

2 ART

Jon Hamm How I escaped Don Draper

‘Every role
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and a
cigarette’



cover story

Me Too? I have had my own run-ins with people who've been swept up in it

Jon Hamm talks to **Helena de Bertodano** about his Hollywood altercations and how he's shrugged off the legacy of *Mad Men's* Don Draper with his latest role

‘Would you care for a drink?” asks Don Draper — I mean Jon

Hamm — scanning the contents of the minibar in his Hollywood hotel room. Something about the formal phrasing — “care for” — brings to mind *Mad Men's* Draper. If this were genuinely Don not Jon, whiskey — specifically Canadian rye — would be obligatory. As it is, I opt for Evian water. He follows suit.

Rarely has an actor been so indelibly associated with a role, except perhaps Bryan Cranston as Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, or, in another era, Larry Hagman as JR Ewing. Hamm stopped playing Draper more than three years ago, but is still fighting an uphill battle to carve out an identity separate from the womanising, hard-drinking, rootless man of advertising — one of the most iconic performances in television history.

“At first every role I got offered had a tie and a cigarette,” says Hamm, 47. “I actively worked against that

and started to do a lot more comedy. I don't choose things just to be subversive or reactionary, but I choose things that I find interesting.”

His latest film, *Bad Times at the El Royale*, is richly layered. Artful and stylish, it is an atmospherically twisted period thriller with elements of comedy. Like *Mad Men*, it is set in the Sixties, and also like *Mad Men*, Hamm's character is hiding a secret. But there the similarities end. Hamm

plays an obnoxious vacuum-cleaner salesman called Laramie. “He's very gregarious and flamboyant,” says Hamm. A loud-mouthed Southerner in a checked jacket, he is the antithesis of cool; Draper would have crushed him under the sole of his polished Oxfords.

The film, says Hamm, is a bit of a unicorn. “To do something original like this is quite exciting.”

In truth, Hamm doesn't look like Draper. At first I can't work out why and then realise that it is partly down to his ready smile and laughter; Draper almost never openly smiled.

Hamm, who has short spiky hair and is dressed casually in a navy V-neck and beige trousers, kicks off his blue suede shoes to rest his feet — in bright

blue and orange socks — on the stool in front of him. In short, he looks very relaxed, which Draper rarely did, unless semi-comatose with drink.

He says that timing contributed to the success of *Mad Men*. “We were incredibly fortunate. It was the beginning of peak TV, so there weren't 50 new shows all considered masterpieces.”

We ponder whether *Mad Men* would be made in the present climate. “I think it would be a little more difficult. It was a good show, it deserved to be made, so I don't know what that says about where we are as a culture that we're so terrified of offending someone, anyone, that we're almost paralysed...”

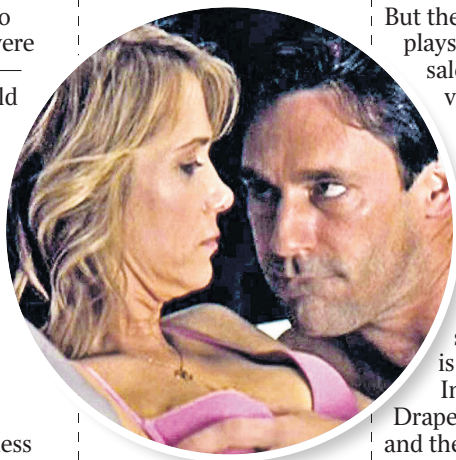
Although he fully supports the Me Too movement, he says he does not have much to contribute to the conversation, although it was a conversation that needed to happen “because the behaviour that it's responding to is deplorable”.

I ask if it was a surprise to him. “Some was, some wasn't.” He pauses. “I can say I've had my own run-ins with some of the people who've been swept up in this thing.”

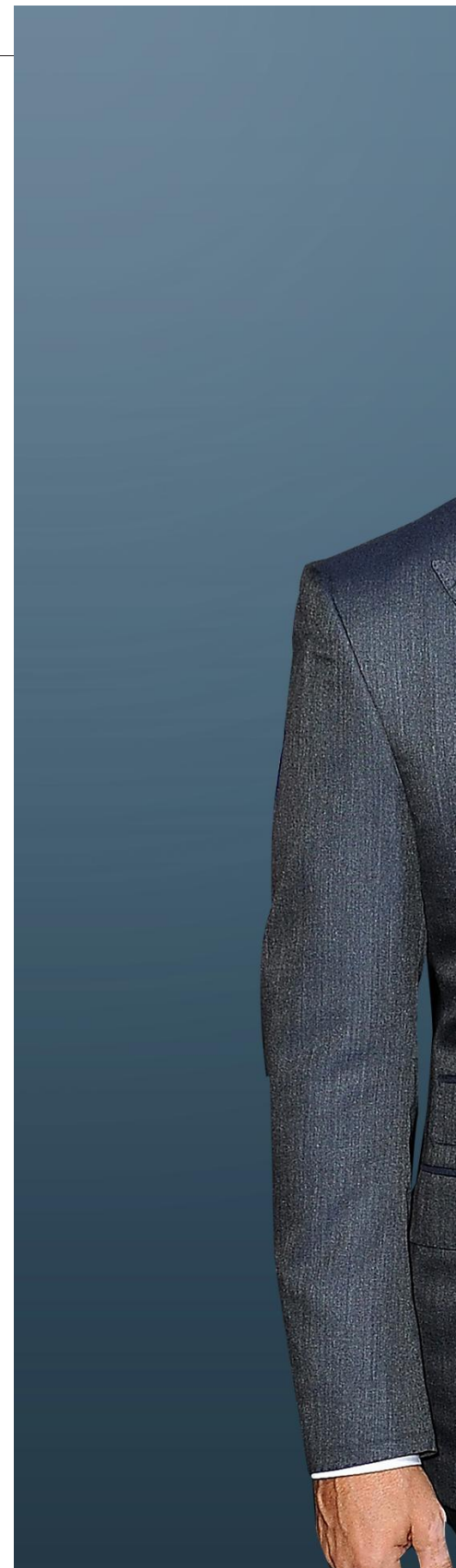
What does he mean — run-ins as in people have... “Sure,” he breaks in.

I continue — as in people have tried inappropriate things on him? “Sure,” he repeats. “[But] I'm certainly not going to name anybody.”

He draws a distinction between his own experiences and those of more vulnerable actresses. “It's certainly different being a 6ft 2in, 200lb male



Jon Hamm and Kristen Wiig in *Bridesmaids*





“I think it would be a little more difficult to make *Mad Men* now

than it is being a 5ft 4in, 100lb female. There's a physicality there." He adds: "Us straight white guys have been saying a lot for a long time; we might want to start listening a little more."

Born in St Louis, Missouri, Hamm was an only child whose parents divorced when he was two. His mother, a secretary, died of stomach cancer when he was ten, a devastating blow that has overshadowed his life. "It becomes a watershed moment and in the early Eighties in St Louis there was no grief counselling. It was, like, 'Go home and read a book.' My dad was incredibly supportive, but he wasn't equipped to deal with it. And then he died when I was 20."

Family friends tried to help. Hamm describes one friend's mother, who

was horrified to see the state of his car. "All four tyres were falling off, it was a disaster." She took it in for repair, then insisted on buying him new glasses. "She's been a wildly important part of my life. I text her on Mother's Day, she sends me Christmas cookies."

At first he threw himself into his studies. "All I wanted to do after my mom died was work, work, work... I was a very good student, I was diligent and got very good grades. I was an honours student in both high school and college and I got a scholarship to study in college."

He seems unusually keen to establish his academic credentials and I wonder if he feels that people sometimes assume that he is not intelligent. "Of course. I've been unfairly judged: 'Oh, he must be dumb because he's good-looking.' I make a point of not doing that to other people. It's 'judge not lest ye be judged.'"

In the final series of *Mad Men* one of Draper's junior colleagues, John Mathis, yells at him: "You don't have any character. You're just handsome. Stop kidding yourself!" Draper promptly sacks him. Mathis touched



Left: Jon Hamm and, above, in *Bad Times at the El Royale*

a nerve, which Hamm possibly shares with Draper. Yet the perception is wrong: Draper — and Hamm — seem to have character in spades.

Matthew Weiner, who created the series, was intrigued by Hamm, remarking after his first audition: "Now there's a man who wasn't raised by his parents."

"I think it was wildly insightful of Matt," says Hamm.

Once he left college, he found life even tougher. "I wasn't distracted any more. That's when I got self-destructive and really hard on myself."

Therapy helped him. "And drugs. I was put on Prozac and my brain chemistry was altered, so I wasn't in a downward spiral. People think it's representative of weakness, but it's not. If you need help, you need help."

Hamm acted at school and college, then returned to his high school to teach drama. In 1995 he set off for Los Angeles with \$150 in his pocket, but found it hard to establish himself as an actor. His first agency, William Morris, dropped him after three years, so he found another. "I just kept at it, it was a lesson in perseverance." He worked as a waiter and even took a job dressing soft-porn film sets. At 26 he landed his first credited role as "Gorgeous Guy at Bar" in the legal drama *Ally McBeal*. But it was another ten years until his breakthrough role on *Mad Men*.

He still has regular therapy and is almost evangelistic talking about its benefits. "Mental health is incredibly important." In 2015 he did a stint in rehab for alcoholism. That year also marked the conclusion of *Mad Men* and the end of his 18-year relationship with the actress and director Jennifer Westfeldt. He has not had a serious relationship since. "I'm hitting the pause button," he says. "It's a process to end a very, very long relationship."

Not that he has ruled out settling down. "You never know when [the right] person might appear in your life. You just want to be present to the idea..." In the meantime, though, he wants a dog. "I miss having a canine presence in my life."

In retrospect, he is glad he did not become successful younger. "I probably would not have handled it very well at age 20 because I could barely handle it at age 35. It's

“I was put on Prozac and my brain chemistry was altered

Hamm as Don Draper with his wife, Betty, (January Jones) in *Mad Men*



a complete life shift. Everything you knew or thought you knew changes radically; the way people treat you, it's easy to get lost." Westfeldt once described people's reaction when meeting Hamm: "It's become this constant 'OhmyGodI'mgoingtodie!' It's like being with a Beetle."

Hamm has never quite got used to it. "It can be trying. I don't think anybody loves being gawked at or the subversive attempts at recording you, whether you're picking your nose or scratching your butt. It feels mean-spirited and aggressive. It's one thing for someone to say, 'Would you mind taking a picture?' Then I can say yes or no." Does he ever say no? "I often say no if I'm in a meeting or in a terrible mood. It's so pervasive. I could spend the rest of my life taking selfies and I've got better things to do."

So it is not surprising to discover that he has little truck with social media. "I've no interest in sharing that stuff. I'm not judgmental about it. If other people enjoy that dopamine rush from getting x amount of followers or likes or clicks or what have you, great."

"Why can't Jon Hamm find another great role?" asked *Variety* magazine last year. Certainly he has had no shortage of work since *Mad Men*, but as yet nothing defining. Still, having won two Golden Globes and an Emmy for his performance as Draper, he should be allowed some time to find his second act. He has several upcoming films, including *The Torture Report* ("I play Obama's chief of staff negotiating the release of a very vulnerable document") and the *Top Gun* sequel: "They won't allow me to talk about it," he says apologetically.

And he will be in *Good Omens*, a television series about the apocalypse adapted from the novel by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett. Hamm plays the archangel Gabriel. "In this telling of it, he's the idiot from Home Office who's trying to get two other idiots to do their stuff. It's wildly funny."

Hamm sees comedy as his natural home. He has hosted *Saturday Night Live* several times with panache, played Tina Fey's boyfriend in the comedy series *30 Rock*, and provided some of the funniest scenes in *Bridesmaids*. Recently he took on Abraham Lincoln in a Sarah Silverman sketch. No, he says, he did not compare himself to Daniel Day-Lewis. "This version had a lot more fart jokes."

Legend has it that he and John Slattery, who played the sharp-witted Roger Sterling in *Mad Men*, wanted each other's roles. "True," says Hamm. "He got all the best lines. John said, 'But you get all the girls.' I was, like, 'It's not real.'"

Hamm's character does not get any of the girls in *Bad Times at the El Royale*. That distinction goes to Chris Hemsworth, who plays a chiselled, dangerous cult leader, or, as Hamm describes him today, "a swaggering shirtless paragon of masculinity and cool."

Is that a hint of envy in his voice? "At a certain point in my career I might have been offered that role," Hamm says, chuckling. "But I don't think I've ever looked that good with my shirt off."

See review, page 8