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CULTURE

Why the world still remembers James Dean

He became the icon of cool after only three films. Dean accomplished a lot before his death 65 years ago, at age 24.



THE SHORT LIFE OF JAMES DEAN

Exceptional talent

The defiant look and messy hair are a now well-established part of modern fashion and pop culture. 1950s youth looked up to James Dean as an idol. The charismatic actor played the rebel in life as well as on the big screen. The pain caused by his death was felt across the world by an entire generation.



THE SHORT LIFE OF JAMES DEAN

Young tap dancer

As a child, James Byron Dean — named after the famous poet by his mother — loved dancing, music and art. When his mother died, his whole world came crumbling down. Dean was sent to live with relatives in the countryside and grew up in a difficult familial situation. His father, strict and unapproachable, lived far away in Los Angeles.



THE SHORT LIFE OF JAMES DEAN

A lost soul

The agony and repressed rage that he embodied in his first movie "East of Eden," were authentic. He had learned his craft in the legendary Actors Studio in New York. But his success wasn't immediate. Dean initially took on bit parts while making ends meet as a table cleaner, parking attendant and cinema usher.



THE SHORT LIFE OF JAMES DEAN

'East of Eden' (1955)

... was his first movie. In 1954, Elia Kazan, Oscar-winning director and one of the hottest names in Hollywood at the time, offered Dean the main role in his upcoming picture — it was the beginning of a promising career. Kazan had discovered the future star in a small theater on Broadway. Dean's character represented an alternative to the rough-edged masculinity often seen in westerns.



THE SHORT LIFE OF JAMES DEAN

'Rebel Without A Cause' (1955)

It was his leading role in "Rebel Without A Cause" (1955) that gave Dean his breakthrough as an actor (here seen with co-star Natalie Wood). His penchant for improvisation drove the director and his fellow actors crazy but it drove his female audience wild.



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THE SHORT LIFE OF JAMES DEAN

Idol for young rebels

The new Hollywood star had more to offer than just his highly authentic style. Privately, he was a keen boxer, had a passion for racing cars and took care of his physical and nutritional health. He could also let his fists do the talking on set when the situation called for it, as seen here in a scene from "Rebel Without a Cause" (1955).



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THE SHORT LIFE OF JAMES DEAN

'Giant' (1955)

The American epic "Giant" — the third and last movie Dean would appear in — solidified his position as the epitome of cool — and the immortal rebel on the big screen. The movie appeared in cinemas in 1956 after its leading man had already passed away. The picture brought him a posthumous Oscar nomination for best actor.



THE SHORT LIFE OF JAMES DEAN

Passionate racer

In 1955, the avid sports car driver bought a new silver Porsche. He had his nickname, given to him by his co-workers, painted on the back of the car — "Little Bastard." Only five such cars of this German brand existed in the USA. But the car's speed would be his downfall — on his way to a car race, James Dean crashed his new vehicle and died.



THE SHORT LIFE OF JAMES DEAN

Cult figure

A cult-like following built up around the deceased actor in the months after his tragic accident. Objects associated with the star, such as his jeans and cigarette box, shot up in value. During the memorial service for him in 1956, fans stormed his grave and took the floral arrangements that had been laid there. Warner Brother's management was inundated with fan mail and love letters for years.



THE SHORT LIFE OF JAMES DEAN

The immortal icon

James Dean's image has long been a staple of pop and protest culture. Posters, photos, songs and documentaries about the young rebel are key additions to cultural history. In the 1950s, actor Horst Buchholz was referred to as the "German James Dean." Photographer Anton Corbijn dedicated his movie "Life" (2015) to Dean, which tells the story of a legendary photo reportage.

Although the exact circumstances of James Dean's fatal car accident are unclear, what is certain is that on September 30, 1955, the 24-year-old movie star [lost his life and became a timeless cultural icon](#).

On the day of the accident, Dean was traveling across California with a friend, German mechanic and racecar driver Rolf Wütherich. The pair were on their way to a car race, Dean was an avid racing fan.

In the twilight of the early evening, a car coming in the other direction turned in front of his Porsche, cutting him off. Dean, who had already been warned by the police for speeding earlier in the afternoon, was driving too fast and unable to swerve out of harm's way. He hit the other vehicle nearly head-on and died immediately, his neck broken.



Tragic end of a career: James Dean's Porsche after the accident

Wütherich was thrown out of the vehicle but survived. The actor's prized silver Porsche Spyder had been reduced to a pile of scrap metal.

The dream of becoming an actor

James Byron Dean, born on February 8, 1931, spent his early years on a farm in the US state of Indiana. As a child, he loved art and music, played the violin, made pottery and even tried tap dancing. Yet he only had one dream: to be an actor.



Dean began his acting career in Broadway theater

His family moved to California and his mother died of cancer when Dean was only nine. His father sent him to live with his aunt and uncle in a Quaker household back home in Indiana. Deeply unhappy, Dean sat for hours alone in front of a radio, taking refuge in stories that took him to faraway places. In high school, he became involved in his school's theater group.

Yet the soon-to-be star had an even greater passion: driving. At the time, he was fascinated by motorcycle racing, although he didn't even have his driver's license yet. "My hobby, or what I do in my spare time, is motorcycle," he told his school principal. "I know a lot about them mechanically, and I love to ride. I have been in a few races and have done well."

A fresh start in NYC

After high school, Dean moved back to California to live with his father. The cinema industry, movies, and the studios in nearby Hollywood all interested him ardently. In 1949 he enrolled at Santa Monica College in California, choosing to study pre-law at his father's request. However, law wasn't his thing. He preferred instead to take up acting classes and workshops at UCLA in order to major in Drama. But Dean wanted to pursue a more serious acting career and so moved to New York City, feeling magically drawn to the East Coast metropolis.



His first big hit: James Dean (middle) in "East of Eden" (1955)

The reality of being an actor in the megacity was difficult and laborious. Dean caught a break when he landed a spot in the storied "Actor's Studio" of method actor Lee Strasberg, considered the nation's most prestigious acting school at the time. Encouraged, Dean made ends meet by acting in television shows and theater productions.

A starring role

Dean [was given his major role](#) by Oscar-winning director Elia Kazan who cast him as the angst-ridden brother Cal in *East of Eden*, an adaptation of the 1952 [novel by John Steinbeck](#).

Casting the inexperienced young actor in the film was a big risk for Kazan, but it paid off. Dean dashingly played a young man in America trying to find his own way in the world, and the topic [struck a chord with the youth of the time](#), who were eager to find ways to rebel against authority. The role made him a star overnight, earning him an Oscar nomination.



James Dean takes a break during filming of "Giant"

The rebel myth lives on

Dean saw further success with his second film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) about a sensitive high-school misfit. In 1956 he shot *Giant*, which further cemented him as a posterchild of rebellious youths in the 1950s.

Yet, Dean only lived to see the success of his first film. His accident took place before the second and third films were released. At the age of just 24, he [became a posthumous pop-culture icon](#). His casual, cool way of dressing, haircut and defiant gaze appeared again and again in photography and fashion.

Dean was buried in his home state of Indiana. After his death, the roles he had been scheduled to play were taken over by the young [Paul Newman](#), who, like Dean, had also been influenced by Strasberg's method acting. He too became a star.



The idol for a generation: James Dean

Although Dean died 65 years ago, he has not been forgotten. Today, a small museum in Indiana commemorates the world-famous icon. The intersection where his fatal accident occurred was renamed James Dean Memorial Junction. Decades after his death, fans still place flowers there in honor of the "rebel without a cause."

Adapted by Sarah Hucal

DW RECOMMENDS

The short life of James Dean

Just three movies turned him into a world famous star and cultural pop icon. Then 65 years ago, on September 30, Dean crashed his Porsche and died.
