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Rising star

Local boy makes good in LaLa Land

By Kyle Lawson
The Phoenix Gazette

It's the savvy prodigal son who returns home in a limo that's only slightly shorter than the Queen Mary.

Not only does it save on fatted calves, it impresses the heck out of reporters.

"Hey, not bad for a Phoenix boy," actor Steve Eastin says as he steps out of his football field on wheels. "Be sure and take a picture of this. I want all my old pals to see it."

Eastin's indulging in a little ragging here, but only a little. It's taken the Camelback High School grad 15 years to reach this point. Pardon him if he enjoys it.

Burly, quick-on-the-grin and with a back slap that rates 6.5 on the Richter scale, Eastin has just completed a major role in "Desperado," the TV series filming in Tucson. He allows as how he has time for breakfast before heading to Los Angeles, where he's slated to co-star in a TV movie with John Getz.

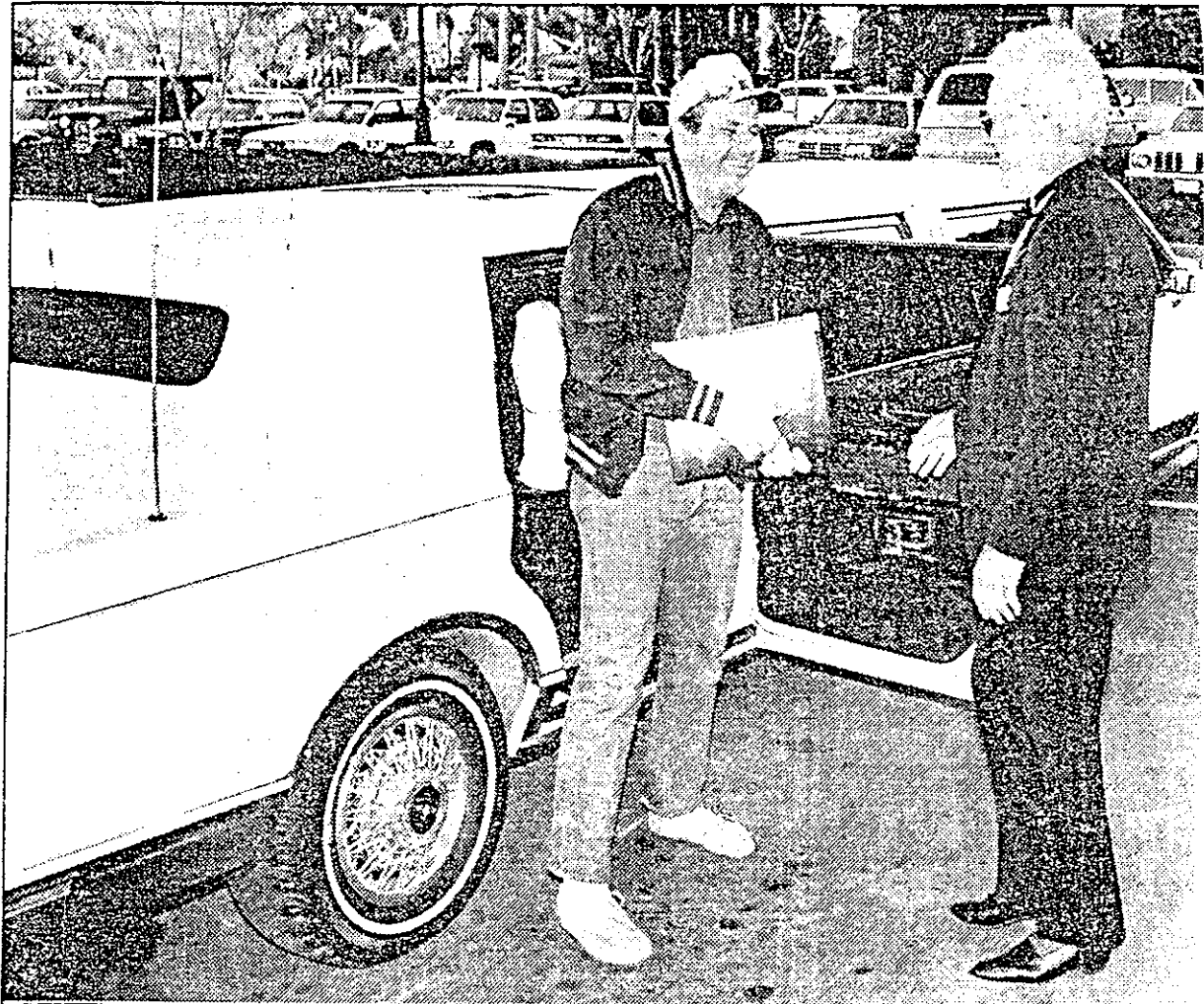
Over the hash browns we find we have something in common besides Phoenix. We both love W.P. Kinsella's novel, "Shoeless Joe." "Some of the damndest, most lyrical prose I ever read," Eastin says. Then he grins. "I made the movie."

Turns out Eastin spent eight weeks in Iowa last summer working on a script that is now called "The Field of Dreams."

"You know movie producers," he grumps. "They can't leave anything alone. In the Hollywood version, Christ didn't die on the cross. It was all a dream."

Also cast in the film are Kevin Costner, Burt Lancaster, James Earl Jones, Ray Liotta and Amy Madigan. Eastin plays Edie Cicotte, the old baseball player who comes back from the dead.

"Hell of a part. Hell of a movie," Eastin says. "Kinsella's given his blessing to the script. I don't know how the public's going to respond."



Russell Gates, *The Phoenix Gazette*

Actor Steve Eastin steps out of a Lincoln ultra-stretch limousine.

"Most of the people I run into on the set are trust-fund babies. Gee, dad, I think I'll go to Hollywood. Send the check. I go to acting class in my old banger and the other people are hopping out of their BMWs."

— Steve Eastin

It's a story that, shall we say, moves freely through space and time. Of course, I hope people like it. A hit wouldn't hurt my career."

Neither will appearing opposite Kevin Costner in a movie. Is the reigning sex symbol everything

People magazine says he is?

"I never slept with him so it's difficult to say," Eastin deadpans. "No, seriously, he seems to wear the mantle of stardom well. He's a good athlete, too. An ex-baseball player. I play baseball a lot, so we

could relate."

Eastin comes by sports naturally. His dad, Ronald Eastin, is a former national junior college coach of the year who retired recently as the athletic director of Phoenix College. His mom is Ann Eastin, the registrar at Camelback High School. "When I was a student there, she was the attendance clerk. It was a disgusting situation," Eastin says.

Eastin's acting career dates to his childhood, when he played the wolf in a production of "Little Red Riding Hood" for Arizona Children's Theatre. "I wanted to play Red," he confesses. "It was the star part."

While a student at Camelback

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Actor

From H-1

High School, he caught the attention of Buster Bonoff, who was producing a series of musicals at Phoenix Star Theatre. Eastin was cast in "Bye, Bye Birdie" and "The Unsinkable Molly Brown." The choreographer was Michael Bennett, who later achieved fame as the creator of "A Chorus Line" on Broadway.

"Michael was one of those wonderful people who can change your life," Eastin says. "His encouragement changed mine. I started to think seriously about acting."

There were other encouragements. "Buster paid me \$40 a week. That's big money when you're 16."

Eastin majored in English literature at the University of Northern Colorado. "I'm glad I did that," he says. "People generally don't take actors seriously but, when you look like a jock and you start talking about Keats and Shelley, they think, 'Hey, maybe there's some dimension here.'"

He pursued graduate studies at the University of Arizona, but only briefly. "I wasn't ready for grad school," he says. "I got a job over at Old Tucson falling off roofs in a stunt show. A hell of a lot more fun. Good for my career, too. (Director) John Sturges saw me and gave me a small part in the Clint Eastwood picture, 'Joe Kidd.'"

With that credit on his resumé, he thought about going to Hollywood, but fate dealt him an unexpected high card. At Camelback, Eastin had been one of the Fabulous Nomads, a rock group that "played Beatle music all over town." Since then, he had developed into a proficient

songwriter and singer. Suddenly, people started taking notice so, instead of heading for the coast, he hit the road for two years with a group known "with all humility as the Steve Eastin Band."

"Was it great? In a word, 'no,'" Eastin says, and lets it go at that.

Back in Tucson, he took a job teaching at Tucson High School. Meanwhile, he heard that they were making a pilot at Old Tucson called "Night Games." He landed a role, it became the series "Petrocelli," and for the next two years he shuttled between the classroom and the sound stage.

Somewhere in there, he ran for governor. "I was 26. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I'm not sure the voters cared about that, though. In one of the polls, I tied for No. 3. My parents got a kick out of that."

Needless to say, he wasn't elected. In revenge, he jumped into his '64 Chevy camper and headed for L.A. He had \$600 to his name. "I didn't realize at the time that, for many years, that would be the high-water mark in my bank account," he says. "Oh, no, I thought 'This is going to be a piece of cake. I'm going to be a star. Fifteen years later, I've started working regularly.'"

He survived because "I was willing to pay the price. I put off starting a family until I was 34. Until then, I lived with a lot of cockroaches."

What happened? "I don't know. A combination of things. Perseverance, mostly. I just wouldn't give up. Finally, a lot of little parts resulted in some bigger ones. Then, I got a

guest star spot on 'Scaarcrow and Mrs. King,' followed by one on '11th Street Blues,' and that opened things up. A nice part in the movie 'Catcha' helped, too."

Now, he goes from role to role. "I tend to follow Jimmy Stewart's advice," he says. "Don't get too flush with yourself. There's too much luck involved."

He isn't sanguine about the chances of Phoenix actors making it in the big town.

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In 1983, he married Jayne Marie, a medical assistant "with her feet on the ground." They have a 4-year-old daughter, Shayne, and another child due in October. The couple met in Phoenix when he came home to recuperate after being mugged and shot in L.A.

"Hollywood. Such a goddamn glamorous life. I can't tell you!" he mutters. Perhaps that's why the Eastins now call Taos home.

"You get to be my age, and you start to realize that the family, a good home life, these are the important things. That doesn't mean that I don't want to act, that I don't want to be, you know, that *thing*, a star. But not at the expense of the people I love."

"My wife and my child are for eternity. Hollywood's just a great place to spend some time on the way."