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The Origin Story of "Alright, Alright, Alright"

A random night in a bar launched my acting career



Matthew McConaughey

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a11y-light · December 18, 2020 (Updated: December 24, 2021) · Free: No

Back in my film school days, I'd take my girlfriend to the Hyatt hotel bar in Austin for free drinks while my classmate Sam was bartending. On one of those nights, my life changed forever.

"There's a guy at the end of the bar who's in town producing a movie," Sam said, handing me my vodka tonics. "He's been comin' in here nightly. Lemme introduce you to him."

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He drank vodka and tonics as well, many of them. A few hours later, as Don stood atop a chair in the midst of delivering one of his legendarily loud charades of a story, the management, to no avail, tried to calm him down. When it was obvious Don wanted nothing to do with toning *anything* down, they tried to kick him out of the bar.

Matching him drink for drink, I had no interest in Don calming down either, so we were unpeacefully escorted out of the Hyatt. Now past two in the morning, as he rode with me in a cab to drop me off at my apartment, I pulled out a joint and we smoked it.

"You ever done any acting, Matthew?" he asked.

I told him I'd been in a Miller Lite commercial for about a second and a half and had done a music video for Trisha Yearwood.

"Well, there's a small part in this movie I'm casting you might be right for. Come to this address tomorrow morning at 9:30 and pick up the script, I'll have the three scenes marked."

The next morning at 9:30, I arrived at the location Don had given me and there was a script with my name on it, and a handwritten note from Don that read, "Here's the script, the character's name is 'Wooderson,' I'll get you in for an audition in two weeks." The script was for *Dazed and Confused*.

Over the years I've come to call the kind of line in a script that can send me flying a "launchpad" line. The line in this script that sent me into flight was:

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older, they stay the same age.

Wooderson was 22 years old but still hanging out around the high school. That line opened up an entire world into who he was, an encyclopedia into his psyche and spirit. I thought about my brother Pat when he was a senior, and I was 11. He was my big brother, my hero. One day, Pat's Z28 was in the shop so Mom and I were picking him up from high school.

We were slowly pulling through campus in our wood-paneled station wagon, Mom driving, me peering out the window in the back seat. Pat was not where we had planned to meet him.

"Where is he?" asked Mom.

Turning my head to look left and right and then out the back window, I saw him about a hundred yards behind us, leaning against the brick wall in the shade of the school's smoking section, one knee bent, boot sole against the side of the building, pulling on a Marlboro, cooler than James Dean and two feet taller.

"Ther — !!" I started to shriek, then caught my tongue because I realized he'd get in trouble for smoking.

"What's that?" Mom asked.

"Nothin, Mom, nothin."

That image of my big brother, leaning against *that* wall, casually smoking *that* cigarette in his low-elbow, loose-wristed, lazy-fingered

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impression in my heart and mind.

And 11 years later, Wooderson was born from *that* impression.

I got the job.

Soon after that, I got called to set to get my makeup and wardrobe approved by the director, Richard Linklater. I wasn't supposed to be in any of the scenes they were filming that day. But once he saw me for the first time in my full Wooderson getup, Rick began to smile widely. That's when he got an idea.

"I know Wooderson has probably been with the typical 'hot' high school chicks," he said, "cheerleaders, majorettes, girls like that — but you think he'd have any interest in the redheaded intellectual?"

"Sure, man, Wooderson likes all kinds of chicks."

"Yeah, right? . . . Ya know, Marissa Ribisi is playing Cynthia, the redheaded intellectual girl, and she's over here at the drive-in with her nerdy friends in the back seat. You think Wooderson might pull up and try and pick her up?"

The next thing I knew I was getting mic'd up and about to film the scene.

There were no lines written for my character and this was my first time on a film set. I'd never done this before. Anxious, I started going over in my head:

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I love my car. Well, I'm in my^s Chevelle. That's one.

I love getting high. Well, Slater's riding shotgun and he's always got a doobie rolled up. That's two.

I love rock 'n' roll. Well, I've got Nugent's "Stranglehold" in the 8-track. That's three.

That's when I heard, "Action!"

I looked up across the parking lot at "Cynthia," the redheaded intellectual, and said to myself: *And I love chicks.*

As I put the car in drive and slowly pulled out, I thought to myself, *Well, I've got three out of four and I'm headed to get the fourth,* then said aloud: "alright, alright, alright."

Those three words were the first three words I ever said on film. A film that my character had only three scripted scenes in, a film that I ended up working on for three weeks.

Now, 28 years later, those words follow me everywhere. People say them. People steal them. People wear them on their hats and T-shirts. People have them tattooed on their arms and inner thighs. And I love it. It's an honor. Because those three words are the very first words I said on the very first night of a job I had that I thought might be nothing but a hobby, but turned into a career.

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