

The (Good) Life of Brian (Van Holt)



In many of his roles, the California surfer-turned-actor has had military or crime-fighting acronyms emblazoned across his back. But they slide right off. As ‘Butchie,’ the lovable, drug-addicted wave rider on HBO’s lamentably fallen *John from Cincinnati*, he showed his true thespian chops. Oh, and clothes hang just fine on his shoulders. Here, the unofficial Mayor of Venice, California holds forth as Chairman of the Board. *By Stinson Carter*

I don’t really believe I’m the ‘Mayor of Venice.’ My friends just call me that,” says 38-year-old Brian Van Holt, who recently showed both his acting and surfing skills in “John From Cincinnati,” the critically praised HBO series from “*Deadwood*” and “*NYPD Blue*” creator David Milch.

Whether or not Van Holt abides or suffers the “mayor” title, he doesn’t have to pay for his coffee at Stroh’s, the upscale Abbot Kinney deli around the corner from his loft. And when we stroll into the neighborhood French bistro after their posted lunch hours, the waiter lets it slide. Much later, at the chic tapas outpost Primitivo, he is greeted by name, and by primo back-porch table. Later still, the jam-packed Otheroom bar makes space for his sizable group. The bill is light.

Abbot Kinney runs from Washington to Main, between the yuppie-dom of Santa Monica and the sleaze of the Venice Beach boardwalk. And it’s a perfect middle ground between the two. Here you can buy a wetsuit or a Paul Smith suit, a slice of pizza or a slice of foie gras. And it’s a place that Van Holt had in his crosshairs years before he finally moved in and took up his post.

"I put myself through UCLA doing commercials, and there was a casting agency down here I used to come to," he says. "It was dead back then," he says of Venice, California. "You could play football in the street and park anywhere. But your car would get broken into for sure." These days, street football would end in a broken collarbone and a dented Prius hood. And if you can find a parking spot, your car will be perfectly safe on the street (perhaps, maybe; it's still got scruff). But it's an ideal place for an actor who needs to stay within Los Angeles' radius of influence, but who says, "if I wasn't close to the water, I think I'd go crazy."

The HBO gig was an obvious fit for Van Holt. "It was so close to home," he says, "Not just the surfing part, but also some of the family problems. I had to beg my way out of a contract with ABC so I could do it; I really owe those producers for letting me go."

Van Holt never knew he wasn't born a surfer boy; he was still a baby when his mother and the man he speaks of as his "biological father" moved him and his two sisters out to California from Illinois. The "man" soon beat a solo retreat back to the Midwest, leaving his family to fend for itself. For Van Holt's mother, that meant working in the shipping-and-receiving department of an Orange County clothing store by day, and getting her secretary certification at a local community college by night.

For Van Holt, it meant following the neighborhood latchkey kids into the ocean to stay out of trouble on land. "I taught myself how to surf when I was 8 years old. I wanted to surf even earlier, but I couldn't afford a board," he says. "Then my sister—she was only 18 or 19 at the time—saved

up and bought me a pintail, single-fin, baby-blue bomber." And within a few years, he was competing in national surfing competitions.

Growing up, Van Holt—who has dated actresses Amanda Peet and Connie Nielsen, but is now single—was a youngest sibling and an only son on top of his all-American good looks. So it's no surprise that when he was 17, the women of the house took the liberty of entering their blue-eyed, rock-jawed little darling into a local modeling contest. "My guy friends talked me into going, just so we could get free booze and hit on the model chicks that would be there. But I ended up winning the thing," he says. "I met my commercial agent there, and that was when I first got into acting."

A few years later, he started taking acting classes at the Beverly Hills Playhouse, which turned out to be a lot more L. Ron Hubbard than Stanislavski. To his credit, he got kicked out when, he says, "they identified me as a PTS, or 'Potential Trouble Source.'" Like any other actor trying to get a "first break"—devoid of any nepotism cards up his sleeve—he struggled for years, cobbling together a modest income with "mostly bit parts and commercials," he says. "Those, and a couple of gems like *Flipper* (with Jessica Alba) and *A Very Brady Sequel!*" With typical showbiz irony, it wasn't until later, after he gave up on Los Angeles and moved to New York, that his Hollywood career finally got a proper launch. "I had to go to New York to make it in L.A.," he says.

Two dozen television and film roles and a decade later, Van Holt's acting work has yielded a solid career, and the family cheering him on now includes a good portion of his new neighborhood.



While setting up for the fashion photo shoot accompanying this story in the garage beneath his loft, a surfing pal of his stops by on his way to the Venice break...on his bicycle, carrying a board. Another friend—the manager and chef of the local barbecue shop—pulls up in his mint-condition, low-rider, circa-1980s white Cadillac to see what all the action’s about. Both friends are pulled into the shoot, and then an audience forms: Neighbors wave, all of them on a first-name basis with Van Holt; local vagrants shuffle over and stare, but they’re on that first name basis, too. A dapper fellow named “Luigi” sticks around. Beers are popped, smokes are lit. This is not hippie-dippy Venice, but the real deal—a dash of gritty, celluloid, and chill. The barbecue shop guy heads to his kitchen to open it up and, a little bit later, make the crew some food. Fashion shoots are typically a tense battle of egos and false praise. This is downright fun. And one can only thank Van Holt for creating the copasetic environment.

The 1972 Triumph Daytona 500 motorcycle he owns seems like a typical “toy” for a guy like Van Holt. And one would assume that the models straddling it for the shoot with him are not the first to do so. But the actor offers up a levelheaded qualifier: He has not ridden it since his best friend died on a motorcycle, and doesn’t plan to anytime soon. Van Holt’s garage is empty save for the Triumph and a few surfboards with their entourage of board bags, wetsuits, leashes, guitar cases, etcetera. His old Ford F250 pickup is parked by the curb on Electric Avenue, and draws a steady flow of offers from contractors manning the surge of loft buildings that have followed Abbot Kinney’s re-gentrification. “I’ll never sell that truck,” says Van Holt. What the contractors don’t know is that the old pickup and the sleek concrete loft are not an accidental pairing. Van Holt didn’t move here to run away from inland Orange County where he grew up, but to run away from L.A. in the direction of home. “I came down to the beach to get away from The Business,” he says. “And I chose Venice because my dad always used to talk about it,” he adds, while clarifying that he’s talking about the man his mother worked for as a secretary and later married. “I got to know him when he was just my mom’s boss. He and I joke and say he fell in love with me first and my mom second. We have a really close bond; he’s my real dad as far as I’m concerned.”

Van Holt doesn’t milk the I-Lived-In-A-Car-With-My-Sister phase of his life for street cred. Nor does he let his success cause him to forget



it. He knows there’s no shame in working for a paycheck, saying, “I did this silly horror movie *House of Wax* so I could buy my Venice loft.” But he also knows that when a role comes around that really moves him, he has to go for it even if it means putting your reputation with a major studio on the line. Like Abbot Kinney itself, he occupies a perfect middle ground: enough focus to make a career out of acting, but enough perspective to know that things like his surfing bug and his “mayor” post could come first. All things, in due time. And as the sun cuts out and the photo shoot wraps, hickory smoke drifts over from his buddy’s barbecue joint across the street—the official call to order for the unofficial City Council.