

'90210's' prodigal son returns to the old zip code



Lucky Luke in the arms of old '90210' flame Sherry Stringfield (left) and Jennie Garth (right) who plays current on-screen squeeze Kelly.

By MICHAEL GLITZ

LAST night I met Tom Wolfe, says Luke Perry, the once- and future Dylan McKay of "Beverly Hills, 90210" and fan of Wolfe's book about the original Mercury astronauts, *The Right Stuff*.

When Perry easily admits Wolfe had no idea who he was — the writer's 12-year-old son is the real fan — you get a sense of the self-deprecating wit that kept him sane during the frenzied early success of Fox's longest-running drama.

Some of that frenzy may return this Wednesday when the adored, wealthy Dylan returns after three years with his rugged charm intact.

His old flame Kelly (Jennie Garth) tries to convince herself she doesn't care. "You can't just reappear and expect me to drop everything," she says. "Why not?" he responds.

Why not, indeed? The 32-year-old Perry is in New York running the talk show gauntlet and he's happily surprised by the attention his return is stirring.

"People never quit calling me Dylan in real life," he says, but he wasn't so certain fans would care that he was back in the zip code that made him famous.

"I didn't think they'd know. I thought they'd flip on the show and say, 'Oh, he's back on?' But it's been a little bigger than that and that's good."

His decision to return couldn't come at a better time for the Aaron Spelling soap. Its season premiere was the lowest in eight years. Original castmember Jason Priestley rode off into the night — in a flashy sports car, naturally — on last week's 250th episode.

Perry's return tonight also marks the exit of Tiffani-Amber Thiessen, who plays the uber bitch Valerie. And starting it down is the WB's young upstart "Dawson's Creek."

"90210" handily beats "Creek" in head-to-head competition, but the newer show is stronger in young teens, the audience of the future. Besides, "90210" has produced so many episodes that there isn't any more money to be made in syndication. So here's the apparent plan.

Perry juices it up for at least 12 episodes this season. The show ends next spring in style, with Spelling prepaging "Beverly Hills, 90210: The New Class." To Luke

Luke who's back

over sometime next season, probably in the same timeslot.

Meanwhile, Perry gets a shot at a sitcom or drama on Fox, as soon as he finds the right vehicle.

"90210" is a smoothly running vehicle itself, regularly bringing on new castmembers to keep things speeding along. (The nice thing about a primetime soap is that, for example, if your car breaks down, you can be certain the grease monkey called in to fix it will be a stunningly attractive guy or girl.)

That makes Perry's return a combination of class reunion and transferring to a new school halfway through the academic year.

But he dismisses any notion of resentment or jealousy from the show's new regulars who might consider him homing in on their territory. "There's not too much of that kind of stuff, we keep it to a minimum," Perry says.

"I think at this point, everybody just wants what's best for the show. Earlier on, there might have been some problems like that, but not now."

That's probably a veiled reference to Sherry Stringfield, who once played the tempestuous Brenda Walsh and had more than her fair share of tabloid rumors and on-set arguments. She was fired at the beginning of the '94 season, but has since made up with Spelling and is at the center of the WB's "Charmed." The left-

For Perry's part, he was always polite about the show, other than a little testiness over the never-ending queries about whether he stayed in touch with his old castmates. ("Do you stay in touch with everyone you went to high school with?" he'd respond.)

Married for five years and the father of one child, he's always maturely acknowledged what the show's done for him.

And Perry always left open the possibility of coming back.

"Anybody who tells you exactly what they're going to do when they leave a show and what's going to happen, they're an idiot," he says bluntly. "They don't. Nobody knows the future."

His model behavior has paid off. "You always hear that the people you step on on the way up are the ones that kick the s--- out of you on the way down," Perry says. "But I didn't step on too many people. I'm finding that out now and it's a good feeling."

Not that his departure in '96 wasn't a blow to Spelling. The show's mastermind — and the most prolific TV producer of all time — had said that he felt closer to Perry than any other member of the show.

"He was terribly hurt when I left the show," says Perry.

"I never intended that, but I just wasn't able to communicate to him what needed to happen to my character in order for me to stay. We just weren't able to come to an agreement. I've been

Perry dismisses any suggestion of resentment from the show's regulars. "Everybody just wants what's best for the show," he says.

"Look," he says. "I have had my ups and downs with Aaron and there are more ups and downs yet to come, I'm sure. It's just the nature of our relationship. But at the heart of all of it, is mutual respect and that occurs rarely in this business."

Some of that respect surely comes from the success Perry has had on his own.

He's a prodigal son, but he doesn't come back empty handed: Perry starred in the successful miniseries "Robin Cook's Invasion," the well-received Showtime movie "Root," and had an amusing turn on the ABC sitcom "Spin City" as the old flame of Michael Boatman's Carter Heywood.

On the big screen, his success has been more modest.

Buffy, the Vampire Slayer — released while he was still on "90210" — flopped badly, though it's now perhaps the brightest show on TV.

"The genius Joss Whedon," he says about the movie's screenwriter and creative force behind the series. "If Joss had directed the movie, it would have made \$100 million."

Perry later gained kudos for his performance in "Normal Life" with Ashley Judd, but the tense drama never found an audience on screen where it belongs. "The studio had their hand on my shoulder about not to release it,"

he says now.

And while the rodeo-based "5 Seconds" was only a moderate commercial and critical success, it never would have been made at all without Perry's passion and four-year commitment to the project.

Still, he can use the boost of "90210" right now just as much as it can use him. A huge science-fiction fan, Perry had a small role in "The Fifth Element." But as far as the new "Star Wars" trilogy goes, "I couldn't even get George [Lucas] on the phone to beg."

It won't be tough convincing people his character Dylan hasn't been watching the show. "I never watched the show," he points out.

Did he make any attempt to find out what's been happening to catch up on the plotlines? "No, because my character wouldn't know, so it makes no sense for me to know," he says. "And who's got the time to sit around and hater to all that? Everybody telling me their individual stories? Good!"

That settled, as Perry prepares to leave, it's time to be sweet. "I'll be back on the screen where it belongs. I'll be back on the screen where it belongs. I'll be back on the screen where it belongs. Keep me off of Page Six, pal."