



# “The last thing I wanted to be was an actor”

He's famed for playing a troubled adman, but the real Jon Hamm loves gags, baseball and sending himself up. As 'Mad Men' reaches its climax, what's next?

**I**n a café near the Los Angeles home of the actor Jon Hamm and his partner, the film-maker Jennifer Westfeldt, the couple have a seat with their names on it. To be precise, they're engraved on a shiny brass plaque that I notice on the green leather banquette opposite me when I arrive early for breakfast. "Er, God I don't why they did it, honestly, it just sort of appeared," mumbles the *Mad Men* star when he arrives. "We were like, 'That's nice'. We do come here an awful lot..."

Hamm is excellent company: unassuming, opinionated, and generous. When breakfast arrives, he urges me to try "the most delicious potatoes on the planet". Our conversation veers from *Mad Men* (naturally) to British comedy ("losing Rik Mayall, oh man that was a blow"), via his admiration for his friend Daniel Radcliffe ("he has an insatiably curious mind") and his disdain for social media. "This constant recording of your life and updating of your 'status'... I don't do that," he says when the subject comes up. "No event 'happened' unless you took a picture of it. Going to a concert or a ballgame, are actual things. But you're not watching because you're busy trying to record it so you can tell your friends about it and put it on YouTube. It's totally meaningless."

With his dark, grey-flecked hair and expressive blue eyes, Hamm is ludicrously handsome; not that this will be a surprise to anybody who has been watching his alter ego Don Draper on television for the past seven years. But in contrast to the troubled adman, who has a dangerous, unsettled air, Hamm, in person, seems untroubled: his features are gentler, unthreatening, less dramatic. He is wearing maroon jeans, a crumpled linen Rag & Bone shirt, and a St Louis Cardinals baseball hat. "That's my team," says the actor, who was born and raised in Missouri and worked in restaurants, as a teacher, and a set dresser on porn films (an experience he has described as "horribly depressing") before landing the career-changing role on *Mad Men*, aged 36.

Hamm has just completed filming the show's seventh and final season, which will be broadcast next year. Predictably he won't be drawn on plot details – whether it's finally all over between Don and his actress wife Megan, whether Don will actually survive the self-destructive cycle of booze and cigarettes. "I can't spoil anything, but there are surprises. In the last episode, 'Waterloo', the agency [Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce] was sold to McCann Erickson; now things are looking up," is all he'll offer.

The drama has won seven Emmy awards. "I can't explain its success," says Hamm. "For whatever reason, when we started the show there was a parallel between the show's world in the early Sixties, the post-Eisenhower era in American culture, politics and society, the rise of Kennedy – and the beginning of the Obama era. No one could have planned for that. It just happened."

Words by  
Elaine Lipworth



**SMOOTH TALKER** John Hamm's character JB in 'Million Dollar Arm', above, has traits in common with his 'Mad Men' character Don Draper, top

Hamm's acting heroes – Gary Oldman, Sean Penn, Meryl Streep, Ralph Fiennes – have all cornered him to tell him how much they love his performance: "And I've just been like, 'Jesus, this is nuts!'" None the less, he says it'll be a "tremendous relief" to move on. "Being in an emotional and precarious state [as Draper] has been a lot of weight to carry. Acting isn't lead mining, it's not physically taxing... except when it is. You talk to [*Breaking Bad's*] Bryan Cranston, you talk to Tina Fey (*30 Rock*) and Hugh Laurie (*House*), all these guys who've been on shows for a long time say the same thing: it's hard work.

"But it's going to be emotional for all of us who work on the show, because we won't have the job to come back to. We won't have our friends to come back to. I keep making the comparison with death, you go through stages of grief: the first is denial; the next is anger and you finally get to acceptance. I got to acceptance a long time ago," he says with a wry smile.

Hamm has experienced considerable loss himself and it's left him with a philosophical approach to his career – and life. An only child, his parents split up when he was a baby. His portrayal of Don Draper was inspired by his hard drinking father Daniel, who owned a trucking company. "My Dad was very much of the same time as Don, he was smart, clever, good with people, everybody's friend. But he also had a dark side." Hamm was raised by his mother Deborah; a secretary who died of stomach cancer when he was 10. His father died 10 years later.

His parents' deaths put him off religion "fairly early on in a real quick way", he says. "That was pretty much it for me. I don't get the mystery of faith. I'm too much of a math guy. The numbers didn't add up so I was like, 'OK, moving on.' I don't need an afterlife; I don't need a second act."

These early childhood experiences have also left him with a different take on the word "parent". "A lot of people have biological mothers and fathers who are absent or abusive and that defines you in the way that it does. My parents were absent because they were dead, so there were other people who filled that vacuum: teachers, friends, caring adults who recognised that I was a child, sort of set adrift. It was the 'it takes a village' mentality," he says.

One of Hamm's "surrogate" parents was the drama teacher at the academic John Burroughs High School, in St Louis, Missouri. Wayne Salomon spotted his student's talent in school plays. "The last thing I wanted to be was an actor, but he was like, 'You could really do this.'" Hamm took his mentor's advice and moved to LA, where he landed various bit parts in television shows, but actually quit acting for a while in his twenties and returned to Burroughs as a teacher himself. "It was important to me to give back to the place that meant so much to me. I also endow a scholarship in my mother's name. She was the person who wanted me to go to the school," he says.

Family – in Hamm's broader interpretation of the word – is the subject of the new film *Million Dollar Arm*, his first post-*Mad Men* leading role. Directed by Craig Gillespie

*I've always appreciated comedy. I loved George Carlin and Cheech and Chong'*

► (*Lars and the Real Girl*), it is pure Disney: a funny feel-good flick along the lines of *Jerry Maguire*, based on the true story of a broke, desperate LA sports agent, JB Bernstein (Hamm), who dreams up an outlandish scheme to discover new baseball stars. Inspired by watching Susan Boyle on *Britain's Got Talent*, he stages a reality competition show in India. Two talented young athletes, Rinku Singh, played by *Life of Pi*'s Suraj Sharma, and Dinesh Patel, played by Madhur Mittal, (*Slumdog Millionaire*) emerge as the winners.

Hamm filmed for several weeks in Mumbai. "You can't get from A to B without something going wrong – and yet the people are so welcoming in the midst of all of this chaos, you kind of forget about it." Was he mobbed by *Mad Men* fans? "No, it's hard to recognise anybody, the whole city is like Times Square on New Year's Eve."

The film follows the winners as they fly to the United States from their impoverished villages and learn to play baseball with the hopes of being recruited onto a Major League team. JB plans to cash in on the publicity and potentially lucrative deals. But once they are in California the boys are archetypal fish-out-of-water. They don't speak English, don't fit in and worse, from JB's perspective, they don't initially take to the sport. JB has minimal concern for their welfare; inevitably, though, he learns some crucial life lessons and turns into a caring father figure.

Hamm's character bears some resemblance to Draper: he's a smooth-talking womaniser, but without the angst. "I liked the story," says Hamm, "it felt very – wholesome is the wrong word – it just felt pleasant after working on such an unpleasant character for the longest time. And this guy did affect these young men's lives in the most amazing way." (Both ended up playing for the Pittsburgh Pirates.) "I've played baseball for the better part of 30 years of my life; I can't do what they do. They learnt it in 11 months."

Serious about baseball, Hamm doesn't follow cricket, but is a fan of Indian batting maestro Sachin Tendulkar. "I spent some time in England a few years back and Tendulkar was the star. I was like, 'This guy is amazing!' There was further cricket education for Hamm when he was back in the UK two years ago filming the British miniseries, *A Young Doctor's Notebook* with Radcliffe, which he also produced. "I got to watch the Ashes, which was fascinating. Dan's a huge cricket fan, so I was getting the low-down from him."

He has become firm friends with the Harry Potter star after meeting him at the Baftas, and Radcliffe was Hamm's first choice to play the younger version of himself in the drama. "Here's the thing I told Dan: 'If there's anybody that knows what it's like to be identified with one character, it's us. We have that in common,' I said. 'It might be fun for both of us to do something out of the box'.

"It turns out Dan is a massive fan of [*A Young Doctor's Notebook* author] Mikhail Bulgakov. Who would imagine that kid, an international superstar, reading some obscure Russian novel. And yet that's Dan. I think he is massively talented. For the majority of his teens he was the most famous person in the world, in the eyes of 13 to 18 year-olds, but he has handled it all with a grace that is enviable. He could buy a castle in the Highlands and be done with it!" Doesn't the same apply to Hamm? He bursts out laughing. "No it's [*Mad Men*] not a £100 million experience for me... But I could live in Dan's smaller castle on his grounds and we could play cricket together."

Hamm is funny. He played Ted, Kristen Wiig's self-absorbed boyfriend in *Bridesmaids*, appeared in Westfeldt's comedy *Friends With Kids*, sent himself up as a dim bulb on *30 Rock*, and he's a welcome guest on many comedy podcasts (his appearance on Comedy Bang Bang as "the Mexican Jon Hamm", Juan Ramón, is a joy). Has he considered doing stand-up? "Never. I've always had an appreciation of comedy; I used to get Richard Pryor and Bob Newhart records from the library. I loved George Carlin and Cheech

*'I wanted to do Ridley Scott's new film. But they were like, 'err, it's not for you. It's going to be Matt Damon''*



**HOLLYWOOD POWER COUPLE** Hamm and his partner, writer and film director Jennifer Westfeldt

and Chong as a kid. But I know enough comics in my life who do it for a living – Paul F Tompkins, Sarah Silverman, and Zach Galifianakis – and I don't have that ability."

**Post *Mad Men*, the roles are flooding in** and Hamm confesses, "I'm not struggling, but that presents another set of difficulties: you don't know if a project's going to be good or be bad." He downs his coffee and beckons to the waitress for a refill. "There are a lot of things I wanted which have gone to other people." For example? "Ridley Scott's new film *The Martian*. It should be amazing, it's a beautiful script and I was like, 'I'd like to do that'. They were like, '...it's not for you'. It's going to be Matt Damon."

Hamm says he has no intrinsic interest in blockbusters and will take interesting roles, whether for cinema or television. A

bit of an Anglophile, he raves about Charlie Brooker's drama *Black Mirror*. "It's f----- brilliant, a terrifying satire, an incredible *Twilight Zone*-esque series. I look at shows like that and I go, 'I could do that for the rest of my life.'"

He's equally vocal expressing his antipathy towards "exploitative" reality television, "*The Only Way is Essex* and *Geordie Shore* point a camera at awful people and then get them drunk and shake the box. They're supposed to make you feel better as a person by showing an example of a more terrible person so you can sit above them and say, 'Well, at least I'm not that person.'"

Hamm is more positive about programmes like the reality show that discovered Singh and Patel. "All of those, *The Amazing Race*, *Britain's Got Talent* and *Project Runway* are showcasing people who have talent. I don't watch them, because I find them manipulative, but I do

appreciate that at the end of *Top Chef* [America's version of *Masterchef*], a guy who was plugging away in some kitchen in Pittsburgh gets a shot at opening his own restaurant."

Having spent the best part of a decade on a programme that many critics regard as "the best television ever", is he concerned that the defining role of his career is behind him? "No. It is definitely the defining role, so few people have an experience like this, but it's been an incomparable run for an actor like myself, so I'll look back on it fondly."

Global fame does not appeal to Hamm. He claims the recognition he's experienced pales in comparison to the pressure faced by heavyweight film stars. "I've seen it. I know Ben Affleck, Matt Damon, George Clooney, Leonardo DiCaprio. I wouldn't trade my life for theirs. It's horrible. You can't go anywhere; you can't do anything. Matt's actually got the right balance and George has a pretty good life too," he laughs. "Don't get me wrong. I'm just saying that they have this double-edged sword that you really can't control."

The grind of *Mad Men* almost over, Hamm is taking time to wind down with Westfeldt. He won't discuss specifics of their relationship "because it just brings unnecessary and unwanted pressure and attention to it". Would the couple like to work together again? "Yeah, totally."

He does tell me that they are about to escape LA for several months. For a long holiday? "Holiday makes it seem like something super planned and pleasant, it will just be me and Jen and the dog in a house on an island somewhere, slowing down and stopping and reconnecting. No I'm not going to tell you where I'm going on vacation," he says, eyebrows arched, "but it's an island in America."

It will, I suggest, have to be a remote island to avoid devoted *Mad Men* fans. I tell Hamm I read a quote from Westfeldt recently in which she compared the experience of going out in public with her partner, to being with a Beatle. "She didn't mention which Beatle," he grins. "She could've very well meant Ringo."

*'Million Dollar Arm' is released August 29*