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The original meaning of the word 'icon' referred to religious paintings of Christ, Mother Mary and other saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church. These days the word is used to describe anyone who is strongly identified with a certain field of activity.

In popular culture most of these 'icons' have emerged from the worlds of music and cinema. However, in this correspondent's opinion, to become a true icon one needs to have such strong visual imagery associated with oneself as to be practically etched in the minds of millions of people.

In the last 115 years of cinema many screen icons have come and gone. Some have proven to have the 'staying power' to truly own that title. Many screen legends such as Rita Hayworth, Mae West, Joan Crawford, John Wayne, Lana Turner and the like may not get mentioned in this article, but that should not detract from their place in this vast pantheon of gods and goddesses of the silver screen. Neither should it prevent readers from delving into the films and literature available in CPLS, featuring these stars.

# THE FACES WE CAN'T FORGET *SCREEN ICONS* OF 20TH CENTURY *HOLLYWOOD*

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## PART ONE

### *Judy Garland*

Perhaps one of the earliest screen queens (with significant longevity, notwithstanding her untimely death) is the girl who immortalised the line 'I don't think we're in Kansas anymore'. In addition, this special star turned the theme song from the same film **Somewhere over the rainbow** into one of the best-loved songs of all time. Judy Garland (born Frances Gumm in 1922) was no stranger to the world of show business before she first stepped into the magical world of **\*The wizard of Oz** in 1939.

The young Garland was groomed by both her parents to be a singing, dancing and acting sensation. And she didn't disappoint. She started singing with her sisters in Vaudeville in an act unluckily known as the Gumm Sisters. It didn't take very long for young Frances to shine and become the standout phenomena the world knew as Judy Garland.

This icon of the stage and screen became a legend at the age of 16 when she landed the career-defining role of Dorothy Gale in **The wizard of Oz**. She also broke the Academy Awards records that year, becoming the youngest actress (at that time) to be awarded a special Oscar for Best Juvenile Performer: (Those were the days before the Academy handed out awards to pre-teens, such as Anna Paquin in 1993 for her performance in **The piano** opposite Holly Hunter.)

It is somewhat amazing that Garland's career as an actress at MGM, under the heavy hand and control of Louis B Mayer, scarcely lasted ten years, and yet produced some of the most memorable musical films of that period. By 1949, addled by a drug addiction (fuelled by Louis B Mayer's private prescriptions for uppers and downers, to help the young star cope with a schedule consisting of almost one film every two months), Garland was unceremoniously fired by the studio. She only made a handful of



◀ Judy Garland



▲ Jack Haley, Judy Garland and Ray Bolger in a scene from *The Wizard of Oz*

films for other studios over the next three decades. The most significant of these post-MGM films must be her Oscar-nominated performance in the 1954 musical adaptation of *\*A star is born*.

She made a comeback with a string of widely successful concert tours, but her untimely death in June 1969 (aged 47) robbed the world of a talent which was larger than life itself.

Judy Garland's legacy does not only include the legion of film and sound recordings, but also includes her daughter, Liza Minnelli, whose own life sadly parallels that of her mother, and yet, she has also attained cult/icon status among her multitude of fans.

### *Doris Day*

Doris Day (born Doris Kappelhoff in 1924) is Judy Garland's junior by only two years, and she also managed to rise to iconic status in her recording and acting career which spanned almost thirty years by the time she retired from screen acting in 1968.



▲ Doris Day on her first day on the set for her first movie role in *Romance on the High Seas*

Day started her career as a singer for a series of big bands in the early 1940s before breaking out with the hit single, *Sentimental journey* in 1945.

By 1948 she had made the move to Hollywood and signed a contract with Warner Bros. Her first appearance on screen was in the lightweight comedy *Romance on the high seas* (1948). In the following few years she would make four films with legendary singer/actor Gordon MacRae (including *\*Tea for two*, *West Point story*, *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the light of the silvery moon*) which catapulted her name and status to great heights.

Her next film, *\*Calamity Jane* (1953) cemented her fame and provided her with her second important signature tune in the form of *Secret Love*.

A year later she made her last film (*Young at heart* with Frank Sinatra) for Warner Bros under her contract.

For MGM Studios Doris Day made the film which she refers to as the most important and artistically fulfilling of her career: *Love me or leave me* (1955) told the real life story of another legendary singer; Ruth Etting, and the title tune of the film became another huge success.

In 1956 she joined the luminary list of blondes to make films for Alfred Hitchcock. *\*The man who knew too much* was a remake by Hitchcock of his own earlier 1934 film. Hitchcock knew that the viewing public would expect Doris Day to sing if he used her in his film, and with Jay Livingston's composition, *Que Sera, Sera* he had a hit film and a hit song on his hands. The song is deeply entrenched in the Doris Day persona. She later used it as the theme song to her television series, *The Doris Day Show*, though readers may be surprised to learn that Day was initially vehemently opposed to the song, and at first refused to record it.

Over the next decade and a half Day reinvented herself with a series of mild sex comedies with co-stars like Rock Hudson and Cary Grant. By the end of the 1960s the popularity of her brand of entertainment had faded, and she decided to go into retirement at the age of 44. Her personal life had seen many tragedies and travesties.



▲ Doris Day getting prepared for her big mud scene in *Calamity Jane*

A car accident at the age of 17 confounded her aspirations of becoming a dancer and her long-time husband and manager Marty Melcher had, unbeknownst to her, defrauded her of millions, leaving her bankrupt despite a lucrative career in Hollywood. In 2004 Day suffered another devastating blow with the death of her son, Terry Melcher. Despite this she has worked relentlessly for the cause of animal rights and still lives a quiet life at her home in California as she approaches her 87th year.

## Marlon Brando

Hailed by many as one of the greatest actors of all time, Marlon Brando also managed to become a screen icon due to his memorable performances in films such as *The men*, *\*A streetcar named Desire*, *\*On the waterfront*, and *\*The Godfather* trilogy.

Brando shares a birthday with Doris Day (3 April 1924), but unlike Day, Brando became known for the serious, dark, and brooding characters he often played.

Perhaps most famous of these characters was that of Stanley Kowalski in the screen

adaptation of Tennessee Williams' electrifying stage play, *A streetcar named Desire*.

Brando had played the part on Broadway before taking the part in the film. The major difference in the casting of the film was that Vivienne Leigh was cast as the pitiful Blanche, as opposed to Brando's original Broadway co-star, Jessica Tandy, whom many readers will remember as the titular character in the 1989 film, *\*Driving Miss Daisy*.

Brando had a reputation for having a voracious sexual appetite and was linked romantically to almost each of his female co-stars in the 1950s and 1960s, not least of which was the Italian actress Anna Magnani who had starred opposite him in *The fugitive kind* (1960).

Another actor who greatly admired Brando, and was also a student at The Actors' Studio in New York, was James Dean, an icon in his own right. Brando himself, according to legend, complained that Dean was fashioning his acting technique on Brando's own. It is hard to dispute this claim, as when one compares the two 'mumblers' (both actors had a habit of speaking quite inaudibly at times, to accent their broody characters), there is a remarkable similarity.



▲ Vivien Leigh and Marlon Brando in Warner Brothers' *A Streetcar named Desire*, 1952

Though his career spanned more than half a century Brando seems to have completed most of his best work during his first ten years in Hollywood (1950 to 1960). During that time he managed to perform in 13 films, almost all of which were critical and commercial successes.

Some of his later contributions include *\*Last tango in Paris*, *\*The Godfather*, and *\*Apocalypse now*.

Brando also had quite a tumultuous private life in his later years, mainly



▲ Marlon Brando and Joanne Woodward in United Artists' *The Fugitive*

concerning his son and daughter. Perhaps because of this he seems to have become negligent in his art and difficult to work with, often arriving on set with hardly a working knowledge of the script.

Despite this he contributed greatly to the history of cinema and added a never before seen sense of smouldering sexuality in a time when actors were often relegated to being handsome and charming.

## Marilyn Monroe

Born just over two years after Doris Day and Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe lived to



▲ Lexington Avenue, New York: filming *The Seven Year Itch* (1954). The actual skirt-blowing shots were eventually recreated in the Hollywood studio

first bit of controversy of her career when she pursued a modelling career and ended up having some nude photographs taken for a military magazine called *Stars and Stripes* in the mid 1940s. This marriage was plagued by jealousy from her husband and ended shortly after:

After managing to find work in Hollywood, Marilyn (who, by this time, had changed her name) made a string of lacklustre comedies, often in very minor roles. Her first film appearance was in 1947, and it was only after a half dozen years and approximately twenty films that she first received the attention she deserved, and made her first few significant films.

Among the films that created the legend which she became are *\*Gentlemen prefer blondes*, *\*How to marry a millionaire*, *Niagara*, and *\*There is no business like show business*.

Her next film, and the film which first established her as an icon, was the 1955 sex comedy *\*The seven year itch*. This is the film which features the (in)famous shot of Marilyn dressed in a white flowing knee length dress, standing over a ventilation grate on the streets of New York, which causes her dress to flare up over her head while she pushes it back down, laughing girlishly, yet seductively.

One of the many (now well-known and published) sad facts of Monroe's life is that she only completed five more films after achieving this iconic status. Within seven years of the release of *The seven year itch* Monroe was dead.

The film, and the publicity surrounding it, proved to be the final straw in her marriage to celebrated baseball player Joe DiMaggio. Again the man in her life's jealousy put paid to her second attempt at marital bliss.

Her third husband was playwright Arthur Miller. Of her three marriages, perhaps Miller was the kindest and most supportive of his famous wife, though he himself shied away from public life. His mature age perhaps also provided Monroe with the father figure she had been missing her whole life.

The final film in which Monroe appeared was based on Miller's writings. *\*The misfits* was released in 1961 and co-starred such Hollywood greats as Clark Gable, Montgomery Clift and Thelma Ritter. Sadly

become the epitome of a screen icon. Even after nearly 50 years since her tragic death there are few people alive who have never seen a poster, or image, of Marilyn Monroe - a true icon.

She was born on the first day of June 1926 as Norma Jeanne Baker-Mortensen.

Her childhood was a difficult one. She never knew her father. Her mother spent time in institutions, leaving Norma Jeanne to be raised by her grandmother, aunts and a string of (often abusive) foster families.

After having married a soldier at a fairly young age, Norma Jeanne encountered the

the film proved to not only be Monroe's final contribution, but it was also the swan song of Gable and Clift.

Marilyn had become (according to some reports) unstable, and during the filming of **The misfits** her third and final marriage came to an end. Arthur Miller once succinctly stated that 'celebrity was a kind of loneliness', and perhaps there is no better example of this than Marilyn Monroe. For the icon and sex symbol of the 1950s, love and acceptance on a personal level always seemed evasive.

Her last public appearance happened in June 1962 when she famously sang *Happy Birthday* to President John F Kennedy, with whom she is said to have had an affair. Less than two months later her naked body was found lying on her bed, clasping the handle of her telephone.

## James Dean

Of all the screen icons old and new, perhaps James Dean's inclusion on the list is the most astounding. The young actor (he was 24 when he died), had only made three mainstream films by the time of his death. Only two of those films had been released at the time of his death, and yet he became an icon whose like is only matched by those of two of his contemporaries: Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley.

James Dean got bitten by the acting bug early on in life when he took part in his high school's dramatic society. Shortly after leaving school he moved to New York to study drama at The Actors' Studio. This studio had some very well-known alumni, including Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, Julie Harris, and director Elia Kazan.

The young Dean found some level of acclaim appearing in some off-Broadway productions in the Big Apple before appearing as the troubled Jim Stark in the 1955s **\*Rebel without a cause**. The film was an instant hit with the disillusioned post-war American youth, and to the horror of parents all over; provided them with an icon, a representative, of that teen angst . . . James Dean.

During that same year Dean was cast as yet another angst-driven youngster in the adaptation of John Steinbeck's **\*East of Eden**. The film re-united Dean with Actors' Studio friends Julie Harris and director Elia Kazan. It was another great success and allowed Dean the financial means to indulge in his favourite sport, namely car racing.

While making his next and final film, **\*Giant** (1956), with Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson, Dean purchased a Porsche Spider. On the last day of filming Dean and a friend drove the car to a racing rally. En route, he was killed in an accident. He was 24, and against all odds, became an instant icon.

Some of the most iconic images of James Dean include him wearing the red leather jacket from **Rebel** . . . and the photograph of him, cigarette dangling from his lips, strolling down a rain-drenched New York street. The photo was later aptly dubbed *The Boulevard of broken dreams*.

James Dean, like Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, make up part of the holy trinity of screen icons. Though there are many worthy of the title, these three epitomise the essence of what being an icon is.

## Elizabeth Taylor

Perhaps one the most colourful and glamorous of the screen icons to be discussed here is Elizabeth Taylor - a true Hollywood legend. An icon, a celebrity with a jaded past, and yet a fine actress too.

Elizabeth was a ten-year-old girl when she started working under contract to MGM. With audience-pleasing films such as **Lassie come home**, **\*Jane Eyre**, and **\*National Velvet** it is hardly surprising that her star rose very high very quickly. By the time she was a fully fledged teenager the studio was already grooming her to be a sex symbol. The public seems to have wanted to hang on to her sweet little-girl image for a while longer; but MGM was already casting her to play characters in their early twenties when she was barely 16.

▼ James Dean with Elizabeth Taylor on the set of *Giant*





▼ *What Twentieth Century-Fox paid a million dollars (and more) to get: the 'official' photograph of Elizabeth made up for her role as the Queen of the Nile*

Films such as **A date with Judy**, **\*Little women**, **Quo Vadis?**, **Father of the bride** and its sequel, tried to ease her transition into premature adulthood.

By the time Taylor was cast in the starring role in **\*A place in the sun** (1951) there could be no more doubt that Elizabeth Taylor, the glamour queen, had been born.

The rest of the 1950s saw her being cast in random roles which didn't do much to showcase her talent, nor to release the rampant sexuality that would later dominate her career.

Not until the 1958 screen version of Tennessee Williams' **\*Cat on a hot tin roof** did Taylor get the chance to shine again, and

at the age of 26 she played the role of the sexually frustrated Maggie ('the cat').

The start of the 1960s saw Elizabeth Taylor involved in a succession of scandals. In 1959 she married Eddie Fisher, who many people thought she had wrangled away from his marriage to America's sweetheart, Debbie Reynolds.

As if this Hollywood betrayal weren't bad enough, Taylor accepted \$1 000 000 to appear as Cleopatra in the 1962 film of the same name. The public was outraged at this new Hollywood excess, which made Taylor the highest paid actress up to that stage.

In her defence Taylor once said: 'If someone is dumb enough to offer me a million dollars

to make a picture, I'm certainly not going to be dumb enough to turn it down.'

Furthermore, on the set of **\*Cleopatra** she met the British actor Richard Burton. The two became involved in a highly publicised affair while filming in Italy while Taylor was still married to Eddie Fisher; the man she had 'stolen' from Debbie Reynolds a scant couple of years earlier. She promptly divorced Fisher and married Richard Burton. Ten years later the lovebirds divorced, only to re-marry a year later and divorce again a year after that.

As can be seen, the 1960s were a turbulent and notorious period of Elizabeth Taylor's life and career; but the love/hate affair she had with her public had its benefits. In 1960 she suffered a bout of pneumonia which nearly cost her her life (if the publicity is to be believed) and consequently, swept up in emotion there was a wave of public sympathy which lead (many believe) to her receiving the year's Academy Award for best actress in what is (upon reflection) a fairly mediocre film. **Butterfield 8** co-starred Eddie Fisher and South African-raised Laurence Harvey. Taylor played a call girl (prostitute) involved with a rich married man, while spurning the advances of a timid admirer, played by Eddie Fisher. Life imitating art?

Despite never quite recapturing the glamour, notoriety and artistic output of the 1950s and 1960s, Taylor continued to be a figure of public interest well into the 1990s.

She has managed to garner a slew of seven husbands (eight marriages, considering her re-marriage to Burton), fuelled a craze for diamond jewellery, marketed one of the most successful woman's fragrances of all time, **White Diamonds** (after Chanel No. 5), and became the unexpected spokesperson for the fight against HIV/AIDS in the early days after her friend Rock Hudson died from complications stemming from this illness.

It is sometimes easy to forget that Elizabeth Taylor featured in over sixty films in a career spanning over fifty years. Elizabeth Taylor received the OBE (Order of the British Empire) from Queen Elizabeth II of England in 1999. Today, she lives a fairly reclusive life, plagued by ill health.

In the following issue we'll feature a list of a selection of the films, and books featuring the stars mentioned in this article. Many of them are available from the CPLS, so let's get nostalgic about cinema, re-visit the work and lives of these legends of the screen.

Note: *\*Available from CPLS stock.*

