

Down Home Boy

Texan Matthew McConaughey's tobacco-chewing, beer-drinking, "life is a freeway" approach to stardom just might help him survive it.

Interview by Allison Glock

Matthew McConaughey is looking forward to making coozies. You know, those squishy rubber can holders that keep the Bud cold and the beer sweat off your hands. His production company, j.k. livin, is rolling out, which means McConaughey is reading scripts and considering projects and, well, a man best considers a project with a drink in his hand, and what better to swathe the drink in than a j.k. livin coozy?

"Yeah man, coozies," he says slowly, almost perversely, with sand in his voice, followed by "ye-ah, ye-ah" -- long, rough and dirty. It's a stoner's voice, a whisper of California and a gutful of Texas. A seedy drawl, lazy and sop rich with aw-rights, heymans and whatz-ats?

"Coozies, man," he says again, blue eyes jiggling, bare feet propped up on a nearby chair, exposing his smooth ankles, tanned a butternut brown, because among other things, McConaughey is not a sock wearer. He grins conspiratorially, and you can't help but picture itÑthe spongy foam rubber squeezing just hard enough, the beer inside perfect, guzzle-able, cool. He keeps grinning, all crinkle eyed, staring you dead in the pupils, daring you not to feel his joy, and you can't help but think, Yeah, what the hellÑcoozies, man. Right on. How awesome would that be? And you want one for yourself; no, you want to be invited to McConaughey's house in Malibu to use one of his because then you're a brother, man; then you're a cozy cousin, laid back and easy and comfortable, spitting chaw and swigging beer and soaking sun and just hanging.

You want all this because this is Matthew McConaughey's eclat, his way, and in a world rife with attitude, posturing, whiners, oozers and guys who roll their eyes, a 27-year-old man who makes more than \$2 million per picture and still gets jazzed about coozies **is a man you want to be like or be liked by or sleep with or, at the very least, buy a drink.** Which happens to McConaughey a lot, especially since, given a choice, he would rather eat at the bar.

Tonight he has been bought a vodka tonic and a shooter by the bartender at La Terraza, a fish house in Dorado, Puerto Rico, a few hours south of the set of *Contact*, a Robert Zemeckis sci-fi thriller costarring McConaughey and Jodie Foster. It is McConaughey's first major film since *A Time to Kill* turned him from a sweet-ass bit player into a megawatt leading man.

He has made only a handful of other films, among them *Dazed and Confused* (from whence comes the name of his production company, after his token-happy character's signature line, "Just keep livin', man"), *Boys on the Side* and *Lone Star*. Only *Time* was a

blockbuster, but that was enough. He is now on the A list; he gets to say no. He is, as he says, "on the starting five." Except his butt never hit the bench.

"He's tremendously talented. He's serious about his work, and he's got that unbelievable screen presence," says Zemeckis, who chose McConaughey less for his experience than for his charisma. "It's a gift," he explains. "You can't create it. You can hone talent, but either you've got that chemistry thing or you don't. Chemistry is what makes you a star, and McConaughey has it. He's going to be a giant, giant star."

"Thanks, RickyÑthanks, man. Gracias," McConaughey says affectionately as the bartender replaces his damp coaster. Ricky beams. Ricky does not know McConaughey, nor does he recognize him as a movie star. He shines because McConaughey is that likable and cool, which sets him apart not only from the tables of sandal-wearing tourists but from whole legions of men who have never fixed their own flat tires, stomached a punch or banged their girlfriends in the back of a flatbed.

McConaughey has done all three, and done them, one presumes, well, because he is southern, all swagger and soul felt pride. Born in Uvalde, Texas, in 1969 and raised in Longview, McConaughey comes from good stock. His daddy played football (most notably for Bear Bryant at the University of Kentucky) till injuries eventually sent him into the oil business, where he worked until he died, in 1992. His mama, K-Mac, taught school and looked after the boysÑ Matthew and his older brothers, Rooster and Pat. Being the youngest, Matthew was precocious and took his share of licks, picking his own switch on many occasions.

"We had a cool rule about that," he explains, gulping his complimentary drink. "We always got our butts whupped instead of grounded, because Mom and Dad said our time was valuable. And so, when I was in school, if it was going to D hall Saturday morning or getting licks, I always took licks, 'cause I'm not gonna give you my Saturday."

On Sundays the McConaugheys went to church for the Methodist service, which was held an hour after the Baptist service and distinguishable from it only by the fact that the Baptists proffered a narrower margin for transgression. On Fridays McConaughey and his schoolmates would sneak off to Shreveport, Louisiana, to get drunk and watch World Wrestling Federation matches in the Hirsch Memorial Coliseum.

"We didn't like Skandor Akbar, leader of the bad guys," says McConaughey. "So when he comes walkin' downÑsix nine, 484 poundsÑwe'd spit on him." Such enthusiasm for the sport often resulted in McConaughey's ejection from the stadium, upon which he would sneak back in and hurl rotten tomatoes. "One time we got kicked out and chased all around, and we got mixed up and I walked eleven miles out of town and ended up at this little bar. Man, there were smarter things to do than that."

When McConaughey finally made it home at 6 A.M., he was already late for a golf tournament. "My pops grabbed me out of bed and said, 'Get your ass to that tournament!' So I called my girlfriend, Sherry, who'd never driven a stick shift, and got her to drive me

to Paris, Texas." McConaughey would rev the car to fourth, then leap over Sherry, who would take the wheel so he could snag some rack until the next stoplight. "You know how much trouble I've missed by just striding right through it? Just going headfirst?" He laughs, shakes the ice in his drink. "I look back and think I'm really lucky to be alive."

Hollywood is lucky, too. McConaughey is a man's man, which makes him a woman's man, which makes him box office manna. He's the kind of man you'd want to be stranded roadside with -- agreeable, funny, handy with tools, able to roll a joint. Even when he's overacting as the self-righteous lawyer in *A Time to Kill*, McConaughey still ingratiates.

Much has been made of his looks. The camera doesn't just love him -- it ripens him. On film he is himself, only more so. And, yes, he is a looker -- a cowboy with an awkward, fleshy mouth that sends him talking sideways, like a schoolkid. (More often than not, there is something in his mouth -- chew, cigar, straw, toothpick, finger -- drawing further attention.) The rest of his face is equally voluptuous. His eyes droop. His lashes look curled, like a doll's. His forehead is high and tan and framed with a corona of unruly ash-blond curls. His chin usually sports its own ash fuzz, a beard a hitchhiker would grow, wild and woolly. But there's more. He's no flat-line stud, no Tom Selleck. McConaughey's appeal has layers. There is, as *Lone Star* director John Sayles has said, "nothing histrionic about him." His face reveals his energy; it is alive with a thousand expressions and questions. If McConaughey ever tired of acting, he could reopen Jonestown with a wink.

Part of his appeal is that of all southern men, in that he is blessed with a moral paradigm that doesn't shift. Life gets simple quick when you believe you know right and wrong and are bred to have honor, self-respect and one foot in the soil.

"I think my gift is in finding the goodness in a character -- not that he has to be righteous -- but I can always find some thing attractive about him." He drains his drink and continues. "Passion is attractive. The clock moves a little slower in the South, but people have passions. People get outdoors. There's more bare feet. Less packaging, more product. We've got some characters down south, boy. I'll tell ya. Old school." He says the last in his lubricious, drawly way, 'oweld skooool,' and then laughs big, picturing the characters he knows, the characters he will breathe to life. It tickles him, his career. After all, Texas boys don't become thespians; they play ball or make deals, usually involving construction or destruction and a fleet of cherry pickers.

"We weren't against the arts or anything," McConaughey says of his kin. "But when I first thought I was going to be a lawyer, that was already stepping way out of the system of our family, because I would be in school for so long."

McConaughey went to college at the University of Texas at Austin thinking law school until one day, rifling through a stack of old Playboys and Sports Illustrateds, he came across Og Mandino's *The Greatest Salesman in the World*, a basal little guide for living, about as thick and as dense as a cocktail napkin. Still, the book's feel good message rang

as clear as moonshine to McConaughey. He should follow his bliss, and that wasn't law -- that was the magic of moviemaking.

"I read the first two chapters, and I knew right then that I wanted to go to film school. It just hit me. And I changed my major the next day."

Shortly thereafter the sort of miracle that happens to the blithe blessed happened to McConaughey, turning a random bar meeting into a role in *Dazed and Confused*, which introduced him to Hollywood and a life where "there are no Help Wanted signs," but "man, you can say something original to a lot of people. Woody Allen says success just allows people to be what they always were anyway. *I've always been kind of weird*. Now I have a chance to be weird when and where I want. And people don't say, 'What?' anymore. They say, 'Ahhhh.' "

McConaughey is sitting on the porch of his hotel room, slid down in his chair, heels propped up on the railing, vodka tonic tinkling in his hairless brown hand. Before him the ocean breaks on a rockbed, where hours earlier he had sliced up his knuckle on coral while swimming in the rough water. You can see the cut skinning up his index finger, but he hasn't mentioned it, and when a buddy does, he waves it off. "Naw, man, tain't nothin'." He is wearing frayed khakis and a floral-print shirt that resembles Victorian wallpaper. The shirt is unbuttoned enough to display his chest, a fashion statement McConaughey works often.

Watching him eye the ocean, you notice no cloud of brood or hostility that usually comes with a twentysomething man-child. There is no stink of fear, only the mind-addlingly seductive presence of jejune enthusiasm.

"*I look at life like a freeway*," he says earnestly. "You get yourself your seven lanes, enough room to go right and left, and your direction -- but then don't be afraid to take the exits. *It's fun to get lost along the way, as long as you remember which direction you're going*."

McConaughey likes metaphors. And maxims. And he especially likes the quick theological hits you get from quasi-religious self-help tomes. At times he sounds as if he's written a few of his own, and it's tempting to gag a little on the holly-jolly spoon, but then you look into his eyes, his soft face, and you think, Hell, yes, life is a freeway or "a pair of bookends," and "what's hardest is most gratifying," and you should "greet the day with love in your heart" and could I please have a refill on the communal Kool-Aid, brother?

He waxes on: "I love 'thank you' and 'you're welcome.' Nobody says it anymore. 'You're welcome' means I received your thanks." And just when you think you can't stomach another New Age, up-with-people proverb, he spits up a down home gem like "I'm not about to throw down a full house against a royal flush" or "It's important not to outgrow your cot." And you clink your glass with his and become one with his freeway-flowing world.

"When I was a kid, it was 'Hey, you're a McConaughey, and that means there are a few rules.'

McConaughey is attempting to explain how he's stayed so mellow in the face of abrupt success. He believes it has to do with family, with roots and values. He was taught all the standards, such as "Don't say 'can't,'" "Don't lie," "Do it right," "Respect women." He learned them all by switch or swallow, did right, flew straight enough. And then, thirsty for a bath of freedom, he fled to Australia for the summer in 1988 to cut loose. The plan backfired.

"I had a chance to go on a foreign-exchange program, and I think I took about three seconds to say yes. I wanted to go because I could. Boy, did I learn self-reliance that year," he says, squeezing another lime into his drink.

"I was 18, and I went over there, and [one of my gifts is that I can get along with any walk of people, find a common denominator](#). And I had many situations where I wasn't, I couldn't. And there were many people I was not getting along with, which had never happened. I'm going, 'Is it me? It has to be me.'" Sucked down under, his charms, for the first time ever, failed him. He was rejected. He wasn't liked. He couldn't get laid. "I felt lost. It was the most pain I've ever been in," he says, scratching his shin.

"I was unhappy spending so much time with myself. I got heady and lost my instincts. I stopped eating meat, having sex. I ran every day to sweat out the madness. I was down to 147 pounds."

Then, as any good southern boy would, he got over it. "I said, 'Enough is enough. If I'm going to spend this much time with myself, I'm going to look inside and say, "That's pretty neat right there." I had to find out the good stuff about me. In the end, I laughed my ass off. [I am the funniest son of a bitch I know when I d take myself too seriously](#)."

Which rarely happens. Like the time last year when McConaughey was in a London airport and two fans rushed up, seeking his autograph.

"Mr. Gibb, Mr. Barry Gibb," they squealed, "could you please sign this?"

McConaughey obliged, signing their outstretched tickets: "Stay alive! Love, Barry Gibb."

"[I think I'm ignorant of being reacted to like a movie star. I've got to watch it now. I have to watch people's agendas now. I don't want to get cynical, but I know I have to be wary. I have to decipher who has good intent](#). There's something really pure about ignorance. But then there's something really foolish about it, too. [It's probably time for me to become more of a man](#)."

Deep in the damp Puerto Rican rain forest, McConaughey is walking through the Contact set lunch tent. It's slow going because, even though it's been raining for a week and the shoot is delayed and the crew is boot-deep in muck, McConaughey's arrival prompts

warm attention. Everyone wants to say hello, slap his back, make a crack, make him smile. McConaughey's in no hurry. He soaks it in, slaps his own share of backs, whispers a few naughty jokes, grins the grin.

McConaughey feels like a brother, a younger brother, masculine yet nonthreatening, a babylike innocent whom everyone wants to touch before he spoils, a plum to be pinched and tasted.

A few minutes later, Jodie Foster joins the lunch crowd. A few folks say a tentative hello. And she offers a little comma of a smile, warm enough but professional. She is liked, of course, but she touches no one and takes her lunch to go.

When McConaughey finally does eat, it's with actor Tom Skerritt, a few other cast members and his driver, John Chaney, a good old boy from Louisiana. McConaughey's lunch plate is heavy with beans, fish and sauces ("I love me some condiments"). Beside it sits his ever present Levi Garrett Chew. After lunch he and Skerritt smoke cigars that McConaughey cuts with a knife. McConaughey sucks on his until his dimples touch.

All day on the set, McConaughey spends only enough time in his trailer to piss and pack his cheek with chew. The rig is on loan from locals, chicken farmers which would explain the faint aroma of sour feathers. The stench gives him an excuse to be where he joneses to be anyhow, out and about, hanging, chatting up the crew. McConaughey was warned about the trailer and the stink on the car ride up the mountain. When he heard, he laughed, then spat into a beer bottle and went back to reading the sports page of USA Today.

It is the same reaction he had the night before, when his driver was MIA and he was stuck outside in the rain, waiting. "Liquid sunshine," he said, tilting his face toward the heavens. Then he strolled a bit up and down the street, never once flinching as the rain pelted his head and shoulders.

"There are things you can control and things you can't. I don't worry one second about going down in a plane or dropping in the middle of an earthquake. I'm not going to spend my mind time on something that doesn't matter."

At this point, McConaughey does a little twirl, spinning a quick circle with that mad-dog grin on his puss. "Sandy taught me how to dance," he says. "She's a great dancer."

Ah yes, Sandy. The inescapable lovefest that is Sandra Bullock and Matt McConaughey's relationship reminds one of a grade-school, note-passing, playground-smooching, pants-peeing, giggle fit romance. It inspires envy and eye rolling in equal measure. For months Bullock has gushed on, issuing all manner of unequivocal praise in print and on television, including those three words.

"I'm the best thing that ever happened to that boy," Bullock explains in a phone interview from Austin, Texas. "I'm the only one with enough guts to kick him in the pants."

McConaughey, she says, has done the same for her. "He gets in my face. He shows me things. He shows people faith. He is a man. I mean, even the way he throws a barbecue -- he sticks a beer bottle up a chicken's butt, and when the beer boils over, the chicken's done. There's no one who enjoys himself more than Matthew. He is the mayor of all good time."

Despite all the shared luv, the two haven't fessed up that they are more than friends. Indeed, when they appear in paparazzo snaps holding hands and beaming like chrome fenders at noon in August, they do seem to be genuine pals.

"Sandy's wonderful," McConaughey says rhapsodically, still soaking in the rain. His damp hair has seized up into a helmet of tendrils, and the drizzle seems to have fogged his brain, making him downright stuttery.

"I really like women as the wonderful creatures they are. Women are beautiful. I mean, I like women. I love the differences between men and women. Yeah. Women. Yeah. I mean. What was your question?"

Not surprisingly, women have never been rare on hand in McConaughey's world.

Later, on his hotel porch, Mc Conaughey is once again sipping and slouching, picking at his bare feet with his fingernail. He is thinking about heroes.

"I don't respect people who are good at what they do but don't hold their worth as a man. When I was a kid, I loved the Incredible Hulk. He had such a great rule for livin'. Here's a guy who never looked for any harm, never looked for any trouble and would turn the other cheek to give you two chances. But the third time, once you pushed him past the point, you didn't know how bad you were about to be fucked up. I always liked that."

McConaughey has himself been pushed too far and cracked some heads to commemorate it. He remembers those who did him wrong, stepped over the boundaries of decency and honor and had it coming swift and hard to the jaw. "I've never started any fights," he's quick to point out. "But I can't stand bad manners, especially in front of women. And then you ask a man to apologize, and that's a challenge to their manhood...." He trails off, perhaps remembering his last fight, a couple of years back, when he took a fist solid to the side of his head. He shrugs.

"Used to be, you fought and then came in and bought the guy a beer. Now you can't have a good, clean fight. The respect for life is much lower, and it doesn't matter to some people, because they don't give a damn about themselves."

He is quiet. Then he shrugs again, downs the backwater of his drink and gets up to pour another round from the ever full bar in his room. When he comes back, he is smiling, as if the very act of moving has snapped him awake and away from the funk of regret. He plops down, refills his glass and lights up a cigar. Leaning back, he exhales a fog of sweet smoke.

"You know, you can govern fortune. There's a cool quote about how you can walk through the gates of fortune and either wait or charm luck to be on your side." He puffs again, ogles the sunset. "There are times to be bold and seize it. And there are times to sit back and recharge and figure out how to go down that path."

Watching him, his Chiclet teeth working, his toes fanned toward the sun, his eyes as lively as a bucket of crawdads, you can almost hear the gates creak open.

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