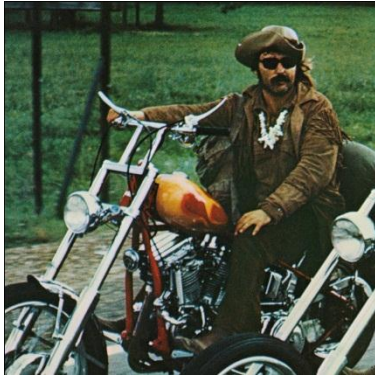


## The Wild Ride of “Dennis the Menace”



# A Tribute to Dennis Hopper

by Jarrod Emerson

SPECIAL FOR FILMS FOR TWO®

A rebel riding cross-country on his chopper, giving the finger to the middle class; a drug-induced photojournalist, living in a rogue Colonel’s hazy jungle kingdom; a sex-crazed, impulsive drug dealer who loves Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. Each of these diverse masks has been worn by one man: Dennis Hopper.

However, this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to describing the career of the veteran character actor, who succumbed to prostate cancer on May 29, 2010 at the age of 74. In well over 100 feature films, Hopper’s most enduring performances are those that draw an incredible parallel with his own life—particularly in roles of a man who is struggling with drug and/or alcohol addiction (something he was quite open about in his later years). If ever an entertainer’s life was reflected in his best work, Hopper is a prime candidate.

Originally from Dodge City, Kansas, Hopper’s family relocated first to Missouri, then to the California. Living in San Diego, young Hopper developed an interest in Shakespeare and began studying at the Old Globe Theater. By age 20, he had found his way to Hollywood, landing bit parts alongside James Dean in first REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE and then GIANT.

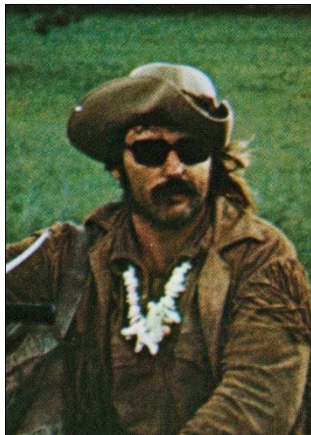
Deeply affected by Dean’s untimely death right after the GIANT shoot, Hopper, who had taken cues from Dean’s on-set behavior, began to build on that instruction. His tendency to block his own scenes created conflicts with directors, and culminated in a legendary 80-take scene on the set of Henry Hathaway’s 1958 western FROM HELL TO TEXAS. Barely in his 20s, young Hopper’s attempts to command such authority, with no stardom or influence, did not sit well with the Hollywood system. According to Hopper, these escapades resulted in him being relegated to television for the next decade.

<http://www.films42.com/tribute/ByJarrodEmerson.asp>

During this time, Hopper moved from Los Angeles to New York City in order to study acting under Lee Strasburg at the Actors Studio. Hopper spent the next five years as a student of the renowned teacher. Throughout the mid-60s he managed to make a number of one or two-episode appearances in several TV series as he continued his studies with Strasburg. Also during his time in NYC, Hopper met and married Brooke Hayward, making him the son-in-law of actress Margaret Sullavan. This connection led to small roles in two John Wayne films (THE SONS OF KATIE ELDER and TRUE GRIT) which reunited him with director Henry Hathaway. He also played a supporting role in the Paul Newman classic COOL HAND LUKE.

Not long afterward, he met and befriended Peter Fonda on the set of 1967's THE TRIP, and the two set out to make a film. The result was EASY RIDER, with Hopper making his debut as director. Acting here as "Billy," one of two chopper-riding rebels, Hopper showed us a lost man; Billy knew how to rebel, but not where he was ultimately headed. And as director, Hopper showed a special talent for improvisational editing and memorable characters. Aesthetically, Hopper's knack for unconventional storytelling had finally found the right material.

Fitting in nicely as part of the American "New Wave," the commercial and critical success of EASY RIDER opened the door to numerous small budget and independent films. Hopper received the Best First Work prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969, as well as an Oscar nomination in the Best Original Screenplay category (shared with Fonda and Terry Southern) in 1970. Suddenly, Hopper wasn't just able to find work—he was given the keys to whatever car he wished to drive.



Dennis Hopper with Peter Fonda  
& Jack Nicholson in EASY RIDER.  
Photo Credit: NewsCom/Archives

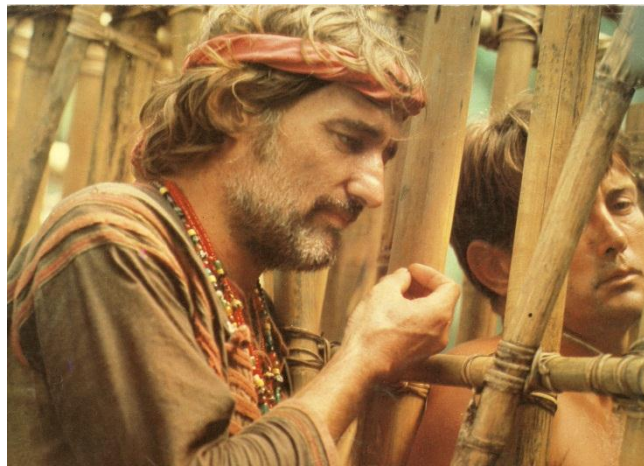
Unfortunately, Hopper's much-anticipated follow-up to EASY RIDER did not turn out as everyone expected. Universal Pictures gave Hopper free rein to film his script THE LAST MOVIE. A million-dollar shoot in Peru resulted in a product that only Hopper believed in. Upon viewing the completed film, Universal refused to distribute it unless Hopper agreed to completely re-edit it. When Hopper rejected that demand, Universal retaliated with an extremely limited release—only two weeks in three cities.

Throughout the remainder of the 1970's, Hopper appeared in forgotten films—mostly low-budget and/or European—and despite occasional acclaim, none of these brought

him anywhere close to the heights of EASY RIDER. Hopper would later admit that both his ego and his naiveté were to blame. However, another culprit was contributing to his problems: Hopper, always heavily reliant on alcohol, became addicted to cocaine as well, which led to increasingly erratic and unstable behavior.

Still, a few promising roles came his way as the seventies progressed. First was a memorable appearance in the German thriller THE AMERICAN FRIEND. Released in 1977, the film is an adaptation of the novel RIPLEY'S GAME. Hopper stars as "Tom Ripley," a career criminal dealing in art. Ripley gains the trust of an ill photo framer in order to use him for a murder. Hopper's performance is one of a man who likes to play dress-up. Ripley's disguises (for example his trademark cowboy hat) are character traits that hint just how mysterious this phase of Hopper's career was.

Next Francis Ford Coppola offered Hopper the chance to work with one of his idols, Marlon Brando, in APOCALYPSE NOW. Although, in the end, he only has a few minutes of screen time with Martin Sheen's "Captain Willard" (and no scenes at all with Brando), Hopper's portrayal of an unnamed photojournalist helps to define the madness surrounding Brando's "Colonel Kurtz." Yes, Brando is the headliner, but it's Hopper who gives APOCALYPSE NOW the necessary segue from Willard's purposeful trip upriver to the total insanity he finds in Kurtz's compound. Hopper is indelible here as a man who has lost his soul to the dark side.



Dennis Hopper with Martin Sheen  
in APOCALYPSE NOW.  
Photo Credit: NewsCom/Archives

Shortly afterwards, Hopper also helmed and starred in the Canadian production OUT OF THE BLUE. Originally hired just to act, Hopper stepped up when the original director jumped ship, also rewriting the script as well. Hopper portrays "Don," a small town truck driver. Fresh out of prison after running into a bus full of kids, Don returns to find his family spiraling out of control. Hopper's performance is heartbreaking; he's a man who wants to clean up the messes in his life, but has neither the strength nor the drive to do so. With its harsh, relentless tone, Hopper's talents as actor/writer/director all shine through in this Canadian gem.

But unable to reclaim EASY RIDER's huge success, Hopper's cocaine use escalated until reality came crashing down during a film shoot in Mexico in 1983. After the ensuing crisis, Hopper finally went sober. When he read the script for David Lynch's dark noir-thriller BLUE VELVET, Hopper enthusiastically phoned Lynch, exclaiming that he had to cast him as "Frank Booth" because Booth was, in fact, him!

Hopper took full advantage of this chance for a comeback as the foul-mouthed, over-sexed, and psychotically deranged villain. In one of many memorable scenes, student "Jeffrey" (Kyle MacLachlan) witnesses Booth's brutality as he tortures his girlfriend "Dorothy" (Isabella Rossellini). Watching, like Jeffrey, from a distance, it quickly becomes apparent that even sitting safely in the audience, we are in for a wild ride.

Frank Booth has no subtleties, only extremes and impulses. By saying he was Frank Booth, Hopper admitted he not only knew the state Booth was in, but also had the sobriety to convey it to the fullest. Frank Booth illustrates Hopper's acting skills at the height of his control. BLUE VELVET, anchored by Hopper's performance, gained acclaim for its revelatory (albeit creepy) authenticity.

Immediately after completing production on BLUE VELVET, Hopper traveled to Indiana to shoot the sports drama HOOSIERS with Gene Hackman. In HOOSIERS, Hackman plays down-on-his-luck, middle-aged coach "Norman Dale," hired to lead a small-town Indiana high-school basketball team. Hopper portrays "Shooter," the town drunk, who has an opportunity to redeem himself when Dale asks him to be the team's assistant coach.

Throughout the film Shooter struggles to shed his alcoholism, reconnect with his shame-filled son, and to assist with coaching the basketball team. This is particularly true of one pivotal moment in which Dale intentionally turns the reins over to Shooter midgame. As he exchanges looks with his son, an initially overwhelmed Shooter rises to the occasion, helping the team win. Another memorable moment involves a hospitalized Shooter and his son embracing, having gained each other's respect. By showing his own struggles so nakedly on screen, Hopper finally won his own game as well—he earned his second Oscar nod, this time in the Best Supporting Actor category.

Following these successes, Hopper blazed his way through a variety of projects, most notably directing Sean Penn and Robert Duvall in the 1988 gang drama COLORS, and acting in Tony Scott's TRUE ROMANCE as "well as Jan DeBont's SPEED (one of decade's biggest blockbusters). With these and many other roles in the 90s, Hopper was at the top of his game, able to utilize his previously drug-addled talents to the fullest.

Hopper's last major part was in ELEGY, director Isabel Coixet's 2008 adaptation of the Phillip Roth novel THE DYING ANIMAL. Here Hopper displayed a surprisingly tender side as "George O'Hearn," best friend to Ben Kingsley's promiscuous professor "David Kepesh." Throughout ELEGY, the two have believable chemistry as old friends, and Hopper surprises us by making his O'Hearn the more mature, accepting of the two. Hopper really illustrated his full range in ELEGY, showing an unexpected ability to play a mature, subtle character after so many villainous maniacs.



Dennis Hopper as "George" in ELEGY.  
Photo Credit: Joe Lederer (2007)

In March of 2010, Hopper received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Already battling prostate cancer, a skeletal man made one of his last public appearances. His passing leaves behind a legacy of turbulence, and, in spite of a rough start, the enduring work of an artist who not only survived but persevered. Through good and bad, Dennis Hopper gave himself to the world, and the arc of his prodigious journey can be seen in films which will live forever.

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Ohio-native Jarrod Emerson has been residing in Chicago for the past four years. He is a graduate of Columbia College Chicago, and is currently enrolled in courses at the Second City Training Center. He has been working with FF2 since 2007, and leaps at any opportunity (or excuse) to see more films!

**FF2 Editor's Notes:**

Although we've seen most of the films mentioned in this piece, we saw them before we began FF2, so, alas, most of them are not listed in our database. We are very grateful to Jarrod for going back into the archive to create a personal record of Dennis Hopper's most memorable moments on screen.

"Highly Recommended" by both of us (4.5/4), ELEGY was #8 on Jan's Top Ten List for 2008. To read her review, visit:

**<http://www.thehotpinkpen.com/?p=644>**