

Film News: Character Actor Harry Dean Stanton Dies at 91

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LOS ANGELES – He was often categorized as the ultimate male character actor, but Harry Dean Stanton stood out on his own, with a persona that added immediate recognition in any supporting performance, and was unforgettable when he stepped into a lead role. Stanton died on September 15, 2017, at age 91.

With his hang dog demeanor and distinctive voice, Stanton made his mark over a 60 year career, and appeared in character roles in notable films such as “Cool Hand Luke” (1967), “Kelly’s Heroes” (1970), “The Godfather Part II” (1974), “Escape From New York” (1981), “Pretty in Pink” (1986) and “Last Temptation of Christ” (1988). He had bigger and more up front roles in “Repo Man” (1984), “Paris, Texas” (1984), “Wild at Heart” (1990), “The Straight Story” (1999), “The Green Mile” (1999) and the upcoming “Lucky” (2017).

Harry Dean Stanton was born in Kentucky, and was a World War II veteran in the Navy, serving on a ship involved in the Battle of Okinawa. He attended the University of Kentucky, studying journalism and radio, but as a life long singer and performer moved to California to study acting at the Pasadena Playhouse. As an actor, he made his national debut on the “Inner Sanctum” TV series in 1954, and his credited film debut in “Tomahawk Trail” (1957, as Dean Stanton).

He kept the Dean Stanton moniker through the 1960s and ‘70s, and with his standout presence took advantage of the Western TV boom of the late 1950s, appearing on “The Rifleman,” “Johnny Ringo,” “Laramie,” “Rawhide” and “Have Gun Will Travel.” He did a few films, coming up memorable in “The Man From the Diner’s Club” (1963) and “Cool Hand Luke” (1967). He moved on to cult movies in the 1970s, crediting himself as “H.D.” Stanton in “Two-Lane Blacktop” (1971), and Harry Dean from then on, jumping between parts in mainstream films (“The Missouri Breaks”) and underground (“Renaldo and Clara”).

As a character actor, he got a standout role in late 1970s in the film “Alien,” as crewman Brett, and as Bud in “Repo Man” (1984). He broke out as a lead actor in the sublime “Paris, Texas” in 1984 – written by playwright Sam Shepard – and was a favorite actor of directors Sam Peckinpah, John Milius and David Lynch, appearing both in “Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me” (1992) and the current Twin Peaks revival on the Showtime Network. In his later years, he became a go-to for distinct character roles, such as a corrupt polygamist on the HBO series, “Big Love” (2006-10), and as a security guard in the superhero film “The Avengers” (2012). His home state of Kentucky honored him with a Harry Dean Stanton Film Festival, and he was the subject of two documentaries (“Harry Dean Stanton: Crossing Mulholland” and “Harry Dean Stanton: Partly Fiction”) He is the title character of a film releasing in a couple weeks, the wonderful elegy of “Lucky.”



Harry Dean Stanton as the Title Character in "Lucky"
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

The two young screenwriters of "Lucky," Logan Sparks and Drago Sumonja, struck up a friendship with Stanton at a Los Angeles dive he hung out at, and was moved to write the movie in honor of Stanton's particular style and presence. Stanton died in Los Angeles, with no information on survivors, except for the legion of filmmakers he worked with and admirers he gained along the journey.

Harry Dean Stanton summed up his life with "I'm a late bloomer. It's just a matter of how you evolve; of what your pace is. Hopefully, the older you get the more you grow. So, that has been my speed, the beat of my drum. I march to the beat of a different drum... you'll pardon me for using this expression."

Sources for this article came from Wikipedia, IMDB and the New York Times. Harry Dean Stanton, 1926-2017



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