

# Ashton Kutcher overcomes media images to forge his own identity

By Barry Koltnow  
The Orange County Register

Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber, who wrote and directed "The Butterfly Effect," worked on the dark, time-travel drama for seven years. They thought of it as their baby.

Understandably, they felt very protective toward it, and the last thing they wanted to do was turn it over to the goofball from "Dude, Where's My Car?"

"Yes, I bought the myth," an apologetic Gruber said. "I saw him as a bimbo."

It wasn't just "Dude, Where's My Car" that gave the filmmakers pause when it came to casting Ashton Kutcher as a dramatic lead in their film, which opens Friday.

There was the long-running television sitcom "That '70s Show." And the MTV celebrity prankster show "Punk'd" didn't help. Then there were the tabloids, which had a field day with Kutcher's rocking-chair-robbing romance with 41-year-old Demi Moore.

The lowbrow comedy work, combined with the sensational headlines and endless paparazzi photos of the happy couple and her three children attending movie premieres, frolicking on the slopes and posing with Moore's smirking ex-husband Bruce Willis, were just too much to ignore.

"There was no way he was going to be in this movie," Gruber said. "Then I met him, and I did a 180 (degree turn)."

The 25-year-old Kutcher leans

back on a sofa in his Los Angeles hotel suite after nervously lighting another in a series of Lucky Strike cigarettes. But a visitor suspects that he is less nervous about the interview and more concerned over whether his favorite team (the Iowa native is rooting for the Carolina Panthers) will win the overtime NFL playoff game being shown on TV.

In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that this interview was conducted while both parties were watching the football game.

The story about the directors' initial concerns over his dramatic-acting capabilities doesn't faze him at all. He says that he's grown accustomed to people underestimating him. They underestimate him, he says, because they don't understand him.

"People are afraid of what they don't understand, and they don't understand me," he explained. "They don't understand my friendship with P. Diddy (rap star Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs). They keep asking, 'Why are those two guys friends?'"

"If I was hanging out with a white guy my own age who was on a TV sitcom, they'd understand. But because I'm hanging out with a black man from the rap world, people freak out. They think there must be something wrong with it."

"The same goes for my relationship with Demi. People don't understand it, so it freaks them out."

The couple met eight months ago at a dinner in New York City at about the time he was hosting "Saturday Night Live" and she was in town after wrapping the "Charlie's Angels" movie. Their meeting might have had something to do with their mutual

friend P. Diddy.

From the moment they were spotted in public lip-lock they became fodder for the tabloid gristmill. And it has continued unabated, with occasional breaks thanks to Brittany's marital foibles and the continuing J. Lo and Ben circus.

"It's the one competition where you desperately want to come in second," he said of the tabloid covers.

The 6-foot-3-inch Kutcher has grown weary of the constant paparazzi attention, but he is cautious about complaining too much.

"I know it's looked at as a privileged problem," he said. "I understand that. I get it."

"But they literally sit at the end of my driveway and wait for us to leave the house. Then they follow us all day, everywhere we go. The only difference between a stalker and a paparazzi is that the paparazzi is holding a camera."

"Would I like it to change? Yes. Would I like there to be a law prohibiting this kind of behavior? I don't know. We already have too much censorship in our society."

"I really don't think we should have to pass a law giving someone a minute of privacy. If people just respected other people, we wouldn't need a law like that."

The son of factory workers (his dad worked at the Cheerios plant; his mom was employed by Proctor & Gamble making Head & Shoulders shampoo), Kutcher was born and raised in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, but the family moved to an 80-acre farm in

tiny Homestead, Iowa, when he was 13.

In 7th grade, he caught the acting bug when he played a thief in a school play and the audience laughter gave him "instant gratification."

Following high school, he enrolled at the University of Iowa as a biochemical engineering major, but he dropped out after one year when he won a modeling contest in a shopping mall. First prize was a trip to New York City, where he signed with an agent.

"That's my story," Kutcher says with a laugh, "and I'm sticking to it."

Although he found work as a model (for the likes of Calvin Klein, Gucci and Abercrombie & Fitch), the life of a male model is not as glamorous or prosperous as their female counterparts.

In fact, at one point he was living on instant soup.

"It was my starving model stage," he said. "But there was no way I was going to quit or call home for money. There was no way I could tell my parents that quitting college to pursue modeling was a mistake. That wasn't an option."

He appeared in a New York University student film, which led to an audition for the movie "Varsity Blues." He had to borrow money for the subway to get to the audition.

Obviously, he lost the part to James Van Der Beek, but it did get him a trip to Los Angeles to test for an NBC sitcom. He didn't get that role either, but his agent sent him to another audition the same day for a new Fox comedy called "That '70s Show." The rest, as they say, is tabloid history.

He said he ended "Punk'd" because he felt the short attention span of the MTV audience would soon spell disaster anyway, but he is developing new shows for MTV and Fox.

"I want to constantly do new things to challenge myself and surprise other people," he said. "That's why I did this new movie."

"The Butterfly Effect" (it derives its name from the environmental theory that if a butterfly flutters its wings on one side of the globe, it can cause a natural disaster on the other) stars Kutcher as a man who discovers how to go back in time to relive traumatic moments in his past that he blocked out as a child.

"I thought it was a cool title and a cool character," he said, "and the movie only cost \$9 million to make. Even if I fall flat on my face, I think I can make back their money."

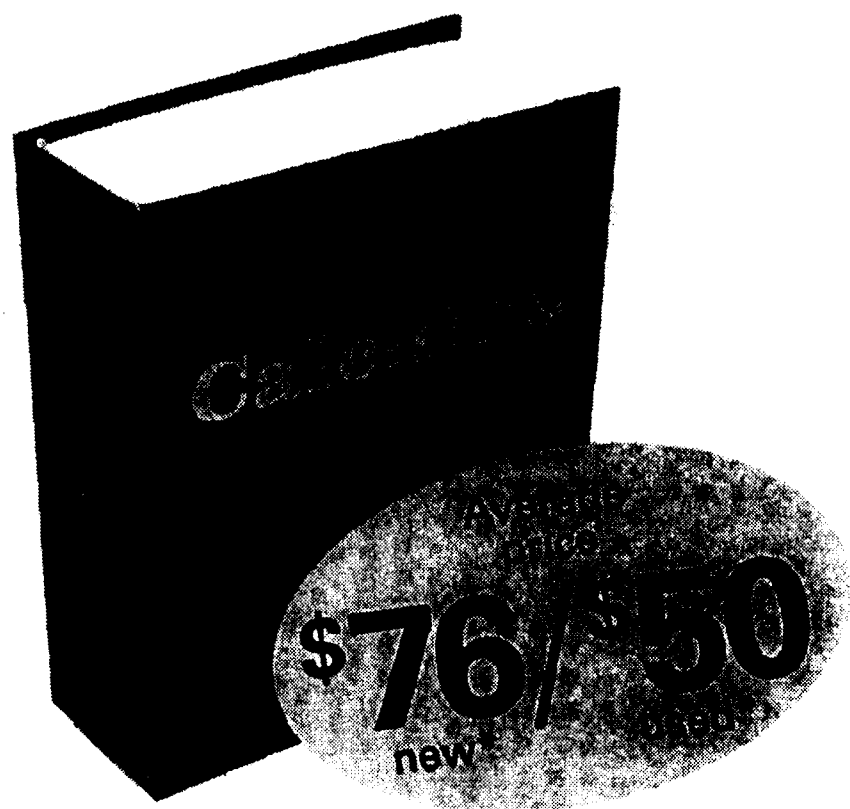
"There will be people who won't like, but maybe some people will like it. I'm willing to take that chance. This was a deliberate attempt to do something new; it was not a deliberate attempt to change people's image of me."

As for that image fostered by the tabloid press, Kutcher said he has learned to live with it.

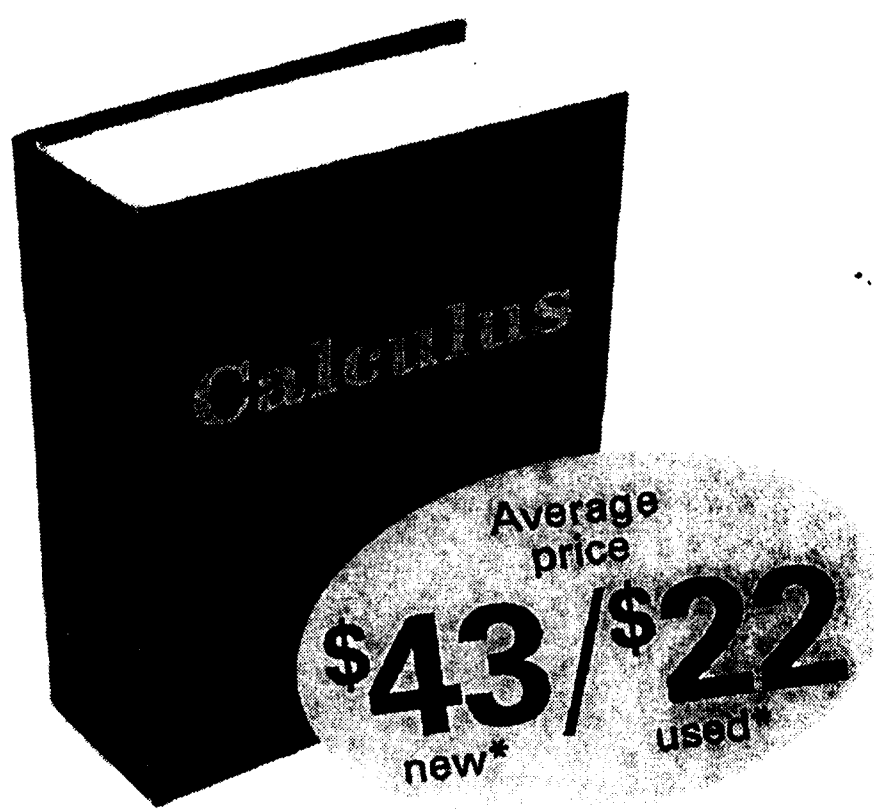
"They really should write a handbook for new celebrities," he said. "It's all kind of surprising what happens to someone in my position."

"Personally, I don't read the stories about myself. I don't watch the TV shows. I know what the truth is. I go to work, do my job and have a wonderful relationship. I just live my life, like everyone else, only people choose to write about mine."

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