

Robert Downey Jr..

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Actor

- **Born:** April 4, 1965
- **Birthplace:** New York, New York

Robert Downey Jr. has received intense press attention for both his acclaimed screen roles and his long struggle to overcome his drug addiction. He first earned notice in the 1980s when he appeared in such teen-oriented films as *Weird Science* (1985) and *Back to School* (1986). His characterization of the silent-film genius Charlie Chaplin in Richard Attenborough's *Chaplin* (1992), for which he earned an Academy Award nomination for best actor, put him on the map. Since then, he has appeared in such memorable films as *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Wonder Boys* (2000), *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), *Zodiac* (2007), *Tropic Thunder* (2008), and *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), as well as multiple films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, including *Iron Man* (2008), *The Avengers* (2012), *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019).



Robert Downey Jr. in 2020.
Getty Images

Early Life

Robert John Downey Jr. was born on April 4, 1965, in New York City, the son of the actor Elsie Ford Downey and Robert Downey Sr., a maverick independent film director. Downey Sr. caused a stir with such absurdist comedies as *Putney Swope* (1969), in which a Madison Avenue ad agency is taken over by militant African Americans, and *Pound* (1970), in which humans portrayed dogs facing death at a dog pound. Downey Jr. grew up with his older sister, Allison, in an unconventional, chaotic household. His family moved often; they lived in the Greenwich Village section of New York City and the town of Woodstock, New York, among other places.

Downey made his film debut at age five when he played a puppy in *Pound*. Recalling his son's first forays into film, Downey Sr. told Jamie Diamond for the *New York Times* (December 20, 1992), "He did it because it was better than having a babysitter. But it might have led him to believe that to be creative was much better than trying to get a regular job." When Downey was thirteen, his parents divorced. After living with his mother in New York for a few years, he



went to California and moved in with his father. In the eleventh grade, with his father's blessing, he dropped out of Santa Monica High School and returned to New York City to pursue an acting career. (The elder Downey had also left high school before graduating.)

Early Film Career

Success came quickly for Downey. He won roles in *Baby, It's You* (1983), directed by John Sayles, and *Firstborn* (1984), a film by the British director Michael Apted. During the 1985–86 television season, he was a regular cast member of NBC's hit comedy show *Saturday Night Live*. Next, he landed a number of roles in teenage comedies, among them *Weird Science* and *Back to School*. During that period, he came to be associated with the group of young actors dubbed the Brat Pack. "My friends and I were out of our minds, absolutely out of control, partying," Downey told Johanna Schneller for *GQ* (January 1993). "In New York, eighteen years old, thought we had it together 'cause we were making \$1,250 a week. Completely on the road to destruction."

Then came one of Downey's earliest starring vehicles, *The Pick-Up Artist* (1987), in which he was cast as a lothario opposite Molly Ringwald. Although the film did not fare well at the box office and earned tepid reviews, Downey attracted notice for his boyish charm. His portrayal of a drug addict in *Less Than Zero* (1987), however, showed that he was capable of playing roles other than adolescent pretty boys, as did his appearances in *True Believer* (1989), in which he played a young lawyer who helps defend a man wrongly accused of murder, and in *Air America* (1990), an action-adventure film in which he played a pilot who flies questionable characters to remote regions of Laos and Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War for the CIA.

Throughout that period, some questioned Downey's choice of film roles. Most of the films he appeared in had failed to garner critical acclaim, and many, including *Johnny Be Good* (1988) and *Chances Are* (1989), were panned outright for their lack of substance. For his part, Downey, too, was ambivalent about some of his assignments. As he told Alan Mirabella for the *New York Daily News* (August 9, 1990), "This business is flat, dead. I'm not saying I could do any better if I were running a studio, but I know I couldn't in good conscience make some of the films they are making." Downey got his chance to dispel concerns about his seriousness as an actor when he played the silent film star Charlie Chaplin in Richard Attenborough's *Chaplin*. The biopic chronicled Chaplin's life from early childhood, through his years of Hollywood success, exile from America, and triumphant return to Hollywood in 1972 when he accepted a special Academy Award for lifetime achievement. The role seemed a fine fit for Downey, who, coincidentally, lived in a Spanish-deco house in the Hollywood Hills that reportedly had been built for Chaplin.

To prepare for the role, Downey, who played Chaplin from age nineteen to eighty-three, learned pantomime, two British dialects, and how to play tennis left-handed as Chaplin had done. Vincent Canby described Downey in the film for the *New York Times* (December 25, 1992) as "good and persuasive as the adult Charlie when the material allows, and close to brilliant when he does some of Charlie's early vaudeville and film sketches." Downey relished the role. "I will never do another *Chances Are* or *Air America* again," he told Bishop. "I'd sell my house before I made a movie that didn't feel right. . . . Part of me feels that acting is my job—a damn good living, and I don't want to give up the lifestyle—but another part is just starting to recognize the tertiary, healing, element to art. I have to believe that there's something, some greater purpose, for my doing it, because, really, nobody has any business playing Charlie Chaplin." For his effort, Downey was nominated for an Academy Award for best actor and won a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) prize in the same category.

In 1993, Downey worked with his friends Josh Richman and Donovan Leitch on *The Last Party*, a documentary about the 1992 national political conventions, which he narrated. He also appeared in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993), which was based on short stories by Raymond Carver. In the film, he played a make-up artist whose friend kills a teenage girl. He won raves for his performance in Oliver Stone's controversial *Natural Born Killers* (1994), in which he played a twisted television journalist, and the period drama *Restoration* (1995), in which he played a seventeenth-century physician in the court of England's King Charles II. In a review of the latter film for the *Chicago Tribune* (January 26, 1996), Michael Wilmington described Downey as "a marvelous comedian who can summon up nerves and pathos."

Drug Addiction and Legal Problems

Despite these successes, Downey wrestled with substance abuse—something that he had been battling throughout much of his career. In 1987, his dependence on drugs prompted him to seek therapy at a rehabilitation center. Recalling that period, Downey told a reporter for *Cosmopolitan* (September 1990), "I don't blame L.A. or having money or access to drugs. Some part of that addicted behavior was serving me, but fire can cook for you or burn you, and I was getting burned. I was lucky to have people who cared enough to bring it to my attention." For some time afterward, he seemed to have overcome the hold that alcohol and drugs had had over him. Then, in June 1996, after being pulled over for speeding near his Malibu home, he was arrested on charges of possession of cocaine and heroin, possession of an unlicensed firearm, and driving while intoxicated. About a month later, he was arrested again, this time for wandering into the home of a neighbor and passing out in a bedroom. After being placed in a rehabilitation center by the court, he escaped, only to be readmitted

four hours later. At the end of the ordeal, Downey pleaded no contest to charges of cocaine and heroin possession, driving under the influence, and possession of a concealed weapon. In November 1996, California municipal judge Lawrence Mira fined him \$250, ordered him to spend six months at a supervised live-in rehabilitation center, and placed him on three years probation with mandatory periodic drug testing. Later that month, the court gave Downey a furlough so that he could host *Saturday Night Live* in New York City on the grounds that the work would help Downey's self-esteem.

Although there were concerns that his acting career would suffer because of his drug problem, Downey managed to get work after he left the rehabilitation center. He appeared in *One Night Stand* (1997), in which he starred opposite Wesley Snipes and Nastassja Kinski; *Hugo Pool* (1997), which was directed by his father; and *U.S. Marshals* (1998). Also in 1998, he reunited with Robert Altman to star in *The Gingerbread Man* opposite Kenneth Branagh.

However, Downey's drug problem did not go away. He failed to appear for mandatory drug tests in September 1997, following a four-day relapse during a break in the filming of *U.S. Marshals*. Subsequently, in October 1997, his probation was revoked after his drug counselor revealed to authorities that Downey had used drugs and alcohol in violation of the court order. At the time, he was filming *One Night Stand*, in which he played a man dying of AIDS. Downey was eventually sentenced to six months in jail for violating probation and testing positive for drug use. For his part, Downey told the court, as quoted in *USA Today* (December 9, 1997), "I have been addicted to drugs in one form or another since I was eight years old, and when I was fifteen, I started to try to get help, without so much as a parking ticket to motivate me." He then added, "The fault lay with me." In interviews, Downey revealed that he had been introduced to marijuana as a youth and used drugs with his father.

Prison and Career Revival

Downey spent the next six months inside Los Angeles County Men's Central Jail. He was allowed several furloughs to work on *U.S. Marshals*, as well as to have a plastic surgeon treat a wound incurred when another inmate punched him and to rerecord dialogue for *In Dreams*, a 1999 film by Neil Jordan. Some decried the furloughs as preferential treatment afforded to celebrities but denied to ordinary inmates. Eventually, the clamor subsided, and on April 1, 1998, Downey was released from jail. His release coincided with the theatrical opening of *Two Girls and a Guy*, in which he played a duplicitous womanizer confronted by the two women he had been dating simultaneously.

Despite his addiction, Downey continued to work. In 1999, he appeared in the romantic comedy *Friends and Lovers* and in the comedy *Bowfinger* , which starred Steve Martin and Eddy Murphy. He also played the husband of a documentary filmmaker in the drama *Black and White* . In August of that year, however, he was ordered to serve a three-year prison sentence stemming from his previous parole violation.

In August 2000, Downey was granted an early release from the California Substance Abuse Treatment Facility and State Prison after an appeals court determined he had served long enough, due to his prior time in rehab, to fulfill his sentence. That year he portrayed a book editor in the Michael Douglas vehicle *Wonder Boys* and joined the cast of the popular show *Ally McBeal* , on which he played the recurring character Larry Paul, from 2000 to 2002. For his performance, Downey won the 2001 Golden Globe Award for best-supporting actor on a TV series, but he was ultimately cut from the show following two additional arrests.

Iron Man and A-List Success

Downey has said that he has not used drugs since 2003. That year he appeared in the film *The Singing Detective* , which also starred Mel Gibson. The hard-to-categorize film was not popular with audiences, but critics praised Downey's performance. He also appeared in the horror movie *Gothika* (2003) alongside Halle Berry as a psychologist attempting to determine whether Berry's character is possessed.

In 2004, Downey released his first album, *The Futurist* , which combined jazz and pop and featured the actor singing and playing the piano. He also appeared in director Steven Soderbergh's segment of the three-part film *Eros* . In 2005, Downey had a role in George Clooney's drama *Good Night, and Good Luck* , about pioneering journalist Edward R. Murrow, and he also appeared with Val Kilmer in the thriller *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* . The following year, he had roles in the Disney remake of the comedy *The Shaggy Dog* (2006) and Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), an adaptation of the Phillip K. Dick science-fiction novel.

In 2007, Downey played a police reporter in David Fincher's well-received *Zodiac* , about a notorious serial killer, and he also played a principal in the independent film *Charlie Bartlett* . The following year, he starred in the blockbuster film *Iron Man* , an adaptation of the Marvel comic book. The film did well at the box office, and Downey was lavishly praised for his performance. Ann Hornaday wrote for the *Washington Post* (May 2, 2008), "It's difficult to imagine a better actor-character fit than that between Robert Downey Jr. and Iron Man, the superhero who, out of all of comic book writer Stan Lee's creations, probably possesses the darkest of dark sides. Like Downey himself, Iron Man, a.k.a. Tony Stark, has addiction issues;

like Downey, the wealthy, hard-partying weapons dealer has had his ups and downs, by turns reveling in and suffering from the blandishments of privilege."

He also attracted critical raves and intense media attention that year when he appeared in blackface in the Ben Stiller comedy *Tropic Thunder* as an Australian method actor playing an African-American soldier. "All but stealing the show, Robert Downey Jr. is not merely funny but also very good and sometimes even subtle," Rogert Ebert wrote for the *Chicago Sun-Times* (August 12, 2008). "When it's all over, you'll probably have the fondest memories of Robert Downey Jr.'s work. It's been a good year for him, this one coming after *Iron Man* . He's back, big time." For his *Tropic Thunder* role, Downey earned an Oscar nomination in the category of best supporting actor.

In 2009, Downey appeared in *The Soloist* as a reporter who helps a homeless cello prodigy played by Jamie Foxx. (The film was based on a true story involving the award-winning reporter Steve Lopez.) He also starred in Guy Ritchie's take on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's iconic detective in *Sherlock Holmes* and won an unexpected Golden Globe Award for his performance. In 2010, he starred in the comedy *Due Date* , alongside Zach Galifianakis. He then starred in two sequel films: *Iron Man 2* (2010) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011).

The Iron Man series served as the beginning of the much larger franchise, a series of interconnected films based on Marvel comic book characters known as the Avengers. The success of *Iron Man* , as well as the popularity of Downey as Tony Stark, set the tone for the reception of the following films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Downey's prominence in the film industry surged, and he became a central figure in what has become one of the biggest franchises in film history. On top of film series about multiple Marvel superheroes, including Captain America and Thor, the franchise expanded to include several television series, film-inspired comics, and video games. Between 2012 and 2019, Downey reprised the role of Iron Man in seven films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe: *The Avengers* (2012) and its sequels (2015, 2018, and 2019), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017). In each, critics applauded Downey for his stellar performances and ability to show character growth across multiple films. During the same period, he also appeared in films such as the comedy *Chef* (2014) and the crime drama *The Judge* (2014). Despite his success during this period, Downey was not immune to occasional criticism; his performance in *Dolittle* (2020), a remake of earlier films about a doctor who can speak to animals, was not enough to save the film from dismal reviews and a disastrous

performance at the box office. In 2022, Downey produced a documentary film, *Sr.*, about his relationship with his father.

Personal Life

In 1992, Downey married the actress Deborah Falconer. The couple had a son, Indio, in 1993, and divorced in 2004. In 2005, he married Susan Levin, whom he met when she produced *Gothika* . (Since then, she has produced a handful of her husband's other films, including *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* and *Sherlock Holmes* .) The couple had a son in 2012 and a daughter in 2014.

Principal Works

Chaplin , 1992

Good Night, and Good Luck , 2005

Zodiac , 2007

Iron Man , 2008

Tropic Thunder , 2008

Sherlock Holmes , 2009

The Avengers , 2012

Captain America: Civil War , 2016

Avengers: Infinity War , 2018

Avengers: Endgame , 2019

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