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*Harry Dean Stanton, whose lengthy film and TV tenure included roles in *Pretty in Pink*, *Big Love*, *Repo Man*, and *Wim Wenders' Paris, Texas*, [has died](#) at the age of 91. In 2006, EW's Karen Valby spoke to Stanton, who worked with everyone from Alfred Hitchcock to Justin Timberlake, about his formidable career.*

Finding Harry Dean Stanton is a bit of a trick, for he literally lives off the beaten path. To get to his bachelor cabin on Los Angeles' famous Mulholland Drive, one must first find the hidden driveway, wind down a steep hill, and climb up a flight of rickety wooden steps. The door to his lair, nestled in a rustling thicket of trees overlooking the San Fernando Valley, is ajar; his doormat bears a smiling green alien announcing "Welcome UFO's and Crews."

Stanton is standing inside in bare feet and a black bathrobe, and his ragged wolf face looks weary. He didn't make it to bed the night before, too busy drinking and playing the guitar, and he missed a lunch earlier with his old friend and former roommate Jack Nicholson. When he passes a mirror, he grabs at his wild mane in disgust. "My hair looks like s—!" he roars, without losing the American Spirit clenched between his papery lips.

He is perhaps the greatest character actor alive. Weeks from his 80th birthday, Stanton has been in over 150 films and TV series. A short list of the directors he's worked with includes Alfred Hitchcock, Sam Peckinpah, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, John Carpenter, John Huston, Ridley Scott, David Lynch, and Terry Gilliam. He played a romantic leading man just once, to stoic, heartbreaking effect, in Wim Wenders' 1984 Palme d'Or winner *Paris, Texas*. However, he usually shows up as the dignified but doomed criminal, or, conversely, the dignified but doomed lawman. In *Pretty in Pink*, as Molly Ringwald's crumpled, tender father, he hooked the girls in the audience, and in *Repo Man*, playing the antiestablishment buddy with the best lines, he got the guys. Something about that bony face, and those vulnerable sunken eyes that have seen it all and then some, elevates whatever movie he's in, no matter how small his role.

"Harry Dean exudes a spiritual awareness that's steeped in deep sadness, and it's so compelling to watch on film," says Nicolas Cage, who starred with him in *Wild at Heart* and later directed him in 2003's *Sonny*. "He's a compelling man to be around as well because he defies a lot of laws. It's remarkable to me that he's into his 70s and is still up all night. He came over to my house once and we had some drinks. I had a motorcycle in my living room, and he got on and straddled it like he was all of 18 years old. I

remember just thinking, ‘How is he doing this? Why is he doing this? How is it possible?’”

How is it possible that the old man sitting there on his old sofa, hairless little calves propped up on a coffee table covered in ash and harmonicas and Mardi Gras beads, has both the critically acclaimed HBO series *Big Love* and four upcoming movies — bit parts in David Lynch’s *Inland Empire*, Nick Cassavetes’ *Alpha Dog*, the Wilson brothers’ comedy *The Wendell Baker Story*, and another Owen Wilson comedy, *You, Me and Dupree* — in the can? He lights another cigarette and exhales slowly. How is Harry Dean Stanton still alive?

When speaking about his formidable career, Stanton can be a man of few words. Of his stellar work on *Big Love*, on which he plays the snarling leader of a polygamist cult, Stanton shrugs and acknowledges he’s never seen an episode. “I’m getting some of the best reviews I’ve ever got,” he says. “I can take it or leave it. What do I have to say about the series? The writing’s good.” He’s not one for self-promotion; he doesn’t remember many specifics about the new Lynch film (“but I always loved working with David”), and questions about *Alpha Dog* seem to exhaust him. “I don’t know,” he says, his gravelly voice a bit wheezy. “I get tired of talking about it after a while. I’ve been doing it for so long.”

Born in West Irvine, Kentucky, on July 14, 1926, raised by strict Southern Baptist parents, Stanton moved to California after a tour of duty in the Navy during World War II. His first movie role was playing a soldier in 1957’s *Tomahawk Trail*, and he’d spend the next several years playing cowboys and soldiers in Westerns. But his loose, laconic style wouldn’t take hold until 1967’s outlaw epic *Ride in the Whirlwind*, which starred — and was written by — his pal Nicholson. He had been Nicholson’s best man at his 1962 wedding to Sandra Knight, and when the couple divorced six years later, they lived together for a spell in Stanton’s Laurel Canyon house.

“Jack called me and said, ‘Harry, I’ve written this part for you,’” remembers Stanton, “‘but I don’t want you to do anything.’” Nicholson’s pivotal direction — “Let the wardrobe do the acting and just play yourself” — continues to inform Stanton’s work today. “After Jack said that, my whole approach to acting opened up,” he says. “I was the head of a gang, I had a patch over one eye and a derby hat, and my name was Blind Dick Reilly. I saw that when playing a head of a gang, or a three-star general, or the head of a corporation, you don’t have to do anything. It dawned on me that the crew, the writers, the director, and the thousands and thousands of people who watch it all know that I’m the head of a gang. I can be indecisive, I can make mistakes, but I’m still the head of a gang. So that just freed me.”

This spontaneous approach obviously doesn’t work for everybody; not every ingenue can pull her hair back and put on a pair of glasses and convince the audience that she’s a nuclear physicist. “Then they’re not being,” Stanton shrugs. “They’re just acting, I guess.” He remembers the words of Oscar winner Maximilian Schell (*Judgment at Nuremberg*). He told him, “To be a fine actor, one must never put on an act. Never on stage, and never off.”

Stanton next joined Nicholson on Arthur Penn’s *The Missouri Breaks* in 1976, where he befriended Marlon Brando. “I saw Harry Dean make one of the bravest and most inspired moves I’ve ever had the chance to witness,” Nicholson once marveled about their meeting. In the scene where Brando is supposed to kill Stanton’s cattle rustler character, the legendary actor was decked out in a hammy costume of a wig, floral dress, and bonnet. Outraged that he was going to be gunned down by a man in a dress, Stanton jumped Brando off screen, wrestled him to the ground, and ripped that ridiculous outfit from Brando’s already massive girth.

“There was so much star power there on set, with Marlon and Jack,” explains Stanton, grinning fondly now. “So I tore that dress right off of him and, oh, yeah, Marlon loved it. Because that’s something he would do. You never knew what he was going to do, on camera or off. He had great unpredictability, such spontaneity. He was always good, even when he got fat as a pig.” When Brando was alive, the two insomniacs would stay on the phone until dawn practicing Shakespearean monologues. “‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day,’” Stanton quotes from *Macbeth*, remembering how Brando made him rehearse the piece over and over again.

Stanton’s house is something of a memorial to the many great friends he’s made over the years. (He has a photograph of Brando in his *Missouri Breaks* drag, signed “Harry, I don’t know what you’re doing but you don’t tear somebody’s dress off when they have a gun. Love always, Marlon.”) The mantelpiece is full of black-and-white shots of old girlfriends, including one of Rebecca De Mornay. The two met when the actress was 19 years old, while she was apprenticing on the set of Francis Ford Coppola’s 1982 love story *One From the Heart*, and they were together for a year and a half.

“There’s a massive age difference between us,” says De Mornay, now 44, “but he’s obviously very young at heart. He is my longest friend in life. You can count on Harry Dean’s complete honesty and authenticity every minute, and that is very rare. It’s what makes him such an incredible actor and it makes him an incredible friend.” She gave him the white stuffed dog lying on the sofa next to Stanton’s head. They named him Trouble.

Ask Stanton if he has a girlfriend today and he answers with some swagger, “No, I have girlfriends.” He never did get married. “Thank God they all said no,” he laughs sharply. “I just wasn’t psychologically made to get married or, God forbid, be a father.” He says he has “one, maybe two” sons. “I talk with one of them every now and then.” He sighs, and lights another cigarette.

He played a lost man unfit for a wife and child in *Paris, Texas*. His career-defining performance won him raves, but he was robbed of an Academy Award nomination and would never get another shot at a romantic leading role. “Harry goes his own way, and a lot of people may have had a problem with that in Hollywood,” says Cage. “That’s why he remains uncompromised as an artist, because he’s never really done anything but told the truth. I could see where some people may not know how to handle that.”

Soon after, Stanton costarred in Alex Cox’s biting punk fantasy *Repo Man*. “He had that Old West skeletal thing that was irresistible for European film directors,” says Cox about casting Stanton as the speed-snorting elder statesman who takes Emilio Estevez under his grizzled wing. “For me, it had to be Dennis Hopper or Harry Dean.” The cult film endeared Stanton to young men everywhere, who continue to quote the Code back to him wherever he goes, but the production was not without tension. “He was 58, and I was 29,” remembers Cox. “I think the gap between our ages made it difficult for Harry to accept me as a director. He didn’t want to learn his lines at first. He insisted that Warren Oates had read his lines off cards stuck to the rearview mirror in *Two-Lane Blacktop*, and he would do the same. I told him this would be a breach of his Screen Actors Guild contract. Luckily he believed me.”

Stanton admits he had “problems at times” with Cox on set. “But *Repo Man* was a brilliant satire,” he concludes. “So I hand him that. Somebody once said, ‘Never judge the artist. Judge the art.’”

The phone on the couch jangles loudly, and Stanton punches the speaker button. “Yeah.”

“You watching Lingo?” It’s his guitarist Jamie James calling about a program on the *Game Show Network*, Stanton’s favorite TV channel. “You see the girl in the dress?” James chortles appreciatively. Stanton hangs up and pulls out the remote. “We haven’t had a girl on in a while. Let me just see what she’s got on. Oh, there she is,” he says approvingly, admiring Chuck Woolery’s young blond assistant with feathered hair and a low-cut electric blue dress. “She’s better-looking than Vanna White.”

The living room is crowded with microphones and amps and the two guitars Stanton uses for gigs. In high school, Stanton sang in glee clubs and had a barbershop quartet, but it was legendary guitarist Ry Cooder, composer of the haunting soundtrack to *Paris, Texas*, who convinced him he had real chops. On the album, Stanton sings an old Mexican lament, “Canción Mixteca,” and it’s a gem of a jukebox song, made for late nights of beers and tears.

Stanton worked with music legend Bob Dylan on the 1973 production of Sam Peckinpah’s *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. “We became good friends after that. We drove all the way once from Guadalajara, Mexico, to Kansas City to see the singer Leon Russell,” he remembers. “I met him first at a studio in Santa Monica and we recorded a couple songs, and he asked me if I wanted a copy. I said no.” Ask him why and he sighs wearily. “Neur-o-tic,” he says, each syllable a stab. “Shooting myself in the foot,” he says with a great sniff. Cooder once approached him about producing a record with him, and more recently, so has T Bone Burnett. “A lot of them talk about it all the time, but I never pursued it,” says Stanton. He shrugs again. “I like to do nothing.”

Today, he mostly plays pickup gigs with James at local L.A. clubs like Mint and the Hotel Café. (He also sang at his friend Hunter S. Thompson’s funeral.) Wherever he goes, he carries a worn-out song list in his pocket. “Just to remind myself that I’m a singer,” he says. “I do all the classics, like Dylan, Kristofferson, Jimmy Reed, Mexican mariachi songs, some jazz songs from the ’30s. Cole Porter’s ‘Begin the Beguine,’ that’s one of my favorites.” Another favorite is the Italian love song “Torna a Surriento,” and when asked, Stanton breaks smoothly into a tender rendition. His voice, suddenly free of fatigue, is pure and clear.

“You can’t quite believe that this voice comes out of this guy,” says Owen Wilson. The two first met on a plane to Hawaii to shoot the 2004 comedy *The Big Bounce*. “Harry Dean sits down and I think he was a little stressed-out because he was traveling and they wouldn’t let him smoke on board. The stewardess asks him what he wanted, and he said, ‘Something tropical and make it a double!’ I always thought that would be a great title for a movie.” (Wilson has an idea for a buddy comedy the two might do together.) When they later shot *The Wendell Baker Story* in Austin, Wilson says, Stanton lost some of his ghostly pallor. “He gets on a bit of a night owl schedule in Los Angeles,” he says. “When he’s working and gets a tan going, he really looks incredible. We’d work all day and he’d stay up all night dancing.”

Debbie Harry once sang that “I want that man, I want to dance with Harry Dean...” When reminded of the lyric, Stanton positively beams. “I love her. She’s gorgeous. We met after that,” he says with a sly grin, “and oh, we danced.”

When Stanton was in his 20s, he stumbled across a tattered copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays in the dirt. “It was a romantic find,” he says. “I read it and started underlining it.” Hooked into the transcendentalist wavelength, Stanton’s devoted his life to studying enlightened thinkers like Lao-tzu and the philosopher Eckhart Tolle. There’s a print above his bedroom door that reads “Peace in Every Step.”

Ask him if he’s proud of his career, and he snorts, “Pride goeth before the fall.” Ask him if he’s a happy man, and he practically spits in response to such a banal question. “I don’t know how to answer that,” he says. “I’m just dealing with what’s happening, with what is. Joy, happiness, good, bad, all those terms are meaningless to me. If you think of yourself as a separate soul, you’re f—ed,” he cautions. “You’re seeking, you’re expecting something. It’s all right to be ambitious and go out there and kick ass and all of this bulls—, but you’re under stress all the time. Am I going to be accepted? Am I going to be famous? That crosses your mind, but you

don't hang on to it or get attached to it.”

His 30-year-old assistant, Logan, an aspiring actor in a Navy T-shirt and beat-up USC cap, arrives, bearing cartridges for the fax machine and two new cartons of American Spirits. The two spend a lot of time sitting around talking. “If George Lucas met Harry,” admires Logan, “he'd think he was a cross between Yoda and Obi-Wan.” “Yoda said the same type of Eastern stuff, did he?” wonders Stanton. “Huh, I'll have to see those movies again.”

The sun starts to set and his phone rings. Stanton's friend and neighbor Will McCormack, who has a role in Courteney Cox's upcoming FX series, *Dirt*, wants to take him to a wrap party later that night. “What are the hours of the soiree?” Stanton asks, firing up another cigarette. “Nine, or maybe even 10, right? Oh, good, good,” he says, his lion's voice softening to a purr. “We'll have a good time. I was hoping to get in a half hour of sleep beforehand, but it doesn't look like that's going to happen.”

“It's hard to find an actor who doesn't admire him,” says De Mornay. “They need to be around him because, in terms of being true to himself, he's such the real thing. He just is who he is. He needs to live alone, he needs to smoke cigarettes, he needs to be around people who aren't boring. If someone can really present the dynamics of what it is to be a plumber, he is literally as riveted by that person as he is by the Dalai Lama or a famous actor. He's just one of a kind. When it comes to staying up all night, never getting sick, he can outdistance anyone. He is as old as he is, and none of us are immortal. But Harry Dean...,” she laughs, her thought trailing lightly off into the air like a ribbon of smoke.

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