

“I love the challenge of raising a great man. There’s a reason I’ve been around 39 years”

STORY TIFFANY BAKKER



In reel life, Matthew McConaughey is a natural at playing the hapless

bachelor-made-good but, in reality, he’s taken the leap from lovable larrikin to family man

When I meet Matthew McConaughey, I expect him to be shirtless. I don’t know why, I just do. Think about it; you see infinitely more photos of the 39-year-old running/cycling/surfing/doing-anything-outdoorsy topless, than of him tuxedo-clad on a red carpet – where he tends to look rather uncomfortable and fidgety.

McConaughey lets out a deep laugh when I ask about his aversion to clothes. “This is a business where you’re objectified, whether you’re male or female,” he says. “I say to the paparazzi, ‘Fellas, take your shot and go.’ It’s just they usually find me on a beach.”

It has become something of a running joke, particularly since 1999’s ‘bongo-gate’, when the actor was arrested, naked, playing his bongos and allegedly smoking a bong with fellow actor Cole Hauser. Then his good pal Matt Damon added fuel to the fire when he appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman* and did a spot-on impersonation of the star, joking in the McConaughey drawl that every movie “requires me to take my shirt off”.

Surprisingly, in his new film, the rom-com *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, there’s barely a hint of flesh. The closest we get to bare skin is an early-’90s flashback scene in which McConaughey’s womanising character, Connor, with his long, flowing locks and unbuttoned silk shirt, looks somewhere between a grunge-era Eddie Vedder and Fabio. At that point, his love interest, played by Jennifer Garner, has a dig in a way you suspect might be an in-joke. “Let’s button you up,” she smirks, “you look like a gay pirate.”

When we meet at a newly renovated Beverly Hills hotel, McConaughey is fully clothed in an old denim shirt, jeans and boots; there’s nothing actor-ish about his attire. Surveying the surroundings, he lets out a long, low whistle. “This is fan-see,” he says in his distinctive slow Texan slur. “I never imagined this would be my life,” he adds, looking around. “I never dreamt of it, because I wasn’t a child of the media. I wasn’t allowed to watch TV and I’d only seen two films before I was 19. At the same time, the reason I fell into it so naturally was that my mother wouldn’t let me be a voyeur of anything – she’d make me go and be the subject of it, be a doer.”

Spend even the briefest time with McConaughey and you gauge that he truly wants to be perceived as an acting every-man. He’s not remotely pretentious; he’s courteous and polite, and at pains not to separate himself from the people who pay to watch his films.

“I see actors insulate themselves so much, they don’t engage in life,” he says. “And that’s fine, but it’s not for me. I do the things I’d still be doing if I was a frigg’in’ accountant.” The energetic actor even has a foundation aptly called Just Keep Livin’ (which is dedicated to helping teenagers understand the importance of good decision-making, health education and active living), as well as a production company and record label of the same name.

Even the way he famously “fell” into acting mirrors his go-with-it attitude. He was at a bar and happened to meet director Richard Linklater, who was so taken with McConaughey’s charisma, he suggested he audition for his upcoming film. That turned out to be slacker classic *Dazed and Confused*, and it ignited the perception of McConaughey as a slacker king.

“I loved [acting], and people told me I was good at it,” he says, a hint of incredulity in his voice. “They kept asking me back, and I thought, if I can do this, great.”

His first leading role came in 1995, when he starred as idealistic lawyer Jake Brigance in the John Grisham adaptation *A Time to Kill*, alongside Sandra Bullock. Then he took on the role of Baldwin – another idealistic lawyer – in the story of the mutinous slave ship *Amistad*. In more recent years, he’s gained a reputation as the go-to man for romantic comedies, with mixed results. Most notably was *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003) and *Fool’s Gold* (2008), both with Kate Hudson, and 2006’s *Failure to Launch*, opposite Sarah Jessica Parker (which failed to launch at the box office).

Does it bother him, I ask, that he’s perceived as a bit of a one-trick pony, that we’re not likely to see him up on the Oscar dais any time soon? He exhales, shrugging his shoulders. “We have a big appetite for putting people down but, at the heart of everyone, there’s enough room for all of us to succeed,” he states firmly. “I’ve never been a jealous person, and I’ve never felt built up by someone else’s failure – that’s a cheap thrill.”

In *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, McConaughey plays a successful New York photographer with an insatiable appetite for women and a tendency to dump his many conquests all at once – via conference call. The actor says he had a ball playing Connor. “I love that he has no filter; he’ll say things we’ve all wanted to say, and you go, ‘Did he just say that?’”

Still, fans of the star will be pleased to hear he sees no similarities between himself and the character. “I’ve never been a manipulator, even in my bachelor days,” he says. “I never wanted to do things to people that could catch up with me later on. Having said that, this character has a great appetite for lots of women, and I can understand that.”

In the film, Connor is at his brother’s wedding when a ghostly past girlfriend, braces and all, comes back to haunt him – literally. She’s intent on showing him the error of his womanising ways. He also runs into a mortal ex, Jenny (Garner), who may or may not have been the love of his life. “I was excited Matthew was doing the film, because the role demands a moviestar,” Garner says later. “It needed somebody who could be a total cad and have women falling over themselves to get to him, but who’d wink at you while he was doing it, and you’d forgive him. Plus, my daughter fell for him.”

It seems McConaughey has a hold over girls of all ages. Little Violet (the three-year-old daughter of Garner and actor husband Ben Affleck), according to her mum, remains smitten. “That’s what she remembers about Boston, where we shot some of the film. She says, ‘Is that where we were with my Valentine?’”

As for his own romances, McConaughey has been linked to fellow actors Bullock, Penélope Cruz and Ashley Judd. These days, he’s happily involved with 24-year-old Brazilian model and handbag designer Camila Alves. The couple, who’ve been together for two years, welcomed their first son, Levi, last July, and McConaughey is relishing his new role.

“I love having the challenge of raising a great man,” he says. “You can be super-serious about something and [kids] just sit there and blow bubbles at you. >

Kids remind you that stuff doesn't always matter. Of course, you're still a parent, and you have to teach them. There's a reason I've been around 39 years; I have to teach him things and, if I didn't, I'd be irresponsible. You want to shepherd them along, but they're going to become what they become just with guidance."

He admits he was lucky to have an example set by his own family. "I have cool parents, but they were disciplinarians. Mom says I was pretty responsible, but I loved getting away with things."

Along with his two older brothers, Michael and Patrick, it seems the three McConaughey boys were a wild bunch when they were young. "They're outlaws," he laughs, "but we were disciplined within our tight unit. Family was above the law – if you were convicted of something or the principal said you did something, and you said you didn't, the family would take you down and fight the system. And we always told the truth, because if you told a lie and Mom and Dad were hung out to dry... Oh sh*t, you didn't want to do that."

His eldest brother, Michael (known as Rooster), has become something of a star in his own right, after taking part in reality show *Black Gold*, about his business supplying pipes to oil rigs. This is the man who named his son Miller Lyte, after his favourite beer. "Rooster, he's genius," cackles McConaughey.

His parents, he says, had a "passionate" relationship – one so fervent that 'for better or worse' meant divorcing and re-marrying three times. (His father died in 1992, after making love to his wife, which McConaughey has claimed he'd like as his own "exit strategy".)

"I think marriage is a beautiful institution and it can work," he says. "My parents are good examples of how it worked and how it didn't. I'd rather not get married and get divorced, but I'm not against marriage. I don't happen to be married now, but it's not for any moral reason – it's just not for me right now."



McConaughey plays a cad in *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, co-starring Jennifer Garner.

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He and Alves, he insists, are happy with the way things are. "We recently drove for 42 days across the US with a caravan on the back of the car. I call it 'the friendship tour'. I think she was ready to kill me by the end of it."

Travelling is a big part of the McConaughey philosophy. As a wide-eyed 18-year-old, he spent a year on a pea farm in Gorokan, on the NSW Central Coast. He realised one thing pretty quickly: a Texan accent, a good dose of charm and cowboy boots were only going to take him so far.

"That year," he recalls, "was one of the hardest of my life. Becoming a young man, I was just coming into my personal freedom and, all of a sudden, I was off on a farm in the middle of nowhere. I thought, I don't have my friends or family, I'd better figure this out. I started writing in Australia, and I still pull out those diaries. It was a good time, at that age, to be forced to go inward and to do some soul-searching."

It seems Australian pea farmers are to be thanked for inspiring McConaughey to move into show business. "There's no doubt I wouldn't be here – with the life I have now, doing what I'm doing creatively – if I hadn't had that year. I want my son to do something like that in the future."

I catch McConaughey looking at his watch. He's keen to return home to Alves and Levi. After we've said our goodbyes, I hover in the lobby and watch the actor saunter out, a bag designed by Alves slung over his shoulder. I expect an entourage to mysteriously appear from a secret door. Or at least a personal driver. Something. Anything.

Instead, a white truck (nice, but nothing ostentatious) pulls up. A valet throws McConaughey the keys and he hops into the driver's seat. With a wave, he pulls out into LA's La Cienega Boulevard and heads home his own way. And that, you suspect, is exactly the way he likes to do things. **SM**

Ghosts of Girlfriends Past is in cinemas May 7.

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