

TV Close-Up: Austin Nichols

by Eirik_Knutzen

According to Washington, D.C., legend, President Jimmy Carter ordered a wild turkey to be set free on the White House lawn on April 24, 1980, the night Austin Nichols was born.

AUSTIN NICHOLS - Austin Nichols plays John Monad, a surfing mystic with supernatural powers in the TV drama 'John From Cincinnati.' CNS Photo courtesy of HBO. Family lore holds that the healthy baby boy, screaming at the top of his lungs, was named - under heavy pressure from his paternal grandfather, a man of great taste and good humor - after Austin Nichols, the master distillers of Wild Turkey Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey based in Lawrenceburg, Ky.

Regardless, it was fate for the young man who was born in Grand Rapids, Mich., and raised in Austin, Texas, from the time he could walk. But there is no truth to the rumor that his father, Dr. David Nichols (a University of Texas-trained radiologist), was drinking Wild Turkey in vast quantities as his mother, Kay (a 12-time U.S. National Champion water-skier), went into labor.

Today, Austin Nichols enjoys seeing his name on the labels of millions of Wild Turkey bottles, but doesn't quite share the passion for the spirit with his ancestors. He did learn how to water-ski from his athletic mother, however, and did it well enough to be ranked third in the world and winning three events at the 1997 Pan-American Championships as a member of the U.S. Junior Water-ski Team.

The youngster also learned how to surf from his highly competitive father, although he seldom had the opportunity to test waves in landlocked Austin. He finally upgraded his surfing skills riding the short waves off the Southern California coast while working on a bachelor's degree in English (concentrating on creative writing and literature) at the University of Southern California.

By the time Nichols graduated from USC in 2002, he had already taken private acting lessons with top Hollywood drama teachers and made his professional debut on an episode of the series "Sliders" (1995-2000).

"I don't remember making the conscious decision to get into acting - it's like it chose me," he explained matter-of-factly. "Once I took an acting class outside high school at 15, it totally eclipsed everything else in my life."

Now a good surfer with a useless liberal arts degree, Nichols quickly scarfed up loads of professional experience with guest shots on such episodics as "Odd Man Out," "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," "Family Law," "Watching Ellie,"

"Wolf Lake," "Six Feet Under" and "Deadwood." He became a series regular for the first time on "Pasadena" (2001-02), followed by "Surface" (2005). And he was highly decorative in the apocalyptic big-budget feature "The Day After Tomorrow" (2004).

The dark, sleek, 6-foot 2-inch athlete also put his muscles to work credibly in two motion pictures: as a tennis pro in "Wimbledon" (2004), and a college basketball player in "Glory Road" (2006). Both required him to bulk up in the gym and train intensively with pros. His current test of strength is the cable series "John from Cincinnati," playing John Monad, a surfing mystic with supernatural powers who suddenly crops up in Imperial Beach, Calif., near the Mexican border and touches a terribly dysfunctional family of surfers like they've never been touched before.

Co-created by screenwriter-producer David Milch ("Deadwood") and Surf Noir novelist Kem Nunn ("Tijuana Straits"), "John" seems in part inspired by surf family royalty stretched thin between Southern California and the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Bruce Greenwood and Rebecca De Mornay play Mitch and Cissy Yost, the bitter and withdrawn surfing grandparents; Brian Van Holt portrays their wrecked, drug-addicted son, Butchie Yost, and Greyson Fletcher represents Shaun Yost, their intrepid, surfboard-toting 13-year-old grandson.

Prior to shooting a single frame of "John," the 29-year-old Nichols spent three months sharpening his surfing skills with the legendary Malloy Brothers of Ventura County, Calif.

"After a week or two, they said I didn't need them anymore," laughed Nichols. "So I surfed every day for three months, to the point where I could pass for somebody pretty damn good at it. Of course, the part calls for me to be extraordinary at it, so Dan Malloy doubles me occasionally. But mostly it's me."

An unexpected benefit of the job is spending roughly two weeks a month filming interiors in Los Angeles and the other two weeks doing exteriors in Imperial Beach - a genuine, weathered and faded community just south of San Diego and within eyesight of Tijuana, Mexico's Bullring-by-the-Sea.

"I see IB as a beautiful armpit of Southern California ... sort of dressed up to be seedy," he explained earnestly. "But there are many really cool people down there just making their way."

Still single ("I'm dating a few ladies, but I wouldn't call any of them girlfriends"), he maintains an apartment he doesn't particularly care for and refuses to call "home" in Los Angeles. Instead, he prefers to think of himself as a traveler and thrives living in hotels. And he feels secure knowing that he can order a bottle of Austin Nichols' Wild Turkey from room service.

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