



## Hunter, Tab (b. 1931)

by Linda Rapp

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A portrait of Tab Hunter  
by Greg Gorman.  
Courtesy Algonquin  
Books.

Young Tab Hunter's blond good looks made him a movie idol in the 1950s. His romantic heterosexual roles on screen concealed his true identity as a gay man.

The actor was born Arthur Kelm in New York City on July 11, 1931. A few years later his mother, Gertrude Gelien Kelm, divorced her abusive husband, Charles Kelm, and moved to California with her two young sons. She resumed her maiden name and changed the children's surname as well.

Hunter left school at fifteen to join the Coast Guard, lying about his age in order to be accepted, but was discharged when the deception was discovered. He returned home and went to work at a riding academy.

Horsemanship had long been Hunter's passion. As a young teen he had frequented a riding school where he met an actor named Dick Clayton. After Hunter's dismissal from the Coast Guard, Clayton encouraged him to try his hand at acting and introduced him to agent Henry Willson, who represented Rock Hudson, among others.

Willson decided that the aspiring actor needed a new name, declaring, "We've got to tab you something." When Clayton volunteered that the young man was a horseman who rode hunters and jumpers, Arthur Gelien (né Kelm) became Tab Hunter.

Hunter's film debut in Joseph Losey's *The Lawless* (1950) was less than auspicious: his only line was cut. His first major role came in Stuart Heisler's *Island of Desire* (1952) opposite Linda Darnell. Often half-naked in this film, Hunter attracted the attention of gay men across the country, who were to become some of his most loyal fans. He rose to stardom in 1955 when he appeared in Raoul Walsh's *Battle Cry*, playing a Marine in a love triangle.

In September 1955, with the release of *Battle Cry* imminent, *Confidential*, a Hollywood magazine known for exposing closeted gay celebrities, ran an article about the arrest by the Los Angeles vice squad of Hunter and about two dozen others who were attending a "pajama party" in suburban Walnut Park in 1950.

Since the police found nothing more than dancing by same-sex couples in progress, the party-goers were at first charged as "idle, lewd or dissolute persons" and even that was reduced to "disorderly conduct." Hunter was assessed a fifty-dollar fine.

In a 1974 interview Hunter downplayed the incident, claiming that he had only gone to the party--which was not, he insisted, a pajama party--at the casual suggestion of a friend and that he had been surprised to find gay men and lesbians in attendance. He added that he had been in the kitchen innocently preparing a peanut butter sandwich when the raid by the vice squad occurred.

Since *Confidential* had a limited circulation and the national press did not pick up the story, Hunter survived the 1955 outing and his career did not suffer. In addition, he used the common ruse of "dates" with

actresses--duly photographed and reported by popular fan magazines--to mask his true personal life.

While America was reading that Hunter was enamored with Debbie Reynolds, Dorothy Malone, or Natalie Wood, Hunter was actually pursuing an affair with actor Anthony Perkins, a tortured homosexual who eventually (though apparently not successfully) attempted to become heterosexual. Hunter and Perkins were involved with each other for several years.

Although the public remained in the dark, members of the entertainment industry were aware of Hunter's sexual orientation. His sexual orientation was also widely suspected by members of the glbtq community, who were among his most ardent fans.

Hunter solidified his image as a "Golden Boy" and teen idol by recording the pop tune "Young Love" (by Carole Joyner and Ric Carty), which topped the charts for over a month in 1957. Gifted with a pleasant voice, but not great musical talent, Hunter subsequently recorded other singles and albums, their successes due more to his celebrity as an actor than to his musicianship.

His movie career prospered for a while. He enjoyed notable success in the 1958 films *Damn Yankees* (directed by George Abbott and Stanley Donen) and *Lafayette Escadrille* (directed by William J. Wellman) and in Sidney Lumet's *That Kind of Woman* in 1959.

As he matured and was no longer suited to "boy next door" roles, he worked increasingly in television. His own *Tab Hunter Show* (1960-1961) was short-lived, but he continued to appear on the small screen in both dramas and comedies and occasionally on game shows. Even as his spectacular looks faded, Hunter remained popular by virtue of his ability to project a sweet nature.

Hunter had a brief turn on Broadway in 1963 playing opposite Tallulah Bankhead in a production of Tennessee Williams's *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. A legendary disaster, the show closed after five performances.

In the 1970s, as his career as a movie star declined, Hunter toured in dinner theater productions.

He continued acting in films, some produced in Europe and most not particularly memorable. In 1981, however, he appeared with transvestite actor Divine in John Waters's *Polyester*, which has become a cult classic. Four years later, Hunter again teamed with Divine in *Lust in the Dust*, a spoof of cowboy pictures, directed by Paul Bartel and co-produced by Hunter and Allan Glaser.

In association with Republic Pictures International and Bonnie Sugar, Hunter and Glaser made the 1992 film *Dark Horse*, described as a "touching family drama." The story was by Hunter, Glaser was the principal producer, and David Hemmings directed.

Hunter's love of horses drew him to another project, a series on the HorseTV cable network called *Hollywood on Horses*. The show debuted in June 2002 with Hunter as host and executive producer.

As of August 2003 Hunter and Glaser, along with Neil Koenigsberg, were negotiating with director Peter Bogdanovich to make a film to be called *Blues in the Night*, based on a story by Evelyn Keyes.

In 2005, Hunter published a memoir, *Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star*, co-authored with Eddie Muller. In the memoir, Hunter not only discusses his career and his relationship with Anthony Perkins, but also reveals that he and Glaser have been life partners as well as business associates for many years.

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