

Why Bogart Remains Number One

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In 1999 the American Film Institute did an end-of-the-century poll of film critics to decide the greatest movie stars of all time. Number one, by a comfortable margin, was not Tom Cruise, but Humphrey Bogart! It was not just the AFI poll that Bogart led; he was frequently listed at the top of popularity polls in entertainment magazines in the 1990's. This is a remarkable development that begs the obvious question: Why should Bogart remain number one?

A first glance at his screen character would not explain it to someone who didn't know his films. The familiar Bogart image is that of a tough, solitary, gun-toting, hard drinking, cynical, world-weary little man -- and a scrawny little man at that. He was a fairly homely one, too, on top of being a chain-smoking near-alcoholic. This is our number one, the 20th century's finest!

Bogart's characters were usually very serious, almost grim people. They were usually in some dire, life or death peril, too. He had a definite sense of humor, but it seemed that there was usually an edge, or a bitter quality, in the things he found funny. There were some similarities to the screen image in the man's real life personality, though fortunately he seems to have been a gentler soul in reality.

To understand the impact on society of Bogart's film career, one should know that it came in two parts: the gangster roles of his early movies, and the more fully developed roles that came later. Bogart's screen persona in his early movies is a real testament to his gifts as an actor. Warner Brothers typecast him as a brutal, two-dimensional gangster in many years worth of film noir. He brought these characters off in such a convincing way that the public actually assumed Bogart had to be a product of the world's meanest slum. In fact, his childhood and teens had been entirely upper crust.

Humphrey Bogart was born in New York City in 1899 to Maud Humphrey, a famous advertising illustrator, and DeForest Bogart, a wealthy Manhattan surgeon. Hoping that their son would eventually enter Yale, the Bogarts sent him to the finest private schools. But his failing grades and insubordination led to constant trouble, and expulsions.

Bogart rebelled entirely from his parents in 1918 and went off to join the Navy. A significant incident from his Navy days came when he was assigned to escort a prisoner to the brig. The man smashed his handcuffed wrists into Bogart's face in an attempt to escape. Bogart was left with some nerve damage, and the permanent twitching in his upper lip that became one of his trademarks. At least, that is one story. Back in those days movie studios freely concocted stories about their stars.

After the Navy Bogart returned to New York and did some small time acting. His career went into high gear when he landed the role of a murderous gangster on the lam in the Robert Sherwood play, **The Petrified Forest**. When this Broadway hit was to be made into a movie, its star, Leslie Howard, refused to appear in it unless Humphrey Bogart played the villain. This gesture by Leslie Howard was Bogart's entry into films. In gratitude, he later named his daughter Leslie Howard Bogart.

The downside of movie stardom for Bogart was that for years he was cast only as Petrified Forest-style gangsters! This became intensely frustrating for him. The typecasting, and yet another unhappy marriage, led Bogart to drink heavily.

He finally got his artistic break in **High Sierra**, a movie that allowed him to play a slightly well rounded gangster character. Mad Dog Roy Earle was not all bad, and his love for his girlfriend leads to his death at the movie's end. The trait of the tough guy with a heart was established. This was brought to perfection in **Casablanca**, in which Bogart's hard-boiled character announces at one point that he "sticks his neck out for nobody," and then proceeds to do exactly that at the movie's climax. He risks his life and gives up the woman he loves to help the war effort. He tells her that the lives of one or two people don't amount to a hill of beans in this world. He makes a transition from selfishness to selflessness.

Going from a condition of looking out for number one to a state of personal sacrifice is the subject of much philosophical writing. Bogart just did it, in the more fully realized characters of his later films. There was usually no explicit explanation given for his change of heart. Usually only a soulful facial expression let you know that his better side was stepping forward. And Bogart could be soulful! He seemed to be someone who had suffered in his life. He was certainly the original antihero in American Cinema. Marlon Brando, James Dean, and an army of others up to the present day were influenced by Bogart.

The fact that not everything was explained about his characters allowed the audiences to fill in the blanks as they wanted. Like most very popular figures, Humphrey Bogart meant different things to different people. Ultimately, the question of why Bogart is number one takes us into the realm of the human heart. That means it is a question that will never have a definite answer.

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