

Downey, Robert Jr.

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Robert Downey Jr.

Actor

Born Robert John Downey Jr., April 4, 1965, in [New York \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york\)](#), NY; son of Robert John (a filmmaker) and Elsie (an actress) Downey; married Deborah Falconer (a singer; divorced); married Susan Levin (a producer), August 27, 2005; children: Indio (son; from first marriage).

Addresses: *Office*—Sony Classical, c/o Sony BMG Entertainment, 550 Madison Ave., [New York \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york\)](#), NY 10022.

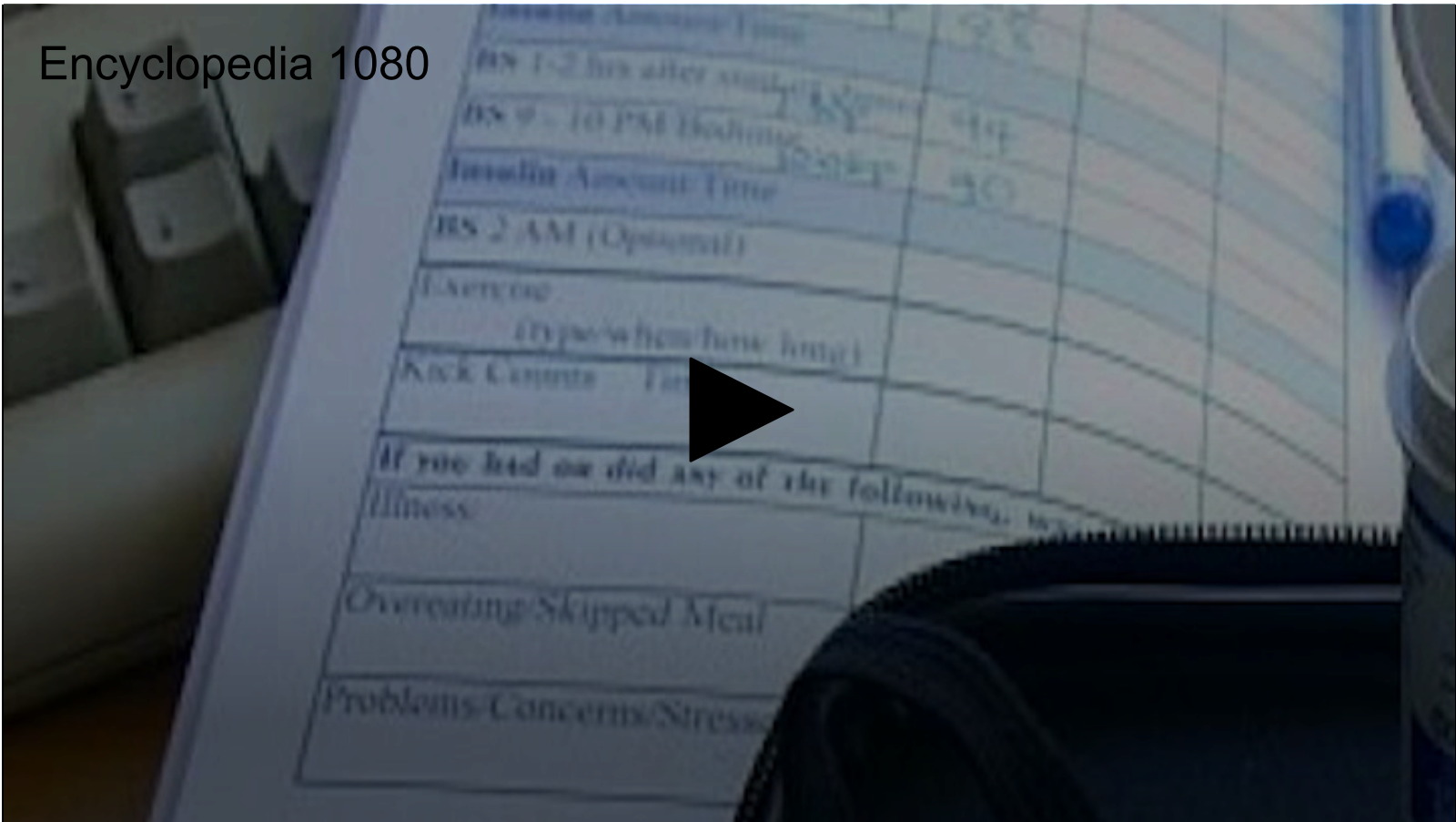
Career

Actor in films, including *Pound*, 1970; *Greaser's Palace*, 1972; *America*, 1982; *First Born*, 1984; *Weird Science*, 1985; *Back to School*, 1986; *Less Than Zero*, 1987; *The Pickup Artist*, 1987; *True Believer*, 1989; *Chances Are*, 1989; *Soapdish*, 1991; *Chaplin*, 1992; *Heart and Souls*, 1993; *The Last Party* (narrator), 1993; *Only You*, 1994; *Natural Born Killers*, 1994; *Restoration*, 1995; *Two Guys and a Girl*, 1997; *One Night Stand*, 1997; *The Gingerbread Man*, 1998; *Black and White*, 1999; *Wonder Boys*, 2000; *The Singing Detective*, 2003; *Gothika*, 2003; *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, 2005; *Good Night and Good Luck*, 2005; *The Shaggy Dog*, 2006; *A Scanner Darkly*, 2006. Television appearances include: *Saturday Night Live*, NBC, 1985–86; *Ally McBeal*, FOX, 2000–01. Stage appearances include: *American Passion*, c. 1982. Released first album, *The Futurist*, 2004.

Awards: Golden Globe Award for best supporting actor, Hollywood Foreign Press Association, for *Ally McBeal*, 2001.

Sidelights

While the talent of Robert Downey Jr. as an actor has never been in question, his brushes with the law and drug and alcohol abuse have often overshadowed his acting career. After appearing in a number of teen flicks in the 1980s, he emerged with an Academy Award nomination for his work in 1992's *Chaplin* as silent film star [Charlie Chaplin \(/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/charlie-chaplin\)](#). Becoming sober in the early 2000s, Downey continued to appear in challenging films.



Born in 1965 in [Greenwich Village \(/places/united-states-and-canada/miscellaneous-us-geography/greenwich-village\)](#), Downey is the son of Robert Downey, an underground avant-garde filmmaker, and his wife, Elsie, an actress who appeared in his films. Downey and his older sister, Alison, were raised primarily in New York, though the family spent a year in Europe and Downey attended a British prep school for a year. Downey had an unusual upbringing which included being introduced to marijuana by his father at the age of six, a decision Downey Sr. later regretted.

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Downey inherited a love of acting and performing from his mother, and began appearing in his father's films at an early age. He made his film debut in 1970's *Pound*. All the actors played dogs, and Downey played a puppy. The actor then appeared in his father's 1972 release called *Greaser's Palace*. This was a violent film in which the character played by young Downey had his throat slit by another character playing God.

When Downey was 13 years old, his parents divorced. He first lived with his mother in New York City, but soon moved to California to live with his father. Downey began attending Santa Monica High School, but dropped out when he was 16 years old because he wanted to begin an acting career. He then moved back to New York to focus on acting. He appeared in some regional and Off-Broadway stage productions, including a role in a play called *American Passion* when he was 17. Downey also auditioned for television pilots and other roles. In 1982, the actor appeared in *America*, a feature-length film directed by his father. Two years later, Downey began a relationship with actress Sarah Jessica Parker. The couple lived together for a number of years, until a painful 1990 split.

After appearing for a season on NBC's sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* from 1985 to 1986, Downey focused almost exclusively on an acting career in mainstream films. In the early to mid-1980s, the actor began appearing in supporting roles in teen comedies like *First Born*, *Weird Science*, and *Back to School*. Downey moved to leading roles with 1987's *The Pickup Artist*, which became a cult classic. In that film, he played a schoolteacher looking for love.

As Downey began finding success as an actor, he developed what would become a long struggle with drug and alcohol problems. In the late 1980s, one role reflected his own life. He played Julian, a crack addict who was once rich but had to work as a prostitute to pay for the debt to his dealer in 1987's *Less Than Zero*. Downey sought treatment for his own addictions, completing treatment the same year the film was released.

Downey's career continued to build in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He shined in the 1989 romantic comedy *Chances Are*, playing a reporter who realizes that he is the reincarnation of the dead husband of a woman he meets. Downey also had critically acclaimed roles in 1989's *True Believer* and 1991's *Soapdish*. In the former, a courtroom drama, he played a young idealistic lawyer. The film, however, was a failure at the box office. In the latter, he played a complex television producer. His *Soapdish* co-star [Kevin Kline \(/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/kevin-kline\)](#) told Jamie Diamond of the *New York Times* that "Robert opens doors most people are reluctant to and lets out strange and exotic creatures."

In 1992, Downey had a breakout role in *Chaplin*, a biopic of silent film legend [Charlie Chaplin \(/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/charlie-chaplin\)](#). Directed by Sir [Richard Attenborough \(/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/richard-attenborough\)](#), the film was a critical and box office triumph. It covered the whole of the comic actor/director's life, with Downey playing the adult Chaplin, the focus of the movie, from ages 19 to 83. Downey researched the role extensively and even taught himself to play tennis left-handed like Chaplin.

Even Chaplin's daughter, Geraldine, thought Downey played the role to perfection. After seeing Downey's screen test for the role, Benedict Nightingale of the *New York Times* quoted her as saying, "I was flabbergasted and in a way horrified. I had thought my father was unique. But Robert has the same silhouette, the same way of standing, the same way of pondering. And the way he moves, his hands, everything. To watch him still give me a very, very weird feeling." This role, which resulted in an Academy Award nomination, was perhaps the high point of Downey's career.

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The triumph of *Chaplin* confirmed Downey was a serious actor and lead to many leading roles in the 1990s in both comedies and dramas. He appeared in a variety of roles. Shortly after *Chaplin*, Downey starred in the romantic comedy *Heart and Souls* and narrated a documentary, *The Last Party*, about the 1992 presidential election. In addition to appearing in the comedy *Only You* in 1994, Downey had a critically acclaimed turn in *Natural Born Killers* as Wayne Gale, a tabloid journalist.

Many of his roles were challenging. In 1995, Downey appeared in a costume epic, *Restoration*. Two years later, he played a dying AIDS patient in *One Night Stand*. Also in 1997, Downey had a leading role in *Two Girls and a Guy*. He played an actor who becomes involved with two women who learn about each other. What began as comedy turned into a tense drama. In 1998's *The Gingerbread Man* Downey portrayed a private investigator, and in 1999's *Black and White* he played a gay husband.

While Downey's career was solid, his drug problems increased through the decade. By the mid-1990s, he began being arrested on drug-related charges instead of going to rehab. In 1996, Downey was arrested for cocaine and heroin possession as well as possession of an unloaded .357 magnum after being pulled over for speeding. He was sentenced to probation and rehab, but Downey ran away from the program and missed court ordered drug tests. He continued to use cocaine. Downey was arrested again for being high, entering a neighbor's home, and falling asleep on a bed inside. Violating a court order to not use drugs, he was sentenced to 180 days in jail which he began serving at the [Los Angeles \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/los-angeles\)](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/los-angeles) County Jail in December of 1997.

Downey was jailed again in 1999 for violating his parole. Though he emerged seemingly clean, he relapsed again. Drug problems continued into the early 2000s. He was arrested again in November of 2000 for drug possession and again for felony drug possession in early 2001

× after a cocaine and Valium-induced spree at a resort in Palm Springs, California. Despite these

many arrests, he still had the support of fans and was able to find work. David France and John Horn of *Newsweek* wrote, "People want him to succeed ... not just for Downey's good but as a victory for the human spirit."

During this period, Downey continued to appear in acclaimed roles such as in the ensemble picture *Wonder Boys*. He played a bisexual literary agent in the film, which was released in 2000. Downey also branched out into television, after one of his stints in jail. He took a role in the hit television show *Ally McBeal* from 2000 to 2001 as Larry Paul, a lawyer who becomes involved with the titular character. Downey won a Golden Globe Award for best supporting actor in 2001 and was nominated for an Emmy Award. His 2001 arrest led to his firing from the show.

Downey took about two years off from acting in films to focus on a year-long rehab program to kick his drug and alcohol addictions. He finally embraced sobriety this time, but his past addictions created problems with his career. Because of his past, Downey had to put up part of his salary up or get insured on certain shoots; otherwise producers had to pay much higher insurance costs. In 2003, he insisted drugs and alcohol were no longer a problem. Downey told Jason Lynch of *People*, "I'm less of an insurance risk than anybody I'm going to work with for the next while because I am aware of my limitations." This situation led to Downey losing a role in a [Woody Allen](/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/woody-allen) film.

His comeback project came in the 2003 noirish film *The Singing Detective* as a hospitalized novelist who is suffering from psoriasis, hallucinations, and other paranoias. The character also puts himself in the screen version of his novel in his dreams. While that film only saw limited release, Downey also appeared in *Gothika* in 2003, which co-starred [Halle Berry](/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/halle-berry). On the set of this film, he met Susan Levin, a producer, who became his second wife in 2005.

In 2004, Downey took on a new artistic project when he recorded and released his first album, *The Futurist*. In addition to singing and playing the piano, he wrote eight songs on the record, some inspired by the films he had appeared in, and also covered the songs of other musicians. Of his songs, Downey told Hilary de Vries of *New York Times*, "I think I'm more sensitive and

× introspective and filled with wonder at the universe because of what I've gone through than I

care to admit. So every one of the songs is influenced by my experience, but I hope it's a little obscured." Downey had written songs for years and previously recorded a few singles which appeared on some of his movie soundtracks. *The Futurist* received good reviews from critics.

Downey continued his film career, primarily in independent films, in the early 2000s. One film that received rave reviews was 2005's *Kiss Kiss Bang, Bang*, a comedy-adventure which parodied [film noir \(/literature-and-arts/performing-arts/film-and-television/film-noir/\)](/literature-and-arts/performing-arts/film-and-television/film-noir/) pulp fiction detective dramas. Downey received critical kudos for his performance as Harry Lockhart, a thief who becomes an actor and later has to help a detective, played by Val Kilmer, who happens to be gay. Commenting on Downey's performance, Jay Stone of *The Gazette* wrote, he "dominates the movie with an unforced and natural performance."

Also in 2005, Downey appeared in *Good Night and Good Luck*, a drama about the McCarthy hearings in the 1950s filtered through the experiences of journalist Edward R. Murrow. The film was directed by actor George Clooney. Downey played Joe Wershba, who worked with Murrow. In 2006, Downey appeared in *A Scanner Darkly*, a rotoscope-animated adaptation of the [Philip K. Dick \(/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/philip-k-dick/\)](/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/philip-k-dick/) novel, along with [Keanu Reeves \(/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/keanu-reeves/\)](/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/keanu-reeves/) and [Winona Ryder \(/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/winona-ryder/\)](/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/winona-ryder/). That same year, Downey showed that he still had some mainstream appeal when he played Dr. Kozak in the Disney remake of the children's film *The Shaggy Dog*.

Downey's acting career seemed to be back on track with many roles planned in a number of films, including a role in *Zodiac*. In this film, he played a journalist named Paul Avery who was fascinated by the Zodiac Killer in the 1970s. Of Downey's undeniable talent, Michael Sragow of *Salon.com* wrote, "On big screens or small ones, in comedy or drama, he moves through dark and light emotions like unique multicolored quicksilver, sluicing to the heart of elusive characters...."

Selected discography

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