

TRAIL BLAZER

After 40 Years in the Saddle, Clint Eastwood is still braving new frontiers.

By Kenneth Miller/Reader's Digest, May 2007

Nearly 25 years after Harry Callahan dared a thug to start shooting – and gave the phrase “Go ahead, make my day” a whole new meaning – the violence in Clint Eastwood’s movies has a subtlety and impact that Dirty Harry could only dream of. After spending the better part of his career playing the tough guy on-screen, Eastwood has become the gentle giant behind the scenes, directing a spate of critically acclaimed and award-winning films.

His 2006 companion movies, *Letters from Iwo Jima* and *Flags of Our Fathers*, take an unflinching look at war. *Letters* is a work of extraordinary empathy, one of the first US films to tell a World War II story from the perspective of Japanese soldiers. Unlike the propaganda films of the time, it grants as much humanity and complexity to Iwo Jima’s defenders as to the GIs who raised Old Glory atop Mount Suribachi.

In the short span of one year, Eastwood released two notable films. Not many 76-year-olds can conceive of that kind of success. But it’s not just the output; it’s also the distance that Eastwood has come. The action hero has transformed himself into an artist – a creator of stereotype-busting movies that provoke serious thought and deep emotion in audiences around the world. “The journey he’s made from his raffish beginnings is just astounding,” says film critic Richard Schickel.

So how did he get here? Did Dirty Harry take an anger-management class? Eastwood bristles at the suggestion that he ever shared the shoot-’em-up instincts of his early movie characters. “I’m an actor playing a role,” he told biographer Douglas Thompson. “It’s a fantasy.”

Straight Shooter

Four decades ago, when peace and love were all the rage, Eastwood made his mark in *A Fistful of Dollars*, playing a hard-eyed, poncho-wearing drifter whose Colt .45 did most of his talking. Then came the ruthless San Francisco plain-clothes cop of the *Dirty Harry* movies, who favoured a .44 Magnum. But in real life, Eastwood literally wouldn’t hurt a fly. “When we see a bug at our house,”

his wife Dina has said, “we coax it out the window.”

Other aspects of his personality are more in line with his screen persona. What audiences love about Eastwood is that he embodies a certain ideal of American manhood: quietly confident, stubbornly independent, street-smart, self-amused and – even in his darkest roles – essentially decent. “That humanness comes through in all his work, both as a director and an actor,” says Gene Hackman, who first paired with him in *Unforgiven* (1992).

Like the protagonists of many of his films, Eastwood also possesses a relentless urge to claim new territory. “I was always reaching out for something different,” he told one interviewer. “Half the fun of making a movie is doing something that’s outside your experience.”

In an industry based on illusion, Eastwood has risen to Hollywood’s zenith largely by daring to be himself.

The Long Ride

The classic Eastwood character – detective or desperado, boxing coach or soldier – is a blend of dependable professional and intractable wanderer. That mix has roots in Eastwood’s own life.

During the Depression, his father, a bond salesman, travelled between Washington State and California pursuing jobs that never seemed to last. Clint attended at least half a dozen schools and excelled at none of them. (Had he been a kid today, he has said, he might have been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder.) He wore a leather jacket, tinkered with cars and hung with a tough crowd. Still, he learned to value hard work as a source of pride, security and self-sufficiency. He packed groceries and delivered newspapers, worked as a logger and a steelworker, fought forest fires and dug swimming pools. A jazz fanatic, he taught himself piano and played for pizza and tips at an Oakland bar.

Drafted into the army during the Korean War, Eastwood did a hitch at Fort Ord, south of San Francisco, where his fellow soldiers suggested that with looks like his, he really ought to try out for the movies. After enrolling at Los Angeles City College, he did. His chiselled cheekbones and six-foot frame won him bit parts in *Revenge of the Creature*, *Tarantula* and a film starring Francis the Talking Mule, but soon he was back to spadework. Then in 1959 he landed the part of

Rowdy Yates, sidekick to the trail boss, in a new TV western series called *Rawhide*. He held on to the role for seven years.

Eastwood's ambitious side, though, grew frustrated with the show's constraints. (In private he described his character as "Rowdy Yates, idiot of the plains.") In 1964, during a break in production, he found an escape route: the lead role in a low-budget cowboy movie, filmed in Spain by an iconoclastic Italian named Sergio Leone. Surreal, visually innovative and with minimal dialogue, *A Fistful of Dollars* featured Eastwood as the mysterious gunman who plays two criminal gangs off each other. The film became a smash hit in Europe, and he quickly shot two sequels with Leone. (All three premiered in the United States in 1967.) A new genre was born: the spaghetti western. The success of the films allowed Eastwood to finally quit his day job.

But he was not about to trade one trap for another. After a few more turns as an actor (*Hang 'Em High*, *Coogan's Bluff*), he moved into the director's chair. His debut, 1971's *Play Misty for Me*, was a radical departure from his earlier films – the complex story of a womanizing DJ stalked by a psychopathic female fan. He alternated such experimental work with crowd-pleasing fare, including the comedy *Every Which Way But Loose*, in which he shared top billing with an orangutan named Clyde.

Aiming High

The longer Eastwood has worked, the more thoughtful and daring his film projects have become. "Every movie I make teaches me something," he has said. "That's why I keep making them." Since becoming eligible for Social Security, he has made such must-see (and Academy Award-laden) films as *Unforgiven*, about a gunslinger haunted by his past; *Mystic River*, about the repercussions of child abuse; and *Million Dollar Baby*, about a struggling female boxer and the broken-down trainer who takes her on.

Eastwood has always declined to be pigeonholed as an actor, a filmmaker or a man. After some critics denounced *Dirty Harry* as a "fascist", he came out with the sequel *Magnum Force*, in which Harry battles a cabal of vigilante cops. When *Million Dollar Baby* was released in 2004, social conservatives complained that the film endorsed assisted suicide for its paralyzed protagonist. Unruffled, Eastwood replied that his movie simply affirmed a basic American theme: an individual's right to live, or die, as she sees fit. Though a registered Republican, Eastwood makes no secret of his support for reproductive choice, his opposition

to the Iraq war – or, when discussing his last two movies, to war, period. The best political label for him, he says, is libertarian, with a small *l*.

When he's directing a movie, Eastwood is like the teacher who's on top of everything and brings out the best in everyone. His film sets are legendary for orderliness and efficiency. "One of the first things he told me was, 'No great work can be done amid chaos,'" says Emmy Rossum, whose role as a troubled teenager in *Mystic River* helped launch her career.

Eastwood often composes the musical themes for his movies. "So many directors are busy running around, trying to show off their authority," says Hackman. "Clint's not like that. He's a great listener, and he approaches everything in a practical way."

Behind the scenes

Off duty, Eastwood is unpretentious and private. He stays away from Hollywood, opting for the company of old friends in his adopted home town of Carmel, California, halfway between L.A. and San Francisco. (He served as mayor from 1986 to 1988; after local authorities passed an ordinance banning public consumption of ice-cream cones, he ran for office and turned the old administration out.) He still drops by the Hog's Breath Inn, the rustic eatery he once owned on San Carlos Street. "He doesn't make a big show of entering a restaurant," says Schickel, a longtime friend. "He kind of slopes in, wearing his chinos and his little jacket."

But come on, he's Clint Eastwood. Eventually, people notice. "We were playing golf one Sunday morning in Canada, while we were making *Unforgiven*," Hackman recalls, "and there was a crowd of about 50 people watching us. Clint was the first to tee off, and he missed the ball totally. Well, they laughed and applauded, but he didn't get mad. He just turned and gave a slight bow. That, I think, exemplifies him."

Eastwood, in fact, sees a well-played round of golf as an analogy for a well-lived life. "You have to trust your swing," he told interviewer Charlie Rose. "Don't worry about what anybody else is doing out there... You'll do OK with your own game. And somebody else will do OK with theirs."

His taste for independence is mirrored in his romantic history. Though his first marriage lasted 25 years and produced two children, he has acknowledged that

he strayed widely; he has another four kids by various paramours. In his own way, though, he's really a family man. He's on friendly terms with most of his exes and offspring, and several of the youngsters have appeared in his movies. Son Kyle, 39, a composer, often scores his father's films.

Going strong

A late but enthusiastic convert to monogamy, Eastwood has been married since 1996 to Dina Ruiz, 41, a former TV news presenter whom he met when she interviewed him. They have a ten-year-old daughter, Morgan.

Caring for a tween helps to keep him fit, as does jogging, following a spartan diet and pumping formidable quantities of iron. "I saw him outmatch men a quarter of his age," says Ryan Phillippe, who appeared in *Flags of Our Fathers*. "I remember everyone was at the gym and Clint had just finished on the bench press. [Actor] Barry Pepper sidled over to see if he could lift what Clint was lifting, and he couldn't move the bar."

But Eastwood's most potent youth elixir is his work. On the *Flags* set, he wore an officer's uniform in case he was caught on-camera, and referred to himself as Colonel Kumquat. He took his turn behind the camera during difficult scenes, standing in a small landing boat battered by the waves. "Just being in his presence," Phillippe jokes, "makes you feel like less of a man."

"I probably would have retired years ago if I hadn't found interesting things to do," Eastwood said recently. "They keep saying yes to you."