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LAW**  
Ripley's  
sexy  
scene-  
stealer

**MICHAEL &  
CATHERINE  
ENGAGED**  
What's age got  
to do with it?

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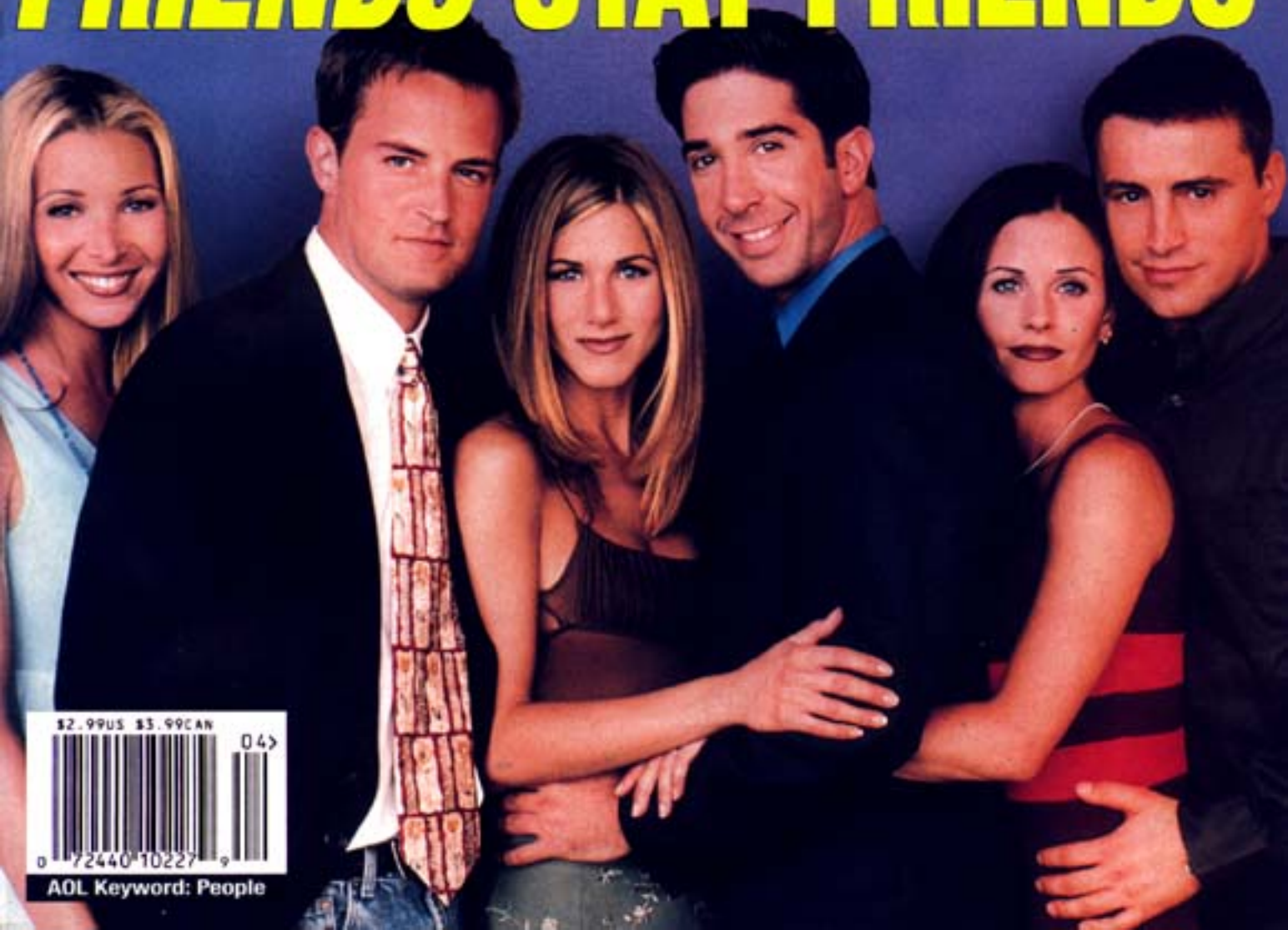
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# People

weekly

**HOW THE  
FRIENDS STAY FRIENDS**

Off-camera they've stuck by each other through heady times and heartache. What's the secret of TV's closest cast?



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"We come to work, have a great time and make each other laugh," says Schwimmer of life on the *Friends* set. "It's that working relationship that keeps us going."

# The Buddy System

Embracing parenthood, surviving breakups, conquering demons, the *Friends* grow up, but never apart

It's the Dec. 17 taping of *Friends*, and life is a giddy lovefest for the show's Party of Six. Sitting on a sofa between takes, Matthew Perry has an arm around Courteney Cox Arquette as they giggle over a private joke. Jennifer Aniston plops down beside them, and he rubs her back; later the girls start preening each other's razor-straight hair. When the three join David Schwimmer and Matt LeBlanc for a scene where they mull over a porn video (Lisa Kudrow's ditsy Phoebe Buffay may have stumbled into skin flicks), the actors can't help cracking each other up during the take. Finally they nail it, and there are whoops all around.

Juvenile? Maybe. But after six seasons, true team spirit, not to mention chain-reaction laughter (triggered this time by the wise-cracking Perry), still rules. When the NBC comedy about a clan of charmingly neurotic Manhattan twentysomethings first aired in 1994, much was made of an ensemble crew so mutually supportive and tight-knit they seemed to be joined at the hip. The cast members played poker and shopped together; they even took a field trip to a paint-your-own-pottery studio and rolled the dice in Las Vegas. "I think it was the very first notes session, Courteney was sitting in one of her costars' laps or they were sitting in hers," re-



Aniston and Cox  
give each other the  
squeeze at an AIDS  
fund-raiser in L.A.  
in June 1998.



LeBlanc (with fiancée Melissa McKnight) is "the biggest teddy bear on the planet," Aniston has said.



Schwimmer squired his girlfriend, Israeli actress Mili Avital, to L.A.'s Doolittle Theater last year.

Kudrow (with Perry, Cox and Aniston at a 1995 pediatric AIDS benefit in L.A.) has called the group "outrageously supportive of each other."



A wild and crazy guy, husband David Arquette (monkeying around with Harry the sloth at Busch Gardens in Tampa Bay, Fla., in June) has helped the cautious Cox lighten up.



They've kept mum about their future, but Aniston and Brad Pitt (at the L.A. premiere of *Fight Club* in October) have talked about the joys of marriage.

calls Tom Selleck, who played Cox's love interest in the third season. "Everybody was kind of there for everybody. It's more the exception than the rule in this business when you see that. They eat lunch together," adds Selleck, "and that doesn't happen on many sets." James Burrows, who directed such legendary ensemble shows as *Taxi* and *Cheers* and who molded early episodes of *Friends*, agrees: "They do more things together than most casts, and it's amazing that they do, as difficult as it is for them to keep away from the paparazzi. But," he says, "they still love one another."

They're pretty wild about the ratings too. These days, *Friends* is one of TV's top-ranked comedies, regularly placing in the Top 5 on the Nielsen list. Last week it won the People's Choice Favorite Television Comedy Series Award (at the ceremony for which, by the way, Aniston and Kudrow arrived as a couple, holding hands as they walked down the red carpet). The show's appeal, believes executive producer Kevin Bright, stems from the fact that it "holds up a mirror to the life of gen Xers who are still deciding about careers and what's important to them. No matter who you are, it's a reflection of where you're heading, where you are, or where you've been—and that's a testimony to the writing." But much of the credit also goes to a cast that just keeps clicking on-camera and off. "It's not a conscious thing—we like each other tremendously and get along very well," says Schwimmer, 33, who plays

the endearingly nerdy Ross Geller. "We're having as much fun as we did the first year, if not more."

Granted, the gang no longer throws weekly wrap parties or gathers on Thursday nights to nibble on munchies and watch the show. Having seen each other through all manner of growing pains—everything from drug addiction to broken hearts and do-or-die contract negotiations—the costars have ventured their separate ways in both their personal lives and solo movie careers. But they're nowhere near the point, as Cox Arquette once jokingly predicted, where "we all go to our big trailers and never speak." "As we all get older, we spend more time with our significant others, so of course the dynamic changes," says Schwimmer, who is currently dating actress Mili Avital, 27. "When we can, we lunch together at the commissary or in one of our dressing rooms and just catch up. We've really grown to be brothers and sisters more than anything else."

The cast has mellowed into an extended—and ever-extending—family, embracing new members as readily as they swap hugs on a soundstage at the Warner Bros. lot in Burbank, where they tape some 24 shows a year. When the 35-year-old Cox, who plays Monica Geller, married then-27-year-old actor David Arquette last June, her buddies didn't just show up for the happy affair at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral; they had nursed her through the bitter end of a 5½-year romance with actor



Kudrow (with son Julian in '98) said that while she and husband Michel Stern have no plans, "we'd definitely like another [child]."

Michael Keaton in 1995. Her girl*Friends* helped plan the wedding and pick her Valentino silk-crepe gown, and Kudrow stood by as a jittery but ecstatic Cox had her makeup done in the bridal suite.

They also made sure to stand by Aniston, 30, when she began dating Brad Pitt, 36, in 1998. Careful to make him feel welcome, the cast remained friendly but unfazed when the superstar visited the set to celebrate the show's 100th episode that October. "They don't feel different from him, because Brad and Jen have had the same relationship problems as anybody else," says actress Jessica Hecht, who plays Susan, the lesbian wife of Ross's ex. In fact, Aniston has experienced her own share of heartbreak, much like her character, Rachel Green. The actress, who broke up with actor and live-in love Tate Donovan in 1998, often turned to Perry when she needed a shoulder to cry on. "He really helped me when I was going through a relationship problem," she told *PEOPLE* in 1995. "He's a great listener." These days, which she has described as the happiest time of her life, Aniston hangs out with fellow lovebirds LeBlanc, 32, and his fiancée, model Melissa McKnight, 34, at her antiques-filled house in Laurel Canyon or at Pitt's multiterraced Craftsman home nearby in the Hollywood Hills.

The actors also rallied 'round Kudrow, 36, when she



Battling addiction in 1997, the skeletal Perry told *Cosmo* he knew he would be okay "when I realized Leno wasn't making fun of me."

and her husband, ad exec Michel Stern, 42, were expecting their first baby. Not only could they not keep their hands off Kudrow's growing belly, Cox, Aniston and the women on the show threw her a blowout baby shower-cum-tea party at L.A.'s posh Peninsula Hotel. Now, whenever Kudrow brings 20-month-old Julian to the set, her costars go gaga. "They're so affectionate, you could kind of see them thinking, 'It's going to be my turn one of these days,'" says Wil Calhoun, a former *Friends* writer and supervising producer. "[Julian's] amazing," LeBlanc told *IN STYLE* in 1998. The actor, who plans to wed later this year, even offered to babysit—a dry run, perhaps, for his future family, which will include McKnight's children from her first marriage—Tyler, 8, and Jacqueline, 4. "I guess we're just getting a little more domestic," Kudrow told *IN STYLE* in December. "I can't believe how much they listen to me talk about the baby—and I thank them for that."

Sharing is one thing, snitching another. Fiercely pro-

tective of each other's privacy, no one in the group ever goes against the family—and they know how to close ranks when besieged by the press. In 1997, when concerned cast members saw Perry (the self-deprecating Chandler Bing) grow more emaciated by the day, they kept mum until the actor revealed he was addicted to the prescription painkiller Vicodin, which he had been taking for injuries following a jet-ski accident. "When he was going through that," recalls June Gable, who plays the chain-smoking agent of Joey Tribbiani (LeBlanc), "Courteney Cox, particularly, was like a mother to him. And everyone, all the cast, supports each other. They're just there, like rocks."

After Perry, 30, checked himself into Minnesota's Hazelden Foundation, his costars monitored his progress but issued only brief public statements on how impressed they were by his courage. Perry himself is pleased with his triumph over addiction. "I am proud of it," he said in 1998. "I don't think there's anything in the world that I can't face, having faced that. That was the scariest thing that's ever happened to me. You get a whole new respect for yourself and life when you go through something that difficult."

The cast's silence during Perry's ordeal, according to Kudrow, is a testament to their solidarity. "Reporters would ask us questions about each other, like 'What do you really think of so-and-so?'" she once explained. "Those questions felt really personal to me, and I knew these people had become part of my life." The all-for-one, one-for-all attitude can also kick in when other actors rub them the wrong way. "If someone comes on and alienates one of us, then the other five just shut them out," LeBlanc told the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* in 1995.

From the start, an unofficial equal-opportunity policy



LeBlanc (with Perry at a 1994 celeb hockey match in Los Angeles) has said he has no plans to leave "the coolest job in the world."

has helped keep the cast thick as thieves on the set. After moving to a new soundstage a few years ago, they actually drew straws to see which actors would get the two larger dressing rooms, and the prized suites are rotated annually. "This year Courteney and I are the lucky devils," says Schwimmer. A pie chart was once posted in the writers' room to ensure that all six characters got the same number of lines and jokes, but now such fairness is taken for granted by cast and crew. The result? No breakout star—or overripe egos. "As they say, the fish stinks from the head," says director Burrows. "And since there is no

head on that show, there's no stink." Adds Schwimmer: "The one thing that has evolved as each of us has matured is our ability to communicate. There's no *one* peacemaker. If anything happens to arise between one of us and another, we go right to the person and say, 'Listen, this hurt me or this bothered me.' It's because of those skills we've developed over the last six years that we do get along so well."

Not to mention a mutual realization that there is safety in numbers. For while they have all tried movie projects with varying degrees of success, the *Friends* have discovered that happiness lies near



Cox will reprise her role as a gutsy TV reporter in the February tinger *Scream 3*.



Aniston, who starred with Paul Rudd in 1998's *The Object of My Affection*, said it was the first film she was proud of.

the nest. At first, Perry told ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY, "it was just a big deal that we were getting the offers. 'Wow, you got a movie? Great!'" Schedules had to be adjusted—the cast, for example, had to work double shifts in 1998 to accommodate Schwimmer when he was filming *Six Days, Seven Nights*. But such outside pressures have only drawn them closer. "We all made movies and realized, no no no no—this is where home is," Perry told *TV Guide* in 1998.

Even so, their commitment to the show, which bounced back with critics and fans last year, is not unconditional. Back in 1997, the *Friends* famously banded together to negotiate a salary bump-up that would give each of them \$120,000 per episode. "It was probably the first time where you had six people tied together [financially]," says director Burrows. That contract expires in May, and several cast members have insisted they would not return if one of them bailed.

In November, when asked if she was bored with the sitcom, Kudrow, who has a thriving film career and is the only cast member to have won an Emmy, said she was unsure. The show's executives say it's too early to speculate if anyone will leave. In the meantime, no official negotiations have been announced, but it's estimated the network is prepared to double their salaries. "None of us have heard anything," says Schwimmer, who, like his costars, is already earning enough syndication residuals to

keep him in the money for the foreseeable future. "We're just focusing on having a good time and doing the best work we can."

And a good time is being had by all. The guys battle it out playing Super Mario during breaks. Trading gossip and decorating tips, the girls are especially close and always will be, Aniston told *Rolling Stone* last March: "Try getting us out of our dressing rooms when one of us is needing to talk. . . . We're like, this is priority. Friend in need!" And the posse keeps hounding Perry for listening to all those brooding Tori Amos and Sarah McLachlan ballads, which make everyone blue.

Back at the taping, someone somewhere is reaching out to touch someone else. When newcomer Reese Witherspoon, who plays Rachel's bratty kid sister for two episodes airing next month, flubs a line during a scene at Central Perk cafe, Aniston gives her—what else?—a big hug. Life without the Thursday Night Six? "I can't imagine showing up for work and about to rehearse a scene at the coffee shop with one of the cast gone," muses Schwimmer. "I just wouldn't want to be here."

• Paula Chin

• Tom Cunneff, Mark Dagostino, Michelle Caruso and Elizabeth Leonard in Los Angeles



Discuss *Friends* on PEOPLE on AOL (Keyword: People)



At the Jan. 9 People's Choice Awards, Schwimmer credited "a certain chemistry" with the show's success. And "no egos," Aniston added.