

AND FOR MY NEXT QUEST... THE GREAT AMERICAN ROAD TRIP

There's more to Elijah Wood than Frodo, as he reveals on a spin round Beverly Hills in his favourite British car

Lord of the Rings star, car enthusiast and confirmed Anglophile Elijah Wood was 24 when he bought his first Mini. Eight years on, and the memories are still fresh: 'They're like go-karts,' he enthuses. 'They're super fun to drive; the way they take corners is so tight and precise. They respond so quickly to your actions, and because of how small they are, you feel like you're an extension of the car.'

Without missing a beat, he recalls a favourite Mini-related memory: a 2004 road trip from Los Angeles to Rosarito in Mexico for a *Lord of the Rings* reunion holiday with British co-stars Billy Boyd and Dominic Monaghan. 'It was hilarious,' he says. 'I drove down with the stuntie [stuntman] Sala Baker, a giant Samoan dude. When I picked him up, he was like, "Really? I'm going to get in that?"' Wood's voice sinks an octave as he impersonates his friend. It must have been quite a sight, the two of us in the Mini, because his head was reaching the top of the interior. I'd like to buy a vintage Mini. I've always coveted them. You rarely see them on the road in the States, so it's always a pretty cool sight. The Mini's always been one of my favourite cars to drive. It has a childlike essence.'

The same could be said of Wood, who arrives for lunch at a French cafe close to his beachside bungalow in Venice, Los Angeles, in a hipster ensemble of cord jacket, blue shirt and designer jeans. Now 32, he still retains the boyish good looks that prompted director Peter Jackson to cast him in the career-defining role of Frodo Baggins. 'I know,' he laughs. 'I still look 18.'

It was at that age that he landed the pivotal part, and flew out to New Zealand to begin filming. 'It was the first time I lived away from home for any length of time.' The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy would take up the next five years of his life. 'By the time we'd finished and won 17 Oscars, I was 23, so a huge chunk of the beginning of my adulthood was established there.'

He and the other principal cast members spent months working 15-hour days. 'I don't think any of us have been that exhausted in our lives. We became very close and we would spend our free time together.'

'I learned to surf at Castlepoint, a two-and-a-half-hour drive outside Wellington. I loved DJing with Dom [Monaghan] at the Matterhorn, a local bar in Wellington, and having brunch every Sunday at the Chocolate Fish Cafe with Liv Tyler and Orlando Bloom. It had a massive influence on me; I grew so much and made some of the best friends of my life.'

On another occasion, he drove down the west coast of New Zealand's South Island with *Rings* co-star Viggo Mortensen. 'We passed the Fox Glacier - that's literally on the side of the road, this giant, blue piece of ice. We would take a lot of road trips.'

While staying in North Island, he experienced another, less sedate form of car travel as the passenger of a professional off-road rally driver. His electric blue eyes sparkle when he talks of the car feeling like it was constantly about to spin out of control. 'It's all about fishtailing and using corners as part of the driving experience. It's frightening and totally exhilarating.'

It was in New Zealand that Wood first became immersed in British culture. Influenced by his British co-stars, he became a fan of Steve Coogan and award-winning British satirical shows such as *The Day Today* and *Brass Eye*. 'I became a real fan of Chris Morris, but also older stuff: Derek and Clive, *Fawlty Towers* and so on.' He also fell in love with music from Manchester ►



SCAN
the
picture
to watch Elijah
Wood in LA
talk about his
favourite cars

INTERVIEW **ELAINE LIPWORTH**
PHOTOGRAPHS **MICHAEL MULLER**

► — Joy Division, New Order, the Happy Mondays and the Stone Roses. He subsequently founded his own record label and now has a second career as a DJ. ‘One of the best experiences I’ve ever had was at a tiny bar in Dalston in London. Apparently, they never dance in Dalston, but we had everyone dancing. We DJ’d for five hours straight, and when they shut the bar down there was an after-party for all of us until 4am.’

Wood was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the son of factory workers who later owned two delicatessens. He credits his appreciation of classic cars to his father Warren. ‘He had a black Mustang convertible and would drive me to school in it. In the summer we had the top down and we would go and get ice cream. It was very cool.’

As a small child he developed a passion for films. ‘I grew up on Spielberg,’ he says. ‘*ET*, *The Goonies*, the *Indiana Jones* trilogy.’

Encouraged by his mother, he got into modelling and doing commercials, and was spotted by a talent scout who asked if he was interested in making movies. ‘It sounded like fun to me,’ he recalls. So aged just seven, he moved to

LA with his mother and brother, initially for six weeks to ‘try it out’. Meanwhile, his father and sister ‘stayed back in Iowa to hold the fort’. Soon, though, his father and sister joined the rest of the family.

‘Within six weeks I got my first job, on a Paula Abdul music video. The director was David Fincher [*The Social Network* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*], but that was before he made movies.’

He went on to make his film debut in *Back to the Future Part II*, and fell in love with acting immediately. Despite never taking a drama class, Wood landed subsequent roles in Barry Levinson’s 1990 drama *Avalon*, *Internal Affairs*, directed by British film-maker Mike Figgis, JJ Abrams’ *Forever Young* with Mel Gibson and Ang Lee’s acclaimed drama *The Ice Storm* (1997).

His parents divorced when he was 16. ‘It was OK,’ he says. ‘My mum, I think, ultimately waited until we were able to emotionally and intellectually understand. So it didn’t really come as a surprise, and we were old enough to process it. And she instilled in me a great sense of humility from a young age. She’d always make me hang up my clothes at the end of the day on set. When I was a kid, they would try to move me through the queue at catering to get ahead, and she would be like, “No, you stay here and wait.” I still do that to this day.’

He admits that typecasting was a problem for him following the final chapter of the *Rings* trilogy in 2003. ‘Those films have been embraced by pop culture. They’re incredibly well made; iconic, classic storytelling. I’ll be in my sixties and still be Frodo. But it’s something I accepted long ago. I was talking about this to John Hurt, and to this day he still gets people coming up to him with photos from *Alien* to sign.’

His new film, *Maniac*, is a stylish, disturbing remake of a cult 1980 film about a serial killer who scalps his female victims. Wood says he’s surprised at how beautifully it turned out. ‘Some of the initial reviews are referencing that I’ve taken this role in an effort to get away from Frodo. It’s been eight years since the last



Elijah Wood takes to the streets of Hollywood in a Mini; below in *The Lord of the Rings* with Sean Astin

‘I’ll be in my sixties and still be Frodo. I accepted that long ago... John Hurt still gets photos from *Alien* to sign’



Lord of the Rings movie; that’s not even on my mind any more.’ That said, he did return to New Zealand and the world of Tolkien for a brief appearance in Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, an experience he describes as ‘surreal’. ‘It was like no time had passed. Just being in Hobbiton in the wig and the ears and the costume and the feet...’ He leans back and smiles. ‘I’ve been doing it all my life.’

If life sounds enviably good, there have been struggles. ‘I’ve had things that I had to overcome, like everybody does,’ he says with a shrug. ‘I went through a period a couple of years ago where I didn’t work for two years. When I was 29 and turning 30, I went to therapy for the first time. It was amazing. It made me laugh a lot at myself, but I also learned a lot of groundbreaking things. It was like mental excavation. I found it fascinating.’

He has a girlfriend, but won’t discuss relationships. ‘I’m a pretty open person but I try to keep that one thing sacred. I’ve always imagined the romantic ideal of getting married and having kids.’

Despite the huge success of the *Rings* films, Wood says his extravagances are limited to ‘food and vinyl’. With regard to the former, it turns out his love of Britain extends beyond cars, comedy and music to places to eat: ‘There’s a great Spanish restaurant on Old Brompton Road called Cambio de Tercio that I really like.

‘England had the worst reputation for food for so long, but it’s really exploded over the last ten years. It has proven that it’s home to wonderful food with some wonderful chefs.’ He adds that it’s his dream to eat at Heston Blumenthal’s The Fat Duck in Bray. ‘It’s meant to be incredible, but I couldn’t get a reservation.’

Nor, it seems, will celebrity help Wood jump to the top of the two-year waiting list for his dream car, the £50,000 electric Tesla Model S. He recently drove a friend’s and describes it as ‘a game-changer’.

‘I don’t think I’ve honestly ever felt that way about a car before. It’s as if Apple developed an automobile. I’ve never been in a car that responds so quickly and moves so fast. It’s remarkable; it gets 300 miles to the charge and it’s constantly connected to the internet. There are no actual dials; it’s 100 per cent screen that can be changed with software updates.’

But the eco car isn’t the car he’d choose if he ever gets to realise his ambition of taking a ‘great American road trip’ across the country. ‘I would love to drive something vintage, a Mustang or an old wagon.’

He says he’d like to tackle the open road with a girlfriend or a group of friends. ‘Road trips are tough. They bring out interesting things in people. You can have great friends who aren’t necessarily great travel companions. It’s always been one of my favourite ways to travel, but you have to be careful – it’s a long time to be on the road with someone.’ ■

‘*Maniac*’ is out on March 15