

# MEET HOLLYWOOD'S GREATEST FAILURE



Actor, director, ferocious self-promoter — **Dennis Woodruff** is stitched into the very fabric of Hollywood. And yet, despite decades of trying, he still can't catch a break. *Empire* joins him in LA to find out why the hell not

WORDS SAM ROWE PORTRAITS STEVE SCHOFIELD

AND DAISY



It was Christmas, 1957. After neatly wrapping the contents of his toy box — to dole out to family members in lieu of proper gifts — five-year-old Dennis Woodruff was taken aside by his grandmother. “Be proud of the fact you are a Woodruff,” she told him.

“You are a very special person, don’t let anybody ever tell you that you’re not.” Motioning towards the window of her extravagant home, located deep in the Hollywood Hills, she added: “Your grandfather built Hollywoodland.”

Indeed, his grandad was real estate developer S. H. Woodruff. In the 1920s he, along with a crack team of eager investors, transformed a humble canyon in the foothills of Los Angeles into a beacon of prosperity, embodied by a row of 43-foot-high sheet-metal letters that, as night fell, lit up the skyline: HOLLYWOODLAND.

While Woodruff Sr.’s place in history would be relegated to a footnote (his “crowning achievement” sullied by the Wall Street Crash, floods, fire, the loss of “LAND” to bad upkeep and in 1932 actress Peg Entwistle leaping from the ‘H’ to her death), his sign remains a potent symbol of the entertainment industry below.

As for young Dennis Woodruff, it was here, peering out of the glass, in the shadow of his grandpa’s sign, that he decided: stardom awaited. After all, Hollywood was his birthright.

## SIX DECADES LATER, AND

the 88th Academy Awards are just days from taking place. But while the usual Armani-clad suspects will engage in their time-honoured skirmish in pursuit of a hallowed, 24-carat gold-plated man, there is one Hollywood resident who, as he does every year, will simply watch it on TV.

“I do still wonder why I haven’t been invited to the Academy Awards, it hurts my feelings,” confesses Woodruff, now 63. “In reality I am a bit of an icon in Hollywood,” he reasons. “I live just around the corner and they even have seat-fillers at the awards; why can’t I go?”

Though he does own an Oscar — it’s duct-taped to his car’s bonnet and cast in gold plastic — industry recognition still eludes Woodruff. Yet this isn’t to say he is not a big deal in Hollywood. Far from it.

In a town bloated with an estimated 109,000 actors — of which just 21,000 have had a paying job and 80 per cent are unemployed at any given time — Dennis Woodruff is something of a cult hero. Studio heads recognise his face



Above: Dennis Woodruff attends ‘his’ star on the Walk Of Fame. Only a matter of time. Clockwise from top right: The multi-hyphenate hits the streets of LA for more madcap vox pops; *Spaceman SFX*; the TMZ-style *Dennis Woodruff Show*; Fergie as Angelyne (see sidebar, right) and Josh Duhamel as Woodruff on Hallowe’en, 2012.

(Woodruff’s been known to stand outside the Paramount gates with his headshot on a stick). Celebrities do, too — *Transformers* actor Josh Duhamel dressed as Woodruff for Hallowe’en in 2012. Other Angelenos, meanwhile, can’t make their mind up on Woodruff’s character. “[He] is possibly LA’s most unique (*sic*) creative local legend...” tweeted one last December; “Dennis is the product of distilling all the delusion, fantasy, desperation and wrong-headed tenacity in this city into a single human being,” went a post on Reddit. But unlike the lustrous invitees to the Oscars, Woodruff is famous for not being famous. And from a time when the phrase “reality star” didn’t exist.

But does this make the spotlight-hungry filmmaker LA’s greatest loser, a victim of the Hollywood establishment’s refusal to recognise his talent? A mere hustler? Or does he illustrate a triumph of spirit, the American Dream in glorious Technicolor, a plucky underdog unafraid

to wrestle the Hollywood machine? One Wednesday in November, *Empire* tracked Woodruff down to his converted garage home to figure out which.

## THE FIRST THING YOU

notice about Woodruff’s abode is the fact that “garage” really means just that. In the dimly lit, windowless living room, guns dangle precariously from the wall, ten thick-backed TV-sets are piled upon each other and Daisy — a rescued Chow “mixed with I don’t know what” — snores noisily on the couch. “Did I tell you I’m from outer space?” booms Woodruff, by way of a hello.

As a conversationalist he confuses easily, often spinning off on wild tangents. But Woodruff’s enthusiasm is truly boundless, even if at times we see his self-confidence waver. He habitually asks *Empire* if he’s doing okay, are we getting what we need, has he answered our question properly? Meeting him,



though, you’re overwhelmed by his almost childlike zest for life; it is hard not to want him to succeed.

When he was ten years old, Woodruff tells us, he was offered a part in a John Wayne film (he forgets which). “The Duke” was an acquaintance of his grandfather’s, and wee Dennis was, he says, “really good friends with his kids”. After he plucked up the courage to ask the Western icon for a role, Wayne wrote Woodruff’s mother a letter in response saying he’d found him a part. She was not impressed. “My mum got really mad,” says Woodruff, mournfully. “She said I’d bothered him and his family.” And just like that, the chance for child stardom slipped through his fingers. “They were trying to shield me from the fact that Hollywood is a very superficial place,” Woodruff explains, “and that nobody really cares about you.”

But after studying for an arts degree in the early 1980s (his teacher’s foremost advice being that he should “go into

drama”), Woodruff decided he could no longer resist his destiny, and sought acting work. Over the next few years he suffered rejection after rejection, his agent, Jack Scagnetti, securing him work only as an extra. So next he dreamed up his “art cars”, which, with their many stickered slogans, advertised him as an actor for hire. It was a guerrilla PR campaign he hoped would get him spotted by the very industry figures that would otherwise swerve his advances. Yet still Woodruff had no joy, his cars hardly inspiring confidence in those he was hoping would hire him. It was only then, while he was living in a trailer park and at his lowest ebb, that his brother Scott had a brainwave.

“He said, ‘You don’t need Hollywood to come knocking on your door — you can do it all yourself,’” remembers Woodruff. It was as if a light had been flicked on in his mind: why wait for an invite from the establishment, when you can create your own industry from the bottom up? >

# ★ STREET LIFE

DENNIS WOODRUFF ISN’T THE ONLY ‘CHARACTER’ YOU’LL FIND ON THE SIDEWALKS OF HOLLYWOOD...



## Angelyne

Singer-actress-model Angelyne grabbed attention during the mid-1980s by promoting herself on Hollywood billboards. Also dabbling in art and even politics (in a 2003 California election she ranked 28th out of 135 candidates), she’s referred to herself as a “unicorn icon” and is often seen tooling around LA in her hot pink Corvette.



## LA Jesus

Real name Kevin Lee Light, the Messiah-impersonator has wandered the streets of Los Angeles since 2009, posing for photographs and dishing out advice, and even came to London to ‘bless’ Oxford Street shoppers in 2014. It’s still not clear why, and fittingly he refuses to accept cash. In 2012 Aerosmith wrote *Street Jesus* about him.



## The Tree Man Of Venice

Stroll along Venice Boardwalk, and you won’t mistake Lionel Powell for anyone else. He is the man perched on ten-foot stilts, covered in foliage. So adored in LA that, along with doing charity and environmental gigs, Mr. Tree has performed for Hugh Hefner (and assorted wildlife) at the *Playboy* Mansion.



## Harry Perry

Perry’s original tunes, electric guitar and oversized turban have rocked Venice Beach boardwalk since 1973, with *Tenacious D* in *The Pick Of Destiny*, *CSI* and Red Hot Chili Peppers video *The Adventures Of Rain Dance Maggie* among his credits. And did we mention he does all this on rollerskates? Because he does.



Spending what few dollars he had left, Woodruff bought a camera, turned his caravan site into a mini-film set and started production on *Dennis Woodruff The Movie* (1985). A documentary-cum-showreel, it mainly comprised Woodruff's TV appearances — news packages or interviews that focused on him and his wacky billboard cars — interspersed with short, autobiographical films: “all sorts of clips about my life and what I was doing at the time”. Woodruff's neighbour kindly took on editing duties. “It was a hit!” he exclaims, claiming that 4,000 VHS copies were sold out of the boot of his car in just three months.

Today, Woodruff pairs his dogged pursuit of fame with a relentless work ethic. Writer, director, producer and sometime-cameraman of his own DIY motion pictures, Woodruff is a one-man movie empire — a “rebel without a crew”, as he puts it. With his eye to the lens of a battered old camera, Woodruff's record-light blinks ad infinitum, hundreds of LA residents unwittingly becoming background artists — sometimes fully fledged characters — in his movies. With no budget to speak of, any willing co-stars are fellow hard-up actors, performing in return for the exposure, if not as a personal favour to the man himself.

Boasting a vast back catalogue, the Woodruff canon contains 15 movies. Among his best known is *Spaceman* (2007), the frantic tale of an alien's vacation to Hollywood. In its 2011 sequel, *Spaceman Returns*, Woodruff explains, “He comes back a second time, because his planet is dying as all the women have become lesbians” and meets... Dennis Woodruff, playing himself.

But there's more to his oeuvre than such surreal, low-fi capers. There's also

*Obsession: Letters To David Lynch* (2008), which highlights just how close he's come to taking a step up, and how frustrated he is with his near misses. Woodruff recounts a chance coffee-shop meeting in which he told the *Twin Peaks* director that he was living in his car — the one with “Cast Dennis Woodruff” scrawled on it — and said he would love the chance to prove himself. And so he claims he was cast in a small, speaking role in *Lost Highway* (1997) as a prison inmate, only to be cut (something he didn't discover until he attended the film premiere). “I thought it was my big break,” he says. “I felt betrayed, and I got mad at [Lynch], because I felt I really deserved that part. So to get even at him I thought I'd make a movie to prove I was a better filmmaker.”

A suitably embittered piece, *Obsession* sees ‘David Lynch’ (not the real one) appear and slash ‘Dennis Woodruff’ (the one and only) into several pieces. Once wrapped, Woodruff hand-delivered a copy to Lynch's home. “I never received any feedback,” Woodruff says, with a smirk, though he does say that Lynch briefly spoke with him on his driveway. “He said, ‘You should've told me, I could've helped you with the movie.’” Woodruff pauses, unable to suppress a giggle. “I said, ‘Well, if you did that, it wouldn't be my vision.’”

While such endeavours failed to further his career, the knockback which inspired it barely dented Woodruff's enthusiasm for self-promotion. Undaunted, he has since made documentaries on art, surfing, even a *Spinal Tap*-ish production about himself. Woodruff also shoots a *TMZ*-style YouTube show, in which he approaches members of the LA



Clockwise from above left: Stills from *Spaceman*, *Spaceman Returns*, *Obsession: Letters To David Lynch* and a self-promoting ad. Above: Woodruff with the Hollywood sign — “Hollywoodland” when his grandad helped to develop the area in the 1920s.



public for rapid-fire interviews. Amid the tourists, homeless and joggers, *The Dennis Woodruff Show* has even featured Bill Murray. However, it's worth noting the interview was the result of Woodruff spotting the actor on the sidewalk and thrusting a Handycam in his face.

And it doesn't stop there. Woodruff's job is not done until he presses a DVD-R into his audience's palm. Yours, for “a small donation” of five or ten bucks. In 2011, the *Daily Mail* made the astonishing claim that Woodruff lived in a caravan, yet earned £250,000 every year just from selling his films. While he dismisses the story as “embellished”, Woodruff says his on-the-street patter earns him around “a hundred thousand dollars” annually. Some LA residents dismiss his sales tactics as a mere twist on panhandling, but Woodruff isn't ashamed to show *Empire* how he operates, and suggests we tag along on his next sales excursion.

## LATER, BENEATH THE

azure LA sky, Woodruff readies himself for work. Pulling up between a Starbucks and Urban Outfitters on Melrose Avenue, he parks his infamous white Pontiac (licence plate: CAST DW). It's one of many four-wheeled business cards strewn with slogans: “Buy my movies”, “Give me the part” and, for the sake of diversity, “Help all animals”. He drags a gold lamé jumpsuit over his shirt and paint-flecked shorts, completing the look with a motorcycle helmet adorned with “jewels” (a nod to *Spaceman*).

Today represents Woodruff's first outing in months, owing to a sabbatical (his mum, brother and dog — another Daisy — all passed away during the past year). Woodruff retrieves a fat wedge of merchandise from a satchel, his hands aquiver. But after a few false starts, with passers-by staring straight through the 63 year-old alien on the pavement, it's *Empire* feeling anxious. Perhaps he'd

fare better had he not left Daisy in the car. The vet-sanctioned cone *does* make her appear intergalactic. Then...

“Dennis! S'up dude, how are you?” Bounding out of Starbucks, LA native and budding hip-hop artist Draino Corleno pulls Woodruff in for a firm embrace. Is he a fan? “Hell, yeah! His movies are rad, bro. Dennis is a fucking awesome underground film artist. Seriously, this is the big dude right here.” A relieved smile spreads across Woodruff's face. “I told you I was famous,” he chirps.

Over lunch (hamburger and fries, plus an extra patty wrapped in tissue for Daisy), Woodruff makes a confession. “I was really nervous when I got out of the car. It's been a while and I had a little stage fright,” he says earnestly, between spurts of ketchup. “Now, all of a sudden, I feel relaxed. I love people. I'm a people person. This is what I'm supposed to do.”

Although today's take amounts to just \$10, Woodruff insists selling his films



isn't as important to him as advertising himself. Besides, the inheritance from his mother allowed him to invest in a car dealership a few months back, and he'll soon sign the papers for a loft apartment, which he paid for in cash. “When she died,” he tells us, “my mom said, ‘You better not blow all this money on making movies...’” Woodruff, it appears, is respecting her request, and will be renting out the apartment. He says he prefers to stay in his garage, which costs very little: about \$650 a month rent. Anyway, “Any garage is just a house without windows or a kitchen.”

The self-advertising is working, he assures us, and he reels off a list of admirers. The Vice Chairman of NBCUniversal, Ron Meyer, called him “very talented”, Woodruff insists. The President of Paramount, “the next Charlie Chaplin”. James Cameron once bought a movie. And stars owning Woodruff-original artwork (another passion of his) include Nic Cage, Paris Hilton and Quentin Tarantino.

He also highlights his other notable flirtations with the entertainment industry. Upon being spotted on an LA street by Tom Green, Woodruff was asked to star in a handful of the comedian's skits (including one bonkers sketch whereby Saddam Hussein — played by Woodruff — threatens to blow up Los Angeles, only to be unmasked as a Swedish lobster by Green and skateboarder Tony Hawk). Woodruff was personally invited to cameo in *LA Love*, a music video by self-proclaimed fan Fergie, stealing the show dressed as Spaceman. There was even a nod to his infamous cars in *Volcano* (1997).

Though Woodruff at times seems frustrated by the fact his fame mainly revolves around his lack of it, there's no malice towards the actors who scaled the ladder instead of him, nor those who regard him as an oddball. While out on the sun-baked boardwalks of Los Angeles, his films underarm, Woodruff is simply eager to please and be recognised, relishing every hug, high five and car honk. The cash doesn't hurt, either.

But when a customer exchanges a crumpled \$5 bill in exchange for a DVD, its title scrawled on in Sharpie, they're not investing in independent cinema. Not really. They're placing their faith in Woodruff himself. The underdog who wears a glossy spacesuit, and point-blank refuses to give up his dream. And why would he? Hollywood is in his blood. ■

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