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Now it's Branson: The Movie

By: Jamie Doward

To his supporters he is an inspirational wealth creator, a fantastic visionary and Britain's greatest entrepreneur. To his critics he is, to quote *Private Eye*, the grinning pullover. The rest of us will have the chance to make up our own minds when *Sir Richard Branson: The Movie* hits British cinema screens. The Virgin tycoon's colorful life story is to get the Hollywood treatment after a US studio bought the rights to his bestselling autobiography, *Losing My Virginity*.

Crystal Sky, best known for buying the film rights to video games such as *Tekken* and *Pac-Man*, is looking to produce the film as early as next year. The studio is believed to have earmarked \$50 million.

The Virgin boss was initially reluctant to sell, but Hollywood actor Jon Voight, a mutual friend, brokered a deal between Branson and Paul over dinner at a London hotel.

'Richard thought it was strange to tell his life story while he was alive. He thought it would be better to wait until he was dead,' says Paul, who wrote, produced and directed *Falling in Love Again*, starring Michelle Pfeiffer and Elliott Gould, at the age of 20.

His enthusiasm won over the usually publicity savvy Branson, who has used his high public profile to launch a string of companies, including the Virgin Atlantic airline, Virgin Records and Virgin Trains.

Paul, who claims to have followed Branson's career avidly over the decades, said: 'I think he's inspirational for all young people. He's done things the right way, with style and fun. He's a great example.'

Branson, currently in South Africa promoting World Aids Day with Nelson Mandela, still appears to be slightly ambivalent. 'I'm absolutely flattered and slightly apprehensive that somebody would want to make a film about my life. Life's been a great adventure and I look forward to seeing the results in a couple of years' time,' he said.

While the film will focus on Branson's seemingly inexorable rise from geeky public schoolboy to international businessman, Paul said he wanted to use the tycoon's life story to explore broader themes. 'I see it almost as Britain's answer to *Forrest Gump* - it will go through the decades and watch how society changes around him.'

The film will start in the Seventies and trace Branson's earliest ventures - breeding budgies at school and launching a mail-order record store - as well as his numerous, sometimes death-defying, attempts to break world records.

It will also focus on Branson's notorious battle with British Airways, which became increasingly bitter and is said to rankle both sides even today.

Crystal Sky is thought to be looking to bring in the acclaimed scriptwriter Ron Bass. A winner of six Oscars, Bass wrote hits such as *Entrapment*, *Rain Man* and *The Joy Luck Club*.

But the big question in Tinseltown is which actor will play the billionaire. Branson declined to be drawn. 'I have no idea who the producers are thinking of,' he said.

Names mentioned so far include Russell Crowe, Brad Pitt and Ewan Macgregor. One Virgin employee suggested to Branson that the producers should look beyond Hollywood and approach one-time DJ and cohort of Mr. Blobby, Noel Edmonds.

Branson is thought to be less than enthusiastic about that idea.