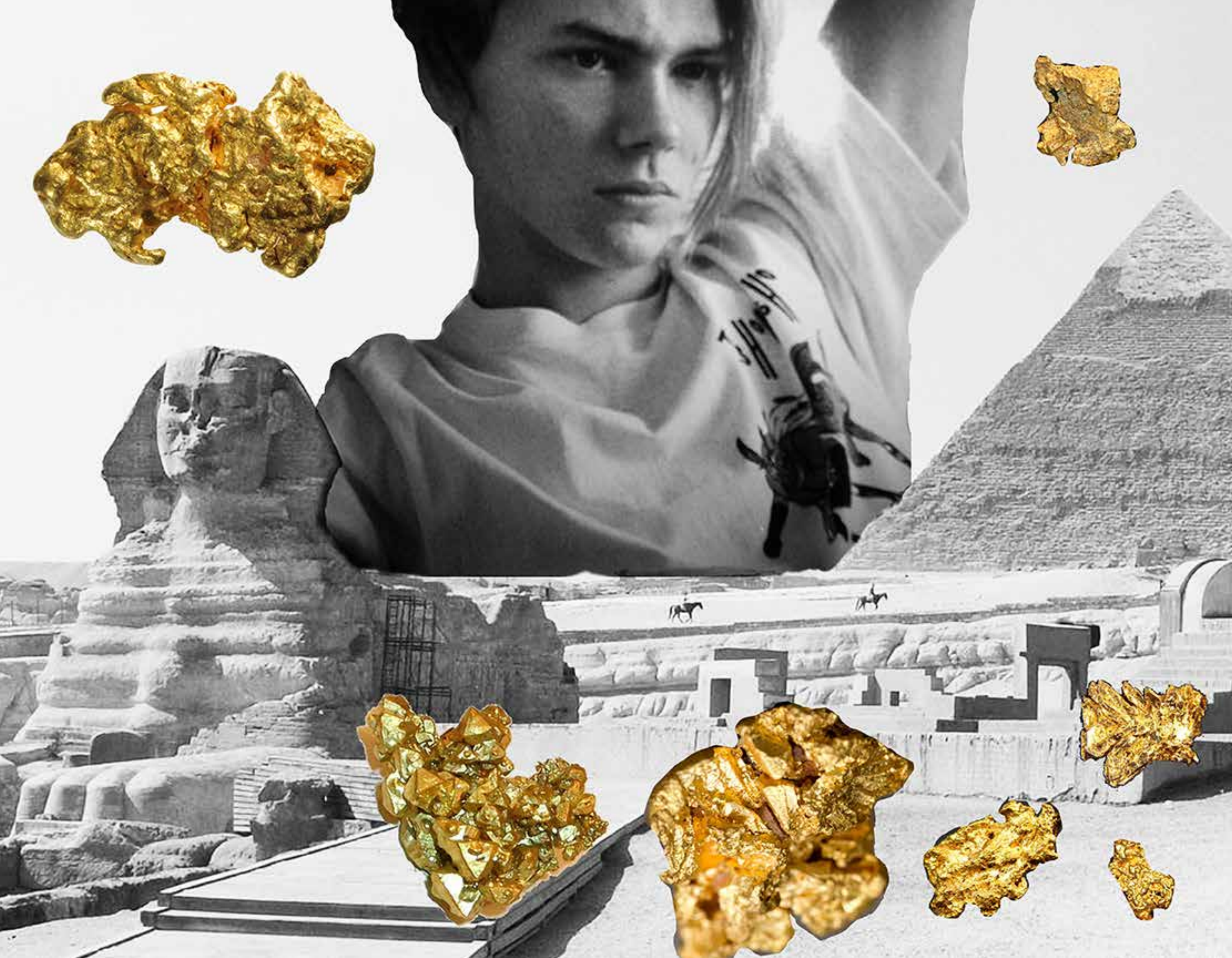
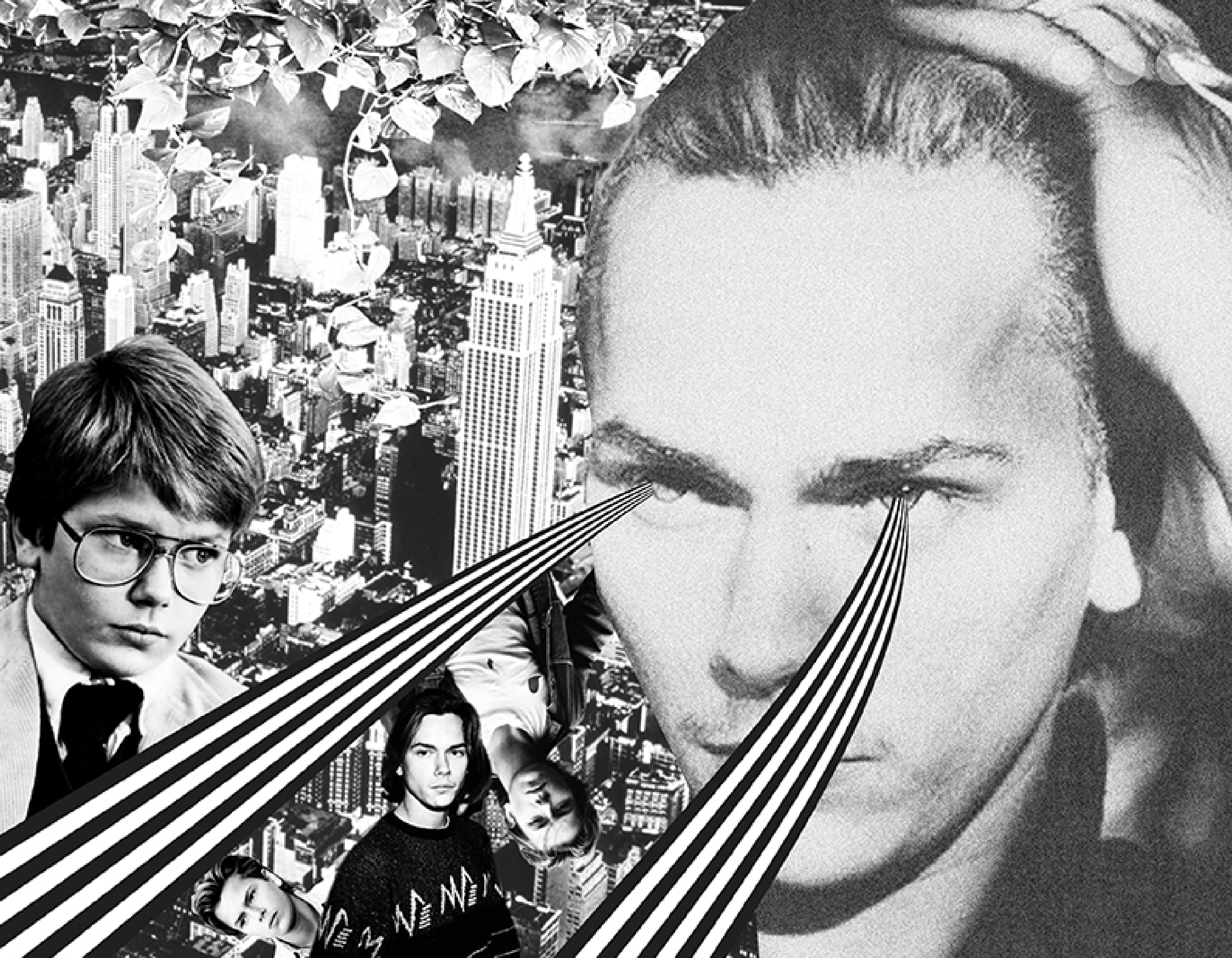


RIVERZINE LA









BOY MEETS BOY

In *My Private Idaho*, River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves portray a pair of teenage prostitutes, each of them more victim than vulture. Phoenix is a narcoleptic, Mike, who dozes off at dangerously inopportune moments as he searches endlessly for his long-lost mother; Reeves is a blue-blooded runaway, Scott, who turns tricks as an act of rebellion against his father. *Idaho* is the story of a rich boy who falls off the hill and a kid on the street, says its writer-director, Gus Van Sant. I saw a bit of the hill in Keanu's personality and a bit of the street in River's. They played out those extensions of themselves.

It makes sense that Phoenix and Reeves, briefly teamed in Lawrence Kasdan's *I Love You to Death*, should resurface together in Van Sant's twilight *America*. Although both have starred in mainstream hits - Phoenix in *Stand by Me* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and Reeves in the *Bill and Ted* adventures and *Point Break*, for example - they have specialized in playing outsiders. Alienation has meant success. Reeves's Holden Caulfield-like pothead in *River's Edge* brought him a flurry of acclaim that has never abated; Phoenix's performance as the son of radicals in *Running on Empty* earned him an Oscar nomination at seventeen.

Reeves is the first to arrive for dinner at Suite 55 in the Chateau Marmont on Sun set Boulevard. He looks a bit dazed from a run-in with the paparazzi at a Hollywood screening. I just stopped on my bike to ask the guard, like, what movie was playing, he says. And suddenly all the guys around me are yelling, 'Keanu, look up!' Did he? No way, man. I beat it out of there. It was weird. He grins, and then offers to grate some Parmesan cheese for the pasta, first asking what side of the grater to use. Soon Phoenix shows up. Immediately, he's at Reeves's side in the kitchen, peeling garlic. Within

minutes, though the two escape to the balcony. Phoenix lights up a Camel. He cocks an eyebrow: Doesn't figure, huh? Then he exhales. I know. I should quit.

Suddenly he and Reeves are off, excitedly exploring the possibility of doing Shakespeare together. They stand nose to nose - Phoenix newly bleached blond a part of his bid to play the young Andy Warhol in a future Van Sant biopic, Reeves dark-haired and tanned - like positive and negative images of each other. They sustain their banter throughout the meal, as one interrupts the other, but only to complete his thought.

GINI SIKES: Keanu, you've said you accepted a part in *Idaho* first, hoping River would do the film too.

KEANU REEVES: No. We were always together.

RIVER PHOENIX: He was lying. We were doing *I Love You to Death*, and we both got the *Idaho* script. We were driving in a car on Santa Monica Boulevard, probably on the way to a club, and were talking really fast about the whole idea. We were excited. It could have been like a bad dream - a dream that never follows though because one commits, but we just forced ourselves into it. We said O.K., I'll do it if you do it. I won't do it if you don't. We shook hands. That was it.

PAIGE POWELL: River, what were the challenges you were faced portraying a character who suffers from narcolepsy? When I first saw your narcoleptic attacks on film, for in tenth of a second they could have been perceived as comic. Then they seemed painful. It's clear that they come out of nowhere. How'd you know how to do that?

RP: Mainly from Gus's descriptions of what Jake would do. Jake was a narcoleptic in Portland who worked with me [on this aspect of the part]. I spent a lot of time talking to him about why narcolepsy happens. I understood it completely from the medical and scientific standpoint, thought they don't know exactly what it is. But when I was with Jake he never had a narcoleptic attack in front of me. After I'd done a few of the fits, Gus said they were exactly the way Jake had them.

KR: Do you think this film will cause narcolepsy? I mean, should parents watch out for their children?

RP: I would definitely stress that viewers should all be very aware of the catching nature of narcolepsy.

KR: Should viewers wear special glasses?

RP: It's like the eclipse. If you look at it too long, you might get it.

PP: While we're on the subject of research, did the two of you hang out with the street kids in Portland?

RP: Totally.

KR: Yeah, a little bit.

GS: Were there ever times that you felt that asking street hustlers for information was somehow exploiting them?

RP: I think they were flattered that their story would be told.

KR: No, man. I don't feel that this story is a contemporary tale of the street. It's not current in the places or the language. The only ways this story in contemporary is in a larger sense, in its emotions and perhaps what goes on inside of some people.

PP: Aren't emotions timeless?

KR: Exactly. But I'm talking about how they're manifested in language, or, you know, in anything that people are doing. I'm just saying this film is not representative of the street scene in Portland.

RP: That's very true. If a kid from Portland saw this movie, he wouldn't think it was Portland street life. But our responsibility to go as deep as we can and to explore all the directions that might even be suggested in a script. Just so we have all the bases covered. Our research was extracurricular it wasn't necessarily needed.

GS: Describe how you went about researching the lifestyle of street hustlers.

RP: I entered it through friends of Gus's who were already on the street, Scott and Gary. Gary died in a car wreck recently, from what I heard; God bless his soul. Being anonymous also helped us, I think.

GS: They had no idea you two were actors researching a role?

RP: No, no. It was all in character. We were just hangin'. If anything, they thought, 'This is another cat who is trying to take my spot on the street. There was a little curiosity, but never any animosity of jealousy. Because it's a brotherhood on the street, man. You all watch for each other's backs. Because no one wants to see anyone get stabbed.

GS: So nothing was set up?

RP: Some street kids came over to Gus's house, and we met different people at different places. It was staged in that sense. But the actual street stuff was just us, working on our own time. Like guerillas. [laughs] It was very sensational for us. I thought our main problem was to find out if we would be the real guys. Gus's choice was to use real street guys or us, so Keanu and I felt a great burden. We wanted to believe in this script and work out the problems.

GS: Both of you are very popular among adolescents. In particular, teenagers seem to relate to you, Keanu, because of your Bill and Ted persona. Was there any kind of concern in your camp, from, say, your agent or manager, that playing a male prostitute would hurt your image?

KR: Hurt my image? Who am I - a politician? [laughs softly] No. I'm an actor. That wasn't a problem. But shooting was a very intense experience. I had just finished Point Break and was still into my character. I felt a bit of anxiety about Idaho. I was overwhelmed at what I had to do - it was like, Oh, no! Can I do this? I was afraid. But Gus and River made me fit in. Said, Let's do one bitching movie. I don't know about you, River, man - but I was introduced to so many elements through the guy I was playing. Real people. My imagination. Gus's interpretation. Shakespeare. It was rich! And it was just bottomless, man. You could go as far as you could go, you know?

GS: I remember reading an interview with Robert Downey Jr. after Less Than Zero, where he said he was afraid people would harass him because of his character. Has anyone reacted strongly to your roles?

RP: Fuck them. That's all I can say. A big capital F and a U-C-K, and then THEM. T-H-E-M. KR: Get a clue, man.

GS: So you haven't had any negative-

RP No. I get negative shit all the time. I don't care.

PP: Do you think anyone would have taken this script ten years ago?

RP: Porno stars maybe. Like maybe one of Warhol's crowd.

PP: Joe Dallesandro?

RP: Possibly one of those cats.

GS: One of your co-stars is a Warhol actor - Udo Kier, from Dracula and Frankenstein, Which brings me to a prurient question

KR: It's your job!

GS: How comfortable were you guys filming your three-way sex scene with Udo?

RP: Well, I really didn't help matters. While we were doing our scene I said, Just think, Keanu. Five hundred million of your fans will be watching this one day. Like a stupid idiot. I made him feel completely self-conscious. But Keanu rose above it. Gus scolded me endlessly the night after.

KR: Did he really?

RP: Yeah. He scolded the shit out of me. I almost cried. That was terrible of me. I was just trying to break the ice. You know, I thought it was humorous - I was trying to save Keanu from being freeze-framed by twelve-year-olds at home!

KR: Thanks, brother.

RP: Later on, Keanu was filmed naked with the beautiful Chiara [Caselli, who plays Scott's Italian girlfriend, Carmella]. That scene was really a drag. He was having a great time with this girl, but it was freezing cold and they were dying. So I think they were more worried about the temperature than the nudity. That took five hours.

GS: The scene you did with Udo must have been easier simply because you two were already good friends. How did you meet?

RP: Actually, I met Keanu through my ex-girlfriend Martha [Plimpton] while they were doing Parenthood - they were sucking face regularly. My brother, Wakim, otherwise known as Leaf, was also in it. So, Leaf and Martha were his buddies before I was even a friend of his. Then I met up with him on I Love You to Death. And I liked the guy. I wanted to work with him. He's like my older brother. But shorter.

PP: Keanu, Scott is a rich kid who wallows in the gutters to rebel against his father, who's the mayor of Portland. Gus based Scott on Prince Hal in Shakespeare's Henry IV plays

KR: Yeah, but in the Shakespeare world, Prince turned out to be a good king. To avoid internal strife he gets into these wars. All the dukes and lords were pretty happy because men were going off to die for a noble cause and people were being fed. But in Idaho, Scott is not connected to the people. He's got his own agenda. He just dogs everybody and goes his own way. So he doesn't have, like, the noble aspect. In the end, his father was very compassionate and concerned. Perhaps that's what makes it a modern tale.

GS: Were you concerned at all that Mike speaks in street vernacular throughout the film, whereas Scott goes in and out of Shakespearean verse? Did you think you switch in speech might seem jarring, Keanu?

KR: The Shakespeare stuff was an aspect of the script. Gus said it was something to do and to think about it. So that was my game. I wasn't worried. It just seemed challenging and interesting to me.

RP: I was afraid of it not working.

KR: For me?

RP: No, for the entire film. I felt we needed to very clear on how we set up the transition scenes between the mock Shakespeare stuff and the docudrama street stuff. There needed to be stepping stones to those scenes - so it wouldn't be like jumping from black and white to Technicolor. It was

important to organize our thoughts and to support Gus stylistically.

KR: I wasn't aware of all the different styles going on in the film initially, though. You were looking through the camera a lot more than me.

RP: It was more of my duty in the character of Mike to be concerned with the directorial perspective. I was aware of how my narcolepsy would affect the narrative, how the random narcolepsy fits would affect the viewer. I'm glad that it didn't turn out to be a tale through my narcoleptic vision. But it was something I had to take full responsibility for, and it made me ask all these questions. Even when I wasn't involved with the scene, I had to be aware of it to some degree so that I could make myself match up to everything.

PP: The thing I like so much about Gus and his work is his compassion. *Mala Noche* just ripped my heart out. In *My Own Private Idaho*, he's dealing with the search for home and family. Was that theme important to you in deciding to do this film?

KR: Oh, not for me.

RP: I have really strong feelings about the search for home and mother. I thought it was very, very touching. You just knew that someone who could come up with this premise would have something to back it with in terms of knowledge and experience. Which Gus has.

PP: What was it like working with Gus as a person - living in his house, on location, and so on?

RP: Gus has those qualities that we all need to get back. Open eyes, open ears, a kid's stream of consciousness. You know, the things kids do - like putting their fingers up strange pipings in the house or acting all soft because they've screwed up and Mom's mad at them. That's Gus. Just being a kid. He was very collaborative, completely wide open. It was like a family operation - co-op style.

GS: How did you two manage on the set?

RP: Every morning, Matt [Ebert, production assistant] woke us up by singing show tunes. He'd drag us by our ears down to the van.

KR: No, man. I was always there, prompt and ready.

RP: But he had to drag me by the ear down to the van. I'm very stubborn about getting up in the morning.

KR: Yeah, man. But I knew that Matt would grab me by the ear, too, so I'd just hang out.

RP: Yeah, Keanu would wait downstairs with his script in hand, ready to get in the van, and I would be upstairs fumbling for my clothes, although I usually sleep with my clothes on.

PP: Gus was pretty spontaneous about what scenes you shot each day, wasn't he?

RP: I have no clue. I don't know when he fuckin' decided to shoot what or where or when or why, man.

PP: Well, when you woke in the morning didn't you know what scene you were going to shoot?

KR: Generally, yeah. I'm sure that was other people telling Gus, You need to know what you're going to do tomorrow. I don't know if that was necessarily his personal impetus, but I think the machine was asking him what we were going to do so that we could be ready.

PP: The movie starts in Portland, moves to Idaho, then to Italy. While filming sequentially, did anything develop that you couldn't have anticipated at the beginning?

RP: The campfire scene was definitely a combination of Keanu and me working together off-set, fucking around with improv, talking about our characters. Getting deeper into it, we discovered a

lot about our relationship within the film, and by the time we were ready to shoot the last scene in the States, we had enough insight to go a hell of a lot deeper than the script ever told us it would.

GS: That's the scene where Mike tells Scott that he loves him.

RP: There was a lot of deep love [in the film]. You don't know until you see the dailies whether it comes across or not. But because we shot in sequence, we were watching the film unfold before us, and when that scene came around we could just, like, ad-lib it.

PP: That scene is very similar to the one you did in *Stand by Me* -

RP: The confession scene. It's also similar to a scene in *Running on Empty*. Gus did see both movies, so maybe he sampled them.

PP: When I visited the set in Italy, I noticed that you were both always really sweet. You'd have gone without sleep and be really tired, yet were always considerate to the hotel clerks, limo drivers. Everyone.

RP: Oh, yeah. We're great guys. We really are wonderful people. I think Keanu and I are the nicest guys on the planet - with the exception of George Bush and Ronald Reagan.

KR: They are the sweetest guys! They're good to their clan. We should say thank you now that we have the opportunity. Thanks, guys!

RP: [laughs] I'm sorry. You gave us a compliment.

PP: O.K. But it's true - you did seem to demonstrate a genuine consideration for anyone you worked with on the set.

RP: But seriously, we know what it's like to be on the bottom. The Lord Jesus Christ has given us a chance to be on top. So we're not going to abuse it. We're going to be very thankful for it, an gracious about the luck that we have in our positions. We're very lucky young men. We do what we want, we get to be creative and make money.

KR: Right on brother. Right on.

GS: So what else are you guys doing now?

RP: I want to buy a 16mm camera. I'm not committed to the idea of being a filmmaker, but I'd like to try some shorts. I really like documentaries. And I want to drive through the mountains where I used to live when I was doing this TV series [*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*] when I was twelve.

I'm going with my girlfriend.

KR: Every moment is precious. I'm trying to travel. I want to go to Paris. It's probably just a pipe dream. I'd like to read some books. Take some voice lessons.

GS: To do more Shakespeare, perhaps?

KR: Um, who knows? I really would like to do Shakespeare with River. I think we'd have a hoot. We could do *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Romeo and Juliet*.

RP: I'll be Juliet.

By PAIGE POWELL and GINI SIKES

Interview Magazine, November 1991

©1990 Interview Magazine.

Painting: *River and Keanu as Mike and Scott in My Own Private Idaho*

2006 Oil on linen 40 x 58 inches by KEITH MAYERSON





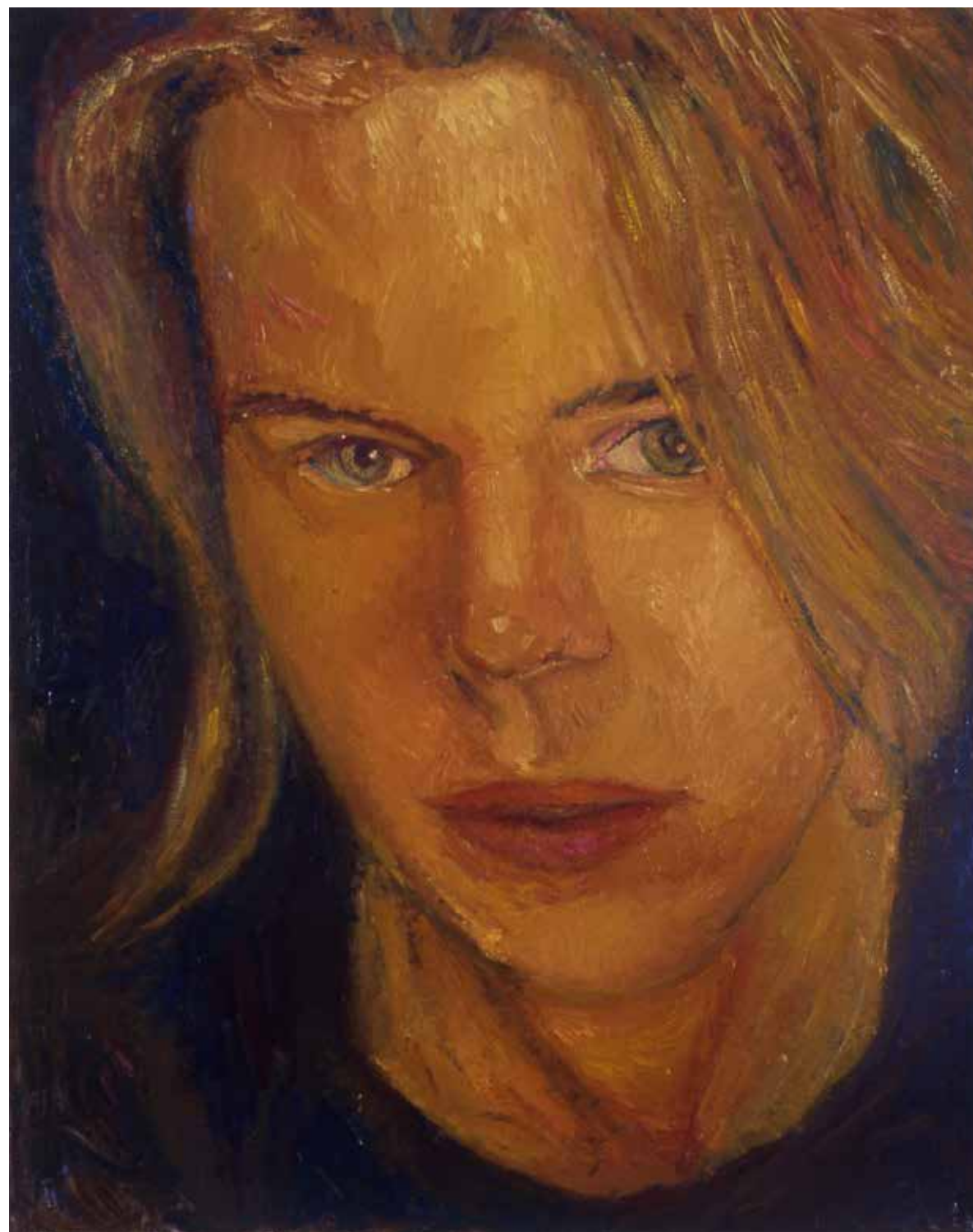
KEITH MAYERSON
RIVER, JOHN, AND THE BLUE MEANIE
1994 OIL ON METAL 17.5 X 16"



KEITH MAYERSON
JOHN SAVING RIVER FROM THE BLUE MEANIES
1994 OIL ON METAL 22 X 20"



KEITH MAYERSON
LITTLE RIVER
2002 OIL ON LINEN 19.75 X 15.75"



KEITH MAYERSON
RIVER
2002 OIL ON LINEN 28 X 22"





THE HOT CHICK



Y O U N G R I V E R

Far from Hollywood, amid frogs, snakes, canaries, and potheads, our intrepid reporter encounters the elusive irreducible River Phoenix.

Charlotte. Shit. I'm still in Charlotte, a connection city in a ganglia of connection cities that form the gray matter of the South. Two airline attendants are standing over me, trying to pet me to respond to the last boarding call for the flight to Shreveport. When I wave them off, they apologize and order me back to sleep with honeydew drawls. Los Angeles has made me soft; I needed a mission. And now I know where I'm going, alright, and it isn't to Shreveport. And it isn't up the river to the red-filtered, tribal horror of Colonel Kurtz. Down--I'm going down to Florida, a jungle of commerce, retirees, mockingbirds, Cuhans, Baptists, elusive Kennedys, hurricanes and gentrified Disney characters. I'm going to Gainesville to have a picnic with River Phoenix--nature boy, teen idol, renegade.

Sauntering, wild-in-the-streets River, the child Joni Mitchell never had, the son Norman Schwarzkopf hoped he never would. An outing with River in his adoptive hometown of Gainesville, where the picnic ants might be crocodiles, and where there's a better than even chance we won't be feasting on swordfish tacos.

"When River was nine years old," his publicist has explained to me, "he caught his first fish. It flopped about a on a rock for a while, then died. Right then and there, River had this vision that he had killed a fellow living thing. He cried for three days straight and vowed never to eat meat or fish again." Boarding the flight to Gainesville, I'm wondering what it must've been like for River the first time he ever mowed the Lawn.

Gainesville is your basic college town. Some disenchanted conquistador tossed his copy of Summa theologica into a swamp and the University of Florida bubbled up from the cattails, Burt Reynolds and all. They keep the heads on their shrimp at Gainesville's most popular sushi bar, where I've gone to escape the Florida humidity that envelops you-like a sleeping bag. I'm doing my best to avoid eye contact while I go through the background material I have on River: Strong performances in four films--Stand by Me, Running on Empty, The Mosquito Coast, and the last of the Indiana Jones trilogy. One stinker as a headliner--A Night in the Life of Jimmy Reardon. One walk-through in a supporting role--I Love You to Death. Plays a Vietnam-era marine in the fall release of Dogfight. Latest effort sounds most intriguing--the role of a male hustler in Gus Van Sant Jr.'s My Own Private Idaho.

Parents were '60s flower children who dropped out to become missionaries for The Children of God in Venezuela and the Caribbean Islands. The father, John, and his wife, Arlyn, christened their five children after generic items you'd find on the "Family Feud" tote board if the subject were Emerson: River, Liberty, Rain-bow, Leaf, and Summer. Strict Vegetarians. Family became disillusioned with secular transgressions of David Berg, the C of G's spiritual leader, and left the church, which in turn left them destitute, high and dry in South America. Family changed surname to Phoenix, embarked on new life that centered around getting back stateside where the children would become movie stars.

At this point, I'm jolted out of the skimming mode by a passage detailing the Phoenix children's

education: "None of them has even been allowed to attend school--they've been tutored at home to keep them away from the negative influences of peer pressure." Was the poor kid raised by the Keebler elves or just domineering parents masquerading as flower children? Jimmy Connors, Brooke Shields, and Patti Davis survived domineering parents. Jesus, Hamlet, and Hitler didn't fare as well. Which way did River fall?

"Once you get to meet him, it'll probably be alright," one of his people has told me, in the unconvincing voice of someone thinking out loud. But I'm reading too many paragraphs about River's individuality, paragraphs in which the writer, perhaps under River's spell, spouts the kind of philosophy you'd expect from Nietzsche looped on Ecstasy. Wrote one beguiled journalist: "His determined awareness makes him the intelligent woman's hope of what the new generation of men will be like in the 21st century--a combination of strength and sensitivity." Whew. At least I have the rest of the day to determine who I'll be sharing a picnic basket with--Bambi or one of the Boys From Brazil.

At 12:45 a.m., back at my Holiday Inn, I finally get a call. The guy on the other end identifies himself as Sky, River's brother, which immediately throws me, since I was under the impression that River's parents hadn't covered that realm yet. Sky wants to know if I'm crashed out for the night; if I'm not, I could meet him, and possibly River, at the place called the Club Demolition.

"I'll be wearing a T-shirt. And I have a beard," Sky offers. Fine. While I'm trolling for clothes, something I read at the sushi bar resurfaces: "One of my beliefs is about harmlessness to animals. I don't believe in eating meat or using any animal by-products or contributing to suppressing animals," said River. Not wanting to get off on the wrong foot, I lace up my cloth Jack Purcells, knock down a can of Cuban iced coffee, and climb into my rented Plymouth.

The business district of Gainesville resembles something like an Indian bead belt. One long stretch of boulevard, diminishing in density at either end, the center colored by student chow houses. Club Demolition lies on the northern end. At the door, the cover is four bucks or whatever you can give, all proceeds going to the feminist women's health center.

The inside of Club Demolition embraces the '60s milieu. Basement club house decor--a beat-up, oval shaped bar, behind which an unfed-looking man wearing a chocolate leather beret serves fruit juices and sparkling soda. No liquor license yet, hut the absence of spirits is hardly missed. The musty, redolent aroma of pot, rotted jeans and body sweat kicks my ass back 20 years. I immediately give up on locating Sky (if, indeed, there is a Sky), be-cause the place is packed, and beards and T-shirts are everywhere.

I sidle up to the bar and plunk down a dollar fifty for the last cranberry sparkler, figuring this Sky guy will make himself known to me while I listen to the jazz band. They're called Fromage and they're about as tight as a limbo contest. A tall young man with an anxious smile skips through the loitering crowd at the front door and slides into the spot next to me, immediately striking up a passionate exchange with the leather-headed barkeep.

"Hey, man, sorry about last night. I'm totally tapped out, yeah?" The bartender commiserates with a sentimental nod. There's a perishable quality rimming the Asiatic shape of the young man's eyes. A small crop of pimples invades the feathery growth of facial hair around the jaws, not yet

coarsened by shaving. For the life of me, I can't decide if it's River. All I've seen of him was in dated films or teen magazine spreads where his appearance was burnished into an idyllic conception of youth, and this man has burst from his adolescence, like Li'l Abner popping buttons on a shirt borrowed from the Beaver. He might be just a celebrity look-alike who parties at night and pounds together crates for air conditioning parts by day. His tank top is right from the bottom of the hamper; his attitude is innocent hophead in a police lineup. If this is River, the image of Bambi on weak knees surrounded by forest creatures in cloth shoes is going fast.

The boy-man asks for a cranberry sparkler. The bartender motions at my bottle with a reproachful wrinkle of his eyebrows. "Last one."

"It's cool. Listen, I'm supposed to meet this guy here, if anybody asks for me."

"Yeah. And who the hell are you?" the bartender rags him. When I finally identify myself, the corners of River's mouth jump for a millisecond, as he points to my wrist.

"I was looking at that thing and thinking, huh, that's no Gainesville watch. Glad you could make it."

River and I chat for a while about how much the club reminds me of the places I used to hang out in a long time ago.

"Yeah, weird, isn't it? A lot of miniature yous walking around." Then, inexplicably, River asks me what I do in Los Angeles. "You don't act, do you? Don't you just hare acting?"

Before I can plumb the meaning of this observation, River is pushing me towards the band area. His presence here in Club Demolition seems about as significant as a Wednesday in May. No pointing or whispering, and none of the emphatic denial-syndrome of Movietown, either.

"Sometimes I'll hear stuff like, 'Hey, man, where's your skateboard, dude,' from people who think I'm Christian Slater. Shit like that. But this place is generally very cool. We played here." River is referring to his band, Aleka's Attic, in which he's a lead singer. I've dutifully listened to the one cut they have on a benefit album, "Tame Yourself," (the monies going to People For The Ethical Treatment of Animals), and while they'll never be described as "the seminal band from the Sun Belt," the approach is serious enough. River passes around photos of Aleka's Attic's latest stint, a three-month tour of clubs and colleges on the East Coast.

"Listen, man, I feel really awful about you having to come down here on an airplane to risk your life to talk to me. I wouldn't do it," River confesses. When I report that my wife is happy, since at her urging I've mailed in for the American Express automatic flight insurance, a sudden wave of gloom all but topples him. He touches my shoulder. "Wow, that's a drag."

I point to one of the photos that depicts River covering his face as a man wraps his arm around River's shoulder, buddy to buddy.

"I think he was a drug dealer. Brutal tour. Brutal tour."

"I was supposed to meet your brother here--"

"My brother?"

"Sky."

"Oh, Sky. Yeah, he's not really my brother. I mean, he wants to be and I've known him since I was three, so I guess he is my brother, really. Anyway, it works out well with him posing as my brother. He sort of runs interference, like the whole picnic thing. Look, I'm sorry about the five-hour limit and all, but I need an out for jerks. But I can see by the way things are going that this is probably gonna be alright. You want

another glass of juice?"

Later, walking back to the deadbeat Plymouth in the dark, I'm trying to sort out the proposed agenda, which appears fraught with small print and subtext. I'm invited to River's house in the city tomorrow, where we might have the picnic. Or, I might possibly sit in on an Aleka's Attic recording session if I make it out to River's farm. The whole process has a scratch-off game quality to it: if the word "jerk" appears under the silver wax before the happy face does, then I jump on the next flight to Charlotte for a connection back to L.A.

The following morning, River wants to sleep in--as in "don't call me until 11:30." I give him until 11:45, figuring that after last night's funkathon at Demolition, he might be inclined to loiter in the shower. When he answers, he is guarded, and there is an accusatory hollowness rumbling on the line.

"Michael," River nearly hisses.

"Yeah, River. So, are we a couple of picnicking fools?"

"I thought you were supposed to call at 11:30." This does not bode well. A punctual River.

"Yeah, well, I thought you could use the extra 15 minutes. Sorry." But he wants to know why I called him at 9:30. I specifically didn't call him at 9:30. After some figuring we have the whole mess debugged. No, I didn't call him at 9:30, but the other Michael, the photographer, who finally hit town in the middle of the night, did.

"Wow," says River. "When you called that early and told me you just got in a few hours ago, I was sure you were fucking with my head or something. Anyway, your friend probably thinks I'm a snarling bulldog, Æ

We're sitting in an enclosed porch that runs the length of the two-story, Reconstruction era house River rents. Two canaries use the tops of our heads as temporal vistas in their revolving bird world, which, by the design of River and his live-in companion, Suzanne Solgot, includes the entire porch. This is the first chance I've had to actually talk to River, and I want to know, for starters, what the hell all this hornbook 'n' hearth education and lapsed Children of Godders business is about. But it's hard to get serious with the tickling claws of a canary running over the bridge of my nose.

"So, were you guys Banana Republic moonies, or what?"

"Oh, my God, no," River stretches out his legs and chuckles at them. "It was honest to goodness missionary work my parents were doing. They were archbishops of South America, just before we broke from the church. What happened was, my dad started finding out stuff, getting into top secret categories, like that the leader was involved in fraud, a big hypocrite, and this group wasn't as wholesome as they led people to believe. I'd rather not even mention the name of the group, simply be-cause I'd rather not lend credence to them by doing so. One day my parents just said, 'We're outta here.'

"But it was a great stepping stone. I learned to play guitar there--my sister Rain [short for Rainbow] and I got interested in entertaining, performing. It was a neat time growing up in Venezuela in the late '70s--Carter. I remember hearing news about hostages. Where was that?"

"Iran."

"You're kidding. The Olympics were held in Iran?"

"Oh, no, no, you must be thinking of the 1972 Olympics, and Munich," I correct him, referring to the attack on the Olympic Village in which members of the Israeli wrestling team were murdered by Palestinian terrorists. River would've been two years old at the time. Living not in a hut on a South

American beach but in Madras, Oregon, his birthplace. The words to James Brown's "Don't Be a Dropout" make a wicked loop through my brain.

"So somehow your family managed to leave South America."

"Well, first my sister Rain and I did a lot of singing in the streets," River explains. "Then we met this doctor who used to be a pop star in Spain. He had a recording studio in Orlando, Florida, and he told us we could come out whenever we wanted to. We got his number, showed it to my dad. We had no money. So a priest got us on this old Tonka freighter that carried Tonka toys. We were stowaways. The crew discovered us halfway home-- my mom was pregnant, all of us running around, four kids. They threw a big birthday party for my brother, gave us all these damaged Tonka toys--it was a blast."

Through the screen door, I can see Suzanne approaching. When she reaches the screen, she presses her T-shirt up against it.

"Can you read what it says on my shirt, Riv?" she asks, in no particular hurry to come in. "Hi, baby. What's it say?"

"It says," she reads, straightening the shirt over her chest, "'Damn the rules. It's the feeling that counts. You play all twelve notes in your solo anyway'--John Coltrane." She says "hi" to the photographer and me, and then says to River, "Don't let them sit on the bird shit."

Suzanne steps in, an attractive 26-year-old whose non-aligned good cheer could crumble a hardened bunker. River's slouch disappears and he brightens. Honey pie Ice Cream, the male canary, lands on my knee. When he takes off, he leaves a small, army-green legacy on my pants.

"It's best if you let it dry and then just flick it off," Suzanne suggests.

River excuses himself for a moment, and when he comes back, his face is covered with a dry, face-tightening application of white cream-- Marcel Marceau at a Grateful Dead Concert. Wearing his skin mask, he elaborates further on the family's exodus from South America.

"When we finally made it to Florida, we stayed with my grandparents for a while, then moved to central Florida. My sister and I pursued our interest in music, playing in talent shows and fairs. My dad was doing carpentry work, my mom was working for some community service agency."

"And what about school?"

"We went to school," he insists. When I recount the articles claiming that his parents kept the children out of school, River's mouth goes Macaulay- Culkin-via-Edvard-Munch incredulous.

"Bullshit. Besides, any good family would teach their children at home, above and beyond school. And as far as 'having our careers thrust upon us,' that's bullshit, too. We wanted to make it, we all wanted to be entertainers and our parents did whatever they could do to help us."

What evidently helped the most was mother Arlyn's schoolgirl friendship with Penny Marshall back in the Bronx. After recognizing Marshall on an episode of "Laverne & Shirley," Arlyn wrote to Paramount studios about her kids.

"They answered, yeah, we'd be happy to see your children. If you're ever out in California, by all means, look us up, but don't make a special trip. And so, of course, we just threw everything into the old station wagon and drove out to Burbank. We had a shitty little apartment in North Hollywood. No kids were allowed so we had to hide in the closet when the landlady came around to inspect the place."

The female canary, which unaccountably has no name, is using the screen door as an obstacle course,

clanging her way up the mesh, but getting hung up in the protective grate.

"No! Don't do that!" River scolds her, and damned if she doesn't listen.

"So you did the TV commercial schlepp, I bet."

"We schlepped forever in L.A.," River nods, with a vigilant eye on the canary. "Moved every three months, being evicted regularly for late rent, for kids, for whatever. We just kept it so we'd rather be poor than owe anybody money. So we didn't have any debts, but we had no money whatsoever--it was just day to day. Biggest problem was, I was terrible for commercials--I couldn't smile on cue. And I'm terrible with pictures, too." This last remark is loudly directed at Michael the photographer, who's busy setting up lights. "I hate it. Bank right," River leans slyly into the imaginary camera. "Bank left. I don't want a bunch of makeup artists pimping me."

"Hey, River," Michael dishes it back, "I told Warren Beatty I was coming to see you."

"What'd he say?"

"He said, 'Yeah, River Phoenix. I like the guy. What is he, 40 now?'"

"I'm very glamorous, aren't I?" says River. Actually, his shirttails look like used hankies. And the hair, over which the birds are jousting for airspace, is in need of a comb.

Sensing that having his picture taken carries with it the agony of the sinner before his confessor, I ask permission to browse, which River appreciatively grants. The house has a wonderfully nostalgic flophouse quality, with furniture moved to accommodate temporary sleeping arrangements. A sheeted mattress is surrounded by the clutter of books and empty plates. The stair-case, finished with an early-American bannister, leads to nowhere. Positioned in the middle of the dining room is a leather examination table with a toilet seat-shaped collar fixed to one end. In the midst of wall tapestries and house plants, it cuts a queer apparition. It seems Suzanne is studying to become a massage therapist. "I use it to perform on friends," says Suzanne, who met River three years ago at a party. "But until I get my license, I can't really charge anyone."

"When we first met," she continues, now talking about River, "he seemed really sweet and gentle. At least he's getting some hair now. When I met him he didn't have any hair." Suzanne is a self-possessed, independent sort. In fact, she points to a virtual emblem of her independence--an empty suitcase propped in the corner of the room. "I got it as a present for my 18th birthday,À

Suzanne tells me she left her adoptive parents in Michigan and came south for school. Since she's so independent of her family, I ask her about the symbiotic relationship River's supposed to have with his. "The family's really close-knit--but he's used to spending a lot of time away from them, and me as well. Because I'm in school, I can't really travel that much with him. It sucks and it kinda doesn't suck. Because it gives us space." When the issue of Little Rivers comes up, a private grin is aimed at the guitar music in the other room.

"It's funny you should ask--because I'm ovulating right this minute."

Out on the bird-porch, River is plucking an immaculate Ovation guitar, the rich man's acoustic, doing a yeoman's job on The Beatles' "Blackbird." I bring up the family discussion with him, "It's all fabric for the imagination of the press--and if it sells, then that's the slop they pick. Sure, my family's close and when I was growing up we were all we had. [But] I haven't talked to my dad in a



couple of months--he's out of the country. My parents are on vacation, I drove them away. They took the hint and bought the tickets. They were heading in the Central America direction."

By mid-afternoon, the phantom Sky finally shows. With a matured Brooklyn accent and a Smith Brothers black beard, he proffers a cooler filled with vegetarian sandwiches and mineral water. River unwraps a plastic pouch and sprinkles what looks like grass onto rolling paper.

"Smoking herbs. I'm trying to quit cigarettes. Don't ask me if this is helping. Anyway, so, yeah, my family's important to me. I think what's happened is that I've grown up enough so that my anxiety attacks have matured beyond the meaning of life' teenage trauma stuff. One day you just wake up and you feel your age. After the last tour, I woke up and it was like, 'Wow, I feel 20.' What a fucking relief."

Don't follow River if you're walking the streets with him. The body is ambulatory while the mind backtracks. He has led us, after a short time that includes a silent interlude of meditation under a "Walk" sign, to a small town square like the one in Back to the Future, When we finally make it into an espresso bar, I'm gently instructed not to mention the name of the place when I write about it and to order low acidic coffee.

We are discussing drugs with the unmistakable nostalgia of deal-a-meal people talking about desserts. River recalls the Children of God sermons from the years in South America.

"We heard Janis shot airplane glue into her veins the night she died, that's the kind of stuff the pastor would tell us. 'Cocaine-- the devil's dandruff,' I think I might wait till I'm 70 and then do it all at once. Just stay ultra-healthy till I'm 70 and then just go, Waaaaaaa--ooooo!"

Michael the photographer and I share a few somewhat hyper-bolic tales involving LSD, "Yes, the Lord is very prevalent and real, isn't he, boys?" says River, who carries his own psychotropic lore. "I've copped back some weird earplay about me and acid and I just thought it was a joke--I thought they weren't being serious. I thought it was this reverse psychology thing to get information out of someone--'I heard you took acid.' I would just laugh. It would frighten the hell out of me to be a creature walking around in the '90s taking acid.

"Acid doesn't really supply you with any answers. I grew up talking to people your age. My best friends, since I was 8, were your age. And I've heard every acid trip in the world. And I've been there. I've really been totally, completely able to understand and comprehend the experience--to the point where I've been stimulated vicariously. The thing is, right now, why throw a curve on life?"

River stops dead in his tracks to mull something over, then picks up the trail again. "I tell ya what.

That's actually not such a bad rumor to have going around about you. . ."

By the time my carrot cake arrives, River's assailing his memory banks like a kid trying to kick open his own locker, unable to come up with the name of his favorite television journalist.

"The thing to do," Michael the photographer suggests, "is to go through the alphabet very slowly and you'll come up with the first letter of his last name." River gives it a whirl, but it's like throwing water on a drowning man. "No," he sighs. "No, I've already passed it."

"Then put it out of your mind and tell me about this Gus Van Sant film," I suggest.

"Gus Van Sant is a beautiful person. Every day of my life since I've finished My Own Private Idaho,

at some point in the day, I find the conversation somehow goes back to that film because it was such a great experience. I just start getting all joyous about it and start blabbing about it, so..but if you can believe it, there's a project out there that I feel just as strongly about, even though there's a good chance I might not be involved."

He's talking about the Robert Redford project A River Runs Through It.

"It's a great script. Just the best script that I've read that's come out of Hollywood in a long time. I auditioned--me and about a thousand other guys. It was a nice audition and I haven't auditioned in a while. I thought I'd be nervous...you guys don't smoke do you?"

The Redford project has River in a lather. His eyes sweep the room for smoke, someone to bum a cigarette from. Eventually, he relents and buys a pack, smoking one with guilty little puffs aimed up at the place where the name of his favorite TV journalist has yet to materialize.

"I had a really good talk, good meeting with Redford but I think he's gonna find the guy. The guy who just is that image--that Montana mountain boy, fly fisherman image. That's what I think he should do, I believe so strongly in it, I just want the best guy for it. If I get it, great. If I don't, I wasn't right for it.

It was the reverse scenario when River was approached for the lead as the smooth killer in A Kiss Before Dying, eventually played by Matt Dillon.

"I just don't have the cool in me to do that role. They came back eight times to try and get me to do it. Too many chances and too much money. They kept coming back, I kept saying no, no, no, and they went up, up, up, with the money. BILL MOYERS!" River shouts, the relief in his exhale almost palpable as he continues. "It was a really good script but I just didn't want to do a remake, unless I knew it was gonna be better--and I just didn't believe in the character."

An hour later we're at a Thai restaurant on the outskirts of town. River is holding court. "Martin Scorsese would've sicked the goodfellas on Julia Phillips. That's why she spared him. He's well-connected, he has the power, believe me. I bet, if he wanted to, he could hire the National Guard." Our table is loud and full. A trumpet player who will be laying down a horn track on the Aleka's Attic demo tape sits next to Suzanne, who can't stay long--her class on "Nutrition in the '90s" is tonight. The lead singer from Fromage has joined us after having spent an afternoon with another friend of River's who injected magic mushrooms.

"Yeah, and knowing him, you guys had one giant meaning of life seminar," River says, rolling his eyes.

"It got hairy," the singer concedes. "He kept saying, 'Why are there road signs? Why do hooks have pages? A silk shirt is really shit from a worm.' " We're all cracking up, but River's mood seems to be giving him some trouble; there is an unfocused melancholy in his stare, an indolent resignation in the slouch that even Suzanne can't seem to snap him out of. "When he's mad, he can get pretty crazy," Suzanne remarked back at the house. But he doesn't seem mad, just sad. Then he hears the rumor about a Japanese businessman who wants to take his Van Gogh to the grave with him, and he all but

falls out of his chair, in what we have come to regard as the patented River-you-could-drive-a-semi-through-his-mouth look of astonishment.

“Oh, well I think that man should be kissed silly until he gives it up!”

“That’s one way to do it.”

“No, that’s the best way to do it,” River admonishes me. “Love conquers all. Even the assholes that don’t want it.”

Some of us are Still hungry; more dishes are ordered.

“Eat slowly--it’s better for you,” River coaches, then orders another Thai beer in Spanish. Spanish, River tells us, was his first language, growing up in Venezuela.

“It’s uncanny how closely your life mirrors the storyline in Mosquito Coast,” I point out, “right down to the corrupt clergyman.”

“Yeah...ironic, isn’t it? Paul Theroux didn’t steal my life story. I just misplaced it. Needless to say, I was very comfort-able with the material.”

After dinner, I’m alone with River for the first time as we make the half-hour ride out to the Phoenix family farm. It’s a straight shot and a dogleg out into the uplands, a fertile stretch of swamp ooze and softwood forests separating the eastern and western coastal plains. After the Macbeth-type gloom that lingered over River during dinner, I can’t get that scene in Annie Hall where Woody Allen’s driving through the night with her psychotic brother out of my head. River, however, is a pleasant surprise, rallying into a warm, engaging companion. With a snowstorm of fireflies spiraling into the windshield, he unwinds, leaving the Brando-as-Zapata-as-Hamlet veil back at Bohn Thai. We’re bantering over the highs and lows of his short career, starting with Stand by Me.

“It was a great film, but I had nothing to do with it. At that time in my life, I was not responsible enough for my craft to feel as though I could represent it and feel comfortable--and I was very insecure. I mean, at that time I was going through puberty and I was hurting really bad. When I watch it, it’s one of the true performances for anyone of that age, or any age, for that matter. Yeah, I liked it. I thought it was very honest.”

We move on to A Night in the Life of Jimmy Reardon, which had River as a teenage Tom Jones in a sputtering comedy whose self-absorption nears black hole status.

“It was confused in itself, but it depends. If it was taken on its own, and you didn’t see Stand by Me or Mosquito Coast, I don’t know how you would take it. As far as people I’ve talked to, general America loves the hell out of it.”

By the time we reach the ranch, somewhere out in a blue-black residential forest, we’re back to talking about the Redford film. If you want the role badly enough, you grab the bull by the horns and pursue it, I maintain. River shakes his head.

“No. I won’t. I just won’t. I just can’t. With Bob, you gotta trust the intuition of the director and know that he had the clear picture and if you fit, it’s natural. But to force it is egotism to some degree. It’s like, sure, you can do a great job, but you’re better off trusting the decision to the creator of the film. I’m just happy to see the film being made and I think, in this case, the way it’s gone so far, who knows what’ll happen--but

It’ll be a better film because of me not being in it.

We are now entering the premises.”

After numbers are punched in on a security pad, a gate swings open to a rutted, mud and roots driveway, most of it obscured by swamp fog. Rain is on the way.

“One of the things that was introduced to me,” River continues softly as we head inside, “at an early stage in life was to try to make stuff happen. But nothing ever worked that way for me. What I learned on my own was that to try and play God with your life will wrack your brain and your nervous system, and mess up your natural direction in the course that’s already there...But look--I just don’t want to read about me being made into a basket case because of my work. It’s self-pity that I hate. I mean, it comes with the territory. An actor with any conviction goes the extra mile-- but of course you’re gonna suffer damage to your brain.

“You gotta just be as neutral as possible so that only the work is what you read. Otherwise you can see it in certain grade actors’ performances--it might be a great performance, but you can actually see the on-set tension in their work, and that, to me, is like fool’s gold. It’s a hard lesson to learn, but you have to trust time and space as it is, with or without you. Then you give everything what it deserves, and there’s no pressure.”

The guest house of the Phoenix family ranch has been converted into an apartment/recording studio. The band is in the middle of putting together a demo tape (River has a recording deal in the works with Island Records), under the stewardship of a tempera-mental engineer named Blake. “He’s a ballbreaker, but if we did it alone we’d have nine songs done in a year. I’ve been using you guys as an excuse for some time off,” River warns Michael and me, which explains the arctic handshake from Blake as we enter the studio.

River’s running up and down the stairs from the engineer’s studio to the sound booth, where he’s conducting the trumpet player, to ensure the right tempo. The music has an Osterized Police/XTC/Byrds blend, at once nimble and plodding. The vocals, supplied by River and his sister Rain, are ethereal and boneless, and made all the more so by the weak self-affirmation of octave harmonies. By the fifth run-through, the horn player’s got his licks down. Outside, an electrical storm fires up the landscape like a crack of light flooding in from heaven’s door.

“Aleka,” River explains, “is the spirit of the group. This room,” he points at the crisscrossing rafters, “is Aleka’s Attic. Aleka was an imaginary creature who wrote poetry and music and gave up its spirit for the band.”

Later, the lights have been turned down and the crowd is gathered around a TV set. “Feel like watching a movie?” River asks, wrapping his arm around my shoulder. The gang around the set includes the two Joshes--Josh, the bass player, and Josh, the drummer--Bill, the horn player and Rain, wearing an “Ugly Americans” T-shirt, plus Blake and the singer from Fromage. Two and half hours later we have seen a sound-and-edit work print of My Own Private Idaho, a gorgeous film. River and Keanu Reeves play male prostitutes in a kind of Watt and Murphy’s Excellent Adventure. The character River plays, hopelessly in love with the Keanu Reeves character, is searching for his mother in a valueless wasteland of “dates” and betrayal. The grainy, choppy quality of the tape and the occasionally garbled sound docs noth-ing to diminish the impact of River’s

performance. In his first real role as a young man, he blows me away.

On the way back to town, I can't get the movie out of my head. I feel a vicarious guilt as I look out at the thousands of frogs all over the interstate. You can hear them pop under the tires.

When he jumps into the Plymouth the following morning, River is wearing the same threadbare print shirt hanging out of the same migrant worker pants he wore the previous day, "Jesus, River, you slept in your goddamn clothes."

"No, man--I slept in a blanket of warm flesh."

Blake has called for a vocal session out at the ranch, and River wants me to see the place by daylight. Halfway there, River's cranked up with Lennon's "Imagine" playing on the radio.

"The fucking asshole who shot Lennon is in some Mafia prison, can you believe it? John Lennon was bumped off because of his pro-environment stand. If John Lennon said, 'Turn off your televisions now guys, we'll save electricity for two days straight,' fucking three million people instantly in America would've done it. If John Lennon would've said, 'Please,' over the airwaves, 'please don't vote for Ronald Reagan'--you're telling me that three million people going in to vote for their president wouldn't have been canceled out?" River takes a deep, cleansing breath of the air rushing in from the windows. As we get closer, the fertile peat and weed rot odor fills the car.

"It's the gators," River smiles.

The ranch by day is overwrought with the buzz and croak of living creatures, a terrestrial arc of biology.

"You wanna see a gator?" River asks. Hell, yeah. "Take a dip out there," he grins, pointing to the swamp beyond the wire fence running off into the landscape. The swimming pool, a stark blue rise in the flats of a meadow, is littered with dead frogs who've blindly hopped from the underbrush in the middle of the night. The frog population takes a beating in the ecosystem down here.

At the end of the recording session, we're standing in a circle, having beers in front of the main house. Blake is moaning about the band. "We'll never whip these guys into shape." Told that the Beatles did their first album in a matter of a few days, River scoffs, "Yeah, and what was that? Like, 'She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah.'" "Then there's a momentary silence broken only by the random chirping of crickets.

"Hey, River, I was waiting for you to kiss Keanu, there was such build-up," Blake teases, alluding to a scene in last night's film.

"But I didn't, man. You happy that I didn't? Don't you feel so much more comfortable being around me now, 'cause I'm a macho stud, right?"

"No. You're still a wuss, Riv. Good shot of you guys pullin' up to town on the bike, though."

"Cool, huh, Blake? Was I studly enough for you?"

What has stayed with me from the film are time-lapse shots of clouds--"It's like putting a York Peppermint Patty on your heart, isn't it?" River remarked last night. But more indelible than that was the utterly broken, busted-up spirit of River's character, which, he said, was inspired by "heavily researching" Werner Herzog's *Stroszek*.

"We shot a lot of that stuff early in the morning. So I wouldn't wake up until the last minute, and I wouldn't be fully awake until like five takes into the shot. There was one point, man, it was

Seattle in the cold, I actually was feeling anxious to not be this person."

Just as River is saying this, Blake suddenly leaps backwards. In the middle of our circle, coiled in the grass, is a black swamp snake. We all scatter, except River, who does a little capriole/powwow around the terrified snake: "Spiderman, Spiderman--no one knows who you are!"

In the car as we head out later, River is hanging out of the back window, guiding me out of the yard. He doesn't want us to run over the snake.

"Straight back--straight back--all the way, straight back. STRAIGHT BACK!"

"You've got it."

"Sure, you frogicidal maniac!" River hollers, possibly serious.

The Velvet Underground's banana album whines in a place called The Hardback, while the bass player in the house band, The Moles, tunes his guitar. River is calculating my time, concluding I've got plenty to spare before my flight departs. A studious-looking guy sitting in the corner table near us keeps eyeing River, who is taking one last wade through his stream of consciousness.

"I feel like quail."

"Is that on the menu?"

"No, no--Quayle. The veep. I love Quayle," River whispers, "and I love Bush. I love bush, literally."

"If you're feeling insecure about being in a movie about gays, forget it."

"First of all, the picture's not really about gays," says River. "Second of all, I don't like, have any real hang-ups." Despite three days of snakes, frogs, and canaries, and despite the Len-non conspiracy theory, I believe him.

We're eating ice cream sandwiches and deciding who should be on the world's biggest pricks list.

Somebody mentions Joel Schumacher.

"The Grinch," River proclaims, "is the biggest prick. I can't help it. I love Dr. Seuss."

"You know, he did an adult book once," I tell River, who is fascinated.

"For late bloomers?"

"He also did a film," a student from a table in the corner chimes in. "Great guy, great film. I think it was called *The Eighty-Eight Magic Fingers of Dr. Twilliger*. 'Course, I was tripping my balls off, first time I saw it." The kid pauses, eyes River. "Hey, I've seen you around, somewhere. Do you know Brigitte?"

"Know of her," River grins. "I don't know her. Maybe I better."

"That can't be it, then." The young man thinks for a moment, then it hits him, like a flash of Florida lightning.

"I know, I met you through the bass player in...what was the name of his group?"

"Aleka's Attic."

"That's it," the young man agrees, "Aleka's Attic. How you doin'?"

"Haven't changed a bit," River answers peacefully, then assures me, one last time, that I have eternity before my plane leaves. Happiness takes hold of his face.

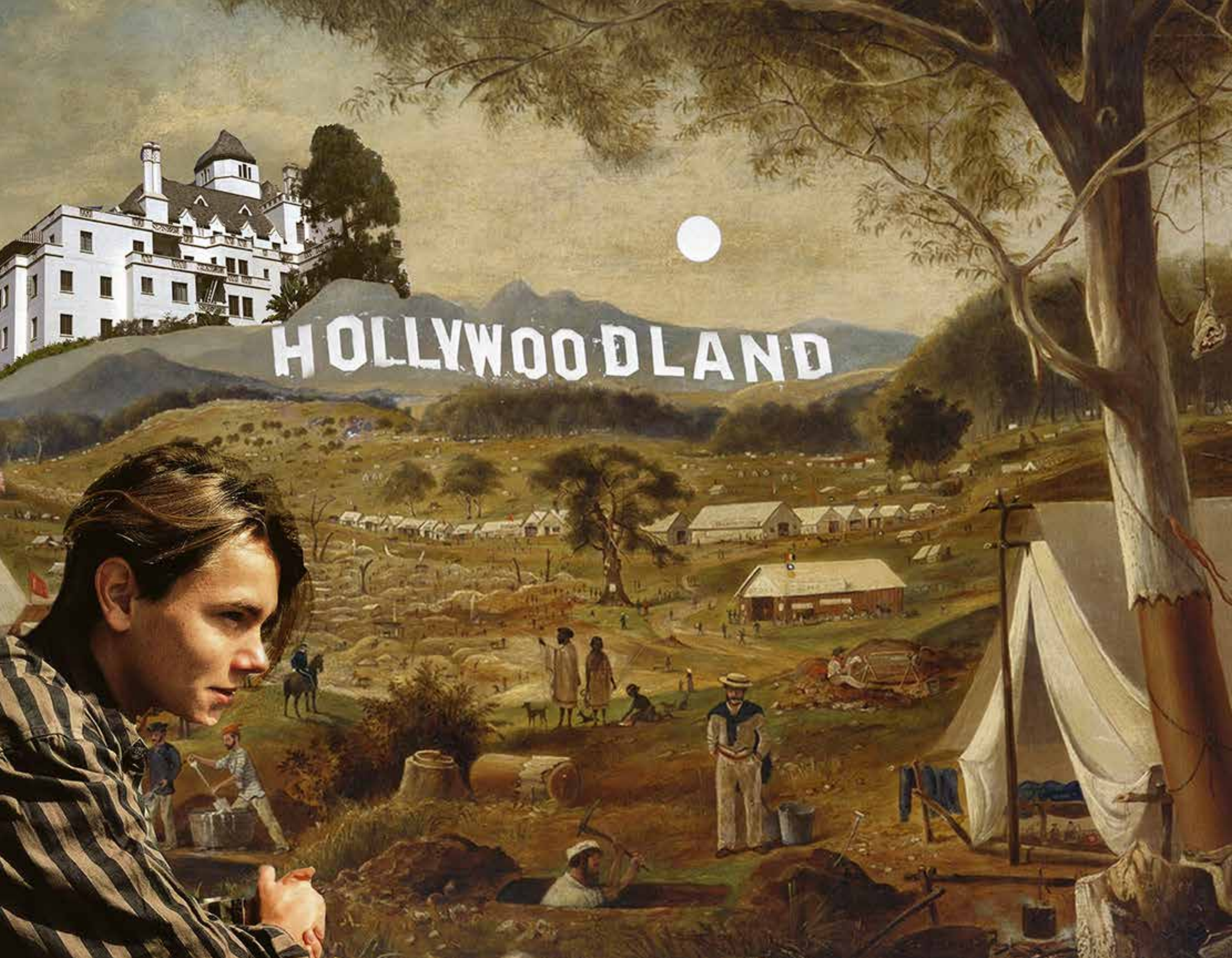
"Hey, if you miss it, it was meant to be, right?, Æ

By MICHAEL ANGELI

Movieline Magazine, September 1991

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HOLLYWOODLAND

ALL RIVERS RUN TO THE SEA

RIVERZINE LA

A TRIBUTE

CREATED BY DAVID MACKE

DESIGN BY OLIVIA SMITH

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#RIVERZINE

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