



Principled, intelligent and talented, Frances Farmer was never one to play by the rules but her rebellion would cost her dearly, recalls Steve O'Brien

Fallen Angel



DID YOU KNOW?
Frances Farmer has been the subject of various songs, including Nirvana's *Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle*, *Everything But The Girl's Ugly Little Dreams* and Culture Club's *The Medal Song*.

The year is 1936 and the movie *Come and Get It* has made its lead actress Frances Farmer Hollywood's newest and brightest star. Critics and audiences are raving about this 23-year-old Seattleite, with Photoplay magazine calling her performance "sensationally brilliant" and influential gossip columnist Louella Parsons predicting that Farmer will become "the next Greta Garbo".

Except it didn't end up like that. Today, Frances Farmer is remembered more for her colourful off-screen exploits than for her once-promising career. Drink and drugs certainly played their part in derailing the life of Frances Elena Farmer, but attitude played its part too. Los Angeles has always been a town of insincerity and sycophancy, where it's safer, politically and socially, to say what people want to hear, than what you really think. But Frances Farmer had no filter. If she thought something was rubbish, which she frequently did, boy, did she let people know. And that made her not just unpopular in Hollywood, but dangerous too.

That pugnacious streak of Farmer's was evident even as a kid. She courted controversy when she was a senior at West Seattle High School, penning an essay titled 'God Dies' where she laid out her Nietzsche-influenced views on religion. A burningly intelligent teenager, she was a member of the debate team and the creative writing club, contributing short stories and poetry to the school's literary magazine.

She arrived in Hollywood in 1935, but would soon become disillusioned by the commercial treadmill of the studio

system. She openly clashed with director Rowland V. Lee on the set of 1937's *The Toast of New York*, after her character was extensively rewritten, while *Come and Get It*'s director William Wyler said of her: "The nicest thing I can say about Frances Farmer is that she is unbearable." When questioned by one journalist about her experiences in Hollywood, she answered, "It's a nuthouse."

Farmer had always been a keen drinker, but her alcohol intake began to escalate in the Forties, leading to an arrest for drink driving in 1942. Farmer couldn't even be questioned without picking a fight, telling the arresting officer, "You bore me!" She was fined \$500 and sentenced to 180 days in jail, suspended. A few months later, with half the fine still outstanding, a warrant was issued for her arrest. In January 1943, police tracked the actress down to LA's Knickerbocker Hotel, where they found her naked and inebriated. At the police station she was asked what her occupation was. Her answer? "C***sucker."

She was sentenced to 180 days in jail. In court, Farmer threw an inkwell at the judge and punched a police officer, telling the jury, "Listen, I put liquor in my milk, I put liquor in my coffee and in my orange juice. What do you expect me to do, starve to death?"

Through the efforts of her sister-in-law, however, Farmer avoided jail time and was instead sent to the psychiatric ward of Los Angeles General Hospital on January 20, transferring to the Kimball Sanitarium, a minimum-security psychiatric institute in the San Fernando Valley, a few days later.

It would be nine months until she was released into the guardianship of her mother. Freedom would be short-lived, however, and in 1944, Lillian Farmer had her daughter sectioned for a second time. Three months later, she was out, but again, not for long. When Frances Farmer was admitted for a third time, in May 1945, she would remain institutionalised for almost five years.

FREEDOM FINALLY

Life at a psychiatric hospital at that time was brutal. "They don't have means for individual psychiatric care, there are only so many beds available," Farmer said in 1958. "I stood in line with 15 or 20 girls like myself, in the hospital for one reason or another. We received shots, or hydrotherapy baths, or electric shock treatment. I don't blame the hospital at all, but I don't think it helped me much."

On March 23, 1950, at her parents' request, Farmer was paroled back into her mother's care and was formally discharged a year later. With her freedom restored, the one-time movie star took a job sorting laundry at the Olympic Hotel in Seattle, the same hotel which had, 14 years before, hosted the world premiere of *Come and Get It*.

Eventually, she returned to stage acting and, in her final years, fronted a local television programme, *Frances Farmer Presents*. The one-time 'God Dies' author even found religion in later life, converting to Roman Catholicism in 1968. Sadly, a lifetime of fast living would catch up with her, and she was diagnosed with esophageal cancer, dying on August 1, 1970, aged 56.

Though her tumultuous life may be more talked about than her work, 51 years after her death, Frances Farmer is justly celebrated as a true tinseltown rebel, a principled and burningly intelligent free spirit who refused to play the Hollywood game. As one trade paper put it at the time, Frances Farmer was "a 'no' girl in a 'yes' town".

Frances Farmer as spurned singer Lotta Morgan in *Come and Get It* (far left). She also played Lotta's daughter, who becomes the object of affection for the man who rejected Lotta 10 years earlier. Frances' brushes with the law led to stays in psychiatric hospitals (left).