

# JACK LORD

By Oscar A. Rimoldi

Photos from the Oscar Rimoldi collection

Before the popular television series "Hawaii Five-O" made a household name of Jack Lord, fame and fortune had been inexplicably elusive to the actor. He had trekked the long, rugged, uphill road of a career on the stage and in the movies, with uncompromising determination. "Once I set up my goals, I went after them. But it had to be on my terms, without asking favors or cultivating important friendships in order to further my career." His terms were highly ethical but hardly accepted in a medium where mavericks are seen with suspicion, and sometimes with open hostility.

## **MOST DISLIKED**

Jack Lord had seen success come to so many of his contemporaries while always bypassing him. When his great chance came with "Hawaii Five-O," he was already 42. Time was running out for him. Then, the Establishment fighter joined the Establishment with a vengeance, and inevitably, his push upward provoked a wake of resentment. "Of the 25,000 actors in the Screen Actors Guild," said a fellow actor, "Jack is the single most disliked." Jack was fully aware of all the emotions he stirred up, but remained undaunted. "In a competitive world like show business, only the tough ones are the winners."

Jack Lord was born John Joseph Ryan, in a rowdy Irish



Jack at the beginning of his career in "The True Story of Lynn Stuart."

neighborhood on Halsey Street in Brooklyn, on December 30, 1928. He attended John Adams High School in New York where he manifested talent in painting and wood carving. With his characteristic lack of modesty, Jack likes to say that he was an artist before he was an actor. He entered New York University on an athletic scholarship and majored in Fine Arts. He served in the Navy during the Korean War. After his discharge from the Navy, Lord decided on an acting career. Always planning each move in a very rational way, Jack chose Sanford Meisner as his acting teacher. Not only did he consider Mr. Meisner one of the best in the business, but one who would not

waste his time with un-talented students.

Meisner remembered Lord as being "very intense. There was a quality about him that I liked, but he tended to take everything - and particularly himself - very seriously, and in this profession you must have a sense of humor to survive."

## **CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF**

Meisner's recommendation was strong enough to get Lord small parts in several plays that never made it to Broadway. His luck changed when he appeared with Kim Stanley in "The Traveling Lady." It was an important part, the critics liked him, and the play was a hit. That led to an audition for Elia Kazan who was looking for a replacement for Ben Gazzara in his tremendously successful production of Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Kazan was very pleased and gave him the part of Brick, later played by Paul Newman in the film version. Those who saw Lord in the play remember a powerful, emotion-charged performance.

The kudos Jack Lord earned for his acting in these plays prompted him to a serious miscalculation: he thought he was ready to conquer Hollywood. He soon found out that two Broadway hits don't make an actor a "name" to film producers. No one rushed to hire him.

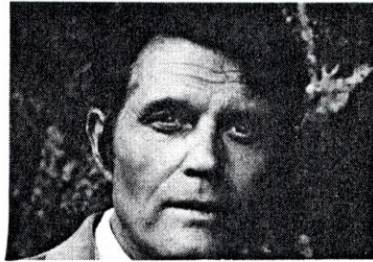
Luckily, Lord had met



Jack starred with Robert Ryan and Aldo Ray in "God's Little Acre."

Gary Cooper when Jack, a struggling actor in New York, was trying to sustain his eating habits by selling Cadillacs. One day Cooper came into the showroom to look at an old Duesenberg he had formerly owned. Lord talked to him about the tribulations of an aspiring actor. Cooper sympathized and took him to lunch. They met again by chance in Hollywood. When Cooper learned he was unemployed he asked him to come to Warner Bros., where he was to star in "The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell." Lord was cast in a small part which he made strongly believable. For better or for worse his film career was launched.

After playing a series of "heavies" in half a dozen pictures, including the popular James Bond Caper "Dr. No," Lord refused to be cast for any more villains. It was an attitude that Hollywood didn't like. Some considered it phony, others an uncalled arrogance for a beginner in the trade of motion pictures. As a result



Jack as cop Steve McGarrett, chief of Hawaii Five-O.

he was out of work for eight months.

#### OUT OF WORK

During Lord's forced inactivity he wrote an article for the Los Angeles Times in which he accused Hollywood of crushing an actor's versatility. "This is a murderous town for type casting," he wrote. "Why? Because the great majority of people who cast pictures can't see beyond the last part you did. They play it safe. There must be a producer or a director in this town with enough imagination to know that a good baseball player can play many positions. Same thing applies to a good actor. I am a good actor. I hope I won't have to wait for a New Yorker to spring me from this emotional prison." Not a piece of writing to endear himself to Hollywood producers.

While Jack was waiting to

switch from heavies to heroes in films, he kept busy by writing a television series titled "Tramp Ship," based on his own experiences of five years at sea. He did twenty-six story outlines which he sold to TV producer Don Fedderson.

His chance to play the lead and the hero came at last. It was in independent producer-director James Clavel's offbeat Western, "Walk Like a Dragon" (1961). The film had a very limited distribution, critics hardly noticed it, and it faded fast into oblivion. Jack was disheartened. He was confident this film would finally put him in the front rank of Hollywood newcomers.

#### BACK TO TV

Lord turned to television for the kind of heroes he thought he was meant to play. He was signed to star in "Stoney Burke," a modern oater about the adventures of a rodeo cowboy. Jack's ambition was now quite visibly unreined. "I'm going to make Stoney BIG," he said. Alas! The series didn't last long enough for Lord to make good his promise. "Stoney" was cancelled at the end of the first season. Lord was not discouraged. "This time," he decided, "I won't need to collect unemployment."

Jack took a crash course in singing before embarking on a series of personal appearances on the rodeo circuit. Dressed in the Stoney Burke costume, he would walk into the arena with his saddle slung over his shoulder, say a few words to the audience, and then sing some country and western songs. So successful was this venture - which could hardly be called a



Jack with Sean Connery in "Dr. No."

show - that it kept Lord busy for a couple of years, netting him \$200,000 a year. No doubt Lord's shrewdness paid off well, and he was right when he called "Stoney Burke" 'the most successful failure in television history.'

#### HAWAII FIVE-O

Then came the series that everybody said couldn't be done: "Hawaii Five-O." When Lord and his partner, producer Leonard Freeman, took the pilot to CBS they were told nobody could make a successful series 3,000 miles from home base. No studio, no equipment, no trained personnel, hardly any professional actors, no costume rentals, no prop houses. Lord confessed that "they were almost right." But he never listened to these voices of doom, and against the staggering logistical problems "Hawaii Five-O" was done, and ran for twelve

seasons on CBS prime time.

To achieve this success Jack Lord demanded a great deal of hard work from the people around him. His compulsion to control everything and everyone connected with the show created unpleasant misunderstandings among his collaborators. His obsessive need for perfection made him the target of much animosity and gained him a reputation of "difficult." He has been accused of belligerency, rudeness and arrogance. Because he seldom granted interviews, writers labeled him "His LORDSHIP," and some went so far as to imply that he changed his name to "Lord" to give himself a higher status in life.

Marie, Jack's wife of twenty-eight years, who had shared and supported unflinchingly her husband's drive for success, says that although Jack Lord has a rather unbending facade, he is a sensitive, vulnerable

man. "He was deeply hurt by the cheap shots he has taken in the twelve years of 'Hawaii Five-O,' but he knows the leader is always assailed because he is the leader."

Has the hard-sought fame and success brought Jack happiness and satisfaction? "Not exactly in those terms," he admitted. "Our success has enriched everybody, the State of Hawaii, its people, our cast and crew, CBS and, of course, myself. That's a satisfaction. On the other hand, whatever I have accomplished hasn't brought me complete satisfaction with myself. I'd like to be a better human being. I have been probably too busy to notice other aspects, other problems of life on this planet. But there is room for improvement in everyone's life. Mine is no exception."

No doubt, Jack has been working on that, and in the only way he knows: hard.