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RAY LIOTTA

The Radius Interview

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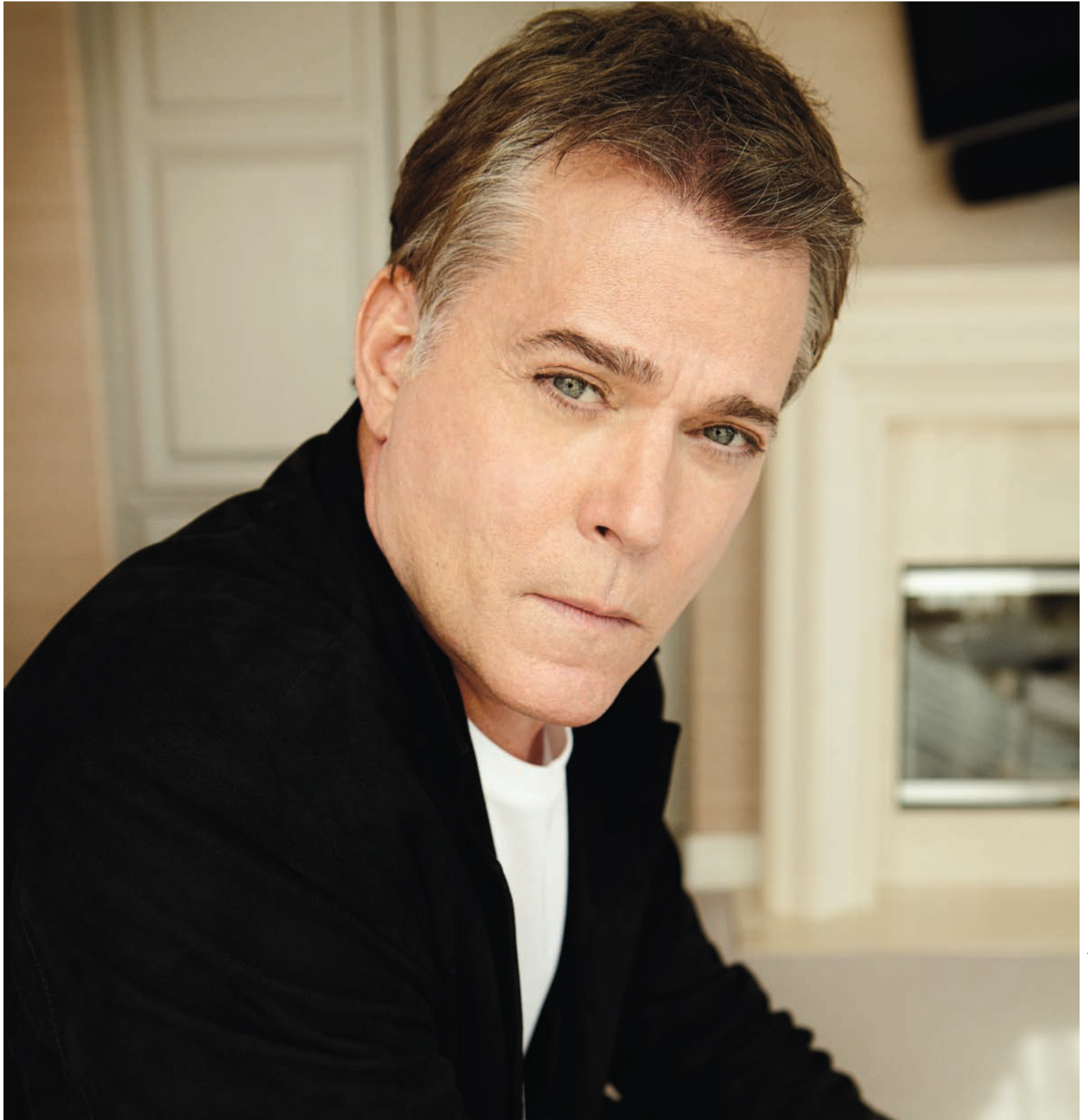
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THE radius INTERVIEW



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RAY LIOTTA

One of the trickiest things an actor is asked to do is play a bad guy audiences want to root for. It requires nuance that comes from years of experience and study. When Newark-born Ray Liotta burst onto the movie scene as the menacing third wheel in the 1986 comedy *Something Wild*, he stole the show from top-billed Melanie Griffith and Jeff Daniels and became the talk of Hollywood. Few knew that Liotta had been priming for this part for nearly a decade—first as a young soap star on *Another World* and then as a protégé of one of L.A.’s top acting coaches. He may also have channeled some of the bad boys he encountered growing up in Union. Liotta’s knack for portraying complex and sometimes morally ambiguous characters has earned him a special place in the annals of American cinema, and cemented his reputation as a Jersey tough guy. As **Robert Piper** discovered, all these years, Ray has been playing against character.

radius: Did working with Jonathan Demme in *Something Wild* give you a road map of how to work with directors as a featured actor?

LIOTTA: It did. What I loved about Jonathan was that he was just so into it. The best directors I’ve worked with—Jonathan, Martin Scorsese, Ridley Scott—they all have this passion to make this make-believe situation appear as if it’s really happening. They get giddy about it. They take it very seriously, but they also realize they’re making a movie, so it’s also fun. You know, that being my first big movie, it definitely shaped me and stayed with me.

radius: *Goodfellas* has become an iconic movie, and in many respects it made you an iconic actor. Did it make you a better actor, too?

LIOTTA: Yeah, no question. I mean, I think every movie I’ve done, I’ve approached with the desire to be better. See,

I didn’t do my first movie until I was 30. I did a soap opera from 22 to 26. Then I moved out to L.A. and nothing really happened. A couple failed series, some guest shots. But what I did is I went to acting class as soon as I got to L.A.—I studied. I was with this one guy, Harry Mastrogeorge, for 12 years. I did my first movie, *Something Wild*, and then went back to class. Did my second movie and back to class. Right through *Goodfellas*, *Field of Dreams*, and a couple after that. So, yeah, I loved learning. This is a job where there’s no end—you’re just always getting better. You’re taking on different challenges. But yeah, working with De Niro, and Joe [Pesci], and Lorraine [Bracco] and working with Marty [Scorsese]...those are great people. They are very dedicated to what it is that we do. So by the time I got there, I was just locked in, I was locked in and ready to go. I did so much homework and it was just great. I definitely learned from that.

radius: How much complexity was written into the Henry Hill character, and how much did you bring to the part?

LIOTTA: Well, obviously, you know the script is the Bible, so to speak. So everything is coming off of that. What I *did* do though when I got the part is I went and talked to Nick Pileggi, who wrote the book. It was actually called *Wiseguy*, but I think there was another film with that name so they changed it to *Goodfellas*. What Nick had was hours upon hours of cassettes of him interviewing Henry for the book. I was home—my mom was sick and passed away actually in the middle of *Goodfellas*—so I had a lot of time. Every time I would go into New York, I would get into the car and put the cassette in and listen to Henry. So that really fleshed everything out.

radius: Was that Scorsese’s idea?

LIOTTA: Marty didn’t really want me to talk Henry once I got the part. We were locked into what was in the script that he



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Orion Pictures/Sony Entertainment



and Nick wrote. But I listened to a lot of Henry's tapes. Almost through the whole thing, for hours, he's eating potato chips as he's giving the interview. It's very disturbing. He just chomped away with those potato chips.

radius: How did you get the part in *Goodfellas*?

LIOTTA: I've heard I was his first choice. But I've also heard different stories. I heard that Bob [DeNiro] mentioned something to Marty because he had seen *Something Wild*. *Something Wild* was such a great dynamic part at the beginning of my career. I was someone new, someone people started looking at. I saw Marty at the Venice Film Festival [in 1988]. I was there with the movie *Dominick and Eugene*. My dad and I were at the hotel in Venice and there was all this commotion—like 20, 30 people walking through the lobby. And in the middle of it was Marty.

He had a bunch of bodyguards around him because he was there for *The Last Temptation of Christ* and he was getting, I guess, a lot of heat from it and threats. I remember, I went right toward him and started reaching my arm out to get his attention, and the bodyguards just all threw me and pushed me back. I said, "No, no, no, I just want to talk to Marty, I just want to say, Hi." Marty said that's when he knew.

radius: That he wanted you to play Henry Hill? How so?

LIOTTA: I think because he'd seen *Something Wild* and I played such an aggressive character. And yet I didn't challenge the bodyguards back in the hotel. The reason why Henry Hill got to be who he was and do what he did was because he was on the outside, he did whatever he was told, and didn't make waves. Marty didn't tell me—it took a year 'til it finally happened. I would get calls from other actors who heard that I was in the running, actors who I had never talked to in my life. A lot of people wanted that part.

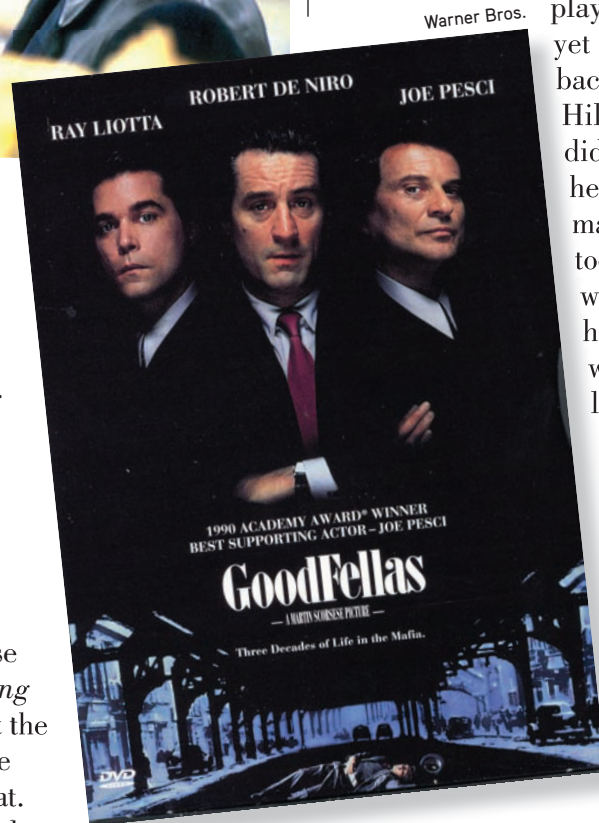
radius: New Jersey is celebrating the 100th anniversary of Frank Sinatra this year. Since you're one of the few people who have played him, what can you tell us about Sinatra that is perhaps underappreciated?

LIOTTA: Just that he was nice, giving guy. You hear about the edgy stuff, but there are as many things about how he helped

some of his friends who were down and out.

Whether it was money or giving them a job, he was a loyal and good guy.

radius: What advisers did you work with on the TV movie?



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LIOTTA: I talked to a lot of different people who knew him. I read so many books about him. And I listened to his music nonstop.

radius: Do you prefer playing a bad guy with a little good in him, or a good guy with a little bad in him?

LIOTTA: It's not that I like either, it's just how people are. I don't think anybody is just one thing all the time. You know, you're not making any judgments when you play these kinds of parts. You're trying to make them into human beings, flesh them out. Depending on how the writing is, sometimes it's in there and sometimes it's through homework. I've never been in a fight my whole life, so to play these kinds of edgy characters...to my friends? It's *hilarious*. So they're fun to do. But after a while, you just want to be the hero. You want to kiss the girl without having to choke her first.

radius: What role was the most fun for you to play—where can I find the great unheralded Ray Liotta performance.

LIOTTA: Ninety percent of them are fun! I did [*The Identical*], which nobody saw, where I played a preacher. That was probably closest to me in terms of being a more loving and nicer type of a guy. But I don't take roles to learn something about myself. You take movies because they're interesting and challenging. Someone just said, and I kind of agree, that you look for the script, the director, and the people that you are working with. If you can get at least two of those three things, you know it's a safe bet that the movie and the experience will be a good one.

