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Earl meets Alvin

Jason Lee brings his nice-guy persona to the 'Chipmunks' movie **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

Actor Jason Lee is promoting his new family film "Alvin and the Chipmunks" (opening Friday), and that means being grilled by the media. For the moment, the media is represented by three middle-school girls from Long Island who've won the opportunity to interview the actor. Armed with glasses of milk, they pepper Lee with questions, and though they know him from his voice work in the movies "Underdog" and "The Incredibles," they're unaware that he apparently is on some TV show called "My Name Is Earl."

"You've never seen it?" asks Lee politely. "You should watch it sometime. It's a really good show."

The entire scene is sweet, just like the family film he's promoting and indeed just like the 37-year-old California native's entire career. Since his wry but kind-eyed breakout in director Kevin Smith's movies, he's always sought out good karma by seeking out good roles.

In "Alvin," Lee plays Dave Seville, the human straight man to the titular rodents. In this CGI-spiked update, a struggling musician whose life gets turned upside down when three talking, singing chipmunks — Simon, Theodore and Alvin — pop up in his life. They become pop sensations when Dave writes them a holiday tune called

"The Chipmunk Song (Christmas Don't Be Late)." There is, of course, an evil record company executive (David Cross) who must be thwarted before Dave and the gang figure out how to live as a family, though not before Dave hollers "Alvin. Alvin! ALVIN!!!!"

The goodwill Lee brings to the film is also evident on his hit NBC sitcom "My Name Is Earl." Though it revolves around a one-time criminal, his foul-tempered ex-wife, an illegal alien and a guy in the witness protection program, it, too, is a charming, sweet-natured affair.

Throw in his Zen-filled rocker in 2000's "Almost Famous," his skateboarding millionaire in the 1999 comedy "Mumford" and his loyal best-bud to Ben Affleck in 1997's "Chasing Amy," and you see a pattern. Nice-guy becomes him. Or would he jump at the chance to play a serial killer?

"I wouldn't go out of my way to play a serial killer," muses Lee, who nonetheless played a gleeful demon in Smith's 1999 religious lark "Dogma." "I think there are other ways to challenge myself as an actor without going to the extremes that other actors feel they have to go to. You can do it comedically.

"There are many challenges and in different forms. 'Earl' is a challenge — the challenge of having to maintain that kind of schedule. To maintain patience with the

mustache, which gets annoying, as petty as that seems don't necessarily tell my agent I only want to do sweet funny or endearing things."

So it wasn't a plan to avoid bitter or cynical roles. B Lee — who has a 4-year-old son named Pilot Inspektor with his longtime girlfriend, actress Beth Riesgraf — is still reaping the karmic benefits ... he thinks.

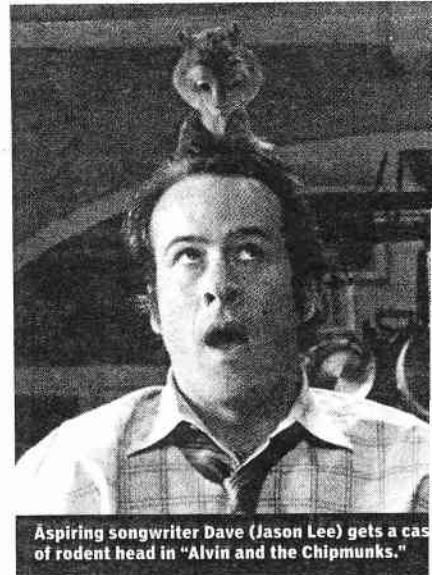
"Maybe it's a good thing that no matter how angry I get, I'm still not the [jerky guy]," he says. "Or maybe it's a bad thing. Maybe it means I would never be able to play Bill the Butcher in 'Gangs of New York' or something like that. Maybe the audience just wouldn't buy. Maybe people would just say, 'Oh, that's Earl.'"

For the moment, though, Lee is not Earl, since the writers strike has put TV shows on hiatus and given him an unexpected vacation. A huge fan of road trips, he's planning to head out in pursuit of another of his passions: photography. And along the way, he'll probably be listening to the band Midlake, a critically acclaimed group steeped in '70s music like Fleetwood Mac that he's been championing for years. Talking about Midlake's driving force — singer and songwriter Tim Smith — Lee reveals what's important to himself as well, and what may be the fuel for his laidback nice-guyness.

"What Tim Smith is into, he is very passionately into. You have a lot of things these days passed off as ironic. That's sort of an excuse to like something that would otherwise be considered ridiculous or campy," says Lee, who's known to appreciate the work of Burt Reynolds and achieved fame as a skateboarder long before the sport became an X Games fixture.

"Just to see someone so unapologetically passionate about this music that really inspires him — it's not for cool points. You can sense and feel the sincerity." ♦

I don't tell my agent I only want to do sweet things.



Aspiring songwriter Dave (Jason Lee) gets a case of rodent head in "Alvin and the Chipmunks."