



James Dean posing for
a publicity shot in 1955

STARK REALITY

When *Rebel Without A Cause* screened back in 1955, it was a surprise success at the box office. Seven decades on, we return to the cinema aisles to revisit a coming-of-age classic from the era's most iconic antihero.

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

It was a howl of anguish which rang out around the world. "You're tearing me apart!" screamed the teenage Jim Stark, his parents aghast after they find him under arrest for public intoxication. It was a cry that juveniles across the land would have sympathised with, that their folks were incapable of dealing with their kids' turmoil, as they were part of the problem. "Please lock me up, I'm going to hit somebody, I'm gonna do somethin'..." Stark pleads to the police inspector, kicking and whacking the table with coiled-up frustration. It's a high-voltage scene that crops up in the first minutes of *Rebel Without A Cause*, and was unlike anything the big screen had ever seen. The teenager had never before been spotlighted as someone distinct and separate

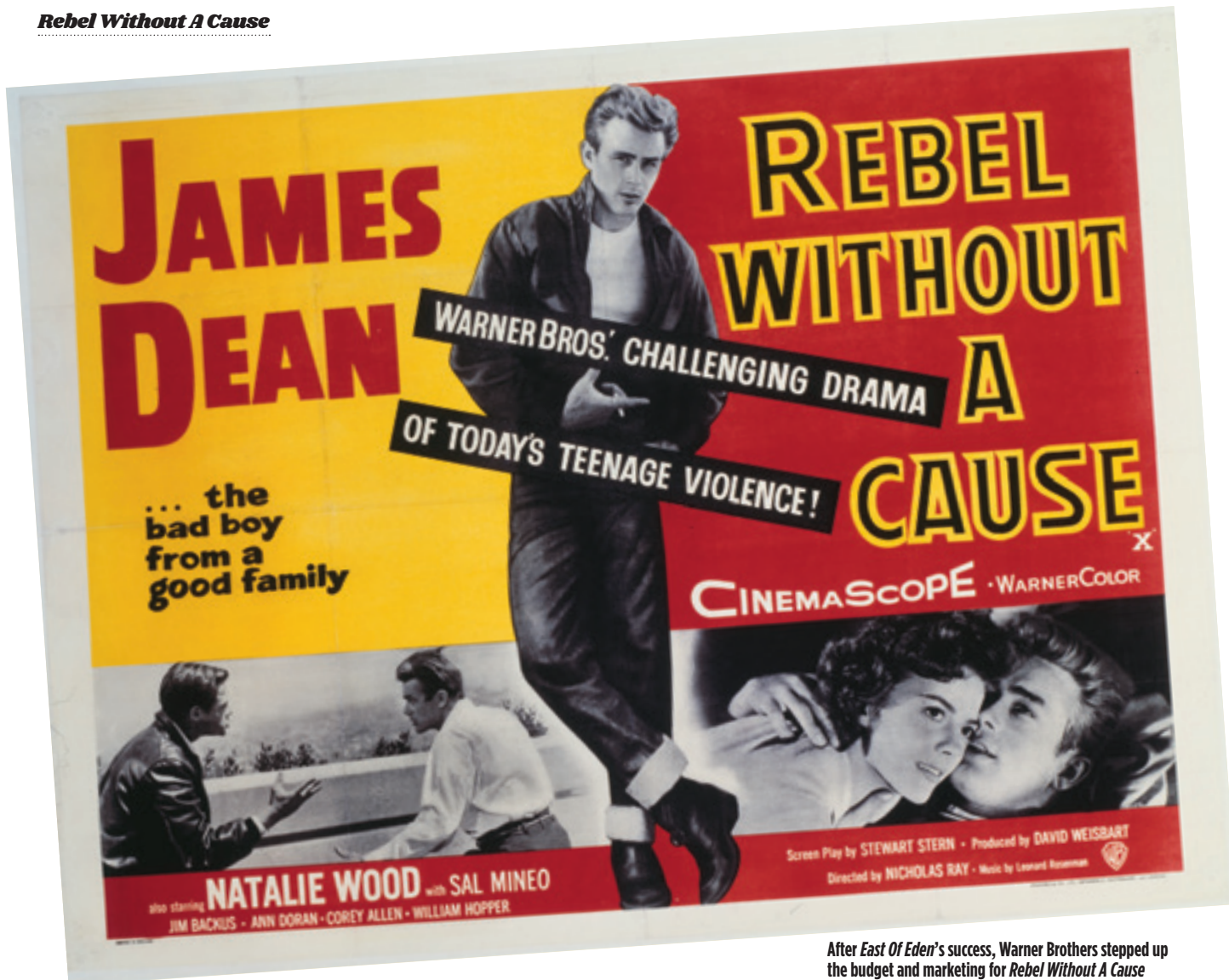
to his parents, with a tornado of new and terrifying emotions surging through him. And with this film, James Dean, despite being aged 23 at the time of its making, would become cinema's ultimate teenage tearaway, an icon for the disaffected and alienated.

What made *Rebel Without A Cause*, and James Dean's electrifying turn, even more impactful when the film was released in the fall of 1955 was that its impossibly handsome leading man was already dead. It was 30 September, just four weeks before *Rebel* landed in cinemas, that James Byron Dean perished when the Porsche 550 he was driving smashed into a Ford Tudor sedan at an intersection in California's San Luis Obispo County. The phrase "live fast, die young", originally from the 1947 book

Knock On Any Door, seemed to have been coined for Dean. At the time of his death, he'd made just three movies (*East Of Eden* and the posthumously-released *Giant*), but *Rebel* would become his signature film and role, cementing him as the pin-up boy for adolescent insurrection.

What made *Rebel Without A Cause* so incendiary was that it was a story of teenage rebellion told through the eyes of its three post-pubescent protagonists. The adult characters from the movie – from Stark's square-pegged parents to the local police chief – are almost peripheral, one-dimensional archetypes, as lightly sketched as teenagers were in most films of the time.

Though the movie is clearly riding the zeitgeist of 1955 (it was released a few months after that other youth-focused ➤



► drama of the year, *Blackboard Jungle*), its origins date back, rather incredibly, to 1944. That year, psychologist Robert M. Lindner had released a non-fiction book detailing his work with a Pennsylvania penitentiary prisoner named only as Harold. Warner Brothers weren't interested in the story, but they wanted its title – *Rebel Without A Cause: The Hypnoanalysis Of A Criminal Psychopath*. After purchasing the rights to Lindner's book, the studio got to work on a story worthy of its attention-grabbing name.

Various writers, among them Leon Uris, Peter Viertel, even Theodor Geisel (otherwise known as Dr. Seuss) were hired by Warner to add some dramatic flesh to that provocative title, and it was one of these ultimately aborted scripts that Marlon Brando read from in an screen test from 1947. That footage survives to this day and can be viewed on YouTube. It's a fascinating watch, but it's not *Rebel Without A Cause* as we know it, something eventual *Rebel* screenwriter Stewart Stern confirmed to *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2013. "It's oranges and apples," he told them. "I heard that there was a test

that Marlon did, but Nick [Ray, director] had no interest in that."

Besides, by the time Nicholas Ray had come onboard by 1954, Brando was already 30 and far too old to convincingly play a juvenile delinquent. He was also by then too big a name to sign on to what Warner initially envisaged as a low-budget quickie, to cash in on the explosion in youth-accented cinema.



James Dean in a publicity still for *Rebel Without A Cause*. He's just 24, and would be dead before the film's release.

After *East Of Eden*'s success, Warner Brothers stepped up the budget and marketing for *Rebel Without A Cause*

James Dean, fresh from the set of Elia Kazan's *East Of Eden* (his first movie), was picked as the film's antihero. With their lead hardly a marquee name, Warners had little reason to expect *Rebel Without A Cause* to be a big hit. They pictured it as an inexpensive B-movie, rather like that year's *Blackboard Jungle* and 1953's *The Wild One*. Ray had begun lensing *Rebel* in monochrome, but when *East Of Eden* opened to gangbusting box office and reviewers began to single out this James Dean kid, Warners upgraded *Rebel* to an A-picture. Now a prestige production, Ray dumped the already shot black and white footage and was allowed to shoot the entire picture in Technicolour.

Stewart Stern had come on board *Rebel* at the request of Ray. According to an interview the writer gave to the *Michigan Quarterly Review* in 1999, he'd been approached by the director (whose previous movies included the Western *Johnny Guitar* and film noir *On Dangerous Ground*) to take another run at the screenplay, as put together by Irving Shulman. But more than tickling up Shulman's script, Stern used the opportunity to start from scratch.



Sal Mineo, who portrayed Plato Crawford in the film, was himself gay and considered Plato to be also

QUEER AS FOLK

It may not be explicitly stated in the film, but it's been claimed that the character of Plato Crawford was, in fact, gay. Certainly at the time of the film's making The Motion Picture Production Code forbade any reference to homosexuality, but as *IndieWire* wrote in 2014, "*Rebel* remains one of the most important films in the queer film canon."

The coding of Plato as gay is subtle, but definitely there. He never shows any interest in any female, has a picture of Alan Ladd in his school locker, and looks at Jim as if he's falling in love. Most straight viewers would have seen it as pure hero worship, a teenage kid looking at an older boy like a brother, but it was clear to actor Sal Mineo what kind of character he was playing.

When talking to writer Boze Hadleigh in 1972, Mineo, who was himself gay, said of Plato and his death at the end of the movie: "Makes sense: he was, in a way, the first gay teenager in films. You watch it now, you know he had the hots for James Dean. You watch it now, and everyone knows about Jimmy, so it's like he had the hots for Natalie [Wood] and me. Ergo, I had to be bumped off, out of the way."



James Dean's Jim Stark is frustrated and enraged by his parents (Jim Backus and Ann Doran)

"It wasn't useful until it was clear that I didn't have to use it," Stern, who died in 2015, explained. "The reason is that Irving and I had very different sensibilities. At the time, I was in my eighth year of therapy, and I was 'hot' with it. *Everything* seemed psychologically motivated to me, and there was very little of that kind of psychological approach in Irving's script. I also couldn't identify with the kids in his script; they seemed awfully macho to me, and I was always afraid of the macho guys in school. So I had a very different perspective and I wanted to go in a different direction."

approach to the material, and certainly the movie is more judgemental toward its lead characters' mothers and fathers than it is the teens themselves. "She eats him alive and he takes it," Jim moans about his enfeebled dad to the police inspector. "I mean if he had the guts to knock Mom cold once I bet she'd be happy and I bet she'd stop picking," he goes on. "One thing I know is I never want to be like him."

When Jim returns to his parents after a game of 'chickie run' which ends up killing the other guy, it's Jim who wants to do the right thing and go to the police. "You can't

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STEWART STERN

Some elements of Shulman's script remained, however, including the names of the three main characters (apart from Jim, the movie also explores the teenage woes of Natalie Wood's Judy and the insecure, sweet-natured Plato, played by Sal Mineo) and the setting of some of the action at L.A.'s Griffith Observatory.

Stern's relative youth (at 32, he was nine years younger than the more experienced Shulman) and interest in psychology helps give *Rebel Without A Cause* more emotional heft than most melodramas of the time. "I couldn't wait to blame the parents," the writer admitted about his

be an idealist all your life!" his father, terrified of the repercussions, yells at his son. "Nobody thanks you for sticking your neck out!"

Likewise, Judy's sense of isolation and confusion is clearly linked to her relationship with her father. She is admonished by him for kissing him on the cheek, struggling to locate her place in his life, now that she's no longer a child. Then there's Plato, who we're introduced to in the police station, after he's brought in for killing a litter of puppies. It's later revealed that Plato's father abandoned his family when he was a child, and his



James Dean (in the red jacket) and Dennis Hopper, plus others, on the set of *Rebel Without A Cause*

➤ mother is often away from home. A couple of years younger than Jim and Judy, the three of them almost form a surrogate family, and Plato's status as the baby of the group makes his death at the end of the movie (shot by the police who think the gun he's holding has live ammunition in it) even more harrowing.

It's impossible to view *Rebel Without A Cause* now without outside events colouring our impression of it, many of which echo the fates of its primary players. It's hard to watch the chickie run sequence, knowing of Dean's death, mere months later, in a car accident. Then there's the knife fight between Jim and school bully Buzz, watched by a fearful Plato, with the knowledge of actor Sal Mineo's death by stabbing in 1976. Natalie Wood would be the last of the three leads to die, but again, horribly prematurely, in a drowning accident in 1981. In a film about being young, it's a sobering thought that none of the lead actors made it to their fifties.

IN A FILM ABOUT BEING YOUNG, IT'S A SOBERING THOUGHT THAT NONE OF THE LEAD ACTORS MADE IT TO THEIR FIFTIES

Far from being the B-movie Warner Brothers originally planned it to be, *Rebel Without A Cause* outperformed similar juvenile fare both critically and commercially. Wood and Mineo would be nominated for Academy Awards for their turns as Judy and Plato respectively, while Wood would scoop the Most Promising Newcomer prize at the 1956 Golden Globes.

There would be no posthumous honours for James Dean, and yet *Rebel Without A Cause* would become so celebrated and the character of Jim Stark so revered and iconised, that it hardly mattered that the Academy remained so blind to his talents.

Critics may have been shaken by the film on its release in 1955 (*The New York Times* called it "violent, brutal and disturbing"), but time has been kind to *Rebel Without A Cause*. In 1990, the movie was added to the Library of Congress's National Film Registry as being deemed "culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant", while it continues to be referenced in shows and films such as *La La Land*, *Futurama* and *The Sopranos*.

Seventy years on from its release, *Rebel Without A Cause* remains just as fresh, relevant and exhilarating as it was to the rock'n'roll generation, and teenagers today would likely find much that they recognise in the stories of Jim, Judy and Plato. James Dean, meanwhile, never had a chance to grow old, to disappoint us or become boring. He's encased in amber, as Caleb Trask, as Jett Rink, but most importantly as Jim Stark, where he spoke for every teenager not just in the 1950s, but beyond. ★



SHLOCK AROUND THE CLOCK

The birth of the teen movie in the 50s wasn't restricted to the kind of serious fare exemplified by *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without A Cause*.

Eventually, schlock-merchants started pumping out exploitation pictures for the burgeoning teen market. Ed Wood, notorious director of the Worst Film Of All Time (that's *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, everyone) put out *The Violent Years* in 1956, about a gang of delinquent high school girls, while *Teenage Doll* (1957), directed by B-movie giant Roger Corman, dealt with a group of girls involved in a murder, followed the same year by *Reform School Girl*, which explored the lives of young women in a reformatory. Fellow B-movie filmmaker Herman Cohen even managed to blend the teenage exploitation movie with science fiction for 1957's drive-in classic *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*, which included the tagline "We DARE You To See The Most Amazing Motion Pictures Of Our Time!"

Sadly, by the late 50s, there were fewer and fewer movies that explored teenage life seriously, but that only meant that films like *Rebel Without A Cause* were even more valuable. And there's a reason why, in this issue of *Vintage Rock*, we're celebrating 70 years of Nicholas Ray's film and not the platinum jubilee of, er, *Teenage Devil Dolls*.