



Paul Lynde
1926-1982

The Gay Life of a HOLLYWOOD SQUARE

A Conversation With Comedian Paul Lynde

by Boze Hadleigh

Illustrations by Kris Kovick

Paul Lynde became a household word on the original "The Hollywood Squares." He starred in and dominated, via his central square and un-square wit, some dozen of the 16 years of the series, considered by many TV's all-time favorite game show. Lynde was described by pal Alice Ghostley as "amiably crotchety." "Squares" host Peter Marshall called him "the funniest man I've ever known, and in this business, I've known thousands."

Lynde was discovered in a 1952 show that introduced the likes of Eartha Kitt, Mel Brooks, Ronnie Graham, and Alice Ghostley. In *Bye Bye Birdie*, Lynde wowed Broadway, then got to reprise his role in the hit movie version. However, his film career languished, though he did two films with Doris Day—one less than Rock Hudson. Lynde also turned up in the camp classic *Beach Blanket Bingo*, opposite the 1960s' ideal hetero couple, Frankie and

Annette.

But, to his utter amazement, it was Paul, not Frankie, who went on "Hollywood Squares," and found that his subsequent stage appearances were sell-outs. Elsewhere on TV, Lynde was less successful, with numerous failed pilots. He finally played a paterfamilias in his own, short-lived "The Paul Lynde Show."

In 1978, *Talk* magazine asked me to interview Lynde, who was instantly ready, willing, and agreeable. The resultant piece was titled "Now I Love Me!" Like similar articles at the time, it briefly circumvented Paul's "bachelorhood" by noting that, like Mae West, he felt, "I'm single because I was born that way" (West, however, had contractually wed).

The first thing I noticed in Lynde's home above Sunset Boulevard was his taste. We sat on a Recamier chaise lounge, the tape-recorder between us. The living room of the Mediterranean-style home was blue and white. Sunshine flooded the place, lending what Paul called "a Doris Day ambiance." He waggled his head, but in repose, his tanned face was actually handsome. It was difficult to picture him as the fat, unhappy youth he said he'd had to grow to love.

After the *Talk* questions were covered, I asked some others of personal interest. The campier and more honest Paul Lynde appeared after both sides of the tape had been used up. He was unusually candid, partly because he knew that his statements, and the individuals mentioned, would not find their way into pages edited by women and men afraid of lawsuits and of the truth that well over ten percent of Hollywood's performers are homosexual.

Q: Such a beautiful home you have. Do you ever get lonely?

A: There's a difference between being alone and being lonely. I guess it's an old cliché, but when you're young, you always want to be on the go, around someone all the time. I'm not saying I prefer to be alone, but now I can enjoy it. And if I were involved with someone, I'd want time and space to myself, which might sound selfish, but would be essential.

Q: Do you have hobbies? Or time for them?

A: Telling little jokes—that's a kind of hobby. For instance: I have a very, very rich friend. He even has a roll of one-dollar bills...

Q: What's unusual about having a roll of one-dollar bills?

A: In his *bathroom*?

Q: Very good! Speaking of rooms, do you spend much time in the second-smallest room in the house?

A: My closet? (*titters*) No, strike that. *Please!* Oh, you mean the kitchen! Yes. I'm a life-long dieter, but I feel very secure in a kitchen with a big refrigerator with very little in it.

Q: As for relationships, do you think being a busy performer discourages long relationships?

A: Oh, absolutely. I worked 24 hours-a-day to make sure that the loves of my life *didn't* work. I don't know, maybe I shouldn't say this, but hate is very close to love, and many people live in hate, in so-called loving relationships, with contracts and everything, but they can't stand the sight of each other. I couldn't, or wouldn't, live that way.

Q: Are female stars harder to work with than male ones?

A: All stars have hard-ons about themselves....Now, then...

Q: Alice Ghostley is so funny; she has many of your mannerisms. I've always thought of her as a female Paul Lynde. I remember her best from "Bewitched" and Julie Andrews' variety series.

A: Oh, Alice is a pearl. A real gem. And the stories she could tell you about Miss Julie Andrews! (*covers mouth with hand*)

Q: Julie isn't Mary Poppins, is she?

A: Well, you know what [Hollywood columnist] Joyce Haber says about her—she makes General Patton look like Pollyanna.

Q: You know what was so funny? Your drag scene in *The Glass Bottom Boat*, one of my favorite comedies. You looked so uncomfortable and antsy in that gown and red wig!

A: Not *that* uncomfortable, dear. (*winks*) Actually, my dress was more expensive than any of the ones Doris [Day] had to wear. That day I came in fully dressed and coiffed, I was the belle of the set! Everybody went wild! Doris came over and looked me up and down, and told me, "Oh, I'd never wear anything that feminine."

Q: You were also hilarious as the funeral director in *Send Me No Flowers*, with Doris Day and Rock Hudson.

A: Wasn't that fabulous? Those were some of my best lines in any movie.

Q: Was Rock Hudson any fun to work with?

A: Not on the set. The guy was—maybe I shouldn't say this—he was mentally constipated. Real tight-ass. I suppose anyone in his shoes would have to be, but he didn't seem a very happy man.

Q: You mean because he had to repress his own sexuality all



Doris Day & Rock Hudson

Agnes Moorehead



the time?

A: Well, *yes*. What a pain in the ass! It's a tremendous price to pay, but apparently it suits Rock.

Q: Wasn't Tony Randall in all three of those Rock Hudson/Doris Day movies? He was funny, too, but in a much more low-key way. I think it took television to bring him really out.

A: Oh, honey, it would take a miracle to bring that man really out...His thing is to act one way, like everybody's nellie uncle, then mention his wife in every other sentence. He was closer to Rock than I was.

Q: Let's see: you were also in a movie with Debbie Reynolds...?

A: *Yes (sourly)*. *How Sweet It Is*. Her and James Garner. They were nice enough; the movie

stank. We did make it on an ocean liner, on the way to Acapulco. Jerry Paris, the director, wrote it on-board, each day. We all had fun, but no wonder it stank.

At night, we'd sit around and dish. Jerry told me those rumors that everybody's heard about Debbie and her *close friend* Agnes Moorehead. Well, the whole world knows Agnes was a lesbian—I mean classy as hell, but one of the all-time Hollywood dykes. I'd heard those rumors, but Jerry filled in some details that...Oh, I'd better not; I'm not even sure if the story's really true. [Eddie Fisher, Debbie's first husband, had announced his intention to include the story in his memoirs, until Reynolds threatened a lawsuit.]

Q: You know, I vaguely remember "The Paul Lynde Show," mostly because it was set in my hometown, Santa Barbara.

nett, Dean Martin...

A: Yes, yes. But I always wanted to have my own show. Oh, but you know what was marvelous? Jack Benny sent me a note once, after I did Carol Burnett—she's nice, too. It was so complimentary, so lovely... but ya know, we could never have worked together. It wouldn't work—too lavender, with two old queens together. It's a shame, though.

Q: The official Benny biography is Mary Livingstone's project...

A: Yes, the truth about *that* will be a long time coming. I mean the truth always does get out, even officially. But look how long it takes—look at Cole Porter.

Q: It takes longer when the individual was particularly popular.

A: God, yes.

Q: Now who do you think is quite funny? Comedians, I mean.

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A: Yes. (*waggles*) It was kind of based on "All In the Family," only we had someone who looked like a human being for my son-in-law. I was no Archie Bunker, though—the guy didn't have a mean bone, just cranky. The actor who played my son-in-law was real nice, too. I had a wife, two daughters, the whole bit. Oh, well, that's TV for you!

Q: You've certainly been on everybody's show—Carol Bur-

A: Well...Richard Deacon [of "The Dick Van Dyke Show"] is very amusing, in his deadpan way. He's so one-note, you'd never *guess* about *him*. Stop me if I'm shocking you, sonny! But if you've hung around Hollywood, you've *heard* who's gay—what else do they talk about at cocktail parties? Cock-sizes and big deals. And who's sleeping with who and why. It all boils down to sex and



deals....What were we talking about?

Q: Who you think is funny...

A: I'm sorry, I just think the sisters *are* funnier. Outsiders develop humor as a defense, but they also think funnier. If you're on the inside, you can *afford* to be more shallow. Why do you think most of the comedians and also the composers are gay or Jewish? It's a defense, a refuge—laughter and music. So, to round off this list I have to say another deadpan character actor, Richard Haydn. I mean he's best-known as that gay old uncle in *The Sound of Music*, but he's done a million and one things. Oh, of course: and Billy De Wolfe. Now he was on Doris' TV series, and he was priceless! He's done drag and everything.

Q: Other than your drag turn in *Glass Bottom Boat*, do you have any partiality to drag?

A: No, no. Not really. It gets a guaranteed laugh, and I love

is your sexual image a big concern to you?

A: As long as I can work, I'm okay. And they like this quirky persona I've got. If they call me

sionally. But ya know, it's the quality of life that's important, and at my age I can honestly say that. Today I'm thin, successful, I'm far more confident, and I truly mean it. I think, regardless of whether you're a celebrity or not, if you can honestly say that the recent years you've lived through have been the best so far, then you *are* doing something right! ▼

Outsiders develop humor as a defense; why do you think most of the comedians are gay or Jewish?

that, but no. Women's clothes are so *tedious*. Not to mention the hair and makeup. They're crazy to put up with it. I guess men just don't like women the way they already look. Besides, the only transvestite I know is a married man—not gay—and he does it so he can make it with his wife. He can't, otherwise.

Q: On "Hollywood Squares" your quips are often quite risqué, sometimes daringly gay.

nellie, okay, so long as they call me. You'd have to be a moron not to guess that I'm not a heterosexual, by my age. Best of all, the young people love me. They're my biggest audience. That's extremely comforting to a young man in his early fifties.

Q: How big a concern is aging?

A: For a man, it's big. For a comic—a comedian, a droll—not so big. Not big at all, profes-

Boze Hadleigh is the author of Conversations with My Elders (St. Martin's), a collection of interviews with six gay men of cinema. This interview with Paul Lynde is from his forthcoming book, Celebrity Gaze. Hadleigh lives in West Hollywood, California.

About the artist: "Faces are my specialty," says Kris Kovick, San Francisco artist.