

# American icon



In 1955 James Dean became a star and died a legend. **Dennis Stock** photographed the moody young actor for two months during this time. Fifty years on he tells Keith Wilson how he came to make one of the most celebrated images of this era

**The time** February, 1955

**The place** Times Square, New York

**The event** Having chosen the unknown James Dean as his subject for a photo essay on the life of a young American actor, Dennis Stock uses a background of appalling weather in Times Square for creating a romantic image of a troubled young man

**W**HEN JAMES DEAN died in a head-on collision on the highway near Paso Robles, California, he gained more public attention in death than he had during his brief life. On 30 September 1955, the 24-year-old Dean had just finished filming on *Giant*, when he got in to his Porsche Spyder and drove to a race meeting in Salinas. His early death, love of fast cars and role of typecast rebel

and bad boy, provided more than enough image and hearsay for the young actor to quickly attain the shadowy status of American icon.

Of all the photographs that helped shape the James Dean legend it is Dennis Stock's image of the overcoat-clad star, hands in pockets, walking through the puddles of a rain soaked Times Square, that is the most universally known. Dean was still an unknown star when this photograph was made close to his 24th birthday in February 1955. It would be several more weeks before the release of *East of Eden*, his first major film, while *Rebel Without a Cause* was still in production.

Fifty years on, Stock recalls how he came to choose the young actor for a photo essay in *Life* magazine. 'I wanted to follow one of the new generation of actors like Brando, Montgomery Clift and Paul Newman. They had a different personality and attitude in the way they worked and changed the landscape of acting.' But instead of choosing one of these established young stars, Stock found his inspiration in a small arthouse cinema in Santa Monica where *East of Eden* was being pre-screened. 'It was the only film he had done at that stage and it hadn't come out, but at the end of the film, people stood up and applauded. I knew then that he was going to be a very big star.'

Stock stuck closely to Dean for the next two months, compiling a 'Eugene



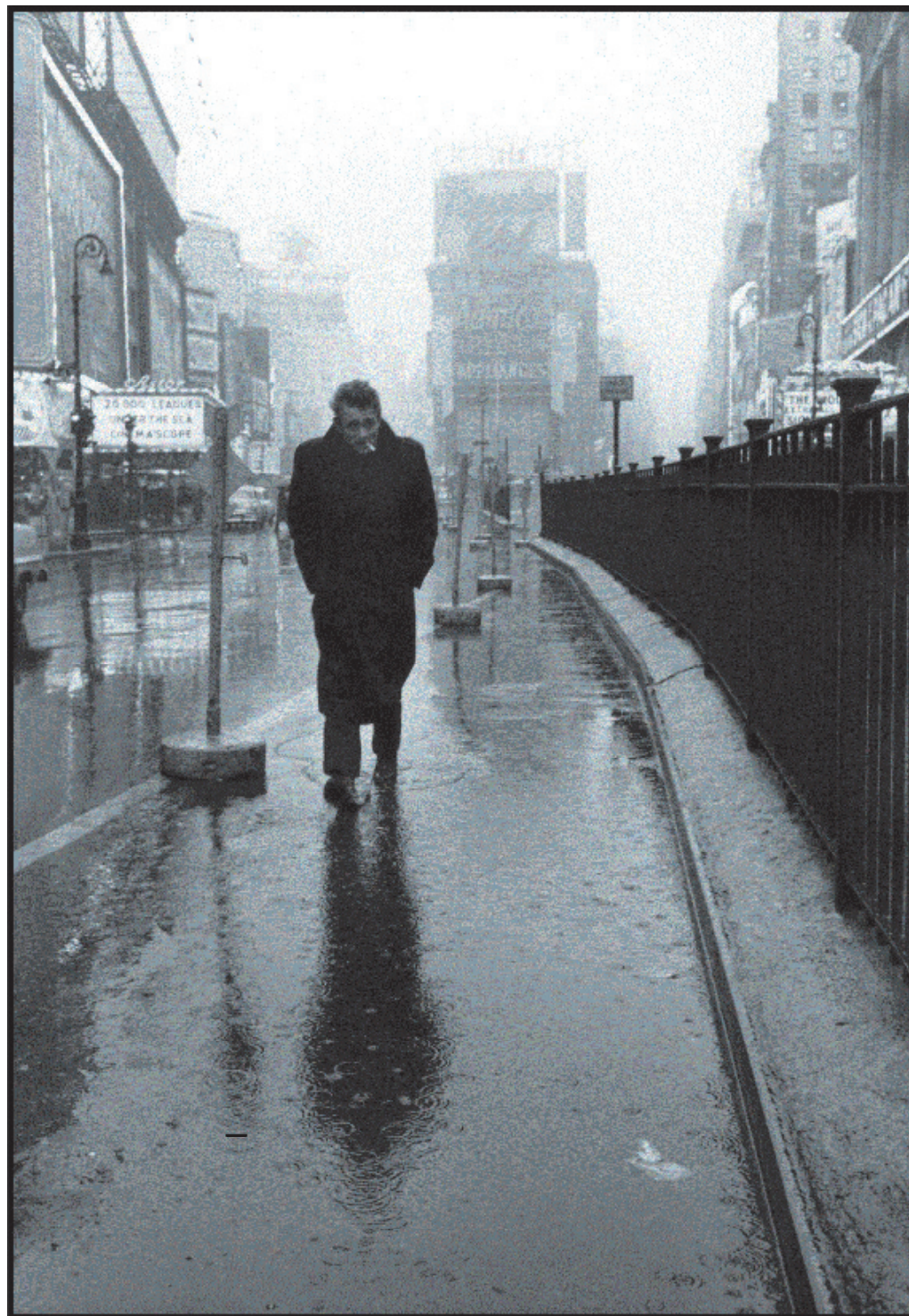


Smith-type essay' whereby he documented the actor's everyday life, from dance classes in New York, to visits home at Fairmount, Indiana. The famous Times Square shoot makes just four frames of the Tri-X contact sheet containing an eclectic mix of locations and situations. We see Dean having his hair cut, visiting a motorbike repair shop in Fairmount, playing with his young cousin Marky, and engaged in conversation with a young woman in a diner. But it is the lone, hunched figure on the wet New York street that has become the representative image of James Dean and the spirit of 1950s American youth.

'It was a foul day,' Stock recalls, 'but that's the uniqueness of it [the picture]. The rain is a very important element and enhances the mood.' Stock chose the third image of the sequence (frame number 19), for the main print, although a tell-tale small Chinagraph cross on the bottom right corner of the last shot (frame number 20), reveals that this frame was also considered. 'My choice was for the smaller figure because it's a more romantic figure. He's more alone, he's against the elements, you can see the shadows on the ground with the raindrops, and his size, the way his eyes are turned to the side, the cigarette in the mouth and hunched shoulders, the image has that suffering look.'

Stock fully accepts that much of this picture's fame is down to Dean's early demise. 'Of course, but that's society, it's not my problem. I am the Dean photographer, so what? I have fun with it and I get on with it. I didn't know he was going to die, I didn't know he was going to be a martyr.' Nor did *Life*, which ran Stock's pictures to coincide with the release of *East of Eden*.

Stock remembers Dean's death with sadness. 'We were friends. We could not have taken these pictures without developing a close friendship. Yes, he was a very screwed up guy but he



could be very sweet too. His problems were like most peoples, only more pronounced.' On the fateful day in September, Stock had just returned from an assignment in Europe when Dean asked the photographer to join him on

the drive to Salinas. 'I got a telex from him asking me to come to the race meeting. I was going to but something clicked in my head and I said, "I can't, I've got something else on." I could have been in that car with him.' **B&W**