

50 MPH: EPISODE 15

“A DENNIS HOPPER APPRECIATION” (with Mark Harris)

Transcript (01:02:57)



KRIS TAPLEY

This is *50 MPH*!

[INTRO MUSIC]

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Pop quiz, hotshot!

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

There’s a bomb on a bus.

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)

You’re deeply nuts, you know that?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Once the bus goes fifty miles an hour, the bomb is armed.

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

Stay on or get off?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

If it drops below fifty...

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

Stay on or get off?!

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

...it blows up.

ALAN RUCK (as “Stephens”)

Oh, darn.

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

What do you do?

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

You have a hair trigger aimed at your head. What do you do?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

What do you do?!

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

What do you do?

KRIS TAPLEY

I’m your host, Kris Tapley, and you’re listening to an oral history of director Jan de Bont’s 1994 summer blockbuster, *Speed*, straight from the people who made it happen. Now, don’t forget to fasten your seatbelts. Let’s hit the road!

KRIS TAPLEY

Welcome back to another episode of *50 MPH* and yet another detour today. In the last episode, *Speed* finally has a bad guy, two weeks into shooting. After just about everyone with a pulse turned down the role of Howard Payne, an ex-bomb squad police officer holding a city bus full of passengers for ransom, the production has landed an American icon in the role of Dennis Hopper. And if anyone involved with this movie deserves a sort of sidebar treatment, it's him. And I couldn't think of anyone better to come on and speak to Hopper's place in cinema history and what he brings to a movie like *Speed* than author, journalist and film historian Mark Harris. So, Mark, first of all, thank you for being here.

MARK HARRIS

Thanks for having me, Kris.

KRIS TAPLEY

Mark was sort of center stage for much of the fodder that this podcast trades in in his post as a columnist and editor at *Entertainment Weekly* in the '90s and he's been a contributor to *Vanity Fair*, *New York Magazine*, *Grantland*, countless outlets. Most importantly, he's the author of a number of must-read books about the film business and its participants, most recently, the biography *Mike Nichols: A Life*, and perhaps most notably for these proceedings, *Pictures at a Revolution*, which examined the birth of the New Hollywood through the lens of the films of 1967. And what better segue to our guy today than that? And you know, before I dig in to Dennis Hopper here, Mark, I want to know, did you ever meet him and interview him?

MARK HARRIS

No, I definitely never interviewed him. I am not sure if I met him or not. I could have, but if I did, it was very much in passing.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, he walked past me at a screening one time. That's all I got

MARK HARRIS

That would be about it, yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

I'm so bummed. It's like, it's my biggest regret in this entire pursuit is that I can't interview Dennis Hopper. He passed away in 2010 at the age of 74. And I just want to knock out some requisite bio information real quick. Dennis was born May 17, 1936, which makes him a Taurus. For some reason, I've been throwing out the astrological signs on this. So, Hopper's a Taurus. He was born smack dab in the middle of the country, in Dodge City, Kansas. And, you know, there was this quote, that I saw from him. He was on Carson in '91. It was the only time he ever did *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, I think. And Carson asked him, "What got you into acting?" And he said, "Well, I was a farm boy from Kansas and I wanted to know where all the trains were going." And I think he probably said that a couple of times over the years, but that just speaks to me. Like, I don't know. I love that. Like, he couldn't be contained. He wanted to know what was out there, and he said movies were an escape for him, too, being in the Dust Bowl. So, indeed, he was drawn to acting in high school in the mid-1950s. He went under contract to Warner Bros. at 18 years old and he appeared in films with James Dean right out of the gate in *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Giant*. I mean, what a way to start. He was in John Sturgis' *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* in 1957 and then he did a film called *From Hell to Texas*, and this is where I want to bring you in, if you might know more about this. It seems like a myth. Maybe it's not. The story goes that he and Henry Hathaway, the director, clashed, and it was so bad that Dennis basically forced 80 takes out of the guy, and Hathaway said at the end of all of that, like, "You're never going to work in Hollywood again." And he was blacklisted for a bit. Have you heard this story? Do you know more about that?

MARK HARRIS

I don't know more about it. It's one of those great, sort of, Hollywood career stories and I think the only part of it that I don't entirely trust is the number 80, which, it feels like Henry Hathaway's spirit or at least patience would have broken long before 80, but it's a great story because, you know, as Nora Ephron once wrote in one of her scripts, it may not be true, but it feels true. It feels like Dennis Hopper pushing against a kind of just rote, automatic, "let's get it done, this is just product," kind of sensibility, and bringing, you know, what would later come to be known as his signature intensity to, you know, this little bit of a throwaway, you know?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

MARK HARRIS

Workday or movie or whatever.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, totally. I also don't know if there was 80 takes of anything back then. I mean, that's-

MARK HARRIS

Right. I mean, take three was a real rarity. But, you know, those stories exist for a reason, and it's to convey something both about who he was and what he was working with, and what he was working against, you know?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

MARK HARRIS

You know, it's funny, in preparing for this, of course, the first place I went was to IMDb. And I hate starting that way, because I feel like it's the same thing as starting an essay saying, you know, "Webster's Dictionary defines Dennis Hopper as," but he has over 200 credits. I mean, that really shocked me. And I think, once you look at those credits, it's a really interesting indication of how many worlds – even by that point, by the time of this head-on confrontation with Henry Hathaway – how many different worlds he lived in, because the guy was just – I mean, above everything else, he was a working actor. He wasn't only sort of an old Hollywood trainee. He wasn't only a product of the New Hollywood. He was – we'll get to that, but he was already over 30 by the time, you know, "don't trust anyone over 30" kicked in. I mean, I think what's really stunning to me is just his work ethic. From the very beginning, this guy worked all the time. There's barely a TV series from the 1950s or early-1960s, from, you know, Gunsmoke to Petticoat Junction that he didn't, you know, do a week on.

KRIS TAPLEY

Absolutely. I mean, he clearly was in love with the form, and I'm fascinated by the fact that he does have a foot in kind of two eras. To your point you were making there, I mean, we'll get to that, but just – he's part of this transition in such a fascinating way. After this incident with Hathaway he went on to the Actor's Studio, trained with Lee Strasberg there. His first lead role – have you ever seen *Night Tide*? Curtis Harrington?

MARK HARRIS

Yes.

KRIS TAPLEY

What a weird movie.

MARK HARRIS

A really weird movie. It's one of those things where you realize that studios and production companies made so many movies back then, there was such an incredible need for product, that every once in a while, some oddball thing could sneak through, you know? *Night Tide* definitely does not – well, you talk about it a little bit – but it doesn't feel like a movie that went through a committee of people saying, "you have to do this, you have to do that."

KRIS TAPLEY

No. And I don't have a lot to say about it. It's just – it's like a fever dream when you watch this movie. The coloring the way – just, the photography is very strange. He plays a sailor on leave and he meets this girl who is performing as a mermaid and I guess thinks she's really a mermaid. It's a very strange movie. I mean, it's got, like, *Nightmare Alley* vibes almost.

MARK HARRIS

I was going to say, from that description, it sounds like you're describing, like, a Del Toro movie, you know?

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally. He should remake it. I mean, it's wild. But that was his first leading role. And it's in this period where he's kind of on the outs in the industry, you know? And he says – he credits John Wayne with saving his career in this period, because he convinced Hathaway to bring him on to *The Sons of Katie Elder*, and then they did *True Grit* together as well. And the story goes, it was basically because he was married to Brooke Hayward, who was actress Margaret Sullivan's daughter, and so Henry Hathaway was like, “You married a good Irish woman's daughter and you're a good actor, so we'll hire you.”

MARK HARRIS

Right and then, like – so he's literally a son, or a son-in-law, of Old Hollywood. Like, his roots go deep.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

MARK HARRIS

And it's interesting because if you see him in some of the early stuff that we're talking about, he's handsome. You can see why he got work. But he's not movie-star handsome. He's not, like – you don't look at him and automatically think, “Oh, this guy's going to be, you know, a leading man for his entire career, for sure.” He's a little, just, odder and more interesting than he is conventionally handsome, and that often, you know, in the history of Hollywood, means you're going to have a much more interesting career than if you were just a straight-up, you know, poster boy.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, like, he's not James Dean. He's the guy that gets in a fight with James Dean.

MARK HARRIS

Right. Right. A little dark, a little scary, maybe a little haunted, a little brooding. But he might be more the guy who wants to get the girl than the guy who gets the girl.

KRIS TAPLEY

Right. And this relationship with John Wayne is fascinating to me. It almost seems like fodder for a book if you're looking to add anything else to your till of projects. Because, you know, Dennis was really into the method. Wayne hated the method – method acting – and they clashed over stuff like that. But also, there's a story about how Wayne, like, wanted to kill him because he was like, "Where's that Commie bastard?" Because he was mad that his daughter – John Wayne's daughter – had heard a Stokely Carmichael speech at UCLA. And Alex Cox wrote something like, "Yeah, John Wayne basically blamed Dennis Hopper for the '60s." Which I just think is hilarious. I mean, it's just this fascinating relationship, and that they worked together a couple of times. And this is that foot in that older Hollywood. And when you see Dennis Hopper in *True Grit*, that's a completely different way to go about whatever he's doing in that movie opposite John Wayne. It's like, the clash is fascinating in such a great way.

MARK HARRIS

Right. It's almost like Hopper is bilingual. I mean, it's like, he one of the very few American movie actors who you can say represents something both about the rebellion of the 1950s and about the rebellion of the 1960s, and yet, at the same time, throughout both decades, he's doing, like, the oldest form of moviemaking, like, westerns. You know, you didn't get much more reactionary than late-1960s westerns, and *True Grit*, I mean, it's based on – you know, it's a really good movie. It's based on a novel by a great writer. But it's not, it's not, like, an anti-western. It's not like one of those sort of dark revisionist westerns that would come along in something like, you know, *Bad Company*, just a couple of years later. It's John Wayne. The unusual part of it is that Wayne is playing kind of old and worn-out and, you know, but it's a western, you know? It's a straight-up western that speaks a language that movies have been speaking for, like, 40 years by that point. And there's Dennis Hopper understanding, really well, how to adapt himself to that form. And, you know, I say that because, you know, I think when you say the name Dennis Hopper, no matter what role you flash on first, and I think there's one that people jump to pretty quickly in the 1980s, the first thing you think is kind of, like, crazy rebel or dangerous guy, and so it's an interesting counterweight to that, that he really was, like, a working actor who didn't suddenly emerge in the mid- or late-1960s, but had just, like, you know, been training and studying and also working and working and working, you know, for at least a decade before people really started to know who he was.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. And we haven't even gotten to – now we do – *Easy Rider*, which would be the film he would direct and he got an Oscar nomination for screenplay with Peter Fonda and Terry Southern. So, what's the significance of this film? I just – it's an obvious answer, but I just want to hear you say it.

MARK HARRIS

Well, you know, we were just talking about *True Grit*, and *Easy Rider* came out the same year. And it's one of those movies where you can see in a single movie the switchover from old to new. I mean, you know, it's this – people referred to it then as a

hippie movie, you know, a movie about a sort of road trip into the west, into the wild, where, you know, ideas about the greatness of America kind of get dismantled along the way instead of, you know, enhanced. It sort of borrows the physical landscape of westerns to do something really, really different. And, you know, the interesting – I think it's a really good introduction to Dennis Hopper, in a way, because it's not an out-of-control movie. It's a movie that simulates out-of-control-ness and it's not a movie made by kids. Dennis Hopper was young, but he was 32 or 33 when it came out. So, he wasn't the generation that was 19 or 20 in 1969, you know, the emerging hippie generation. He was someone who had been around long enough and seen enough to bring a little bit of perspective to things. And, you know, part of *Easy Rider* is that, you know – the idea that even the ideals of a younger generation are not invulnerable to, you know, getting screwed up and crashing. So, you know, in a strange way, it's a controlled movie. Like, he knows what he wants to do with it. It's not just this kind of slap-dash, crazy, "let's make a movie" thing, even though there are aspects of it that are, you know, on-the-fly and they didn't spend a ton of money on it or a ton of time on it or anything, because they didn't have a ton of money or a ton of time. But it's not casual. It's a movie that's carefully made to feel casual, and I think there's something about the essence of Dennis Hopper in that, in that, you know, when we get into his later performances, you get to, like, crazy, out-of-control villain work a lot of the time, and yet, you know, those characters are in the hands of someone who really understands acting and really understands what the camera does and how a face relates to the camera and how to use your face and your voice and your body and your pitch and your attitude to create the effect that you want to create on screen.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it's that whole thing about knowing what the rules are to know how to break them. And I think there's part of that in there. But, yeah, there's – I think it was a review or something, someone said that no one embodies the lost idealism of the '60s more than Dennis Hopper, when they were writing about *Easy Rider*. And I think that says it.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, that's a lovely line. Because, you know, he – Dennis Hopper always looks like he lost something, you know? Something that he's not going to tell you. As soon as he gets to be, like, you know, 35 or 40, but not older than that, there's, like – so many of his roles just convey, almost outside of the text, sometimes – the fact that he's been through it, you know? That there's history there.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. I guess the opposite of control, maybe, *The Last Movie*, which would be his next film, 1971. A total disaster. I don't know that I've ever made it through it all the way. It's a – talk about a fever dream. I mean, it's – would you like to take a stab at this? I mean, it's-

MARK HARRIS

Oof. I mean, I'm not sure that I've made it all the way through. You know, the catastrophes of the late-60s and early-70s, in terms of moviemaking were really, like,

loud catastrophes. Like, this was not a subtle – I mean, I feel like I've just tried to make a case that *Easy Rider* is carefully constructed to sort of feel off-the-rails sometimes. *The Last Movie* is off the rails.

KRIS TAPLEY

Right. It killed his momentum. I mean, it's, like, exactly the moment when he needed to launch after *Easy Rider*, and this movie happened. And for a guy who was already, sort of – clearly, given his interactions with older Hollywood and stuff – like, seemed always on the verge of just being blacklisted or something, it wasn't – it didn't do him any favors.

MARK HARRIS

Right. And, you know, when we talk about this transition from the Old Hollywood to the New Hollywood, I think it's important to remember that the Old Hollywood did not vanish. It turned into something different starting in the late-1960s and the early-70s, but Old Hollywood was, like, *Airport*, you know? I mean, there were big kind of establishment Hollywood movies throughout the '70s that still represented the kind of strong, controlling hand of movie studios, as opposed to the individual vision of directors, and they weren't done under the literal studio system that had existed before then, but they were still, you know – *Airport*, which was a huge hit in 1970, is a producer's and a studio's movie much more than it is obviously a director or a writer or an actor's movie, although there are some very good actors in it. And I bring that movie up because that kind of created a new template for what non-New Hollywood movies of the '70s could be. And those – if you want to think about, like, the *Airport* faction of Hollywood at that time, that faction was very happy to see someone like Dennis Hopper fail with something like *The Last Movie*, because the rap on those guys from Old Hollywood was, “They don't know what they're doing. They're all attitude, but no discipline. So, they're not going to make it unless they allow themselves to be eventually put in harness to how movies are made.” And something like *The Last Movie*, which really does feel out of control, that was kind of like the proof, in a lot of ways, that Old Hollywood was looking for, that guys like Dennis Hopper just couldn't cut it, you know, as directors or as filmmakers.

KRIS TAPLEY

I pulled up the plot, just because it's hard for me to put into words. This is going to make it sound a lot better than it is, but *The Last Movie: Kansas* – Dennis Hopper's name – is a stunt coordinator in charge of horses on a western being shot in a small Peruvian village. Following a tragic incident on the set where an actor is killed in a stunt, he decides to quit the movie business and stay in Peru with a local woman. He thinks he has found paradise but is soon called in to help in a bizarre incident. The Peruvian natives are, quote, “filming” their own movie with, quote, “cameras” made of sticks and acting out real western movie violence as they don't understand movie fakery. Sounds awesome!

MARK HARRIS

That is all, like, technically true, and yet, it suggests a kind of linearity that will not be your experience. You hear that and you think, “Oh, this is like kind of an American Werner Herzog movie or something.”

KRIS TAPLEY

Exactly, right? Sounds like *Fitzcarraldo* gone well, but not at all. Yeah. And then throughout the '70s, a bunch of movies I haven't seen frankly, *Crush Proof*, *Kid Blue*, *Bloodbath*, *Tracks*, *Mad Dog Morgan*. Have you seen these?

MARK HARRIS

No, I really haven't seen most of them. But what that tells you is he didn't disappear. Like, there's that work ethic kicking in, you know? He went where the jobs were. He wasn't a '60s casualty. You know, his career, as you said, absolutely took a big dip in the '70s. But it's not one of those dips that results in a huge gap in the resume, which you often see with guys like that. He mostly kept working, even if it was on really undistinguished material or really not very interesting roles. There is this kind of born-in-the-Depression, Midwestern work ethic that, you know, that kicks in. You're an actor. You act. You go get the jobs you can get and you do it. Then you go on to the next thing.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. And I have seen – I imagine you have, too – *The American Friend*, Wim Wenders, which is a fantastic movie, based on Ripley's Game, the Highsmith novel. Him and Bruno Ganz.

MARK HARRIS

And that's maybe where it begins to turn for Dennis Hopper a little bit, because it's – even though he is the most unlikely Tom Ripley of anyone who has ever played Tom Ripley, like, he is nothing like Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley, but *The American Friend* is nothing like a Ripley novel. Still, like, whatever you can say about it as an adaptation, on its own, it's a really interesting, compelling movie, and this isn't a five-minute part. This is a really, really substantial role, obviously. He's Ripley and, you know, working for Wim Wenders. That kind of director he probably had not worked with before. So, I think that was probably – that movie was the first time in a number of years where people could go, even if it was only an art-house audience, and say, “Oh, Dennis Hopper. There's Dennis Hopper. I haven't seen him in a while.” Because they probably hadn't seen him in a lot of these littler movies that he had made in the '70s before then. *American Friend* was, like, '77, I think?

KRIS TAPLEY

'77, yeah. And what's interesting, too – I like that, you know, Wenders hired him, and then he decided, since he's got a director in one role, he's going to hire Nicholas Ray for a role and Sam Fuller for a role. It's a really cool movie. And if you like Wim Wenders' movies, you know that the work of Robby Müller, the DP, is, like, a huge part of the artistry of those films and it's on fire in that way as well. I like that movie a lot.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah. And so, you see it, and you start to think, “Oh, well, maybe, like, given the company he's in, maybe this is the beginning of Dennis Hopper as some kind of icon.” Like, it's a movie that, if it was your first encounter with Dennis Hopper, I think it would encourage you to say, “Oh, that guy is really interesting and unusual. And he doesn't seem like, you know, a half a dozen other actors.” Like, you can't automatically put a bunch of other people in that role the way he plays it. So, that was probably the first time in a while that he really did something distinctive.

KRIS TAPLEY

And he probably brought a little something to it in the fact that, in the '60s, he got into photography, and he would be a photographer throughout his career and exhibit around the world and have a very keen interest in art, and that plays an interesting role in the kind of character that he's playing in the film, too, so.

MARK HARRIS

Ripley has to be like a little bit seductive, a little bit gentle, and this is the most sort of macho, least sexually ambiguous Ripley you're ever going to see. But it's still – it's not, you know, a straight-up tough-guy leading man part at all. It is, as you said, in this world. It's set in the art world, and Hopper is very elegant in it. Even the way he kind of moves and sits. I mean, he's playing a guy who, as you know if you've ever seen any Ripley movie or read the novels, is largely self-created. And even though *The American Friend* doesn't get too deeply into that, you can tell that Hopper had it in his head, that he knew he wanted to do something with that.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, definitely. And the relationship between him and Bruno Ganz is interesting, unusual. There's something to it. Like, there's an undercurrent in the movie, I think, that really works, so.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, and when you see the movie, you think, “Oh, like, what an exactly-right pairing. Like, what a good idea to put these two guys together,” without really knowing why.

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally. A couple of more things and then *Apocalypse Now*, which, what else can be said? Just a manic, great, perfect-for-him kind of a role. Probably part of what would end up having him typecast in those kinds of roles going forward. To me, the best part about it is him and Brando clashing, because he's always clashing with somebody. Might as well clash with Brando, too.

MARK HARRIS

Right.

KRIS TAPLEY

I just love that. And you get a load of all of this in *Hearts of Darkness*, the making-of documentary of *Apocalypse Now*. But, boy, huge spark plug in that movie, to say the least.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, and it's also interesting because he's, like – he's gone from making movies in the late-1960s to making one of the first period pieces about that period. I mean, *Apocalypse Now* is '79, so it's a little bit of a look back, you know? And you get to enjoy the era-specific wild-man authenticity that Hopper brings to that part. And, you know, he's not – if he's an out-of-control element in *Apocalypse Now*, we now know that there are so many out-of-control elements in that movie that he's by no means the first one, so.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's like, *Apocalypse Now* might as well have included Dennis Hopper in its cast. And after this he does *Out of the Blue*, which is – he steps into the role of director here because the original director, I don't actually know the circumstances, but he just took over this movie and kind of reshaped it. I've never seen it. It was not easy to find for a while, but there was a big restoration that screened at the Venice Film Festival in 2019. Have you seen *Out of the Blue*?

MARK HARRIS

I've seen it, but for a really long time. Yeah. Do you know the director was who he replaced?

KRIS TAPLEY

Leonard Yakir.

MARK HARRIS

OK.

KRIS TAPLEY

If I'm saying the name right. But, yeah, he stepped in for him, and from what I read briefly, kind of changed the movie drastically and made it a better movie as a result, a more interesting movie. But, again, I haven't seen it. But the Blu-ray is on the way to my house right now.

MARK HARRIS

Alright.

KRIS TAPLEY

Now we're in the '80s, though, and we're going to come on to some iconic stuff for him, I guess. But *Rumble Fish*, you know, he comes back to work with Coppola again on *Rumble Fish*, which is a fantastic, fascinating movie. I think Hopper is a guy that's always going to be, or always was going to be, drawn to the avant-garde, and this is

certainly that. And it kind of felt like, in that way, him and Coppola were meant for each other, because Coppola was – even still, I mean, he's on his own trip with how he wants to make movies and how he wants to operate in the business, you know?

MARK HARRIS

Right, and, you know, when *Rumble Fish* came out, it was sort of billed as, like, the back half of the double bill that started with *The Outsiders*. I mean, those two movies were very – they're both you know, S.E. Hinton adaptations and they share a lot of DNA and they're very paired in people's minds, but *The Outsiders* was a somewhat more conventional, not a Brat Pack movie but Brat Pack adjacent. An easier story to give to audiences. And *Rumble Fish*, it's black and white. It's much more artistic. It feels like Coppola, really, not being self-indulgent, but indulging his appetite to do something strange in a way that he did not necessarily indulge it on *The Outsiders*, and so, there's Dennis Hopper.

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally. And, might as well. Yeah, exactly. I mean, I like that movie. I haven't seen it in a while, but I like that movie a lot.

MARK HARRIS

And by then you start to get the sense that Hopper is someone who is really interestingly elastic. Like, he's a distinctive presence, but he's also someone who, if he trusts the director, whether it's Coppola or Wim Wenders or, you know, even Henry Hathaway on *True Grit*, he's someone who's really willing to give himself over to the specific language and vision that a director is advancing in a movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

'86 is a huge year for him. He's got, like, six movies that year. He's apparently said that he never turned a role down during the stretch, and it certainly seems like it, but the big ones, obviously, are *Hoosiers*, which he was nominated for, and *Blue Velvet*, which, somehow, he was not nominated for.

MARK HARRIS

Right. This is the pivotal year in Hopper's – in the sort of making-of-the-image that Hopper would carry through the rest of his career. And yes, you're right, it's those two movies, and there was a lot of discussion at the time whether – I mean, it felt, like, pretty sure that Hopper was going to get his first acting Oscar nomination unless he canceled himself out, because he would have been considered for supporting actor for both *Blue Velvet* and *Hoosiers*. And I think people knew that it could go either way, and yet, there was still a little bit of a surprise when the way it went was *Hoosiers*, because *Hoosiers* is a nice movie. It did not have much of a release or a huge national profile, and the Oscar campaign around it, as I recall, was entirely centered on the possibility that Hopper would get nominated. Like, he was that movie's chance, whereas, with *Blue Velvet*, there was tremendous critical support for it for Best Picture on down, and there was a sense that the movie was going to be a really interesting test case for the Academy membership because, you know, there were absolutely people who were saying, “Oh,

they are not going to touch *Blue Velvet* with a 10-foot pole. I mean, it's way too weird and creepy and strange for them. They're going to completely snub David Lynch. It will not get any nominations." And so, the people who believed that, you know, they probably felt they were right when Hopper got nominated for *Hoosiers* instead. But the Academy did recognize David Lynch. I mean, they did nominate him for Best Director. So, they weren't right in that way, but I think there was a feeling in '86. The vibe around Hopper was, "Wow, he's been working for a long time and he's so good." And it's one of those kinds of magical things like when Daniel Day-Lewis arrived in *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *A Room with a View*, literally in New York on the same day. You know, there's nothing showier you can do as an actor than to kind of make this simultaneous impression in two wildly different roles. And that's one thing that Hopper did, because, of course, his role in *Hoosiers* could not be more different than his role in *Blue Velvet*. And so, – I mean, *Blue Velvet* obviously would have been a critical sensation no matter what, and Hopper certainly would have been noticed no matter what in it, but to have *Hoosiers* as well, it was the first moment when people really sort of said, "OK, we've got to take this guy really seriously. He's so impressive, and he can do so many different things."

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. And I don't actually like *Hoosiers*, by the way. Like, you watch that movie and it's, like, interspersed with the basketball stuff, it seems like Gene Hackman and – oh jeez. Beverly-

MARK HARRIS

Is it Beverly D'Angelo?

KRIS TAPLEY

No, not Beverly D'Angelo. *The Right Stuff*. Not Beverly.

MARK HARRIS

Is it Kathleen Quinlan? Was she in-

KRIS TAPLEY

Barbara Hershey.

MARK HARRIS

Oh, Barbara Hershey. Right. Sorry to forget Barbara Hershey.

KRIS TAPLEY

Sorry, Barbara.

MARK HARRIS

I love Barbara Hershey.

KRIS TAPLEY

But every time I look up, it's like, Gene Hackman and Barbara Hershey walking through the woods talking. To me, it's like, the role got the nomination more than the performance, because he plays the town drunk who kind of, like, gets a chance to be the assistant coach and there's a redemption arc. Although he has a moment of falling off the wagon, and then the character kind of disappears in the big rah-rah stretch at the end.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, I don't think that he would have gotten that nomination if *Blue Velvet* had not existed.

KRIS TAPLEY

That makes sense. It shows the range.

MARK HARRIS

Right. I mean, it put him in people's minds to consider as a serious actor, which, you know, was absolutely well-deserved. But yeah, when you go back now, if he had gotten the nomination for *Blue Velvet* instead, I don't think that would raise any eyebrows at all. I mean, you would think, "Of course." You know, an unbelievably showy role in a fantastic movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

And this year, he was also in a movie called *River's Edge*. Have you seen that?

MARK HARRIS

Yes.

KRIS TAPLEY

Wow.

MARK HARRIS

And that's another – I mean, *River's Edge* is a movie that's really, really worth seeing or revisiting if you haven't seen it in a long time. And it was just – I don't remember what his fourth, fifth and sixth movies were that year, but those three, I mean, that'd really be a career year for any actor, you know, any character actor or supporting actor. That's pretty remarkable.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, one of them was *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*. Talk about range.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, that one probably did not get a lot of Best Supporting Actor buzz.

KRIS TAPLEY

No, but *River's Edge* is interesting. People might not even just realize that is – he was in this movie with Keanu Reeves. And it's weird. The characters don't really interact. Although there is one scene where they're in the same shot. There's, like, literally a rack focus from Keanu to Dennis in the back and he's got this funny line about beer. Not about Heinekens. But they're in this movie together, and people probably forget that, because most of his interactions are with Crispin Glover in the film.

MARK HARRIS

Right. It's funny because when that happens, when there are two actors in the same movie but they don't cross over and you ask them about it later, the answer can be anything from, like, "Oh, yeah, we got to be best friends on that movie because the production took forever and we were sitting around," to, like, "Nope, never met him."

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally. Very cool movie. People should check that out if they haven't seen it. Cool might not be the word. Talk about disaffected youth. I mean, it's-

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, it's very striking. I mean, it's grim and it's striking and, you know.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. He went on to direct *Colors* with Robert Duvall and Sean Penn in '88. It's about cops in South LA. I haven't seen in a long time, but it's kind of the beginnings of a stretch of films, like, you know, *New Jack City*, *Boyz n the Hood* would come later, when actually black filmmakers were telling these stories, but-

MARK HARRIS

Right. I mean, Robert Duvall has a very, very showy, dramatic scene at the end. And one thing you get from *Colors* is probably not a surprise at all, Hopper was really good with actors.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, absolutely. And he went on to *The Hot Spot* a couple of years later. I was watching that last night because I haven't seen it in forever, and it's so weird. It's, like, sort of an elevated B movie. This hot-house noir, you know, with Don Johnson and Virginia Madsen and a young Jennifer Connelly. And I was reading – have you seen it? *The Hot Spot?*

MARK HARRIS

I vaguely remember this sort of – one of those Vestron Video-style, Venetian blind, neo-noirs.

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally. 100%. I mean, it's like, you know – there was another one later, *Palmetto*, with Woody Harrelson. Like, that kind of a movie. But it's – what I read was that Mike Figgis

had written a script called *The Hot Spot* that was, like, a heist movie. This what Don Johnson said. And then, like, three days before production, Hopper comes in with this script that was written by a guy that was adapted from an old book, that the script had originally been written for Robert Mitchum years before, and he was, like, "This is what we're going to do instead." Now, that sounds kind of crazy for something like that to happen three days before production, but this was what Don Johnson said. And so, who, knows how apocryphal it is, but point being, it seems like there's never a dull moment when Hopper is in charge, I guess, you know?

MARK HARRIS

Absolutely true. And yet, he's still doing interesting, serious prestige work. Like, I know that just a couple of years before *Speed* is *Paris Trout*. *Paris Trout* is, like, a genre that has almost been forgotten now, which is, like, the early-90s, extremely high-end, pre-streaming cable movie. But *Paris Trout* was, like, based on a really, really well-respected novel by Pete Dexter. Hopper was the star of it. It's a very dramatic, intense story. It's a villainous character, but it's really serious movie. He got an Emmy nomination, I think his only one, for the performance, and it's sort of a good benchmark of the esteem in which the industry was starting to hold him post-*Blue Velvet*.

KRIS TAPLEY

I've never seen that one, actually. Stephen Gyllenhaal, though, directed it.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, it's really, like, super well-made. You know, it's a good movie. A lot of those made-for-cable films are hard to find now, but it belongs in his filmography, you know? It's really serious, committed work.

KRIS TAPLEY

Same year, he did *The Indian Runner* with Sean Penn, which I haven't seen in ages. Sean Penn directing. We're getting close to *Speed*. There's some early-90s stuff. *Boiling Point* with Wesley Snipes. *Red Rock West*, John Dahl. Dennis Hopper is so at home in that kind of movie, I feel like.

MARK HARRIS

Right, and you can start to feel in the way that resume unfolds that, like, after *Blue Velvet*, everybody wanted him. Like, there's a whole iteration of, like, neo-noir directors or whatever that's thinking, like, "Oh, I've got to get Dennis Hopper for my movie."

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

MARK HARRIS

His career had, by that point, ascended to the point where, like, he could lend a smaller project credibility of a kind by his presence.

KRIS TAPLEY

Was he ever in a Coen brothers movie? I guess not.

MARK HARRIS

Gosh.

KRIS TAPLEY

He should have been.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, it seems like a sort of adjacent universe, you know?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. Like, there's a world where they make their first movie a few years later and they cast him instead of M. Emmet Walsh or something.

MARK HARRIS

Right.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's interesting. Before we get to *Speed*, though, in 1993, I just have to say this because *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* is making a billion dollars worldwide and everything right now. But before Jack Black, there was Dennis Hopper as Bowser, although his name was King Koopa or something in that movie, *Super Mario Bros.* Terrible, terrible movie. John Leguizamo, Bob Hoskins as the Mario brothers and, I mean, have you seen it? I imagine you did back then.

MARK HARRIS

No.

KRIS TAPLEY

You didn't see it?

MARK HARRIS

No, because that was, like – I was working at *Entertainment Weekly* then. I was in charge of movie coverage, and I guarantee you it was not even the most interesting movie of that week.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

MARK HARRIS

I'm not sure what week it came out, but whatever that week was, my mind was on some other movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it's bad. It's quite bad. And I guess maybe the first real video-game movie, in a sense, but at a time when they weren't putting money into that kind of thing.

MARK HARRIS

Right, I mean, that's probably why I didn't see it, even within the job I had, because the idea that a video-game movie would be anything but a quickly forgotten throw away. I mean, it was just, you know – that was a completely degraded idea to do a movie based on a video game in 1993, so.

KRIS TAPLEY

I'll say this much. It's not worth watching sober, but otherwise, it can be fun. Anyway, the next year, finally, here we are: *Speed*. As I said, the last episode, we talk about the kind of whirlwind casting for this. Everybody turned it down Gary Oldman. Jeff Bridges, there's a list of names. Christopher Walken was, like, a hair's breadth away from playing the role, but he wanted some time off after a film he had just shot and they needed the guy to go immediately. And they end up with Dennis Hopper, who, I think, is the best possible choice because he had played villain roles, obviously, up to this point, but nothing like this or in a movie like this. What I like to say is that there's this line in the movie where he calls Keanu Reeves a punk. It's, like, at the very – toward the very end, in the subway. He's, like, walking out of a door with Sandra Bullock held hostage and he says, "Punk." And I love that because if it's 30 years earlier, Dennis Hopper's the punk. So, it's like this passing of the punk torch to the guy who's about to be Mr. Cyberpunk and *Johnny Mnemonic* and *The Matrix* and stuff. And, I don't know, I like to say that when you are obsessed with a movie as much as I am with this one, you maybe start to see things that are not there. But I like that bit, anyway. But the point is, they're interesting foils. I mean, here's Keanu Reeves and a guy who is Mr. Method, and they just make such a dynamic pairing for a movie that needed something like that. Do you remember at the time, like, what was the vibe around Hopper being in a movie like this?

MARK HARRIS

Well, you know, I'm thinking of a whole period from, like, the late-80s to the mid-90s and remembering just, you know – which you can now look back on as a kind of time of extremely proficient, you know, like, action-suspense entertainments of which, you know, the one to which your podcast is devoted is obviously a great one. But so much hinged on whether you had a great villain and a great actor to play the villain. I mean, if you think back now, you know, Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* is still Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, but is *Die Hard*, *Die hard* without Alan Rickman? I mean, is *In the Line of Fire*, *In the Line of Fire* without John Malkovich? Like, if you got a really, really spectacular actor to do that part, the whole movie was elevated, you know? Including the heroism of your heroes or your hero and heroine. And I think Hopper, for me, was that kind of get in *Speed*. And obviously, the actors that you talked about in the previous podcast, the ones who turned it down or almost took it, I mean, you know, Christopher Walken, Gary Oldman, those were actors of a caliber.

KRIS TAPLEY

They also wanted Robert Duvall, by the way. That's somebody they really wanted.

MARK HARRIS

Right. I mean, those would have all been very, very memorable. But it's interesting that Hopper, just – you know, this is always tricky, because it's cheating, in a way, to say, “Well, in hindsight, of course, he's the only one who could have done it or he's the perfect one.” But he seems really right because, aside from the fact that he can do menace and villainy and evil, you know, in his sleep by this point, there is a kind of lightness to him. He knows that *Speed* isn't, like, this huge plunge into darkness, you know? And he just finds this way of playing the part that seems to, in some ways, speak the same language as Keanu Reeves. I mean, as different as they are as actors, Hopper really gets what the tone of *Speed* is supposed to be, and so, he is as good a villain as you could want in the movie, but he doesn't overweight it. You know, he doesn't play it the way you might think of playing a villain in a much darker and grimmer movie, you know?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, he brings a lot of energy to it that wasn't necessarily there either. You know, Joss Whedon told me that some of the lines he wrote were kind of written to be portrayed a little meekly like this, because his big pitch was, he wanted Charles Grodin to play this role, because he just wanted, like, a nerd who was kind of quiet, but clearly a psychopath, and then Dennis Hopper gets ahold of that line and it just becomes something else entirely. And so, he would really just sort of improvise tonally on set a lot and just go different places with a line. And that's what it needed. I mean, it needed that spark and he's awesome. I mean, I've always loved him in this movie. I think he's – again, he's just such an interesting foil for Keanu. He is – to go through all of those actors and then end up with him. I mean, it's just such serendipity to me, like, “Oh, well, I guess we're going to have to go with Dennis Hopper.” Like, are you kidding me? Like, that's fantastic.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, it's a really weird assignment, too, right? Playing this kind of part Because the audience has to be really rooting for you to die, preferably in some visible and horrible, applause-generating way, and yet, it also has to enjoy every minute you're on screen. You know, I don't think it's necessarily easy to do that. You can often pull off the first, with the aid of the script. It's harder to pull off the first and the second at the same time. But Hopper's really fun to watch. Like, you know, he's an inventive, interesting actor. And so, he's just a pleasure to watch in *Speed*.

KRIS TAPLEY

And he definitely goes out in an applause-generating way. I mean, my God.

MARK HARRIS

Yes, not back for the sequel.

KRIS TAPLEY

Which I've said, but I had that spoiled for me. Before I even saw the movie. A guy in baseball practice was like, "Dennis Hopper gets his head knocked off at the end." But this was before spoiler culture being a thing, so, I was just, like, even more excited to see the movie. I was like, "What? Really? I can't wait." So, anyway.

MARK HARRIS

Right. And then the next year you have *Seven*, so, I guess there's a little mid-90s beheading thing happening.

KRIS TAPLEY

Things got dark. But since we're on *Speed*, before we kind of sprint to the finish on his career, what do you have to say about that movie? I mean, not to put you on the spot, but, like, this is what I'm doing here, right? So, I'm getting people to talk about *Speed*.

MARK HARRIS

Speed?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

MARK HARRIS

Oh, gosh, you know, I love *Speed*. I mean, I was on, you know, another podcast, Screen Drafts, a while ago, and we were – a couple of us were picking the best – I think the topic we had was pick, like, the seven best directorial debuts of the '90s, and *Speed* was, like, such an easy pick for me, because you see a lot of those movies from 30 years ago, that it's an awkward age for movies, in some ways. Like, they haven't aged all the way for a lot of people to being, like, classics that you can appreciate from a distance of, you know, many, many generations. But they're not new enough to be new, and so, you see some movies from the period and you're like, "Oh, this is technically so much clumsier than I thought it would be," or, "Wow, the attitudes in this are really actually offensive," or, "Oh, my God, these jokes are so corny." *Speed* is just so much fun to watch. It's such a pleasure to see unfold. It's so economical. Like, it's a really tight movie. You know, we were not, then, in the era where directors felt they had to give everybody two hours and 35 minutes in order to feel that they had, you know, gotten their money's worth. And so, I think – I mean, I rewatched it for this other podcast, and I was really just surprised, like, within a few minutes, I just stopped taking notes and started to watch it again and enjoy it. It's so much fun.

KRIS TAPLEY

It really does belong in that conversation of the debuts. People just forget, I think, maybe, or they don't realize or whatever. I mean, obviously Jan de Bont was a DP and had a huge impact on the aesthetic that he was kind of finally directing a movie and bringing into that aesthetic, but he directs the hell out of that movie and the camera's always where it needs to be and, you know, we recently lost the editor, John Wright, but I spoke to him and he was like, "The movie just came together. It just melted together."

Because when you've got a thousand cameras on stuff, like, you're going to have a wealth of footage to choose from. But it was like, Jan was ready to do something like this. And this was just the perfect vehicle, no pun intended, for that to happen, I think, so.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah. And it just has that great thing that's partly luck and partly immense skill, that everybody involved seems to be, like, on the same page, making the same movie, doing the same thing, after the same effect, and that's a great thing when it happens.

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally. Just to wrap up with Dennis here, after he comes out of *Speed*, he does *Waterworld*, plays the bad guy in that. He does the movie *Carried Away*. *Basquiat*, perfect for him. Just – *King of the Hill*. He shows up in *King of the Hill* in an episode. I'm just looking at just the wide variety of stuff, and always, so many movies that I'm, like, "Never heard of it. Never heard of it." He just kept going. *EDtv*. One interesting story here is that he was going to do *The Truman Show*. I guess he was probably shooting it, and he was in the Ed Harris role.

MARK HARRIS

Really?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. And he left over creative differences. I'm just, like, what was that? Like, I'd love to know more about that, because Peter Weir, you know, not a volatile personality. So, I just wonder what that was all about.

MARK HARRIS

Right, and that's surprising, because, you know, the vision of that movie is so clear. So much of it seems – so much the creativeness of it seems just deeply built into the script, and also, potentially, what a great role for Hopper.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

MARK HARRIS

I mean, it was a great role and Ed Harris. It's a really good part. So, yeah, I don't know anything about that. That's really interesting.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, and it's interesting, too, because Ed Harris is one of the guys that turned down the role in *Speed*. Although that might have been when the character was – there was a period where the Jeff Daniels character was the bad guy, ultimately, was revealed to be the bomber, and so I think it might have been during that period. He turned it down twice, in fact. But yeah, I'm just looking at Hopper's IMDb after this, and it's – he never had another big kind of marquee movie or role after that, it doesn't seem.

MARK HARRIS

No. No, it's odd. And he, you know, didn't have another Oscar nomination after '86.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it's interesting. Some TV in here. He did 24.

MARK HARRIS

Right.

KRIS TAPLEY

He's in *The Crow: Wicked Prayer*. I mean, like, what?

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, I mean, you can say that maybe he lowered his value, in a way, by doing too much.

KRIS TAPLEY

Maybe.

MARK HARRIS

But he liked to work, so.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's hard to say he saturated things, either, because it's, like, you didn't know this was going on. No one saw these movies.

MARK HARRIS

Right.

KRIS TAPLEY

He shows up in *Elegy* with Ben Kingsley eventually, which was sort of his last notable film role. And then he did the *Crash* series, which he was in for, like, the whole – he had a major role in that series, kind of spinning off of the movie. The Paul Haggis movie, not the-

MARK HARRIS

Right.

KRIS TAPLEY

Who did the other one? Cronenberg.

MARK HARRIS

I don't think a lot of people saw the *Crash* series.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. It was, like, Starz or something, yeah. But that was his last big thing, and then, of course, posthumously, he would be in *The Other Side of the Wind*, along with a lot of other people posthumously.

MARK HARRIS

Right.

KRIS TAPLEY

But, and then, like I said, he passed away in 2010. Prostate cancer caught up with him. And that was it for Dennis Hopper. And I just think this – I go back and look at interviews that he did. He just seems like a guy I would have loved to have talked to. You know, Jack Nicholson had this line that conversation is the elixir of life, and you look at Dennis Hopper talking to people and you just get that vibe. Like, there was never any ego about what he had to say, although he had plenty to say that you would think somebody could have an ego about. He would have a lot to say about famous people, but it never felt like he's dropping names. It's just, this guy was a fixture of American pop culture for a long time.

MARK HARRIS

Oh, yeah. Worked for, like, 55 years. Tons of movies. Tons of TV. There's probably no one in the business who he was more than, like, three degrees away from.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. And just – it's so funny to me that he apparently had all these dust-ups with people because, I mean, look, maybe he was just great in front of a camera being interviewed, but he just seemed like a likable guy. I mean, he seemed like a guy who certainly probably had, you know – was uncompromising in certain ways. And I could see that being an issue artistically, but he just seemed like salt of the earth in a lot of ways.

MARK HARRIS

Yeah, well, you never know. I'm sure he had his dark spots.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. But you never interviewed him?

MARK HARRIS

No, I never did.

KRIS TAPLEY

Well, like I say, that's the biggest regret of this show and I'm trying to get people talking about him as much as I can. So, thank you for coming on and helping to contextualize him and just do a deep dive into Dennis Hopper.

MARK HARRIS

Well, it's a pleasure. Thanks again for having me.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's Mark Harris, everyone.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH*...

KRIS TAPLEY

Let's take a bit of a breather before *Speed* heads into production.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I remember seeing it at the cinema when it came out, and it felt super fresh, and it still felt fresh when I saw it last week. It just moves and moves. And it's so clever.

KRIS TAPLEY

I talk to author and journalist Nick de Semlyen, whose recent book *The Last Action Heroes* sets up the action-movie canon *Speed* would ultimately join.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I think it's just a fascinating period of Hollywood history. It's so excessive. I mean, the '80s was excessive, but this just felt like the natural place to go if you are telling outrageous stories about outrageous people.

KRIS TAPLEY

Where does Keanu Reeves fit in with the Planet Hollywood set? And how would the 1990s give way to a new breed of action superstar?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

You can draw a line from Bruce Willis' John McClane to Jack Traven, quite clearly. Keanu in *Speed* is like an evolution of that. It pushes it even further. He's an ordinary guy. Like, when he arrives and he's there in the kind of a group of SWAT guys. He doesn't stand out. It's like, if you had Arnold coming in, everyone is looking at Arnold, but Keanu kind of blends in a little bit.

KRIS TAPLEY

All of that and more next week right here on *50 MPH!*

KRIS TAPLEY

Thanks so much for listening. *50 MPH* is written, produced and edited by yours truly, Kris Tapley. You can find us on Twitter @50MPHPod. I'm @kristapley. That's Kris with a K. You can also catch every episode and more at our website 50MPHpodcast.com. If

you dug the show, please like and subscribe and do all the things. We'll see you next time.