

## ***Interview: Writer/Director John Mulholland on Gary Cooper***

Q1(A) As an expert on the legendary Gary Cooper, how would you describe the relationship between the actor and yourself?

***JOKE: Relationship?!? Hmmmm ... besides, not sure that I qualify as an expert on much of anything, unless you count Irish gin mills ... and there I'm something of a connoisseur.***

(B) How long have you studied the life and works of Gary Cooper?

***My old man took me to see my first Cooper movie when I was, ten, DISTANT DRUMS. Why Cooper in such a mediocre movie should have intrigued a ten year old is a question I've never quite answered. But there you are.***

Q2(A) In your opinion, what is the significance of the actor Gary Cooper?

***In many ways, he represents much of what is best about the human spirit (apologies for the banality of this statement) -- as an actor and as a person. Al Pacino has said that Gary Cooper brought a dignity to whatever role he played, no matter how inferior the movie (Hey, maybe that nails why I hooked on to Cooper watching the very inferior DISTANT DRUMS!). Pacino says that Cooper never played down to an audience. No winking, as if -- "Hey, I know this is crap, but I gotta earn a buck." He was always a pro, and this isn't always as easy as it might seem.***

***In interviewing many, many men and women who knew Cooper, never once did one of them speak about him but with the highest regard. Many said that he was the most loyal person they'd ever met. One of the people told of an actress (name escapes me) whom Cooper acted with in a silent film. She was a big star and he was a nobody. She was friendly with him, gracious with her time. Came the talkies, her career went south. By 1933, she was history, wandering the studio lot, unable to get roles. So, one day she sees Cooper across the road, he was now the top Paramount star. She is ashamed, knowing that he'll never acknowledge her. So many others made sure to avoid her. So, her back turned, shoulders hunched, she scurries away, when she's brought up short by her name being called, ferociously loud. She looks over her shoulder and there's Cooper, loping across a lawn, leaping a fence, and grabbing her and swinging her high before embracing her. They spent the day together, in the commissary, wandering the lot, and though he offered to get her a part, she refused. Her career was over, her voice didn't work well on screen. But his generosity of spirit was a tonic, indeed.***

***Nice story. Nice man. Really amazing when every single person you speak with has nothing but praise for the man. Burt Lancaster was producing VERA CRUZ, Cooper was holding him up with demand after demand, right up until the weekend before production was to begin. Cooper got everything he wanted, far more than producer Lancaster had wanted to give. Lancaster later said that Gary Cooper was the single best businessman he ever dealt with. And he always said he was an even better person than businessman. Guy slams you in negotiations, and you still like him.***

(B) How do you think or in what ways will the film works, art and inspirations of the legendary Gary Cooper have an impact on emerging talents in the industry?

*Those exposed to Cooper – actors, writers, directors – will see the man who revolutionized the art of film acting. Who understood from the beginning that, in Cooper’s words, “the camera is the enemy.” You don’t give it everything, hide, let it find you, don’t go after it. Don’t reveal everything right away, take your time, underplay. The audience has a couple of hours, let your character out slowly, there’s plenty of time.*

*A telling comparison is to watch two westerns from 1929 – IN OLD ARIZONA and THE VIRGINIAN. Warner Baxter won Best Actor for IN OLD ARIZONA. Yet, his perf is embarrassingly over-the-top today, eyes rolling in sockets, arms wildly gesticulating, his laugh too energetic, in other words, the man was acting. Take a look at Cooper, same year, same genre, and even though there’s a crudeness to the movie – second year of alkies, after all – his perf is wonderful. Goes from boyish pranks to a mature man taking responsibility. But he’s never acting.*

*Karl Malden likes to tell when he did THE HANGING TREE opposite Cooper. He did his first scene with Cooper – now, Malden was stage trained, actor’s studio, a “real” actor –but he came off the set, muttering to himself. He’d learned something many another actor had learned – you can’t overact Cooper, you can’t underact him, all you can do is say your lines and get out of his way. But Malden also learned something else about Cooper, who produced THE HANGING TREE through his own company. Malden’s contract called for him to be billed below the title. But Cooper had his name elevated to above the title, up there with Cooper and Maria Schell. Malden said that sort of behavior is rare, indeed.*

Q3. As an expert on his life and works, what lessons or stories do you think Cooper would want you to convey/ voice to emerging talents.

*Life’s short. Live it.*

*Jack Hemingway called Cooper a one-handed actor. Didn’t mean that he only gave a part of himself to acting, but that he had so many interests beyond acting. He was curious about everything, never stopped learning. He was an amateur astronomer, amateur taxidermist, could take a car apart and put it back together, including the engine, an artist, photographer, hunter, fisherman, horseman, art aficionado, student of the west, etc. He lived life. He was at home with the Queen of England, the Premier of Russia, Pablo Picasso, as he was with the cowboys and grips and workers he hung out with*

Q4. Your upcoming documentary: *Cooper & Hemingway: The True Gen*. Is yet another contribution to the continuation and resurrection of Cooper’s legacy for audiences of the younger generation. What would you say are some of your most memorable experiences/ moments in producing the documentary?

*Finishing it?*

*Not sure how to answer this. Would like to think it will encourage the young who see it to see Cooper’s films and read Hemingway’s stories.*