



Hudson, Rock (1925-1985)

by Keith G. Howes

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Hollywood's star system was still in force at the start of the 1950s; tall, dark, and very handsome Rock Hudson was totally a product of it. His limited talent was mainly nurtured within the strict confines of a studio (Universal) contract and a series of B pictures.

After playing bad boy redeemed in *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), Hudson's popularity soared, consolidated by a number of successful melodramas, such as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Written on the Wind* (1956), which were directed by Hudson's mentor, Douglas Sirk.

Hudson was born Roy Harold Scherer, Jr. in Winnetka, Illinois on November 17, 1925. When his mother divorced his father, an auto mechanic, and married a man named Wallace Fitzgerald, the future actor became known as Roy Fitzgerald.

After high school and military service, he moved to Hollywood to pursue a movie career. Agent Henry Willson named him "Rock Hudson."

The Sirk films and an Oscar nomination for *Giant* (1956) notwithstanding, Hudson was not taken seriously as an actor until, ironically, he turned his hand to light comedy in *Pillow Talk* (1959), co-starring Doris Day. Other comedies with Day soon followed, including *Lover Come Back* (1962) and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964).

Throughout the 1960s, he alternated frothy sex comedies with action dramas. His one challenging role--that of a man who changes identities, in *Seconds* (1966)--caused little excitement and the film failed at the box office. A few years later, he was starring as a police commissioner in the long-running television series, *McMillan and Wife* (1971-1977).

The glossy hothouse melodrama that Hudson had helped popularize in the 1950s had, by the early 1980s, become a world television phenomenon. Hudson joined the cast of one of these super-rich sagas, *Dynasty*, in late 1984. His drawn features aroused comment, and by mid-1985 photographs of the spectral, virtually unrecognizable star were flashed across the world. Rumors that he was suffering from AIDS were confirmed when he sought treatment in Paris.

Hudson's death, a few months later, focused world attention on the AIDS virus and its sufferers, enabling Hudson's friend Elizabeth Taylor and others to gain the ear of government and moneyed people who had hitherto been deaf and mute on the subject.

Hudson's sex life received detailed attention posthumously when a lover, Marc Christian, whom he had not informed of his diagnosis, successfully sued his estate.

On screen, Rock Hudson was the epitome of the movie star: upright, virile, unassuming. His screen



Top: A publicity photograph of Rock Hudson.

Above: Rock Hudson with Dana Wynter in a promotional photograph for *Something of Value* (1957).

Publicity photograph of Rock Hudson (top) courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

partnership with Doris Day further boosted his popularity as a wolfish playboy with a mischievous little boy charm. It could be claimed that Rock Hudson was one of the greatest actors who ever lived: a gay man who became an unassailable international symbol of heterosexuality.

Rock Hudson was probably the last of the manufactured stars, his screen presence bolstered by "beefcake" photographs, fan clubs, and an eternal bachelorhood briefly interrupted by an arranged marriage to Willson's secretary Phyllis Gates in 1955 (they were divorced in 1958).

However, in the more open 1970s, Hudson did become more visible in bars and bath-houses on the West Coast, and was even included post-coitally--anonymously but with his blessing--in Armistead Maupin's newspaper serial *Tales of the City*.

Hudson's charismatic mixture of seeming guilelessness and single-minded ambition, wearing a public mask until it was savagely ripped off him, places him firmly among the great American glamor icons: James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and President John F. Kennedy.

Bibliography

Davidson, Sara, and Rock Hudson. *Rock Hudson: His Story*. New York: Bantam, 1986.

Royce, Brenda Scott. *Rock Hudson: A Bio-Bibliography*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995.

About the Author

Keith G. Howes has been researching, writing, and speaking about gay film, radio, and television for 25 years. He lives in Sydney, Australia where he is employed as a bush regenerator, helping to restore native flora and fauna.