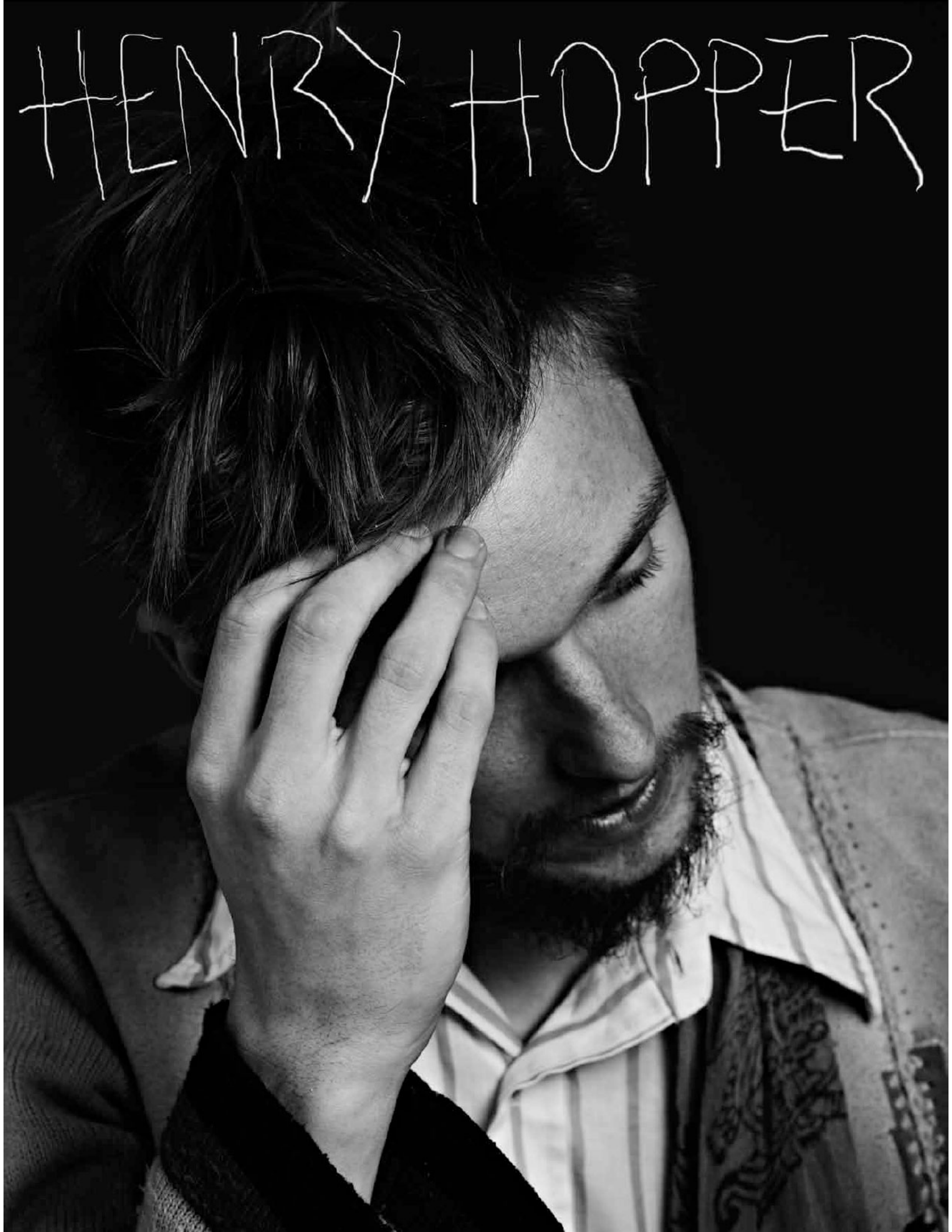


HENRY HOPPER





Calling Henry Hopper elusive is destined to become 2011's great understatement. If the late and legendary Dennis's 20-year-old son isn't in the mood to be pinned down, then it's quite simple – he won't be. After his *Man About Town* photo shoot, which no one was sure he'd turn up for until he walked through the studio door, efforts to hook up for the accompanying story become like trying to grab a darting gecko by the tail. For one thing, Hopper's agent loses all contact with her client. Word is he might have headed out to the Joshua Tree desert without his mobile phone charger, while someone who's worked with him before wishes us luck in a way that suggests she doesn't expect to see him surface for anything so tedious as a deadline. In desperation, I even reach out to Gus Van Sant, who's directed him in his leading-man debut, *Restless*. The cause is looking lost when, on a day that another Hollywood legend Elizabeth Taylor passes away, Hopper unexpectedly reveals himself.

"What's goin' on?" he drawls in the unmistakably dreamy-drowsy cadence of a born-and-bred Californian. He's currently ensconced in the Venice beachfront property of his friend, gallery owner David Quadrini, gazing out at the grey Pacific and white sky as a rainstorm passes over. When I tell him he's been a hard man to trace, I'm expecting to hear the favoured film-star excuse – that his insanely hectic, jet set existence has put time into a vacuum – but he merely shrugs, yawns and says, "Yeah... I've been kind of doing my own thing lately. I get lost to my paint sometimes..."

So, I've been stood up for paint... but never mind, it's here and now and so is Hopper, finally. Gracile, almost waif-like in appearance, with a mop of straight, tawny hair and a powerful resemblance to his father, Hopper begins to tell me that he's a man on a mission – he and Quadrini are currently scouring Venice for a studio space for the young artist – but from this tiny conversational kernel, a mighty monologue springs forth that summarises why he's a CalArts dropout, how having his

own exhibition of paintings at 18 made him to want to "get out of this box and do it my own way" and what he's doing now (small watercolours which he layers onto lightboxes). But it's also largely about his own philosophy of artistic expression, his disillusionment with the "very selective" art world and how he thinks the marriage of art and film will herald a new frontier for creative interconnectivity. Here goes: "The way that I see it there's more levels for us to communicate with each other and I feel like it's really needed in our time right now so that we can have something collectively to build off of and I think it is happening and I mean people always tell me that I'm young and idealistic and it's a utopian idea, but it just feels like the stars are lining up and ideas are coming through that we didn't even realise were there..."

Nine minutes later, Hopper pauses, although I'm not entirely sure it's for breath. Having listened to Hopper's space-man ramblings, a less generous soul might be tempted to write him off as another dreamy surfer dude who's puffed too much weed and spends far too much time staring up at the stars. (And, hey, for all we know, Hopper's done both.) But the longer you converse with him, the more it's clear that Hopper is a young man of deep passions, yes, but also of fundamental substance and a hungry intellect that's been very well fed. Anyone who drops Dostoyevsky, William Blake, Albert Camus and the Ancient Library of Alexandria into conversation, not to show off but to illustrate some genuinely salient points, is a man grappling with life's larger questions, what Hopper terms "the real shit."

For sure, this can make him come across as splendidly, youthfully naive. For instance, his suggestion that cinema should become a tool for expanding people's minds with stories that tap into the universal human experience basically forgets 100 years of work by phenomenal filmmakers that has attempted exactly that. But in the same breath, he lobs in a quote from Luis Buñuel, and you forgive him. "I feel like there's been an artistic

jump in filmmaking into exploring the spaces in our dreams and elements of the transcendental..." he muses airily, citing *Enter the Void*, *Black Swan* and *Inception*. "Buñuel said, 'When the eye of the cinema really sees, the whole world goes up in flames.' I don't feel like the greatest artistic tool that we have should be used to create movies that make a couple billion dollars for corporations. That's not what it's for."

With such an idealistic outlook, it's no surprise to hear that the two filmmakers he feels most inspired by are Gaspar Noé and Harmony Korine. He's in touch with both, Noé by phone (they're trying to meet up) while he and Korine are mulling over various collaborations. In fact, making *Restless* with Van Sant, Hopper feels, "has somersaulted me into another room where there were things that I didn't know were there – I broke through something." He was already falling out of love with CalArts when the script first came through and offered him an escape route, and *Restless* ended up becoming a cathartic experience for the first-time movie actor. (If you don't count a weeny appearance when he was five in a 1996 LA hip-crowd indie called *Kiss & Tell*, which starred Heather Graham, Rose McGowan, various Arquettes and his mother Katherine LaNasa.)

In *Restless*, Hopper plays Enoch Brae, a teenager who awakens from a coma to discover that both his parents were killed in the same accident, and who subsequently dreams up an imaginary friend – a WWII Japanese Kamikaze pilot, no less – and starts to crash funerals where he meets and falls in love with Mia Wasikowska's terminally ill cancer patient. In life, Hopper also had his first encounters with mortality, on two separate occasions. First, his good friend Elena passed away a week into the shoot in Portland, Oregon, and he flew back to LA for her funeral having spent the week filming in mortuaries and climbing in and out of coffins. A few months later, after *Restless* wrapped, his father succumbed to prostate cancer although, before he died, Henry was able to screen a cut of *Restless* for him in his bedroom, surrounded by his four children. (Henry has three half-sisters: 48-year-old Marin from Dennis's first marriage to actress Brooke Hayward; 38-year-old Ruthanna from his third marriage to Daria Halprin; and eight-year-old Galen from his final marriage to actress Victoria Duffy. At the time of his death, Dennis was locked in a divorce battle with Duffy, who filed a lawsuit this year against Henry and his older sisters, alleging that they'd wrongfully forced her to move out of Hopper's Venice compound in order to claim a bigger share of the inheritance. Let's just say that relationships are a tad *frosty* with his stepmother.)

"[My father dying] was a huge part of this film," reveals Hopper. "Basically, the storm of that began right when I got home, I got back right at the right time, which was in itself incredible. And that he got to see the film was very meaningful to me and to him, it hit a really powerful note, because my father

was my teacher and my best friend and I would credit him with teaching me about not only film, but art and living and how to deal with A to Z, and I was able to finally create something that had a lot of meaning..."

Enoch gets a crash course in the meaning of life, and so did Hopper on *Restless*. Admitting that his dreams are always "really weird," Hopper had one during production in which "an entity" appeared telling him to read William Blake. The next day, he purchased an anthology of the English poet's lofty, prophetic works and started devouring them. "He's got this poem called *Eternity* that goes, 'He who binds to himself a joy / Does the winged life destroy / But he who kisses the joy as it flies / Lives in Eternity's sunrise,'" says Hopper. "Meaning that things are temporary and you can get caught in the illusion, or you can see the invisible framework that exists underneath, that holds everything together, and the beauty that's there once you can accept that."

Hopper laughs, not because he's worried about sounding like an existential doom merchant, but because although he's only 20 he worries that he's old before his time. "I remember always hearing when I was younger, people who were like 20 going, 'God, I'm so old,' and I'd be like, 'I wonder why that is?' I feel like it's a second adolescence where all these questions get thrown at you when you step out of the cocoon..." Of childhood? "Yeah, and that's a choice to do that. Some people destroy themselves to stay in the cocoon."

Dennis met Henry's mother Katherine LaNasa, a ballerina, at a dance recital in the late 80s. They married in 1989, had Henry on September 11th, 1990, and divorced in 1992, with Henry splitting his childhood between the LA 'burbs of Venice and Hancock Park (where LaNasa moved to), and Taos, New Mexico, where Dennis also kept a residence. If he wasn't working, Dennis would drive Henry to school every day, although he had a busy schedule. "I had two different realities," says Henry. "I spent a lot of time with my dad when he wasn't working, but I remember him being away for months at a time." Like any kid slighter than most of his peers and under scrutiny because of who his father was, childhood brought its trials. "Ever since I was a kid people have been saying bullshit about me," he laughs ruefully. "Mostly it was on a localised level, like, 'What's going on with Henry?' But I got the shit teased out of me. I got bullied and all that kind of stuff, and I feel like, 'How do people make it through in this age without learning how to dodge some bullets and take others?' Because, fuck, what are you going to do if you're spending all your time thinking about what other people think about what you're doing? How are you going to enjoy anything? So I don't care – and I feel more free that way."

Hopper recalls his relationship with his father really blossoming when he decided he wanted to make art in his mid-teens. "He

said to me, 'I'm glad I got to stick around for you to try to grow up a little bit.' We started talking about things and, you know, I'd bring him Camus and he'd go, 'I've read all his stuff' and I was reading Nietzsche around that time and there were lots of discussions about freedom and art and philosophy, about what fucking matters and what's fucking righteous. I feel like every father's job is to teach their son how to keep it real, keep your head, be cool, respect yourself. I can't be a judge of what kind of job he did but I feel it was a really solid one."

Although it appears that Henry is mimicking his father's footsteps in wanting to pursue both art and acting, he says the latter was presented to him as an ultimatum by his parents when he was 15, tearing around Venice with his skateboarding friends and getting into masses of trouble. "It was kung fu or acting," laughs Hopper, pouring himself a cup of coffee in Quadrini's kitchen. "It came down to [adopts Dennis's voice], 'You gotta have some structure, man...'. So I went to the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute in LA and ended up making my best friends there, who got me through this time."

Restless wasn't his first film proposal, either. When he was 17, he met Wes Craven at one of the frequent parties in his father's Frank Gehry-designed oceanfront Venice compound. Still unsure of whether he wanted to pursue an acting career, he said yes to Craven (with whom he bonded over their love of Abstract Expressionism) when offered the lead in his horror film, *My Soul to Take*. But at the 11th hour, Hopper was forced to drop out after contracting mononucleosis. A huge fan of sci-fi horror films, and in particular Craven's *The Last House on the Left*, Hopper was mildly disappointed but, as you'd expect, chalks it up as "something that just wasn't meant to be. I was really into doing it just for the fun of doing a Wes Craven movie and I still have a lot of respect for Wes."

At times Hopper can sound like he's channelling his father – who practically defined Hollywood counterculture with *Easy Rider* and his renowned, prodigious intake of illegal substances – never more so than when talking about Hollywood's efforts to suck commodifiable young actors into the star-making machinery. Hopper's resisting all moves in that direction – keeping elusive – knowing that his pedigree makes him a prime target. "I was talking to this filmmaker the other day who I consider to be a fucking amazing artist and he said, 'Just stick around the right people,'" muses Hopper. "And that's something I'm really trying to do, I'm trying to hang around people that I respect and that respect me and that don't have vested interests in regards to me... Because, yeah, of course they want to commodify me. I saw this interview with Johnny Rotten where he said, 'It's my body, don't I have the right to do whatever I want with it?' That's how I feel – it's my body and I'm going to use it to create things that I feel mean something."

"In the most high profile situations where I've felt like I'm being commodified," he continues, "the question that's put on the table is whether I'm an artist or an actor. And that in itself is very, very silly. Why are people forced to sort of have this idea of creating themselves into a demigod figure? Why should that be the goal? It doesn't make sense. It's a question that I'm interested in posing because I feel that when people really ask themselves things, they get answers in return."

And Hopper's a young man continually searching for answers, and seeking out new mentors. "I reach out to certain people and the way they express themselves. I think the world is full of teachers." Growing up surrounded by poets, philosophers, actors, artists – people whose lives are ruled by the right side of their brains – provided him with a sturdy foundation of knowledge, and he still relies on his father's circle of friends for guidance, including the actor Dean Stockwell and his godfather Julian Schnabel. He recalls recently going into Caffè Trieste in San Francisco and being greeted by the poet Jack Hirschman with a big bear hug. "He said, 'You look just like yaw fatha!' I didn't expect that reaction and it was kind of a doozy. It made me feel like I have this really big family."

I tell Hopper that I doubt there was ever a single moment where he thought, "I think I'll be a lawyer/doctor/banker." He cracks up at the notion: "One can grow up in any kind of environment, doing any kind of job, but personally I feel like I'm nothing *but* creative. I don't understand these other ways of being and I feel like it was supposed to be this way. I'm not even sure what I'm doing half the time, but I'm not just sitting on my ass – I'm always working, always thinking, always trying to create something and feel like I'm transforming."

Locked into his interior landscape of reading, writing, painting, music (he plays guitar, just bought an auto-harp and gushes about these 50s recordings by Mexico's Tzotzil Indians that he's really into right now, "music that's layered in sunshine"), he admits to feeling dissociated and angsty in LA recently, and regularly uses nearby Joshua Tree as an escape valve. He'd like to start spending time in New Mexico again, journeying back to near where his father is buried and where "there are a lot of people who love me."

"I feel like the storm of my youth has passed," says Hopper, his voice slightly faltering with emotion, "and I'm in this new place where all this other stuff is possible, but it's a place that I never could have imagined for myself, with me as a man and my father somewhere else." Hopper opens a sliding door and strolls out onto the terrace to stare at the ocean. "It's beautiful when it comes down to it and this life is a miracle."

MATT MUELLER