

## Russell Crowe: A star is brawn

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### **He's one of Hollywood's biggest names and he's got the ego to match. Did fame just go to his head, or was Russell Crowe born to be wild? Paul Ham investigates**

Just who is Russell Crowe? A boorish, beer-swilling redneck, or a complex, sensitive artiste? A committed underdog with a boulder-sized chip on his shoulder, or a natural bully with a rare gift for acting?

Today, Big Russ is the 'next Brando', tomorrow, a foul-mouthed boover boy. No wonder he hates the press. It is easy to conjure tired contradictions, to portray the pool-hall job inside this sublime, intelligent actor. February's much-publicised rage after a poem was edited out of his Bafta acceptance speech was no ordinary tantrum. It was a fusion of autocrat and purist; the rage of the macho aesthete. It's not difficult to make a pattern of violent behaviour out of a few public outbursts. But life is more complicated.

Picture an anxious seven-year-old fidgeting in line at Vaucluse Public School one sunny morning in 1971. Born in New Zealand, he has been in Australia for four years. He and his parents live in a leafy, bourgeois part of Sydney. He's already a bit of an outsider. And he's about to endure acute embarrassment. Crowe is wetting his pants. Again.

There is nothing unusual about this sort of behaviour at that age; many children do it and suffer teasing as a result. What is interesting is the reaction when Crowe did. For recounting this story is a Sydney housewife, now with young sons of her own, who was the classmate beside him that day. 'Russell used to wet his pants every single day - he had a problem,' she says. 'Nobody mocked him for it. But he wasn't a wimp. He was tough. So nobody gave him a hard time.'

'They were scared of him,' says another childhood friend. 'He was one of the toughies - boisterous, loud, a show-off. But nice, not nasty. He used to run the doctors and nurses club. He'd probably thump you if you mention that now.'

Intriguingly, both refuse to be named. They're afraid of Crowe - a pattern that repeats itself during research for this article. Very few people will say publicly what they honestly think of him.

In the early 1980s, a 19-year-old Crowe inflicted his first song, I Wanna Be Like Marlon Brando, on a blameless audience at a New Zealand night club. A female friend recalls: 'It was terrible, the sort of song that cleared the dance floor. But Russell couldn't give a sh\*\*. He'd written a song. It was awful. But for him, it was progress.'

Then there's his decision to do 1991's critically acclaimed Proof. 'I had [been given] four opinions on the script and every one was negative,' he said later. 'Then I sat down and read it and it was the most beautiful script I'd ever read. Nobody knows what is gonna be good for me, only

me.' Confident artist or insecure brat? Perhaps overweening self-confidence is a reaction to detractors rather than a personality trait. Hugely sensitive, a highly driven perfectionist, he takes himself and 'his art' deeply seriously.

At his nadir, unemployed in Sydney, he refused to do advertisements. He said he'd rather starve: 'Acting is not about the money, although people find that hard to believe. Ten years ago I would have arguments with friends about 'Give me bohemia or give me death', and they thought I was crazy. And I have gone all over the world with my art because there are people who respect and only want to work with that kind of person.'

His career began at six, when he appeared in the TV series *Spyforce*. At 12, he talked his way onto a long-running soap, *The Young Doctors*. His parents, Alex and Jocelyn, were film and TV caterers, and their youngest son hung around sets after school. They instilled an old-fashioned belief in him, of the virtues of hard work and the pursuit of truth. They are, by all accounts, hard-working, generous people, bohemians with traditional values. They have provided an emotional anchor throughout his life, and he rewards them with unstinted love and protection. Reporters who inquire about them are given the raised finger.

The Australian chat-show star Ray Martin, 58, is a good friend, despite the age difference and his belonging to a profession that Crowe despises - journalism. They bonded over their mutual love for their rugby league team, South Sydney. 'Russell's very close to his parents and brother, Terry,' Martin says. 'He adores them. If you want to see him go berserk, just insult his mum or dad.'

In 1976, they sent him to Sydney Boys High School, a 'progressive' inner-city state school that sells itself on 'selective' admission criteria.

In the 1970s, it took locals like Crowe on a nonselective basis. Classes were a mix of bright, nerdy types and local, tougher boys aware of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll. Crowe gravitated to the latter.

It is the only government-funded school in Sydney's 'Great Public School' (GPS) sporting network. Its rivals are among Australia's most snobbish establishments, attended by the sons of the city's wealthier residents. 'High' boys have always been the butt of private-school jibes; Crowe would have felt the sharp end of these. He formed several lifelong mates at Sydney Boys High. One, John McGrath, a millionaire estate agent, shares the distinction with him of being voted by their class as the two boys least likely to succeed.

Crowe seems determined to keep Australia's legend of mateship alive. Unsurprisingly, some of his gang won't comment - or only guardedly - on their mate Russ. Blake Veverka recalls him as the ringleader of a 'rabbly type of mob. There were half a dozen of us. We still get together. Last year we went to the Easts-Souths game. We're standing among these A-list people and Russell's just being a normal guy. Whenever we get together we don't talk about Hollywood; we relive old school days'.

Tony Hannon says his former pupil was not a top intellectual, but obviously intelligent. 'He was an independent spirit. Interested in everything, he spoke his mind, wouldn't put up with sh\*\*.' It

is an intriguing description of a then 12-year-old. 'He used to play these practical jokes,' Veverka recalls. 'He'd go to Sydney Girls High, and try all kinds of things to get their attention, make them laugh.' When the old gang met last year, Veverka says the star really looked after them, taking them - girlfriends in tow - to watch his band, 30 Odd Foot of Grunts, out on the town. He always remembers his mates.

On the cusp of puberty, Crowe was bundled back to New Zealand. It was a difficult parting. Echoes of the adult can be seen in the sense of alienation that permeated his youth, the transience of his upbringing, the loss of friends.

By 14, he was hiding under the bar of his parents' Auckland pub watching a rock'n'roll band and dreaming of pop stardom. 'He wasn't allowed in the pub where we played,' the singer Tom Sharplin recalls. 'But we ensured that he could see us through a section of the bar.' 'I've been in a room where 50 people are punching each other because they're drunk,' Crowe once reflected. 'I was basically a kid faced with adult fury. This is tattooed in my brain.'

By day he attended Auckland Grammar School, stitched-up and conservative. His Sydney inner-city swagger raised the hackles of teachers and pupils alike; he only lasted a year. 'He had a few hassles [there],' says Bob Laing, former deputy principal at Mount Roskill Grammar, where Crowe's parents moved him to. 'He'd get his backside caned for various things he thought weren't fair.' Like singing in the corridors. 'He was a lively character. He wasn't rude to teachers, he wasn't bolshie, he just had a strong personality.'

Crowe played rugby and made Mount Roskill's cricket first XI as a 'pretty useful' seam bowler. His cricketing cousins, Martin and Jeff Crowe, later captained New Zealand. Early on, their success overawed him; later he would ridicule the seriousness lavished on sport in New Zealand. Considered capable of better than his C-plus and B-minus grades, he won an English prize at Auckland grammar and edited Mount Roskill's newspaper. At 16, he conceived a brief love for journalism. Does Crowe see what he might have been in the gaggle of zoom lenses and notebooks trailing him? Maybe the recognition has bred contempt. His scorn for the media says more of him than the heavily censored 'interviews' he occasionally 'gives' by e-mail through his agent.

He viscerally hates his critics. When Crowe says 'no comment', he usually means 'f\*\*\* off'. His overreaction to media criticism appears to derive from his apparent belief that only he has the ability, and the right, to assess his own greatness.

Crowe refused to be interviewed for this article, despite several approaches, even to answer questions via his agent. Yet on the road to stardom, he would cultivate the press when it pleased him. As his triumphs mounted, he grew less interested, indeed contemptuous; journalists had served their purpose. A New Zealand writer sums it up: 'He craves publicity, then pulls off the 'leave me alone' trip along with a 'haven't you done your research?' rave if you ask the most simple question.' Like most of Hollywood's big stars, he chooses his own media now: an 'interview' with the magazine Red; a fireside chat with a US Western magazine.

His run-ins with the media are colourful. Asked if the mental-health theme of *A Beautiful Mind* increased its chances of Oscar glory, he replied: 'You can take your cynicism and put it where the sun don't shine. I don't do my job to garner praise or garner awards. I do it because a film is an elusive medium that fascinates me.' Actually, the question related to the film as a whole, not to him.

In 1993, he dismissed the ruckus over *Romper Stomper*, the movie about Melbourne neo-Nazis that led him to Hollywood, as 'tabloid-bloody, reactionary press. One thing the film does is make an audience examine their own bigotries. That's important, especially in this country where the middle-class broom sweeps problems under the carpet'. His rants rarely discriminate between people and issues: evidence of an autocratic frame of mind, or the dangers of a little learning?

By 1981, Crowe showed all the symptoms of a rebellious middle-class kid. After two years at Mount Roskill, the 17-year-old dropped out without matriculating (the A-level equivalent). In 1980, he had begun working as a nightclub DJ until 5am. 'Teachers used to wonder why I slept through first-period geography,' he said later. There was a brief stint in insurance and more DJ-ing. Having decided that his talents lay in acting and singing, he formed his first band, *The Profile*, with his schoolmate Mark Stauffer on bass and Crowe on rhythm guitar. The band changed its name to the *Romantics*, and Crowe adopted a new moniker, *Russ le Roq*, partly apparently to distance himself from his famous cousins. Then came his big chance: a gig at his friend Tom Sharplin's Auckland club, the *King Creole*. 'Russell wanted to be the best, so he went to the best in town,' says Sharplin, modestly. Was he talented? 'I wouldn't comment on his singing at all, but he was quite competent on the guitar.'

If some remained unconvinced, *Russ le Roq* was not among them. Terence O'Neill-Joyce, who released *le Roq's* records, said he 'had more confidence than the rest of the people I was dealing with put together'. Jean Norman, a journalist who used to see the band, recalls an astonishing exchange: 'One night we sat on the fire escape, slightly stoned, talking about our dreams. He said, 'I am going to go to Hollywood and become a world-famous actor.' He is the only person who has said this to me and - obviously - he has done it. Such blinding self-belief was utterly unheard of in that set/age/time.' 'He was popular with girls,' says Sharplin. 'He always stood out. But nothing, not even a pretty girl, would get in his road to success.' The young Crowe was initially ill at ease with women. Silcock says a failed liaison with an older woman known only as Sylvia, who appeared in the band's *Shattered Glass* video, left Crowe in tears.

A New Zealand journalist who actually befriended Crowe describes his personality traits: 'He is antagonistic. He tries to belittle you. He's physically imposing, not that tall but thickset. He conducts himself in a way that suggests he's not at all concerned with physical violence if that was to come his way. At times, he's smart and affable, but there's a snappy, combative side to him. He's got the kind of demeanour that says he's physically confident. Lots of men don't like that; it makes them feel insecure. But lots of women do like it; it makes them feel the opposite.' The actress Sharon Stone would say as much years later. Crowe's love life is the source of intense media speculation. Few women who saw *Gladiator* deny his extraordinary machismo. 'He has always pulled lots of girls,' as one friend puts it, bluntly.



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There's the intriguing headline, 'Go Russell, Go!', in an Australian newspaper. 'He's known to have it off with the hair people, with make-up, in his trailer,' says a New Zealand acquaintance. 'And he goads himself on - talks to himself while he's rooting. It's loud enough to cause embarrassment. He's a wild colonial boy who has talent and balls.'

In his early twenties, Crowe started drinking heavily. One old Auckland drinking mate - again, frightened of being named - was struck by his prodigious capacity for the 'amber nectar'. 'He likes a beer. He drinks huge amounts of draught. The first time I met him, he wore me out.' He couldn't finance his prodigious tastes. Crowe noted in 1983 that he'd spent NZ\$7,000 trying to get his records released: 'My last royalty cheque was for \$240, though after I'd paid various costs I was left with \$80.' At his lowest ebb, he became a bingo caller but was sacked after introducing rhyming slang: his favourite was 'Number One, up Yer Bum'. Russ le Roq refused to abandon his dream of stardom. 'Maybe New Zealand's not big enough,' he once said. 'I always felt uncomfortable there,' he recalled a decade later. My formative years were in Australia. Everything I knew was Australian.' With Sharplin's help, he secured roles in *The Rocky Horror Show*, which toured Australasia. Overnight, Russ le Roq was dead and Crowe the actor was born. He moved to Sydney. With no formal dramatic training, he relied on his childhood experiences, musical talent and sheer chutzpah on the treadmill of auditions. He washed cars, waited on tables, DJ-ed again, even busked in King's Cross, Sydney's red-light district.

'When I arrived in Sydney, I spent 22 weeks in this \$50-a-week place with just a bed, a cupboard and the toilet halfway down the corridor,' he later said. 'For the first time my parents were some distance away. I did a lot of thinking and realised I appreciated what my father had instilled in me. People think that because there is a dole there they should use it, and there are a lot of ways to misuse the system. I believe in singing for my supper. I'll never accept a grant because what I do should be able to be founded purely on free enterprise.' Few have articulated the middle-class Protestant work ethic more succinctly.

The north Sydney-based agents Bedford and Pearce were impressed by his *Rocky Horror* performance, and signed him. In the mid-1980s, there was a part in *Neighbours*, then critically acclaimed performances. He had a gift for choosing original, striking parts. He was impressive in a minor role in *Spotswood*, starring Anthony Hopkins and Ben Mendelsohn: 'I have four scenes with Ben and in each one I verbally abuse him, slap him, strangle him, then punch him, in that exact order. What more can an actor want?'

There was *The Crossing*, a young-love triangle: 'I always wanted to play that laid-back Aussie male who has an emotional outpouring.' There he met the actress Danielle Spencer, with whom he has been linked on and off for years.

One notable failure was in the Australian run of *Blood Brothers*, from which he was allegedly sacked. At the time, his abrupt departure was attributed to a 'throat infection'. A production source says: 'The producer was furious with Crowe; the producer was the type of person you don't f\*\*\* with, but Russell f\*\*\*ed with everyone.'

In 1991 came *Proof*. He played a middle-class rebel, Andy, who helps a blind man. 'He's a bit rootless and directionless,' Crowe said of the character. 'But he has made himself that way. I

enjoyed playing Andy, but Andy gets stuck in a lot of things, you know? I hate people like that.' It would not be the first time that Crowe would express contempt for people who couldn't raise themselves from a rut.

Crowe's seminal performance in *Romper Stomper* attracted Sharon Stone's interest and he hit Hollywood for the flop *The Quick and the Dead*. *LA Confidential* soon followed, in which he gave his customary '120%'. The hit led to *Gladiator* and a Best Actor Oscar; and *The Insider* and *A Beautiful Mind* would confirm his status as one of the world's greatest actors.

Surely such accolades would calm the beast within? Still he appears to have become steadily consumed by his over-sensitive ego. In 1993, a tabloid called Crowe 'big-headed' when he refused to be photographed with children at a Kids with Aids fundraiser. Years later, he would erupt at the mere mention of the article: 'I didn't want my picture taken with whatever f\*\*\*ing fluffy TV celebrity was there. I was there because friends of mine had organised a charity night, for a charity I believe in. I'm not a f\*\*\*ing celebrity, man. Don't try and hand the cloak of celebrity on me, I got my own goddamn clothes.'

The Crowe code of ethics won't suffer any breach. Consider his attack on Geoffrey Wright, who gave him his big break in *Romper Stomper*. When the director affectionately remembered him as the 'rudest actor I've ever met', Crowe hit back. 'I made a movie with him called *Romper Stomper*, the shoot of which was 28 days,' he erupted. 'I've known Wright for eight weeks of my life, in 1991, okay? So he's got no right to be giving quotes based on that.'

This is vintage adult Crowe: laying down the law for others. Wright, though, has more to say. He recalls Crowe as 'a wonderful actor to work with because he gives you everything he's got. He'll challenge you occasionally, sometimes he's a bit blunt. But no other star in Hollywood works as intensely and conscientiously as Crowe. He's a genuine star, a genuine character actor'. Gracious words from a man whom Crowe has slighted.

His Australian co-star in *LA Confidential*, Guy Pearce, says he can understand Crowe's anger at anyone who seeks to demean his performances. What was it like playing opposite Crowe? How were the brawls? Pearce says: 'Being allowed to work in that capacity was magnificent. Everyone felt inspired. *LA Confidential* was my proudest achievement, and I think it was one of Russell's. He played opposite me, yeah, he was the bully.'

Crowe's rugby mate Ray Martin has interviewed the actor at least six times in the past 15 years. 'He tends to be like a distracted genius, but you don't get that glazed eye. When you get his attention, you've got his total attention. He may look down, and you don't know if what you've said has reached him. Then there's a delayed reaction. There's a thousand things going on in his head. He loves an intellectual joust. This is interesting for an Aussie, because we're not known for our geniuses. He can lift the conversation above rugby.'

'Crowe is really like a Renaissance man,' continues Martin. What of his view towards your own profession? 'He's got a great bullsh\*\* meter. If you ask him a dopey question, he'll tell you. He calls a spade a spade. Journalists who have wronged him are blacklisted.' But what of the Bafta award biff - Crowe shoving a producer up against a wall by the scruff of the neck? 'If you

structure your programme so there isn't time for him to say thank you, then accuse him of being up himself, I can see why Crowe would want to punch someone,' says Martin. 'I don't think he's a bully. He's got a soft side. He's a new-age bloke. He treats women equally - I've seen him with make-up and hairdo, and he charms them out of the room.'

There's one group who will drink a toast to him any time, any place. 'To the Meatball!' shout the members of the Orara Valley Axemen in a pub near Nana Glen, seven hours' drive north of Sydney, where Crowe has his country property. The nickname stuck after Crowe put on weight for his role as Maximus in *Gladiator*. The Axemen are the local rugby league team. There's Jim, Danny and Luke and another Jim - local plumbers, handymen, farmers. They have all gathered for their Friday afternoon piss-up and they all know Crowe very well. 'He'll be sitting in the pub, and no-one'll know. And he'll have a few beers,' says Danny. He also contributes happily to his chosen community. He signed the Tallow Wood Bush Band to play at his Christmas party and he gave A\$5,000 to the Little Athletics Club.

When he's 'at home', security guards man the entrance to the estate and Crowe usually arrives by helicopter. There's a private cinema, helipad and herds of prime beef cattle, to whom he talks for relaxation. He plans a cricket pitch and lap pool.

His 'wild man' reputation is well known in nearby Coffs Harbour, a popular seaside resort. Last year he was filmed brawling with security guards outside a nightclub. The owner allegedly threatened to give the film to the media unless Crowe paid A\$200,000 - and now faces trial for extortion. And few locals can forget the night Crowe and Tom Cruise 'got pissed and laid blackies' (skidmarks) with their Harleys in the pub's driveway. 'They were on their motorbikes out the back doing wheelies,' remembers a barmaid. 'They couldn't ride them.'

These days Crowe divides his time between Nana Glen and Hollywood, where he is filming Patrick O'Brian's classic Napoleonic maritime novel, *Master and Commander*. And he wants to try his hand at directing - he has in mind a war film, provisionally titled *The Long Green Shore*, set in Papua New Guinea during the second world war. 'I'd love to see him direct, it will be like an out-of-body experience for him, an imposed objectivity,' muses the director Geoffrey Wright.

Crowe is, in the final analysis, simply a very fine actor. He certainly thinks so. Only recently he had the breathtaking effrontery to criticise Olivier who, he said, 'barely put his toe in the water'.

Perhaps his love of the laconic Australian community he lives in is his best antidote to the Hollywood hype; an undoubtedly intelligent man's flash of self-awareness about how to keep that oversensitive ego in check. Such a community takes no prisoners when it comes to bullsh\*\* detection. For the one thing you don't do in them is act like a big shot and throw your weight around. A Meatball that was 'up himself', as the locals would put it succinctly, would soon find drinking companions at his local dwindling, and be condemned to splendid isolation on the estate. Low profile is everything. And it is here that Crowe has achieved this beyond his wildest dreams. Just meet Adell, the barmaid at The Golden Dog in Glenreigh, Crowe's local. 'I wouldn't know him if I fell over him,' she says. 'He was sitting out front last year with the little blonde one.' Meg Ryan? 'Yeah. Her. And I served them both. I had no idea who they were.'