

life stories

James Dean: the rebel for a new generation

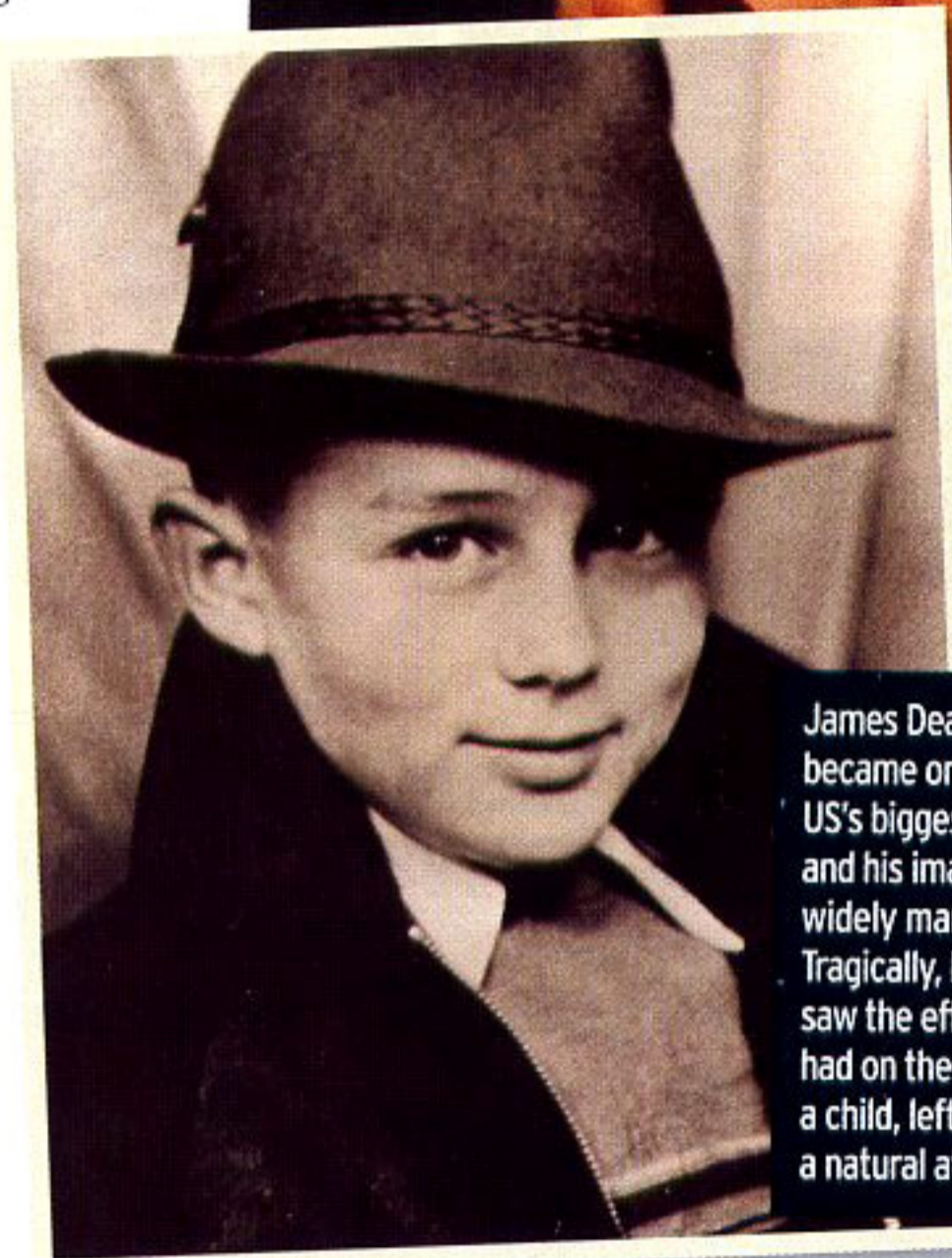
Fifty years ago, James Dean died after releasing just one film – and a legend was born. Chris Morris explores the man who invented the teenager

Without Jimmy Dean, The Beatles would never have existed,' said John Lennon. 'The person I related to growing up was James

Dean,' said Al Pacino. 'He is the greatest actor I have ever known,' said Dennis Hopper. In the 50 years since James Dean crashed his Porsche Spyder in 1955, the accolades haven't stopped. Yet when he died, he was hardly famous. So how did an actor with just one film to his name become a 20th-century icon?

James Dean was born on 8 February 1931 in Marion, Indiana, to Winton Dean, a dental technician, and Millie Wilson, an arts lover. In 1936, the family left the farmland of Indiana for Los Angeles when Winton got a new job. But in 1940, Millie was diagnosed with cancer and died.

With good intentions, Winton sent young Jimmy to his Aunt Ortense in Indiana. But the sensitive boy withdrew into himself, taking refuge in sports and 'the arts' his mother had loved: painting and listening to radio plays. At school, he was quiet and unpopular and it didn't help that he lost his front teeth and needed strong glasses for myopia.



James Dean, above, became one of the US's biggest icons and his image is still widely marketed. Tragically, he never saw the effect he had on the world; as a child, left, he was a natural at mimicry

But Dean had a talent for mimicry, and auditioned for school plays. He turned out to be a natural. At his aunt's Christian group, he acted out 'the evils of the demon drink' so vigorously, respectable ladies were left 'shaken'.

He loved getting reactions from people, and continued it off-stage, once offering a

teacher a cigarette in class. An emerging charm helped him get away with it. 'Jim knows how to play people,' a teacher said.

It was not unknown in the 1940s to escape military service by claiming to be gay and Dean was reported to have used this ruse – a rumour that would follow him through life. With a military career ruled out, Dean took up his father's invite to come to Los Angeles. Winton wanted to re-establish their relationship and offered to pay for a pre-law course. But Dean had other plans, and took a minor in theatre studies at UCLA. Winton tried to bond with his son, but Dean's resentment for his earlier rejection was deep. Later, his anger would translate into an ▷

▷ intense on-screen presence but, as a teenager, it just got him into trouble.

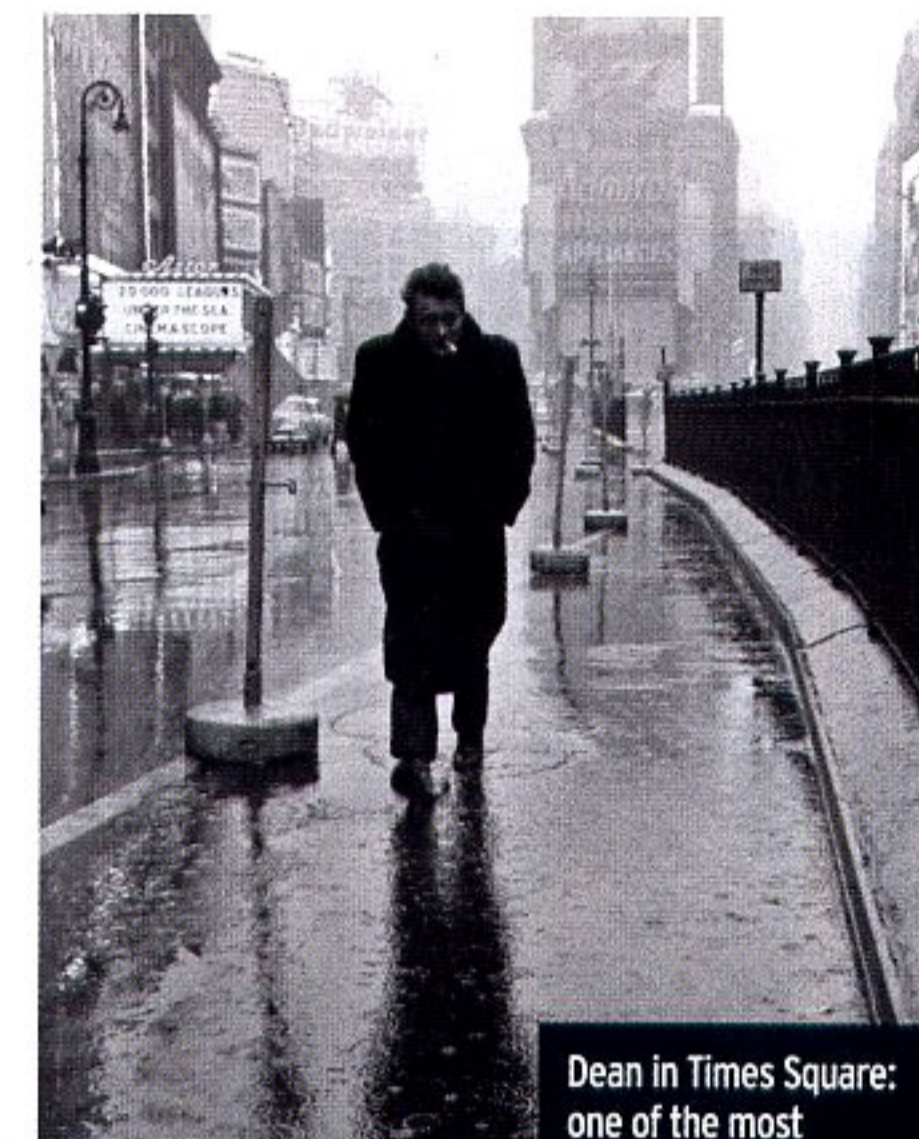
Despite his insubordinate attitude, Dean's talent was unavoidable. By 1950, he had secured an agent and a lead role in a commercial. His pretty-boy looks were also finally starting to draw attention – from both sexes. Dean began dating actress Beverly Wills, but annoyed her mother, the comedian Joan Davis, by swearing. The rumours about his sexuality were also fuelled by his involvement in a gay Hollywood party scene. At one point, he moved in with gay radio director Rogers Brackett.

Dean lasted only a year at UCLA. On the advice of an actor friend, he decided his naturalistic style would be better suited to a new theatre movement taking place in New York. Dean arrived in the Big Apple in 1951. 'It's rough going. I hope I get work before I run out of money,' he wrote home.

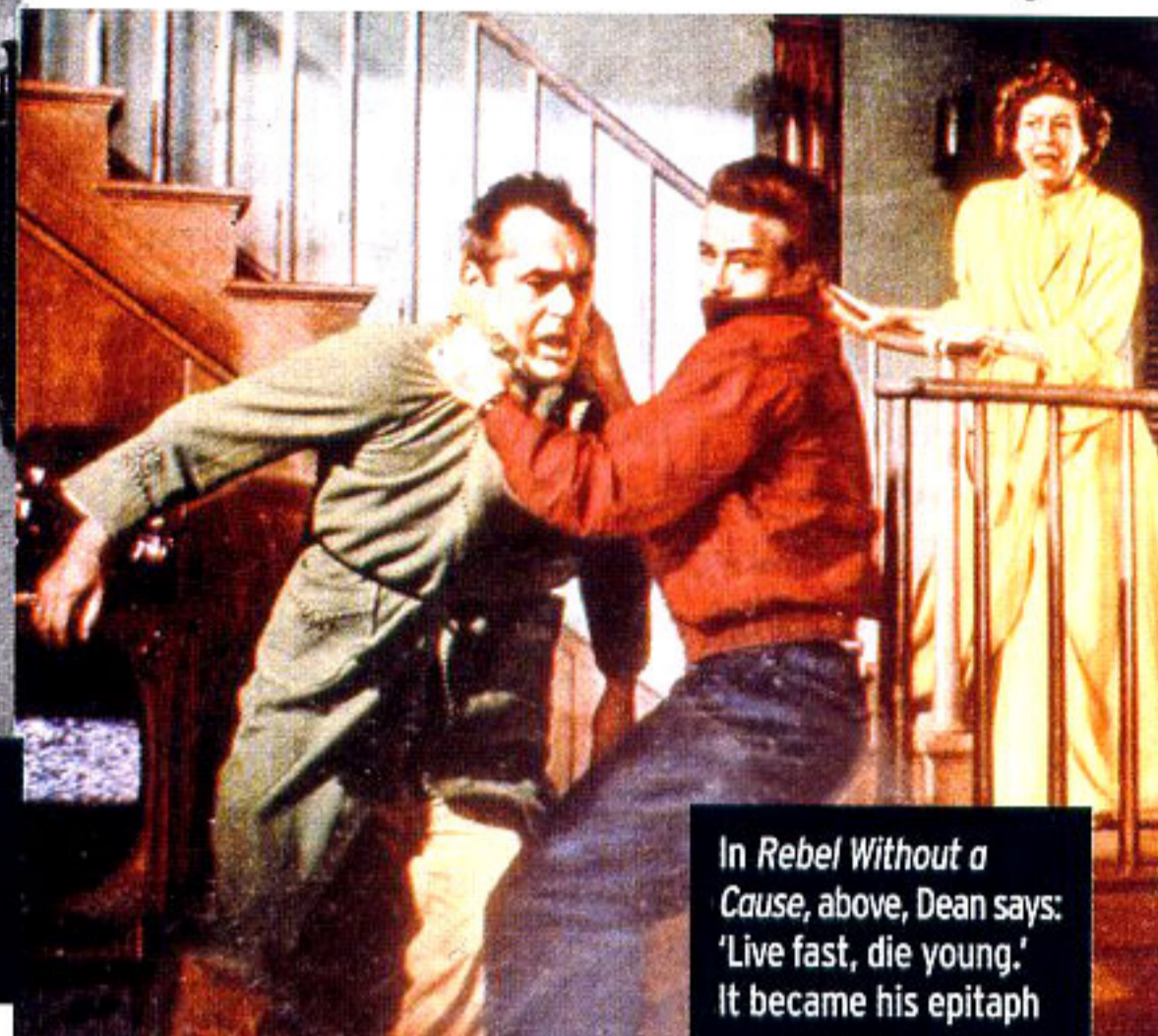
Although moral conservatism still dominated US society, Dean arrived in New York at a period of discontent among artists and left-wing intellectuals. Another faction was also ready to rebel – American youth. And unbeknown to him, the belligerent young actor was about to become its face.

On Dean's arrival, he won occasional minor radio and TV roles, and started dating singer-dancer Elizabeth 'Dizzy' Sheridan. Reportedly, Dean confided to her about his relationship with Brackett. 'He did not want to be gay,' Sheridan said years later. Dean is reported to have asked: 'What is it about me that attracts guys? I'm a man, but if they don't let up soon, I'm going to begin to doubt myself.' He claimed he had succumbed to Brackett's advances on just one occasion.

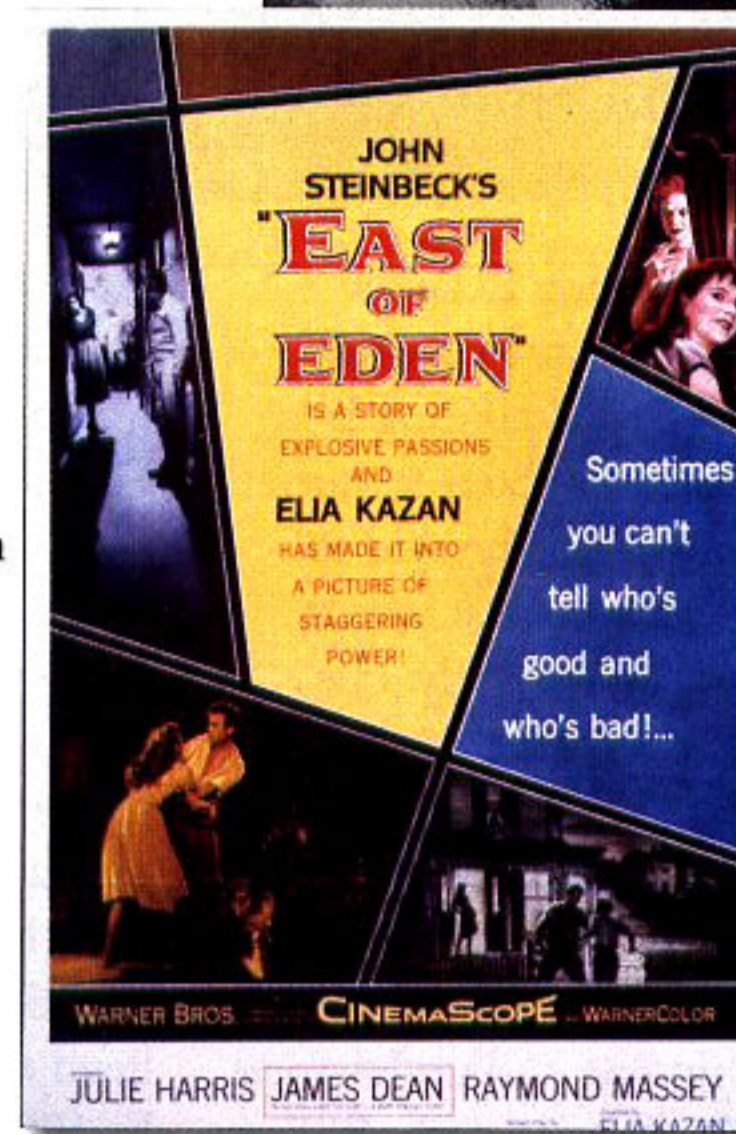
At 21, Dean won a place at the Actor's Studio in New York and thrived on the Stanislavsky school of acting, which trained actors to



Dean in Times Square: one of the most iconic photographs of the 20th century



In *Rebel Without a Cause*, above, Dean says: 'Live fast, die young.' It became his epitaph



Above: with Brando, left, who was invited on to the set of *East of Eden*, far left, to motivate Dean

'live in the part'. But fellow actors found him difficult. An intuitive scene-stealer, he was also something of a prima donna.

It was a theatre role as a homosexual Arab boy in *The Immoralist* that gave Dean his break. Spotted by director Elia Kazan, Dean was offered a leading role as a tortured young man who vies with his brother for their father's affections in the film *East of Eden*.

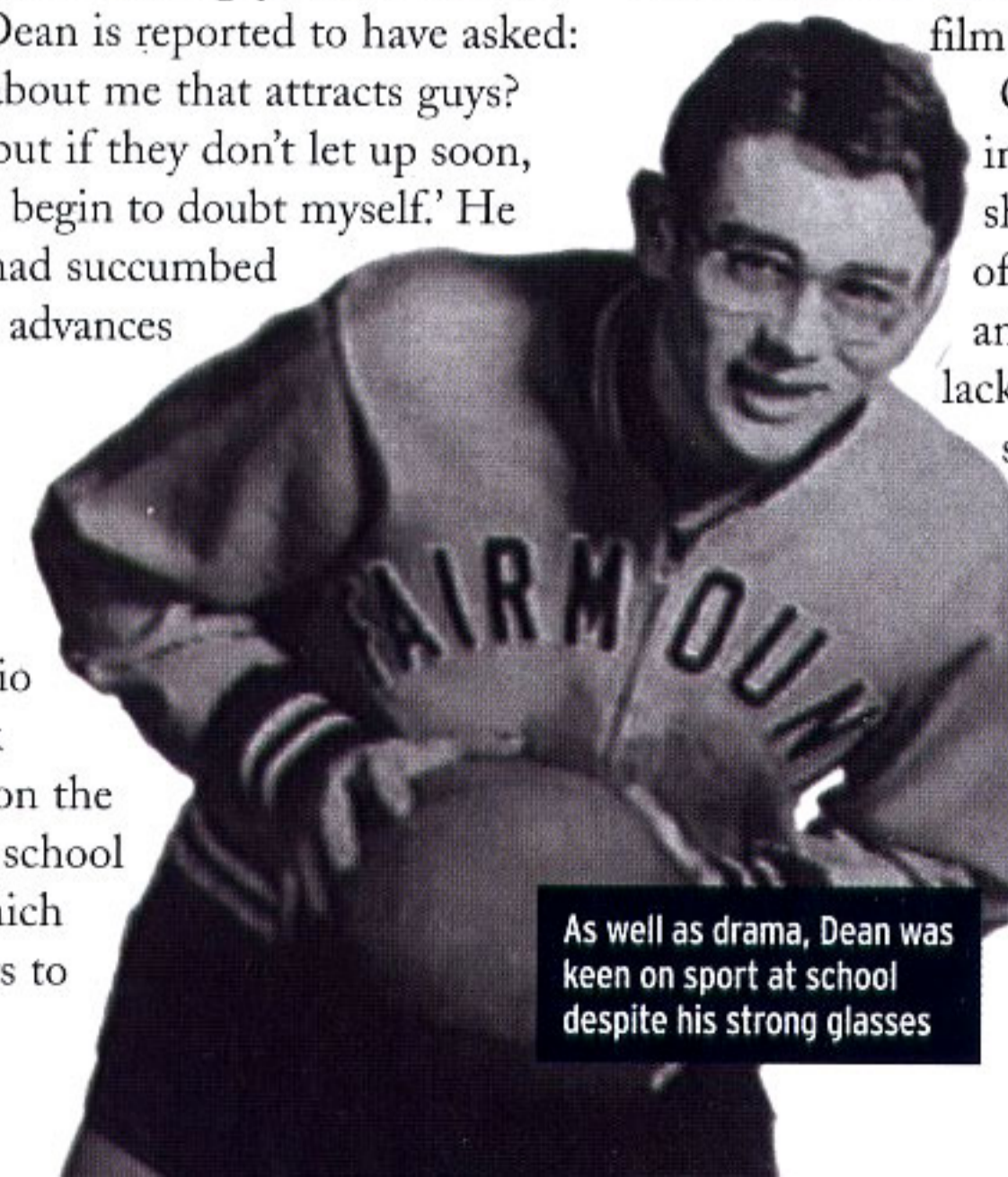
On set, the young inexperienced actor shone for '95 per cent' of his scenes, but annoyed Kazan with his lack of technique. Highly sensitive and desperate to succeed, Dean was devastated by the director's criticism. So Kazan invited Dean's idol, Brando, on set for motivation, but 'Jimmy was so adoring, he seemed

shrunk in misery,' Kazan said. By the end, Dean was an emotional mess. 'It's over,' he sobbed to co-star Julie Harris.

Aware of Dean's leading-man potential, Warner Bros set him up with 22-year-old Italian actress Pier Angeli for publicity – and to stamp out gay rumours. To the studio's delight, the couple embarked on a passionate, if stormy, relationship. 'I could often hear them arguing through the walls,' said Kazan.

Like everything in Dean's life, however, the romance was brief. The split was blamed on everything from Dean's career to Angeli's mother, but both were broken-hearted. When Angeli married, Dean sat on his motorbike opposite the church revving the engine loudly.

As his career took off, Dean dated more starlets, at the same time worrying that no one would take him seriously. 'I'm not a romantic leading man. They'll never give me a real chance,' he said. He had no idea just how seriously his next role would be taken. In teen angst movie *Rebel Without a Cause*, Dean plays a ▷



As well as drama, Dean was keen on sport at school despite his strong glasses

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATRIX, RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE, MPTV.NET, SCOPE FEATURES

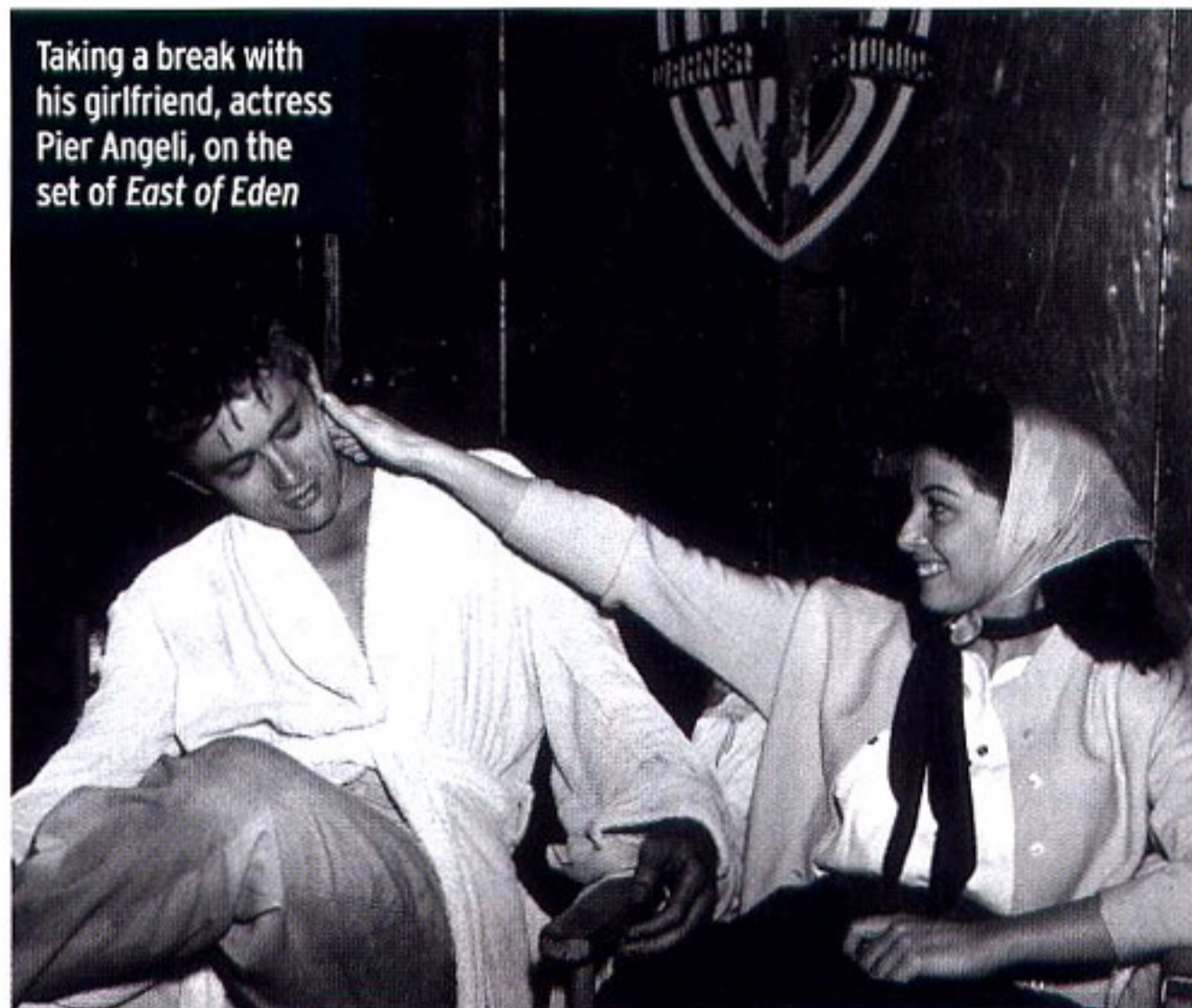
PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE KOBAL COLLECTION, LFT

◁ troubled boy who arrives in a new town for a fresh start. At a cast party for the film, a photographer suggested a photo-essay of Dean's life entitled: 'Moody New Star'. The *Life* magazine shoot would include a picture of Dean walking through Times Square in a heavy raincoat – and it became one of the most iconic photographs of the century.

In May 1955, Dean was cast in his third and final major film, *Giant*, alongside Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson. Again, Dean found himself in conflict for his difficult attitude, this time with Hudson (other traditional actors often found it hard to deal with the unpredictability of Dean's method acting and his refusal to do the same scene twice) and director George Stevens. Dean sought solace from Elizabeth Taylor. 'Everybody hates me and thinks I'm a heel,' Dean said. 'Maybe, I'd just better go away.' He had no idea how prophetic those words would be.

For a while, Dean had been buying fast cars and taking an interest in racing. When his agent, Jane Deacy, negotiated raising his pay to \$100,000 a movie, Dean bought a tiny Porsche Spyder 550. He called it 'the little bastard', and entered himself in a race.

On 30 September 1955, after filming had wrapped on *Giant*, Dean set off for the race. A few hours into the journey, with Rolf



Taking a break with his girlfriend, actress Pier Angeli, on the set of *East of Eden*

mechanic, he got a speeding ticket at 65mph. Later, at 5.30pm on Route 466, Dean noticed a Ford Sedan coming from the opposite direction and about to turn left. 'That guy's gotta see us,' he said to Weutherich. Those were his last words.

James Dean was killed instantly. His neck was broken and his chest impaled on the steering wheel. Weutherich was thrown clear. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, Dean's character had declared: 'Live fast, die young.' The words became his epitaph.

Until that point, no one had understood Dean's impact on American youth. But his death was met by mass hysteria. He had only released one major film, but 3,000 people attended his funeral. Fans

ransacked locations where he'd lived, and Warner Bros received 8,000 letters a month asking for photographs. When *Rebel Without a Cause* was finally screened, fans cried: 'Come back, Jimmy!' In the film, Dean played a confused adolescent, who hates his parents and authority. He was the role model US youth needed to

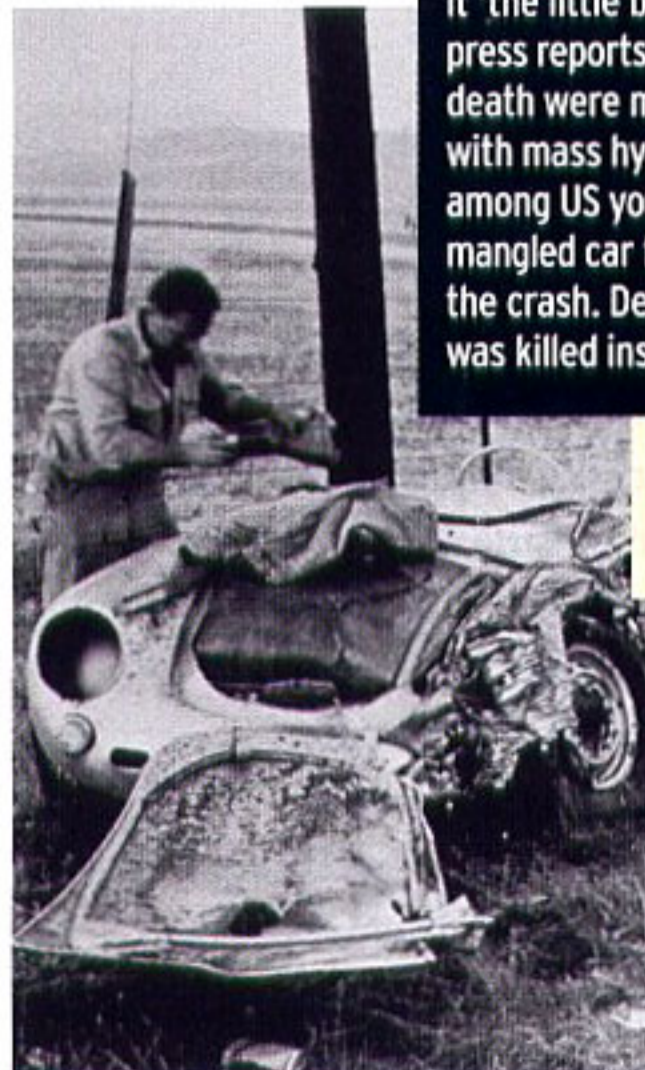
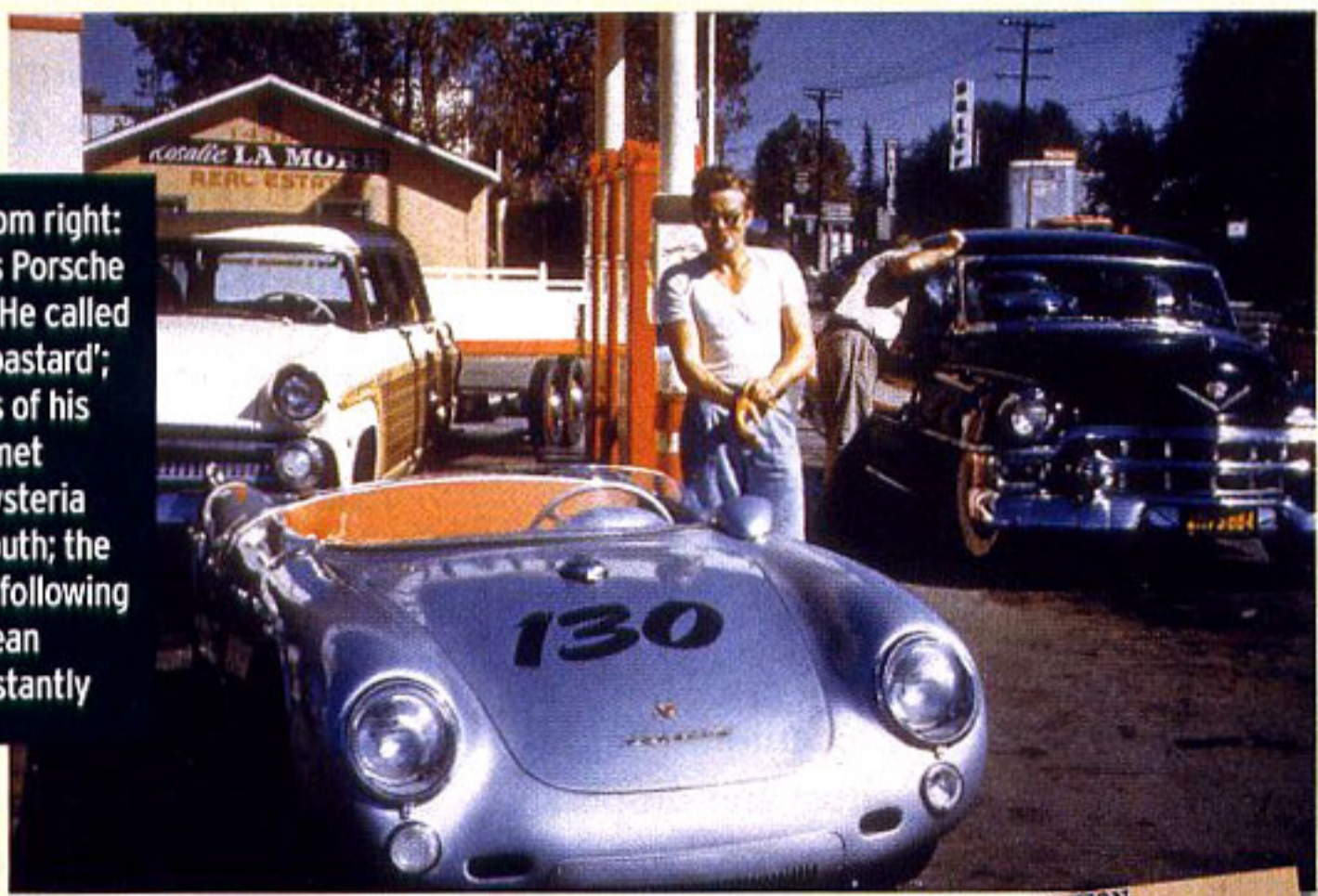
express their discontent at their parents' conservative values. The teenager was born.

The cult of James Dean began to grow. Fans started claiming that he was really alive; that the crash had mutilated his face and after cosmetic surgery, he would reappear. The following year, Dean was nominated for an Oscar and *Giant* premiered, further fuelling the hysteria. Teenagers from Britain to Indonesia wore his famous red nylon jacket. On the 15th anniversary of his death, crowds lined the streets to see *Giant* re-released. In 1982, the play *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* opened on Broadway. Along with Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe, Dean had become one of the US's biggest icons.

And 50 years later, his influence remains widespread. Bob Dylan mimicked the Times Square photograph on an album cover; Morrissey wrote a book entitled *James Dean Is Not Dead*. From Leonardo DiCaprio to Brad Pitt, A-list actors have reportedly wanted to play him on screen, and his image is still widely marketed on everything from ashtrays to pillowcases.

Tragically, Dean never saw the effect he had on the world. Nor did he have the chance to find contentment and peace of mind beyond the anger and hurt of a young man – or to develop a career as extraordinary as Marlon Brando's. Yet his mark on the world remains unrivalled. 'There was a saying that Marlon Brando changed the way actors acted,' said *West Wing* actor Martin Sheen, 'but James Dean changed the way people lived.' ■ For further reading, see *James Dean* by George Perry (£16.99, Dorling Kindersley).

Clockwise from right: Dean with his Porsche Spyder 550. He called it 'the little bastard'; press reports of his death were met with mass hysteria among US youth; the mangled car following the crash. Dean was killed instantly



SPECIAL EDITION
James Dean Killed As Result Of California Car Accident

FAIRMOUNT IS STUNNED TO LEARN OF TRAGEDY WHICH CLAIMED NATIVE SON; HEADON COLLISION NEAR INTERSECTION CAUSES FATALITY FRIDAY

Each time that he came home, for a visit he would also visit the high school and talk to the student body. On one occasion he explained the art of bull fighting... which he had practiced somewhat.

one of the larger daily papers in this area carried an article dealing with the filming of "Giant" in Texas. It went into detail explaining how the heat taxed the energy