

Influences: Sean Penn

By [Logan Hill](#), New York Magazine - December 20, 2004



(Photo: Globe Photos)

Your children are named after a couple of influences—Dennis Hopper and Jack Nicholson.

They were, and they weren't. Basically, these were names that we'd liked, aesthetically. But, yeah, when I first saw *Easy Rider*, it certainly set my mind free about what movies can be. Jack has always been a shot in the arm to everybody who acts.

Your father was in the business.

Yeah. I consider myself fortunate that in my home, acting or the creative arts were a good option. This was a respected tour of duty in my family. Acting wasn't something that was left to tragic bohemians. But we weren't a family that obsessed on cinema.

What did your family obsess on?

Nonfiction. My father was a big nonfiction reader.

Are you reading any now?

I just started **Jon Lee Anderson's** *The Fall of Baghdad*. Better than good.

What music did you listen to when you were growing up?

David Bowie. That was a seminal thing. Take "Changes." There was something so *un-mellowing* about it. And I listened to it at a particularly open-minded, hungry time. Adolescence.

Rock stars aside, in your adolescence, was there ever, say, a politician you admired?

Thomas Jefferson.

Why?

"Our children are born free, and that freedom is a gift of nature and not of those that gave them birth." That's Jefferson. And that was a fantastic argument for independence from parents.

Ever have a crush on a movie star back then?

Well, you know, **it's always gotta be Ava Gardner, doesn't it?** I remember somebody, asked if he'd have an affair with Ava Gardner, said, "No." Asked why not, he said, "Too addictive."

Do you remember the first live performance you saw?

I cannot tell you that I ever fell in love with the theater as an audience. I fell in love with the theater as an actor for a period of time, but I have struggled as an audience, and I struggle more now than then. I was always a movie guy.

Have you ever liked a musical?

I loved *The Lion King*. Brilliant.

Was there an actor you once adored but have fallen out of love with?

Well, I was once a **Monty Clift fan**, but that kind of came when I was in acting class and following up on Clift, having heard that he'd influenced people who were interesting to me, that sort of thing. Early on, I just thought the movie was a movie, and I didn't care about who the star was for a long time. Then I started paying attention to everything that Jack was doing, everything Al Pacino was doing, or Bob De Niro was doing. The discipline and concentration that De Niro brought to it, that was pretty big for me. *Raging Bull* just makes me weep.

What music are you into?

David Baerwald I go back to a lot. There is a plainness to his lyrics and the way he sings. He really hits home for me. When I first heard him, I sensed, *This guy's my age and grew up in L.A.* And then I met him and, yep, he was my age and grew up in L.A.

What would your peers be surprised that you listen to?

Well, I am a **Justin Timberlake** fan.

Do you dance to it?

I don't dance. That's why I'm a fan. The guy's a ball of talent, no question about it.

Do you have any art in your home?

Gottfried Helnwein I own. I have a few pieces of his from his recent L.A. series. We ultimately ended up working together on a video project for Peter Gabriel ["The Barry Williams Show"]. Some things that are familiar lose their gravity after time. When someone like him makes the familiar so continually provocative, you can find a deepening appreciation for something.

Who's your artistic antithesis?

There's a lot of 'em out there. I won't attack them here. But I'll tell you what I probably would prefer to happen less and less: actors that I know and respect in shampoo ads. Or modeling.

Why?

It gets in my way when I see them in a picture. I feel like if you're gonna tempt distraction, there might be more productive things to invest your time in. I guess when you see a great bank-vault thief taking a cheap hammer and knocking in a storefront to steal some change, it seems beneath them.

Is there an art out there that you feel you should appreciate—but don't?

Fashion. It exudes mirror-time.

Is there an artistic movement you'd like to bring back?

Films that break the Three Thoughts Rule. Where you actually have more than three thoughts to a picture.

Is there another star whose popularity worries you?

You know, we're always in trouble with the popular. Bukowski said to me once, "If too many people like you, you're doing something wrong."

On the other hand, who gives you hope?

I love [Bono](#). He does all these things that he's genuinely invested in. And he has a real compassion for people, without losing the edge on his art.