



Rock & Hudson

THIRTY YEARS ON

IT'S BEEN THIRTY YEARS SINCE ROCK HUDSON DIED OF AIDS-RELATED ILLNESS. ANDY WASLEY LOOKS AT HOW THE SCREEN LEGEND'S DIAGNOSIS AND DEATH CHANGED THE PUBLIC'S ATTITUDE TO HIV AND AIDS

“There was AIDS before Rock Hudson, and AIDS after,” wrote Randy Shilts in *And the Band Played On*, his monumental 1987 history of the epidemic. Perhaps the statement seems a little glib; perhaps even meaningless to young gay men who can’t remember Rock Hudson, or the dark days when AIDS cut a swathe through generations of men whose illness was seen by many as comeuppance for their “preference”. Actually, Shilts was acknowledging a fact: Rock Hudson’s death on 2 October 1985 from an AIDS-related illness shifted perceptions worldwide.

Swarthy, sturdy and smouldering, on screen in the 1950s and 60s Rock Hudson seduced some of Hollywood’s most iconic starlets as one of film’s most popular ladies’ men. Following an Oscar-nominated appearance alongside James Dean in Dean’s last movie, *Giant*, Hudson’s frequent appearances alongside Doris Day in a series of romantic comedies secured the duo’s place in American hearts as a much-loved romantic pairing.

Off-screen Hudson was an intensely private gay man whose close friends included the *Tales of the City* author Armistead Maupin. Unfortunately his friends’ discretion was not enough to keep the star’s private life strictly out of public view. As early as 1955 the LA scandal sheet *Confidential* threatened an exposé of Hudson’s sexuality. His studio bought the paper off with a story about another gay actor so that the star’s reputation could remain unscathed.

Despite rumours and public revulsion against gay people, Hudson enjoyed a successful career in film before turning to TV in the 1970s. There, too, his good looks and charisma helped him secure roles on wildly popular shows like the detective series *McMillan & Wife* and, latterly, the 1980s soap *Dynasty*. It was during his stint on *Dynasty*, early in 1985, that his illness started to become apparent.

Hudson was diagnosed with AIDS in June 1984. He was known as a heavy drinker and smoker who had had a heart bypass operation in 1981 – he later speculated that he had caught HIV from a blood transfusion during that operation – and for some time it was possible for his team to deflect rumours that he was suffering from the illness.

While gossip columns were already speculating on Hudson’s condition following problems with his speech on *Dynasty*, a press conference with his former screen partner Doris Day ignited wider speculation about his health. During the press conference, on 16 July 1985, Hudson appeared painfully thin and confused. Following more than a week of press speculation, on 25 July Hudson’s publicist confirmed the actor’s AIDS status, making him the first celebrity to publicly acknowledge his illness. Ten weeks later, on 2 October 1985, Rock Hudson died in his sleep at home in Beverly Hills.

Hudson’s diagnosis was no more tragic than the 15,500 other diagnoses reported by the end of 1985, when there was no effective treatment for HIV. But shortly after the announcement his friend Joan Rivers – an early advocate for AIDS awareness and support – was clear about what the actor’s honesty could do for public perceptions. “Rock’s admission is a horrendous way to bring AIDS to the attention of the American public,” she said, “but by doing so, Rock, in his life, has helped millions in the process. What Rock has done takes true courage.”

Perhaps, in recognising the effect of Hudson’s death on public attitudes, it’s instructive to recall just how hostile American political culture was towards HIV/AIDS at that time. It took until 1987 for the US President Ronald Reagan – a

close personal friend of Hudson’s – to publicly acknowledge the disease and its impact. According to the US Foundation for AIDS Research, more than 40,800 people in the USA had died from AIDS by the end of that year. Even following Hudson’s death Reagan’s statement of sympathy betrayed no interest in the fact

that Hudson was one of more than 12,000 people whose lives had been lost to the illness.

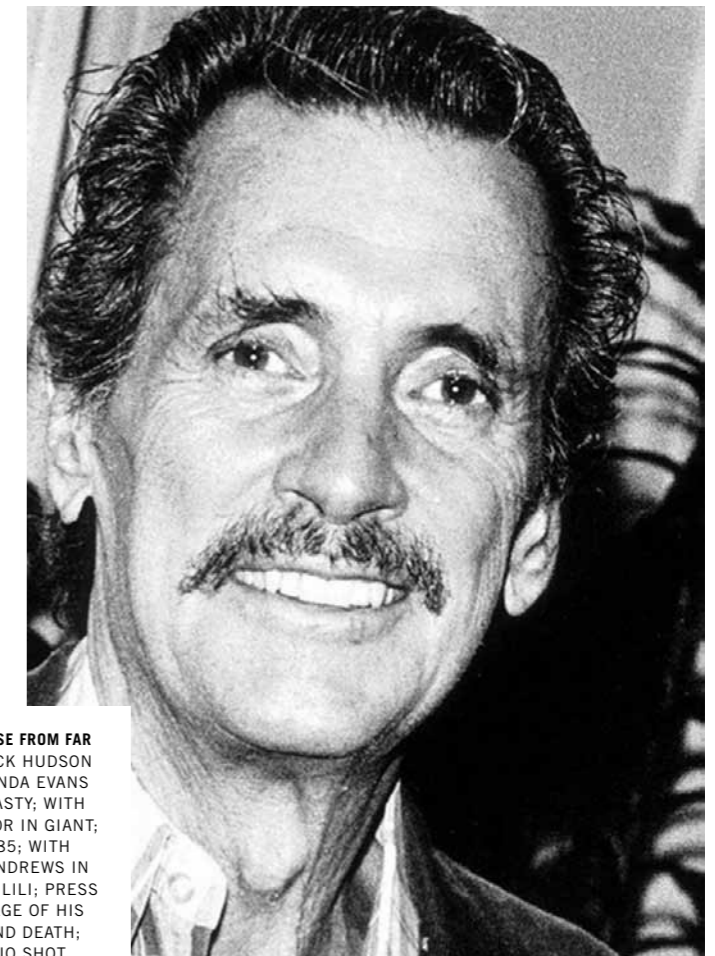
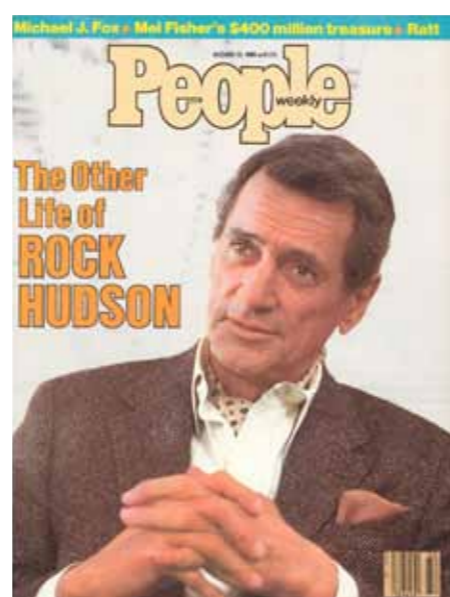
The public’s and media’s moods, too, weren’t entirely sympathetic to Hudson’s misfortune. An on-screen kiss with his *Dynasty* co-star Linda Evans in February 1985 – several months after Hudson’s diagnosis – sparked a furious response from viewers and actors who felt Hudson had put Evans’s health at risk. We know now that kissing cannot spread HIV. Though we should, perhaps, make some allowance for the fact that less was known about the virus 30 years ago, it remains saddening that the last few months of Hudson’s life were somewhat marred by public ignorance.

Maybe that overstates the fact a little, though. What can’t be denied, on reading press coverage of Hudson’s public battle with AIDS, is a clear shift in public attitude. In the ten weeks between the announcement of his illness and his death, private donations to HIV/AIDS research topped more than \$1.8 million – double the amount collected in the whole of 1984. Two weeks after his death, the US Senate approved a doubling of AIDS research spending to more than \$220 million.

Barely a month before he died, Rock Hudson released a statement to a celebrity fundraiser which collected more than \$1 million for AIDS research: “I am not happy that I have AIDS, but if that is helping others, I can, at least, know that my own misfortune has had some positive worth.”

Thirty years on, a cure for HIV remains beyond our grasp. Arguably, though, it remains undeniable that, in Shilts’s words, there was indeed a difference between “AIDS before Rock Hudson, and AIDS after”.

“It remains saddening that the last few months of Hudson’s life were somewhat marred by public ignorance”



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: ROCK HUDSON WITH LINDA EVANS IN *DYNASTY*; WITH LIZ TAYLOR IN *GIANT*; IN 1985; WITH JULIE ANDREWS IN *DARLING LILI*; PRESS COVERAGE OF HIS LIFE AND DEATH; STUDIO SHOT

