ANOTHER SIDE OF
In the summer of 2015, Matt Smith attended a star-studded charity polo match where one of the players happened to be Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge—otherwise known as the future king of England. After the match, Smith waited to be royally received. The woman in charge of introductions told the prince that Smith would soon be portraying William’s grandfather Prince Philip on a new Netflix series, The Crown. Panic gripped the actor. “I thought, ‘Oh, God, oh, nooooo’,” remembers Smith. But Prince William, when asked if he had any advice, simply grinned and said, “Legend. Complete legend.” Smith laughs, shaking his head. “I thought, ‘Oh, good: legend! I’ll just play that.’”

Matt Smith

The Brit trades in his Doctor Who bow tie to don royal coattails as Prince Philip on the enthralling, addictive historical drama The Crown. By Sara Vilkomerson @vilkomerson
Turning the historical figures of the British royal family and government into relatable human beings—complete with their humor, foibles, eccentricities, regrets, longing, and ambition—is at the heart of The Crown, which debuts on Nov. 4. Created and written by Peter Morgan (The Queen) and executive-produced by Stephen Daldry (The Hours), who also directed several episodes, the series begins in 1947 with the lavish wedding of Prince Philip and Princess Elizabeth (Wolf Hall’s Claire Foy). The 10-episode first season focuses on the next decade, which includes the death of Elizabeth’s father, King George VI (Jared Harris), her 1952 ascension to the throne, negotiations with Prime Minister Winston Churchill (John Lithgow), tensions over the scandalous love life of her sister Princess Margaret (Vanessa Kirby), and the struggle to balance what it means to be the head of not just her family but also the entire British Empire.

Nothing better illustrates that internal tug-of-war than the show’s portrayal of the early married life of Elizabeth and Philip. For many of us, Queen Elizabeth II, now 90, and Prince Philip, 95, have been those eternally gray-haired figures waving alongside various pageantries. With The Crown, the couple have been returned to the gleam and passions of their youth. “He loves her, and yet he’s rebelling against everything. I thought it could be very interesting to get my teeth into [the role] because there’s that great conflict,” says Smith. “It lifts the royal veil, and you see them when they get ready for bed, bitch about people, have breakfast, and fall out and are uncomfortable with one another.”

In person, the utterly British Smith, 34, is friendly, charming, and curious. He asks as many questions as he answers while worrying that he’s talking too much (he isn’t) or that he’s ordered too much food (“You should write that the greedy man wolfed down the calamari!”). When a stranger approaches the table to tell the actor how much he and his sons admire him, Smith thanks him sincerely and says to tell his children hello.

Such is Smith’s life now after starring as the Eleventh Doctor on the long-running cult-favorite BBC series Doctor Who from 2010 to 2013. It’s the kind of part that can take a little-known actor and turn him into one who is unable to eat lunch uninterrupted and inspires screaming Comic-Con crowds. “Look, there are worse crosses to bear, and it’s part of being an actor—other people have to a much greater degree than I have.” (For the record, he does still watch the sci-fi series: “I will always support it. I’m a fan.”) Since hanging up his time-traveling shoes, Smith has done films including Terminator Genisys and Pride and Prejudice and Zombies, and signing on to another TV series made him slightly wary. “After doing such a long-running show, I wanted a sense of variety,” he says.

But Philip turned out to be too juicy a character to pass up. “Like the Doctor, Philip is an alien in this world. He’s a total outsider. He was the guy who would say the wrong thing at the wrong time,” says Smith of the Queen’s consort, who was known as “Phil the Greek” due to his birthplace. In Smith’s hands, Philip is dashing and dangerous, courtly and brash, and constantly bristling at his loss of independence. “He has this need to be himself, assertive, and the man of the house, but as soon as George VI died, he had to walk two steps behind his wife,” says Smith. Peter Morgan—who knew he’d found his Philip the minute he saw the onscreen chemistry between Smith and Foy—says, “Matt has electric appeal and danger in equal measure to vulnerability and likability. He manages to be both totally anarchic and very disciplined at the same time. The contradictions within him are what make him unique and make watching him so compelling.”

Fun fact: According to the show, Philip likes to sleep naked, so Smith is the only cast member to appear nude. “I had no idea that was going to happen,” he says. “On the day, it was like, ‘Can you get your bum out?’ And it made the cut! Thanks, Stephen Daldry.” His onscreen wife thinks he brought it on himself: “Well, he shouldn’t have such a lovely bottom,” Foy says with a laugh. She and Smith became close friends while shooting. “He’s a brilliant person. And he’s a spontaneous and exciting actor who loves a challenge. He makes you a bit braver yourself.”

Becoming enthralled by the trials of this family—and trust us, you will—might change your opinion on the monarchy. It certainly did for Smith. “I totally have more affection for them,” he says. “Before, they were just there, like Big Ben. Now I drive by Buckingham Palace and I feel like I know what’s going on inside. I’ve grown to understand them as a family.” The Crown is currently in production for season 2, tackling Elizabeth’s reign in the 1960s. As for what’s ahead, Smith only grins. “Tune in. S— gets really interesting.”