

BlackBook

Joaquin
Phoenix

Progressive Culture
March/April 2000

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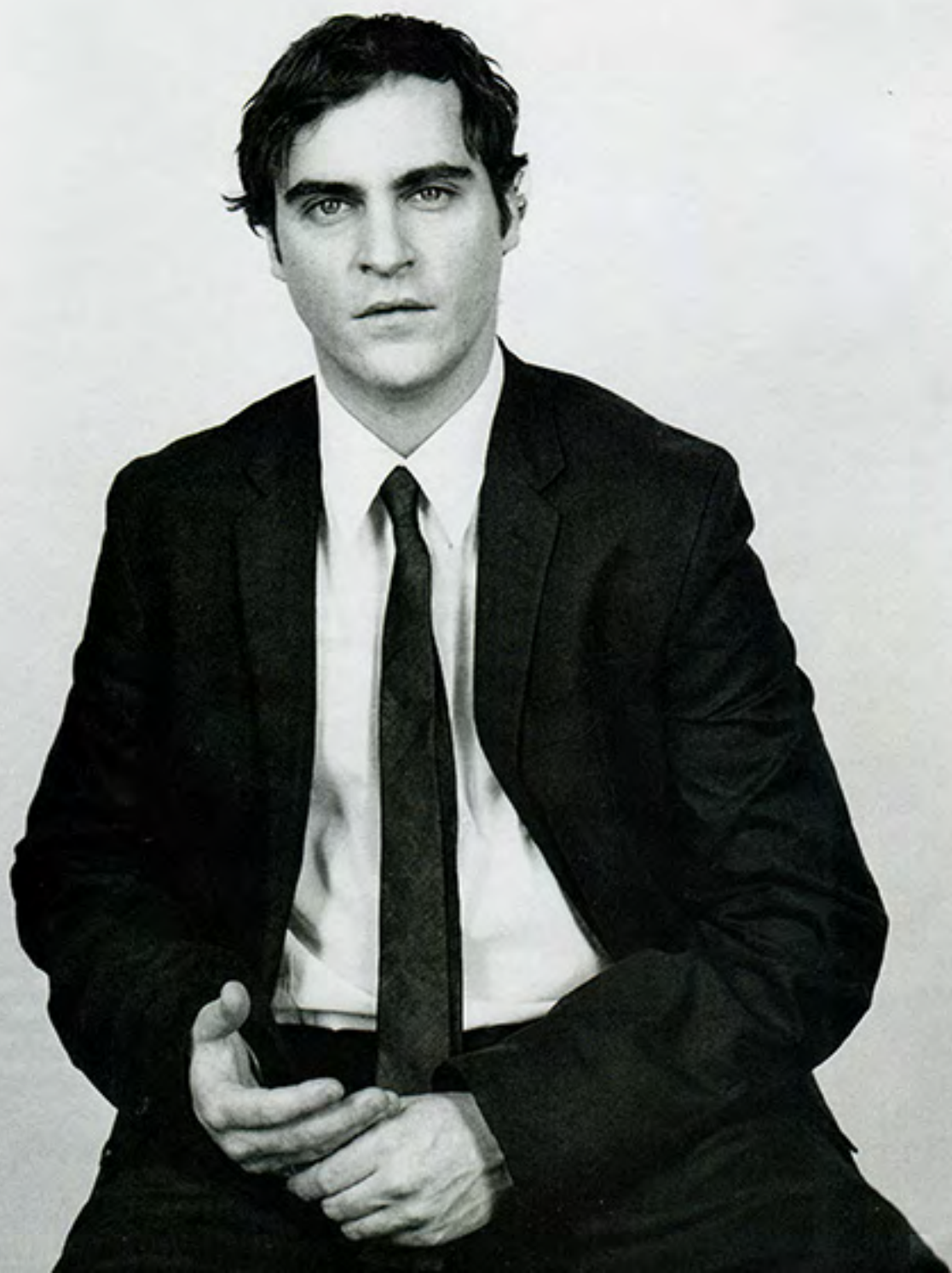
Cutting
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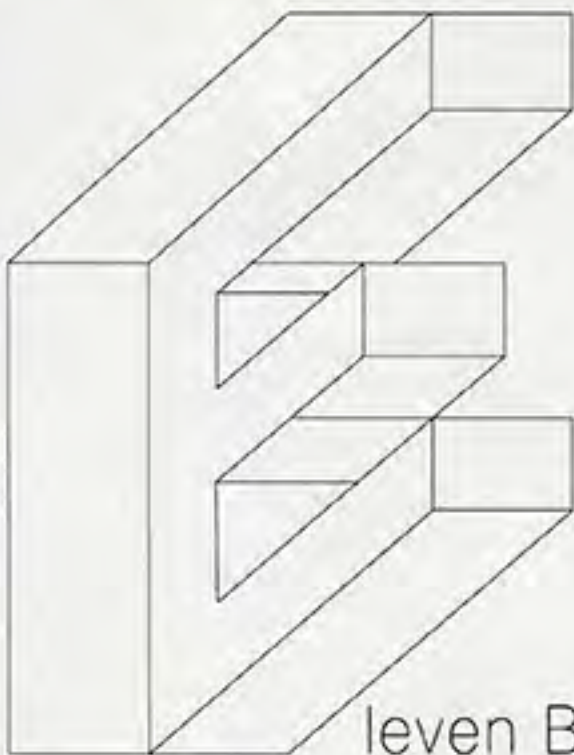
Little Black Book List
Nightlife Guide:
NYC, LA, Paris



Misfits







leven Bullets

story Gabe Hodson photography Anette Aurell

Actor Joaquin Phoenix takes a metaphorical trip to the firing range, dodging all the usual bullets about his family and love life, and managing to squeeze off a few rounds of his own.

Note: Due to the author's idiocy, he understood that this piece on Joaquin Phoenix was supposed to be 20,000 words, only to discover, after finishing the piece at said word count, that the piece was only supposed to be 2,000 words. And so, Gabe mailed the 20,000 word version to Joaquin Phoenix—who's films include *The Yards*, *Gladiator*, *Quills*, *Signs*, and the forthcoming war satire, *Buffalo Soldiers* (a film which Joaquin wants to make clear, "It's OK to laugh at")—with the request that he, Joaquin, blindfold himself, use scissors to cut the article up into fragments, and then mail the fragments in a box back to Gabe. Joaquin performed this task, that of blindfolding himself and cutting up the original piece, with startling ingenuity and élan, and upon receiving the box full of variously sized fragments (62 in total, and some of the pages were cut long-ways, not side-to-side), Gabe took them to a firing range in Manhattan, and appended all 62 fragments to a jumbo-sized target. Then Gabe, employing the use of a pistol (the type of pistol will remain a mystery, though we will say it was definitely not the over-hyped, runaway success firearm of the season—the *Giuliani forty-five*), discharged eleven (out of sixteen) rounds into the target and, surprisingly, managed to place a round in eleven different Joaquin-generated fragments of the original, preposterously long piece. What follows are those eleven fragments, in the order they were shot, minus the bullet holes. Please note:

The author does not condone the use of guns as a remedy for writer's block, nor should you, the reader, given the above antidote, feel that you are in any more danger than usual of being—*God Bless America*—shot while reading this piece.

1

IF JOAQUIN IS IN YOUR AIR SPACE, BE CAREFUL, BECAUSE HE PROBABLY HAS YOU IN HIS SIGHTS, WITH HIS HUMAN-THEFT MACHINE LOCKED AND LOADED.

Joaquin was describing to me his theory about being authentic as an actor. And then I said, "Do you think this desire to be authentic and genuine leads you to study other people?" As in regular citizens?

"You're amazing. You couldn't be more on the money. As an actor, to me, the most important thing is observing people around me. I still do it all the time, and look at someone and imagine what their life would be like, and then I'll store that emotion."

When I pressed him further on his tendency toward Emotion Profiling, and asked him what exactly makes a person a good candidate for this, he explained that it could be anyone. He said, "People I pass in a party. Something they forget about it, but to me it means a lot for no reason that I know. That's my material. Sometimes I'm convinced I can look at somebody and know what his life is like. Of course, I

could be wrong. A guy walks down the street. And I just start thinking about him. About his life. I go into his business life. A mixture of a real person and my own fantasy about him."

I made the comment that this tendency reflects a strong imaginative impulse, and that, I thought, on some level at least, that meant he had to actually care about these people.

He said, "Absolutely. Sometimes I can get really worked up. I was shopping for Christmas, and I saw this kid in the store. I got really sad for him." Joaquin explained that the kid looked alone, but then amended his story by saying, "I know if I talked to a psychologist they would say I was projecting."

I asked him if his celebrity status had impeded his ability to study people, since one assumes he gets studied a lot himself in public.

"I don't recognize people recognizing me. It still freaks me out. I feel so strange about it. I'm still just the kid I always was."

2

JOAQUIN GETS BALLISTIC ON THE SUBJECT OF EMOTIONAL TARGET PRACTICE, AND THE LITTLE KNOWN SIDE EFFECTS OF CONSTANTLY PUNISHING THE BULL'S-EYE.

I asked Joaquin what it was like to finish a movie. Did he want to rush into another movie, or take a break?



Joaquin, for what's it worth, is extremely conscientious . . . which is not to say he is normal, or just like a Regular Joe, because he's not. He's completely fucking weird, but aren't all the really good things completely fucking weird?

"You have to stop yourselves sometimes. Your emotions can get the better of you. When I'm done with a film I'm totally neurotic emotionally. You've spent three months funneling your emotion into something specific. You've had a definite mark you have to hit. You go from that to suddenly, no mark. It takes me a while to just get back to this life."

3

WORD OF WARNING TO PEOPLE WHO MIGHT TAKE IT UPON THEMSELVES TO INTERVIEW JOAQUIN IN THE FUTURE, AND WHO WILL THEREFORE LIKELY RECEIVE A PAPER BRICK THROUGH THEIR MIND'S WINDOW, THIS BRICK BEING FULL OF PREVIOUS INTERVIEWS HE'S DONE, NOT LEAST OF WHICH WILL BE THIS ONE.

Who are you people, you Celebratory Writer People, that apparently feel compelled to shoot Joaquin with the same batch of questions (word-bullets) every time, even when you see it gets horrible results? (My favorite interview from the press packet was where Joaquin told the interviewer, "This is the most boring interview in the world.") Why would you hassle someone about stuff like that, for instance, when common sense and courtesy says you shouldn't touch on (words have been deleted), or (word has been deleted), and definitely not (words have been deleted), because you

know you wouldn't want that type of question launched into your face? Joaquin, for what's it worth, is extremely conscientious, self-deprecating in the best possible way (which is to say, it's not a form of arrogance), an agile conversationalist, and, I am not being hokey or kidding about this, seems to exude a kind of warmth and exuberance for other people in his vicinity (constantly watching people, making sure to personally thank the owner/manager of the establishment—here comes the obligatory plug for this kind of piece: Yaffa's Tea Room—where we conducted the interview, and one time even standing up and doing an endearing impersonation of a mutual friend), seemingly comfortable switching topics and emotional gears at random (no he does not speak in ADD-style, *Late Show* sound bytes, or preprogrammed promotional jargon), which is not to say he is normal, or just like a Regular Joe, because he's not. He's completely fucking weird, but aren't all the really good things completely fucking weird?

4

ARE YOU SAYING THAT IF I ASK JOAQUIN THE WRONG TYPE OF QUESTION, THEN HE WILL BITE ME?

So no, Joaquin will not bite you. But he will get up and walk out (let's be clear, he did not do this to me), not in anger, but because despite everything he's

accomplished by the age of 28, he's managed to retain—salvage, defend (insert your own verb here, but make sure it has a semiheroic connotation)—whatever it is that makes him a sensitive human being, someone who makes it clear that he loves and admires his mother, which, if you're the type of future interviewer I am addressing right now, you should give a try.

5

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THE CHARACTER, ELWOOD, FROM *BUFFALO SOLDIERS*, THAT INTRIGUED YOU?

When I asked Joaquin the above question, he said he was, "Looking for something that would allow me more freedom with the character. Elwood is a great character. There's something very liberating about playing that character."

I said Elwood—the drug-making, arms-running onlistod army man stationed over in Germany—struck me as having a lot of conflicting impulses, which I knew, from my own writing, usually makes for an interesting character.

He said, "Playing with all those kind of conflicting ideas in a character is fun. Finding a balance. You want the character to be sympathetic to a certain degree. Yet you can't cater to that, you can't make him too sympathetic."



I tried to bear that in mind as I considered how I'd make Joaquin into a character in this piece. For instance, what would Joaquin be wearing in this piece? A wedding dress made out of weapons-grade plutonium. I decided.

6

THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT IS A PAID ENDORSEMENT THAT WAS SUBSIDIZED IN PART BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT FROM THE UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES:

There is a very real chance that by the time you are reading this America will be at war, and so, given the state of our economy and thus the high rate of unemployment, I'd like to recommend you consider a career in the Armed Forces. Think about it, wars are when all the really good medals get handed out, and everyone knows that medals are better than money. In fact, if this war actually happens, you might consider the whole thing a veritable gold mine of medal-winning opportunities, so don't get caught off guard and miss the rush. But, if you're still on the fence about it, and you're one of the fashionistas that reads this magazine, then consider this: How chic would you look in a body bag?

7

WHO IS ONE OF JOAQUIN'S FAVORITE LIVING ARTISTS?

The one-armed, pipe-smoking man named Ion Birch, whose show, "The Young Penis," is where I ran into Joaquin. And when I say ran into, I mean literally. We butted heads and fell over. But isn't art always better to look at when you're dizzy or suffering from a concussion? If you don't believe me, then why did the Whitney recently install a boxing ring in their main area?

8

JOAQUIN ON THE SUBJECT OF INSPIRATION:

I ask Joaquin about other young people in film, both actors and directors. At one point I mentioned the name

Spike Jonze, because I'd heard his name mentioned somewhere before, and was made to understand this Mr. Jonze was a living, breathing person.

"I think he's wonderful. Anyone who just does it, and doesn't die in the process is just amazing. The odds of having a good film are against you. Because you're trying to get so many different people toward a common goal. It's just so difficult."

We then talked about the fact that I admire different writers, and that sometimes I feel there's a sense of fellowship with other writers, even if they're doing something completely different than I do.

"I've never really felt a great sense of competitiveness with other actors. A healthy sense of competition—in that I see something that's wonderful, and I get inspired." This made perfect sense to me, because my favorite writers are the ones who make me want to go write. Joaquin said, "I think that's what Brando, James Dean, Montgomery Clift did. I think those cats would watch each other's movies. I think they were propelling each other."

9

JOAQUIN'S PERSONAL MISSION TO SAFEGUARD HIS IMAGINATION FROM THE FORCES IN THE WORLD THAT ARE PLOTTING TO OVERTHROW IT, A KIND OF REGIME CHANGE OF THE HEAD:

Joaquin told me that he's always been a daydreamer. He said that when he reads a book it usually trampoline him off into his own imaginary space. "Especially if something's good, I will take a character from a book and invent fictional scenarios, and run the characters through these scenarios."

I said I thought that was pretty great.

He said, "I mean, yeah, it's great. But my memories—how do I know if my memories of a book are from the book or something I invented?" I commented that using your brain to plagiarize a book seemed like a good thing to be doing. I said, "I've spent so much time reading books, so that my own memories from my life, I don't know if they're mine, or a character's memories

from something that happened to them in a book."

10

THE DIRECTOR AS PREEMPTIVE STRIKE AGAINST BAD ACTING:

Joaquin said, "To me, my director is everything. We have to be on the same page. I get so excited because it's this wonderful partnership. With that partnership, you're capable of almost anything." I pushed him on what sorts of things a good director can make happen.

"A really perceptive director will say, 'I know you're not really laughing.' That's what James Gray did for me. And Night Shyamalan from *Signs*." He said they'd let him know when he wasn't being honest. "To me that's the most important thing—for me and acting—honesty. And being as true to the character as possible in the moment. And really feeling it. [I mean, I don't really believe in acting. I don't really believe in pretending to be happy. I believe in genuinely feeling that emotion in that time. However you can arrive at that emotion. Of course, it's really impossible to do that all the time. It's what I strive for.]"

Then I said that I thought a good writer uses his weakness to advantage, though, that he or she learns to camouflage his or her weaknesses with his or her strengths. I said, "You do one thing beautifully, and another writer does the other thing beautifully."

Joaquin lit up, and he said, "That's right, but wouldn't it be great if you did it all beautifully?"

11

A RIDDLE FOR THE READER, WHICH THE AUTHOR BELIEVES SAYS A BOOK'S WORTH ABOUT THE WAY JOAQUIN LOOKS AT THE WORLD:

Q What was the last thing that Joaquin said to Gabe at the end of the interview regarding this piece that Gabe was now going to write about said interview?

A "You should just write a story with the two of us in it."

Catch Joaquin Phoenix in *Buffalo Soldiers* (Miramax) due to hit theaters May 9.

For instance, what would Joaquin be wearing in this piece? A wedding dress made out of weapons-grade plutonium, I decided.