
MIZZOU

The magazine of
the Mizzou Alumni Association

[Home](#) » [Summer 2010](#) » [Features](#) » Home-grown Hamm

Home-grown Hamm

Mad Men's Jon Hamm got his start at Mizzou

Story by Nancy Moen

A guy walks into an advertising agency in the 1960s, and his life changes forever. It's a slick, fictional scenario that resonates in real life for Jon Hamm, who walked onto the set of AMC television's award-winning drama *Mad Men* and into stardom.

Hamm, BA '93, plays Don Draper, the show's main character, a suave, hard-living advertising executive with a failed marriage and a mysterious past. While President John F. Kennedy confronts the Cuban missile crisis, Draper faces his own problems in a haze of cigarette smoke and alcohol.

Set in New York City, the Sunday-evening series about the advertising world quickly sold critics on its fine acting and witty scripts. A growing buzz hailed *Mad Men's* period-piece cleverness and proclaimed Hamm an A-list actor.

The resulting rush of major awards — Golden Globe, Emmy, Screen Actors Guild and Peabody — highlighted the series' successful first season in 2007 and spread through the third.



In his role as *Mad Men's* Don Draper, Jon Hamm — with chiseled good looks and acting prowess — earned a Golden Globe Award in 2008. But few fans know the accomplished actor got his start at Mizzou, where friends and faculty enjoyed his down-home demeanor. Photo by Frank Ockenfels/AMC

Loyal viewers tend to scrutinize *Mad Men* for details in dialogue, costuming and set design that reflect the period. Draper and his male colleagues wear well-tailored suits and fashionable thin ties. They work in walnut-paneled offices with stocked bars and stacked secretaries nearby. At social events, the wives of executives serve food and drinks that were popular circa 1960: martinis, deviled eggs and the obligatory relish tray.

The center of interest for the show is Hamm, a multiple-award nominee and winner of a 2008 Golden Globe for best actor in a TV drama series. The St. Louis native thought the *Mad Men* script was the best he had ever read. It was a good call on his part.

Viewer feedback indicates the show resonates with people in the industry, Hamm says. For many ad professionals, the 1960s have become “a romanticized time when things were great. Our show helps disabuse people of that idea.”

Hamm survived audition after audition for the role of Draper, thanks to his obvious talent and a résumé listing some impressive TV roles: a romantic firefighter on *Providence* that Hamm turned into a series regular; a police inspector on *The Division*; a semi-regular spot on *The Unit*; and guest appearances on *CSI: Miami*, *Related*, *Numb3rs* and *The Sarah Silverman Program*.

In a *Vanity Fair* article, Alan Taylor, director of the *Mad Men* pilot, said he and creator Matthew Weiner nearly rejected Hamm for the lead role because of what they called reverse prejudice — they thought he was too good looking.

The public has proclaimed no such qualms.

It's Miller time

The unknown Jonathan Daniel Hamm cut his acting teeth on productions in MU's Department of Theatre with Professor Jim Miller as his mentor.

“Jon has the intellect to fill the screen,” Miller says. “He was the most intellectual actor I have had in 30 years of teaching.”

Miller describes Hamm as a throwback to the silver screen's leading men of the past and “iconically handsome.” He's a Gary Cooper or Cary Grant in comparison to today's “leading boys,” Miller says.

“Think of those superstars, including Henry Fonda. They were forceful even when they weren't doing anything. Jon is a man in the classic sense. He looks mature, he's a regular guy's guy, not a narcissist about his looks, and he has talent and depth.”

Hamm studied as part of a class that Miller considers his most talented group of students ever. Miller not only



Above: Jon Hamm stars as the romantic lead with Kami Rodgers in MU's 1992 production of *Cabaret*. Below: Hamm, in hat, with Marvin Davis, left, Michael Miller, in black vest and Michael Cargill, A&S '94, in Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, produced in 1993. Photos by Mike

recognized Hamm's talent, he saw a young man who needed financial help for college. Hamm didn't plan to major in theater, so his chance of finding a theater scholarship was unlikely.

But Miller had an idea. He urged Hamm to transfer his major to theater for one day, complete the scholarship form, take the required audition and then transfer back to his English major. The plan worked. The audition went well, and Hamm won an acting scholarship.

Desantis



"Jim was one of the first directors I worked with," Hamm says. "He's staggeringly talented: a director, costume designer, acting teacher. He really taught me a lot about making choices, being bold and being proud of being an actor.

"He's a multitalented guy who asks students and protégés to rise to a high level. That's what you want at that level of your education, to be inspired, challenged and driven, especially in an industry where most people fail. You need that kind of inspiration to succeed."

Hamm played the role of Cliff in MU's 1992 Summer Repertory Theatre production of *Cabaret* and the role of a Polish-American miner, Colgoz, in the 1993 production of *Assassins*. (See sidebar, Page 21, about Hamm's experience in those musicals.)

"We had an incredibly talented cast of people and did some cool work as young kids," Hamm says of the two summer seasons. "We were all proud of *Assassins*."

The Stephen Sondheim musical was a controversial piece about the assassins who have attacked American presidents. MU mounted the first production of the show after the original finished its off-Broadway run. "I saw a production of *Assassins* on Broadway, but ours was better," Hamm says.

The Department of Theatre entered the musical in the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival, where it made the semifinals.

Learning the lines

University life wasn't easy for Hamm. His mother died when he was 10, and his father died 10 years later, when Hamm was a sophomore at the University of Texas. Although Hamm had an academic scholarship at UT, he left Austin to return to St. Louis, where he worked at a restaurant for a semester before transferring to Mizzou.

Hamm needed familiar surroundings to counter the loss he had experienced. He recognized that professional acting is a young man's game, so he

Read it here first

Shocking Revelation about Jon Hamm!

In a surprising discovery, MIZZOU has uncovered hidden facts from Jon Hamm's collegiate past that have been missed by the usually thorough tabloids and entertainment publications.

Reliable sources confirm a

wanted to get a degree and get on with his life.

“It was tough. I was surviving on the good will of strangers and friends at that point in my life,” Hamm says. “MU was comfortable for me. It was close to home and affordable.”

Hamm was fortunate to have a friend at Mizzou who introduced him to campus life. Bob Lawson, BA '92, of Brooklyn, N.Y., and Hamm roomed together, and the two still stay in touch.

Hamm also began a continuing friendship with Richard and Patty King, owners of The Blue Note in Columbia. “Jon came down every night after his show or after rehearsals to hang out,” Richard says. “After several months everybody knew him. We were a close-knit group of people.”

For most of his MU student life, Hamm lived at a house on Ninth Street, near The Blue Note. He was a customer who didn't hesitate to bus tables and work at the door if he saw that help was needed.

“He worked here, but I'm not sure he was on the payroll. I don't think he was,” Richard says. “He was just that kind of guy. All the women love him, and you understand that.”

Some of Columbia's children learned to love him, too. Hamm worked at Kids Depot as a day care teacher from 3 to 6 p.m., after his classes and before rehearsals. He enjoyed the children and was comfortable in a day care environment, which he had experienced personally after his parents' divorce.

But the only people who worked in day care then were women. “I pitched the idea of having more men who taught, and Pat, the owner, hired me,” Hamm says.

The *Columbia Daily Tribune* reported that Kids Depot closed in late 2009.

Fast forward to film

Hamm's intelligence, nice-guy personality, acting talent, heartthrob good looks and comedic timing (he labels himself a comedy nerd) are impossible to miss. His former theater classmate, Melanie Moore Paxson, BA '94, of Los Angeles, remembers the humor he displayed at an awards ceremony for MU acting students.

secret buried in MU's Department of Theatre for more than 15 years. It appears that although Hamm's acting ability and handsome face were meant for the stage and screen, his singing voice earned a “don't call us, we'll call you” review.

“It's true,” says Professor Jim Miller, who axed Hamm's solo in the 1992 Summer Repertory Theatre production of *Cabaret*.

When confronted in Los Angeles with the information, Hamm let down his guard. “It was easily the worst song in the play,” he says. “Jim made the right choice. I'm an enthusiastic singer, but not a very talented one.”

Hamm did, however, have a solo in a 1993 MU production of *Assassins*. Miller says Hamm performed the song in a “rough voice.”



In character on the *Mad Men* set are, from left, John Slattery as Roger Sterling, Jon Hamm as Don Draper and Robert Morse as Bertram Cooper. Photo by Carin Baer/AMC

“As the winner was about to be announced, we would hear from a deep resounding voice in the auditorium: ‘Jon Hamm.’ That was Jon announcing himself as winner each time,” Paxson says. He kept it up throughout the ceremony.

Paxson, who co-starred with Hamm’s longtime girlfriend, Jennifer Westfeldt, in ABC TV’s series *Notes from the Underbelly*, says *Mad Men* is one of her favorite shows and “Jon is brilliant” as Don Draper.

Entertainment reporters seem to agree. Hamm’s name and image are ubiquitous: Hamm on *People* magazine’s Sexiest Men Alive list. Hamm hosting *Saturday Night Live*. Hamm modeling menswear of the 1960s, in photos by Annie Leibovitz. Hamm featured in *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, *Rolling Stone*, *GQ*, *In Style*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Elle* and most of the popular press.

Although TV brought Hamm stardom, there’s film in his future. He has three movies set for release in 2010 and 2011.

Hamm plays a lead role as an FBI agent in *The Town*, a crime thriller about a heist job complicated by a romantic love triangle.

Ben Affleck stars in and directs the film, which is based on Chuck Hogan’s novel *Prince of Thieves* (Scribner, 2004). Another Mizzou-trained actor, Chris Cooper, BGS ’76, plays the father of Affleck’s criminal character. The release is scheduled for September.

Hamm plays defense lawyer Jake Ehrlich in *Howl*, an independent film about the 1957 obscenity trial based on Allen Ginsberg’s poem of the same name. “It’s an interesting, experimental script with an eclectic approach to story telling,” Hamm says. The film opened Jan. 21, 2010, at the Sundance Film Festival.

In a smaller and more mysterious role, Hamm will play a character known as High Roller in

Sucker Punch, a film from Zach Snyder, the director of *Watchmen* (2009). Little is known about Hamm's role, and he declined to fill in the blanks about what he called a strange film: "We don't want to spoil it for people."

Hamm's first starring movie role, as a detective searching for his missing son, was in *Stolen Lives* (2009), which debuted in November at the St. Louis Film Festival. Before that, he had supporting roles in *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001), Clint Eastwood's *Space Cowboys* (2000) and Mel Gibson's *We Were Soldiers* (2002).

Closing credits

Hamm says he loves Mizzou: "I'm proud to be an alumnus. It's a wonderful school with a lot to offer in so many areas."

Being a college-educated actor is an advantage, he says. "A degree helps an actor by providing scope. You get a sense of what's out there through exposure to the arts, to theater, music and literature ... I had many excellent teachers, but my experience in the theater department overshadowed it all."

Hamm retains his respect for teachers. "They have inspired me, challenged me and helped me make good decisions."

Readers might wonder why Hamm chose English as a major rather than theater, particularly since he admits to having an interest in acting that dates back to his childhood.

Working toward an English degree required the study of literary works from classical to contemporary. Hamm loved the variety, and he remains a committed reader.




For a theater degree, he would have needed to complete courses in the theater arts — set and stage design, lighting and costuming — which didn't hold his interest as much as acting.

After graduation, Hamm returned to St. Louis and applied for a position teaching drama at his high school alma mater, John Burroughs Preparatory School. He got the job, with the assistance of a glowing letter of recommendation from Miller. "Jim's quote was 'I made you sound like Jesus,'" Hamm says. Hamm taught until 1995 when he left for Los Angeles and a path from obscurity to stardom.

Despite the new fame, Hamm says he's still a Midwesterner: "At the end of the day, I haven't changed at all. I'm the same person I was 20 years ago at Mizzou. Other people have different expectations and views, but my day-to-day hasn't changed."

Share your comments with Mizzou magazine at Mizzou@missouri.edu.

Note: If published, feedback may be edited for length, style and clarity.

 [Follow us on Twitter](#)  [Join us on Facebook](#)  [Subscribe to our feed](#)

Published by MIZZOU magazine, 109 Reynolds Alumni Center, Columbia, MO 65211 | Phone: 573-882-5916 |
E-mail: Mizzou@missouri.edu

Opinions expressed in this site do not necessarily reflect the official position of MU or the Mizzou Alumni Association.

Copyright © 2021 — Curators of the [University of Missouri](#). All rights reserved. [DMCA](#) and other [copyright information](#).

An [equal opportunity/affirmative action](#) institution.

Last updated: Feb. 15, 2013