



# Dennis HOPPER

Hollywood heavyweight, countercultural hell raiser, outsider and born-again artist: the star of *Rebel Without A Cause*, *Easy Rider* and *Apocalypse Now* has lived an extraordinary life on both sides of the lens. Here, he comes clean - boy, does he come clean - on surviving half a century on the big screen, that daily half-gallon rum habit and why he's still got an Oscar win in him

**D**ennis Hopper is what I would call a "proper" movie star. He's made more than 60 films in an extraordinary 50-year career, starring in the iconic *Rebel Without A Cause* with James Dean. Now 73, the firebrand Kansas-born star has rubbed shoulders with them all - John Wayne, Robert De Niro, Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Newman, Ava Gardner. You name them, he's known them, acted with them, fought with them. And he's partied with them too, notably his great friend Jack Nicholson - taking more drugs, swigging more booze and sleeping with more women than should be medically possible.

Hopper's been married five times, has four children, and has now been clean for 26 years. He's also a keen photographer, painter, director and art collector; and lives in Venice Beach, California. So all things considered, he's more than worthy of the epithet "legend". The reason for our encounter was ostensibly to promote a stunning new book of intimate, behind-the-scenes movie-set photographs he took through his early acting years. Published by **Taschen**, it's a massive, 546-page tome, limited to 1,500 copies and selling for £450. It's an extraordinary book, almost paparazzi in its feel, yet way too artistic for that genre. Hopper is a talented man.

I'd never met him, but the moment I was asked to interview him for *GQ* I smiled to myself and thought; "God, that's going to be fun."

And it was.

He even sounds like a proper movie star, with that distinctive gravel voice that comes from a lifetime of excessive Hollywood misbehaviour, and a readiness

to answer any question you throw at him as truthfully as he possibly can, because he doesn't really care what people think of him any more.

And if I was him, I wouldn't care either. I'd think: "I starred with James Dean, John Wayne and Marlon Brando - do you think I give a crap what any of you lesser mortals have to say?"

Remember, this is the man who played the nitrate-sniffing, sadomasochist Frank Booth in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, a part so disturbing, eerie and messed up that even Steven Berkoff rejected it, since commenting: "There was nothing in that part except destruction."

Gruff, tough, battle-weary, indignant and still raging against much of the world, Hopper is also one of the most drily amusing people I've interviewed.

**Piers Morgan** How are you, Dennis?

**Dennis Hopper** I'm good, thank you.

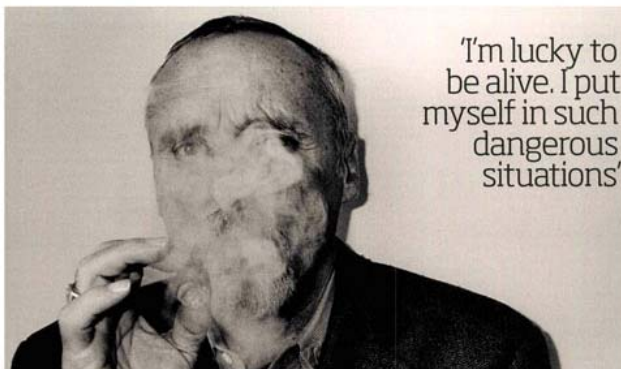
**PM** You were, in a way, the world's first real paparazzo, weren't you?

**DH** [Bursts out laughing] Some paparazzo! I've never been called that before.

**PM** How do you respond to that allegation?

**DH** I never made any money from my photographs, so I wasn't a very good paparazzo, was I?

**PM** In 1971, you directed and starred in



"I'm lucky to be alive. I put myself in such dangerous situations"

**The Last Movie, and a Universal movie executive told you, "Art is only worth something if you're dead. We'll only make money on this picture if you die, Dennis." Does that kind of sum up the Hollywood ethos?**

**DH** I said, "You're talking to a paranoid, and you say *that!*"

**PM Art seems to have been almost as important to you as making movies?**

**DH** You know, I'm just a middle-class farm boy from Dodge City, Kansas. And I always

thought that acting was art, writing was art, music was art, painting was art, and I've tried to keep that cultural vibe to my life. I never wanted to don a tie, or go into an office.

**PM If I said you could only act, paint or take photos, which option would you take?**

**DH** I would never make that choice.

**PM What if I held a gun to your head?**

**DH** Then I guess I'd die [laughs]. No, look, I'm primarily an actor, and always have been.

**PM How would you feel if that guy from Universal was right, and your real commercial success comes after you die? What would you most like to be remembered for?**

**DH** I have no idea. The film I am most proud of is *Easy Rider*. Because it was a kind of Mother Goose piece of storytelling about what was going on in America at the time with the Vietnam war, race riots and so on.

**PM Did you ever imagine when you made *Easy Rider* that there would be a black president of America in your lifetime?** >

**DH** Well, I'd marched with Martin Luther King before I made that movie. But I don't think any of us on those marches ever dreamed it would happen in our lifetimes, no.

**PM You were a Republican for most of your adult life, yet voted for Barack Obama. Why?**

**DH** I changed to Republican when Reagan became president because I wanted to see a change to years of Democrat-run Senate. And I voted Republican until Obama. I think he's terrific. I'm pleased to see him trying to restore America's reputation around the world. There's a lot of work to do, but at least he's trying, talking to the right people, spelling out the problems and attempting to solve them, and it seems the recovery has started, so hopefully he is having a positive effect.

**PM How did Martin Luther King compare to Obama?**

**DH** He was a preacher, not a politician, and it was a different time. Obama is better educated.

**PM James Dean, what was he like?**

**DH** As an actor, he totally changed the way I worked.

I thought I was the best young actor in America, if not the world, when I met him. I was 18, had been playing Shakespeare in San Diego, and then I met James on the set of *Rebel Without A Cause*. And I knew we were going to get along great when I was asked to test all the leading girls in his absence because he was in New York. So I ended up testing Jayne Mansfield, Natalie Wood and so on.

**PM Sounds like a gruelling job, Dennis...**

**DH** Yeah, but then Jimmy arrived, and I saw him start to act, and I realised I was nowhere near as good as him. I'd never seen anyone improvise like that. I was full of preconceived ideas about when to make a gesture, how to read a line. I considered myself an accomplished Shakespearean actor. And he'd do this improvising, and I'd check the script and think, "Where the hell did those lines come from?" He taught me some basic stuff. "If you're going to drink something in a film, *drink* it. If you're going to smoke something, *smoke* it. Don't act as if you're drinking or smoking, just do it as you would off-set." That was such good advice. He taught me to live the moment, in the reality, not fill my head with presupposed ideas, or anticipate what may or may not happen.

**PM How good an actor was he?**

**DH** He was the best I ever saw.

**PM Better than Brando, Wayne, Nicholson?**

**DH** He had something none of the others ever had, he had a dancer's sensitivity. He had a very creative way of physically moving.

**PM What impact did his death have on you?**

**DH** I believe in destiny. I was 19 years old and Jimmy was 24. I was in a little theatre in Los Angeles at the time, and my agent was called out just before the curtain went up and was told the news, and he came back and said: "Something terrible's happened, and I want you to promise me that whatever else you do, you'll stay here in the theatre. James Dean is dead." And in that exact moment, the lights went out on the stage and a spotlight went up on a single chair. And I just freaked out, and ran into the street.

**PM What did his death teach you?**

**DH** Life can be f\*\*\*ing cruel. He wasn't racing, he was going to a race. He was only going 70mph when he died, though he'd been ticketed for going 120mph before that. The guy who hit him wanted to die.

**PM Your lifestyle got pretty crazy soon after James Dean died, was that linked?**

**DH** It was prompted by a desire to continue what he'd been doing without the training. He taught

me what real Method acting was about – that you couldn't think about how to answer a door, how to pick up a cup, what your voice might sound like, any of those things. But a lot of directors hate that and want you to do it the way it's scripted, so it creates tensions.

**PM A lot of *Apocalypse Now* was improvised...**

**DH** Almost all of my part.

**PM Could you have done that if you'd never worked with Dean?**

**DH** No. I would probably have learnt about improv from someone else, but not in the same way.

**PM You worked with John Wayne, that must have been amusing?**

**DH** I was like his in-house commie. If anything went wrong on set, he'd yell, "Where's that pinko Hopper?" On *True Grit*, he arrived one day in his helicopter, and started shouting: "My daughter went up to UCLA yesterday and that communist Stokely Carmichael made a speech using all this four-letter language, and I want that f\*\*\*ing pinko Hopper, I want his f\*\*\*ing head!" But he was always funny to me, I think he liked me. And his sons were good friends of mine. He just believed I was a communist.

**PM Were you?**

**DH** Borderline.

**PM Which part of the line?**

**DH** I was a pretty heavy socialist at the time, put it that way.

**PM Was John Wayne a force for good in America, given his rabid right-wing conservatism?**

**DH** He certainly thought so. Look, he fought the battle of Iwo Jima, it's hard to talk to a guy like that.

**PM Was he a good actor?**

**DH** Yeah, he was. But he gave me some advice that never worked. He said, "Pinko Hopper, break that line in half, give yourself a pause in the middle. Because they won't be able to cut away from you then."

**PM Sounds like good advice.**

**DH** Yeah, if you're him. Nobody was going to cut away from John Wayne. But they were definitely going to cut away from Dennis Hopper, and that's what they did!

**PM What's the worst movie you**

**ever made, the one you can barely think about without trembling?**

**DH** There are a lot of them, ones that used to only play in Fiji.

I think one I made in Germany in the early Eighties called *White Star* was the worst, it was absolutely terrible. I don't even know if it was ever released.

[Oh, it was Dennis, it was...]

**PM When you know you're making an absolute turkey, how on earth do you get through it?**

**DH** Drugs got me through that one. It's strange, I always try to do the best acting job I can do under the imaginary circumstances of my working position at any given time. But it's terrible when you know it's going bad, and you know it immediately. But you just have to still try to do the best job you can.

**PM You've not tried drink or drugs in more than 25 years. But I have to clarify a few things about the period you did both to vast excess.**

**DH** OK.

**PM What did you use to consume in an average day then?**

**DH** Let me see, around half a gallon of rum, 28 beers and three grams of cocaine.

**PM In a day?**

**DH** Yeah.

**PM How tall are you?**

**DH** 5'8½".

**PM That's a lot of consumption for a little guy. I would die if I did that, how did you stay alive?**

**DH** Oh, it's not as hard as it sounds. If you mix the rum, like I used to, then you can drink it all day long, no problem.

**PM Yes, but half a gallon? You make it sound perfectly normal, Dennis, but it's not.**

**DH** [Laughs] I used to get thirsty, you got to have a beer or two if you get thirsty...

**PM What was the best session you ever had?**

**DH** I had a lot of them. But I wasn't totally crazy. I mixed it with cranberry juice, which is very good for your liver [laughs loudly]. Alcoholism is so mad, you kidding me? I used to make every excuse in the world to drink.

**PM If I had even one tenth of that, I'd never have been able to work the next day; how did you do it?**

**DH** Because I'm an actor. And I always came in on schedule and on budget, and if anyone had ever told me I was f\*\*\*ing up a movie with my behaviour, I'd have stopped. My main objective, my only objective, was to make a great film. And I believed the drink and drugs helped.

**PM What drug made you the most creative?**

**DH** I was an alcoholic. People would ask me what drugs I used, and I'd say, "Oh a little coke, some marijuana, but I'm really taking drugs to hide the fact that I'm an alcoholic." And I'd laugh because I thought that was a joke at the time. But it wasn't a joke. That was a reality.

**PM When did you think: "I can't do this any more"?**

**DH** The day I was finally incarcerated, and couldn't get out, and I knew I'd stay there unless I stopped. So I stopped. It was as if I'd been smashed to the ground with a sledgehammer.

**PM** Do you miss alcohol or drugs?

**DH** No, not at all. I still use a bit of grass, smoke some cannabis, but never any hard narcotics. And I've had no alcohol for... 26 years... no beer, wine, rum, nothing.

**PM** Never been tempted?

**DH** No.

**PM** Do you prefer this

**Dennis Hopper to the drunken, crazy one?**

**DH** Oh yeah. I am lucky to be f\*\*\*ing alive, I put myself into such dangerous situations.

**PM** Like what?

**DH** Getting up in the morning.

**PM** You've been married five times. Was that because of all the partying?

**DH** The industry makes it very rough for marriage, because you're never together, you're always being separated, away from your family for long periods of time on location. And it puts you up on a pedestal of some kind. It's very strange. You're put in positions where you can have affairs with more people than you could in a normal job.

**PM** How many of the marriage breakdowns were your fault?

**DH** Some of them. Daria, my second wife [actually Dennis, she was your third], definitely. I screwed that up. We have a wonderful daughter together, who's pregnant now with her first child. My second grandchild.

**PM** Did you ever think you'd be a grandfather?

**DH** I never thought I'd see 30...

**PM** Do you like being 73?

**DH** It's not my favourite age, but I like being alive.

**PM** What do you most regret not being able to do now that you used to be able to do better?

**DH** Not hitting a golf ball as far. But that was always true.

**PM** Are you good in bed?

**DH** I think I'm pretty good at it.

**PM** An accomplished technician?

**DH** An accomplished technician is the right idea. I like to dress

up as a mechanic, goggles and everything.

**PM** What's been the best sex you've ever had?

**DH** Wow... oh dear... my whole life just flashed before me... I may be dying!

**PM** Was there any Hollywood actress you wish you'd had an affair with?

**DH** A few. I'd have loved to have had an affair with Ava Gardner.

**PM** I don't blame you, she was amazing. Did you get close?

**DH** I saw her, I was in the same room as her. But no, sadly.

**PM** Did you bottle it?

**DH** I think I should leave it right there. There were lots of sex symbol actresses around when I signed for Warner Brothers, such as Ava and Lana Turner and Virginia Mayo, Bette Davis.

**PM** Who was the sexiest? If I could trap you on a desert island with one of them, who would you choose?

**DH** Marilyn. She looked the desert island type, didn't she?

**PM** Definitely. Did you know her?

**DH** Not really, though we both trained at the same Lee Strasberg acting school together in New York. But she kept herself to herself in class, never wore make-up, wore a bandanna over her hair, and baggy trousers and a sweatshirt. So you never got a glimpse of the movie star Marilyn everyone knew. She was very quiet and shy, the whole thing was an act.

**PM** Do you still hang out with Jack Nicholson?

**DH** Absolutely. He is really a special guy. He has never gone on TV to sell a movie, the only time you see him on TV is when he's watching the LA Lakers play. And it's really America's loss because he's one of the great storytellers. Has one of the gifts of the gab.

**PM** I love the way he never gets angry about the paparazzi, or complains about invasion of privacy. He was photographed recently on a boat surrounded by sexy young girls, clutching a six-pack and a box of pizza.

**DH** He always says that the best revenge is living well. Jack doesn't have to try to be Mr Muscle Man or anything. He doesn't need to, and that's why he's so great. He's a proper friend, if you call him then he calls back immediately. A super guy. Calls me Hopps.

**PM** Was he a good guy to go partying with?

**DH** The best. He has such wonderful energy, such a great personality.

**PM** Who pulled the most women when you were both at your peak?

**DH** Oh, Jack. Obviously. I would pull one, and then he'd pull them over to him. >

**PM** Who do you think are the best actors today?

**DH** Meryl Streep, she's just giving incredible performances.

**PM** And of the men?

**DH** The guy with three names.

**PM** Daniel Day-Lewis?

**DH** No, though he's great. The guy who did *Capote*.

**PM** Philip Seymour Hoffman?

**DH** Yeah, him. He was amazing in that priest movie recently with Meryl [*Doubt*]. Javier Bardem is brilliant, and Penélope Cruz is a great actress. And they're together, too.

**PM** Joanne Woodward once said of you: "Dennis Hopper is a genius, I'm not sure of what, and I'm not sure he knows of what, certainly not acting, but he's a genius." Thoughts?

**DH** I remember that one. She obviously didn't think I was much of an actor.

**PM** Many people do think you're an acting genius.

**DH** I've had my moments.

**PM** Her husband, the late Paul Newman, was another good friend of yours.

**DH** Absolutely. In fact I dated Joanne before they got married.

**PM** Well, I suppose if you're going to lose a woman to anyone, it may as well be Paul Newman.

**DH** Yeah! He was such a regular guy, he liked nothing better than to work on his cars, and make spaghetti sauce, and popcorn, and salad dressing. And he'd do barbecues. And that was all about

as American as you can get.

**PM What do you think of fame?**

**DH** I don't really like it. It makes you retreat. I don't enjoy being recognised. It's unpleasant.

**PM Is it worse now with the internet, celebrity TV shows etc?**

**DH** I don't use the internet, and neither does Jack. He said to me, "You know why we are never going to use the internet, Hopps? Because neither one of us can type!" He's right. We can't. I never even look at it. I'm too busy for all that.

**PM Is it still as much fun being a movie star as it used to be?**

**DH** Well, it's changed. The studios used to run the show, and control everything. But now actors have become like bank chips. There are eight or so actors who make all the money – Jack, Michael Douglas,

Brad Pitt, George Clooney, people like that. So they now have the power.

**PM What's your current worth in Hollywood?**

**DH** Not much. I don't work for the studios any more.

**PM You're like Mickey Rourke, you've always had run-ins with the studios, haven't you?**

**DH** Yeah. But Mickey's a friend, and gives me hope all the time. Though he hurt himself pretty bad in *The Wrestler*... I think he's a little old to be jumping off things, getting beaten up and cutting himself with razors.

**PM Do you think you could still one day win an Oscar, even at this late stage of your career?**

**DH** Absolutely, and make a great movie, too. I feel as if I've constantly been denied the financing to make my best work. I've had some great films that never saw the light of day because I was blacklisted by certain people, and couldn't get the money. That's frustrating.

**PM What did you make of Michael Jackson's death?**

**DH** I find it tragic. Obviously Michael was looking for an experience that none of us really understand. Being dropped out to wherever by a doctor. It was like he was being put to practical

death, or a death-like state. It was weird, I just don't know what was really going on his head or what experience he was getting out of it. But he was obviously getting a kick out of it, bizarre though it sounds. I have never heard of such a thing.

**PM When you see what happened to him, Elvis, Marilyn and so on, do you consider yourself lucky to still be here?**

**DH** Yeah, although I never felt suicidal. Strange though that may seem, most of the time I was having a great time. I never wanted to kill myself. I had a little bit of intelligence, not much. I didn't take a load of pills with the booze and coke, if I had, then I might have checked out.

**PM Francis Ford Coppola said of you: "I hire Hopper for the two per cent of brilliance, not the 98 per cent of horseshit."**

**DH** Terrific! Perfect way to describe me.

**PM You did a few dodgy commercials for Japanese TV, didn't you?**

**DH** Yes. One involved me lying in a tub with a rubber duck.

**PM Can you remember what you got paid for that?**

**DH** \$780,000.

**PM For someone who is such an artist, did you not feel a bit like Bill Murray in *Lost In Translation* as you sat in that tub? A bit awkward?**

**DH** It's tough when you're having to speak Japanese, definitely. My God! They actually filmed it in Ireland, where I was making a movie at the time. It was a lot of fun. I felt really lucky. The whole pop-art culture cured me of any kind of "I can't do commercials" bullshit issues as an actor.

**PM Talking of pop art, I heard that you bought the first Andy Warhol soup-can picture for just \$75 because he was a friend of yours?**

**DH** That's right.

**PM But you then had to give it to your first wife in the divorce?**

**DH** Right.

**PM That must have hurt?**

**DH** Not as badly as the Lichtenstein I bought for \$1,100 that I left with her too, and it later sold for \$16m. She didn't make all that, though. I bought it from Roy for the \$1,100, then she got it in the divorce, and she sold it on for \$3,000, and he sold it to his partner for \$6,000, and it was that partner who made the \$16m. I saw the sale on the front page of *International Herald Tribune*, and I was like "Oh f\*\*\*... I could be living in the south of France by now!" But it's OK, art is like that. I still have a lot of great art.

**PM Warhol's prediction that everyone would one day be famous for 15 minutes has pretty**

**much come true, hasn't it?**

**DH** I haven't done a survival TV show yet, so there's still hope... I don't watch all that reality stuff like "America's Got No Talent" or whatever it is...

**PM Steady, I'm a judge on that.**

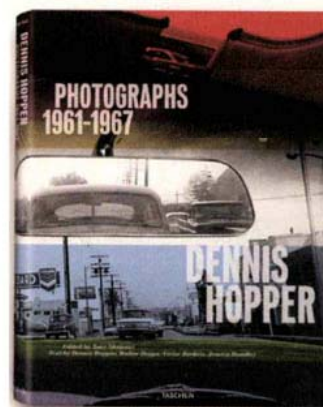
**DH** I know.

**PM I was going to invite you to audition. You could come on and drink a gallon of rum, 28 beers and snort three grams of cocaine. That's some talent...**

**DH** And still take a photograph... maybe out of focus, but it would be a photograph. ☺

DENNIS HOPPER: PHOTOGRAPHS 1961-1967 (TASCHEN, £450) IS OUT NOW.

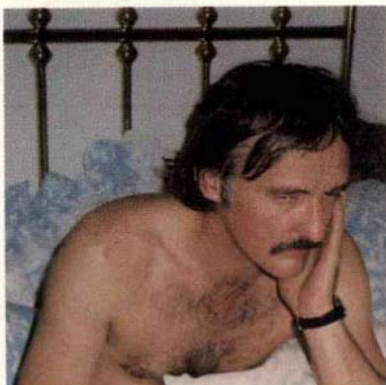
Hopps' shots (from top): Hopper's view of the Sixties in his new book, *Photographs*; raising hell with Jack Nicholson - 'He's a really special guy. He's one of the great storytellers' - at an Oscars party, April 1970



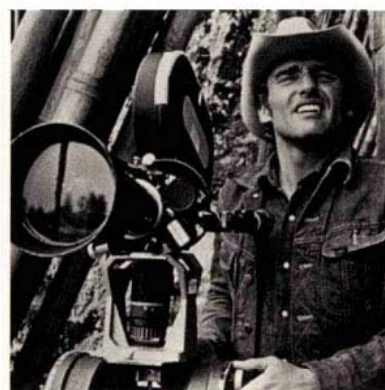
'I never felt suicidal, I was having a great time. I didn't take pills with the booze and coke, if I had then I might have checked out'

PHOTOGRAPH DENNIS HOPPER; REX

**Spaced Hopper:**  
**Dennis Hopper (below)**  
**indulges his thirst in bed**  
**in LA, November 1978;**  
**a habit he admits**  
**contributed to the**  
**breakdown of his third**  
**marriage, to Daria**  
**Halpern (right, with their**  
**daughter, Ruthanna)**



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 around half  
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PHOTOGRAPHS LUCY SAROYAN/GETTY IMAGES; CATHERINE MILINAIRE/CORBIS



**Life through a lens:**  
**Dennis Hopper captures**  
**Martin Luther King in 1965;**  
**starring with James Dean -**  
**'the best actor I ever saw' -**  
**and Natalie Wood in Rebel**  
**Without A Cause; and filming**  
**The Last Movie in 1971**