

THE LAST DAYS OF ROBERT EVANS

*The charismatic Paramount chief who ushered in Hollywood's golden age with **The Godfather** and **Chinatown** clung stubbornly to the tropes of his glory days as his life wound down. When the studio abruptly cast him aside after 52 years last July, he made one final push to stay in the picture*

BY SAM WASSON

END OF A PLAYER

Robert Evans at Woodland, his beloved Beverly Hills estate, in 2008. By 2019 the once compulsive man-about-town seldom left its gated confines, commanding visitors to his bedside, where he pitched hopeless projects while the theme music from his long-gone hits played in an endless loop in the background



knew it was Robert Evans because my landline rang, then my cellphone rang, then my landline rang again. This was the relentless outreach effort of a Jewish mother or ace producer, formerly King of Hollywood, who had never been told no. Still, at 89, request and fulfillment was Evans's only plane of operation, and where others, I know, had been put off by the ceaseless phone calls, the "urgent" cries of wolf ("overfucking" as an ally of Evans perfectly described it). I was only annoyed/amused. Evans was a hero of mine, the greatest studio head of the poststudio era, and if this was how the master worked, who was I not to answer the call? "Hello?" "Sam ..." A panther's voice. "I've been calling you." "Evans, I'm writing. Are you OK?" "I need to see you. When can you be here?" "I can't today. I'm working. What about this weekend?" He was quiet. I got nervous, probably his intended effect. "Saaaaaaam ..." Evans loaded that one syllable with so much threat and seduction it sounded to my own ears like a paragraph. "I need to speak to you."

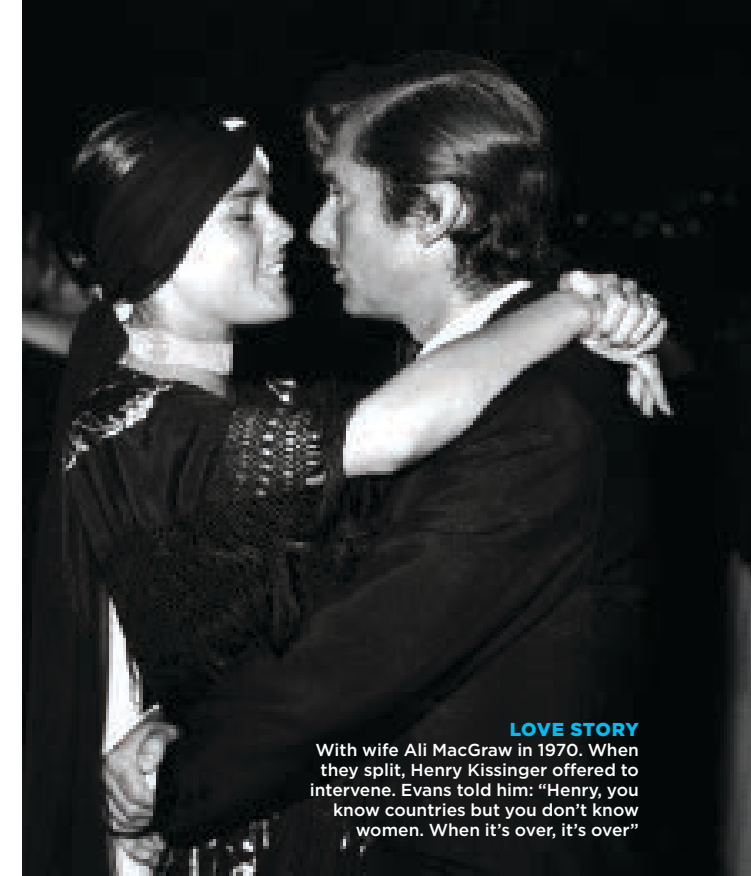
Twenty minutes later I was sitting in his living room. I had been asked to wait—either by Alan, Evans's butler of 27 years, or Rosie, housekeeper of 30 years—I can't remember. Evans, in his bedroom and in his bed, prepared to receive me, his first guest of the day. In other words, I was waiting for Evans to get made up. No one ever named it—a formality, I gathered, of working for the powerfully vain—but no one tried to hide it either, for when I was at last summoned into the master's bedroom, I crossed paths with a makeup person, with her bag of colors and brushes, making her way out. "He's ready for you," she said, grinning broadly. This was vanity, Evans style: disarming, fun, relished in good humor. This was Evans's Hollywood, too: vanity before vanity was a sin.

I took my seat at the side of Evans's bed (black Porthault pillows and sheets, black-fur throw) and waited for him to say something. Evans didn't show his cards by starting a conversation. But to do what he did, to bring people to him and get them to work together, he didn't have to; he just needed that phone, that speed dial—Dr. Kivowitz, Jack N.—and the goodwill of his interlocutor to wait as he reached for the word.

Robert Evans's mind was still vivid.

I had observed it, discussed it, read about it, contemplated it, and written about it—I had originally met Evans, first as an author, researching my book about *Chinatown*—but had long since given up on trying to fathom it. Evans was no intellectual—this he would freely, almost proudly, admit (like former Columbia boss Harry Cohn, who didn't have to think to know what America wanted to see), but he was, like his old friend Henry Kissinger, a chess player nonpareil (but unlike Kissinger, Evans's genius lay in his warmth and openness). He loved people as much as he loved the triumph. That's what this house—Woodland—was about. He would invite you over to his side of the chess board and explain to you exactly how he was going to get the queen, even if it was yours. Then he would do just that. Then he would ask you to stay for dinner and a movie—and stay as long as

PARAMOUNT HAD BEEN KEEPING EVANS UNDER CONTRACT AS A COURTESY. NOW, WITHOUT EXPLANATION, THE COURTESY HAD ENDED.



LOVE STORY
With wife Ali MacGraw in 1970. When they split, Henry Kissinger offered to intervene. Evans told him: "Henry, you know countries but you don't know women. When it's over, it's over"

you wanted. I loved this about Evans before I even met him: He was not an executive anyone hated. He never made enemies. In fact, quite the contrary: For all his excesses, he lead with his love of Hollywood, his loyalty, and his devotion—proved many times over—to talent above all else.

He'd told me many times, "Hollywood gets a bad rap, kid. But there's no other industry that flies the flag higher. We're number one in every country in the world."

This morning he was very still, uncharacteristically solemn.

And yet he was wearing a tuxedo shirt and a baseball hat. It said "Che." His hands were clasped, his eyes down. His breakfast tray had been pushed aside untouched. There was a stripe of tan concealer on his collar.

Finally, he said: "I have a problem."

"What is it?"

"They killed me."

"What?"

"I have to do something ... great ... different ..."

We had stopped interviewing years ago. Now we just talked. Or rather, Evans talked and I cheered him on. Over the years I had heard all manner of movie ideas—the interracial *Love Story 2* starring Cardi B. and Clint Eastwood's son, Scott; a limited series based on *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, his classic memoir, which Evans was calling *Hollywood '69*; a satirical detective show about a female detective, working title: *Pussy*—each represented in outlines and headshots and embryonic visual ideas encased in their own little laminated portfolio, which Evans had delivered to his bed whenever he wanted to paint, for his guest, the picture of an unmade movie. Evans had stopped making movies, but he hadn't stopped describing them, turning through these slim binders ("Always bring props to a pitch," he would say), pointing and

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PAUL HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES; JACK ALBIN/GETTY IMAGES

explaining, purring, watching the listeners' eyes for boredom or enthusiasm and then modifying the dream accordingly. On one such occasion, a mere two beats after I lost interest, he held his hands out in front of him as if cuing an invisible orchestra to climax and said, "Then ... she reaches for his hand. ..." He didn't say "The end"; he didn't say "Fade out"; he simply ended there—with an image. It hung in the air, in my mind.

Today, however, he wasn't dreaming aloud. Something had stopped him.

"Do you know?" He was reading my mind again. No, I didn't know. He nodded. *Good. It's good that you haven't heard yet.*

"What happened?"

He turned to look at me, the first time since I got there. "Fifty-two years at Paramount ... no more."

Slowly details emerged. It had begun, days earlier, with rumors. They had been conveyed to Evans from his office on the lot, the rumors that Paramount, the studio he quite literally and famously rescued almost exactly 50 years ago, would not be renewing his deal. Evans awaited some kind of decisive phone call from the boss, Jim Gianopulos, either confirming or denying; none came. Nothing came. There was only waiting and silence at Woodland and the growing conviction that no news was bad news, that there would be no renewal.

Paramount's side would be clear enough: Evans hadn't made a movie since *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, 17 years ago. Despite the portfolios strewn about the duvet, he had nothing in development. The studio, it seemed, had been more than generous keeping him under contract as a courtesy. And now, for no apparent reason and without explanation, the courtesy had ended—without courtesy.

By the time I had been called in he had already taken counsel from his innermost circle of Tom Hagens—Peter Bart, Hawk Koch, and other friends and colleagues who went back with him to the good days—but was as yet still unable to envision a next move. That he was asking me, a short fuse, a Sonny Corleone, no one's idea of a tactician, to weigh in on the predicament indicated how desperate he was: All I could do was refer him to the powerful, pointing at the phone, advising him to call in the heads of every family, call Bryan Lourd, call Graydon Carter, call Sumner Redstone, Barbara Broccoli, but this was not producing. Producing was deliberate, not emotional. It was surveying the landscape, deciding where and when to move, weighing the consequences, and waiting.

But the landscape had shifted since Evans's last great move. And he was too old to wait.

"Evans," I said. "I'm the wrong guy. You know how to do this. You're Bob Evans. You need a Bob Evans."

"You're a writer," he said. "It starts with the writer. ... The printed word."

The seams were showing. He was leaning on old lines. I knew; I had already written them into my book.

"The script ..." he intoned. "The script ... it has to be great ... different ..."

"What script?"

"A love story ... about a man and a woman ..."

Cliches, but he meant them. His Regency mansion, his painted tan, the white roses, the Damon Runyonisms he sprinkled with Yiddish, he meant them. You must understand that. The act was an act, but it was real. As Ernst Lubitsch—the only director ever to hold Evans's job—said, "I've been to Paris, France, and I've been to Paris, Paramount. Paris, Paramount, is better."

Eventually the phone did ring: Evans was to be moved off the lot posthaste. His office—packed to the ceiling with photographs, awards, scripts, mementos, the studio's only living link to the last



THE PRODUCER
As chief of Paramount Pictures in the 1970s, Evans's green-lighting of *Love Story* and *The Godfather* saved the studio from financial ruin. Clockwise from top left: with Faye Dunaway, whom he cast as Jack Nicholson's costar in *Chinatown*; with Jacqueline Bisset and *Chinatown* director Roman Polanski in 1975; before leading Paramount, Evans appeared in minor roles in 1950s films like *The Sun Also Rises*; Evans relentlessly pursued Hollywood talent, even on the tennis court of his Beverly Hills home

age of sustained, auteur-driven filmmaking—had to be emptied immediately.

"Sumner told me, 'You'll be at Paramount as long as I own it.'" This was Sumner's mantra. In those days Evans repeated it, literally, word for word. But Sumner was hardly Sumner anymore. The reins had been handed over to Shari. Evans knew that. And yet: "Sumner told me. ... Sumner told me. ..."

That's how Robert Evans died. Pneumonia ended his life, but Paramount broke his heart. I was there. I saw it.

Ali didn't even stop to take her clothes off. Emerging from the living room, she took one look at the pool, set among the gardenias and daisies and red and yellow rosebushes of Woodland, and dived in. She dived like she owned the place, like she had known Evans for years, and they had already courted and married and had a son, Joshua, instead of having just met ten minutes before, when he picked her up down the street at

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: KYPROS/GETTY IMAGES; FRANK EDWARDS/ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY SAM WASSON; MARTIN HILLS/GETTY IMAGES

the Beverly Hills Hotel. When she surfaced, smiling his way before diving down again, her eyes did not show the cunning of a beauty greedy for reactions—Evans was fluent in actresses—but satiation, peace. She loved it here. Woodland—Evans’s home and, for a time, hers—was paradise.

Evans and Ali MacGraw divorced after four years, but Woodland’s fountains still arched into the pool, the moon still rose over the projection room, and Evans, a ripping pain from sciatica down his back, still watched, from his bed, her ghost diving in, smiling, diving back down. He regarded that night and all their nights to follow with the unforgiving eyes he turned on a film flailing in postproduction, blaming himself for the dream he had in hand but couldn’t hold. There were so many things he should have done, but now there was nothing he could do. It was over. She had gone off and done *The Getaway* with Steve McQueen.

Evans knew it was his fault; he had left her first, many times, not for another woman but for his boss, Charles Bluhdorn, chairman of Paramount, his first love. “I’m a failure in many ways as a man,” he confessed, “because of my obsession with what I do.” Bluhdorn guarded Evans as jealously as a teenage lover, calling him away from Ali in sickness and in health, to tend to studio matters, to *The Godfather*, to *The Great Gatsby*, which now would star not Ali but Mia Farrow. One of many casualties of the divorce.

“If I can negotiate with the North Vietnamese,” said his friend Henry Kissinger, “I think I can smooth the way with Ali.”

“Henry,” replied Evans, “you know countries, but you don’t know women. When it’s over, it’s over.”

Alone he kept the same schedule he had when he was married. He woke late, in time for lunch, and went to bed, with the help of sleeping pills, long after Hollywood had punched out. In between he was a man attached to a phone. His home, at one time, had exactly 32, an average of two per room, but his favorite—a relationship that would last longer than any of his marriages—was the one he kept on his bed, on a pillow between his Rolodex and his view of the pool. Writers had the blank page; Robert Evans had

the dial tone. All his imagining—his multilayered consideration of scripts and how to get them into movies—began here on the phone, with slightly more than nothing, just seven digits and a hunch. What about Faye Dunaway for *Chinatown*? What about Jane Fonda? Would she come for dinner this week? He wanted to talk to her. He wanted to hear her ideas. ...

These invitations were stepping-stones that Evans would place across dry riverbeds. Then he would step back, survey his progress, and ask, Will those get us to a movie? What else do we need? Are we ready for the flood? Daniel Selznick said: “He had the same thing that my grandfather and my father and other people who created the business had. How do you define it? It’s a crazy hunch, some combination of brains and instinct gambling.” Savoring the process (“Come for dinner tonight, Roman. We’ll keep talking. ...”), he thrilled to the deliberate accumulation of stepping-stones, along the way asking, always asking, Has my dream changed? Has yours? Are we still having fun?

This is what Robert Evans, head of Paramount, did for a living: It was why he lived.

■ **By the time I met him**, about three years ago, he was confined to bed, though not by choice. He had stopped going out almost entirely; part of it was vanity, the other part was he didn’t like what he saw of the Hollywood out there. Jack Nicholson was no longer a regular presence at Woodland, neither was Warren Beatty. “We all like to stay home,” was Evans’s rationalization, and it also happened to be true. Roman Polanski, of course, wouldn’t be returning to America; nor would Evans’s dear pal Helmut Newton be returning to Earth. Evans’s son, Josh; Ali; Evans’s sister, Alice, lived out of town. The stalwarts, those that remained, were producer Hawk Koch and Evans’s one-time right hand, Peter Bart; the former TV personality Nikki Haskell; tennis pro Darryl Goldman (who had the court to himself); Alan; Rosie; and Evans’s assistant of 34 years, the beloved Michael Binns-Alfred, who worked from Woodland.

He didn’t lack for company, even, despite his age and condition, for female company, but he was horny for creative intercourse. The book I was writing, about the making of *Chinatown*, he regarded almost as his own, not in any possessive or underhanded way, but in the manner of a collaborator. “I want this book to be ... different,” he would say, as if I had asked, “slightly off-center, interesting. ...” This was the Evans that alienated Francis Coppola, the producer overstepping, who, in ego and enthusiasm, let his dream crowd the room.

Whenever I came, the bedroom music was the theme from *Chinatown*, the theme from *The Godfather*, the theme to *Love Story*, all on repeat. But whenever we sat down to work, he insisted he didn’t want to talk about his past; he wanted to talk about his future. But we always returned to the past.

“Forgiveness,” he would say. “That’s all there is. ...”

“I should have done more,” he would say, “I should have done ... better. ...”

He claimed he had no money, no real money, and claimed it didn’t matter. When Ava Gardner read his palm all those years ago, he an actor scratching for work in *The Sun Also Rises*, she decreed, “You will live forever and be a millionaire.” He worried about one all his life but not the other. “I may die poor,” he would say, “but if I’m remembered, I’ll be remembered as the richest man in Hollywood.”

He claimed he was a bad businessman, code, I think, for “I am not an executive. I am a producer.” It sounded like a Frank Capra line, and Evans acted the shit of out it. But like the white roses and painted tan, he meant it.

Yet he was bitter, returning constantly to two figures—\$100 million, the purchase price of Simon & Schuster when he bought it for Paramount, and \$4.8 billion, what Sumner Redstone got when he sold it—and how he never saw a penny. He kept saying it didn’t matter, though, and in a way it didn’t. Money was not money but a symbol of recognition, Evans’s Achilles’s heel. In that way and too many others, he never stopped being an actor.

“Four,” he would say, pointing to the Library of Congress plaques—for *Rosemary’s Baby*, *Chinatown*, and the first two *Godfather* movies—framed behind his headboard, “I’m the only producer with four. The only one.”

Who was arguing with him?

■ **“Saaaaaaam ...”**

“Evans.”

“I need you to come to Woodland. I need to talk to you. It’s very important. Can you come now?”

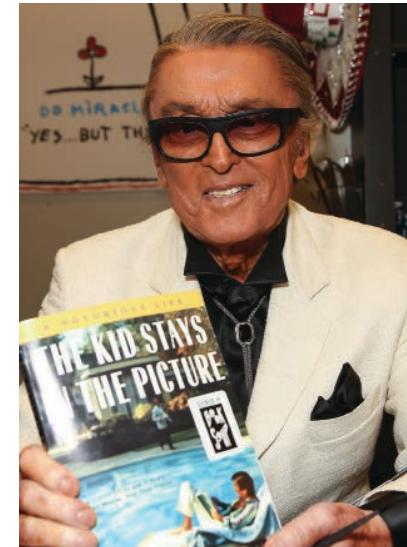
I would bring our friend, the producer Brandon Millan. Not only would Brandon know how to help Evans achieve what Brandon playfully termed Evans’s “second second act,” he had studied Evans’s work and technique longer than I had and understood, with an assurance and complexity that belied his 34 years, precisely how to move a dream from the mind into the world. Always dressed as if for a night out with a very beautiful, or at least very educated, woman, Millan brought his own props to Evans’s bedside.

In 1968 Evans had resuscitated Paramount on a platform of popular art—ostensibly commercial projects, directed by exciting filmmakers—an approach Hollywood had long since abandoned. It would never be too late, Millan explained, to revisit the mandate, to repeat history, for as Evans knew, as we all agreed, a kiss was still a kiss.

I listened as Millan described a broad artistic model to Evans, who received all in his thinker pose, thumb clamped between his teeth. When Millan finished speaking, Evans reached out his hand. Millan took it.

“Do it,” Evans commanded.

In the context of such a large undertaking, I wasn’t sure what “it” referred to. Before I could guess, Evans reached out his other hand to me. I dutifully rose and took it, and he pulled me down to him, to his cheek on the pillow. He smelled of face powder and fresh linen.



THE LION IN WINTER
Evans basked in the attention he received after the publication of his 1994 memoir

His voice cracked: “Do it.”
“Yes,” I said, unsure what I was agreeing to. “We’re doing it.”

He was holding both of our hands and his eyes were wet and, unthinking, I blurted out something to interrupt a mood I thought was leading him to tears: “You’re Robert Evans. What do you want?”

I think I meant what else do you want, but I’m not sure.

It was July 31, 2019.

■ **Millan and I** returned August 8 and were shown to the bedroom, where Evans was sitting straight up in bed, grinning.

“I have the greatest love story ever told,” he cooed as we approached. “Ever?”

We were seated.

“It’s called”—a portentous pause, the make-em-wait-for-it-pause—“*Forever*. ...”

What followed was, alternately, the most engrossing, most boring pitch I expect ever to hear, a seemingly improvised pillage of *Casablanca* and *Roman Holiday*, but with none of the dialogue. Evans proceeded to describe the clichés with a degree of emotional investment so urgent I almost forgot how banal they were, and desperately wanting him both to fill in the details and cut to the chase, found myself, nearly 15 minutes in, seeing that *Forever* wasn’t only a pitch, it was the story of Evans’s forbidden lust for Princess Soraya, who eventually must leave her young man in California and return to the Shah of Iran, her ex-husband.

The last word of his tale, predictably, touchingly: “Forever ...”

Then it was over.

He held out his hands, held them in the air in front of him, as if reaching for the princess one last time, too caught in the memory, or the story, or the hope of a movie deal, to care how he looked, which recalled, to me, Mr. Louis B. Mayer, hand on heart, pledging allegiance to the flag, too earnest to be false, too hammy to be earnest. But a lifetime of romance will do that; it’ll make old dreams look old.

Evans lowered his hands, a conductor after the last note melts into the walls of Carnegie Hall, and turned to us for our reaction.

■ **I got the call** the morning of the fires, October 28.

Later I would learn they lost touch with Evans when he was taken to Cedars with pneumonia. Nicholson came.

Alan, Brandon, and I shared a long night’s drink. It was like the end of *S.O.B.*

“He returned home to Woodland,” Alan explained, “and died in his own bed with a view of his beloved garden, the sound of the fountain playing outside, and the warm California air wafting in through his French doors.”

When Evans was first hired, Gulf + Western regarded the Paramount lot as merely a piece of real estate. It was ready to sell. Evans, outmaneuvering them, dragged the studio, kicking and screaming, into a cultural revolution, and turned Paramount into the top studio of its day. He saved the lot. He saved the studio. The only studio that is still in Hollywood.

Robert Evans loved a good story. But he may have loved Hollywood more. ■



THE INNER CIRCLE
Robert Evans, left, attends the placing of Jack Nicholson’s footprints in the forecourt of the Chinese Theatre in Hollywood in 1974. Nicholson, one of Evans’s closest friends, would later star in *Chinatown*’s sequel, *The Two Jakes*

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