

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: JOAQUIN PHOENIX

A candid conversation with the eccentric actor about dealing with fame, the truth about his hip-hop spoof and embracing the mystery of it all

On-screen or off, Joaquin Phoenix isn't for the fainthearted. Known best for film roles that showcase his capacity for brooding intensity, idiosyncrasy, physicality, combustibility and raw vulnerability, Phoenix has impressed as a megalomaniac Roman emperor in *Gladiator* (earning an Oscar nomination), a country-music hellion in *Walk the Line* (another Oscar nomination), a traumatized World War II veteran in *The Master* (yet another nomination) and a heartbroken divorcé who falls in love with a Siri-like operating system in *Her* (an Oscar nomination that should have been). But after 30-plus years in the acting game, when he's not busy filming with top directors such as Ridley Scott, Paul Thomas Anderson or Spike Jonze, Phoenix's public image has been known to get murky. Or downright mind-boggling. Or ominous. Or darkly funny.

In 2005 he entered rehab for alcoholism; less than a year later he crashed and rolled his car and, as it filled with leaking gasoline, was saved by director Werner Herzog, who miraculously happened to be passing by. In 2008 Phoenix told the world he was bowing out of acting to become a hip-hop artist. His weight ballooned; he sprouted a bushy beard, donned sunglasses, dreadlocked his hair and played a couple of train-wreck gigs. Actor Casey Affleck,

Phoenix's friend and brother-in-law (married since 2006 to Phoenix's sister Summer), filmed it all—including Phoenix's romps with hookers and cocaine—for a 2010 movie, *I'm Still Here*, advertised as a documentary. Then, in front of 4 million TV viewers (and hundreds of thousands more on YouTube), Phoenix appeared to strike the final match in his career self-immolation with an infamous guest appearance on *Late Show With David Letterman* during which he seemed spaced and incoherent. It turned out to be a hoax, of course, an elaborately staged, drawn-out Andy Kaufman meets Sacha Baron Cohen-esque performance piece.

But something few people get about Joaquin Phoenix is that off screen, he's not a moody, egocentric, arrogant, volatile twit. He's a sardonic jester, a leg-puller engineered for fame but smart enough to see right through it. His parents, Arlyn and John Bottom, raised him that way. Searching, nomadic hippies, the two met as hitchhikers in 1968; by 1974, when Joaquin was born in Puerto Rico, they (with River and Rain, Joaquin's older brother and sister) had gravitated to the Children of God sect, a lightning rod for controversy. Watching TV and fraternizing with nonbelievers was discouraged. When Phoenix's parents fled Children of God in 1977, they boarded a Miami-bound

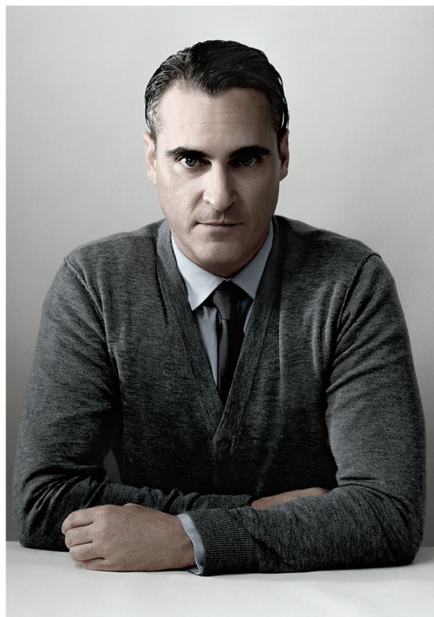
ship, then relocated to Los Angeles. To celebrate what they saw as a risen-from-the-ashes rebirth, they changed their last name to Phoenix.

Arlyn Phoenix got a job as secretary to NBC's head of casting. The Phoenix kids went to work. Billed as "Leaf Phoenix" throughout the 1980s, Joaquin scored roles on *Murder, She Wrote* and *Hill Street Blues*, leading to attention-getting big-screen stints in *Russkies* and *Parenthood*. By 1989, tired of what he called "banana in the tailpipe" roles, he stopped making movies, until something much better came along six years later in the form of *To Die For*, a smart, wicked, Gus Van Sant-directed bit of comic nastiness. Phoenix, hoping to show off his range in a wider variety of material, including big comedies, kept the dark stuff coming with such downers as *8MM* (as a character who sells porn films) and *Return to Paradise* (as a flower child awaiting execution for drug possession). But those flicks led to *Gladiator*, a box-office hit and awards grabber. Accolades, fame and stardom have brought things Phoenix tolerates but probably hates, such as scrutiny and intense public curiosity—and interviews.

We sent PLAYBOY Contributing Editor **Stephen Rebello**, who last interviewed David Fincher, to track down Phoenix at a Middle



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMANDA DEMME

"I think I know what it's like to be an attractive woman. I think that's basically what the experience [of fame] is, right? But that sycophantic energy is uncomfortable to be around. Nobody wants to experience that."

Eastern restaurant in L.A.'s explosively hip East Side. Rebello reports: "I first met Phoenix in 2007 when I interviewed him for a PLAYBOY 20Q, during which he smoked and fidgeted a lot but was charming, kind and archly funny. That same guy turned up seven years later for this interview, minus the cigarettes. Arrogant? Combative? Uncommunicative? Please. He might rather have been doing something else—maybe anything else—but Joaquin was frank, talkative and endearingly off center."

PLAYBOY: In three decades as an actor, you've received Oscar nominations for *Gladiator*, *Walk the Line* and *The Master*; won a best actor Golden Globe for *Walk the Line* and been nominated for dozens of other U.S. and international awards. You're most identified with isolated, intense, troubled characters in films by some of the most individualistic directors, including, most recently, *Her* by Spike Jonze, the upcoming *Inherent Vice* by Paul Thomas Anderson and a new dramatic film by Woody Allen. Aspects of your life and your off-screen behavior have caused some to think of you as eccentric, unfiltered, maybe even unhinged. Can we discuss what's real and what's not about that?

PHOENIX: Oh boy.

PLAYBOY: You announced in 2008 that you were giving up acting for a career as a hip-hop artist and infamously guested on *Late Show With David Letterman*, thickly bearded, twitchy, wearing dark glasses and mumbling in monosyllables. In the movie *I'm Still Here*, Casey Affleck filmed you apparently snorting cocaine, hiring a hooker and, during an embarrassingly bad hip-hop performance in Miami, hurling yourself into the crowd to brawl with an audience member. You kept this up for more than a year, later confirming what many had already guessed: It was a stunt, and the movie was a faux documentary. You said you did it as a comment on the disintegration of celebrity and because you were "frustrated with acting because I took it so seriously." Even so, it's the kind of stunt that could leave fans, critics, moviemakers and guys like David Letterman feeling as though they'd been chumped. When Letterman had you back on the show the next year, you apologized and claimed he wasn't in on it. But come on—was he?

PHOENIX: David Letterman was not in on the joke. My agents, my publicist Sue Patricola—she's really good in the movie because she seems so concerned, right?—they were all in on it, of course. But look, David Letterman is one of the smartest guys on television. There's no way that guy doesn't know what's going on in some way. That's what I'll say about it.

PLAYBOY: Is it true that Ben Affleck, Casey Affleck's brother, as well as Matt Damon urged you to come clean sooner because they thought the stunt could hurt your and Casey's careers?

PHOENIX: Maybe Casey had that conver-

sation with them, but I didn't. I can see how people felt like they'd been duped. I think I would have had a similar reaction. I totally understand people getting defensive and scared because they don't want to be taken advantage of. I think now everyone knows it was never our intention to attack people. We were clearly attacking ourselves.

PLAYBOY: Did the self-spoofing accomplish what you hoped it would?

PHOENIX: Well, I'm under the impression that it was a liberating experience for me. Unlike when you're acting and everyone is there to support you and you can do take after take, when I did those live music shows and the movie, the safety net wasn't there. Or maybe the safety net was there, but it was old, worn, full of holes and probably going to collapse.

PLAYBOY: Did it collapse?

PHOENIX: When you're dealing with a thousand people in a club and you're doing a fake fight everyone thinks is real except you and the guy you're fighting

The spoof was a liberating experience for me. The safety net wasn't there.

with, you don't know what's going to happen, and the outcome was very unclear. That was scary and also a great experience. I said it was done to experience a change. I don't really know what it did. Only time will tell. You try to analyze it on your own, or you do interviews and get asked questions about it, so you try to say something that sounds interesting and cool. But really, I don't know. Maybe it's just human nature to want to find some positive outcome in whatever it is you do. You lie to yourself all the time, right?

PLAYBOY: Do you think we all lie to ourselves?

PHOENIX: Yeah. This is actually true and proven. If you didn't lie to yourself, it would be awfully lonely. Statistically, in all of us, in all our affairs, the odds of failure are so high that if you didn't lie to yourself, you'd probably just give up. So maybe we're prone to wanting to see positive results based on our actions.

PLAYBOY: The incident had the press sift-

ing through old quotes of yours, looking for clues or explanations. One quote that was offered as evidence several times was this: "My significant other right now is myself, which is what happens when you suffer from multiple personality disorder and self-obsession." To us that sounds like you being flip and funny rather than literal.

PHOENIX: I definitely did not say that, or if I did, I didn't say it seriously. I could have been in a fucking mood and just felt like, "I don't want to talk to you," but felt pressured into doing something I didn't want to do. So it's totally possible someone might have been like, "He's an asshole," or whatever. But they're probably just doing their jobs.

PLAYBOY: Do fans approach you more cautiously now?

PHOENIX: It's no different. I think I know what it's like to be an attractive woman. I think that's basically what the experience is, right?

PLAYBOY: How do you mean?

PHOENIX: It's like when you notice somebody walk past you, then stop and turn around. I started to realize it's the same thing that sometimes happens to attractive women. They'll be like, "Just come up and say, 'Hey, how are you?'" Talk to me." When someone is shuffling back and forth, it makes me uneasy. I'm definitely not interested. But if somebody comes up and goes, "Hey, how are you? My name is so-and-so"—great. I'll rap with you. If you're genuine in your curiosity about something, that's great. But that sycophantic energy is uncomfortable to be around. Nobody wants to experience that.

PLAYBOY: It's got to be uncomfortable for the person who's hemming and hawing about talking with you.

PHOENIX: Of course, and I understand that as well. A woman came up the other day in a store and said, "I'm really sorry, but can we take a picture?" I said, "You know what? I don't do that, but thanks so much for coming up. I mean, I'm here with two of my friends and you're alone and came up and said hi. That was really brave of you." Whatever energy she had was gone instantly. We chatted a bit. It was fun. Then she went and bought her fucking tube socks and I bought my stupid little sweatpants, and that was it.

PLAYBOY: Your first film after *I'm Still Here* and a four-year break from moviemaking was 2012's stunning *The Master*; Paul Thomas Anderson's controversial epic that had a Scientology-like cult as its backdrop. Its release revived interest in how, in the early 1970s, your parents, John and Arlyn Bottom, and your siblings, River, Rain, Liberty and Summer, traveled through Central and South America as part of the Children of God religious group. The group has become highly controversial as ex-members continue to surface and publicly reveal the sexual abuse of young children and a

highly sexualized environment in which husbands and wives are expected to share their partners with others.

PHOENIX: As I understand it, you're on the outside of that group until you're accepted. I don't think we ever got to that point, because frankly, as it got closer, I think my parents went, "Wait a minute. This is more than a religious community. There's something else going on here, and this doesn't seem right." And so they left very early on.

PLAYBOY: How were they introduced to the group?

PHOENIX: Through friends. I think my parents had a religious experience and felt strongly about it. They wanted to share that with other people who wanted to talk about their experience with religion. These friends were like, "Oh, we believe in Jesus as well." I think my parents thought they'd found a community that shared their ideals. Cults rarely advertise themselves as such. It's usually someone saying, "We're like-minded people. This is a community," but I think the moment my parents realized there was something more to it, they got out.

PLAYBOY: Have you ever compared notes with Rose McGowan, who has talked about spending the first nine years of her life with her parents in an Italy-based version of the cult? She told the press about the sect's female members being perceived as existing only to serve their men sexually and having to go "flirty fishing" in bars to lure new recruits.

PHOENIX: We haven't, but I think a lot of what has been exposed about the group happened in the 1980s. She was there well into the 1980s, I think. It's kind of a typical progression of something like that, you know? It starts out one way and takes some time before it evolves into something else. When people bring up Children of God, there's always something vaguely accusatory about it. It's guilt by association. I think it was really innocent on my parents' part. They really believed, but I don't think most people see it that way. I've always thought that was strange and unfair.

PLAYBOY: With all the traveling you did with your family, was it tough to make friends and then have to say good-bye?

PHOENIX: Yeah. We were fun kids, so there were plenty of friends. I had some pretty solid friends at different times, sure. To be honest, most of my friends were my sister's friends and they were girls. It was much more fun to hang out with girls than boys.

PLAYBOY: When did you figure out that girls were as aware of you as you were of them?

PHOENIX: Well, that's immediate, isn't it? I don't know what age, but it's as soon as you all start becoming curious about each other. I don't recall sex being discussed in my family. You become a teenager and start having curiosity about it.

PLAYBOY: Your parents' disillusionment

with the group prompted them to celebrate a rebirth by changing your surname from Bottom to Phoenix and relocating to southern California. That's when your mother got a job at NBC and brought you to talent agents, who signed you at the age of six. Did you enter show business willingly?

PHOENIX: Oh yeah. We were always singing and playing music, and we were encouraged to express ourselves. When you're a kid, acting is an extension of playing. You have an imagination, right? If that's encouraged and you're in an environment where you're given these props and opportunities to express yourself, it's terribly exciting. I always loved it. In fact, I was thinking about it driving across the San Fernando Valley today. We used to live deep in the valley, and the station wagon would break down all the time when we'd go on auditions. But I loved those moments when you'd walk into an audition or onto a set and have an experience you didn't know

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you were capable of and didn't really even know where it came from. It was so fulfilling to have that experience.

PLAYBOY: You sound pretty positive, but some actors who began their careers as kids harbor resentment or have real horror stories.

PHOENIX: It's weird that I never had that experience. If that stuff had ever come up, I would just have gone, "Fuck you," and that would have been it. But again, I had a great, supportive family. The most important thing was that I never felt I was put in a position where I had to endure something.

PLAYBOY: There was a four-year difference in age between you and your brother, River, but both of you got lots of TV and movie work right from the beginning. Was there much competition among your siblings?

PHOENIX: We were a team, and whoever was working, well, that was great. We're always supportive of each other. There wasn't competition. We just didn't have

that competitive streak in us the way we were raised.

PLAYBOY: You were homeschooled and were required by the state to be tutored while working in movies and on TV shows. Were you into it?

PHOENIX: No. I don't know if I'm lazy, but I'm a sprinter. Endurance has never been my thing. I just want to go to the next thing. I like acting because I can focus hard for three, four months and then walk away. I hate weekends. I would shoot seven days a week if I could; two days off is way too much. When I'm in it, I don't know if I'm lazy. Luckily, I don't think I've gotten that with acting, but if I had to stick with something for a year or two, I don't know if I could have that kind of commitment. I have hardcore commitment in the moment for a certain thing. I can get into it and give it my all, but I'm not going to last.

PLAYBOY: So you didn't give school your all?

PHOENIX: No, and I regret not giving it my all. I always had the feeling I can't be stuck here doing this; I have other things to do. You get old enough and realize there was plenty of time to invest yourself in several things. I've had a few blocks of four, five years off when I could have dedicated myself to a lot of stuff. For example, I've just started taking trumpet lessons. I tried to play trumpet when I was 15. I figured I would have to study five years before I could play decently. I took a couple of lessons, but five years feels like forever when you're 15, and I stopped. I bought a trumpet about six years ago and took another class. Same thing happened. And so then I was like, Well, now six years have fucking gone by, and if I'd only stuck with it.... Anyway, I took my first trumpet lesson two weeks ago, and I've been practicing half an hour every day since. I don't know if I'll progress that much because I'm easily satisfied.

PLAYBOY: How do you mean?

PHOENIX: I was doing the lesson and we were both just holding these notes together. I found it so enjoyable. I was like, "This is totally satisfying." I don't have this need to achieve greatness, like, "I want more! I want more!" I was totally satisfied running this scale.

PLAYBOY: As you mentioned in your December 2007 *20Q* interview in *PLAYBOY*, you've been a vegan since your third birthday. Is it true you refused to wear any leather in your costumes for *Gladiator* and *Walk the Line*?

PHOENIX: I don't know where that came from, because in *Walk the Line* there were definitely some vintage boots, and I'm sure there was leather in *Gladiator* too. I don't wear leather in my life, but with movies, there are some things I struggle with, like if there are budget constraints or a particular vintage thing they need. For food on set, vegan is pretty common now. There are veggie burgers at fucking

fast-food restaurants and shit. So I think people are pretty good with that.

PLAYBOY: When you're not getting veggie burgers at fucking fast-food restaurants, do you cook?

PHOENIX: Just white-trash vegan cooking. I can make a fucking sandwich, salad, and pasta, but I'm not a proper cook.

PLAYBOY: As an up-and-coming actor, you reportedly lived with Liv Tyler for several years after co-starring with her in the 1997 movie *Inventing the Abbotts*. Some sources speculated that you dated Anna Paquin, with whom you made the 2001 movie *Buffalo Soldiers*. Do you have any rules for dating co-stars?

PHOENIX: It depends, right? I mean, love is love. I don't think your profession should affect your actions, but you shouldn't do anything that's going to distract you from the work.

PLAYBOY: Lately your name has been linked with Allie Teitz, a 20-year-old DJ. Romantic relationships can be tough enough; does the presence of press and photographers bump up the difficulties exponentially?

PHOENIX: Relationships are difficult, so adding public awareness is probably not a good thing. I've been fortunate, and my friends, like me, don't pay attention to that stuff. If you let it be a part of your world, it affects you. If you want to go online or look at yourself in a magazine, it'll probably fuck with you. Luckily I've never had an interest in that. Oftentimes now we have the experience of walking down Melrose Avenue right by the paparazzi, and they sometimes go, "Hey, Joaquin," or they don't say anything, but they don't take a picture. Sure, a couple of times in my 20s when I was dating an actress or some shit, they were curious. Now they mostly take pictures in the hopes that I'll get hit by a car or trip or somebody will throw something at me.

PLAYBOY: Having had such an interesting nomadic childhood and traveling so much while making movies, do you like to stay loose and uncommitted, or do you like putting down roots?

PHOENIX: When I work I usually travel, so when I'm not working I tend to want to just be at home. I can't recall the last time I took a vacation. When I was 20 I went with a girlfriend to some island. "Vacation" to me is getting to stay at home, and I'm fortunate in that I work for a few months, then take off for a couple of months and don't work at all.

PLAYBOY: You've definitely been working a lot lately. You play a permanently stoned, funny private eye in the upcoming *Inherent Vice*, Paul Thomas Anderson's screen version of the Thomas Pynchon novel. The movie is a kind of late-1960s Raymond Chandler-style film noir, except full of stoners, beach bunnies and eccentrics. It's also baffling, trippy and stylized.

PHOENIX: It's an experience, right? It's amazing you said that, because I think that's what you have to do. It just lulls

you into this experience. I wasn't aware of it until after the fact, when the movie was finished. I was walking around in everyday life, thinking, Wow, I was in this other place for so long; I have been taken away on this journey and this experience. As a director, Paul doesn't throw you right into it. He guides you so subtly that you don't even realize you've just been brought into this other world, this other time.

PLAYBOY: One of your co-stars, Josh Brolin, meant it as a compliment when he called making the movie "absolute fucking chaos every day," that the vibe was "crazy and nuts and created insecurity." Was it that way for you?

PHOENIX: Well, Josh is the best. *The best*. Yeah, working with Paul is such an immersive experience. Everybody on set is so committed to that experience. It doesn't feel like making a movie in some ways. Sometimes I don't even fully understand how he does what he does—how he gets you in this feeling

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like you're watching a movie rather than being in one. Some days you're driving home and you go, "Wow, wait—I know we were on that set, but what were we shooting today?" It was dreamy.

PLAYBOY: *Inherent Vice* took so many years to launch that Robert Downey Jr., who was frequently mentioned as most likely to play the hippie detective, recently said Anderson had to break the news to him that he'd grown "too old" to star in it.

PHOENIX: When I get cast, I always think it's because their first choice wasn't available. Of course, who's going to admit that to you? But I don't have any problem with that. For me it's like, just get in where you can. I remember I told Paul, "Listen, man, I don't want you to feel any obligation." When we were filming I said the same thing, and he was like, "Yeah, no, I'll fire you if you don't..."

PLAYBOY: If you don't cut it in the role, he'd fire you?

PHOENIX: [*Laughs*] I don't know if he actually said that. I want the filmmakers I

admire, the people I work with, to make the best movie possible. If that includes me, great. If it doesn't, I understand.

PLAYBOY: Who hasn't called who you wish would?

PHOENIX: I'll always want to work for David Lynch.

PLAYBOY: Your first time working with Anderson was for *The Master*, in which you play a lost, almost animalistic World War II vet who comes under the sway of a charismatic Scientologist-type leader played by Philip Seymour Hoffman. Both of you got Oscar nominations. After working so closely with him, how did his tragic death affect you?

PHOENIX: I don't want to discuss this.

PLAYBOY: But having suffered such a high-profile loss as Philip Seymour Hoffman—not to mention your brother, River Phoenix, in 1993 at the age of 23—do you have a philosophy about what happens after death?

PHOENIX: I don't have a fucking clue, man. I mean, Jesus fuck. If you told me I'm a fucking video game that some aliens are playing somewhere, well, that seems totally plausible to me. Hey, you and I might be some kind of simulation from someone 200 years in the future. I don't fucking know. I mean, anybody's theory seems plausible. So I say, let go, man. Just let go.

PLAYBOY: How did starring in Woody Allen's new movie work out for you?

PHOENIX: He's not at all like what you think or like the characters he plays. He's very assertive and strong, knows what he wants. I liked working with him very much. His writing is so good, and he understands the rhythm of a scene so well, it's amazing to experience. You think of a scene and it seems all right, and then he'll make a couple of small adjustments, and it's like unclogging an artery.

PLAYBOY: Had you ever come close to working together before?

PHOENIX: My mom reminded me that I auditioned for him when I was 20 or something. I don't even know for what. Listen, he's the first filmmaker I was aware of. I remember seeing *Love and Death* when I was a kid. I always wanted to work with him, but I didn't think it was going to happen. So I was very pleased.

PLAYBOY: When you were in your late teens, you took four years off from movies because you were disenchanted with the roles available to you. You did it again in 2008 and didn't turn up in a movie for another four years, citing a lack of inspiration, among other reasons. Would you do that again?

PHOENIX: Believe me, it's hard not to be inspired and excited when you work with people like Paul Thomas Anderson, Spike Jonze or Woody Allen. I'm very open to giving myself to the process now and not trying to control it. I think maybe I did that when I was younger. I had specific ideas about how I wanted to play something, and I was quite rigid in a way. I used to try *(continued on page 157)*



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to map things out from start to finish. That started to change a few years ago when I got to work with these wonderful directors who weren't afraid of uncertainty or of discovering something in the moment. I don't really know anything about surfing, but I imagine surfers interact with something that's constantly changing, that feels like it's alive. I'm after that experience. I've been fortunate to work with directors who seem to enjoy that experience as well. I don't have much ego when it comes to work now.

PLAYBOY: You've won a lot of respect from fans and critics for taking risks as an actor, doing high-wire stuff in your roles—stuff that, if it didn't work, could be pretty embarrassing. Do you see it that way?

PHOENIX: It's not really a high wire. Or maybe it is a high wire but with a strong net and a huge soft mattress underneath. I mean, you're just making a movie. I look at these kids who are fucking 22 years old and playing in the World Cup finals, where you get one shot, no second take, and all the time the opposing team is screaming at you and waving stuff in your face to make you lose. Everyone on the movie is supporting the actors. Everybody wants one another to succeed. We're all working together.

PLAYBOY: So your adrenaline never pumps on a movie set?

PHOENIX: No, I still find it terrifying, and that's crazy, isn't it? In some ways, it's fucking ridiculous that I've literally been doing it for 30 years and still feel like it's the fucking first time I'm making a movie every time I go in. It's probably good, though, just because it means I still care and it matters so much to me. But I think it's a motivating anxiety and fear, as opposed to a debilitating one. Maybe sometimes it's debilitating, and it can get in the way. Hopefully I've gotten better at not fighting it, knowing it's there and just allowing myself to walk with my fear.

PLAYBOY: When you're not working, what do you do to get the adrenaline surging?

PHOENIX: I'm a total fucking coward. In some ways that's probably why I'm an actor. I have *fear*. I've never had the desire to bungee, to jump out of a plane, to zip-line or anything like that. I find it terrifying. I don't think I'm risky in that way. If anything, I've eased off. Four or five years ago I used to ride motorcycles, but you can't really ride without riding fast, and I don't know if that's worth it. It's great fun, but fuck, it's so dangerous. I think I've probably gotten even softer.

PLAYBOY: But you look healthy and in shape these days.

PHOENIX: I meditate, mornings at eight and again at night. I really don't know what the fuck that's about or why it works, but I

don't really know how Tylenol works either. Maybe it's a placebo. Whatever you do to take time out of your day and just stop for a while, I think is beneficial. At least it has been for me. I just started Iyengar yoga, something I'd avoided because I think it's boring.

PLAYBOY: So you're pushing through the boredom?

PHOENIX: For the Woody Allen movie I was very sedentary and out of shape, with a bit of a gut. By chance I was talking to somebody I'd known for some time but didn't know what he did. I asked him, and he said, "I teach yoga." I said, "Great, I'm coming tomorrow." After the first class I told him, "I'll be honest, I don't think I'm coming back. This is miserable, and I used to like you very much, and now I hate you. I don't want this to alter our relationship too much." But I've stuck with it because I like the idea of pushing myself. It's fun to break yourself mentally, give in to something and give up control. That's something I've had a hard time with before.

PLAYBOY: There was a rumor that you might be getting in shape to star in the Marvel Studios superhero epic *Doctor Strange*. But those negotiations seem to have faltered.

PHOENIX: I can't talk about it. I've met on all sorts of movies throughout the years. What seems appealing about some of them is the idea of pushing myself in a way that's out of my comfort zone. But really, it's what I'm always looking for—good characters, big ideas and a passionate filmmaker. If those things line up with any kind of movie, I have interest in it.

PLAYBOY: Were you into comic books growing up?

PHOENIX: There's some great Batman stuff and classic Frank Miller *Dark Knight* stuff and *Arkham Asylum*. But I was always a big Wolverine guy. I love Wolverine—big fucking great dramatic character. They're all conflicted, and they're really interesting.

PLAYBOY: Have you ever regretted saying no to a big movie, maybe even a Marvel movie?

PHOENIX: There's only one movie I regret saying no to—except the person who ended up doing it was so good and was absolutely meant to do it, so I don't have any regrets. I'm not going to say which one, but it was a really big hit. It's getting to the point where they're making some pretty decent movies. I thought *Iron Man* was fantastic.

PLAYBOY: Do you vote?

PHOENIX: Sure, the cowardly approach to voting—some pathetic, lame-ass way of voting for the better of two evils. I wish I were more involved politically. I vote, but I certainly don't know much about the issues. I don't say that with pride. It's terrible. I ought to.

PLAYBOY: What do you know now that you didn't know when you talked to PLAYBOY seven years ago?

PHOENIX: All I know is that I've been fortunate, and my good fortune continues. Other than that, the older I get, the more I know that I don't fucking know anything at all. I feel like I just make up shit, like, "I try not to have any rules," but maybe I do have rules. I don't fucking know. I'm trying to get better at being open to the mystery of it all.

