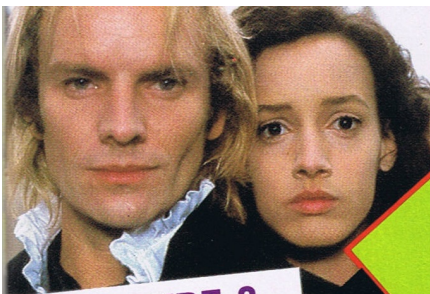


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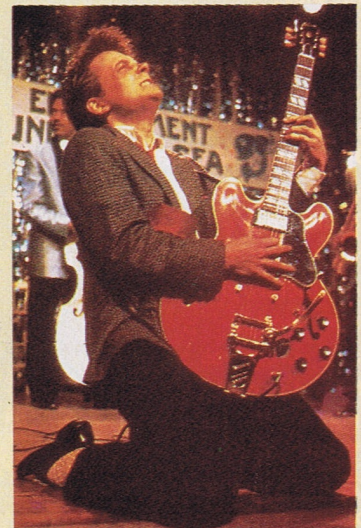
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STARLOG PROFILE

Michael J. Fox

"I Was a Teenage Time-Tripper"

The actor who plays "Family Ties" Alex Keaton takes a chronological cruise "Back to the Future" and dribbles down center court as a hirsute hoopster, "Teen Wolf."

By LEE GOLDBERG

When teenager Marty McFly took a wacko scientist's modified DeLorean on a drive, he traveled 30 years into the past. When Michael J. Fox did it, he went back just six weeks.

Back to the Future, the story of Marty's jaunt to the 1950s, had already been shot

once—with Eric (*Mask*) Stoltz as the star. But six weeks into shooting, director Robert Zemeckis, executive producers Steven Spielberg, Frank Marshall and Kathleen Kennedy and producers Neil Canton and Bob Gale dismissed Stoltz.

And turned back the clock. They started the film again, from scratch.

"At that point, if we had our choice of anyone in the world to be Marty," Canton says, "everyone agreed it would be Michael J. Fox."

The 23-year-old had been considered for the part the first time around but was passed over due to his commitment to the NBC sitcom *Family Ties*. The catch was still there.

This time, though, the producers didn't care if Fox had to divide his energies between *Family Ties* and *Back to the Future*. He was right for the role—and with a July release date looming, they didn't have time to search

for second-best.

Spielberg passed along a copy of the *Back to the Future* screenplay to his friend, *Family Ties* producer Gary David Goldberg.

"I went up to Gary's office and he gave me this script and said, 'They're going to call you tomorrow,'" Fox explains. "He had set up with Steven that it would be copacetic with him if I did both the series and the movie."

Fox was excited, but was "really afraid" his film and TV performances would suffer from the pressure of doing both at once. "But what could I do? I wasn't going to say, 'Geek Steve, I'm bushed.' You *don't* turn a Steven Spielberg movie down."

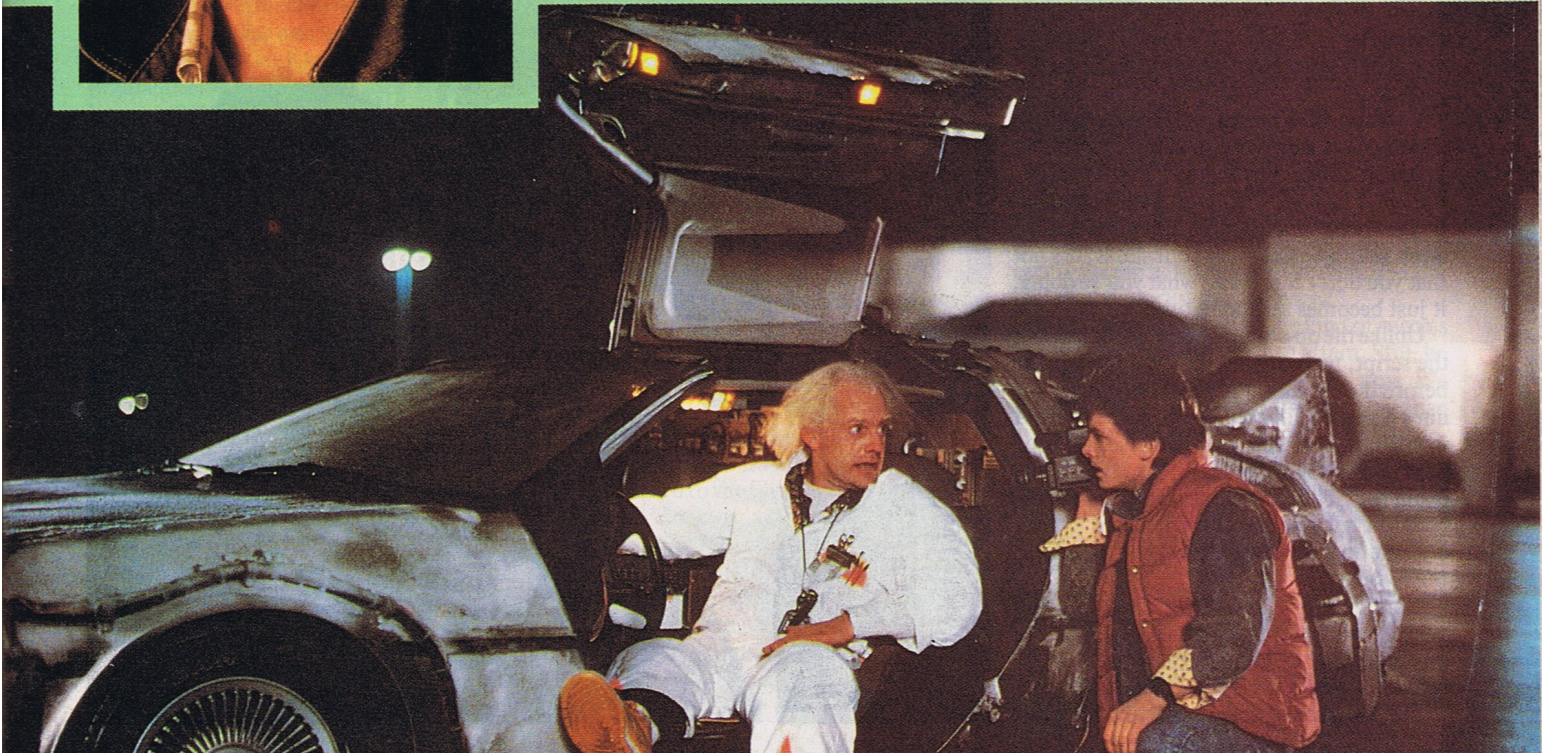
It was a torturous schedule. Fox worked on the series during the day and *Back to the Future* at night "and I also had a job at 7-11 in the Valley," he jokes. "It was intense.

LEE GOLDBERG, *STARLOG's* West Coast Correspondent, is the author of *.357 Vigilante #2: Make Them Pay* (as Ian Ludlow, Pinnacle, \$2.95). He visited the set of *Back to the Future* in issue #97.

Michael J. Fox plays a time-troubled Marty McFly. Getting to the past was easy, now how to get *Back to the Future*?

"Would you buy a used time machine from this man?" is the question confronting Marty (Fox) when he meets with eccentric Professor Brown (Christopher Lloyd).

ALL BACK TO THE FUTURE PHOTOS: RALPH NELSON/COPYRIGHT 1985 UNIVERSAL CITY STUDIOS





In the early days of rock & roll, Marty out-Elvises "The King" to wow the crowd at a high-school dance.

felt. "I would wince a little when someone would suggest where to put the camera and someone else would say 'Last time we did this scene...'" And it's no coincidence that Marty McFly and *Family Ties*' Alex Keaton share more than a passing resemblance.

"I think the similarities in the characters had much to do with me being here. They wanted someone with Alex's kind of energy," Fox suggests. "I never read for them, they just watched *Family Ties* and called me up. Alex has a quality they wanted."

While Fox concedes *Back to the Future*'s premise may be a bit stale, he finds it easy to defend. "It's really fun, you know? I don't know who said it or in what context, but there are only 10 stories. So, when you read a lot of scripts, you see the same themes all the time.

"What made *Back to the Future* interesting was that while some of the themes were familiar, I had never seen them put together in quite the same way," he adds. "There were things happening that I had seen before, but never in this juxtaposition."

Werewolf High

Fox wasn't aching for a movie career and scouring Hollywood for feature roles when *Back to the Future* came his way. "Hey, I'm working," he says. "I'm not looking to make some breakthrough. What's to break through to and what's to break away from? I'm working and real happy with what I'm doing.

"I was very comfortable with *Family Ties*. It's my job, you know? I wasn't thinking of doing a movie. But when something like this project comes along, you don't ignore it. The

Heading Back to the Future, Marty (Fox) bids farewell to his parents-to-be (Crispin Glover, Lea Thompson).

Managing time just got insane. I got four hours of sleep a night. But I just toughed it through.

"The positive way to look at the challenge was to say, 'I'll be very conscious to *not* let the pressure affect my work.' It may have, though," he says. "I *know* it didn't on *Family Ties* because doing the show week after week gets to be like tying your shoes. It's not that you don't care about what you're doing, it just becomes second nature."

Unlike the on-set movie method of reading the script, memorizing the lines, and going before the camera, "it's real easy to get the lines down on *Family Ties* because that's a rewrite process and you rehearse for four days before you shoot on Friday night," Fox explains. "Though on Saturday, I probably couldn't tell you line one. I just had to concentrate on giving everything I had to *Back to the Future*."

He didn't give any thought to replacing another actor and doing scenes everyone else on the set had lived through before. "I just looked at it as a fresh job," he says.

Yet, the spirit of the previous shooting was



only other film that I've starred in is a little one, a werewolf movie, which I did *not* do for any other reason except to be a werewolf. They're calling it now, much to my chagrin, *Teen Wolf*, which really upsets me because the movie is better than that."

"Most people advised me not to do the movie, but that's why I did it," Fox says. "I had five weeks off from *Family Ties* and along came this low-budget werewolf film. It gave me a chance to see how movies were made."

"Most of the scripts I get are about two guys who go to Tijuana to get laid, or about a guy and girl going to New York and they screw all the way. This was a movie about a really lousy basketball player who turns into a werewolf and I thought, 'What a really weird movie.'"

So, Fox gave the producers a call and arranged a meeting. "They were really earnest and really pitched it, so I said, 'What the hell, let's do it.' I liked it, it has its moments."

"But by the time *Teen Wolf* comes out," he adds, "*Back to the Future* will be smoking along, I hope."

Michael J. Fox doesn't seem to have much to worry about. He has a hit TV series and two feature films to his credit. But in his short, albeit meteoric, career, he has had his lean days.

Fox is one of five children of an Army officer and a payroll clerk. He dropped out of high school to play a 10-year-old in the Canadian TV series *Leo and Me*. A small role in *Letters from Frank*, a TV movie shot in Vancouver starring Art Carney, led to queries from Hollywood agents.

He moved to Hollywood when he was 18 and landed roles in Walt Disney's *Midnight Madness* and guest-shots on *Palmerston USA*, *Lou Grant* and *Family*. Between TV appearances, however, Fox sold his furniture to keep the cash flowing and ate more than his share of macaroni and cheese.

But then he was cast as conservative high school student Alex Keaton in *Family Ties*, a dramatic series concept for CBS that mutated into a NBC situation comedy about liberal parents raising not-so-liberal kids.

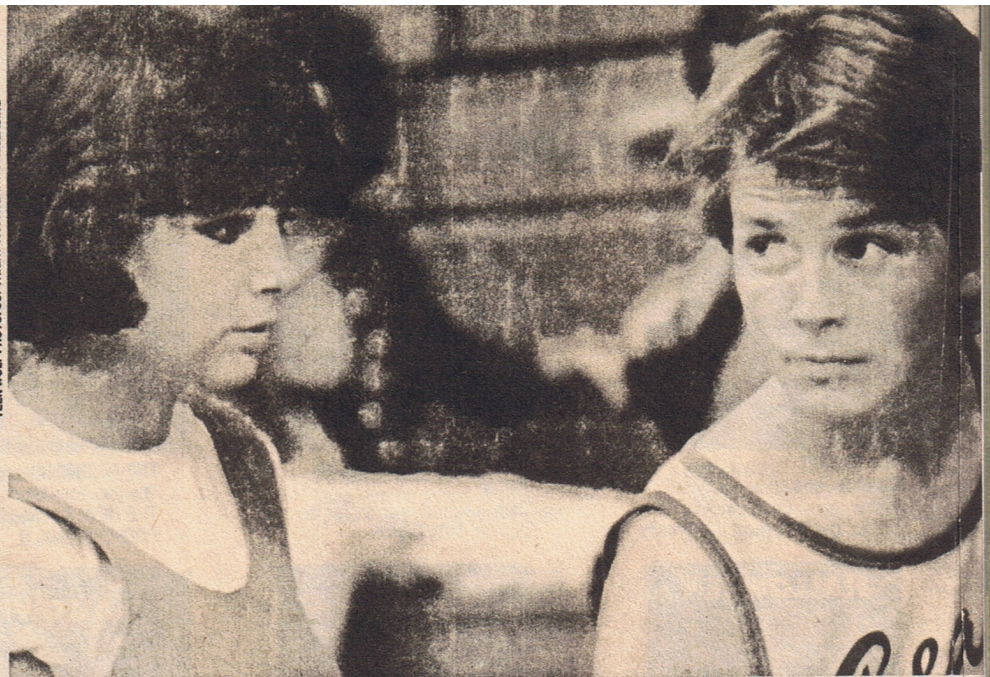
The producers have since scuttled that premise and relied on the comedic elements inherent in any suburban middle-class family with teenage kids.

"We grew from that original concept. It was something to tell the network boys when the producers sat down at the table to talk about the series," Fox says. "Once a series gets into its second and third year, if it doesn't move beyond that initial pitch, it's in a lot of trouble."

After a rocky start, *Family Ties* gained momentum and now, with the help of the blockbuster *Cosby Show* that precedes it, *Family Ties* is a bonafide success going into its fourth year.

"Survival is a moot point now," Fox brags. And he has every reason to: he is largely responsible for the series' popularity.

And, although *Family Ties* is three years old and covers much of the same ground that



Scott (Fox) receives a pep talk from his best friend Boof (Susan Ursitti) just before things get hairy for *Teen Wolf*.

other sitcoms tread, Fox says the quality is holding up.

"It's real tough. Many people don't realize how much effort is involved for four writers and five actors to be entirely consistent," Fox says. "We have our 'A' shows that I'll put up against any show on TV, and there are times we just have *bad* shows. For the most part, I think we're batting over 500, which is what I want."

Although Fox plays just one of the three TV children of Meredith Baxter-Birney and Michael Gross, he has shaped his supporting role into what is now the series' focal point.

"It started to happen towards the end of the first season, mostly because we always seemed to be after *Facts of Life*," he says. "Alex is the most well-defined character and the writers wrote to their strength which was that character, who was well-rounded in a way that they created. They did a good thing and I was fortunate enough to be playing the character. I enjoy that, but I still think the show's strength lies in the family."

Teen Lowdown

Nevertheless, Michael J. Fox is now the teen idol of giggly girls everywhere. He just shrugs it off because "it's kind of beside the point. It's not an accomplishment or an achievement, it's nothing," he says. "Your work is an accomplishment and you can hold that up proudly. How white your teeth are and how blue your eyes are have absolutely nothing to do with it."

Though Fox doesn't find it hard dealing with the fan adulation, he knows enough that if "I put on a tie, comb my hair real nice, and trounce down to the Sherman Oaks Galleria at three o'clock on a Saturday afternoon, yeah, I'm gonna get bugged. I would be a real asshole, too, so I don't do that."

"It's not Beatle time, I don't get chased down streets. Much of that is hype," he adds. "If you *do* run into that kind of response, you just sit and talk to the kids and pretty soon they figure out you're just a person. If they

still think you're neat, that's great."

Fox tries to "just live my life like I always did" but being a teen star does have its benefits. "I can go to cities I've never been to before and I've got friends there."

The bad side is that every move he makes is closely watched by fan magazines and scandal sheets. And when they are exaggerating the truth, they make it up.

"I just read in the *National Enquirer* that I saved a dolly grip's life. It said MICHAEL FOX ADMINISTERS CPR ON CREW MEMBER. I mean, what are you going to do?" Fox asks. "I called them up and said, 'That's *not* true.' They said, 'Yes, it is.' So, I said, 'I was supposedly there and I think I would know.' But they said they would print it anyway. So, what are you going to do? You can't get excited about it. I mean, they could have said I raped and plundered a junior high in El Monte."

His popularity hasn't created friction between Fox and his family in Canada. He says they're "really gassed" about his stardom because they are "so far removed from it that it's still magical."

"The things I might take as everyday and average are still really exciting to them," he says. "They still find it unbelievable that I'm working with Meredith Baxter-Birney. They can't relate to it. So, it's fun for them and I'm real glad it works out that way."

At 23, Fox has achieved the kind of success many actors toil a lifetime to attain. Still, he has his dreams, though "right now it's strange to talk about dreams because everything is so great," he says. "But, someday, I think I would like to produce television, direct films, and act in theater. And if I could do all those things, it would be great."

But he'll stick with *Family Ties* "as long as it goes. I'm not tired of it at all. It's my bread and butter, it's the most fun I've ever had working, and it's an accomplishment for all of us," Michael J. Fox says. "I'm real proud of it. I wouldn't leave *Family Ties* for anything. No way." ★