

RIVER PHOENIX

1982

1985

1986

1986



THE RISE OF RIVER

He was arguably the greatest actor of his generation, heartthrob, eco-warrior, strict vegan, drug addict. And he was dead at 23...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

ON THE NIGHT OF 30 OCTOBER 1993, a party was in full flow in River Phoenix's room at Hotel Nikko, LA, attended by a group of friends that included his new girlfriend, actress Samantha Mathis, and his younger sister and brother, Rain and Leaf (later to take back the name he was born with, Joaquin). River was drinking champagne and snorting cocaine. Eventually, he asked for his car to be brought over and the group headed off to The Viper Room rock club on Sunset Boulevard.

As Viper Room co-owner Johnny Depp and the Red Hot Chili Peppers jammed on stage, Phoenix stumbled to the men's room around 12:45am, where, already drugged-up to the gills, a musician pal gave him an exotic brand of heroin called Persian Brown. As soon as he snorted the powder, he knew something wasn't right. "What the fuck is in it?" he shouted,

before staggering back to the booth where his friends were. He threw up over himself, passed out briefly and asked to be taken outside for some air.

That's when the seizures started: arms and legs flailing, head bashing against the cold pavement... Rain lay on top of her brother to control his convulsions ("He was flopping like a guppy," said one witness), while Leaf made his famously anguished call to 911. "My brother's having seizures... I'm thinking he's had Valium or something... You must get here, please, because he's dying."

At one point, Phoenix momentarily came to, saw a pair of photographers standing over him and uttered his last, wretched words: "No paparazzi! I want anonymity!" By the time the paramedics arrived, the actor was in full-blown cardiac arrest and, despite attempts to restart his heart at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, at 1:51am, the 23-year-old was pronounced dead.

Even as distraught fans turned the Viper Room sidewalk into a flower-strewn shrine, a cruel, recriminatory backlash kicked off.



AND FALL PHOENIX

Out of the woodwork popped so-called ‘friends’, disclosing pitiful tales of intoxication: he’d shown up at a formal wedding in ripped shorts, totally off his head; he’d nearly overdosed three years earlier; he was eternally spaced-out on his final film, *Dark Blood*.

What disturbed supporters and naysayers alike was the gulf between Phoenix’s sensitive, eco-boy image and the mercurial drug hoover he’d become away from prying eyes. This, after all, was the militant vegan who’d once cried when a girlfriend ordered crab off the menu. How had this staunchly ethical world-warrior, once considered the most promising star of his age, allowed himself to become Hollywood’s latest poster boy for drug abuse?

HEY JUDE

He was born River Jude Bottom in Madras, Oregon, to a pair of itinerant hippies who became missionaries for the eccentric cult Children Of God. His mother, Arlyn, was a middle-class Jewish girl who plunged headlong into the LSD-fuelled counter-culture, where she fell in love with John

Bottom. River – whose name was inspired by the “river of life” in Hermann Hesse’s novel, *Siddhartha* – entered the world on 23 August, 1970, to a round of applause from friends invited to witness the event.

Bolting their cart to the Children Of God, John and Arlyn gave up acid (the cult forbade drug-taking), but were present during the commune’s ‘free love’ sexual heyday, where even children were encouraged to experiment, often with the sect’s adult members. (Phoenix later claimed he lost his virginity at the age of four.) With John anointed as the cult’s “Archbishop of Venezuela and the Caribbean”, the Bottoms journeyed through Central America, but eventually quit the cult. Living in a rat-infested hut in Caracas, Venezuela, the family – which now included another son, Leaf/Joaquin, and two daughters, Rainbow and Liberty – survived by peddling River and Rainbow’s hymn-singing talents around the city, before finally hopping a freighter back to the States in 1977.

On their return, Arlyn re-christened the family Phoenix to symbolise their rebirth and

transformed herself from fuzzy Earth mother to steely showbiz matriarch. Sizing up her kids’ burgeoning talents, she steered the clan towards California, where River and his siblings performed primitive dance moves on street corners like a faith-spouting Jackson Five and Arlyn landed them an agent who began sending River up for TV ads.

After four commercials, River rebelled against the ad-world phoniness and told his parents he wanted to be a serious actor. Aware that his button-nosed, blue-eyed cuteness was snagging attention, they relented and he landed a TV series (*Seven Brides For Seven Brothers*) that lasted one season, followed by TV movies and sitcom episodes. Then came his big screen debut: winning a role in Joe Dante’s sci-fi adventure *Explorers*. Playing a boy-genius boffin, it was a tough shoot for the 13-year-old, his unusual upbringing making him a target for bullying cast-mates. Frequently reduced to tears, he nonetheless displayed incredible talent for an actor with no formal training. And directors were soon lining up to cast him. >>

RIVER PHOENIX



Out and about: (above) Oscar night with Martha Plimpton; (right) teen exploration in *Stand By Me*; (far right) *Mummy's* boy.



It was 1986's superlative Rob Reiner Stephen King adaptation, *Stand By Me*, and his tender, honest performance as mixed-up teen Chris Chambers, that rocketed Phoenix to stardom. In the campfire scene, where Chris breaks down over the locals' contempt for his family, Reiner wasn't getting the emotion he wanted, so told River to think of someone he'd looked up to who had disappointed him. The next take, Phoenix unleashed a torrent, and was still wracked with sobs after Reiner called cut. "He didn't have a lot of technique," said the director, "but you just turned the camera on and he would tell the truth... Every time I see that scene I cry." Phoenix never revealed his inspiration.

SECOND SKIN

Phoenix shed his "second" virginity on *Stand By Me*, in a backyard tent pitched for the occasion by his parents. According to his

upbringing clashed with the enormous pressure of being his family's breadwinner.

Although Phoenix was singled out for praise, *The Mosquito Coast* flopped, and the young star was panicked into a pair of dubious career moves — *A Night In The Life Of Jimmy Reardon* and *Little Nikita* — before righting the ship with *Running On Empty*. He was ideally cast as rebel pianist Danny Pope in Sidney Lumet's fugitive-family drama, and acted his way to an Oscar nomination with some revelatory performing, including an exchange where he tells girlfriend Martha Plimpton (also his off-screen partner) that his family are going back on the run — a scene of abject desperation that's among the most moving in his career.

Only 19, his Best Supporting Actor nod was the industry's expression of faith in Phoenix's bright future. "He has a strong, clear persona

Peppers. Off screen, he lamented the media objectification that came with being a teen heartthrob. "I go into remission, shut myself out and freak," he shuddered. "I don't like being out there."

RENT CHEQUE

It was a role his parents didn't want him to do, but Phoenix was breaking free of the tight grip they'd exerted over his career. Gus Van Sant's paean to beautiful, strung-out rebel boys on a spiritual quest for home, *My Own*

'IT WOULD REALLY FRIGHTEN THE HELL OUT OF ME TO BE A CREATURE TAKING DRUGS'

co-star Corey Feldman, River also took drugs for the first time, Feldman claiming they smoked spliffs together. After *Stand By Me*, Phoenix headed to Belize to play Harrison Ford's tormented son in *The Mosquito Coast*. But during *Mosquito's* jungle shoot he kicked against his real father's tense chaperoning (John was trying to talk his son into quitting Hollywood). At one point, director Peter Weir spotted his clean-living star scoffing Mars Bars when he thought no one was looking. But it turned out that teeth-rotting sweets were the least of Phoenix's worries. The shy, docile sensitivity that made him such a sought-after Hollywood commodity also revealed fatal cracks in his personality — as the deep-rooted pain of his bizarre hippie

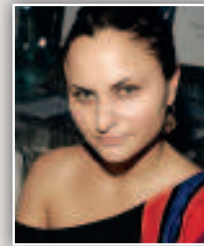
and he's a very good actor, plus he is visually beautiful," gushed Lumet. "He ought to have a brilliant career." Phoenix showed up on Oscar night in a tux, with Plimpton and his mother on his arm. Many tipped him as favourite to win, but he lost to Kevin Kline's comedic gambolling in *A Fish Called Wanda*.

With his career shifting into overdrive, River played the teenage Indiana Jones for Spielberg in *The Last Crusade*, while the Phoenix clan decamped to a 20-acre compound just outside Gainesville, Florida. There, River began spending more time on his music, forming a band called Aleka's Attic and striking up friendships with REM frontman Michael Stipe and Flea of the Red Hot Chili



BROTHER AND SISTERS

Whither River's siblings?



RAIN

Full name

Rain Joan of Arc Phoenix

Born 21 November 1972
in Crockett, Texas

Screen time *Even Cowgirls Get The Blues*, *O*, *Hitch*
Next in age to River, she changed her name to

Rainbow and performed with her brother in their band, Aleka's Attic. She later collaborated with REM, toured as a back-up singer with the Chili Peppers and starred in *Even Cowgirls Get The Blues* for Gus Van Sant. "River and I are as close as a brother and sister can be," she said shortly before his death. She formed a quasi-religious band called The Causey Way, which has since disbanded. Married musician Michael Tubbs in 2003.



JOAQUIN

Full name

Joaquin Rafael Phoenix

Born 28 October 1974 in
San Juan, Puerto Rico

Screen time *To Die For*,
Gladiator, *Walk The Line*

The middle child, Joaquin felt left out by his other sibling's

earthy monikers, so changed his name to Leaf from the ages of four to 18. He quit acting after *Parenthood* (1989) to live away from public scrutiny, before making a stunning comeback in Van Sant's *To Die For* (the family needed a new breadwinner). His desperate 911 call in River's final minutes led to reporters asking him how he could stay so calm. "People are heartless," he declared angrily. "Motherfuckers are cold."



LIBERTY

Full name

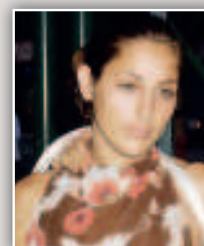
Libertad Mariposa Phoenix

Born 5 July 1976 in
Caracas, Venezuela

Screen time None

The only offspring of the Phoenix family who never took any real interest in

acting, Liberty was an avid dancer but quit after her second child was born. She named her first child Rio in memory of her late brother and worked in Costa Rica for a while as head chef at her father's vegan restaurant. Liberty also spent a few years in a country band and still helps out Rain with her musical career, while raising her three children – Rio, Indigo and Scarlett – in Florida.



SUMMER

Full name

Summer Joy Phoenix

Born 10 December 1978
in Winter Park, Florida

Screen time *The Faculty*,
Dinner Rush, *The Believer*

The youngest member of the Phoenix clan lives next door

to brother Joaquin, went to NYU film school and won an Independent Spirit nomination for her role in *The Believer*, opposite Ryan Gosling. "I think I'm asked to prove myself even more because of my last name. I care more about my self-recognition and the journey of self-love as opposed to outside recognition and the love of others." She married long-time boyfriend Casey Affleck last year and named their son Indiana August.



On-screen: love (far left) renting in Idaho; (above) with Samantha Mathis.

Private Idaho stars Phoenix as narcoleptic rent-boy Mikey, alongside Keanu Reeves as a slumming rich kid. As the perpetually dazed hustler, Phoenix is disaffected, elusive, spaced-out. It's an extraordinary, instinctive performance – and he paid a heavy toll to extract it, immersing himself in Portland's street-kid culture before shooting started. "It's our responsibility to explore all the directions that might even be suggested in the script," he said later. "Our research was extra-curricular, it wasn't necessarily needed."

In light of later events, that comes as a painful admission, but Phoenix sank far enough into his messed up character that he was undoubtedly dabbling in heroin (whether he had before has never been definitively established). For Phoenix, *Idaho* represented a delayed adolescence that he embraced with the exhilaration of a youth hanging out with cool, new friends he was desperate to impress. Only instead of a sneaky spliff, it was foil wraps of smack...

Junkies are notorious liars, and he joined the club on the *Idaho* publicity trail. "It would really frighten the hell out of me to be a creature walking around taking drugs," he fibbed. "Why throw a curve on life?" In the industry, however, Phoenix's smackhead reputation spread fast. Away from the nurturing cocoon of his family, he began patrolling the Sunset Strip's druggy rock 'n' roll scene. He seemed to know LA was a bad influence on him (during a brief hiatus on his last film, *Dark Blood*, he told director George Sluizer, "I'm going back to the bad, bad city") but was unable to resist its lure.

On his last two films, trouble was clearly afoot. Watch Phoenix's angry, mumbling performance in Peter Bogdanovich's country-western romance *The Thing Called Love* now, and you wonder why someone, anyone, didn't strong-arm him straight into rehab. On that fateful October night, he was 11 days shy of finishing *Dark Blood*, and due to go straight on to New Orleans to play the interviewer in *Interview With The Vampire*. Creepily, in the

last scene he ever filmed, Phoenix delivered the line, "I belong to another place. I'm in another world." Around 8pm, he went back to his hotel. Less than six hours later, he was dead.

DOOM ROOM

Sadly, River Phoenix's name today brings the instant, word-association response, "The Viper Room". The concrete pathway that played out his dying moments became a macabre LA tourist attraction, while the media seized on his death as headline news. It was a seismic event that signalled the ruthless ascendancy of celebrity culture, where hard-partying 'It' girls can shove G8 summits off the front pages. There was a feeble attempt to anoint him the new James Dean, but the days when a beautiful, brooding screen idol could become enshrined as legend no matter how sordid their earthly demise were gone and the Phoenix cult quickly faded.

His devastated family circled the wagons, initially denying River's drug problem. As it turned out, his system was swimming in eight times the lethal dosage of cocaine and four times that of heroin. Not counting *Dark Blood*, which had to be abandoned after his death, Phoenix appeared in 13 films in 13 years. His finest performances are testament to an actor able to convey pain, fragility and a wisdom beyond his years, but only *Stand By Me* could realistically be considered a classic. That most of his films are unremarkable has undoubtedly diluted his legacy.

"I love River's family. They brought him up to believe he was a pure soul who had a message to deliver to the world," ex-girlfriend Plimpton told *Esquire* a year after his death. "But they created this Utopian bubble so that River never socialised. He was never prepared for the world in which he'd have to deliver that message."

All his life, River Phoenix believed he was on a divine mission. But he wasn't the messiah. Just a very messed-up boy. **TF**