

James Dean: Gone but

The skid marks on that Friday afternoon, Sept. 30, 1955, stretched for 30 or 40 feet into the junction of Highway 466 and 41. James Dean lay unconscious in the wreckage of his brand new Porsche; he would never emerge from that coma. Photos taken of Dean, while waiting for the police, show his head and face apparently unmarked; but his neck was snapped and he lay impaled on the steering wheel of his prize racing automobile.

But that was just the beginning; James Dean was destined to become more than just another highway fatality statistic. Dean would grip the hearts of teenagers all over the world.

Next Monday marks the 30th anniversary of Dean's death — so let's take another glance at America's perennial rebel.

James Dean's impact on the film world wasn't proportional to his participation in that industry.

Dean only made three movies, or rather the only surviving examples of his skills as a thespian are those three movies. His early work on literally dozens of television dramas and his two Broadway performances where he honed his talents and developed his much hyped screen presence are lost to us: all that's left of his Broadway work are the reviews and a few stills while all his television work was either shot live and lost over the airwaves or the producers of the programs he collaborated on didn't bother to preserve the film.

Even the three films he made didn't transcend his charisma. If *East of Eden*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, or *Giant* had been shot with Marlon Brando (who was

originally cast in *Rebel*), Paul Newman, or any other Dean contemporary these flicks would most likely have been doomed to an early life of occasional screenings on the Thursday night late movie.

As it is, even with Dean's amazing posthumous popularity *East of Eden* and *Giant* are rarely screened today. *Rebel* makes its yearly pilgrimage to the Princess Theatre, but it is so incredibly dated and cliché ridden that it is more of an affront to Dean's memory and talents than a proper memorial statement. Boiled down to cynical conclusion, Dean's films do more to interfere with the myth of James Dean than they help.

Considering how little (speaking in terms of the quantity of his creative output) Dean accomplished, why did the man become such a symbol for an entire generation? Why has his memory survived and endured these past thirty years to such a degree that James Dean posters outsell those of contemporary actors? Why? What made (makes) him so special?

The first factor to consider is that James Dean played one role and one role only: that of the tormented outsider. The tormented son in *Eden*, the confused teenager in *Rebel*, and the maverick rancher in *Giant*, all ring similar, but all are different sides of the same person. Some critics have even gone as far as to say that Dean was playing himself in all three of his films.

The very fact that Dean's career didn't have any variety probably more than anything helped to create the myth. The public usually reduces movie idols to an easily swallowed two-dimensional stereotype, trapping actors in typecasting pigeon-holes that are often impossible to break out of. Leonard Nimoy will forever be seen as Spock to millions of fans, just as Clint Eastwood may never shake the Dirty Harry image no matter how many diverse roles he plays. Often we see pitted battles between artist and fan as the actor fights the valiant battle to escape the narrow confines the public has saddled him with. But not so with Dean.

Dean's public never saw him take advantage of the multipicture deal he signed just before he died. They never saw him flex his muscles in an adult role, or maybe in a historical movie, or a romantic comedy where he would have played a comic role. Nor did they ever see a Dean grow bored of the publicly induced stereotype and rebel against it. Dean was frozen in 1955 as the permanent uncomplaining rebel.

Dean had just enough of a career to be noticed and to spark the imaginations of a generation, but not enough to jeopardize that fragile imaginary life.

And just as Dean's career was reduced and frozen-so was his private life.

The main thing to keep in mind is that we know comparatively little about Dean. The man was incredibly insecure and very introspective. He had few friends and practically no romantic life (that we know of) and even those few friends that he did have he was sullen to; he would often refuse to open up to them.

James Dean was never a public figure when he was alive. He shot all three of his films in the year after he was "discovered" on Broadway, and died a few days after the completion of the filming of *Giant* and a few weeks after the release of *Eden*. The massive media hoopla and attention did not materialize till after *Rebel* was released, and by then Dean was nothing more than a memory.

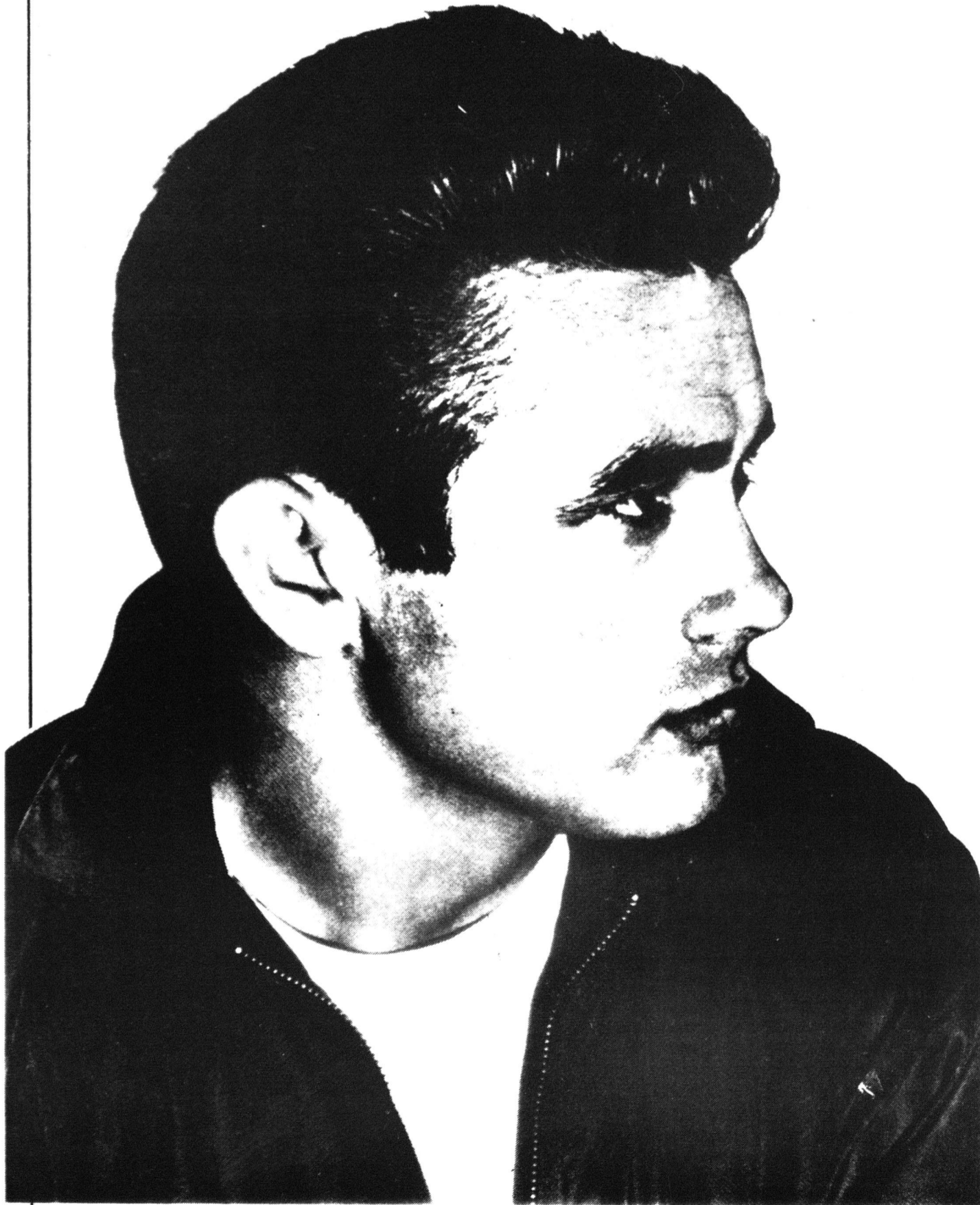
Hence he was never scrutinized by the press or the public. No interviews, no statements to the press, no stolen glimpses into his life. Dean died a private man, and took all his secrets with him.

Once again Dean's reality wasn't there to intrude on the fantasy. He wasn't around to contradict, to disappoint. As it was, even the few people who knew him were arguing about the concrete points in his past.

A dead James Dean can be molded pretty much into anything: the sullen neurotic turns into the quiet loner and again, no fear of contradiction.

There was something more to his appeal of James Dean than the fact that his death eliminated contradiction. Dean answered something, he filled in a very important gap in the psyche of America in the mid-50's.

The wake of the second world war had produced in America the first generation of affluent teenagers.



Story by Gilbert Bouchard
Italic quotes excerpted from John Howlett's *James Dean, a biography*.