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GROOMING BY LAUREN KAYE COHEN FOR AMERICAN CREW TRACEYMATTLINGLY.COM
INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE
True Blood’s Stephen Moyer

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The vampires, shape-shifters, and supernatural storms of hedonism are causing quite a ruckus. In this strange reality where blood-drinking creatures live among humans with a supposed promise of civility, how can everyone live in peace? “True Blood,” the hit HBO series created by “Six Feet Under” mastermind Alan Ball, that’s now in its second season, explores humanity’s irreconcilable differences, and how we manage to move forward without completely destroying each other. Peace is tenuous in the fictional Louisiana town of Bon Temps, just like in real life.

The locals’ first taste of things to come is the arrival of Bill Compton, a 173-year-old vampire, who’s returned home to try to live a normal life. Yet moments after entering the town waterhole, he meets a waitress named Sookie Stackhouse who rekindles in him feelings long forgotten, which launch them both into a mess of trouble. Bill’s conflicting alliances with the humans and his fellow vampires, and Sookie’s wielding of her telepathic abilities, are focal points of the events that have followed: a series of murders, two excursions, a sex-conjuring philanthropist, and some of the most beautiful love scenes in recent memory, accented with fang-drawn blood.

British actor Stephen Moyer plays Bill, whose fiery relationship with Anna Paquin's Sookie fuels this weekly foray into the depths of human conflict and the questioning of moral boundaries — based on The Southern Vampire Mysteries book series by Charlaine Harris. After success on the BBC, stints with the National Theatre of Wales and the Royal Shakespeare Company, and roles in such projects as Quills (2000), 88 Minutes (2007), and the USA Networks TV series, “The Starter Wife” with Debra Messing (2007), Stephen Moyer has broken through in the States as the undead Civil War veteran who tries his best to be good, and to love Sookie no matter the cost. Moyer’s seductive portrayal of the Southern gentleman stricken with bloodlust has earned him legions of fans who tune in to see him and the ensemble cast navigate this scary world, where allegiances are harshly judged and monsters are real.

With his friendly vibe and “Mr. Messy” t-shirt, Moyer is far more approachable than his sharp-toothed alter ego when he meets up with us at a Venice hotspot on Abbot Kinney. Over salads and risotto, we speak with the affable Londoner about “True Blood”'s blursed ethics, and his character's brutal struggle for nobility.

Venice: Tell us about your background, and how you became interested in acting.

Stephen Moyer: I was a choir boy in a tiny little village in Essex called Herongate. I started out singing at a local Church of England church. I was there for six years, starting at around six or seven years old. I became the head chorister of the church. I had to carry the cross. Then I started singing in the school plays. The headmaster saw me, and he made me Tom Sawyer in the school play, and that was it! I played the lead in most of the school plays from then on, and I kind of knew, then and there, that I wanted to do it, from about the age of 13. Then I tried very hard to find a way in. I didn’t know what to do, because nobody had ever done it from where I’m from. None of my family. It’s not the same as going, “I’m gonna go to Hollywood and say that I’m actor.” It just isn’t the same. You can’t do that; it doesn’t exist like that where I’m from. The only way in is to go to drama school, but nobody knew how to do that either. I don’t even know how I found out; I think in the back of a “Stage and Television Today,” there was an advert for one of the drama schools. So I sent out for my forms, and then I got a load of auditions, and next thing you know, I was at drama school.

And then you moved on to plays and television? I did plays for five years. I did the National Theatre of Wales, the Royal Shakespeare Company, a musical with Pete Townshend [called “The Iron Man”]. Then I played Romeo [in “Romeo and Juliet!”] for a year on tour. And from there, television and film kicked off, and that’s what I’ve been doing ever since.

What was your favorite play? We did a pretty kick-ass production of the Oedipus Trilogy with the Royal Shakespeare Company: “Oedipus at Colonus,” “Oedipus Rex,” and “Antigone.” Six hours long. If you got through it, it was rewarding, but most people were asleep after about two hours. [laughs] I love “Romeo and Juliet.” It’s an extraordinary play. “Measure for Measure” was great. I did “‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore,” which is an amazing John Ford play. Really scary shit from the 1630s. It’s a tragedy where everybody dies. Somebody comes in with a heart on a knife — not dissimilar to the sort of gothic, terrifying nightmare that I’m doing now, really.

What was your first television role? [laughs] I did a sitcom for two years, where I was the son of a lovely, lovely dude called Michael Williams. He was Judi Dench’s husband for 30 years. And another lady called Gwen Taylor, who’s a very famous comedienne in Britain. The two of them were husband and wife, and I played their smart-alec student son, Philip. It was called “Conjugal Rites.” My character sat around, eating pizza with Dad, watching football, while Mom has to clean up. The one interesting part of our show — which is heinous, and a crime against television — is that we had a dog who spoke. So when Mom and Dad would be arguing, we’d cut to a shot of him in his basket, thinking, “Blimey, there they go again!” But it lasted for two seasons!

Tell us about the audition process for “True Blood,” and what it was like winning the role of the vampire Bill Compton.
The truth is that I'd been back and forth, and I'd done a couple of pilot seasons, but I'd never really committed to [American television], apart from the year before. And I got so close to so many gigs that year, and somehow it didn't happen. That was tough, you know. It was hard. My family was in England, and you make the decision to try to push things forward. But you go too where the good work is. All I've ever wanted to do is good work. I'd just done a show called "The Starter Wife" with Debra Messing, and I'd gotten back to England, and I really wasn't looking to come back to [the States]. But one day, while I was syncing ADR for a BBC series I was doing, I got a phone call from my agent, saying that the show I was working on at that moment had been chosen not to be taken forward by the BBC, even an hour later, I got a phone call to say, "Alan wants to meet you. Can you fly tomorrow?" It was a very interesting few days.

What a journey.
The truth is, though, I came and did the pilot, and then who knows what's going to happen? It's just another gig at that point. But it was an amazing journey. People say to me, "Did you know this was going to be successful?" Truthfully, no, but it's the first thing I'd ever read where I just went, "This could be the one." Not because of me, but I think that what our show does is check a lot of boxes: vampire fans, Alan Ball fans, HBO fans, drama fans, people who just like a really well-acted story. There's plenty to watch on our show; it's not just about vampires. Our show is an ensemble, and Alan instinct is to feed on them?

Well, I don't know if they can, can they? I mean, we don't shy away from the fact that Bill, although trying to live a moral life, has really only taken innocents out of the equation [when it comes to feeding on humans]. People who are morally reprehensible, or who have done crimes against Sookie.

Then all bets are off.
[Laughs] "C-A-S," Crimes Against Sookie. And he feeds on them. Bill feeds on as many people as the murderer kills in the first season. And that's very important; we did that on purpose. So to answer your question, I'm not sure they can. I think what Alan holds up is a mirror to society. One of the interesting elements of the show, actually, is the turning of Jessica [Deborah Ann Woll] in episode ten

I read [the "True Blood" script] and I was blown away by it. It's not my genre at all, but I could see in it a whole microcosm of society as we know it. I loved the fact that the vampire is the one who's trying to live a decent life.

though it hadn't been seen yet. I had to walk back in — where all of the producers, the director, and everybody working on that job were sitting, and didn't know this news — knowing it had been canceled. And another show that I'd done for the BBC had also been canceled the same day. And that night, my agent, who had been sending me scripts for weeks, said to me, "Look, here's the deal. I won't make you read any other scripts, but just read this one. Everybody is talking about it." I read it and I was blown away by it. It's not my genre at all, but I could see in it a whole microcosm of society as we know it. I loved the fact that the vampire is the one who's trying to live a decent life. The sex addict is human, the drug dealer is human, and the pariah is the vampire. I loved what [Alan Ball] had set up there. And we know that the vampire has a dark past. I was mesmerized by it. I thought it was beautifully written, it was sexy and romantic, rather than soppy and sloshy. And there was this kind of edge to it as well. And I knew right then that this could be amazing. So I took the kids to school that day, and put myself on tape. I had never spoken in a Southern accent, and literally did it for the first time while on camera. Then I finished ADR, picked the kids up from school, got home, and we had been burgled. My entire house had been ransacked. Everything taken. I was walking around, going, "Shit!" My computer, my camera, everything in my world had been taken. My son and daughter ran into their bedrooms to see what had happened. Lilac, my daughter, said, "They haven't stolen our duvet!" And my son said, "They haven't stolen our teddy bears, Daddy!" And I was hugging them, and about

has very cleverly put a lot there to watch. If you don't like one of the characters, there's plenty more to see.

You've said that "True Blood" is the kind of show you would be interested in watching. Did you have an interest in vampires beforehand?

No, and it goes back to what I was just saying, really. Alan is using the framework of the vampire or supernatural genre to tell, essentially, a story about relationships. Why does "Star Trek" work?

It's about the people.
It's about people, and it's about relationships. It's not about sci-fi, and it's not about effects.

It's also about morality.
Very much so. Much has been made about Alan's metaphors. You know, "God hates fags" [may represent] "God hates fags." Vampires "coming out of the coffin." But I don't think it's specifically a metaphor for homosexuality; I think it's for whatever you want to bring to it, and for any disenfranchised society member or minority. Bill is a pariah, trying to live a good life. He just wants to get by without being ostracized from society, and everybody makes snap judgments about him — and they're not wholly clean, themselves. And I think that's a brilliant idea. I think it's sexy, and funny, and odd, and weird, and brilliant.

The show is set in a world with a lot of moral grey area. How can vampires truly "mainstream," and live peacefully with humans, given that their most primal

in season one [when Bill transforms her into a vampire]. A character who had done nothing wrong, and Bill ultimately saves himself at that point, but he knows he's going to be tortured for the rest of his living days, or "unliving" days. And he also knows that were he to say, "No," they would have fed on her anyway. I mean, I love Bill, so I have to give Bill the benefit of the doubt in this. If she's going to be tortured, what's the best that can happen? I'll look after her.

I'm very curious about how the character reconciles his actions.
I think Bill is desperately trying to live a decent life. He's made the choice not to kill innocents anymore, people who are just living their lives. But... [laughs] It's easier said than done. I think what our show says is that nobody is perfect, and everybody has a secret. What Alan does is put obstacles in his lead characters' way, and we judge them by how they react to those obstacles.

There was the scene where you "glamoured" [the vampire version of hypnosis] the police officer when he pulled you guys over, and there was this great moment where Sookie points out that if she hadn't been in the car, you would have fed on him.
[Laughs] Yeah.

It's a fascinating morality play.
An interesting element on our show is that a vampire has the ability to feed on somebody, and then glamour them not to know what happened in the first place, which is a very convenient ability, let's face it. [laughs] You can right a lot of wrongs!
At least as far as anybody knows. Tell us a little about creating your character. You really had the accent down with no preparation?

When I opened my mouth, it was kind of there. We worked on it a lot, to make it different from everybody else. We specifically wanted to give Bill a different aura. Eric [a much older vampire played by Alexander Skarsgård] has embraced the modern, but over the last 50 years, Bill has been living in a vacuum, somehow. And I think we might get to see that in season three, if we get a season three.

I suspect so. The show is hot. I love what they're doing with Michelle Forbes this season. The scenes at her house and at the birthday party for Tara [Rutina Wesley] are intense.

It goes fucking mental after this. In episode three, where Sookie gets scratched, and the crazy lady, the doctor, comes and heals Sookie, who finds Lafayette in the basement — it's the first time that we see Sookie's house being transformed by Maryann. People start to come under Maryann's influence. But the music, the pacing, the detail, the amount that was going on in the episode. And Jessica's first visit to Merlotte's, where she meets Hoyt [Jim Parrack].

In hindsight, Hoyt's little story arc was leading up to a relationship with Jessica. He even asked Sookie if Bill knew any vampires his age.

We didn't know that was coming. Hoyt's kind of lost. He can't get on in the world. He needs something to spark it up, and now he has it. I thought it was beautifully done. And that scene between them in Merlotte's is like something from The Last Picture Show. I was blown away by it.

At first she wants to feed on him, and then she realizes that he's a nice guy, and she wants to get to know him.

And she's spellbinding, man. Her eyes... I'm sort of enraptured over her, and Jim, who plays Hoyt. I just love it, and that's just the beginning.

The Magister character [Zeljko Ivanek], in episode ten, clearly states the official stance on the vampires' relationship with humans — that humans are here to serve them, and Bill tells him that some might disagree.

And then my character goes, "Sorry."

So is there dissent to this idea in the vampire community? And will we see more of this conflict of opinions?

We are going to see that this season. One of the things that is played into — and I think it's a really wonderful choice — is that not only is there an age hierarchy with-
in the vampire society, but there is a rank. And what I realized is that Alan is kind of building a feudal system, and the one thing that you never do, whatever they do to you, is badmouth another vampire. So all of the despicable things that Eric does against Bill, and to Bill, you never see Bill badmouth Eric. It’s really interesting, because he has good reason to this season, but he never does. And later on in the season, there are a couple of other characters who could badmouth somebody, but they don’t. And I love the way they do that. They’ve

Crimes Against Sookie.
Yea. “Sorry! C-A-S, man!” [laughs] Our show has interesting writing. And Alan makes the peripheral characters strong. Terry Bellefleur [Todd Lowe], the Irish vet, has a really great through-line this year. He’s fucking awesome.

He’s a great character. His part is small, but we want more.
You’ll get more. Alan rewards. If they’re good, they give them stuff to do! And I love that. It’s a meritocracy on set.

couldn’t believe how much I missed her. And from then on, we were in each other’s pockets, and have been forever since. Two years.

New topic. So last season, we found out that Sam [Sam Trammell] can turn into a dog, and he tells Sookie that there are many other kinds of creatures out there.

“More than you can imagine,” which is a “Hamlet” reference, of course. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

I think that one of the reasons that women are interested in vampires is because they usually come from a gothic place, when women were treated in a courtly manner, and the men were men.

actually set up quite an old-fashioned world that you can hold up against our modern society, with its slipped virtue, and its slipped manners. I think that one of the reasons that women are interested in vampires is because they usually come from a gothic place, when women were treated in a courtly manner, and the men were men. So this idea pits itself against modern society, against metrotell, if you like, and for the manners and the kindness. The chivalry.

And alongside the chivalry is a darkness, and an animalistic “God-knows-what-he’s-gonna-do.”
Primal, male-female sexual longing.

What attracts Bill and Sookie to each other, and what keeps them together?
Sookie has something about her that is different, and if you read the books, you’ll see why. Bill has never come across someone like her. She’s streetwise, but she’s innocent. She’s spunky, but she’s pure. She’s a throwback for him. She’s a virgin at age 25. And she falls for him because he’s strong, silent, and that’s very important, because she can’t read his mind. He’s trying to lead a good life. Trying desperately to forge, as much as he can, a human way of being. She realizes the points where he can’t do that, and there are limits, and she forgives him. In the first episode this season, he admits that he killed Uncle Bartlett [Cheyenne Wilbur].

And he has a very interesting way of dealing with the situation. He says he’ll make amends, but he won’t apologize for loving her.

And that shows a complicated, deep love. When I read that, I found it quite interesting. When she says, “Did you kill Uncle Bartlett?” he clamps up. He goes silent, almost like a little boy. He knows he’s in the wrong. “I may have killed him, yes…but he hurt you.” [laughs]

Are there parallels or similarities between the relationship your character has with Sookie, and your relationship with Anna?
As much as I may look it without the makeup on, I am not 150 years older than her, but there is an age difference. There is a Sookie-ness to her, but Anna is much more streetwise and savvy. She’s bright, and smart, and funny, and she doesn’t suffer fools. She’s hardcore, man, and I love that. I’m much more outspoken than Bill. My problem is shutting me up. [laughs] Whereas Anna is very reserved. But it works for us. If I clap up, she will get it out of me.

Which is similar to your characters’ relationship onscreen.
There are similarities, but I think that’s not about similarities between me and Anna, or Sookie and Bill. I think it’s good writing — and the fact that Sookie deals with stuff in a way that an evolved woman would want to deal with this stuff. And he’s trying to do that, but sometimes he’s a little bit behind the times.

May we ask where you went on your first date?
That one we haven’t been asked before. HBO put us up in West Hollywood. We were the only two out-of-towners; she’s from New York, and I’m from London. There’s a great sushi restaurant on Sunset, a little hole in the wall, but I always eat there. So that’s where we went on our first date. Well, actually, the very first date, although it wasn’t a date, was breakfast at La Conversation, on the corner of Doheny and Santa Monica. We had omelets. That was when we were first getting to know each other.

And it grew from there?
The truth is that after the pilot, I got back to London, and she got back to New York, and it pulled my legs from underneath me. I

Sam indicates that there are werewolves, too. Will we see any?
There are no werewolves this season, that I know of. But they are in the third book…

In an interview, I read that you had recently eased up on your atheism. What led to this change?
After my church years, from seven to fifteen, I never really went to a church unless I had to. I completely turned my back on it. Atheism gets a bad rap. [laughs] What I loved about it was that it’s about living now. It’s about embracing now. It doesn’t mean hedonism, it doesn’t mean nihilism. It’s about embracing life, and love, and living for today, and the most for today. And the generosity of the human spirit. But some things happened that changed my way of thinking. And actually, all I did was just let go of not believing. I’m not born again. I just let go.

There are more things in heaven and earth.
Yes, there are more things in life. That’s a great quote. It was just like a release. It was a big thing for me, but also not that big a thing. It was just a shift in thought.

Like Sookie’s shift when she learns about this whole world that she never knew existed, and accepts that this is her life now, and lives it.
Now, I’m going about life with this knowledge. So not only have I got all the knowledge that I had before, but now I’ve got that to add to my knowledge. And I’ll go about my life exactly the same way, but with this added onto it. Until something else adds onto it. And inevitably, it does. All you have to do is open up to it.

True Blood airs on HBO. Watch season 2 any time on HBO On Demand.