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JEFFREY HUNTER: I WAS  
ONLY A MAN  
PLAYING GOD



by April Sands

Is he too idealistic for these times?

When Jeffrey Hunter was cast as Jesus in **King of Kings**, the cynics claimed the role would jinx him. Where could he go from here?

He didn't sidestep the challenge. And it's true that since then he hasn't become the star he might be. Yet he is one of the handsomest males in Hollywood and no one denies his acting range.

Has portraying the Son of God seriously hampered his career? Did people expect him to be Christ-like off the screen? Now that he's been seen widely again in **Temple Houston**, what's ahead for him after his TV plunge in his own series? Will another success send Jeffrey Hunter soaring?

"I felt very honored and humble", he says today when reminded of his interpretation of the greatest man who ever lived. "For me it was an adventure in a positive way, and the effect has been definite.

"Making that picture was an experience I can't forget. I'd never dreamt of being considered for such an opportunity, and I prayed often to be worthy of it.

"It was filmed entirely in Spain. I looked forward to going there for six months eagerly since I'd enjoyed making several movies in Mexico before I met Dusty. She studied at the University of Mexico and speaks Spanish fluently. Ever since we married, half-a-dozen years ago, I've wanted to take her and our sons with me when I've gone out of the country to work. We share the fun of living in a foreign land as a family.

"Madrid was our home from May 1st to November 1st that year. No, it wasn't too hot because the altitude there is 3,000 feet above sea level."

They unpacked in the nicest apartment available in that capital city. Marble floors in their hallways, wood-paneled walls, huge fireplaces, and heavy, elaborately carved furniture made them conscious of a different atmosphere from California.

"It was completely furnished, we understood. We found that meant no kitchen utensils, no dishes or glasses, no linen – no bedding! Dusty and I spent our first afternoon downtown shopping for pans and plates and the other essentials we had to have. She's a wonderful homemaker, is astonishingly well-organized, so everything was running smoothly soon."

Three beaming servants pattered around as regular help.

"Before I began filming *King of Kings* we were able to fly to Mallorca for a Mediterranean beach vacation.

While in Spain on location for *King of Kings*, he spent free time touring, learning about the people.



Above. Jeff, wife Dusty, and two of his four sons.

Dusty Bartlett is Jeff's second wife. He's divorced from Barbara Rush.



In *The Man From Galveston* Jeff plays a rough riding, soft spoken attorney. He does his own riding, fighting.

“There was an electric air on our sets, but no clash of temperaments. The Spanish people who were at our sides were superbly polite. When I was meditating, or resting between scenes, everyone treated me with true courtesy.

“The famous scenes we recreated were deeply moving to me when we made them. My ‘acting method’? I looked for day to day inspiration, as I still do.

“I was an altar boy, myself, until I was fourteen. I belong to the Protestant Episcopal Church. To me, God is infinite love and understanding and forgiveness. The more I can attempt to put high standards into everyday life, the happier I am as a person.

“Our sets filled two studios in Madrid. When we filmed the Sermon on the Mount on location near the village of Chinchon, the townspeople were hired as extras. Being religious, they reacted with a certain fervor. “It’s always exciting to arouse a wholehearted response,” Jeff says honestly. “This is the big thrill in acting. But I can’t pretend I was swept away by that role. I feel that picture is the most worthwhile one I’ve made. The reviews and the letters I received afterwards saying it added to religious faith were an unforgettable satisfaction.

“But”, he repeats, “I never confuse any role with myself. To me, acting is a matter of concentration on a characterization at the time I prepare and perform *only*. I’m emotionally involved then, yes. However, I never lose sight of the fact that I am merely an actor giving what I hope is a very convincing performance.

“I had a gentleman’s agreement with the producer to give no interviews until the picture was released. That kept me silent as myself in all publicity for more than a year. I fully agreed the picture deserved a dignified treatment.

“All reporters who visited our sets were therefore kept at a distance by the production staff. People like Jack Paar were content to simply come and observe. The Spanish press automatically covered us with respect.

“There were no limitations for me otherwise. I wasn’t expected to pretend to be Christ-like away from the camera. I could go anywhere, do anything. I just behaved naturally. I was recognized frequently, but it would be sacrilegious to presume there was anything holy about me.

“Dusty and I had terrific times we recall fondly. The Spaniards are so honest, have the highest ideals, are so gracious! We attended a number of social events in Madrid that were a pleasure. We met Spanish stars and were invited to their homes. I can get by in Spanish and Italian, but I’m sorry I’ve been lazy about learning foreign languages. Dusty and I discussed everything though, and at least she knew what I meant.

“Dusty has good ideas about her clothes. While we were in Spain she had a dressmaker use vivid materials for outfits I was enthusiastic about.

“We brought this chair I’m sitting in from Madrid.”

Jeff was this direct with me in the living-room of the Hunters’ ocean front home at Santa Monica. Their two-story house has white sand, beckoning surf, and the endless horizon of the Pacific on the other side of their patio wall.

A genuine home with every comfort, it’s not a typical beach place. One wall of their rather formal, uncluttered living-room is mirrored from floor to ceiling. Against another one an intriguing gray cabinet Dusty designed rises almost to the high ceiling.

“The public knows an actor is playing a part,” Jeff maintains. “From the role of Jesus I went into *Mantrap*, a police melodrama laid in modern Los Angeles. Then I went back twenty years for *The Longest Day*. The battleground realism for that was so rough in France it was the one trip I took alone. But after that Dusty, Chris and Steele went to Manila to live with me there for the months I was a sailor in *No Man Is An Island*.

“We went to Europe again, when I filmed *Gold for the Caesars*, a new MGM movie. In it I’m another kind of man, a slave architect of 100 A.D. Supposedly it took him into the Pyrenees of Northern Spain. Actually we shot our outdoor scenes at Terni, in the wild Umbrian countryside a hundred miles north of Rome.” For this last stay abroad, Jeff leased the luxurious villa on the ancient Appian Way that Richard Burton had occupied. The catacombs of the first Christians stretched below their gardens, and glamorous Gina Lollobrigida was their neighbor.

While he was reminiscing about Rome, Dusty joined us.

She is the poised, glowing-with-health, companion wife a man like Jeff really wants. Dressing in quiet good taste, sophisticated yet unaffected, she is quickly sympathetic. The daughter of a well-to-do Iowa family with a ranch in Arizona, she met him when he was on location in Phoenix. When she moved to Los Angeles, he courted her in earnest for a year.

They were determined to be cautious about love, for both had ended a first marriage with a divorce. Each had a son of 5.

Dusty’s brown eyes are apt to have an amused sparkle since her sense of humor matches her husband’s.

“I like to travel just as much as Jeff does,” she admits.

“But many American wives don’t guess how simple shopping is for them. Supermarkets are scarce out of this country. When you’re a stranger in other lands you have to search for everything in different stores, not under one roof.

“We had a cook in Rome who didn’t arrive anymore one day. Before I could line up a replacement, I was cooking. The chicken you buy in Italy isn’t already cleaned and packaged. I didn’t mind pulling the feathers out, but cutting a head off got me!”

Jeff vows, "She's an excellent cook. Dusty is so happy in the kitchen, or planning to entertain. I'm glad she likes to give parties because we both want to be hospitable to friends."

He plays the piano well, or accompanies himself on his banjo when he sings popular songs. His musical rhythm makes her melt.

Dusty is athletic, to Jeff's joy. She rides, swims, and can skin-dive with him. This winter he's been teaching her to snow ski better. They take the boys and their sleeping bags and head for the High Sierras on week-ends.

Their oldest sons, Chris and Steele, are 11-year-old pals. Chris lives with his mother, Barbara Rush, but visits regularly. Toddie is now nearly 4, and Scott, a year old, receives equal love.

Both Jeff and Dusty are constant readers because they want to be well-informed, and they share a passionate interest in all the arts. Besides, when Jeff decided to learn to fly she charmed him by secretly taking lessons and soloing triumphantly, too.

"She can be more objective about things, while I'm apt to be emotionally fast in my response," he confesses. "But traits rub off when you're truly married. Lately Dusty's been making snap judgments and I've been weighing the pros and cons.

"Though she's more practical than I am, she'll still be as impulsive as I wish. We have trustworthy help, so she is free to say yes when I come home and suggest 'Let's fly to Las Vegas for dinner and that show we've been wanting to see there!'"

Whether he plays the most perfect man who ever lived, a psychopathic killer as he has since in a TV thriller, or a Western hero hunting criminals with a gun, Jeff is a man to admire as himself. His conduct speaks for him. His belief in the basic goodness of God keeps him from getting depressed. Success to him isn't in the superficial rewards, so he'll be reasonably happy tomorrow because he attempts to do justice to today. "If we search for the good to be detected in each experience, we find it is real," he says. "We get the strength we need by allowing ourselves to be guided by an inner awareness. There is an infinite intelligence we can contact by prayer that is available to us always. In my heart I know that when one door closes, another will open if I am ready for the next chance."

This is why Hollywood can never hurt Jeffrey Hunter! •

***Jeff stars in The Man from Galveston (WB); Gold for the Caesars (MGM).***