

is evidence of somebody consumed by art. Paintings and postcards broadcast modern messages on every wall. Even the closets are lined with his photographs of artists. Up in the highest corner of the ceiling, hanging on a little stage, are three papier-mâché skeletons from Mexico's Day of the Dead celebration, engaged in swordplay. The living room is dominated by a 15-foot-high painting by Chuck Arnoldi, laminated wood splashed with blues and greens and slashed with a chain saw. When he sat down on a gray couch near the painting during a recent interview, Hopper looked as solid as a judge.

Q. In 1958, being the latest pretty-boy actor, you talked of wanting to direct. What triggered this desire?

A. I wanted to direct since I was 13 and playing Shakespeare in a theater in San Diego. I went under contract to Warner Bros. because Nick Ray said I would get a part in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and there was a possibility of a part in *Giant*. When I got to *Rebel Without a Cause*, I realized it was a director's medium. With the exception of James Dean, who was doing his own blocking and his own stuff, the actors were basically being used by the director. I got very interested in directing. Also, Dean talked about directing.

Q. Could he have been a director?

A. It's not a matter of "could have." He could have done anything he wanted. A producer on *Giant* was going to sign him to direct *The Actor*, which was a sort of cheap paperback novel. [Dean was killed in a car crash before *Giant* was finished.] That's where I started thinking about it. Jimmy said, "You gotta go out and take photographs, learn about art, learn about literature, even if you want to be an actor."

So I carried a camera with me wherever I went. That's how friends related to me: "Here comes the Tourist." I have a book out called *Out of the '60s*. It's the photographs I took from 1961 to 1967. Artists and civil rights and love-ins. It was a lot easier for me to focus a camera on somebody than dealing with one-on-one communication.

Q. Who were your most significant influences?

A. When I was a kid, Orson Welles and Barrymore. Then when I was 13, I saw Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift in movies the same week, and it changed my life. My thinking about acting changed from this grand, kind of thing to trying to figure out what was an internal actor and what were these people doing.

Then meeting James Dean, certainly. Dean was working in areas that were way over my head. He was externalizing real feelings. He was doing

things you don't really see—except for maybe Crispin Glover [in *River's Edge*]. He does such strange things, almost like a dancer. Jimmy was like that. This is at a time in the '50s when actors only did the script. But Jimmy did the script and then some. Like in *Rebel Without a Cause*, when they arrest him for being drunk and disorderly, they start searching him and he starts laughing like they're tickling him. There was nothing written about that.

AS AN ACTOR, Dennis Hopper didn't always get away with such improvisation. He had his famed contretemps with director Henry Hathaway, for instance, in *Hell to Texas*. The tough old director, whom Hopper figured was just a "screamer-yeller-maniac," put the actor through some 80 takes of one scene. With his reputation thus soiled, Hopper endured an unofficial blacklisting for years, finding work on over 140 television shows instead.

Eventually, he found a second career in the burgeoning film scene generated by Roger Corman's cheap quickies at American International. This sprawling kingdom of B-movies was the training ground for a group of moviemakers who went on to form the brain trust of American cinema: Francis Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Robert Towne, among others. Hopper's friend, Peter Fonda, another Hollywood reprobate, had scored in 1966 with *The Wild Angels*, and Hopper had starred in an unwholesome embroidery called *The Glory Stompers*. Scuzzy though they might have been, the motorcycle flicks were hugely profitable. The movie poster alone of Fonda sitting on his Harley sold something like 16 million. But while they knew a big market was out there, by the late '60s both actors had sworn off doing any biker movies.

Then Fonda came up with the idea of doing one as a modern western. With its blast-of-doom finale (which was then as necessary as an ersatz-Rocky finish is to an '80s film like *Hoosiers*) the \$420,000 *Easy Rider* brought in a fast \$40 million. These shattering profits, coming at a time when Hollywood was swamped by \$20 million flops like *Star!* and *Hello, Dolly*, helped bring about the era of interesting filmmaking that existed in the early '70s.

Q. Your cut was seven percent of the gross. Did all that money and success throw you a curve?

A. No, what threw me a curve is that I went and made *The Last Movie* right after—I didn't take a break. I won the Venice Film Festival for *The Last Movie*, and it's a film I'm proud of. But I overestimated my audience. What they really wanted was a 1940-opiate kind

of film where they didn't have to do a whole lot of thinking. What Spielberg and Lucas came up with. But I didn't even get the opportunity to go that far. Universal said they wouldn't distribute it but for two weeks in Los Angeles, three days in San Francisco, and then they'd shelve it. So there went my career as a director.

Also, I'd left Los Angeles. I'd moved to Taos. Never came back, until recently. The only work I could get was in Europe. I can't say I wasn't angry and upset during that time, because I was.

Q. There are two perspectives to your career: the not-sober view and the sober one.

A. True. I was a mess, hearing voices, going crazy. I was in New Mexico, Houston, Austin, Mexico. I ended up here. I heard my friends being murdered in the next room. I was doing half an ounce of cocaine every few days. I was drinking a half-gallon of rum, then a couple of bags of coke to sober up. I wasn't falling-down drunk and wondering where people were. I was pretty straight when I made *Rumble Fish*.

Q. When did you say, "No more"?

A. When I ended up incarcerated. And hearing voices out on the telephone lines. It was a progressive trip. The hard part is getting over your obsession. I'm over that now. I don't give a f--- if you put a pound of cocaine on the table. I don't want to open my mind; I'm lucky I have a mind to open up.

Actually, [*Easy Rider* producer] Bert Schneider got me out. I was in a lock-up for the drug situation. I couldn't get out. I was taken out of there and put in Cedars-Sinai Psychiatric. Bert said come on out to the house. I was pretty lucky in that there was no kidney or liver damage. It's really amazing when the telephone wires start talking to you.

Q. What's the story behind your next directorial assignment, *Colors*?

A. It's about two cops downtown, and street gangs. There's a program called CRASH—Community Research Against Street Hoodlums. Both Sean and Duvall are cops.

Sean brought me into it about a year ago. I ripped the script apart, which was set in Chicago. They were dealing in cough syrup, and there was this big bust that saved the world from this cough syrup dealing. It was total bullshit. So I said change it to Los Angeles, make it a young cop-older cop thing and make it about gangs, really real, which is heroin, cocaine, PCP. They said nobody wants to see that stuff, and I said they don't want to see anything about cough syrup. And you don't have one bust and save everybody from street gangs. Anyhow, it came back and they've got a new writer and it's beautiful. Good script. This is from the cop's