

# *Hollywood* THE REPORTER

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**Donna Mills:  
The Lady of the '80s**



# Donna Mills: *The star of "Knots Landing" is the exemplary modern woman: breadwinner as well as bread-baker*

**BY BEN PESTA** Donna Mills sits in her canyon home, having lunch with a visitor. The lunch is ultracivilized: pâté, ratatouille, bread in *batard* loaves, berries and cream for dessert. The actress eats sparingly. She is a small, fine-boned woman (her official height, 5'4", may be a slight exaggeration), and she's conscious of the need to keep extra weight from her frame.

Her house is spanking-clean and decidedly feminine, full of *provençal* furniture, bright colors and lively printed fabrics. On first seeing this small, exquisitely pretty lady at home, an observer might think, "a doll in a doll's house." But that, as Richard Nixon once said in another context, would be wrong.

"Donna is a consummate professional," says her manager, Larry Thompson. "She is well trained and experienced in her craft. She is an actress who is coming into her own. Her talent is like a pure, crystal prism. All I need to do as manager is to twist it in the light a little bit, and the whole spectrum of her personality and character is revealed."

It would be no exaggeration to call Donna Mills the Lady of the '80s. Her independence, her dedication, her insistence on taking responsibility for her own life and career are all things to which '80s women aspire. That she's arrived at the top after years of hard work makes her a role model for countless other, younger women, and not only actresses — a situation of which she's acutely aware. Even the role that's brought her wealth and fame, that of video-vamp Abby Cunningham on CBS's "Knots Landing," is a woman who knows what she wants and goes after it, often with a vengeance.

"There's a whole spectrum of '80s ladies," says Deborah Aal, vp TV development for Leonard

Goldberg Prods. "Donna portrays one end of that spectrum in her role as Abby, the other in her personal life. As busy as she is, she's one of the warmest, most genuine people I've ever met. She's all woman. This is someone who wants more than success in her career."

At home, over a glass of very crisp Montrachet, Donna Mills is talking about her early life to her inquiring visitor. Yes, she always wanted to be a performer. But (as with 85% of all little girls in America), the kind of performer she wanted to be was a ballerina.

"I started dancing at age 5," she says. "I was very serious about it; I worked very hard. While I was growing up in Chicago, I danced in a lot of summer stock productions. I never thought much about being an actress, until one day — I can't remember why — I auditioned for a part in 'Come Blow Your Horn' at the Drury Lane. I got the part, but even then I wasn't too excited about it. Just acting, without dancing and moving around, seemed sort of boring."

"Then, on opening night, something happened: people laughed. I realized that, as an actress, you could milk the laughs by your timing and your reactions. You could play directly to the audience, and build the response you wanted by your technique."

She also realized that stardom in the world of dance "took so long, that you had to work so hard — and that it's usually all over by the time you're 35." So, although she continued dancing in summer stock (and still dances today; her home has a studio room, complete with mirrored wall and barre), Donna Mills became an actress.

She came to Hollywood and, unlike most of the young, pretty girls who make their way west,

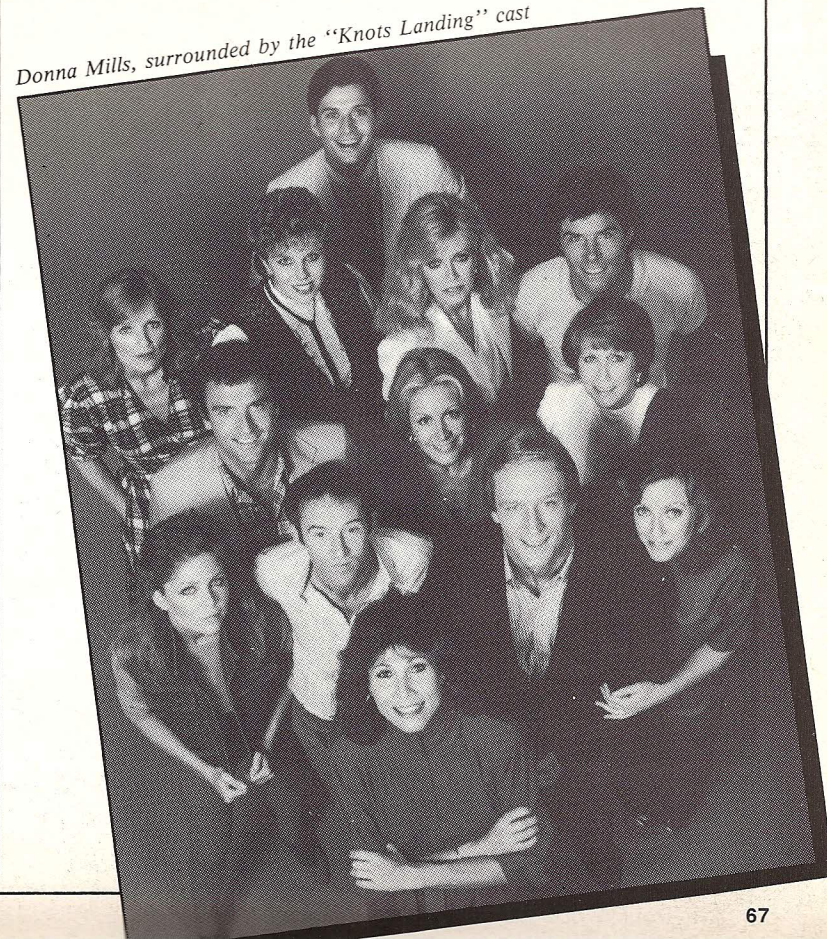
found work almost immediately. She was cast opposite Clint Eastwood in "Play Misty for Me," Eastwood's directorial debut. The film subsequently became an object of cult reverence, and attracted a great deal of attention — but not for Donna. No one remembered her as Eastwood's sweet, blonde girl friend. What we all remember from "Misty," of course, is Jessica Walter screaming and slicing up people with her butcher knife. That sort of behavior leaves a vivid impression.

Not long after, in 1971, the young actress won a series lead. The show, "The Good Life," costarred Larry Hagman. In those days, no one knew what stinkers he and Donna would turn out to be. Hagman was then fresh from what seemed a hundred-year run as America's

boyfriend (an astronaut, yet) in "I Dream of Jeannie," and the new sitcom seemed a perfect vehicle with which to make America aware of an all-American girl like Donna Mills. "The Good Life" lasted almost four months on NBC.

There was another series, a CBS soap, "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing." It made Donna conscious of the tremendous public appeal of the soap opera format. "One of my biggest thrills," she remembers, "was the day Joan Crawford came on the set and was introduced to the cast. She'd called up and said that the show was her favorite, and could she be introduced to us? Imagine! *Joan Crawford* asking to meet us!" Unfortunately, what the soaps did for Susan —→

Donna Mills, surrounded by the "Knots Landing" cast





← Lucci, Anthony Geary and Genie Francis, they did *not* do for Donna Mills. People on the street, when they recognized her at all, still asked after her sisters, Hayley and Juliet.

So Donna Mills kept working. She became the classic Lady in Jeopardy, the heroine of 21 made-for-TV movies. "The Black Dahlia," "Curse of the Black Widow," "The Hunted Lady," "The Bait," "Night of Terror," "Someone at the Top of the Stairs," "Woman on the Run" — there was a common theme running through nearly all 21 telefilms. All featured various goons and plug-uglies who were out to get Donna Mills.

"I played a victim for years and years and years," she says now, "and I've only recently begun to think of what kind of impact that must have on women."

There was one kind of impact those Lady in Jeopardy roles *didn't* have. They didn't raise the public's Donna Mills-consciousness. What would it take? "Psycho in Her Closet"? "Lady in the Trash Compactor"? Here was Donna Mills, no longer the new kid on the block, playing leads and playing them steadily, and *still* that magic role hadn't turned up. Didn't it get, her visitor suggests, a little, well, *discouraging*?

"Oh, yes," she admits. "Especially in the two-year period before I got 'Knots Landing.' I'd worked a lot, and I knew people in the industry respected my work. But, you know, in this town, people might like your work, they might respect you, but they want what's hot at the moment."

"So I was faced with the question, *what do I do?* My friends, many of them producers, said, 'You've got to get a role, a role that will really show you off.' So I had to wait, to start turning down parts. And, believe me, I'm not from the kind of background where you turn down work."

And then came "Knots Landing," and the chance to switch from victim to victimizer. "When I first heard about the show," Donna laughs, "I thought it was about a houseboat!"

A quick look at the Abby Cunningham role cleared up that misconception. But there was another problem. Donna Mills, clean-cut blonde and

longtime lady in distress, isn't the kind of woman who ordinarily gets cast as a video-vamp. Joan Collins is *that* kind of woman. "I *insisted* on reading for the role of Abby," Donna says. "They didn't want me to. They said, 'We know her work.' But I knew that if I didn't read, I'd never get the part."

She read. She got the part. And today, she's one of the women you love to hate. Abby has done for Donna Mills what Alexis Carrington did for Joan Collins, what Constance Carlyle did for Morgan Fairchild. Thanks to Abby, the American public connects Donna Mills' face with her name. She's now "the woman who plays Abby Cunningham, the one who seduced Ted Shackleford in a hot tub."

Not that Abby is exactly like her prime-time bad-girl counterparts. "I like to think that Abby is a much real-er character than the others," Donna says. "Abby has vulnerabilities. She has two children whom she loves. She'll do *anything* for them. She goes after Gary Ewing, but it's because she loves him. She's out for herself, but she never deliberately goes after someone else just to harm them. It's just that people get in her way."

"Alexis Carrington, by contrast, is more like J.R. Ewing: just plain vindictive. Alexis is *bad*. She'll *never* do anything good. It's just not in her character. Last year, Abby donated a kidney to her niece, who needed a transplant. Alexis would have taken the girl's *other* kidney!"

Donna keeps careful watch on Abby's character and motivation, in order not to let her become an ersatz Alexis, or a female J.R. "I have to admit it," she says. "After all this time, the writers really listen to me. They'll even come to me and ask, 'Would Abby do this?'"

And how does the actress feel about her alter ego? "I like Abby," she laughs. "She's done a lot for me. She's given me the recognition I've never had before, and I'm grateful."

Why, the visitor wonders, after a career full of good-girl roles, should Donna Mills have been taken to America's heart for playing a classic bad girl?

"It's because women's role in society is changing," she muses. "In the '80s, people can accept these portrayals. Women watch Abby and think, 'Yes, I can go after what I want, too.' It's not

that they want to be conniving. But Abby is a strong person, she's trying to achieve things by her own efforts, and I think that *that's* the part of her character women identify with."

Larry Thompson has said, "Donna's enjoying a sort of tripod effect right now. The spotlight hit her when she was most *prepared* for it, when the public wanted *what* she is, and *who* she is."

And what she is is a veteran actress, one who's worked long and hard for her success. A few years ago, one heard nothing but complaints from actresses

1946 and 1964, generally considered to be the boom's parameter years, over 76 million Americans were born. That's one-third of our population in just 19 years. Those baby boomers watch a lot of television, especially the women, and many of them are pushing 40. The women of the baby boom are hardly going to look to 23-year-olds as role models. Many of them, in fact, don't even like to be reminded that there *are* such things as 23-year-olds. And that will likely mean more roles for Donna Mills and other actresses in her age-cohort for years



With Clint Eastwood and shag haircut in "Play Misty For Me" (above); with David Janssen in "Superdome" (right)



With Larry Hagman in "The Good Life"

that there were no good roles for women over 30. Now that situation has changed 180 degrees. Our video-vamps are almost all women in their late 30s and 40s. The good girls on the same shows — Linda Evans, Linda Gray, Joan Van Ark and the rest — are also years past girlhood. Our top motion picture actresses, such as Goldie Hawn, Jane Fonda and Jill Clayburgh, are over 35. *Loni Anderson* has a grown daughter! It's a far cry from most of the last 30 years, when sex, goddesses and screen sirens were all in their early 20s.

"It's true," says Donna, "there are *many* good parts for older women today. It's because people in our society are finally recognizing the advantage of wisdom. You just can't have a whole lot of wisdom or experience at 23. That's why people are looking toward women who are a little bit older."

"I remember when I passed 30. I thought, 'Uh-oh! It's all downhill from here.' Instead, it's been all *uphill*. And that's very, very nice."

"That's why I feel responsible to young girls and women who watch my work. Now they have role models. I think it's important that they can look forward to getting older."

Her visitor suggests that there's another factor at work here: the baby boom. Between

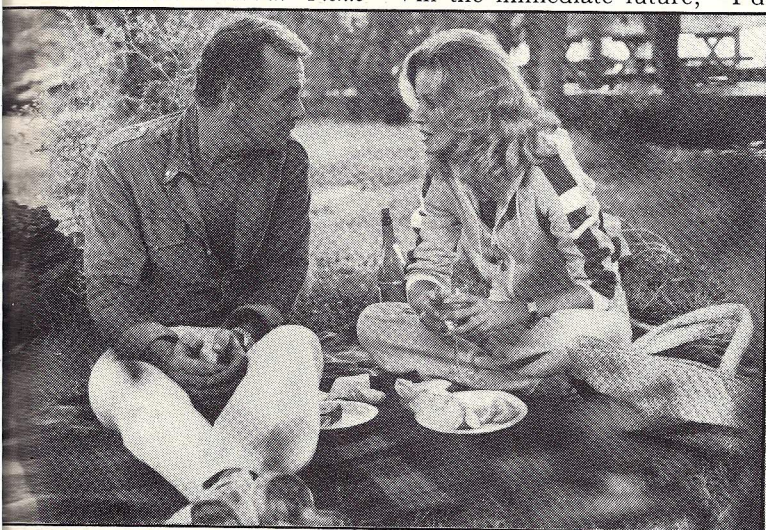
"In 15 years," she says, "I see things staying about the same as they are in 1983. We'll be seeing more and more shows featuring older people in the kind of parts Art Carney gets now. That's partly because of the boom generation, and partly because older people aren't like what they used to be when I was a child. They're healthier and more vigorous now."

Don't be surprised if some of those shows are produced by Donna Mills. She's formed a new production company, Donna Mills Prods., and she has two TV movies in the works,





With Joe Namath in "Picnic"



both of which she's coproducing with Leonard Goldberg. "My ABC project is an 'ABC Theatre,'" she says. "Barry Sandler wrote it. It's called 'Actress,' and it's a multilevel story. The framework is a biography of Veronica Lake, but it's really the story of an actress who *plays* Veronica Lake in a film. Then, at CBS, I have 'Crime of Passion,' written by Sandor Stern. That one's about a woman lawyer who experiences a conflict between her professional life and her emotional life."

It goes without saying that in neither part will Donna Mills find herself menaced by thugs wielding guns, saps, chainsaws, antitank rockets or anything else. "That's one of the reasons why I want to produce," she says. "I'm looking for the kind of roles a woman would want to play, and a young woman would want to watch."

"Donna has developed a very keen sense of what's right for her," comments Deborah Aal. "She knows what she wants, and how she can stretch to play a given part."

"I think she'll make a very good producer," says Leonard Goldberg, who knows more than a little about the subject. "I've known her for many years. She's very bright and very good with people, and those are two of the most important qualities a producer can have. The specifics of production can be learned, but you can't just wake up smart one morning."

"Donna has a way of motivating people. They want to do their best work for her. Also," Goldberg chuckles, "she'll be one of the *prettier* producers in Hollywood."

Naturally, Donna wouldn't mind doing feature films. And, in the immediate future, "I'd

like to do maybe one more series after 'Knots Landing.' Series work is a killer. I'm grateful for the exposure I've received on 'Knots,' but that doesn't change the nature of the work; it's very, very hard." When asked, she admits, laughing, that she wouldn't mind if the next series were titled something like "The Donna Mills Show."

One thing that's *not* in the immediate future is marriage. The average actress gets married 3.6 times; Donna is holding the averages down by never having been married herself. Yet the visitor suspects she may have had several proposals just before lunch.

"I just never thought it was terribly important," she says. "I've always been terribly independent. I never wanted to be somebody's wife, to be an appendage. I wanted to become known as an entity myself before

becoming part of somebody else. It's awfully easy for a woman to become a helpmeet, instead of developing her own skills — which is all right, *unless* you have a burning desire to develop your own skills.

"Lots of men say it's okay if their wives have their own careers, but what they usually mean is, 'as long as I'm the dominant one.' Among all my friends, only one or two couples have relationships that work. And what I see in those one or two is one person subordinating him- or herself to the other."

"I'll tell you, though, at this stage in my life, I think that if I ever *did* decide to marry, I'd be much better at it than I would have been at 25 or 30."

Besides her work, Donna is active in the antinuclear movement. "Have you read Jonathan Schell's 'The Fate of the Earth?'" she asks her visitor, referring to the somber, slim volume detailing the unpleasant consequences of nuclear proliferation. "This is something that *everybody* ought to be concerned about. And yet, when I arranged for a screening of 'The Prophecy,' a Japanese documentary about Hiroshima that was put together from Department of Defense footage, I got almost no response. It was very disappointing. I think this is the most important issue affecting the world right now."

She also supports the presidential candidacy of Sen. Gary Hart (D-Colo.), who has identified himself publicly with the antinuclear movement. "One of Hart's problems is his visibility," she says. "He's the most articulate of all the candidates, he's written a book about his views. But he needs to have some big issue that will make him more recognizable to the public." Her voice carries the tone of experience. Not so long ago, the same problem was shared by Donna Mills.

It's not her problem anymore. But the actress still has an unfulfilled ambition, one that transcends stardom. The subject comes up when her visitor reminds her that she is, in a certain sense, undoubtedly a bigger star *right now* than, say, Meryl Streep. His rationale for this statement, which startles Donna, is that tens of millions of Americans welcome her into their homes every Thursday night, and there is absolutely no question that, when confronted

with photos of Streep and Mills together, more citizens would recognize the latter, just as more recognize Selleck than Redford, or Carson than anyone.

Donna's blue eyes bulge. "Ohmigod," she exclaims, "*how frightening!* And I don't even *feel* like a star. There are still stars *I* want to meet, people like Baryshnikov — and Eddie Rabbitt. I guess I won't feel like I deserve stardom until I do something of long-lasting worth. I'd like to do the kind of work whose quality *I* admire."

Her visitor asks this Lady of the '80s how she'd like to be remembered *after* the '80s. She pauses, considering. "I think I'd like people to say: 'She was a good actress. She did good work, quality work, both as an actress and as a producer. And she did good *works*, using whatever public abilities she had in order to influence people for the common good.'"

"She's a real citizen," Larry Thompson has said of Donna. "She's the quintessential '80s woman, both as an actress and as a person. Donna will have staying power in this town, because her life and the characters she plays are both steeped in reality. She has the talent, the discipline and the determination it takes to succeed, and you can see the result. *Her track record speaks for itself.*"

While listening to Donna Mills speak for herself, the visitor reminisces over actress-interviews past. At one time, he knows, an actress would have been expected to gush to a reporter about her pet ocelot, her diamond-soled pumps, her collection of vintage Bentleys.

In the '80s (thank God!), no one gets away with such nonsense. Women are a lot more like *people* than they used to be, and they're expected to live their own lives and to be accountable for their own words and actions, just like anybody else.

Donna Mills, actress and professional, is just what we expect of '80s women (which is to say, what we expect of people in general). She has taken on the tough job of living by and through herself. She has reached a certain age and level of awareness, and she is putting her experience and awareness to work by making decisions that will determine the course of her life and career.

The odds are excellent that those decisions will prove to be the right ones. ★