

How Donna Mills Broke All the Rules



The actress, best known for playing one of TV's most devious drama queens on *Knots Landing*, has found happiness offscreen by following her own unconventional path

By KARA WARNER

Photographs by AUSTIN HARGRAVES

A Force of Nature
The actress (at her Beverly Hills home in March) says she is still full of energy. "I feel I'm always moving forward."

HAIR: SERENA RADZEL/CLUTIER MAKE UP: JAMES MCGAHON/CLUTIER SET DESIGN: DANE JOHNSON/ALTER MANAGEMENT STYLING: HEIDI MEERS/HE WALK GROUP

Donna Mills started dreaming early. “As a kid, I used to lie in bed at night and imagine myself accepting the roses at curtain calls,” she says, seated in a shady spot of her Beverly Hills home’s sprawling backyard. (There’s a tennis court, a pool and, yes, a vineyard on the property.)

After five decades in Hollywood, Mills is still living the dream—on-camera, front and center. “It always felt that’s where I’m supposed to be,” says the actress, who made her name playing iconic ’80s vixen Abby Fairgate on the *Dallas* spinoff *Knots Landing*. Mills, 81, will soon hit the big screen in Jordan Peele’s upcoming thriller *NOPE* (in theaters July 22). “I can’t say anything about it, but it was really great,” she says of working with the Oscar-winning *Get Out* director. “And Jordan is the nicest person in the world.”

Born and raised on the northwest side of Chicago, Mills began her career as a dancer before pivoting to acting. “Dance is the basis of everything that I’ve done,” she says. Early roles on the daytime soap *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing* in the ’60s and as Clint Eastwood’s girlfriend in his 1971 directorial debut, *Play Misty for Me*, eventually led her to the famous cul-de-sac where she went down in TV history as one of the all-time great prime-time villains. Unlike her four-times-married *Knots* alter ego, Mills never said “I do,” though the mother of one (daughter Chloe, 27) has been with her partner Larry Gilman since 2001.

As for her ageless beauty, Mills says, “It’s a matter of personal pride that I want to look as good as I can. But also, once you have fans, you don’t want to disappoint them.” It’s not just daily exercise that keeps her eternally youthful. It’s a life well-lived—on her terms. She talked to *People* about the ways in which she’s forged her own path.



She Can Still Rock Her ’80s Style

Mills’s vintage wardrobe, which she wears on special occasions, looks as stunning as it did decades ago. “I have a big storage space with incredible clothes,” she says of her collection, which includes classic Escada. “If you know Escada, you know the workmanship, the tailoring, everything’s so wonderful. They’re still in pristine condition.”



don’t do starches. I eat mostly proteins and vegetables. I love vegetables, which I grow—kale and arugula, tomatoes. My greatest pleasure in life is eating it right off the vine. I’m not a good cook. The only thing that I make that’s good is cheesecake. For skin care, the main thing is stay out of the frickin’ sun! It makes such a difference. And somebody asked me, ‘Why don’t you get [cosmetic enhancements]?’ No, because I’m not going to look like a duck. I’d rather have lines than a duck bill.”

She is and always has been happily unwed.

“I never felt pressured to get married. I had different boyfriends for a long time. But I never got married. It’s my choice. I was the exception, not the rule in that. People would ask me, ‘Why aren’t you married? Why don’t you want to get married?’ Because I’m independent. I don’t need to.”

She became a first-time mom in her 50s, adopting daughter Chloe as an infant.

“I was very concentrated on my career, but at a certain point I realized there was something missing—it was a child. So I went after it. By that time, I was 54, and people said, ‘You’re going to be so old [to] have a little toddler running around.’ I never felt that. I never felt older than the other mothers, who were probably in their 20s. If you want to give to your career, I say having a child later in life is better than having a child early.”

And then for 18 years she barely acted—by choice.

“I didn’t work. Well, the first couple of years, I did

work. I did some movies for television and stuff like that, because I could take her. But then, when she started school, I wasn’t going to go out of town for two months at a time. I didn’t become a mother to give her to a nanny.”

Proving the old adage “It’s never too late,” she returned to acting full-time in her 70s and hasn’t stopped since.

“The thing about acting is you don’t have to quit. There’s always older people in movies and television. It’s really been a wonderful thing and continues to be.” ●

‘Look for roles that say something to women’



A Good Girl Gone Bad

Stirring Up Trouble

Mills (with costar Ted Shackelford) relished playing villainous Abby Fairgate on *Knots Landing* from 1980 to 1989. After she’d played so many victims, she says, “that part gave me a lot of strength.”



Damsel in Distress

“He was sensitive and cognizant of a woman’s feelings,” Mills says of Clint Eastwood, her costar in 1971’s *Play Misty for Me*.



Mills never wanted to be America’s sweetheart; she craved the empowerment of being bad onscreen.

“Before *Knots Landing*, I was Ms. Goody Two-shoes. I played the victim, always. I was either being chased or raped. And it’s the reason I wanted that part so badly—that’s not going to happen to this person. It felt good to me. Abby had vulnerabilities and emotions, but the audience only got to see them when she was alone. I thought it was genius the way they did it.”

Her secret to aging gracefully: no to cosmetic procedures, yes to natural lines and mindful eating.

“I usually work out every day. Having been a dancer, I have my ballet bar in a little gym upstairs, and I just got a Peloton for my birthday. I do weight training and a lot of stretching. I’ve always been a healthy eater. I don’t eat sugar. I don’t eat pasta. I

Strong Bond

“She’s divine,” says Mills of daughter Chloe (with her in 2020). “We see each other at least once a week.”



Perfect Pairing

Mills says she and longtime love Larry Gilman (above, in 2012) work well because “we both do our own things.”

