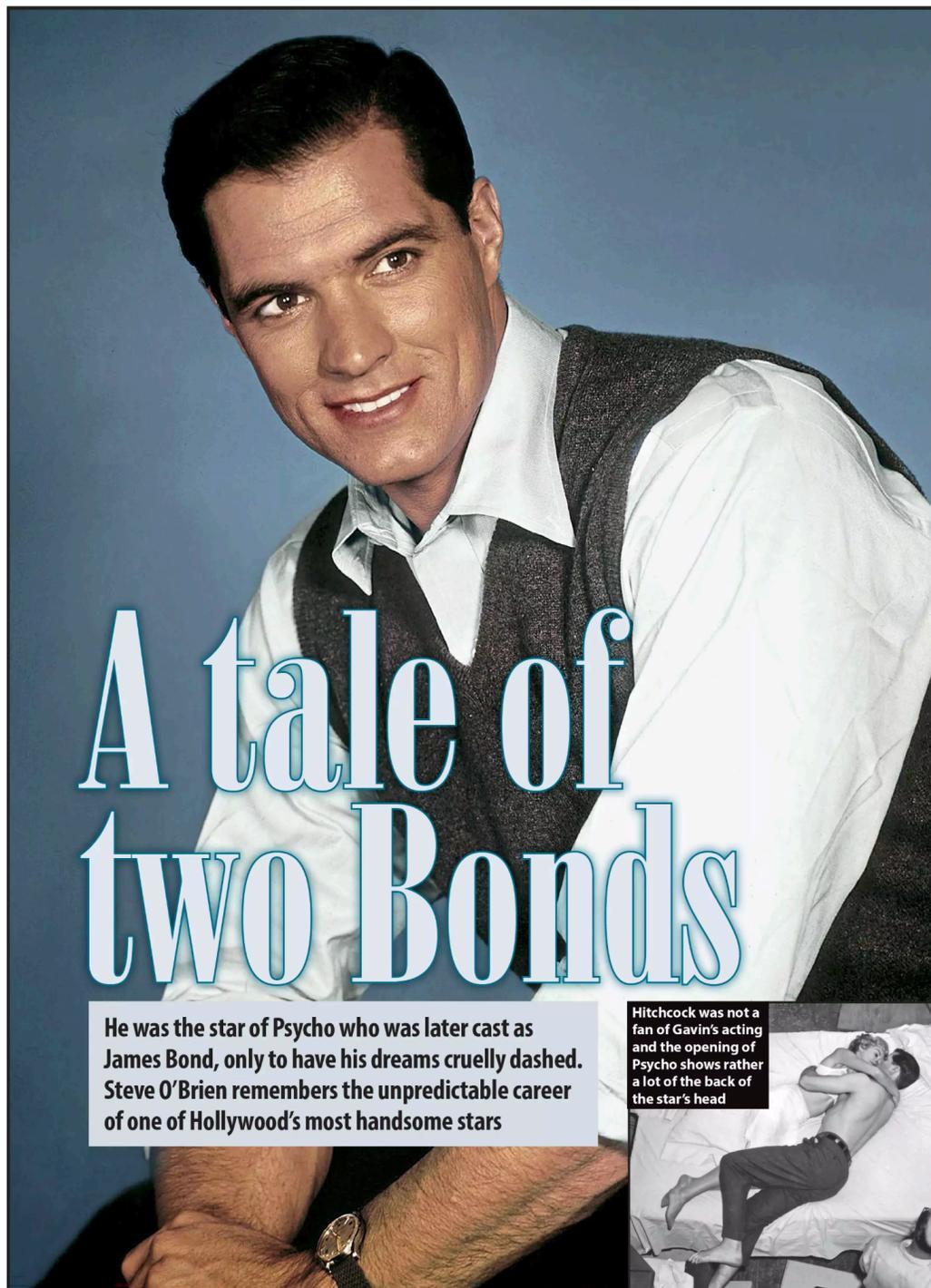
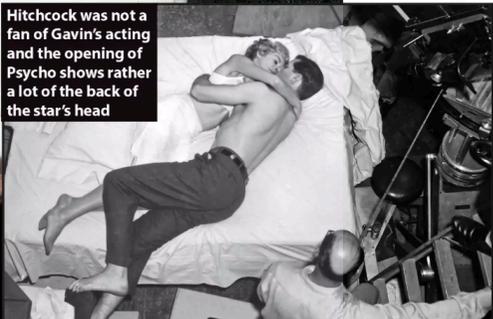


**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Gavin served as president of the Screen Actors Guild between 1971 and 1973. He was succeeded by Dennis Weaver, star of television series McCloud.



# A tale of two Bonds

He was the star of *Psycho* who was later cast as James Bond, only to have his dreams cruelly dashed. Steve O'Brien remembers the unpredictable career of one of Hollywood's most handsome stars



Hitchcock was not a fan of Gavin's acting and the opening of *Psycho* shows rather a lot of the back of the star's head

Other than the six official James Bonds, no actor has come closer to playing the secret agent than John Gavin. In the end, it was Sean Connery who donned the tux for 1971's *Diamonds Are Forever*, returning to the role after George Lazenby's short-lived stint with *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969), even though Gavin, then most famous as Janet Leigh's lover in *Psycho* (1960), had already signed a contract and was all set to go. Unbeknownst to him, United Artists, fearful of another Connery-less 007 film, had made the Scot an offer he couldn't refuse to come back for one more movie. A crestfallen Gavin was paid in full, despite never uttering the words 'The name in Bond... James Bond' on screen.

Whether John Gavin would have made a successful 007, however, is another question. He certainly looked the part, with the same brooding good looks of his predecessors, but as an actor he was more in Lazenby's league than Connery's. Hitchcock had nicknamed him 'the stiff' on the set of *Psycho* (Stuart Whitman had been the director's first choice for the role of Sam Loomis) and he never did achieve the stardom of Rock Hudson, the actor he was most commonly compared to.

John Gavin, then, may not have been the era's most expressive or versatile actor, but in terms of looks, there were few who were more head-turning. Born Juan Vincent Apablaza II in Los Angeles in 1931 to a Mexican aristocrat mother and a Chilean father, he'd never planned to be an actor. After leaving the US Navy he was about to start a job as technical adviser to film producer Bryan Foy, who was planning a movie about the USS *Princeton*, aboard which Gavin had served during

the Korean War. But, wowed by Gavin's matinee idol looks, Foy instead arranged a screen test for him at Universal. Gavin wasn't keen and only attended on the insistence of his father, yet it went so well, the studio presented him with an enticing deal. 'They offered me so much money I couldn't resist,' he said later.

### HITCHCOCK FURY

He made his big-screen debut in the 1956 Western *Raw Edge*, and was a leading man within just two years with *A Time to Love* and *A Time to Die* (1958), a schmaltzy Douglas Sirk war picture that, sadly, bombed at the box office. He'd have more luck with Sirk's next project, the melodrama *Imitation of Life*, which became one of 1959's most successful movies. Then there was *Spartacus* (1960), where Stanley Kubrick cast the 29-year-old in the plum role of Julius Caesar. But it was *Psycho*, which came out just a month before Kubrick's epic, that would become Gavin's signature part, despite its director's misgivings. 'John Gavin had a great look on screen,' a crewmember is quoted as saying in Stephen Rebello's book on the making of *Psycho*, 'unfortunately he was an awfully cold fish otherwise.'

The scene that opens the film, which is meant to emphasise the intensity of Loomis's relationship with Marion Crane, exposed the actor's limitations, infuriating Hitchcock. 'I never once heard Mr Hitchcock raise his voice over the incident,' costume designer Rita Riggs told Rebello, 'but when we began seeing the dailies, we noticed that we saw a great deal of the back of John Gavin's head.'

Hitch's next film but one, *Marnie* (1964), would boast an altogether more commanding male lead, Sean Connery, the very actor Gavin just a few years later was being groomed to replace. He'd already played a 007-like spy in

the French/Italian Bond spoof *OSS 117 - Double Agent* (1968), and was, according to his daughter Maria, thrilled to be offered the role of the actual James Bond. 'He did have that look,' she told the author Robert Sellers, 'and the sort of charisma that a Bond should have. He did have that swagger.'

Gavin was bitterly disappointed to miss out on *Diamonds Are Forever*, and his career in the years that followed would tilt more towards TV than movies. He appeared in many of the Seventies' most popular shows including *The Love Boat*, *Mannix* and *Hart to Hart*, and made his last screen appearance in 1981 on ABC's *Fantasy Island*.

### CAREER CHANGE

Then came an unexpected career twist. The actor's friend Ronald Reagan had been inaugurated as President in January 1981 and, soon after, reached out to Gavin, a fellow Republican, to offer him the job of US Ambassador to Mexico. It was a position he'd stay in until 1986, when he resigned in order to, in his words, 'meet new challenges' in the private sector.

John Gavin spent the next three decades in the business world before he was diagnosed with leukaemia in the 2010s. He died aged 86 in 2018, after contracting pneumonia, leaving behind a wife, the actress Constance Towers, and two children.

Gavin's life could have turned out very different had Sean Connery not been lured back for *Diamonds Are Forever*. By the time of its follow-up *Live and Let Die* (1973), Roger Moore was the favoured candidate and the *Psycho* star was quietly forgotten. Of all the actors who have circled the role of James Bond over the years, none stepped closer to the Martini glass than John Gavin, making his story not just a footnote, but one of the most tantalising might-have-beens in movie history.