



THE MAIL ON SUNDAY OCTOBER 21 2012

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*The weird world of*  
**JOAQUIN PHOENIX**

He grew up in a cult, faked a breakdown on live TV and is now tackling Scientology in this year's most controversial film

**Leona Lewis**

Too many celebs sell their souls to the Devil!

**Pirate prison**

Why is Britain paying for a jail in paradise?

**Eureka!**

Sir James Dyson wants to turn us into a nation of inventors

He was nominated for an Oscar for *Gladiator* but then sabotaged his career by faking a 'mental breakdown'. Now Joaquin Phoenix is staging a comeback with a controversial new film that has shocked Hollywood.  
By Martyn Palmer

# PHOENIX *rising*

A few months ago, Hollywood actor Joaquin Phoenix feared that he'd inadvertently hit the self-destruct button and detonated his career. The 37-year-old actor had followed huge success with Oscar-nominated roles in *Gladiator* and as Johnny Cash in *Walk The Line* with a bizarre documentary called *I'm Still Here*.

In it, he appeared overweight, shockingly unkempt and apparently on the verge of a mental breakdown, claiming he'd ditched his acting career to reinvent himself as a rap artist. Before it came out, Phoenix went on US chat show *Letterman* appearing deluded and incoherent. It was car-crash TV.

It seemed a sadly predictable end for an actor who'd come to the world's attention when his brother River Phoenix died of an overdose outside LA club the Viper Room in 1993. Television and radio news had reported the tragedy using a recording of 18-year-old Joaquin's desperate call for help to the emergency services.

The roles he played in subsequent years – a disturbed high-school murderer in *To Die For*, an ill-fated porn shop employee in *8mm* – were dark and difficult to like. Even his breakthrough in *Gladiator* as Emperor Commodus saw him pale, pasty and embracing Russell

(brother of Ben) to direct. 'I had been acting since I was a kid. When people are coming up and offering you coffees and holding umbrellas for you and stuff, it's easy to lose your humanity. I wanted to shake things up, to try something that turned me upside down and made me scared again. I wanted to be crushed, to crush whatever anyone thought about me and make it as bad as possible, to experience failure. Total failure.'

As usual his performance was compelling. So much so that even since revealing *I'm Still Here* was a fake 'mockumentary' in 2010, he was no longer being offered A-list scripts. Phoenix's bank account was running dangerously low.

'There was definitely a period after *I'm Still Here* when there was a discernable difference in the quality of movies I was being offered,' he says. 'There was a moment in which, frankly, I was placed in a very dangerous place with my mortgage. I didn't know what to do. I was nervous because I didn't know what was going to happen. My accountant was very nervous.'

Twice Oscar-nominated Phoenix was now being offered little better than commercials, which he turned down, and a second-rate movie which he nearly accepted just to pay the bills. 'It was pure luck that I said no. *The Master* came along about four months later.'

Out on November 16, *The Master* is already much talked about partly for its likely success in next year's Oscars: director Paul Thomas Anderson's last film, *There Will Be Blood*, won two in 2008 and this is thought to be as good if not better.

But the other reason is the Church of Scientology, the secretive religion that counts Tom Cruise, John Travolta and many Hollywood powerbrokers amongst its members. In the film, Phoenix plays a tortured WWII veteran seduced by a charismatic religious leader (Philip Seymour Hoffman) who submits him to a personality test highly redolent of the screening process carried out in Scientology. At one point in the film, the son of 'The Master' says of his father: 'You know he's making this up as he goes along?'

If the *Master* is to be taken as a con man, is this a dig at Scientology founder L Ron Hubbard? He is often quoted as having said, when he was a science fiction author, that the best way to make a million dollars would be to found a religion. One would expect the aggressively litigious Church of Scientology to have something to say about the film. Indeed, producer Harvey Weinstein says he was pressured not to make the film; then once it was under way, to make changes to it, which he resisted. In other words, it's not exactly the uncontroversial vehicle you might have picked for an actor trying to get his career back on track.

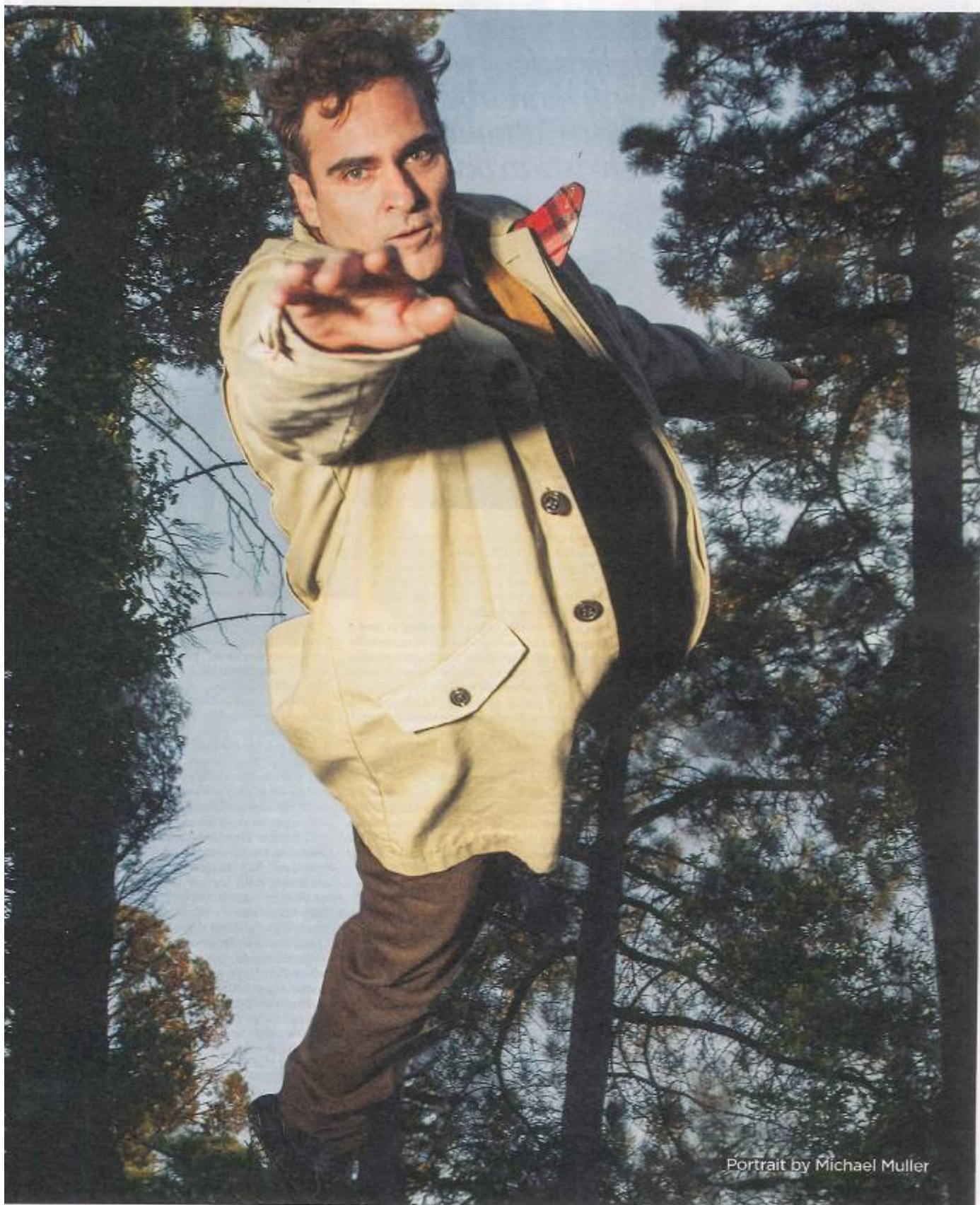
I'm due to meet Phoenix after *The Master's* world premiere in Venice. At a conference before the ▶



Above: Joaquin Phoenix as Emperor Commodus in *Gladiator*, with co-star Thomas Arana

Crowe before stabbing him in the ribs. Few actors' names are simultaneously associated with both darkness and brilliance. A brief stint in rehab for alcoholism in 2005 further fuelled the impression that in Hollywood, he was one of the most likely to go off the rails. But in fact *I'm Still Here* was nothing but a joke. Sort of.

'I wanted to be released from any pressure, any expectations,' Phoenix says of the project he dreamed up with best friend and brother-in-law Casey Affleck



Portrait by Michael Muller

► screening. I watch him fidget, clearly uncomfortable, barely speaking. I'm wondering what to expect from the man who says he detests baring his soul in interviews. When we meet, though, he's at ease. He comes over to say hello, and politely asks if I will wait while he pops onto the hotel's terrace for a cigarette.

Phoenix is bemused by the furor the film's subject matter is causing, he tells me. He says he has no issue with Scientologists. After all, he was raised in an equally idiosyncratic group. His parents were working as missionaries for the Children Of God Puerto Rico when he was born. The Children Of God was a 'spiritual' group founded by hippies in the late Sixties; later, it was hit by allegations of young members suffering sexual abuse.

"My parents left the Children Of God in the Seventies, before the group started to derail," he says. "But my parents, like a lot of people, were searching for something and that's a beautiful, admirable, noble pursuit in life. They thought they were going to be part of a group that shared the same ideals. Yet if one person gains power and becomes corrupted then it morphs into something that is completely different. It's very sad for the people who really do believe. People should be entitled to believe whatever they want as long as it's not affecting or hurting people who don't share their beliefs."

"I've worked with Scientologists and they are lovely people. I don't know why anyone makes fun of their philosophy. They believe they are created from aliens. That doesn't sound much weirder to me than the virgin birth. It all sounds equally fantastical. But from my experience, I don't see anything wrong with it."

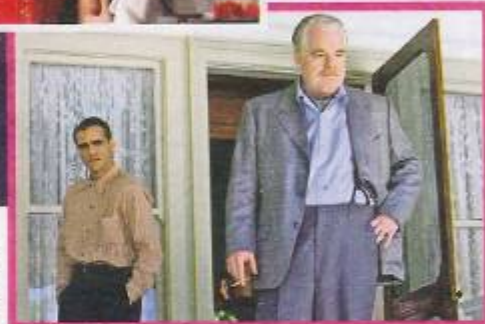
"Years ago I stumbled on one of their stalls on the street and filled out a questionnaire. They told me I was already something called a Ninth Level. And I was like, 'I'm already there!' I didn't give them any information. I don't think the person recognised me!"

Outside of the Children Of God, if Phoenix was ever going to find somewhere he belonged, it would inevitably be in front of a camera. All of the five Phoenix siblings - Liberty, Summer, Rain, River and Joaquin - acted when they were children. For Joaquin, it was intense. "When I was a kid I was in a TV show with my brother River called *Seven Brides For Seven Brothers*," he says. "In one scene, these two men get into a fight. I was

*'Scientology's beliefs don't sound any more absurd than Catholic or Christian beliefs'*



Clockwise from far left: Phoenix in the mockumentary *I'm Still Here*; as Johnny Cash in *Walk the Line*; with Eva Mendes in *We Own the Night*; with co-star Philip Seymour Hoffman in *The Master*



eight years old and I knew in advance that this was TV and none of it was real, but when the two men started rolling around on the ground fighting, the feeling of adrenaline and overwhelming emotion that pumped through my body was so exciting. I was like, "I want to do that again."

"That set me off on this course of wanting to have a physical experience, of wanting to feel it through my body. With acting there are times when I am literally shaking from the adrenaline and they have had to put blankets underneath my shoes because my legs are shaking so much the sound is getting picked up. The adrenaline is coursing through you. Maybe it's my personality. In private, I live a very quiet life. I've never bungee-jumped. I've never sky-dived out of a plane. But in my work I like that intensity. My extreme sport is acting!"

But the intensity of these experiences has a downside which, when Phoenix describes them, are reminiscent of an addict's withdrawal symptoms. "I get to a point on a movie where I look at the clothes and I just want to burn them," he says. So is that why he did *I'm Still Here*? The film came about when Phoenix's fame was at an all-time high after winning a Golden Globe for *Walk the Line*.

"Every time we finish a movie, Casey [Affleck] and I call each other and complain, saying, "Oh, we don't want to act any more." But what else are we going to do? I was watching a lot of *Celebrity Rehab* on TV at the time and I had an idea."

Affleck agreed to film him. He had to stay 'in character', at least in public, for months. Word went round Phoenix was quitting the industry and trying to make it as a rapper. Speculation increased that he wasn't well. By the time Phoenix went on *Letterman*, with greasy hair and a beard of Biblical proportions, mumbling at his bewildered host - who wasn't in on the ruse - it was too late to turn back. It was, he says, pure improvisation, and an intense experience.

Just before I went out, Casey instructed me, "You are destroyed, you have nothing inside you, you feel empty, worthless." So I changed the performance from being something really big into going out there and being numb and quiet. It was terrifying. Afterwards, I remember we experienced elation at what we had done; that it was going to be talked about. But of course, I also experienced real fear, like, "Oh my God, what have I done?"

Despite the damage to his career - it was two years before Phoenix would work again on *The Master* - he doesn't regret it. His aim, he says, was to 'change things' and it worked perfectly.

"Yes, 100 per cent. I felt completely open to all possibilities. They teach you when you are a kid to hit your marks, find your light and know your lines. That's fine, but what that's really saying is "Remove all spontaneity, all life from your performance." I achieved what I wanted with *I'm Still Here*."

At the Venice Film Festival, Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman jointly won the Best Actor award for *The Master*. Despite his best efforts at self-immolation, Joaquin Phoenix is back. Until he jacks it all in again. ■ *'The Master'* is released on November 16

OPPOSITE PAGE: MICHAEL O'NEILL; THIS PAGE: JEFFREY MATTAR/GETTY IMAGES

## Faith no more

Will *The Master* break Scientology's hold over the stars of Hollywood?

Director Paul Thomas Anderson has played down comparisons between *The Master's* fictional order The Cause and the real-life Church of Scientology. But the rest of Hollywood is abuzz with the obvious parallels.

Former senior Scientologist Mark Rathbun was Tom Cruise's personal 'auditor' for six years and says that the film is conclusively a critique of the church, and the fact that it could be made at all is testament to Scientology's waning power in Hollywood. Ten years ago the Church of Scientology would have found out about this movie and stopped production before it began. They can't make threats or exert any real power. We



[the church] have done that in the past. We tried to stop the movie *Bowfinger* with Steve Martin and Eddie Murphy, which parodied a religion like Scientology."

In fact, Anderson privately showed the film to Cruise, who had worked with Anderson on an earlier film, *Magnolia*.

"I think Paul felt, out of respect for him as a friend, he wanted to show Tom the film," says producer Jo Anne Sellar. "I know that they are still friends."

But, adds Rathbun: "Ten years ago it would have been different. This movie is proof that the church is no longer the big bad wolf."