



# NEVILLE BRAND

**Remember Me...**

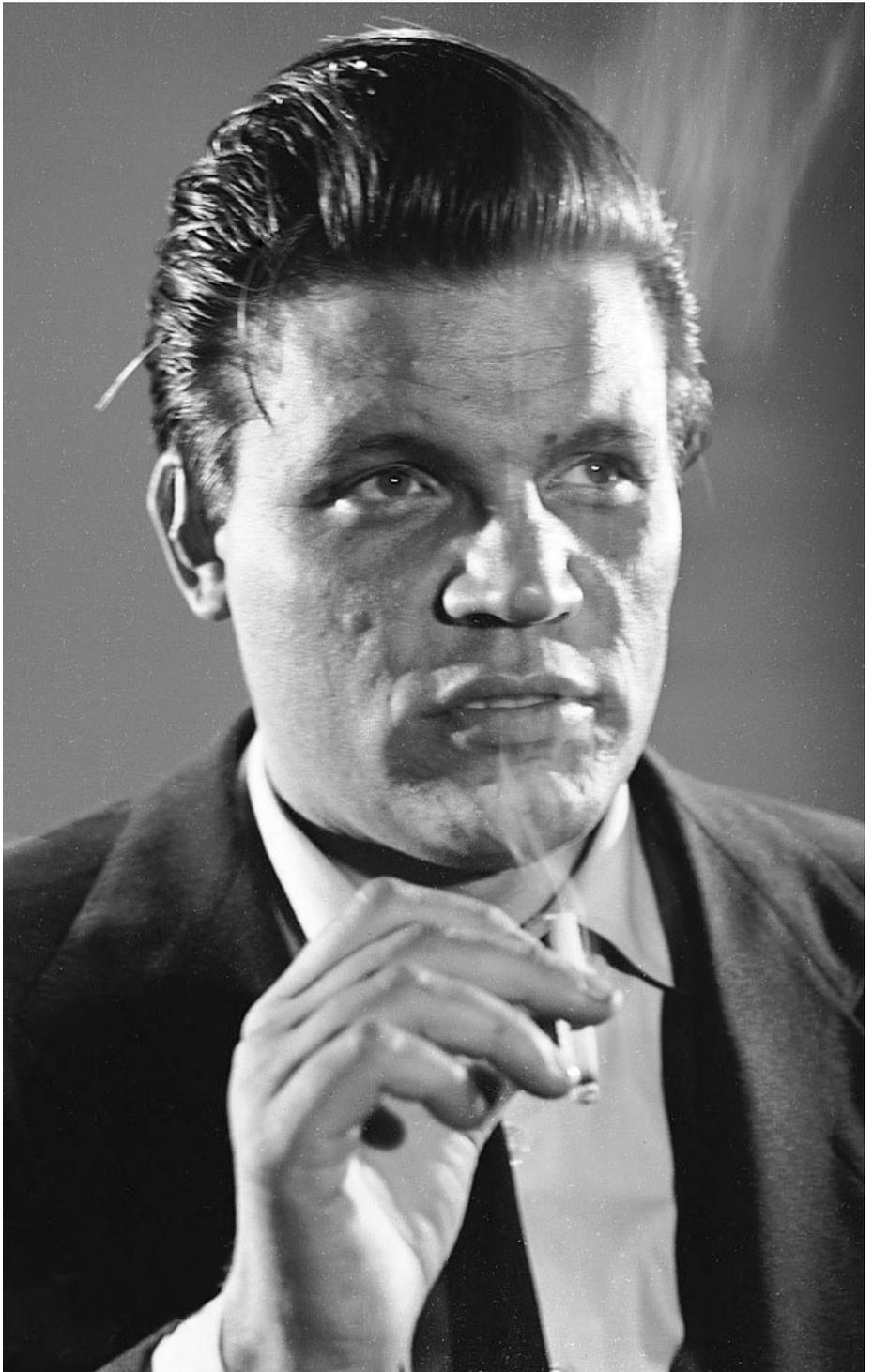
**Carol Saint Martin**

**H**is face had the texture of sandpaper, his voice the rumble of gravel. Neville Brand walked on noir's wild side, never too far from either end of a gun. Brand's brand was a demonic scowl occasionally lightened by a perverse smirk—and he darkened every frame of film in which he appeared.

The eldest of seven children, Neville Brand was born in Griswold, Iowa, on August 13, 1920, to Leo Thomas Brand and Helen Louise Davis. When he was seven years old, his family moved to Kewanee, Illinois, where he spent most of his childhood and teenage years. After his parents' divorce a few years later, he helped to support his family with several odd jobs, such as soda jerk, shoe salesman, and waiter. In 1939, he entered the Illinois Army National Guard before enlisting in the United States Army in 1941. Although sources differ as to whether or not he was the fourth most decorated soldier in World War II, he did receive a number of awards, including the Silver Star for gallantry in combat. After his unit came under attack from German machine guns located inside a hunting lodge, he bravely entered the lodge through a backdoor and single-handedly dispatched the enemy. "I must have flipped my lid," he later said in an interview.

A few months later, in April 1945, he was wounded in action and almost bled to death after being shot in the right arm. "I knew I was dying. It was a lovely feeling, like being half-loaded," Brand recalled. After being rescued and treated, he was honorably discharged as a staff sergeant from the United States Army. A highly decorated soldier, he also received the Purple Heart, the American Defense Service Ribbon, the European/African/Middle Eastern Theater Ribbon with three Battle Stars and the Good Conduct Medal. After his discharge, he appeared in a U.S. Army Signal Corps film with future star Charlton Heston, something that would change the course of his life forever.

He enrolled in the American Theater Wing in New York City under the GI Bill and began





Brand X: a very cross Neville Brand plans to cross out a dying Edmond O'Brien in *D.O.A.*

appearing in numerous off-Broadway plays, including Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Victors*. Three years later, he moved to California and enrolled in the Geller Drama School. After uncredited appearances in *Battleground* (1949), *My Foolish Heart* (1949), and *Port of New York* (1949), he made his film noir debut in Rudolph Mate's *D.O.A.* (1950) playing Chester, a crazy-eyed henchman, described by his boss as a psychopath who is "unhappy unless he gives pain." With his malicious grin and tough-guy talk, he taunts and terrorizes a dying Frank Bigelow (Edmond O'Brien), whom he has been hired to kill for knowing too much. As Chester, Brand owns some of the film's most unnerving scenes: jumping from behind a door with gun in hand, driving himself and Bigelow to a messy showdown, predaciously prowling the picture's dark city backdrops. Brand seems to savor every torturous turn, making *D.O.A.* one of noir's most thrilling and satisfying entries.

That same year, Brand went uncredited twice more: as one of Gary Merrill's vicious underlings in *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950) and as Barbara Payton's ill-fated brother in *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* (1950). He was perfectly cast as the appropriately named hoodlum Gunner in *The Mob* (1951), cruelly badgering undercover cop Johnny Damico (Broderick Crawford) with a loaded gun and a stream of facial slaps. Brand had found his niche in noir.

Several career defining performances would follow. Brand is the hot-headed, gum-chewing, gun-crazy Boyd Kane in Phil Karlson's heist thriller *Kansas City Confidential* (1952). Kane is the twitchiest in a trio of bank robbers that includes the skeevey Pete Harris (Jack Elam) and the greedy Tony Romano (Lee Van Cleef). As Kane, Brand veers in and out of control, delivering a masterfully modulated

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portrayal. Hiding his eyes beneath a pair of shades, Kane barely conceals his psychosis as the audience awaits the inevitable explosion of his volcanic temper. Brand worked with director William Dieterle in *The Turning Point* (1952), enjoying a brief-but-intense few minutes as cold-blooded killer Red, who has been hired to get rid of Jerry McKibben (William Holden) at a boxing match in the film's heart-wrenching climax.

Brand is provided with top billing and a wide emotional berth in Don Siegel's definitive prison noir *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954). As rebellious prisoner James Dunn, Brand stretches his acting chops, playing an inherently decent man who sparks a riot after reasonable discourse fails to alter the inhumane conditions of the prison in which he's incarcerated. Smart, violent, and impulsive, Dunn is



Thrill killers Lee Van Cleef and Neville Brand put a stare and a scare into a hapless victim in *Kansas City Confidential*



Rebellious inmates Neville Brand (left) and Dabbs Greer (right) freeze Paul Frees in his tracks in *Riot in Cell Block 11*

determined to voice his fellow prisoners' demands to the press and the public. He's a quintessential antihero, and Brand rightly received a BAFTA nomination for his performance.

Brand was too skilled an actor to be confined to any one genre. He was Duke, the angriest prisoner in Billy Wilder's POW drama *Stalag 17* (1953). In *Love Me Tender* (1956), he played Mike Gavin, earning audience hatred as the only character to kill off Elvis Presley onscreen. Brand became the first actor to play Butch Cassidy in the Western *The Three Outlaws* (1956). In 1958, he won the prestigious Sylvania Award for what the *New York Times* called a "tremendously effective" performance as Willie Stark in the TV adaptation of *All The King's Men*. Beginning in 1959, Brand endeared himself to a legion of baby boomers as Al Capone in TV's *The Untouchables*, one of his most memorable roles. In 1962, he played Bull Ransom, the compassionate prison guard with whom Robert Stroud (Burt Lancaster) strikes up an unlikely friendship in *Birdman of Alcatraz*. From 1965 to 1967, he played heroic Texas ranger Reese Bennett in the television show *Laredo*.

After a series of diverse performances in film and television, Brand retired in 1985. He was married three times, had four children, and was known to be an extremely avid reader having owned

one of the biggest private libraries in Hollywood (over five-thousand books), most of which were destroyed in a 1978 fire. On April 16, 1992, Neville Brand died from emphysema at age 71 in Sacramento, California. Arguably the greatest of all film noir reprobates, Neville Brand was as essential to the genre as dark alleyways, seedy joints, and shattered dreams. Brand excelled in villainous roles, but he was much more than just a tough-talking, heartless hoodlum. He endowed even his most vicious characters with humanity and dimension. "I don't go in thinking he's a villain," Brand once said of his roles. "The audience might, but the villain doesn't think he's a villain. Even a killer condones what he's done. I just create this human being under the circumstances that are given. I don't think he's a villain. Everybody just condones his own actions." It's an outlook Brand embraced as he walked through the shadows of film noir, firing gats, throwing punches, stealing scenes, and enjoying every last second. ■