

Tab in *Battle Cry* (1955).

# TAB HUNTER: LEGEND

**Fifty years ago, a chiseled young star fired up the box office and created the standard for modern Hollywood's heartthrob heroes. That screen legend was Tab Hunter, who died recently at age 86.**

**By Matt Myers**

Looking at photographs of Tab Hunter in his prime, with his chiseled good-looks, athletic physique and a pearly smile, it's easy to imagine him suited-up to play a Marvel hero or Disney prince in a 20-teens blockbuster. "With blond hair and a tan," Tab Hunter was the prototype Frankfurter desired when he created Rocky.

Tab embodied the pristine 1950s boy-next-door in Eisenhower's America. He was so dreamy, Hollywood coined the phrase, "the sigh guy" especially for him. But behind the movie-star visage was humble Arthur Kelm, a sensitive, closeted, gay man.

While many of Tab's contemporaries suffered the pitfalls of fame and the studio system, Tab/Arthur managed to avoid them and live happily – although there were bumps along the way.

Born in 1931, Arthur Kelm grew up in sunny California alongside his older brother Walter, who was later killed in the Vietnam War. He never knew his father, and he looked after his mother, Gertrude, well into the latter stages of his own life. In his youth he joined the coast guard, became a champion horseback rider and a figure skater. During his acting career, he also became an accomplished singer, releasing over 45 singles.

Arthur's entry into Hollywood, after being renamed Tab Hunter by his agent, got off to a great start with roles alongside John Wayne, Gary Cooper and Robert Mitchum playing soldiers, sailors and cowboys. His leading ladies included Sophia Loren, Lana Turner and Natalie Wood. In 1955 he co-starred in two of that year's highest grossing films, *Battle Cry* and *The Sea Chase*. He escorted Natalie Wood to the Academy Awards in 1956, fueling speculation that they were a couple.

There was a scandalous attempt to out Hunter in 1955. It was part of a ploy to prevent the outing of a much bigger star, Rock Hudson. Hunter's former agent, Henry Willson, provided a notorious tabloid magazine, *Confidential* with a story about Hunter's arrest at a "limp-wristed pajama party" in exchange for the magazine's silence on Hudson.

The story had no discernable effect on Hunter's



The golden boy.



With Divine in Polyester, 1981 (above) and Lust In The Dust in 1985.



### TAB AND TONY

A movie about the romance between Tab Hunter and Anthony Perkins is currently in pre-production with producers Zachary Quinto, JJ Abrams and Hunter's partner, Allan Glaser. Some of the names mentioned in the casting of Hunter include Chris Pine (*Star Trek, Wonder Woman*), Alan Ritchson (*The Hunger Games*), Kellan Lutz (*Twilight*), Chris Zylka (*The Leftovers, Hannah Montana*) and Lucas Till (*MacGyver, X-Men*).

career. Perhaps the public simply couldn't conceive that an actor of Tab Hunter's ilk could be gay.

His best-known film from his pin-up days is the 1958 musical *Damn Yankees*. When he missed out on the lead for *West Side Story*, he moved into television with his own sitcom *The Tab Hunter Show* (the romantic adventures of a Malibu bachelor).

By the end of the '50s, Hunter had cut ties with Warner Brothers but, without the protection of company patriarch, Jack Warner, found freelancing as an actor difficult. His film career continued throughout the '60s in less acclaimed roles, and he also took to the stages of Broadway.

By the late '60s he was living in the south of France and starring in spaghetti westerns, which proved profitable.

He sat out the '70s in a series of largely forgettable American films like *Won Ton The Dog Who Saved Hollywood* and *Katie: Portrait Of A Centrefold*.

But in the '80s, something surprising happened. He was rediscovered by a new generation of provocateurs, including cult film director John Waters, perhaps because Hunter's private gay life had slowly become public knowledge.

In 1981, still handsome, Hunter had no problem taking on roles in Waters' *Polyester* and Paul Bartel's *Lust In The Dust* in 1985. He played opposite plus-sized drag queen, Divine in both. He may have been forgotten by the Baby Boomers but he was embraced by the geeks, freaks and gays of Generation X.

When asked by John Waters how he'd feel about kissing Divine, Hunter replied, "I'm sure I've kissed a hell of a lot worse!"

In his 2005 autobiography, *Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making Of A Movie Star*, and subsequent 2015 documentary, he spoke of his relationships with fellow actor Anthony Perkins and champion figure skater Ronnie Robertson. He also had flings with ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev and actor Scott Marlowe.

However, it was while shopping around the idea for *Lust In The Dust* in 1983 that Hunter met his life-partner, producer Allan Glaser. Despite a 30-year age difference, the couple remained inseparable for the next 35 years.

Hunter's career resurgence also led to other notable roles including schoolteacher Mr Stuart in *Grease 2*. Maxwell Caulfield, who played the film's lead alongside Michelle Pfeiffer, remembers Hunter well, and attended his recent memorial service.

"Tab was a class act, possessed of great manners and charm," he told DNA. "He was very well preserved, of course, which indicates a healthy lifestyle and a happy home life."

Caulfield, also remembers a joint 1982

interview conducted with Hunter for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. In its unique format, one star would question another; in Caulfield and Hunter's case it was like a passing of the teen idol baton.

"Tab gave me a great deal of career guidance at a point in my life where I figured I knew it all," says Caulfield. "In a very sweet and gentle way he told me that publicity was a necessary evil. He called it the hot fudge sundae of life! He said, 'It may seem like an awful lot of bullshit, but it's very important because people are genuinely interested, and if it's not you it'll be someone else tomorrow'.

"He also told me to do one very important thing – go back to the theatre and keep going back because it's so important. He did it because he loved it and it was very good to him.

"But Tab also imparted some great wisdom from his favourite director, Sidney Lumet," Caulfield remembers. "He adored Lumet and said when he was working on a scene with Sophia Loren in the film *That Kind Of Woman* (1959), Sidney told him, 'Tab, you're playing it safe! If you're going to play it safe, you might as well stay in bed all day. It's the safest place to be... You've got to put yourself on the line. We have to be risk people in life!'"

From heartthrob to pop star and cult movie star, Hunter survived the treachery of Hollywood and took the reins of his life. We still his likeness today, in the faces of Chris Hemsworth, Zac Efron, Chris Pine and Ryan Kwanten.

