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TIME

Hard Choices
For Israel

Travolta Fever



A Letter from the Publisher

For such a contentious subject, TIME's special report on socialism (March 13) drew a remarkably calm and reasoned set of responses from our readers, as reflected in the excerpts printed in this week's Letters column. In contrast, the cover story on the serene Cheryl Tiegs (March 6) brought a surge of emotion-charged letters—555 at last count. Most of our critics were angry and articulate women who found the story sexist. Predictably, the most enthusiastic supporters were males who felt that the cover was, as one put it, "a breath of fresh air."

Week after week TIME's readers write, continuing a dialogue with our writers and editors that the magazine has always encouraged. In 1977, 58,518 readers sent in letters, just a bagful less than 1976's election-year record of 59,071.

Among our heaviest mail producers was the coverage of the widely acclaimed television series *Roots*, based on Alex Haley's bestselling book. Americans became fascinated with finding their own roots, and our stories drew 710 letters. A trio of articles on the clash between gay liberationists and Anita Bryant produced 997 letters; most of the correspondents were angry at Bryant. As it happened, the subject that drew the most comment was not a

story at all. When TIME's new graphic design appeared in August, most of the 1,900 comments were sharply negative. But within a month the furor had died down, and readers were writing in to say that they were warming to the changed format as to a new friend.

Every day, four or five bulging mailbags arrive on the 23rd floor of the Time-Life Building in Rockefeller Center. The letters are immediately pored over by Letters Chief Maria Luisa Cisneros and her staff. The most newsworthy are sent to Reporter-Researcher Nancy Chase, who picks those that will be published. A digest of the week's letters is also distributed to TIME's editors and news bureaus. All letters are acknowledged, and those that question the tone, emphasis or factual content of a story are answered by Cisneros, her deputy, Isabel Kouri, or one of six letters correspondents. More and more, Cisneros and her co-workers are finding that the letters are thoughtful, and require thoughtful replies. Says Cisneros: "Our writers are much

more serious now. They really mean business." All of which pleases the writers and editors of TIME, who pay close attention to the comments of their best critics.

Ralph P. Davidson



Cisneros flanked by Chase (left) and Kouri

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COVER STORY

High Steppin' to Stardom

John Travolta owns the street, and his Fever seems contagious



DOUGLAS KIRKLAND/CONTACT

Re-enacting a *Saturday Night* scene in his apartment: "You let people have a look at you."

The moves, the presence, the princely mystique: he struts his stuff and keeps running on a fast track.

Check it out! Man walks down that street so fine. Strides easy. Long, looking right. Left then. Then ahead, then left ... snap! ... again, follows that little sister in the tight pants a ways, then back on the beam. Arms arc. Could be some old trainman, swinging an imaginary lantern in the night. Smiling.

Stepping so smart. Rolls, almost. Swings his butt like he's shifting gears in a swivel chair. Weight stays, sways, in his hips. Shoulders, straight, shift with the strut. High and light.

Street's all his, past doubt. And more, if he wants. Could be he might step off that concrete. Just start flying away.

It's all there, in the walk that John Travolta takes through the opening credits of *Saturday Night Fever*. Right there is the little kid from New Jersey who danced in front of the television while he watched James Cagney storm-tapping through *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. The boy in the chorus who trundled his way through a nine-month tour of *Grease*. The young man who landed a supporting part on a sitcom, watched himself become a TV star, a pretty face on a poster, and a purveyor of slick, sappy top 40 ballads. All that bought him a shot at what is still, in the static-charged currents of media celebrity, the ultimate fantasy fulfillment, the greatest of all gaudy dreams: movie stardom.

John Travolta snagged that too. Just took a stroll down the Brooklyn asphalt, and mid-block he had the street tucked neatly under his arm. By the time he got to the corner he had walked away with the turnaway hit of the season, second only to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 1978 grosses. *Saturday Night Fever* has started Travolta along a yellow-brick show-biz road that reaches out of sight, raised discomania to a national craze and made superstar of a likable rock group called the Bee Gees for the second, or maybe it's the third time (see box).

When Travolta first appears in *Saturday Night Fever*, there's an instant charge—a shock of recognition, of excitement, of acceptance. He has the moves, the presence, the princely mystique. No one can fully define star quality, but you can find illustration enough. And, in 1978, that walk is the best one around.

First, you are astonished. Off the tube, in the rarefied, unsparing light of the large screen, this long-lashed poster boy

from *Welcome Back, Kotter* with the hundred-watt blue eyes and the scimitar smile that promises even more than it insinuates, ought to flounder. Instead, Travolta fills up all that space and pushes at the boundaries.

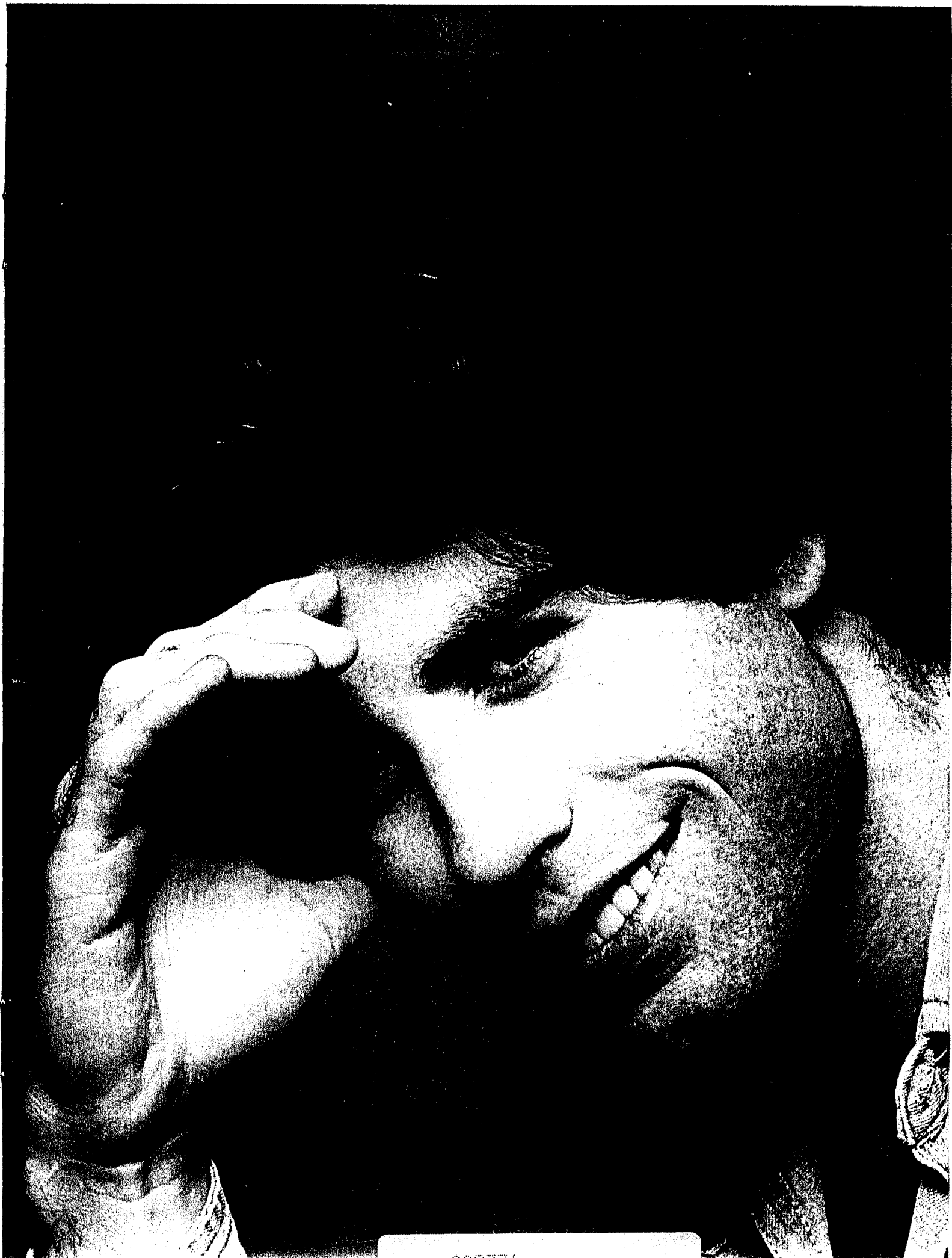
Then you start thinking of comparisons: Robert De Niro blowing the star-spangled mailbox to smithereens in *Mean Streets*; Al Pacino in uniform at his sister's wedding in *The Godfather*, telling Diane Keaton how his father enforced a contract, his voice full of casual, measured menace; Dustin Hoffman end-running out of the church in *The Graduate*. At moments like those, you expect the film to freeze and to see a title appear: "The legend starts here." Travolta's walk said that.

Of course, this is heady company to be keeping, and plunging a 24-year-old with little formal acting training into its midst is probably unfair. Yet suddenly, with one movie, Travolta can be mentioned in that league without apology.

"He is the street Tyrone Power," dithers Allan Carr, a manager-producer who landed Travolta for his \$6 million film version of *Grease*, to be released in June. This time, five years after the road tour. John will have the lead, dancing and singing pre-fab rock-'n'-roll ditties in a voice that sounds like he's been gargling with Ovaltine. His acting skills will not be so sorely tested. "I'd decided not to do the part," Travolta confesses. "But then I reconsidered. I thought, what's wrong with doing a light musical? Brando did it." Clearly, this is a boy who likes to run on a fast track.

File Carr's appraisal for the moment under "glamour" and consider all that De Niro-Pacino-Hoffman talk going around as so much well-intentioned rinding interest. The movie star Travolta most clearly calls to mind is Montgomery Clift. Travolta may lack the depth of Clift's gifts, but he has much the same quicksilver charm. He too can give an audience the sense of immediate but always fragile intimacy, of shared secrets, of private truths known without speaking.

And sexuality. "Maybe the major thing is how sensual he is," suggests Lily Tomlin, who will star with him this spring in a romance called *Moment to Moment*. "And how sexy too. The





Snagging the greatest of all gaudy dreams: Travolta relaxing on the balcony of his Hollywood apartment

DOUGLAS KIRKLAND—CONTACT



Johnny playing with a model of his own DC-3: visions of flight

sensitivity and the sexuality are very strong. It's as if he has every dichotomy—masculinity, femininity, refinement, crudity. You see him, you fall in love a little bit." Adds *Saturday Night Live* Producer Lorne Michaels, whose barbed-wire comedy show Travolta keeps promising to host: "John is the perfect star for the '70s. He has this strange androgynous quality, this all-pervasive sexuality. Men don't find him terribly threatening. And women, well..."

There is a whole future in that ellipsis, which does not take away an inch from Travolta's interpretive skills. A closer look at *Fever* will reveal both an actor who works his tail off and a man with a sharp eye for stage business. As Tony Manero, he strides down that block of Bay Ridge swinging a can of paint like a talisman, and when he stops for a snack at the corner pizza stand he orders two slices, then eats them one piled right on top of the other.

Good and clever, but Travolta can cut much deeper than that. Trying out a new step with his ideal dance partner, he provokes an admiring question ("Did you make that step up yourself?") and a neat reply: "Yeah... No. I saw it on television... then I made it up." The modification, and the contradiction, were Travolta's invention, and they say a lot about Tony Manero's stubborn pride and restless insecurity.

If any more proof be needed, then the scene on the bench facing the Verrazano Bridge is the clincher. Travolta speaks of the building of the bridge, all its specifications and statistics, like a

Travolta as a '50s hero in *Grease*: wooing Co-Star Olivia Newton-John; hanging tough on a car engine; touching up between takes



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man surveying an escape route from Brooklyn he is not sure he can ever take. His girl—the one he has been trying unsuccessfully to put the make on—hears the longing and the edge of desperation in his voice and kisses him on the cheek. He makes no move toward her, does not, in fact, even look at her. His eyes are full, and he is crying. Travolta says now that the welling tears surprised him as much as anyone else, and they may be a sentimental, softening gesture toward his character. But they also make the scene something that lingers in the memory long after the flash has faded and the beat has died.

Just now, Travolta holds the winning hand; or most of it, anyhow. There is no wild card. No overheated tales of profligacy and indulgence. No seamy revelations. The usual insinuations, to be sure, but no backstairs gossip that is verifiable, no sagas of ruinous excess and careening self-destruction. Superstars very often provide their own portfolio of legends to join the ones fashioned for the screen: the abandon of Brando, the hipster brashness of James Dean. If the material isn't available, then the superstars get tagged with it—De Niro is alleged to be Garboesque, Pacino sullen and distant, Redford some kind of Crunchy Granola mystic who holes up alone in Utah.

Travolta cannot be immune to this mythmaking process. Like autograph hounds, it comes with the territory, and the quiet kid from Englewood, N.J., is already getting typed as a kind of Steiff Toy hoodlum. This has something to do, of course, with the parts that have brought him fame: Vinnie Barbarino in *Kotter*, Tony in *Saturday Night Fever*, even Danny Zuko, the cuddly tough guy in *Grease*, all rough-and-ready proles with a hint of self-mockery and a double dose of wistfulness. Travolta's low profile will be his best chance of holding onto his privacy and whatever portion of himself he wishes to preserve for his intimates. The public Travolta, personable and shy, canny and eager, is like a picture in a child's coloring book, where only the bold, broad outlines of a figure are provided. The drawing will take any colors you want. Only the original artist holds the full, definitive master sketch, which he shares sparingly.

Stories, memories, reflections about Travolta come back a little like your favorite shirts from the cleaners: well laundered and stiff. Marilu Henner, a former Travolta flame from the *Grease* road company who is still a close friend, was reminiscing recently about how they would skip down the streets of Manhattan's West Side, making up little street improvisations to play out. One rainy day inspired a fantasy of sinister dealings in a dense London fog. "I'd say to him, 'Is he coming?'" Marilu laughs. "And John would look over his shoulder and say, 'No, I don't think so.'" Another acquaintance, trying to summon an example of the Travolta wit, could recall only his remark to the husband of a very pregnant wife: "Boy, you must have a high sperm count."

Such low-altitude flights of humor and fancy would not qualify Travolta to bus dishes at the Algonquin Round Table. That may be the way he wants it. Part of Travolta's success has been sticking close to what he knows and where he comes from.

His old neighborhood in Englewood hasn't changed, and his parents still live in the same frame house. Kids frequently descend on the place now, and the elder Travoltas pass out glossies of their youngest son. Down in the bright red basement recreation room, there is a large bulletin board crowded with pictures of all the kids. Here the superstar receives equal billing with his siblings, and his picture smiles out among shots of

Ellen, now 37, who is acting in pilots for both NBC and CBS; Margaret, 32, who does TV and voice-overs in Chicago; Anne, 29, just married and acting in New York City; Joey, 27, who was once a teacher and has now taken off for Los Angeles with a gift of \$5,000 from his kid brother and the promise of a screen test; and Sam, 34, who has worked for years as a shipping clerk at Fabergé but, hooked on show biz ("While I was in the service in Europe, I did *Dial M for Murder*"), is learning to play the guitar and trying to get his own band together.

If the Travolta clan has not yet become the Barrymores of Bergen County it will not be for want of the firm support and encouragement of Helen ("a very sensitive, giving woman," says Johnny) and Sam ("a very gentle, sensitive man") Travolta. Sam played semipro football and baseball, worked in the tire business to keep the family dreams within reach. Helen, who was one of the Sunshine Sisters on Hackensack radio during the '30s, joined a local stock company after she married Sam. "She was a great, great actress," Sam says. Adds Helen: "They used to compare me with Barbara Stanwyck."

In the midst of raising the six kids, Helen also found time to direct neighborhood theatricals and pass along some sound tips on acting to young Johnny. "I said once you become a character, you are another person," she recalls now. "You have to be quiet when it is not your turn. And you just don't make an entrance by running into a room. You let people have a look at you as you walk in."

These lessons took root, and Johnny was soon up for a part in one of Helen's productions down at the local high school. He wanted a role as big as Brother Joey's, balked at taking second billing and toddled out of the show. He consoled himself with such pursuits as organizing backyard carnivals and starting a bowling alley in the basement with croquet balls and milk bottles (20¢ per game, soda pop a nickel extra). He did extravagant, free-form tap dances in front of the TV, imitating Cagney ("I loved him. He was so loving and sensitive") in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.

No doubt young Johnny was spoiled in a manner befitting his position as the youngest in a large family. "None of my friends were allowed to eat as much candy as me," he remembers with glee. This indulgence has left him with a marked

weakness for such caloric luxuries as tuna-melt sandwiches and hot-fudge sundaes. Maybe part of the extra attention was also due to some special parental intuition that their youngest was the most gifted of the brood. At six, Johnny was off visiting Sister Ellen in a road company of *Gypsy*. "He'd mouth all Merman's songs from the records," she remembers, "and he could dance every part." When he was nine, he got his first part in a local workshop production of *Who'll Save the Plowboy?* A retrospective appreciation from Mom: "He had only two or three lines, but he said them so meaningfully."

His talent, indeed, was tripping him up in school, distracting him and keeping his grades marginal. He tried to charm and con his teachers with conversation, or, as he puts it now, "I tried to communicate with them on a more adult level." This ploy kept him hanging in, but mostly what he learned to do in high school was dance. At Dwight Morrow High, recalls his schoolmate Jerry Wurms, now working for Travolta's production company and still his closest friend, "we were both taught to dance by the blacks. Somebody in the corridors or outside always had a radio, and somebody was always dancing." Says Travolta, "Whatever new dance came to school, I learned it. I think the blacks accepted me because I cared about them ac-



Travolta with the late Diana Hyland and her son
"Every color I ever imagined."

JULIAN WASSER—PEOPLE

Show Business

cepting me. They seemed to have a better sense of humor, a looser style. I wanted to be like that." One day, coming back on the school bus from a football game, some of the team started singing a James Brown song with the chorus, "Say it loud/ I'm black and I'm proud!" Travolta waited for his moment, then retaliated with "Say it light/ I'm white and outasight!" One early indication of the Travolta charm is that he not only survived the bus ride but also got a few laughs into the bargain.

Along with his tutorials in ethnic rhythms, Travolta had also enrolled for professional dancing lessons at a local school run by Fred Kelly (brother of Gene). Reinforced by the enthusiasm of Sam and Helen and looming academic catastrophe, Travolta left school and home at 16. "I decided I was good enough to compete with the professionals," he remembers. "So I went into New York City."

He lived with Sister Anne and during his first year in the Big Apple landed two parts (in revivals of *Gypsy* and *Bye Bye Birdie*) and an agent-manager named Bob LeMond, who has been with Johnny ever since. "He was a dream," LeMond says. "He got the first part I ever sent him up for, and he's never been turned down since." Young actors currently enduring the rigors of the tough scuffle, or more established ones who still nurse the scars, may be heartened to learn that, in fact, Travolta was rejected in his first movie attempt (for *The Panic in Needle Park*). He scored on his second, rather more modest call—a commercial for h.i.s slacks.

By the time he turned 18, he was on the road with *Grease* and keeping an eye on the lively, lush-figured Marilu, who was bouncing around beside him onstage. "Johnny's spontaneous, but he's not impulsive," Marilu maintains, a fact well borne out by their romantic scenario. Johnny made it through most of the tour before he and Marilu became, as she says, "involved."

Marilu maintains that Johnny is "definitely a one-woman man, very selective. He's not the kind of person you worry about at a party." Marilu and Johnny moved in together back in Manhattan, played out their fantasies of London fog and foreign intrigue on the Upper West Side, ate tuna melts and guacamole (never at the same sitting), listened a lot to the sound track from *Last Tango in Paris*, and even worked together in a show called *Over Here!* By the last night of the show, Travolta had resolved to try his luck Out There. In Hollywood, his old pal Jerry Wurms drove Johnny to auditions on the back of his motorcycle. Travolta scored his first movie job in a little horror called *The Devil's Rain*, in which he melts into a puddle of liquid putrescence while shouting, "Blasphemer! Blasphemer!"

Things looked up after that; how could they not? Johnny landed the Barbarino role in *Kotter* and started his steep, fast climb. He was passed over for a role he badly wanted in *The Last Detail* but won a prime supporting part in Director Brian DePalma's nightmare fairy tale, *Carrie*. He had already broken up with Marilu, but while working on *Carrie* he had become the hottest hood on TV since The Fonz. Four-color posters were being printed, and record contracts were in negotiation.

The summer after *Carrie* was completed, Travolta found himself one of the tube's major attractions, a status that snagged him his own made-for-TV movie, *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*. The part was the first serious test of his dramatic talent. The experience, and its aftermath, turned out to be the most serious trial of his young life.

His co-star, who played his mother, was an exquisitely naturalistic actress named Diana Hyland. She was 18 years older than Travolta, had a young son and an uncertain medical history. They spent a lot of time together, talking quietly on the set. At the cast party, Travolta remembers, "we admitted not only a friendly attraction but a sexual one. The intensity of it

was new to both of us." They "well, sort of kissed." Then Travolta left on an extended holiday, did some long thinking.

When he returned, he says, "we started getting involved. There was something about her—a quality I can't define even now—that I found so appealing. It exceeded anything physical. She had every color I ever imagined in a person." She told him that their six months together were the happiest time of her life. While he was making *Saturday Night Fever*, Diana Hyland died of cancer.

Travolta knew about her sickness, but mentioned it to none of his friends. He said only that she was hospitalized for back trouble. "I used to make deals with myself," he remembers. "If she'd survive, I'd sacrifice seeing her again." He flew to California to be with her at the last, then went to Brooklyn to finish the movie. Says Travolta, "I would have married her." With seven months of analysis behind him, Travolta turned to Scientology to get him through the bad time. "He put his attention to the work and overcame his emotional feelings," Director John Badham recalls. "Some of the best scenes in the movie were done during that period."

No longer flummoxed by what Scientology calls "the low tones," Travolta now lives by himself—quietly, and quite simply—in a penthouse apartment in West Hollywood. The place, decorated in what might be called bachelor functional, has lately undergone some sprucing up after a magazine article described the digs as drab. It also currently houses his buddy Jerry and *Fever* Co-Star Donna Pescow, who are both searching for their own digs. There is a pool table, an Advent TV screen and many prized airplane models, though he no longer spends much time gluing the things together himself. Travolta's fascination with planes is not limited to miniatures; he began taking flying lessons at 16, bought a sporty single-engine Aircoupe for \$5,000 a few years ago and now owns a twin-engine DC-3 big enough to accommodate not only his whole family but a flock of friends as well.

Travolta spends his scarce free time with close friends such as English-born Actress Kate Edwards, Jerry Wurms and Marilu Henner, or—as on one weekend—hunting for some rural real estate in the \$50,000 to \$200,000 range. An evening at a favorite Japanese restaurant on Sunset Strip is likely to be interrupted by autograph hunters, who receive a friendly greeting but sometimes no signature. "Autographs are sort of impersonal," he told some fans recently, extending his hand, "but I'd like to meet you." A lot of the fans are young and pretty, but Travolta resists temptation. "Before I was famous, I had what you would call one-night experiences," he reflects. "But I find these are much more exciting in my fantasies than in reality."

If there is no steady girl in the picture, there are plenty of contracts, deals, packages and gross points to preoccupy him.

So the sky's the limit. Insurance companies will not let him risk his million-dollar neck by piloting his DC-3. Travolta, grounded for the foreseeable future, consoles himself with fantasies of flight. "Gee," he remarked in the Los Angeles County Museum as he surveyed a vault among the treasures of King Tut, "wouldn't it be great if they opened up one of those tombs and found an airplane inside?" From the time he was small and watched commercials for Mars candy ("They were the best—they'd fly you right through the Milky Way"); from the times he got Sam Travolta to spin him around the living room ("Fly me, Daddy!"); from the spring he persuaded his father to help him build a "real" plane in the backyard (the wings and fuselage were made of wooden planks and car batteries powered the propellers)—Travolta has dreamed of soaring, of escaping.

So another dream's been granted. Forget about that walk. This man's fixing to fly.



Travolta as tot, age one year



Stage-struck, age eight