



John Hensley
in Wyoming,
aboard a
mustang colt at
Rim Rock Ranch,
1999

Urbane Cowboy

ACTOR JOHN HENSLEY PLAYS THE REBELLIOUS SON of a South Florida plastic surgeon in the hit TV show *Nip/Tuck*. Hensley's high school character—Matt McNamara—is involved in everything from a threesome to hit-and-run accidents to dating a transsexual old enough to be his mother on the acclaimed drama that returns to the FX Network for its third season in September. That's about as far away from cowboying as a guy can get.

Yet, Hensley insists that nothing prepared him more for acting than growing up in the bluegrass state of Kentucky among Appaloosas and later horse wrangling in Wyoming. In fact, Hensley's first break—getting a manager to represent a kid with virtually no acting experience—came about because of horses.

"I remember the first meeting I had with the man that manages me to this day. I was just starting out and looking for any break I could get," remembers Hensley, 27. "I made up this little resume, which had almost literally nothing on it. And I put at the bottom: Horse Wrangler—Cody, Wyoming."

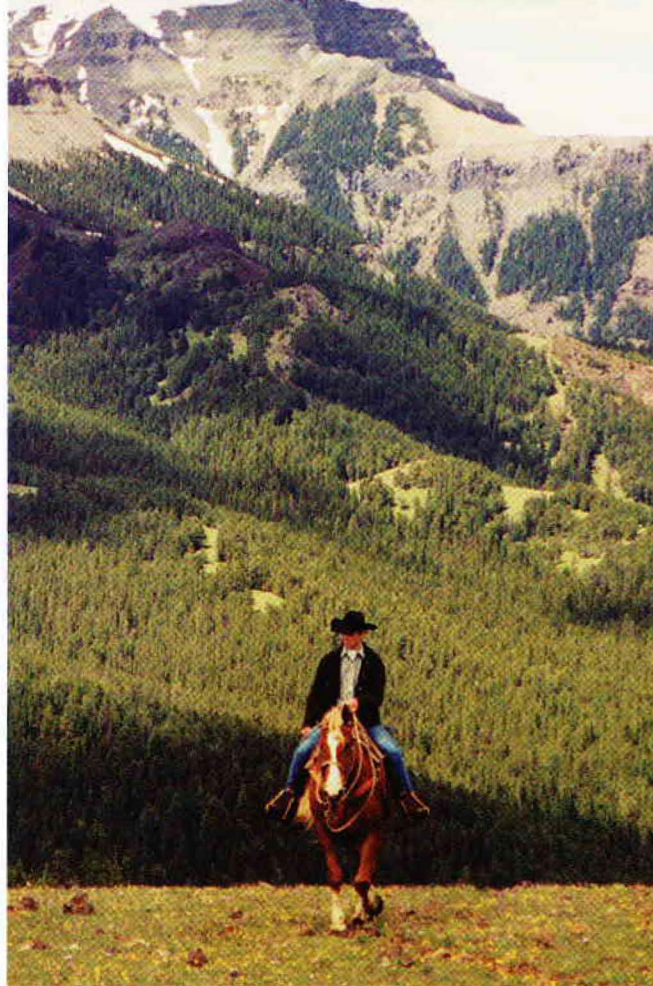
The manager took note of the horse wrangler entry, recalls Hensley. "He

John Hensley, star of the hit TV show *Nip/Tuck*, insists that nothing prepared him more for acting than being a horse wrangler.

By Michael Giltz • Photographs by Starla Fortunato for *Show Circuit*

Styling by Judy Sellards Haft • Grooming by Larri Peak





Riding up Table Mountain, with Ptarmigan Mountain in the background, Wyoming, 1998

“It was my time horse wrangling that made me what I am today.”



With Famke Janssen in *Nip/Tuck*

said, ‘They aren’t making too many Westerns these days.’ And I don’t know why, but I said, ‘Yeah, that’s something I plan on changing.’ And I think he liked it, because he decided to sign me.”

If it sounds like self-confidence won the day, Hensley says a lot of that came from being responsible for a herd of about 150 horses.

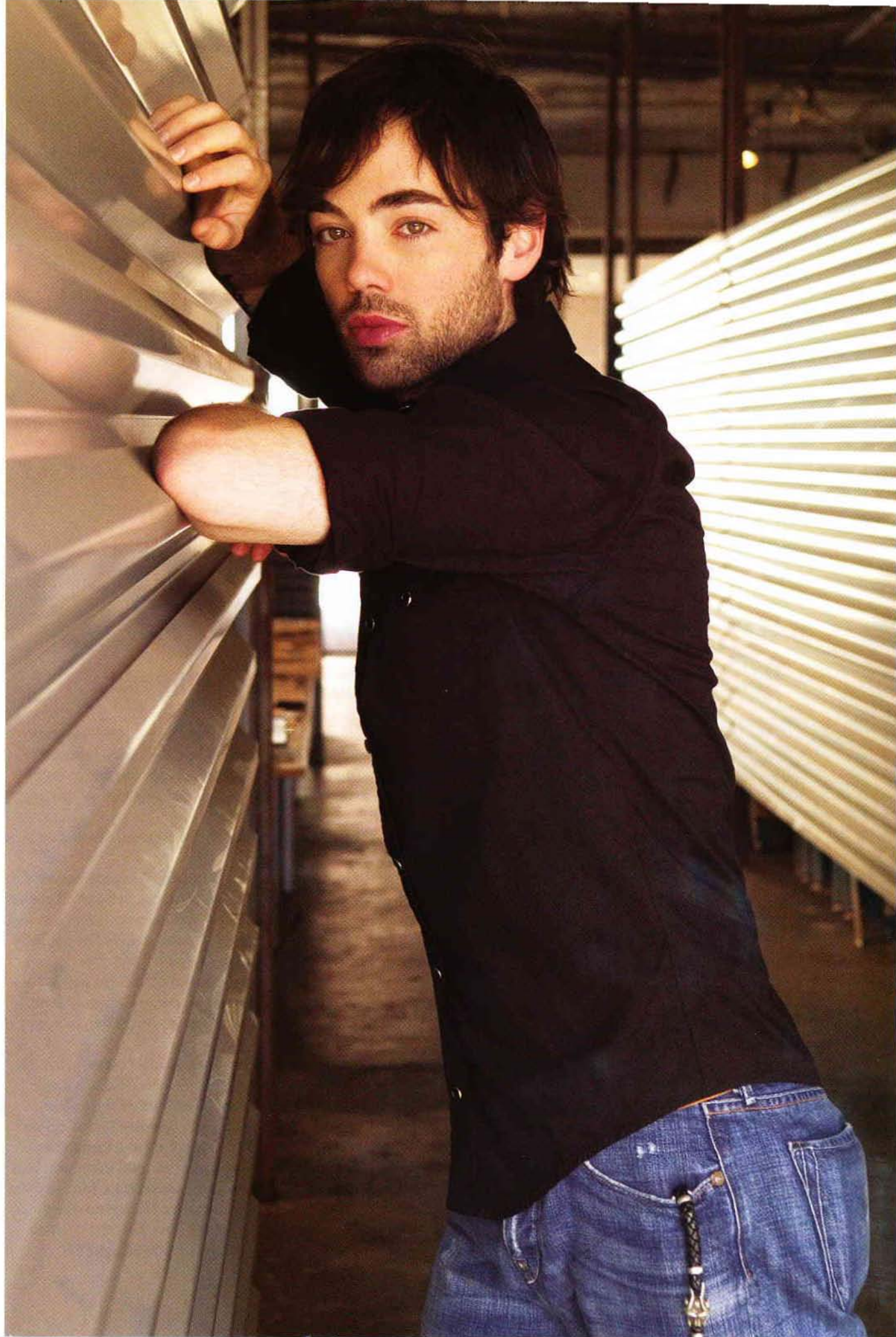
“I really think it was my time horse wrangling that made me what I am today,” asserts Hensley, who has also appeared on *The Sopranos* and has an upcoming independent film called *Fifty Pills*. “It instilled a confidence, or maybe a better word would be solidity, that I didn’t have before. You have to learn self-sufficiency and work through situations and get the job done.”

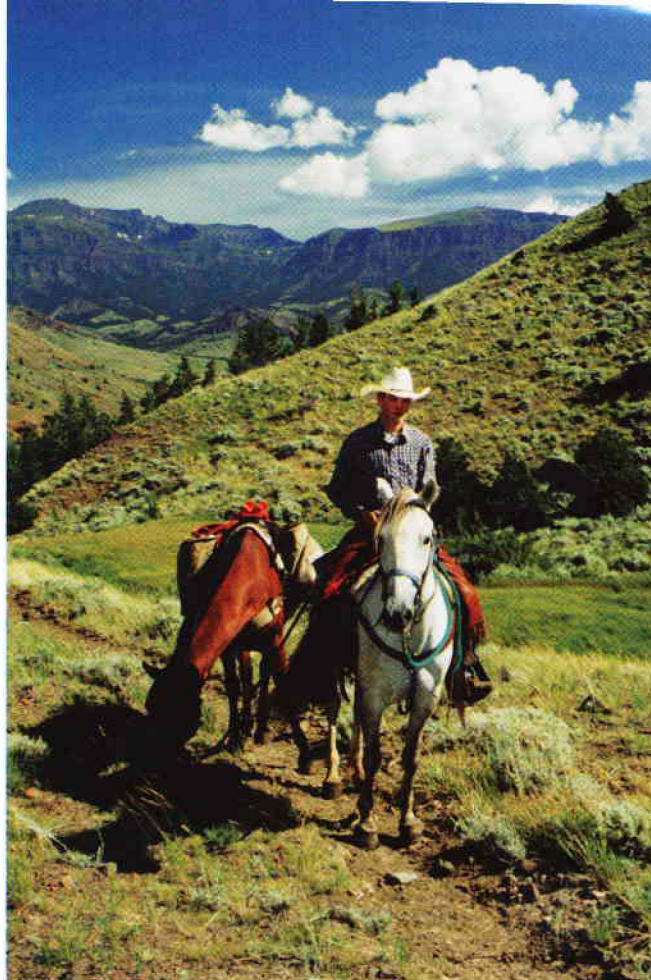
Hensley spent his childhood years in Kentucky surrounded by the Apaloosas his dad kept on their homestead.

“My dad used to call me his horse breaker, because when I was eight I was always the first wide body on the back of a green broke horse’s back,” muses Hensley, who now lives in Los Angeles but would love to own a secluded ranch in the West someday. “He would basically gentle them to the point where they were ready to have somebody on their back. The way he saw it, he might as well throw a little body on there. So really my first memories of riding were being in the riding ring, him sort of gently placing me on the back of the horse and then getting led around by the lead rope.”

When Hensley was about ten years old, his dad scooped the boy onto the back of another horse he was riding. When an unexpected sound startled the horse, it bucked and Hensley was sent flying head over heels, landing on his back in the road. The boy’s father feared his back was broken, but only Hensley’s spirit suffered damage.

“That experience really turned me off to horses for years; it freaked me





Leading a pack horse in Wapiti Valley, Wyoming, summer of 1998.

Hensley would love to own a secluded ranch someday.



out,” admits Hensley. “It wasn’t until I was 15 and my dad took me out to Wyoming for vacation that I rediscovered my love for horses. I remember landing at Cody airport, and I’d never seen a landscape like that in my life and I loved it. I was so desperate to be a part of that, that I would face any fear to be a part of it.”

The final spur to pursue his dream of acting was the sudden and unexpected death of his father.

“He died in the saddle, literally,” recounts Hensley. “He and a friend of ours were up on a ridge and got caught in a snowstorm. But my dad wasn’t the type to wait around, so they were walking the horses down through the storm. Finally they got back on their horses when my dad said he was feeling chest pains. He said, ‘It hurts, it hurts really bad.’

“The guy with him –who’s a very good friend of mine as well as his – joked with him and said, ‘I don’t need your ass dying on me out here.’ My dad was quiet for a moment and said, ‘You know, if I do, it’s been a good life.’”

Hensley’s dad collapsed a few moments later and died before he hit the ground. Hensley takes comfort in the knowledge that his dad was doing what he loved best right up until the last moment. Further, the realization through this experience that life is so precious has propelled Hensley into not wasting another moment. He headed off to college and then to New York City, where that deep connection to nature continued to comfort him.

“When I first arrived in the city, I realized the sun set early, just like it did in Cody, Wyoming,” notes Hensley. “The mountains blocked out the sun in Cody, and the skyscrapers blocked it out early in New York. But it felt the same and I knew right then everything was going to be all right.” ♦