

Where a Young Actor Died and a Legend was born

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Rick Young tried on Friday to align a transparency of the James Dean crash

CHOLAME, Calif., Oct. 1 - At 5:45 p.m. on Sept. 30, 1955, a Porsche 550 Spyder collided with a Ford Tudor sedan here, killing a 24-year-old actor from Los Angeles.

At roughly the same hour on Sept. 30, 2005, Rick Young stood on a dusty median where two highways intersect and held up a vintage picture of the crash site, trying to discern the exact spot in front of him where that actor - James Dean - met his earthly end and began a new life as something else entirely: a legend. "His whole life is like a Greek myth," Mr. Young said of why he had to be here, 50 years later, with other hard-core fans honoring their icon, who made just three films; loved bullfighting, drumming, painting and poetry; and defined cool for a generation. In Mr. Young's midst on this parched plain between Los Angeles and San Francisco was Scott Brimigion, a salesman from Valencia, Calif., and a dead ringer for Dean, with his red jacket, white T-shirt, blue jeans, pompadour and pouty look. There was Vic Bent, pulling up in a replica of Dean's car after retracing the final leg of Dean's fatal route.

Alexander Davis, a 22-year-old former actor, stood there too, awestruck. Mr. Davis's girlfriend, Amy Rasimas, a recent convert to Dean mania, took in the scene: the doughy, middle-aged men in Dean T-shirts, the vintage cars, the 50's music coming from a radio, the German tourists snapping pictures at the new "James Dean Memorial Junction" sign, a young guy sitting somberly on the ground staring off in the distance. "At first I was like, 'This is so morbid,'" said Ms. Rasimas, 20, herself a budding actress who lives in the same part of Los Angeles, Sherman Oaks, that Dean did before he died. "But then I saw it was people truly fascinated with this artist." "Obsessed" might be more precise.

Those looking for a larger point may as well keep driving. If the attraction - a young, sexy star who dangled his cigarettes just so, played misunderstood, rebellious characters struggling in the suburbs and practiced an eclectic range of hobbies, like racing fast cars - is not clear, it never will be. "What kind of kid doesn't want to do those things, play the bongos, bullfight, race cars and hang out with movie stars?" Mr. Young said.

At the time Dean died, he was enjoying the success of "East of Eden"; "Rebel Without a Cause," his signature film, was released several days after he died, and "Giant" opened the following year. He generally received positive reviews - though this newspaper was less enthusiastic about his abilities than others - and received two posthumous Oscar nominations for "Eden" and "Giant." Now, his face adorns sweatshirts, coffee mugs, shot glasses, posters, trading cards, handbags. There is "Rebel" cologne. "James Dean is a brand," said Mark Roesler, the chairman of CMG Worldwide, which licenses products for deceased



Scott Brimigion of Valencia, Calif., with a Porsche similar to Dean's.

celebrities and the Dean estate. "His name has become a brand, and his image is a brand." Warner Bros., his home studio, recently released those three movies, digitally remastered, on DVD. New documentaries have come out or are in the works, including "Forever Young," which debuted at the Cannes Film Festival this year.

But the faithful - and some do attach a religious significance to their Dean devotion - prefer to dwell on the persona, not the product. The annual gatherings here, which coincide with festivities in his hometown of Fairmount, Ind., are light on commercialism. The hoopla, such as it is, revolves around the Jack Ranch Café, a diner near the crash site that displays signs like "Hot beer, lousy food, bad service. Welcome." It has a room devoted to Dean. In the parking lot, a Japanese fan erected a memorial, a rectangular ribbon of aluminum around an old tree, which drew bouquets of flowers and picture takers. There is a car show, and locals display Dean photographs and books.

Mr. Brimigion, the Dean impersonator, makes the rounds, hamming it up when the cameras take aim. Enthusiasts show off replicas of Dean's car, which he was driving to a race in Salinas, Calif., when he crashed.

They trade trivia and gossip. They debate whether Dean was speeding; some of the investigators thought he was in part because Dean had received a speeding ticket hours before, but a jury convened as part of a coroner's inquest found that the Ford, driven by a 23-year-old college student named Donald Turnupseed, had cut in front of him as it made a left turn from Highway 46 to Highway 41. The jury did not blame either for the wreck, and Mr. Turnupseed, who has since died, was not cited. But mostly it is a time for reflection. "He was a little like myself, a loner," said Mr. Bent, 64, whose mother, like Dean's, died when he was young. "I had a pompadour, wore a red coat when I was young and white T-shirts. I eventually grew out of it." A retired sheet metal worker from Albany, N.Y., he raised three children and went on to live a normal life, save for tooling around in the Spyder at Dean-related events.

Likewise, Mr. Brimigion - age "somewhere over 30 and below 50" - tries to keep things in perspective, noting he has two small children and a regular day job. But he was also proud of escorting a French television crew around as they shot footage for a television special. Walking around here on the anniversary of the day Dean died, he said, "makes the hairs stand up on the back of your neck." Not everyone around here buys into the mystique. Phil Dirxx, a columnist for a local newspaper, The San Luis Obispo Tribune, said naming the intersection after Dean was "a goofy idea," suggesting that it was too much celebrity worship and that local "real people, not reel people" were more deserving of the honor. Nobody took up that rebel's cause here.

At the hour of the crash, dozens of people stood at the junction, where pieces of plastic and stray auto parts suggested it was still a dangerous intersection. Somebody tucked a dozen rose stems into the pole holding up the new junction sign. The sun eased down behind the mountains, cooling the 100-degree air. The Spyder replicas roared past. Cameras clicked and whirred, people argued over the precise location where the cars had met, and a man spoke of Dean's ghost, who supposedly haunts the hills, and legends about the remains of the car, which disappeared from a police convention in 1960. A fitting eulogy could be found inside the Jack Ranch Café, where a blow-up of the special edition of Dean's hometown Fairmount News offered this appreciation: "Such a life is not suddenly wiped out in the wreckage of a car in California. Some of us have learned to distrust our senses and to know that as long as we remember, there will live on in our hearts the influence of others."