

Movie News: Film, TV Icon James Garner Dies at 86

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LOS ANGELES – He was the guy that could take care of things for you, with a wink of the eye and a slightly cynical air. Handsome star James Garner distinguished himself in both film and television, and passed away on July 19th, 2014, in Los Angeles after a long stretch of health problems. He was 86.

Garner broke in on a national level by starring as professional gambler Bret Maverick in the 1950s TV series, “Maverick,” and went from there to take on leading man and character roles in classic films such as “The Children’s Hour,” “The Great Escape,” “The Americanization of Emily,” “Victor Victoria,” and “Murphy’s Romance.” He even completed a TV-to-movie cycle by appearing in the Mel Gibson film version of “Maverick.” He also made a second character splash on TV in the 1970s, portraying private investigator Jim Rockford in the sly and popular show, “The Rockford Files.”



James Garner in ‘The Rockford Files’

Photo credit: Universal Studios Home Entertainment

James Garner was born James Scott Bumgarner in Norman, Oklahoma, in 1928. His mother passed away when he was five years old, and he split time between being raised by relatives and his stepmother after his father remarried. At sixteen, he joined the United States Merchant Marines near the end of World War II, and tried to finish high school afterward both in Norman and at Hollywood High School, since his father was now lived in Los Angeles. After doing a bit of modeling while in L.A., he went back to the military during the Korean War, earned a purple heart and worked as a self-described “scrounger,” which he would replay as a character in two movies a decade later.

A chance meeting with a friend from Hollywood High School in 1954 got Garner a non-speaking role on Broadway in the “Caine Mutiny Court Martial,” where he observed Henry Fonda in the lead role every night. Around that time, he changed his name to James Garner, and landed a series of small film roles that led up to “Maverick” in 1957. The explosive success of the series made Garner a household name, and established his charming rogue character. He made headlines during a dispute with the producers after three seasons on the show, and he quit soon thereafter.

Garner's popularity transitioned him back to the movies, this time in lead and memorable character parts. In 1963, after being paired with Doris Day in the frothy comedies “The Thrill of it All” and “Move Over Darling,” Garner anchored the epic World War II film, “The Great Escape,” in which he played a fictional version of his real-life military personality as the scrounger. He repeated that character in Paddy Chayefsky's dark comedy, “The Americanization of Emily” (1964), in which he was paired with Julie Andrews. Garner later cited “Emily” as his favorite film role.



James Garner in a Sequence with Steve McQueen (right) in 'The Great Escape'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

For the rest of the 1960s, Garner portrayed auto racers (“Grand Prix”), gunslingers (“Hour of the Gun”) and private eyes (“Marlowe”). It was the role as Phillip Marlowe that transformed Garner into his next big TV character, James Rockford of “The Rockford Files” (1974-1980). With its distinctive theme song and superbly written scripts, Jim Rockford became one of the best TV private eyes in the medium's history.

After Rockford, Garner returned to films, reuniting with Julie Andrews in the memorable musical, “Victor Victoria” (1982) and gaining an “Best Actor” Oscar nomination opposite Sally Field in “Murphy's Romance” (1985). He went back to TV with “Man of the People” (1991), which failed to catch on, and did a number of television and film appearances afterward, culminating in “Space Cowboys” (2000) and “The Notebook” (2004). He wrote his autobiography, “The Garner Files,” in 2011.

Health issues began to affect his life in the late 2000s, as he had numerous injuries from his television days and suffered a stroke in 2008. He recovered from that first episode, but the last few years his health went into steep decline. He passed away in his home at Los Angeles of undisclosed causes. He was married to his wife Lois Clarke for 58 years, and they had two children.

James Garner was modest and philosophical about his acting ability ... "I'm a Spencer Tracy-type actor. His idea was to be on time, know your words, hit your marks and tell the truth. Most every actor tries to make it something it isn't looks for the easy way out. I don't think acting is that difficult if you can put yourself aside and do what the writer wrote."

Source material for this article came from Wikipedia, imdb.com and People.com. James Garner, 1928-2014.



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