

In the air

As time goes by

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Next Sunday, fifty years will have gone by since Humphrey Bogart died of cancer at the age of 58. The great Bogie. Hero of some of the most memorable films ever made - Casablanca, Maltese Falcon, The African Queen.

What you remember is Bogie, the tender tough guy, the loner who chooses his guns and sticks to them.

Humphrey DeForest Bogart was born on 25 December 1899. His parents were professionals and he and his sisters had a comfortable upbringing in a smart part of New York, with a lakeside retreat where Bogart developed his life-long love of sailing.

Expelled from the academy where he was preparing to study medicine, he joined the Navy in 1918. His ship was shelled and he was wounded; no one quite knows how, but in one version, he was lighting a cigarette for a prisoner in his charge when the man smashed him in the mouth and fled. Bogart's lip was split open, but he gave chase and refused treatment until the man was caught again. The scar partly paralysed the right corner of his upper lip, causing his famous snarl and the slight lisp.

After the navy, Bogart was asked by a family friend to run a theatre company and that eventually led to his first acting part - as a Japanese waiter. Critics were unimpressed, but Bogart had set his heart on acting.

He was committed to learning his craft and trod the boards for some years. But for Bogie - as for all stage-actors - the movies began to offer new horizons and in 1930, he made his first film, a short called *Broadway's Like That*. His film breakthrough came paradoxically through a 1934 stage play, *The Petrified Forest*, in which he played an escaped killer, Duke Mantee.

Till then, he had been given well-heeled roles, but now his real talent shone through: when he walked onstage, with his icy stare, dangling hands and convict's lope, the audience gave a horrified gasp, convinced he really was a killer.

The play won critical acclaim and Warner Bros bought the film rights. They chose Edward G. Robinson to play Mantee, but Leslie Howard, co-star in the play, refused to do the film without Bogart - and Warners finally agreed. The film was a box-office success; Bogart was offered a long-term contract and made the symbolic move to Hollywood.

At first he found film work stimulating, but after a few years of gangsters and criminals, he wanted to move on intellectually. His chance came in 1942 with *The Maltese Falcon*. The complexity of Sam Spade allowed him to flex his actor's muscles as the lo-

ner with the cool intellect, sombre sensuality and uncompromising sense of honour.

Hollywood sat up and took notice ... and then, a year later, came *Casablanca* - and with it a new, more romantic, Bogart.

Casablanca was one big improvisation: Ingrid Bergman famously declared she didn't know till the last day of shooting which man she was meant to end up with. And coming

out in January 1943, it is at least partly an anti-Nazi propaganda exercise. It turns on Bogart's emotionally gutted Rick Blaine, wrestling down his personal demons and „coming back to the fight“ against tyranny.

The film is unforgettable: if your eyes don't mist over when Major Strasser's *Wacht am Rhein* is drowned out by Viktor Laszlo's *Marseillaise*; if your lip doesn't tremble when Louis orders the rounding up of „the usual suspects“ or Rick comforts Ilsa with „we'll always have Paris“, you have no heart!

Casablanca won three Academy Awards - including for Best Screenplay (all those lines that have entered the language!). Bogart himself was nominated for Best Actor.

1944 was a turning point for Bogart: he made *To Have and Have Not*, his first film with Betty Perske, aka Lauren Bacall.

They shared a work ethic, the chemistry worked and Bogart's romantic side responded to Bacall's warmth and humour. On 21 May 1945, she became the 4th Mrs Bogart.

The couple settled down in Beverly Hills with a family of animals and a yacht, the *Santana*. They had a son, Steve, called after Bogart's character in *To Have and Have Not*, and a daughter, named Leslie in homage to the actor whose loyalty Bogart never forgot.

Over the next few years he made some of his most emblematic films: *The Big Sleep*, *Key Largo*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and, in 1951, *The African Queen*, with Katherine Hepburn - the film that won him his only Oscar, for Best Actor.

Typically, Bogart refused to let the award go to his head. „The best way to survive an Oscar“, he remarked, „is to never try to win another one.“ He may not have tried, but



„You know, Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship“

his Captain Queeg in *The Caine Mutiny* (1954) brought him another nomination. And other memorable roles - *The Barefoot Countess*, *Desperate Hours* - demonstrated the range he had acquired as an actor.

But by this time Bogart was seriously ill with cancer - all those trade-mark cigarettes - and surgery to remove a tumour in the oesophagus could not stop it spreading. He fought back, but this was a more insidious enemy than Major Strasser and there was no therapeutic Louis there to help.

Humphrey Bogart died in his sleep in the early hours of 14 January 1957. He was cremated and Bacall had the whistle from *To Have and Have Not* burnt with her husband. At the memorial service, she displayed a model of *Santana* in a glass case instead of a coffin. John Huston gave the eulogy and the priest read a late poem by Tennyson, *Crossing the Bar*, that begins: „Sunset and evening star, / And one clear call for me! / And may there be no moaning of the bar, / When I put out to sea ...“

Bogart has become an icon - the trenchcoat, the felt hat - but he was also a serious actor, with a natural authority, a sober presence; all his characters, romantics, toughs or psychopaths, have believable inner lives.

From his first play to the last of his 80-odd films, he remained a professional who showed respect for his fellow artists - never once late, lines always learnt.

And in 1947, he was prepared to risk his career to protest against McCarthy's witch hunts.

The man who rejected stardom would doubtless have given that ironical lop-sided grin when in 1999, the American Film Institute named him the Greatest Male Star of All Time.