

Style Icons: Steve McQueen

By Caroline Young

He was the King of Cool who was said to marry brunettes but sleep with blondes.

Steve McQueen: the Hollywood bad boy with blue eyes, dirty blonde hair and rugged charm in clothes that always had a practical purpose. He wore casual and masculine sportswear, chinos and polo necks both on-screen and off.

Think of *The Great Escape*, where he wears that same short sleeve blue sweater and dirt-stained chinos, but still looks cool as he does the epic motorbike chase. In real life he was a speed freak who rode dirt bikes, raced cars and would say his fraternity emblem "should be a couple of hub caps hanging from a chain."

His co-star in *Bullitt*, Don Gordon, said of him: "The Steve of *The Great Escape* was the man I knew for twenty years. Like his character in the film, he was cool, together, abstracted from the group, his own guy. Of course he could also be a shit, too, but that was all part of the appeal."

McQueen was, in 1974, the biggest star in Hollywood, a man whose ego was taking over with vanity projects such as dull racing movie *Le Mans*, and he was fiercely competitive in insisting on the exact same number of lines of dialogue and billing as Paul Newman in *The Towering Inferno*. Then he gave it all up - to smoke weed, grow a beard and do vintage motorbike racing.

He was a complicated figure, having spent his childhood between stays in boys' homes and the care of his young prostitute mother. After a spell in reform school and the Marines he swaggered into acting, met his first wife Neile Adams, and after being straightened out in style by an agent he got his first acting gig in TV series *Wanted: Dead or Alive*.

It was Neile who helped shape his image. She said she encouraged him to wear sleeves that stopped at the elbow so that his forearms could be his point of sex appeal. In *The Great Escape* he wears that blue sweater the whole way through, the arms cut away just as she had suggested.

In the *Cincinnati Kid*, despite it being set during the Great Depression, he wears his own style of jacket and sweater - stylishly downbeat but cool. He also managed to bring sex appeal and danger to a shawl collar cardigan. Not that easy a task.

One of his most recognisable roles is as tough San Francisco detective Frank Bullitt, who he based on the real life cop Dave Toschi, a tough guy who always wore his guns in a quick-draw shoulder holster. He layers a camel trench coat over a tweed jacket and a turtle neck in dark colours - navy or charcoal - worn with a pair of jeans or chinos and desert boots, and of course with the gun holster under arm.

McQueen changed his look for *The Thomas Crown Affair*; he wanted to "get past those tough, uptight types" he said, to play an Ivy League rebel in silk shirts, tailored suits and Boston ties. Theadora Van Runkle, who costumed him in *Bullitt*, fitted him with Ron Postal suits from Beverley Hills ("sometimes we had to put thirty pairs of trousers on him to get the right ones to make his behind look great," she said). His hair was cut by celebrity hairdresser Jay Sebring (who a year later would be murdered by the Manson gang). His suits were worn with a Patek Philippe watch, Persol sunglasses and a gold Phi Beta Kappa key.

Such is his status as the ultimate macho icon, McQueen has inspired lines of clothing - Persol sunglasses launched a special edition Steve McQueen line, the Swiss Tag Heuer watch prides itself on him wearing the Monaco watch in *Le Mans* and Barbour created a wax Steve McQueen jacket. Even UK favourite shoe brand Clarks claims he wore a pair of their desert boots.

Here are the key components to dressing like Steve McQueen, give or take some chauvinism:



Desert boots

Steve consistently wore a pair of brown suede desert boots, in his private life as well as on screen. Clarks Originals brown suede desert boots, £79.00

Turtle neck

American Apparel tri-blend turtleneck, £28

Trench coat

McQueen wears it long, single breasted, loose and casually open. It's the sort of item you could pick up on eBay, or try this one pictured: Farrell riding mac, £280, House of Fraser

Tweed coat

Topman brown tweed skinny blazer, £80

Trousers

Dockers Alpha Khaki trousers in New British Khaki, £85

Persol sunglasses

The actor had a collection of Persol 714 blue-tinted tortoiseshell framed shades, and a few years ago the Italian frame-makers reproduced a limited edition collection. The 714s are pretty hard to come by, but a similar version is Persol 3028S, for £290.

Tag Heuer Monaco watch

Created in 1969 as the wrist watch with the first square water-resistant case, the Monaco watch gained iconic status when McQueen chose to wear it to Le Mans in 1970. It could be yours from around £3500.