

I ONLY SAY THANK YOU

The loss of her husband, Jeffrey Hunter, was a tragedy for Emily McLaughlin, but still she says that the five-and-a-half months they spent together were the happiest time of her life.



by Jake Erwin

There is, inevitably, sadness in Emily McLaughlin's eyes, but it would be wrong to say that she has sad eyes. There is also laughter there, and the accep-

tance of life, and the love for something that was once very lovely and—in the way that makes human beings seem worth the air they breathe—always will be.

"I know it sounds corny, but I don't ask why. I only say 'Thank You' for the happiest five and a half months I've ever

known in my life."

It doesn't sound corny. Emily McLaughlin's feeling about her late husband, Jeffrey Hunter—who died less than six months after their marriage—is too real for criticism, too honest for question. She is a woman who has loved, and loves still, and has lived, and lives still. She is a

woman.

I was initially reluctant to ask her about the death; the press has an unhappy way of too-often hovering vulturelike over the tragedies of the famous—and the years as Jessie Brewer on *General Hospital* have made Emily McLaughlin very famous. Before I met her I spoke to another woman who has known her through those years, who told me that she *was* willing to discuss it; perhaps even needed to.

"At first I wasn't going to talk about it at all, but the letters began to come in from people who had been through the same loss, and I remembered what Jeff used to say. He always felt that you have a responsibility to people who identify with you. Sometimes I sound like a soap opera to myself when I talk about my life with him, but I think it should be said."

What she said was this:

"I went to a cocktail party one night because the hostess was an old friend of mine; I really didn't want to go, so when I got there I told the doorman to hold my car because I'd be leaving in ten minutes. I got up to the party and saw all those strangers and decided it was only going to be *five* minutes. Then I recognized Jeff and we looked at each other like kindred souls—we were the only two actors there. He took my coat, and we talked for a few minutes about my children and his, and then he asked me to dinner. This was two days after New Year's, and I still had a good ham at home, so I suggested we go to my house and eat."

When they reached Emily's home they found her son Bobby and a friend working on music to go with a lyric Emily had written—it's called *I'm Standing Here with the Earth Around My Feet*—and they sat on the floor with the kids until 3 A.M. Before he left, Hunter asked for a copy of the lyric; the next morning he called Emily. He had written a tune for the song. (He had been an excellent musician since he was very young, which Emily

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The late Jeffrey Hunter.

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Emily has never looked this glamorous on *General Hospital*.

didn't know.)

"After that we began to see each other regularly, and he invited me up to San Francisco to be a guest on a television show he was doing. We laughed all the time we were there; everything we said seemed funny—at least to us. At the end of the stay we were sitting in the *Top of the Mark*, watching the sun go down, and we decided to get married. It was as simple as that. We'd known each other just over three weeks."

They returned to Hollywood, since Emily was taping *General Hospital* Monday morning, and he picked her up that afternoon to go to Mexico for the wedding.

"I was terrified when I told my son—Robert Lansing Jr.—that I was going to marry Jeff; I was afraid he wouldn't approve. Instead, he said, 'I'm so happy for you, Mom.' And then he said 'What shall I call him?' I said 'You can call him anything you want,' and he said 'Can I call him Dad?' That's when I knew everything was all right."

Bobby went along with them to be Best Man (which led to one of those great fan magazine headlines: *Emily McLaughlin Spends Wedding Night with Best Man*). On Wednesday morning they flew back to Hollywood—she had to be at rehearsal Wednesday afternoon—with a son who could take pride in having been a Best Man at the age of eleven.

"Jeff was the gentlest, most considerate man I've ever known. I think the best trait an actor can have is a certain *child-like* quality—which is not at all the same as being *childish*. Jeff had a sense of wonder about everything; he was fantastically *alive*; interested in everybody—I think that's why he had so many friends."

A month after their marriage Hunter went to Spain for a movie; the time was spring vacation for Bobby so he and Emily went to Madrid to join her husband. Hunter suffered two accidents there—one of which caused

a brain concussion—and on the plane back he suddenly became paralyzed, losing his speech and the use of his right arm.

"The people at TWA were incredible; they had a wheel chair waiting, and men to carry him, and when we got to Hollywood they cleared the plane before taking us off, then whisked us into a car to go home and brought us our bags the next day. They were marvelous."

Hunter spent a week in the hospital and seemed fine; tests showed no serious problems—massive blood clots apparently don't always show on tests—so he came home.

"I can never forget the morning before it happened—he served me a seven-course breakfast in bed, with flowers from the garden. He was like that. And that morning he said, *'This is too good to be true.'* Even before, he had said several times, *'If I cross the bridge first—I'll wait for you on the other side.'* He almost seemed to have a premonition."

After that last, lovely morning, Emily went to rehearsal with no reason to worry about anything. She called home from the studio—for no particular reason; she just called—and a friend who was in the house told her Jeff had fallen down the stairs.

"I went home immediately, and we called the Fire Department, who got there in five minutes. The doctors at the emergency ward told me there was practically no chance, but he was so strong physically we kept hoping he would pull through. He died at 9:30 the next morning."

And so the five month idyll was over, and Emily McLaughlin was faced—as women so often are—with the additional grief of arranging a funeral, of facing life without the most important thing that had ever happened to her.

"People were so marvelous; they saw to it that I wasn't alone. I discovered that Jeff had friends all over the world—I still get letters from people he had



Emily McLaughlin and son Bobby Jr. played a duet in this shot taken three years ago.

Nurse Jessie Brewer, General Hospital.



been kind to in a casual meeting."

Jeff's parents flew in from Milwaukee—"We had just spent the weekend with them, and I'm so happy now that we did"—and her stepson, Christopher, added strength that Emily found rather remarkable for a sixteen-

year-old.

"Christopher is so much like Jeff; he comforted me because he has the same gentleness his father had. He's a beautiful boy."

The funeral was first planned as a small affair, very private, but—perhaps for the same reasons that she has decided that



At her home in Van Nuys, California.

she should talk about the subject—Emily discovered that she couldn't keep it to that.

"Jeff had so many friends—they came in from all over—that I finally agreed to make the funeral a large Episcopalian affair. I think now that maybe funerals are a good thing; for many years

I hated the idea, but I think perhaps the ritual has a certain value for people who have loved. I understand the importance much better now."

Immediately after the funeral Emily—to the astonishment of those who knew how deep her grief was—went back to work on

General Hospital. Many could not understand how she could have done this.

"I think the show saved my sanity. Coming in wasn't easy, but I think it would have been worse to stay at home—we're all very close on the show (I don't think we could do it if we weren't) and everyone understood. People always come to see you in the first week, but these people didn't let it go at that. Two weeks later Peggy McCay took me to Palm Springs for the Peggy Health Tour; she just threw me in the pool and then let me talk. It must have been exhausting for her—I never shut up—but it was very important for me."

And so Emily McLaughlin lived through the realization of the fear that must live in the heart of every woman—or man—who loves, and comes out alive. Partially, I think, because of her own nature; partially, I think, because of the beauty she was given by Jeffrey Hunter in the handful of months she knew him. She has experienced death, now she deals with life—when we met she had just taken her son, Bobby, to camp, and assured him that he didn't have to stay if he didn't want to. Each year she is promised six weeks off from *General Hospital*; she takes them in the spring, summer and at Christmas, to coincide with Bobby's vacations from school. She has chosen to *live*, in the same way that Jeffrey Hunter chose to *live* in his time, and that choice is very important. Too many people don't recognize it.

"I'm not always like this," she admitted before I left her. "I have a lot of black moments; I won't deny it. But so many people just go through life without ever knowing happiness; I had mine. At first I thought I was just kidding myself, but now I know I'm not. When the bad times come—he just seems to be there."

Yes, there is sadness in Emily McLaughlin's eyes. But they are not sad eyes.