

C.R.'s Bobby Driscoll

Childhood fame exacted heavy toll

By Ed Gorman
Free-lance writer

The press loved it. If his screen image had been that of a punk — or "rebel" in the parlance of Hollywood in the '50s — it wouldn't have been so noteworthy.

But this was the kid whom Walt Disney himself had favored with a seven-year contract. This was the kid who had won a special Academy Award for "The Window" in 1949. This was the kid who worked with nice guys like Bing Crosby and Pat O'Brien.

Hardly a punk. Hardly a rebel.

So what was he doing smoking marijuana in the year 1957? Dwight D. Eisenhower was president, for gosh sakes, and "Father Knows Best" was reassuring its middle-class audience that blandness was its own reward.

And here was this kid — handsome, wealthy, famous — smoking his way right out of work and into serious trouble.

What was going on here?

BOBBY DRISCOLL was born in Cedar Rapids to Isabel and Cletus Driscoll. When he was a year and a half old, he moved with his parents to California. At 5, on the advice of a barber, he tested for movies. He soon debuted, with Margaret O'Brien, in a film called "Lost Angel."

He was on his way.

I had a special interest in Bobby's career. He was my first cousin.

These days, no one talks about him much, except Robert Blake who brings him up occasionally on the "Tonight" show. They were friends of a special kind, having endured the perils of child stardom. Blake survived those perils; Bobby didn't.

The big years for Bobby were 1947-1954. Walt Disney had put him under contract and proceeded to make him the hottest child actor of the era. From the time he was 10 until he was 16, Bobby appeared in such films as "Song of the South," "So Dear to My Heart" and "Treasure Island," in which he played young Jim Hawkins.

Even the critics — not predisposed to the charms of kid actors — found Bobby's work estimable. "The Window" — for which he received a miniature Oscar — was a role most adult actors would have a difficult time with. The story of a young boy who witnesses a murder and tries to convince his disbelieving elders of what he has seen, the film offered incontrovertible proof that Bobby was capable of serious craftsmanship.

As did his voiceover role of "Peter Pan" in what has become one of Disney's enduring moneymakers.

If you'd have had to bet on which child actors would go on to adult stardom, you'd have put your money on Bobby.

ONE DAY I wore a special coat to school. I was in sixth grade and not known for my humility. The coat I wore had been sent from California. Bobby had outgrown it. Now, it was mine.

I gave the kids I ran with a tour of the coat, pointing out the magic that accrued from wearing the clothes of somebody who was big at the box office. I suppose I actually did believe that, that wearing his clothes — later there would be shirts, pants, jackets — gave me a shared sense of purpose with a movie star.

Of course, all of us back here had that same shared sense. The Cedar Rapids Driscolls attended Bobby's movies as devoutly as they attended mass. And wished him endless luck. I don't recall a single envious word ever being uttered about him. He was our talisman, our family pride. Celebrity had enhanced him but not spoiled him, due, I think now, to the reasonableness of his parents. They did not buy the Hollywood line.

I KEPT THE newspaper photo in my billfold for a long time. It showed Bobby, now 23, walking down the corridor of a county jail. He might have been James Dean in "Rebel Without A Cause." The year was 1962. He had been busted for possession of heroin. He was sent to Chino State Penitentiary as a drug addict.

The Disney contract had lapsed six years earlier. Disney's market had shifted — the spires of Disneyland taking precedence over the movies — and there was no work for Disney's stable of child actors.

A 1959 bust for marijuana had developed into this bust — much more serious — for junk. His career was all over.

Today, of course, we're more tolerant of addicts. Rock stardom — at least according to its own press — is rife with them. Even presidential aides have been accused of dabbling in lesser forms of dope.

In 1962, however, proximity to hard drugs was the equivalent of practicing black magic.

Bobby paid the price.

YOU HAVE TO HEAR Robert Blake's rap about his own troubles to have any notion of what my cousin went through. Maybe it's the telling rather than the details but whatever, Blake gives you a lucid sense of growing up famous and watching it all end about the time you reach young manhood.

James T. Farrell got the emotions — in a different context — down forever in "Studs Lonigan." The craziness. The fear. The death-fixation.

You hurt like millions of other young men but you hurt in a special way because you've been there — "Ladies and gentlemen, Bobby Driscoll!" — and they won't let you go back.

New York City six years later: The work has not been much. A version of "Ah, Wilderness" on the stage. A throwaway movie called "The Partycrashers" with Connie Stevens (which nonetheless earned him a good review in "Variety"). Radio bits here and there.

THERE ARE EVEN children, three of them from an early marriage that ended in divorce.

He is 31, Bobby Driscoll, and hustling again. He has done the one thing people did not think he could do. He has kicked junk completely. It is 1968 and drugs are chic now. Ironically.

He has been clean for several years and dreaming the old dreams again. Of what was. Of what could be again. Clean.

But the work is not sufficient. Nor is merely hustling.

When they find his body it is in a deserted tenement. Impoverished.

The policeman at the scene writes in his notes: "Young fully dressed white male lying on the cot. Religious memorabilia scattered around. No notes."

Even when they finally figure out who he is, almost nobody pays attention. Just another who died anonymously.

A FEW WEEKS AGO I saw "Song of The South" in a local theater. Bobby was 10 when it was made.

Seeing the film reminded me of one of his visits back here, maybe in 1954.

All of us went to the Marion swimming pool. The girls at the pool knew who he was, of course. How they grinned. It was a movie sequence.

The loudspeaker announced his presence while he was under water. Yet he shot straight up and hoisted himself to the concrete.

Smiled, waved. The immemorial smile and wave of the famous. As JFK smiled and waved in the motorcade. As James Dean smiled and waved at Grauman's the night before his final trip.

It made no sense to me, then. Why he wouldn't just keep on swimming. His fans should perform for him, not he for them.

Ten years later I read William Saroyan's Hollywood novel "Rock Wagram" and then I understood. Too well.

Fame is a road, Saroyan says: It makes you run fast and then it runs out; and you are left to run on alone in darkness.

That day at the Marion pool, Bobby was running.

And in the theater the other night, watching "Song of the South," I was running, too. Right behind him. Waving my arms and yelling.

Trying to warn him about the road and the darkness just ahead.

But he didn't hear.

Up there on the screen, he just kept smiling his Disney smile.



Bobby Driscoll and his parents, Isabel and Cletus Driscoll.

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