

INTERVIEW JACK SHEPHERD

‘POTTER IS  
WHY I HAVE THE  
OPPORTUNITY TO DO  
THE WEIRD STUFF.’

DANIEL  
RADCLIFFE

A decade after saying goodbye to *The Boy Who Lived*, Daniel Radcliffe has landed his most out-there role yet - playing parody singer Al Yankovic in *Weird*. Talking to *Total Film*, the actor reflects on his new biopic, the Potter years, and why he's now kinder on his teenage self.

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genuinely really, really don't have a problem about talking about Potter," Daniel Radcliffe says, beaming over Zoom from a blank room in Nova Scotia. Some actors bristle when interviewers ask about the roles they can't outgrow, but that's not the case here – Radcliffe's more than happy to discuss his time as *The Boy Who Lived*. In fact, he's positively luminous while on the subject. "It was such a hugely formative part of my life," he continues. "To see it still having such a positive effect on people's lives is really heartening and sweet."

In the decade since his Harry Potter story concluded on the big screen, Radcliffe has gone on to play a host of weird and wonderful characters on screen, "weird" being the defining word of his latest project, *Weird: The Al Yankovic Story*, a retelling of the life of parody musician Weird Al. As you would expect from a film about a man who became a global sensation by changing the lyrics to

popular songs and adding an accordion backing, this isn't your typical biopic. From the very start, the facts are twisted, and about halfway through everything goes completely off the rails as the real story is abandoned. And yet, in a weird way, the result is a film that's more true, at least in spirit, to its subject matter than any other biopic in recent memory.

Radcliffe – whose demeanour is so comfortable and relaxed it's like catching up with an old friend (though that's perhaps because many of us grew up alongside Harry Potter) – has an absolute ball playing Yankovic, his eccentricity (and ripped body) on full display. It's a performance that borrows from many of his career deviations since Potter, particularly the comedy roles he's been quietly cultivating, whether as a farting corpse in *Swiss Army Man*, online-troll-turned-action-hero in *Guns Akimbo*, or, most recently, an evil billionaire collector in *The Lost City* opposite Sandra Bullock and Channing Tatum.

That's not to say Radcliffe's only been in comedies since Potter finished, far from it: he's been an undercover cop infiltrating a white supremacist gang in *Imperium*, the famed American poet Allen Ginsberg in *Kill Your Darlings*, and a political prisoner in the thriller *Escape From Pretoria*. It's been a varied few years and playing Al Yankovic is the culmination of everything Radcliffe has done to this point.

"I'm in a position that so few actors are in," he says. "I've got so many friends that are actors who have no autonomy over their career. They just need to work. I'm in a position to be able to pick and choose what I do. A lot of the stuff I've

done, and want to do, is so weird in the way that it's going to be hard to get somebody to put a lot of money behind that." There's that word again, weird. "It's impossible not to use that word," he says. "I keep coming up against that."

**How much did you know about Weird Al before the project and what brought you on board?**

I knew a few of the big hits. I was obsessed with a guy called Tom Lehrer who's the greatest, probably, comic songwriter – or satirist – ever. At some point, it was like, "If you like this, you may also like..." That sent me onto some Weird Al. It was probably my first interaction with him.

When I started spending a lot more time in America, and particularly when I started dating my girlfriend, which was 10 years ago now, she grew up with Al. I became indoctrinated through that, in the best way. Because once you get past the big hits, which are huge fun – and some of them are lyrically brilliant – you get into songs where he is brilliant at what he does. I'm at the point now where I love a lot of the originals. I love the polkas. I was up to that speed of fandom by the time this project came to me.

When I got the initial thing, which was an offer to play Weird Al, I was like, "What?" There are people who are closer physically than I am. And then I read the script, and I had a moment when I realised what's going on, when I was like, "Oh, I can play this version of Al in this version of Al's life." I was so taken by the joke. So it was a very, very easy decision to want to be a part of it. And then it was months of freaking out because I was playing someone I'm actively a fan of. I don't necessarily recommend that, because the stakes of fucking up seem a lot higher.

**And he was there on set.**

Al was an incredibly reassuring presence for the most part. You felt generally like Al was having a really good time, and that made you feel like, "OK, things must be going OK." When I was on set of *Escape From Pretoria*, where I was playing a guy who escaped from prison, and the guy who had really had that experience was there, that felt slightly uncomfortable [laughs]. The tone of this film is so much lighter and more fun.

**It's wild that it was filmed in 18 days. That seems incredibly quick.**

It's truly a testament to what you can do if you're just incredibly prepared. We'd have loved more time, obviously. A couple



Harry Potter: the role that gave Radcliffe the security to pick the work he loves.



Displaying a surprisingly ripped torso in the *Weird Al* Yankovic biopic.

more days would be great. The whole shoot was 18, but all my stuff was in 14. It was mental, but I did love it. I was being asked to do something different every day. There's a part of my brain that just loves never having to stop or slow down. So there's something about being like, "We're doing these six scenes today, but also you have to be learning the stunt choreography for the fight scene tomorrow." The fight scene in the diner [in which *Al* takes on multiple goons] was shot in four hours, and that features a lot of the things I'm proudest of. Our stunt coordinator and my stunt double were truly amazing.

I've done one film quicker, but this is a film with two action sequences and six musical numbers. I would have been panicking had Eric [Appel, writer/director] not been so calm and assured. It's going to be hard when I'm on other things. He's definitely spoiled me for a lot of other directors. But ultimately, you make the film where you get to make it, and [the streaming service] Roku, God

bless them, were the only people that seemed to want to make it – unbelievably to me. I couldn't believe people weren't clamouring to make this thing with *Al*, because he's so huge. But I always end up at a place of just being so grateful to be making something. You could basically tell me, "You've got a day," and I'd be like, "OK, we'll do what we can."

## 'THERE'S A PART OF MY BRAIN THAT LOVES NEVER HAVING TO SLOW DOWN'

**Audiences must find it quite fun seeing you absolutely shredded as *Al* in the film.**

It constantly surprises people when they see that, which is great. There was a report that really implied that I got shredded to play

*Al* in this film, which would have been a truly insane choice. But I attribute it to having to keep up with my insanely fit parents my entire life, who are in their sixties and doing CrossFit. I'm just trying to keep up with them.

**When we think of *Weird Al*, we don't think, "He hits the gym." But...**

He runs around that stage with an accordion for two and a half hours. He does crazy live shows. I don't know. I believe *Weird Al*'s pretty ripped.

**You've said before that the financial success of *Potter* lets you choose these smaller indie projects. Does having that success behind you allow you to be the actor that you want to be?**

Definitely. First of all, it gives you the financial stability to not have to do things you don't want to do, but it also gives you a profile. *Potter* was initially why I have the opportunity to do the weird stuff that I want to do. I'm incredibly lucky to have that kind of freedom. But also, any time you get one of these things made, it feels like such a victory. And this is a phrase I was using before I did this film: weird begets weird. One thing leads to another. As soon as one person goes, "Oh, *Swiss Army Man*," it leads to *Guns Akimbo*. People are more likely to send you stuff. They also send you stuff that's weird for no fucking reason, and you're like, "What is this?" You also get absolute gems sent as well. ➔

➤➤ **How do you feel your relationship with the Potter fandom has changed over the years?**

My only contact with the fans of Potter while the series was going on was at premieres, or events, or when I was recognised in the street. There wasn't a lot of it. We were literally filming for so much of the year that there wasn't a lot of time spent interacting with the fans. The other thing is – I think it seems obvious now, but I didn't think of it at the time – we were all teenagers. We were all going home to our parents. And now we've all grown up, we're out in the world together. I've felt it a lot more since the films finished than I ever did while it was going on. Because you'd feel it in that very extreme way of people screaming at a premiere, but you just black out at those events to a certain extent. It's like an out-of-body experience that you're getting through.

It has been nice to feel it more in the day-to-day of people's lives now. Like on *Weird*, I was working with a make-up team, and they're incredibly cool, young girls. At one point, I noticed a Deathly Hallows tattoo on one of their arms. I was like, "Oh, nice." She had been wearing long sleeves every day, and then one day she didn't. She had a quote, and I realised it was a Potter quote on her arm. I find it incredibly sweet that those films have that place in people's lives.

**It's such a huge part of the culture. There are Harry Potter shops now.**

I have accidentally walked by the one in New York so many times. I get about a block from it, and I suddenly realised, "Ah, shit. I've got to get away." [laughs]

**How different would your Potter experience have been if social media had been what it is now?**

Holy shit, man. I cannot imagine. It was starting to come around just towards the end of Potter. But there was certainly no compulsion from any studio for us to be on it.

I don't have social media, but it'd have been more inevitable that I'd have been naturally on it if we were doing it now. I don't know how I would have coped with that. I'm very grateful we've just about managed to get famous before all that. It would destroy my mind if I was on it.

**How was it catching up with the cast at the reunion special last Christmas?**

It was really nice. It was way more emotional than I had expected. I hadn't slept the day of the second part of my



**FIVE STAR TURNS**

**HARRY POTTER SERIES 2001-2011**

Radcliffe was a household name before he was a teen, nabbing the title role in one of the biggest film franchises of all time. "Every part of my life is connected to Potter and to Leavesden [Studios]," he said at the reunion.

**THE WOMAN IN BLACK 2012**

Proving his adult acting chops (and box-office clout) post-Potter, Radcliffe brought gravitas to a classy Hammer ghost story. As well as taking \$128m worldwide, the 12A-rated film also received a record number of BBFC complaints.

**KILL YOUR DARLINGS 2013**

Showing his interest in challenging material, Radcliffe played Beat poet Allen Ginsberg in this bio-drama. "Radcliffe is every inch the bespectacled American nebbish one associates with Ginsberg," praised *Variety*.

**SWISS ARMY MAN 2016**

He appeared in the debut from The Daniels (*Everything Everywhere All At Once*), as, yes, a flatulent corpse. But while it was funny and inventive, the film was also far more heartfelt than that character description suggests.

**THE LOST CITY 2022**

The latest in a line of comedic turns that suggest he isn't shy about playing supporting roles or sending himself up. "I think there is a rich tradition of... that kind of British bad guy," he says of his billionaire baddie. **MM**



MAXIMUM FILM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; COLLECTION CHRIS TOPHEL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; SONY PICTURES CLASSICS; A24; PARAMOUNT PICTURES; WARNER BROS

interview. I was really jetlagged, so I was teetering on the verge, anyway.

The thing that I loved about it was seeing how well everyone was doing. It was seeing Matthew [Lewis] and Bonnie [Wright] and Emma [Watson] being happy and fully realised people. There was something in particular with Tom [Felton] and the Phelps twins. Tom and I were of a more similar age but he was a bit older than me when we were doing it. The Phelps twins, when we started, were like three years older than me. Which, at that age, is massive. And now we're all people in our thirties. There was something really fun and flattening about that.

But at the same time, it was like, "I'm so glad we are all doing well enough and feeling well enough that we can come and talk about this stuff, and revisit it, and get nostalgic. But also I'm 100 per cent happy that this is not my day-to-day any more." Even seeing some of the sets, you're like, "Wow, this is incredible. I fully, absolutely still feel like I spent 10 years on this." [laughs] Even five years ago I might not have felt as good going back. I feel more secure in what I've managed to do outside of Potter to feel good going back into it. So that felt really nice as well.

**Revisiting the past can often be quite difficult.**

It's also reflected in how I feel about those films. I have a lot more patience and a lot more time for myself as a young actor than I did in my early twenties when I was just becoming not that. I was looking back and going, "I hate all my work." Now I can go, "Ah, some of it's not great, but some of it's fine. You don't need to be that hard on yourself. You were a kid."

**They're talking about making a Harry Potter TV series. Have you been approached for that?**

I have not been approached or heard anything about that. Genuinely, I've only heard on internet sites. Nothing that anybody has ever said to me.

**How would you feel if someone else played Harry?**

That would probably be fine. It would probably be weird but it would also be OK. I don't own that character. And somebody else has already played him onstage. Maybe that's a character that just turns into Bond or Batman – there are many.

**You went from Potter to Equus on stage, and The Woman In Black, your first post-Potter movie. Do you feel that was a turning point?**

Equus was a big moment for me, just in terms of a statement of intention: I know you know me as this one thing, but I'm interested in trying to work on stuff that's different and interesting. And the amount I learned on that... Equus and How To Succeed, the musical I did, were the two most formative things I've ever worked on as an actor. Stage stuff generally is. I knew there was never going to be a single film, or a single project, that would act as a turning point. When Potter started ending, I knew it was about trying to build up as varied a body of work as possible. The Woman In Black doing well was a fucking huge relief. I feel like I got very lucky that that also happened to be a commercially very viable horror movie.

**The Ginsberg movie, Kill Your Darlings, wasn't as financially successful. Did that have an effect on you then?**

No. At a certain point, I realised that judging success by looking at how much money a movie makes, if that's the bullseye, then you give yourself a fucking impossible task. Most things don't make money is the reality at cinemas. You're giving yourself a very small definition of what success

could be. This is something that was helped by being in Potter. I've been in the most commercially successful thing I will ever be in. That's done. So what does it mean to be successful now? Very quickly, I was like, "To be working is a success, and to be working on things you love is a success."

If you do something because you love the script, or you love the people you're going to work with, and you're going to have a good time doing it – I know that sounds really corny – but it's already been a success before anything's happened. And if it makes money as well, or it gains some sort of acclaim, great. That's even better.

That's why I don't like working with people who are horrible, because the experience you have on set matters. That's ultimately all you're left with. I'm not going to watch this back. I'm not going to sit on my deathbed and be like, "Play some of my films, please." The thing that you are left with is the experience that you have on set.

**The way you've previously spoken about Swiss Army Man, it feels like one you're particularly fond of.**

*'ANY NATURAL WEIRDNESS THAT YOU HAVE IS AN ASSET'*

**DANIEL RADCLIFFE IN NUMBERS**



**10**  
The age Radcliffe made his acting debut as the young David Copperfield in the BBC adaptation

**134**  
COMPLAINTS MADE TO THE BBFC ABOUT THE WOMAN IN BLACK BEING TOO SCARY FOR A 12A

**2015**  
The year Radcliffe received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame

**\$1.34bn**  
THE WORLDWIDE TAKE OF RADCLIFFE'S HIGHEST-GROSSING FILM, HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS: PART 2

**3**  
Episodes of The Simpsons Radcliffe has appeared in



➤ It was so much fun. We disappeared into the woods for 23 days and made that movie. Everyone sees that movie, and goes, “How was this pitched to you?” I’m always like, “What do you mean? I read the script.” And I do think that [directing duo *The Daniels are*] true geniuses. That’s a very overused word, but they’re geniuses and lovely people. And the experience of making that film – every day you get to work and are like, “How are we going to do this insane thing?” It was a total joy. And I’m watching the success of *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. It’s just been so cool. I feel like a proud parent, even though I had nothing to do with it [laughs]. They have actual proud parents.

**What do you read in a script that makes you go, ‘This is for me’?**

It’s about what I can bring to something. I used to get sent a lot more actiony stuff, and I don’t particularly buy myself as that guy. The reason I ended up doing *Guns Akimbo* was because I absolutely can buy myself as this nerdy guy. It’s not just that I buy myself, but will an audience go there with me? If you cast me as Jason Bourne, I, as an audience member, would have questions.

There’s no specific criteria. If a script has a really great premise then that will obviously immediately make me sit up. The films I’ve chosen: they have this premise, and then they fully explore it. That is something that will always hook me into a script. They don’t come along often. It’s very hard to do. I’m not looking for comedy out and out, necessarily. But even *Imperium*, which is absolutely the furthest thing from a comedy, is witty. I feel like that’s probably something that’s a through-line in most of the things I do.

**With *Weird* and *The Lost City*, and on the TV show *Miracle Workers*, there’s a real comedy element to your stuff. Is that where you see your future?**

I don’t know to what extent but I definitely want it to be something that remains an active part of my career, in the way that comedy is for Jon Hamm and Steve Buscemi. Steve’s directed on *Portlandia* and *Miracle Workers*. He’s been a huge part of the Tina Fey/Robert Carlock world of writers. I got to work with them on *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, and I’m doing an animated show with them. The comedy world in America is one that I don’t feel like I’m a part of, but that I’m adjacent to, and I really enjoy that. It’s a really nice thing to go to work and just feel like our job today is to make something really silly.

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One of the things that was hugely helpful in becoming more confident in doing comedy was doing a musical on Broadway. I was learning a lot. Because towards the end of Potter, I'd become so... When you're a teenager, and you become very self-conscious, a lot of the time I really hated what my face did. So my choice was, "I'll just make my face do less and less."

When I was doing the stage show, I had a realisation: "My face is sometimes very expressive, and that's not something to be shied away from. Any natural weirdness that you have is an asset." I'm not saying you should make faces and nod to the audience. But you can be a bit freer, and actually that's going to be helpful, and not something to run away from.

**Do you feel more at home on a stage than on a movie set?**

Absolutely not. I learn a lot from being on stage. But in terms of comfort level, and being at home, and the place where I would love to spend all my time, it's on film sets. I always say I really want to direct. I would love to direct TV or film. But I would have zero idea how to direct a play or a musical.

**On Imperium, you put on the American accent the whole time, 24/7.**

**Do you have a method?**

No. I don't have a method. The accent stuff is very practical. There are certain sounds, particularly around Rs, that if I'm going in and out of it all day... I would do it because of that, but I wasn't staying in character. I was still myself. I'm very much just learning my lines and trying to understand the scenes and the thoughts that are making me say those lines, and what those lines are trying to do to the other people in the scenes. But I don't feel the need to live a certain way.

Here's my question about method acting that I'm always fascinated by every time a thing about Jared Leto comes out, or whoever the person is. I'm always like:



Radcliffe played a real-life South African prison absconder in *Escape From Pretoria*.

ADR [additional dialogue replacement]. When you go in, months later, and you're picking up some lines in ADR, and you're in your street clothes, what then? I'm fascinated by it.

**Maybe Jared dresses up as the Joker to go into the recording booth?**

But that's my question. Is that the case? And if that's not the case, then what are we doing?

**Weird is heading straight to streaming on the Roku platform. Do you think the big screen is going to be increasingly for franchise-heavy movies, whereas indies will**

**always head to streaming?** I hope there's a corrective curve. That would be lovely. I find it hard to see how that happens. But I'm probably slightly disappointingly a lot less of a purist than I should be. It would be lovely for *Weird* to be seen on bigger screens. It was great that it got to go to TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival],

and it's going to a couple of festivals. My dream for *Weird* is that it has a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* life where, on Al's birthday, they will play it somewhere in a cinema, and you go and sing along.

But I don't know what would have to change for indie movies to suddenly feel like they are going to be played on big, wide releases. It's so hard to predict. I've got to do so many films since Potter that I've loved and that are crazy and strange. But for every one that you see, there have been two that just died a death. There've been films that I've been attached to for six or seven years that eventually you have to go, "OK, this probably is not going to happen."

I will go wherever they let me make these things. And right now, if that means streaming, I'm very happy with that. They all feel like victories at this point. It is crazy when you read stories about the budgets of indie movies in the '90s. You're like, "This was a different time. It's amazing."

**WEIRD: THE AL YANKOVIC STORY WILL STREAM ON THE ROKU CHANNEL FROM 4 NOVEMBER.**

**'I ALWAYS SAY I REALLY WANT TO DIRECT. I WOULD LOVE TO DIRECT TV OR FILM'**

**DANIEL RADCLIFFE LINE READING**

**"IS THIS CRYING? I DON'T LIKE IT. IT'S WET AND UNCOMFORTABLE."**

**MANNY**  
SWISS ARMY MAN

**"I solemnly swear I am up to no good."**

**HARRY POTTER**  
HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN

**"DON'T WORRY. THIS ISN'T A LOVE STORY ABOUT SOME NERD TRYING TO GET THE GIRL LIKE SHE'S AN XBOX ACHIEVEMENT TO BE UNLOCKED."**

**MILES**  
GUNS AKIMBO

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