

DENNIS HOPPER

ICONIC ACTOR/PHOTOGRAPHER RIDING EASY

BY KIRK SILSBEE

"CRASH," ONE OF THE MOST ENGAGING OF THE CURRENT TV SHOWS IS ABOUT INTERSECTING LIVES SET AGAINST THE EVER-CHANGING BACKDROP OF LOS ANGELES. ONE OF ITS GREATEST ASSETS IS 73-YEAR-OLD ACTOR DENNIS HOPPER. HE CHARGES THE STARZ CHANNEL HIT LIKE A JAB TO THE VIEWER'S EYE EVERY TIME HE'S ON CAMERA. IT MAY STRIKE SOME THAT THE FORMER MOVIE INDUSTRY SUBVERSIVE'S TV PROFILE IS A MELLOWING OF SORTS, BUT IT'S ACTUALLY A HOMECOMING OF SORTS. IT'S NOT THE FIRST TIME, THOUGH, AND THIS TIME HOPPER WORKS ON THE SMALL SCREEN ON HIS OWN TERMS.

Hopper is Ben Cendars, a crazy-like-a-fox veteran record producer, fresh from a year in rehab. He likes to turn the table over and scatter the cards at hand to the wind. His soliloquies are poetic and freaky, delivered with a maniacal glint. More than one critic has likened the character to Phil Spector. As a Hollywood veteran known for his bizarre roles, Cendars is a good fit. Dennis Hopper is hot now, so much so that "TIME" magazine asks for his personal recommendations on restaurants. It wasn't always thus.

*I've been a puppet, a pauper, a pirate,
A poet, a pawn and a king.
I've been up and down and over and out
And I know one thing:
Each time I find myself, flat on my face,
I pick myself up and get back in the race.*

DOWN BUT NEVER OUT

Frank Sinatra sang those words to "That's Life" in 1966. They resonated with his longtime audience, which had seen him through some very good and very bad times. Frank could well have been outlining the bumpy career of Hopper, who was struggling through an eight-year period of "character building" on Hollywood's D List. Except for a leading role in Curtis Harrington's

shoestring-budget indie classic "Night Tide" ('61), Hopper was banished from studio productions.

Though only 30, Dennis Hopper had gone from promising roles in major motion pictures like "Rebel Without a Cause" ('55) and "Giant" ('56) to television exile. He took a swing at director Henry Hathaway on the set of "From Hell to Texas" ('58) and had to take every scrap of episodic TV work that was available in what should have been some of his most productive years. Hopper wasn't seen again in a major movie until "The Sons of Katie Elder" in '65.

AN ARTIST BY ANY OTHER NAME

Born in Dodge City, Kansas, Hopper's family moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where he grew up. Though acting took hold of him early, Hopper took a serious interest in art and even studied with the renowned Americana painter Thomas Hart Benton as a teenager. Painting would be something that Hopper would indulge well into adulthood. His work at New York's Actor's Studio was a conduit to movies. While in Los Angeles in the late '50s, Hopper took a class with local sculptor Julie McDonald. She encouraged him to get a camera.

The grandson of Kansas wheat farmers gravitated to the disenfranchised

artists in L.A.—centered around the Ferus Gallery—who were unwittingly assembling a canon of collective work that would put the city on the world's art map: Ed Kienholz, Billy Al Bengston, Wallace Berman, Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell and John Altoon among them. During the agonizing early '60s, Hopper's first wife, Brooke Hayward, bought him a camera and encouraged him.

BEHIND THE LENS

What resulted was a body of work that depicted L.A.'s creative community as a series of scenes and parties. Hopper produced many iconic images that gave a smart, playful look to the artistic movers of the town: Bengston at the beach, framed by a bikini bottom; Phil Spector at Gold Star Studio, lord of all he surveys; Roy Lichtenstein against one of his blown-up comic book paintings; Jane Fonda shooting an arrow in a bikini; The Byrds and Jefferson Airplane posed among the outdoor sculpture at L.A. County Art Museum; designer Rudi Gernreich preparing model Leon Bing for a runway show; Ike and Tina Turner clowning with a giant inflated Coke bottle.

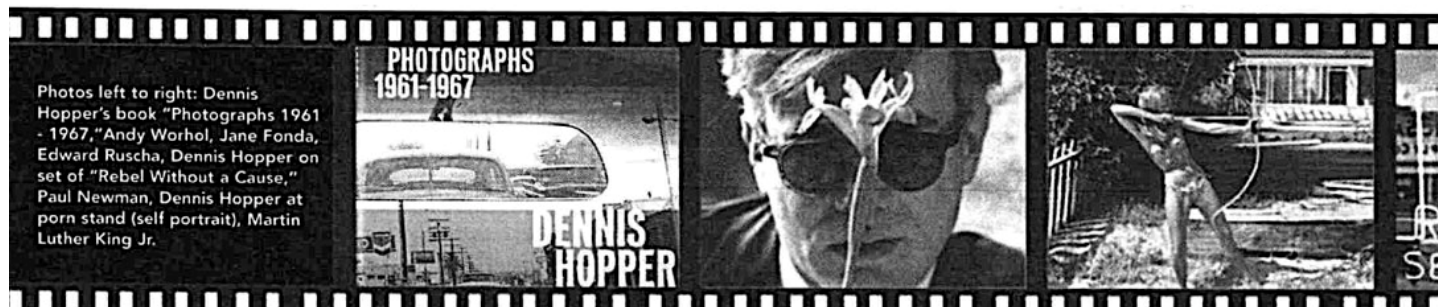
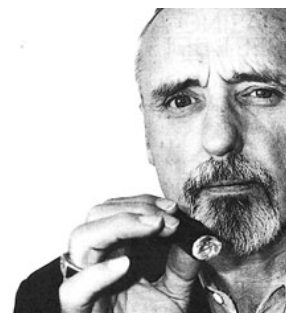
Hopper's most incisive photos run roughly from '62 to '68. It was increasingly a period of personal chaos for him. In Hayward's well-written family chronicle of her fractured family history, "Haywire" (Knopf, '77), she tersely alludes to their eight-year marriage in one sentence. Hopper was making a reputation for himself as a Hollywood Wild Man (his '70 marriage to Michelle Phillips lasted eight days). He capped the '60s with "Easy Rider," a low budget blockbuster of a movie that signaled an end to the studio system and opened the floodgates to independent production. It was, as author Peter Biskind in his well-researched study, "Easy Riders and Raging Bulls" (Simon & Schuster, '98), "how the sex-and-drugs generation saved Hollywood" by remaking it.

"Easy Rider" was an idea that Hopper cooked over a period of time and it took quite awhile to get it funded. Broadcaster Dave Diamond, during his heyday at KBLA in the mid '60s, recently recalled a visit he made to Phil Spector's office in '67. "I was sitting in the reception area," Diamond says, from his home in North Dakota, "and there was this young guy sitting there. He kind of looked familiar but I couldn't place him. I'd look at him and he'd look at me but we didn't say anything. Finally he said, 'Hey, who the hell are you, man?' I told him who I was and he said, 'I'm Dennis Hopper. Do you know Phil? Can you get me in to see him? I've got this movie—I know he'll like it and I need him as an investor. Put in a good word for me, okay?'"

Taschen Books has just published a limited edition (1,500 copies), large format boxed book, "The Many Worlds of Dennis Hopper," which retails for \$700. An Art Edition, limited to 1,000 copies, contains an original photographic print, hand-signed by Hopper. Hopper's images have been anthologized in print before, but at 540 pages, this is his definitive collection. In it, Hopper speaks of his '60s images: "I was doing something that I thought could have some impact someday. In many ways, it's really these photographs that kept me going creatively."

Ben Cendars would certainly identify with that kind of creative survival. ■

Kirk Silsbee writes about jazz and the arts in Southern California. He makes a mean plate of pancakes and is a terrific kisser.



Photos left to right: Dennis Hopper's book "Photographs 1961-1967," Andy Warhol, Jane Fonda, Edward Ruscha, Dennis Hopper on set of "Rebel Without a Cause," Paul Newman, Dennis Hopper at porn stand (self portrait), Martin Luther King Jr.