was found in the shape of a screenplay about a motormouth baby. Obviously.



IT'S RECEIVED WISDOM that *Look Who's Talking* (1989) was Travolta's nadir, the cruel exploitation of a star past his prime. In fact, in box-office terms at least, it laid the groundwork for his resurrection. Travolta, in the role of James Ubriacco, the loveable, ever-so-slightly rumpled dad with an infant Bruce Willis for a son, is affable, charming, and still sexy after all these years. "Twelve years after *Saturday Night Fever* he is a warm and winning actor when he's not shoe-horned into the wrong roles," as Roger Ebert later put it in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The studio didn't agree, shelving writer/director Amy Heckerling's picture for months, then panicking and airbrushing Travolta out of its posters and

publicity when they did finally release it. "It had tested like *E.T.*," Travolta's agent Jonathan Krane told Nigel Andrews. "But their excuse was that John Travolta was box-office poison."

A lawsuit from Willis and Travolta finally forced the studio's hand and, once finally set loose, *Look Who's Talking* was a box-office phenomenon: \$297 million worldwide off a \$7 million budget, the highest-grossing film then ever directed by a woman. In foreign territories, it was Columbia's second-most successful comedy after *Ghostbusters II*. Perhaps what it proved was that Travolta needed a good director. One who could see in him what audiences had once seen, and set it free.

Quentin Tarantino saw perfectly what Travolta was capable of, and told him so. Speaking to *Cosmopolitan* after the movie's release, Tarantino recalled a meeting with Travolta in the director's apartment during which he chastised the star about his recent career choices. "John, what did you do? Don't you remember what Pauline Kael said about you? What *Truffaut* said about you? Don't you know what you *mean* to American cinema?" He offered Travolta the choice of roles in two

movies he was prepping: *From Dusk Till Dawn* or *Pulp Fiction*. "I'm not a vampire kind of guy," Travolta said. And history was thus made.

Pulp Fiction premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, and in all respects it was an instant sensation. But the story that dominated all others that summer of 1994 was, "Did you see *John Travolta*?" It's a jaw-dropping, bravura performance, located in a gloriously weird hinterland between comedy and ultraviolence. Vincent Vega is an utterly unique creation: majestically off-kilter, shambolically cool, unexpectedly sympathetic. It's a breathtakingly out-there assemblage of loopy moments, memetic gestures and raddled, ragged charm. There have been Hollywood comebacks before; there will be again. But there has never been a moment so unexpected, welcome and cinematically joyous as Travolta's reinvention. It was the return of the prodigal star.



AND SO, TO the third act. It would be nice to report that *Pulp Fiction* marked a completely clean break, the start of a triumphant upswing,

It's not been so simple. "*Saturday Night Fever* and *Pulp Fiction* were sort of bookends for my career," Travolta told Larry King in 2009. But what *Pulp Fiction* had achieved was to permanently banish the idea that he was a joke, a has-been: the ghost of *Saturday Night Fever* had finally been exorcised. His career since has been varied, interesting, and constant. Three films a year, often four (in Hollywood they still call this admirable work-ethic "Travolta-ing"). In the mid to late '90s he leveraged his rediscovered popularity, and his new \$20 million asking price (a no-doubt pleasant bump from the \$145,000 he'd got for *Pulp Fiction*), conjuring some of the hip magic he had brought to Vincent Vega in Barry Sonnenfeld's *Get Shorty* in 1995. He played whimsical, romantic and inspirational in *Michael* and *Phenomenon* (both 1996). And then there was John Travolta: Action Star. He was a perfect fit for John Woo's slightly dreamy, dove-strewn style as nuclear terrorist Vic Deakins in *Broken Arrow* (1996), and then puckishly purloined Nicolas Cage's mannerisms in *Face/Off* (1997). The aughts and beyond have been less consistently successful. But he was enjoyably game in John Waters' *Hairspray* (2007), as Edna Turnblad, the role originally

Alamy, Getty Images