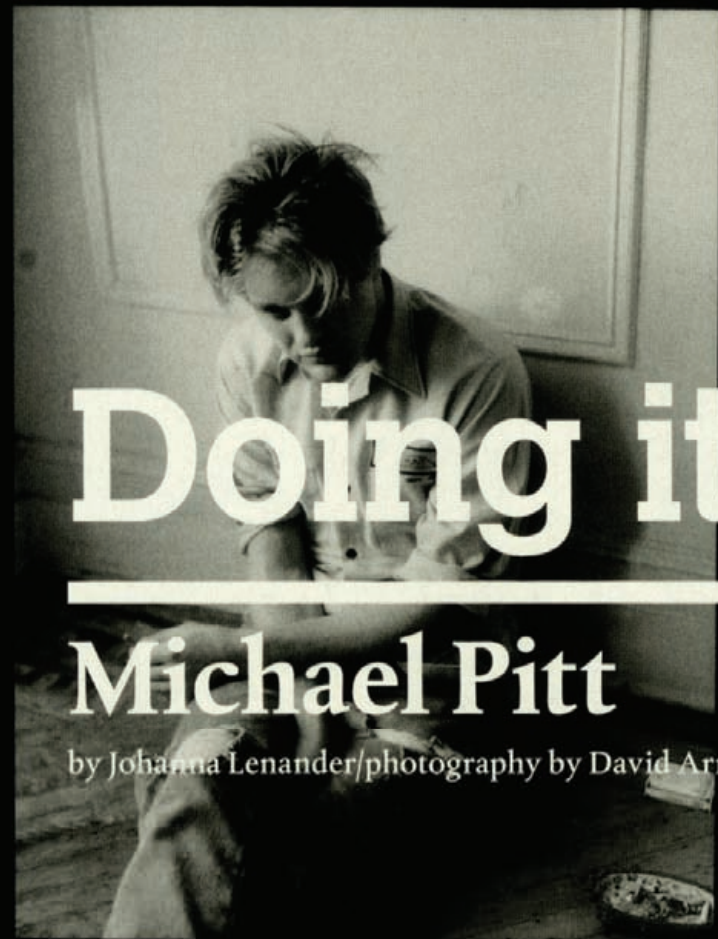




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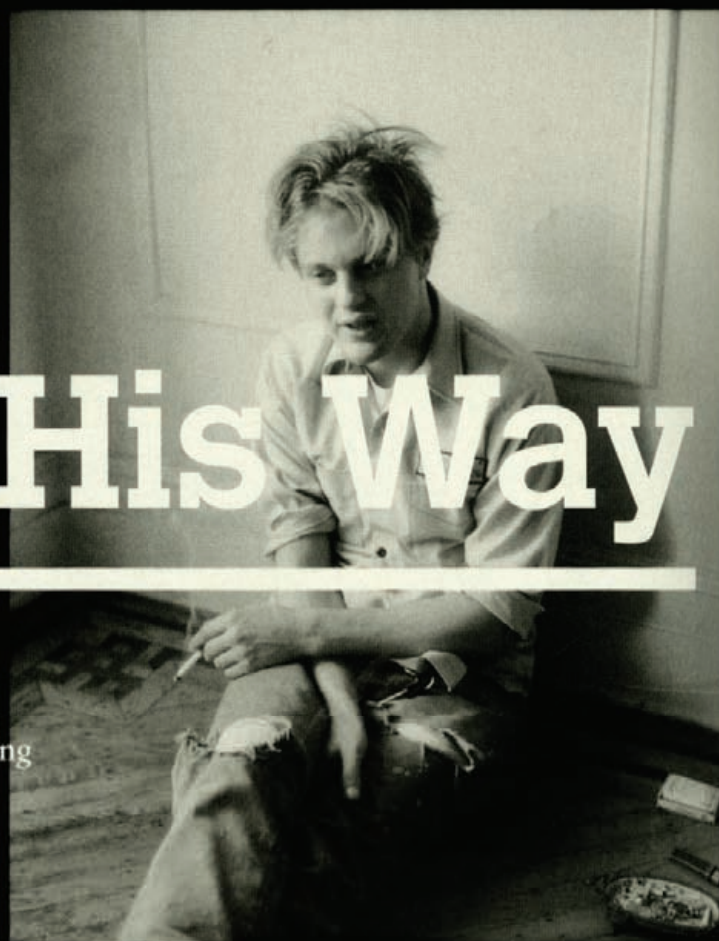


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Doing it His Way

Michael Pitt

by Johanna Lenander/photography by David Armstrong

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An interview with Michael Pitt is a reporter's dream, or nightmare, depending on where you're coming from. Most questions remain unanswered. What you get instead are moments of raw sincerity, something extraordinary among people who live in the public eye.

25-year old Pitt is at the point where he could or could not become a major star. So far he has been working against it. His past projects have been deliberately off-kilter. He exposed both body and soul playing a student who tests his sexual boundaries in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (2003) and he played a sultry glam rock performer obsessed with an East German transsexual in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001). But his best-known and most acclaimed role to date is his portrayal of a self-destructing rock star in Gus Van Sant's *Last Days*, (2005) a challenging cinematic meditation on fame and death loosely based on Kurt Cobain. Pitt also stars in the upcoming *Silk* by director François Girard, a romantic period piece (and potential blockbuster) about a young French silk merchant in love with a Chinese concubine.

It's easy to imagine Pitt as the next teen idol. As much as he probably dislikes it, he is the perfect incarnation of the actor as a young rebel — brooding, sensitive, conflicted, unpredictable and angel-faced; viscerally talented, suspicious of fame, and stubbornly resistant to bullshit.

Our interview begins with a tentative question about Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*, the film he's currently shooting. A long silence on the other end of the line, then an exhalation of smoke: "I think this country is fucked up," he responds throatily.

So I decide to touch on politics: Why does Michael Pitt think that America is fucked up? "Media fucks with me because there is no real information available. I have to get on a plane to know what's going on. I should just leave." When I suggest that he should stay and try to fight against it, he says wearily: "Yeah, but the problem is that when you want to do things you have to go undercover. All politicians say that they are going to change things when they get in a position to do it. And then when they get there they have become like everyone else. The whole game is rigged."

He speaks from the perspective of the underdog, the person who never had to lose his innocence because he's always known life is unfair. "I'm part of the problem, not part of the solution. I'm uneducated and uninvolved," he states. Still, Pitt cannot help but feel betrayed. "I don't think Americans are stupid, I think they're just not given the information," he says. "You have to do so much work to get it."

Pitt grew up in a working class environment in West Orange, New Jersey. ("Exotic, huh?") He landed his first acting gig at the age of 16 in an off-Broadway play. Having dropped out of school, he says it was "the first time no one told me I was stupid." The performance garnered

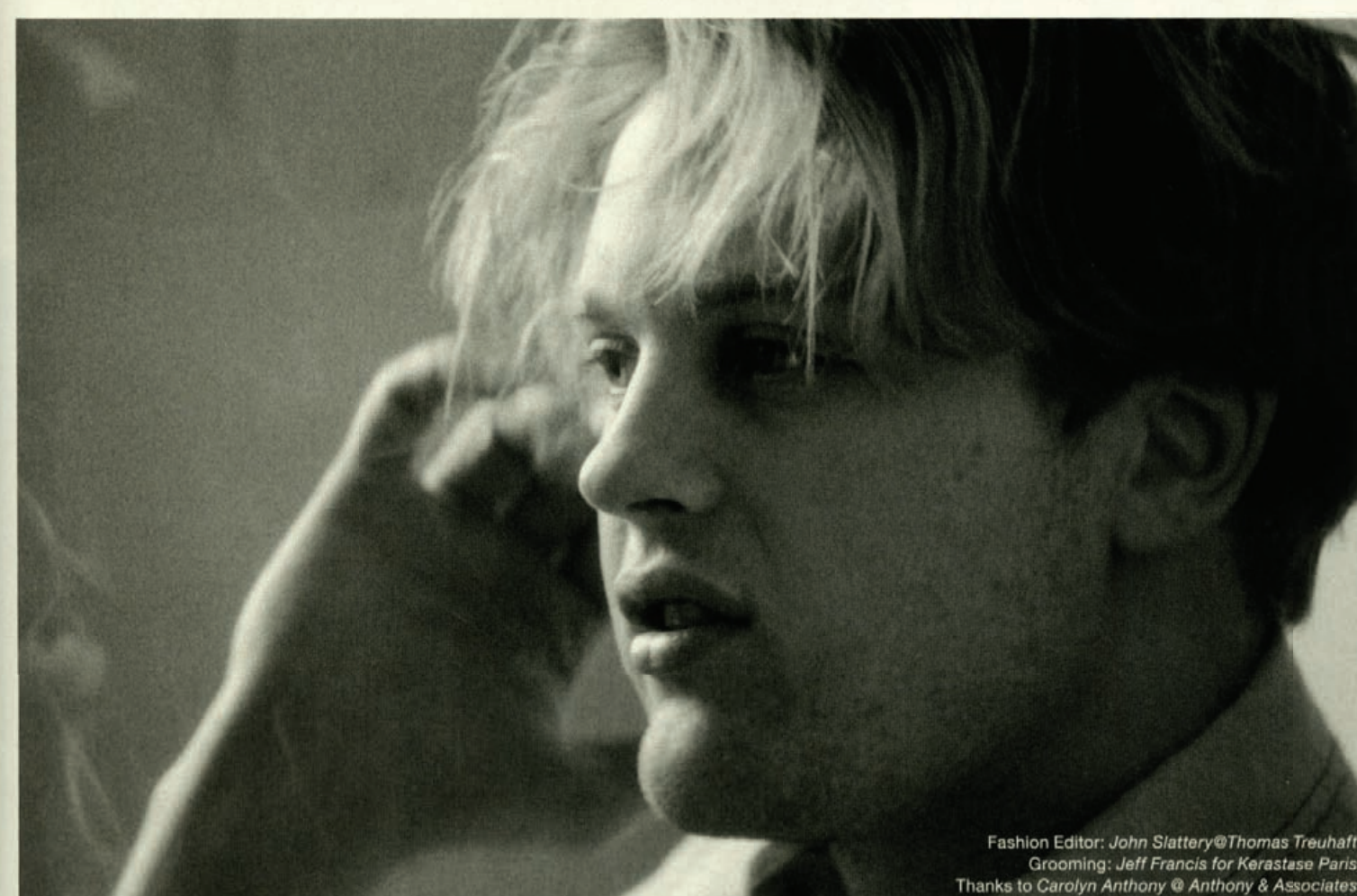
great reviews and he was cast in a recurring role in the popular teen soap *Dawson's Creek*, an episode in his life he appears to want to forget. Though he doesn't mention the TV series, he stresses that he's never been interested in fame and fortune. "I was doing this play and was able to get a little apartment and buy groceries and I thought that was what I was gonna do," he says. "Then it gets more complicated; people say, 'well, here's a shitload of money, here's what we want you to do,' and, at a certain level, especially if you haven't had money, you feel like you have no right to turn this down." Pitt now chooses projects he enjoys: "This is really the only way I can do it because my brain gets bad if I don't. I never come off good and personally it's not healthy for me. I didn't get into this to feel like I was selling a product."

He also plays guitar and writes the music for a four-member band called Pagoda. Pitt performed his song "Death to Life" in *Last Days*, considered one of the film's most touching moments. He says he has only seen the movie once, but likes the fact that Van Sant decided to steer away from literal references, such as using Nirvana for the soundtrack. "The fans were disappointed because they wanted to see their rock god," says Pitt. "They wanted The Doors, but Van Sant forces you to look at the person instead. And I get the sense that a lot of people didn't treat him [Cobain] like a human being."

Like Cobain, Pitt is currently feeling ambivalent about his craft. "Acting is weird. It kind of creeps me out. To do it right you have to really fuck with your emotions. I'm not sure it's healthy for you." He says he feels less conflicted about his music, probably "because I haven't done it for that long." He also seems to enjoy the creative control. "As an actor you're just the vessel. It's not your vision, it's the director's vision. Your job is to help the director. At the end of the day, a good director can make a good film with so-so actors. You do your job and then they make it what they want." Pitt, however, admits that the actor/musician cliché has its own problems. "You don't get respect," he says. "People are judgmental. So am I. I try not to be, but I am. But then again, I believe you should just do what you're doing, and do it pure."



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