

# Who am I?

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I was born in Marion, Indiana, USA in 1931. If I were alive today, I would be nearly 70 years old. But I'm not: I died on September 30 1955, just 24 years after my birth. Even though I died young, my memory is alive and well and my popularity is as strong as ever.

I was an actor and became a symbol of disenchanted youth. My name was (and still is) associated with words like 'angst', 'lonesome', 'despair' and, most frequently, 'rebel'. Many books have been written about me and people have speculated on the man behind the legend, but I never felt like a legend – I felt I was just an actor, doing the best I could.

I only starred in three films and they were all made in the year before my death. I guess people have romanticized my life and my death because I died violently at the height of my career.

Do you know my name?

We asked some English people these questions. None of them could answer more than five. Work with a partner. How many can you answer?

1. Did he grow up in the country or the city?
2. Was he married?
3. He made a TV commercial for a famous drink. Which one?
4. Name at least two of his three films.
5. He employed a style of acting known as... what?
6. Where did he learn this style – Los Angeles or New York?
7. What was his hobby?
8. What make of car did he drive?
9. How did he die?
10. Who are Cal Trask, Jim Stark and Jett Rink?

# James Dean

## THE SHORT LIFE OF A LEGEND

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**J**ames Dean was born on February 8, 1931 in Marion, Indiana, to Winton and Mildred Dean. When he was five years old, James's father, a dental technician, moved the family to Los Angeles. He returned to Indiana when his mother died and was brought up on a farm by his aunt and uncle.

After graduating from high school, he went back to Los Angeles where he attended Junior College and then UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles). However, he grew restless at university and dropped out to pursue a career in acting.

He appeared in bit-part roles in films from time to time and made the occasional TV commercial. His most notable appearance was as the cheerful young man in the Pepsi Cola ad, a far cry from roles he would go on to play.

In the winter of 1951 he moved from L.A to New York where, along with Marlon Brando, he became a member of the famous Actors Studio. The Actors Studio was famous for employing a style of acting known as 'method acting', where the actor has to 'feel' the role before being able to perform it.

He had to wait until 1954 before he got a major role in *The Immoralist* on Broadway which brought him public acclaim. This led to the part of Cal Trask in the screen adaptation of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. He then returned to New York where he did more TV for a few months before winning the role of Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause*. He decided it was time to move to California.

In March, 1955, Jimmy celebrated his success in *East of Eden* by purchasing a Porsche Spyder in which he could practise his passion, road racing. He entered three races before joining the cast and crew of his last film, *Giant*, in Marfa, Texas. It was during the making of this film that he made his ill-fated journey to Salinas to compete in another race. En route he was involved in an accident and killed. People at the scene commented on his appearance as being that of a middle-aged man, not a 24 year-old. This was because in his role as Jett Rink, oil tycoon, he had been artificially 'aged' by the studio to look middle-aged.

Thus ended the life, but not the legend, of James Dean. At the time of his death he was a single man on the verge of being one of the great names of cinema of the 1950s. No-one quite understands why he has become such an icon but as Joe Hyams, his biographer, noted "Perhaps it is because, in his acting, he had the intuitive talent for expressing the hopes and fears that are a part of all young people."