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An Interview with Jim Hodge

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *All That Jazz* Oral History Project.

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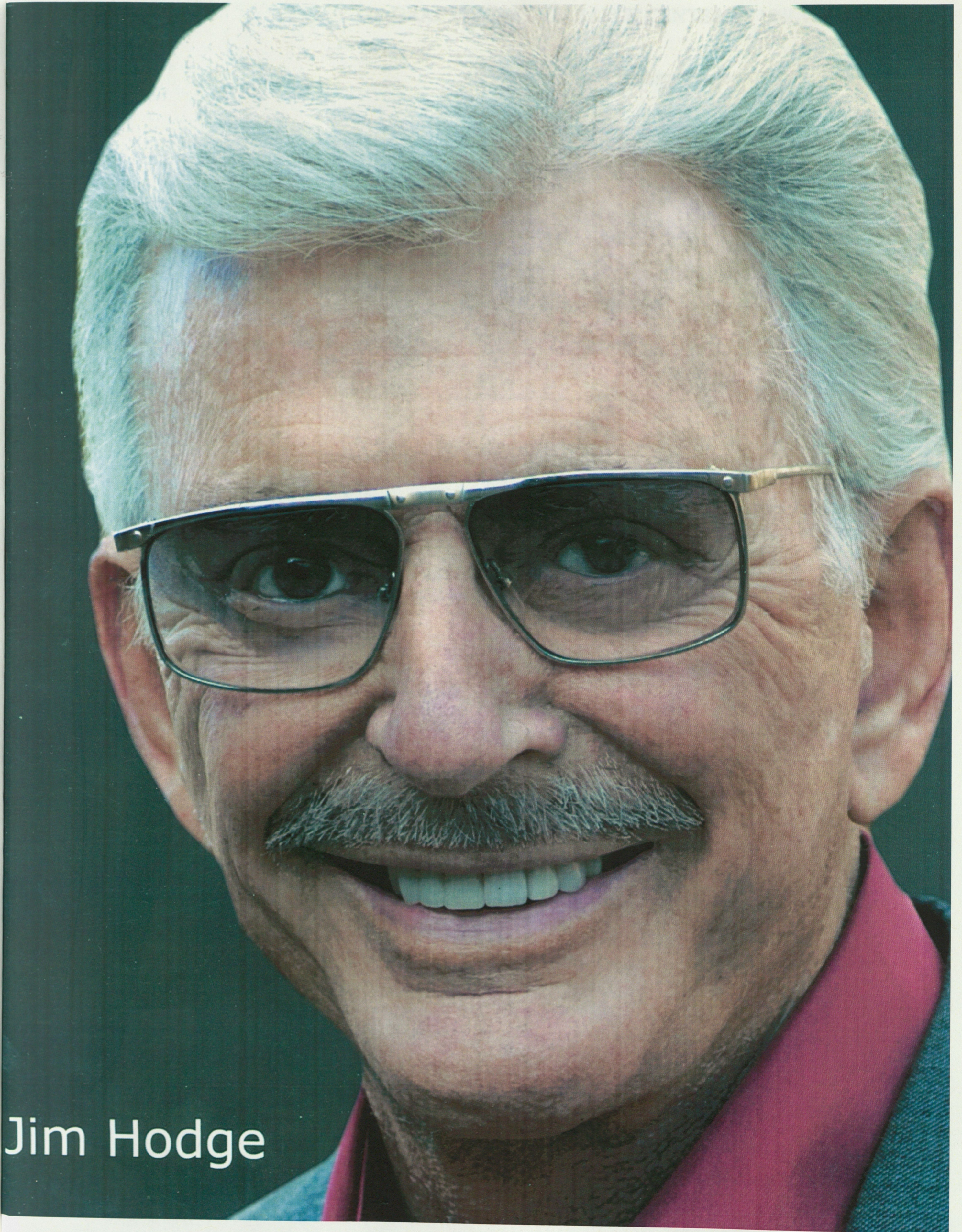
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Preface

Jim Hodge describes an active and success filled life in this narrative. Born and raised in the South, Jim enlisted in the Navy at the young age of 17, just as World War II was winding down. His primary job was that of a cook.

He became smitten with the life of an entertainer after participating in a play and headed for Hollywood in 1952. It was there that he auditioned for Donn Arden, who organized and directed Las Vegas shows. Though he didn't get the part, he did get hired to be a singer for a show featuring Betty Grable. Thus his career was launched and would span the heyday of Las Vegas entertainment from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Jim talks about the people, shows and places that touched his life. He also offers thoughts about the changes in the Vegas entertainment scene as well as shares his relationship with his church over the past 40 years.



Jim Hodge

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV

All That Jazz Oral History Project



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JIM HODGE

Name of Interviewer:

CLAYTEE D. WHITE

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Jim Hodge

Date

4/13/09

Signature of Interviewer

Claytee D. White

Date

9/13/2009

Jim Hodge

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FEATURE FILMS

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TELEVISION

Vega\$ (Detective)
The Night Stalker (Police Officer)
The Millionaire (Businessman)
Bridge Across Time (Mayor)
Unsolved Mysteries (Detective)
Julia (Highway Patrolman)

TRAINING

American Academy Of Dramatic Arts (NY)
Joseph Bernard (Las Vegas)
Madam Rosa St. Ember (Hollywood)

COMMERCIALS

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THEATRE

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Chicago (Billy Flynn)
South Pacific (Navy Captain)
Tribute (Scottie Templeton)

FEATURED SINGER

Stardust; Dunes; Tropicana; MGM Grand
New York & Miami Beach Latin Quarter
Desert Inn; Silver Slipper; Moulin Rouge
(Hollywood); Lake Tahoe; Hilton (Manila)

TALENT

Actor, Singer, Spokesman, Host, MC...

SKILLS

Tennis, Golf

This is Claytee White. It is April 13th, 2009. And I'm with Jim Hodge in his home in Las Vegas.

So how are you today, Jim?

Well, I'm just fine, thank you.

And, Jim, could you pronounce and spell your last name for me, please?

Hodge, H-O-D-G-E.

Thank you. So you were about to tell me where you grew up. Could you go ahead and tell me about that?

Well, as a real young child in Asheville, North Carolina, my dad was in the furniture business. And so he moved a little in the beginning before he got his own business. We moved to Augusta, Georgia, when I was five years old. Then at age 17—I'm trying to think—I graduated from the military academy in Augusta when I was 16. And then we had a two-year junior college, which was coed, in our military area school and I attended there for a year at which point I joined the Air Force Reserve.

At that time the war was still on—World War II. It was a training program for pilots. My brother had been a pilot -- well, he was a pilot during the war. He was older, of course. And so I went to North Carolina State for a year towards that training thing. In May of 1945, however, is when the war ended in Europe and then in August in Japan. So middle of May in Raleigh that program ended. I had until the 31st of May before I was turning 18. Therefore, I had the option of either staying in the Air Force as a ground crewman or going in the regular Army or getting out. So I got out and ran home to Chattanooga where my parents lived—where I was born, and where they used to live—both of them, and I joined the Navy just before my 18th birthday. I went off to Bainbridge, Maryland to boot camp in the Navy.

I've been a lucky person all my life—there's just no doubt about it—as witness my timing for everything. I was really young to get in all that, but just in time to get all the GI Bill rights. When I got out, which was only 15 months later because the war had ended, I came back to Chattanooga and finished my junior and senior year at the University of Chattanooga and did some little theater stuff, which got me started on a career other than the furniture business, which I also went into.

So your parents moved back from?

Augusta.

Back to Chattanooga?

While I was in North Carolina in school. And so when I had to go down -- it was a funny story. When I went down to the courthouse in Chattanooga to join the Navy, the man looked at all my records because my mother had gone home from Alabama, where they first lived, to have me born with her doctor in Chattanooga; everything said Chattanooga, Tennessee. And this man said you haven't been around much, have you? And I said for your information I didn't know my way to the courthouse. So that was my first experience there.

So how did you like Chattanooga?

Oh, I liked it very much. It's a beautiful place.

And, of course, when I came home from the war in the fall of '46, everybody was coming home. We all went to college together again. A lot of them were freshmen because they had been in for several years. I was a junior, though, because I had had those two years already. So, you know, naturally I got to know everybody in Chattanooga pretty soon.

Why did you decide on the Navy?

Well, because I didn't want to be in the Army. And the Air Corps didn't appeal to me at all if I wasn't going to be a flier. So I just thought the Navy. And I knew some friends in the Navy and so forth.

But the lucky part that I was telling you: after boot camp you have a little brief vacation and you go back to assignment unit type thing. And one other boy and myself were chosen for our IQ, which is funny because I'm not that smart, to go to Washington, D.C., to be on Admiral King's yacht. He was the head of the fleet, you know, the top admiral in the Navy. So I stayed onboard his ship, which is docked right next to (President) Truman's ship and (President) Roosevelt's. And I ended up being star struck. I got to see them and all that. Roosevelt was gone, but Truman took the ship down every weekend on cruises. And his daughter, Margaret, who was actually much better looking in person than her picture, was there. And I was always there casting off when they --

So what kind of work did you do on the ship?

I was a cook. They made me a cook because all the cooks were getting discharged. In this place—it was called the USS Dauntless. It was a luxury yacht from the Great Lakes. It belonged to the Dodge brothers, the motor people. And they confiscated it, the Navy, and painted it battleship gray and put some guns on it and docked it in the Washington, D.C. Navy yard. And the admiral lived on the yacht and went to the Pentagon and back every day. And all the men that had been on there were supposedly overseas. We had an overseas address. We got overseas pay. (That was the beginning of the government waste that I knew anything about!) So that's how, you know, I stayed there. Every other night as a cook. Everybody was getting discharged. And so I was a new sailor. And cooking is the last thing in the world I knew anything about and to this day have any interest in. But they had several Filipinos on there who were taking care of the admiral. And they taught me. I learned how to carve a whole ham and a side of beef. I cooked in these big quantities. And I love eggs soft. Well, you know in the Navy they put about a hundred eggs in the pan. Then when it's hard they turn it over. And I stood there and stirred forever because I couldn't stand it. And I spoiled all these guys. Man, these are the best eggs. That's the way you've got to cook them.

So anyway, I did that off and on for a year. Got my discharge and came back to Chattanooga just in time to go into school in September of '46. As I said, I actually was a business major, got my degree in business. But one of my teachers -- I taught a class called Speech, Voice and Diction that was one semester and the other one was Public Speaking because that always interested me. Of course, I had a thick southern accent, which I still have somewhat I'm sure. Well, anyway, I did that. And she was the drama coach also. So she put me in a play. And that sort of piqued my interest, you know.

So what was that first play?

It was called *The Devil's Disciple*. It was a George Bernard Shaw play. It was the lead (part). It was a wonderful part. And I practically ran offstage and learned the next scene and came back on. She was known for not using her drama students. She'd get somebody (who) she liked their looks or liked them and she put them in there. The drama people hated her.

But that was good for you.

Yeah, it was. So I had a wonderful time there.

Great. That's the way college should be.

Absolutely. Back then it was, really.

So what brought you to Las Vegas?

Well, my major story—which everybody that knows me knows—is that the love of my life was Betty Grable. As a kid going to the movies I was the first one there. I was mad about Betty Grable. And so actually when I was in one of those plays—the last one I was in—an actress from Hollywood came through on a tour promoting her movie, which was *Harvey* with Jim Stewart, the one with the big rabbit. She was the young pretty nurse in that. And she was a Tennessee girl. So she came home on tour and was queen of the Cotton Ball. It was very social there. This was a big deal in the summertime. And I used to escort all the debutantes and do all that stuff. And so I managed to get a date with her and we went out because obviously I wanted to. She was on a contract at Universal Studios at that time. She came to see my play. And Lord knows. Nobody ever does this, but she wrote to Hollywood on my behalf, to her studio and her manager and her agent. So I said, look, I'm going. I got out of the furniture business. I saved money for three or four months. I said I'm leaving; I'm going to Hollywood. Well, in the long run it didn't do me much good. But the fact that somebody did that for me is incredible—especially another actor. They just don't do that.

What did your parents think?

Well, they were all for it. They always have been for whatever I wanted to do. So I took off cold turkey to Hollywood in 1952, January. And I lived there till '65 when I moved here (Las Vegas). I came here early with Betty Grable, but I'll explain that.

Anyway, I wandered around. Got a job at United Airlines ticket office on Hollywood and Vine there. NBC was right down the street at that time. And Nat King Cole—all the people, came up and bought their own tickets then. I was in hog heaven; I got to meet all these people. And like I said, it didn't really do any good, but I didn't know that. I just thought it was fun.

And soon I met a girl who lived down the street from me, whose mother was trying to fix me up with her all the time. She was sort of not very pretty, poor thing, but her mother was one of those pushy mothers. One night for dinner this girl had a friend of hers there who was playing the piano and singing. And I had never sung professionally at all. But I found out who her teacher

was and I started going to this "old lady" once a week for a year or more before anything happened. And she said, darling, if you just were Jewish or Italian or something so your voice would be where it belongs, you know, I have to go down inside of you like this to get your voice up because it's so southern and laid-back like this, you know. She was the cutest thing.

So we worked on an audition that they were having at the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood at that time, which was formerly the Earl Carroll Theatre. I think maybe it's still there right across from Sunset and Vine, right there. So I went to this audition they were having. It was one from Las Vegas. And Donn Arden, the man who did all the big shows here, was conducting the audition. There were 60 men there. And four days later there were ten of us left. They kept eliminating. I thought I have a job at last, you know. This was on a Sunday. I had my girlfriend and another couple come to the audition that day. And we're standing up there on the stage like you do and they're sitting out there in the dark. He said, okay, Jim, step out and do your routine. I had a little hat and cane routine to "On the Street Where You Live" [song lyrics] that I had perfected. Finally, the last time I went out and then he'd say, well, step back in line. Then he said, listen, Jim, we really like you, but you're just too tall. He says, we need four men in this show, four singers, but they all have to be the same height and we've already picked two of them. Well, it broke my heart. I thought that's the end of it. But he said maybe I'll use you later in Las Vegas.

So I just dismissed it. And I became a stockbroker in Beverly Hills because a friend of mine had his office and I was a college graduate and all that. So I loved it. And about three or four months later he called me and said how would you like to go with Betty Grable to Las Vegas? I mean that was my first miracle in my life. He was staging her act, her first act after she got out of the movie business. She was about 40 at that time and still looked sensational. I was one of four boys, two of us this height and two a little shorter. We weren't dancers, but we were song men and moving around and lifting her and doing stuff like that. "Boys," they always called us. So I started rehearsing and met her and everything. I would have been paid to do it, you know. And I was doing this brokerage thing at that time. And I said, boys, I'm going to take off for a while. And they were as excited as I was, you know.

So to make a long story short, we rehearsed quite a bit. We opened here on New Year's Eve in 1957, December 31st. So that was the first time -- I had come here a year before with

somebody that was getting married, a friend of mine. But really I came here with her on that date for the month of January. Of course, I loved it. I loved every minute of it.

So where were you performing?

At the Desert Inn. She was a huge hit because everybody knew her and she was just out of the movies and this, that and the other thing.

Oh, yes. So 1957, the Desert Inn, what did it look like?

It looked like all the rest of them. They were like drive-ins. I mean it had a little porte-cochere that you drove under and maybe a two-story building. The Sky Room, it was called, was the second story; up there was a little nightclub where we rehearsed the night before we opened up there because they were doing something in the showroom. Jane Powell was in the showroom. It was her last night. So you've seen the pictures, mostly of the Flamingo, the early Flamingo. They had the great big porte-cochere out there and the 1950 cars all over the place. That's what they looked like.

I mean it was heaven. I loved every minute of it. From the day I got here I just knew I was home. So we worked that month. And it just killed people. Everybody loved her to death. Of course, I got a lot of good experience naturally doing it including getting to pick her up by those legs every night.

Where did you live during that month?

In a motel not far away right down from the Strip on Convention Center Drive. At that time everybody had pretty much come from out of town and we were all living around someplace for the month. Then I went back to my job in Beverly Hills.

And they allowed you to come back.

Oh, yeah. They were excited. And that's all commission stuff anyway. So you only make money if you're selling anything. I was doing very well. I got started all on the telephone.

So that was January. In March -- this is the thing. In March we were booked as the stars of the Moulin Rouge show.

Right there in Hollywood?

Right there in Hollywood. And for two weeks. And I ended up in front of the boys I lost out to because we were the star act. I'm telling you my life has been like that. But that's the concrete

examples of how I got started. And I just -- I don't know. Actually I thought it was natural. I expected things to work. That's why they did, you know.

So we did that. Then we went to Lake Tahoe for a month in the summer. And then we came back to the Desert Inn in September for another month. January we went to New York City's The Latin Quarter, which [TV journalist/personality] Barbara Walters' father [Lou Walters] owned, as well as The Latin Quarter in Miami, which we went to after that; and where our tour ended. And then we were going to Havana. That's when Castro took over.

1959.

Yes. It was February or March of '59 when we finished the act at that point. So, of course, we never got there. And so I came back and went back into the brokerage business again.

So during that time you were working pretty often -- Miami, New York. So would you go back in between to the stock brokerage?

Oh, yeah. I'd go back a month or however much time we had off.

How much were you earning in show business at that time?

Let me see. I think we made \$150 a week if I'm not mistaken, maybe 200. It was one of the two. I can't remember. But that was 1958 and 1959.

Yes, like I said, I would have paid to do it. It was just great fun. And, of course, I met all kinds of people.

Who are some of the people that impressed you most?

Well, Jane Russell, wonderful gal. She and Betty had done *How to Marry a Millionaire*. Marilyn Monroe was in it. Betty said to Marilyn I've had it, honey, it's your turn. You know, she turned it over to her. Everybody loved Betty Grable because she had this sensational sense of humor and not full of herself at all even in rehearsal. She said, well now, what is it Betty does here? Damn, I can't remember all this stuff. The night that we rehearsed up in The Sky Room at the Desert Inn, the night before we were going to open, it was about two o'clock in the morning and we were doing this stripper number, fake stripper number. She had a feather boa. And Donn Arden was trying to—Night Train was the music. He was trying to teach her to do the feather boa. And he was like, oh, my god, this is terrible; she can't do that. One, two, three, four. Well, that night on the stage she did it like she had been doing it all of her life. She was smart enough to let

everybody do everything for her because that's what they did in the movies, see. You just act dumb and they'll teach you. They'll do it for you.

So she was a really smart lady.

Oh, and just so much fun. Everybody loved Betty. And she had this sensational, raucous sense of humor. I said, you should have been a comedian. She said, oh, I did all right. Gosh, I guess so.

Yeah, she did.

Well, through her in Miami I met Martha Raye and Belle Barth and these kinds of people that she liked and the Ritz Brothers. Of course, a lot of her people that would come to see her I would say hello or something. She would be off with them or something and I didn't see that much of her. We used to lie at the Desert Inn pool in the afternoons, though, getting sun. And she kidded me because I always wanted -- when it was lunchtime she would say, oh, Jim has to eat three times a day. We better leave here now. Growing up with my mother that's the way it was always done. I was so new to real show business where they're all kind of lackadaisical about things. And she'd say after a while, well, I better go stick my face in the freezer and get ready for the show tonight.

What did that mean?

It means to shrink it up, you know, so she'd look good.

Did you have to put on special makeup before going on?

Not special makeup, just like Max Factor stuff and a little bit of eye makeup.

Do they train the men to put their own makeup on?

Not really, no. They would tell you if it was bad. But really all you do is like I say your facial stuff. I used what's called Early Egyptian because it's a nice tan look. And then you just highlight your eyebrows and your eyes a little bit and maybe a touch of rouge. Most chorus boys like that overdo it I found out.

So that the lights won't take it all away.

Yes, that's it. Of course, now I don't do eyes and all that stuff. Fortunately, I'm not being compared to somebody 12 years old.

So how did you get back to Las Vegas as a career?

Well, after [Betty's] act I came back and I—first of all, I was singing around in nightclubs in Los Angeles all that time, too, before I even came here. And then -- wait a minute. That was

afterwards, though. I got it mixed up. I got a job in a couple of desert resorts between here and L.A., the Apple Valley Inn and the Hesperia Inn. I was singing one night and this guy gave me his card. People gave me cards all the time. But he said I'm with a date tonight and I've had some drinks, but call me tomorrow. I thought he sounds legitimate. So I called him. It turns out he was an Apple Valley land salesman. That was a big promotional deal at that time. So he wanted me to go up there and audition. So I did. I used my Green Stamps to get a golf bag because I hadn't been playing for a long time. And I had a new Volkswagen. That's the only thing new I had. We'd go up there and I sang. And they loved it and all that. But he said, you know, Jim, they decided they wanted a woman, which naturally they loved the boobs and all that. So I thought, god, that's another waste of time.

But the day that I played my golf up there was head of DOT Records in Hollywood. Randy Wood, he was a big name in Hollywood. He and a guy from Palm Springs who was a furniture dealer were up there and a couple of other guys. That's who I played with and they were good golfers. I was a nervous wreck because I really wasn't any good. But the one guy from Palm Springs was very, very nice. And he said, listen, tonight -- because I was finished and I was going to come on home. He says tonight let's go to the Hesperia Inn. My girlfriend is working over there and I'd like for you to go over there with me for dinner. So I went over there and sang and they hired me there. And I stayed there a year. Then they hired me at Apple Valley after that again for two or three months. I mean that's the way things always went. So that took up that time.

And then I was at Bullocks Wilshire in the men's department in 1963 when Kennedy was shot. That's how I remember that. I was there then. And then the following year -- actually it was '65 when Donn Arden called me, early 65, and said I need a singer in the Lido at the Stardust. So I went over and auditioned for them. And I came back here thinking I'd be here six months. And that's 44 years ago.

Wow. But now, did Donn Arden remember?

Oh, sure he remembered me. As a matter of fact, I was not really his type. He was pretty flamboyant. And he was a chorus boy essentially, but a wonderful director for gobs of people and everything. And he used to stop me on the stage during rehearsal and he'd say, Jim Hodge, no

matter what I do with you, you still look like you. It was actually a compliment, but he didn't want you to stand out, see.

Tell me about Bullocks Wilshire. The reason I ask is because I loved that store.

Oh, yes. It was very nice. Well, I just worked in the men's department at Christmastime. And a couple of these old men that were there all the time were very territorial. But I picked up the phone one day and it was Mae West. And the man, whoever she asked for, wasn't around then. So I got to talk to her for a while. She said listen, honey, I need a few sweaters for some of my boys. And so she just said pick me out a green, a blue and send them. That's the way she wanted them. So I had fun talking to her.

Oh, that's great. Oh, but that store, the class of the store.

Oh, absolutely.

So Donn Arden calls you. And then tell me what happens.

Well, I moved up here in May—next month will be 44 years—May of 1965. And as I say I figured, well, this will be a six-month gig. The show ran for about 15 months.

Which show was that?

The Lido de Paris at that time at the Stardust. And that's when it was gorgeous, '65. Everything was -- I mean the big spectacles in the show like the swimming pools and the waterfalls and the train wrecks and all that. We were in all that in these production numbers. Again, it was like paradise to go to work at night.

So give me a typical day in 1965.

Well, I lived in an apartment. I had a roommate. I always ended up with a roommate. And we'd go to bed about four in the morning. We'd get off about 1:30 or 2:00. We had a bowling league. We went out bowling at night against every other show. We went horseback riding and all that. Parties, people would have parties often or just go to eat or whatever. And usually we would be sleeping basically between four and noon. Get up about noon and go to the gym or go swimming or what time of the year it was, depending, you know, shop a little. I started doing commercials and prints (ads). I was in every hotel brochure, you know, lying in bed or sitting in the room while they're serving and all that.

Do you have some of those photographs?

I probably do if I can find them. I'll look in a little bit. I'm not the greatest at keeping everything, but I'll show you some stuff.

I was in almost every one of them along the way. I had gotten this agent, of course, who got me those. I was doing bits and pieces in the movies and in TV when they came up here to shoot, which culminated, that part of my life, in 1985 when they shot [the movie] *Rocky IV* here and I was in that. And I'm still getting paid for it. That's 23 years ago. Yeah, that was the best thing.

I worked a week, if you can call it work. I was the announcer in the ring. And the two men that announced the show all the time, they were sitting offstage. They're in every one of those. I was sitting right to next of one of them for a whole week, but you never saw me. But then on Friday, which was July the 3rd -- and we were hoping it would go into Saturday, July the 4th. It would have been quadruple time and all that stuff. But finally on Friday afternoon they called my scene. And you can see me...when the big Russian knocked out Apollo Creed and killed him actually in the ring. You can see me going through the people in the background going up there. But then I had my only full screen close-up. I put the microphone to the big Russian -- he was actually a Swede -- in his face. I forget what I even said to him. But I got a big close-up and got screen credit and all that.

So that was in July of 1985. And this is April of 2009. I just got a check for three or 400 weeks about last week. Now, every time it shows you get paid. And it's not all that much each time. But they sell it quite often in bulk to supermarkets or they sell it in overseas markets. And then you get a nice little chunk. Isn't that amazing?

I'm going to write to the Screen Actors Guild and try to find out exactly -- I never did keep track of how much money I made. But I want to find out just for the heck of it. Plus, that got me a pension and my secondary insurance after Medicare. So that's the beauty of it all.

So those are the kinds of things you would do during the day. How much rehearsal did you have to do?

Very little, only if somebody new came in the show. And even then that didn't affect us too much, the four boys -- I mean the three boys in the Lido at that time. There were three singers and we each had our own things to do. At that time we worked seven nights a week, too, you know. And

at the end of the month we would get a couple nights off. And nobody was ever sick because you were docked if you got sick. I loved the way they ran it back then because we were all young and it was easy. I was 38. I was the oldest one in the place. But they didn't -- well, some of them knew it. I wasn't hiding it. Just as I say I got a late start into this. These people had been studying singing and dancing since they were ten or 12 and were in the show in the early 20s or mid 20s and all that. So I was the old man in the thing.

So tell me what your part was like in Lido. Do you remember any of your songs?

Yes. I did "Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow." It was a snowing scene and I was in a ski outfit and so forth with a girl. We sang and moved around. I don't remember exactly. And I was a Chinese emperor in another number.

Chinese?

Yes. It was a big Chinese number.

A little tall, were you?

Well, on the stage it didn't look that tall. Oh, and the funny bit with Donn Arden. When I went to audition for him after being with Betty, as I said I wasn't really his type. He was always saying, well, I don't know about you and all that stuff, but he hired me anyway. It was the first professional stuff don't forget, too. And I was not that great. In Betty's act we had to sing in her keys, which wasn't that great. My voice every now and then would crack a little because it wasn't comfortable for me. So he let it go anyway. So when I went back to audition for him, fortunately that day that I auditioned I had done a show another the Beverly Hilton hotel, a fashion show. And it was like James Bond. I was in an overcoat and a cap walking on the ramp. And all the girls, when they were flashing, it was a bathing suit thing, see. And I was singing whatever. I don't remember. So from that I went to his house that afternoon. And he was known for just cutting you to shreds. He was not a nice person. He'd cut you down. Well, you looked like hell, you know, and all that kind of stuff. But he says, well, I see you've been working. I said, oh, yeah. He wasn't going to bother me that day. So that's when he hired me to go back to the Lido. My solos and stuff were -- oh, what I was going to say was that day at the audition -- everybody loves this because he said, well, now you've got to drop your pants. I'll need to see your legs. I said, oh, god. But he says you're doing a Roman number and you're in a toga and that's why. And

I thought okay. So sure enough I did. That's what we did. I probably have a picture of that somewhere.

That would be great.

It was a lovely number. As I say they had an actual train wreck on the stage. I was in it, but I forget what I did in that.

So how many shows per night?

Two a night and three on Saturday we did.

And this is seven days a week.

Seven days a week.

So what times was the show?

Eight and 12. And Saturday night was eight and I think maybe 11 and one or something like that. Yeah, it was two o'clock when we got out of there, 1:30 or 2:00. But the third show on Saturday night was a drag. But other than that it was fun.

And did people come to all those shows? Did they come to a one o'clock show on the weekends?

Oh, sure. Yeah. Yeah. The Lido was almost always packed. And other thing I learned if the moon was full we'd have the weirdest audiences. I never paid any attention to that kind of thing. But if it was a weird night everybody would say don't you realize it's a full moon. And sure enough, I can't explain it, but there seemed to be an unrest or something in the audience and it's just not the usual way of responding and everything else. It was weird.

Wow. So after the Lido, what did you do?

Well, I was in the Lido 15 months, was the first show. And then he started rehearsal on the second show. Back then the shows only lasted a year or a year-and-a-half, and they made a whole new show, which they don't now. So in the next one he hired—let's see, about seven singers. And he said—because he was a dancer don't forget—he said, all right, this time the singers are all going to dance and the dancers are going to sing. So we weren't featured so much. See, that was the whole thing. He even put us upstairs in the dressing room with the boy dancers. We had our own downstairs before with the other principals. He was like that. And then he did not give me a number. He gave all the nice numbers to the other people. But I was the swing boy because I was

the only one that could do them all. So when it was someone's night off, I'd take their spot and do that. So I did have that.

But after about six weeks the boy who was the lead singer at the Dunes in the Casino de Paris got ill. We were making 300 a week at that time. He was making 500 and he got very ill. Oh, and the first year I was there during that Lido thing, talking about luck, one of the boy singers and I went to the university and studied French. I was already a graduate; I just audited the course, because we were with all those French girls and we learned to speak French, see. So I ran into Frederic Apar, who was at the Dunes, between shows. And I got a guy to come play the piano for me at the audition. He says how is your French? And I said, well, I can speak a little. I had to sing in French. I wouldn't have known how to do it. I sang a Maurice Chevalier number. And the presentation at the Dunes was that -- I don't know if you ever saw it back then -- oh, I have a picture of that -- the stage. It has a huge stairway that comes out of the ceiling about three stories high. It's all sparkly and everything. The girls are down on the floor and I start at the top in tails singing and snapping my fingers. Every time I snap these great big balls of feathers come up and there's a showgirl on either side of me. And that's the way I make my way down the stairs singing in French. So it was pretty spectacular. And the picture of it caught it just right.

And a couple of years later, maybe three or four years later, I went back and auditioned for Donn again. He's notorious for: if you ever leave him, that's it. But I had also grown my mustache then, which was no biggie. He had me come back the next day probably just to tease me, you know. And then he says are you willing to shave your mustache and take orders? I said, well, of course, I am, Donn. He never hired me. And he said I saw you in the Dunes by the way and you looked like hell. So that was just Donn, you know.

When we were in Miami with Betty that last thing we did, there was an adagio act, a guy that lifted the girl and everything. And they had a low ceiling in that theater. It wasn't very conducive to that. So the guy was always kind of at odds and out of sorts anyway because it was hard to do. And those guys, Donn never liked them because he wasn't really in charge of them. You know, he was with the show people. When he got drunk, that was his main problem. He'd come backstage drunk and everybody would try to get out of his way because he was just crazy. But this one time he got onto this guy about something. The guy just socked him against the wall

and he spilled down the wall like a cartoon character.

Oh, everybody loved it. And, god, Donn even loved it. He was a masochist. He just floated down that wall like a cartoon. So that was one of the nice things we enjoyed. There are so many things that happened.

How many shows do you remember performing in here, Lido and the Casino de Paris?

Well, the Lido was about 1500. The Dunes—oh, so I got that job at the Dunes and I went over there in December. I was only in the new Lido show a couple of months, you see, when I left. That's why Donn -- you can't leave --

So did you leave in the middle of the show, in the middle of Donn's second show?

Oh, yeah. It had just started six or eight weeks. But he wouldn't give me a number or anything and wasn't treating me very well. Then I had a chance to make 500 a week and (be) the only singer in the show. So I gave notice and left. Well, of course, he hated it.

So I went there and I stayed about six months. So that would have been, say, about 800 shows I guess. And Frederic had hired one of the boy dancers from the Casino. Every summer they did Viva le Girls up in Lake Tahoe, as well as the one that was running here at the Dunes in the lounge. That was known as the finest lounge show ever because they spent a ton of money on it back then. And it was beautiful and everything else. So he says I'm not happy with my singer in Lake Tahoe. I want you to go up there. So we went up there together and sat and watched the show. And he says you see, he is not elegant. I want you elegant. I said okay. I never thought of myself that way. So he bought me my first tuxedo and paid for my act. I got my own spot to do three songs. They fixed the charts and everything. Of course, I got a raise. So I spent the summer up there doing that. And that was a kick because it was the first time I got to do my own thing by myself, you know, too.

And my roommate, who was in the Lido show at that time after me, not at the same time, he came up on his day off to see me, though, and brought a Basset Hound. He had always had Bassets and he found this one -- not this one here at that time. He came up to see the show. And that night he said to me after the thing was over, he said, I'll be damn. He said you look like you've been doing that forever and you got away with it. You're telling jokes and everything just like you were Bob Hope. And I said, well, I thought that's what you're supposed to do. So that

was my first thing of having some idea that I could get away with doing that kind of stuff. I didn't think of getting away with it. I thought that's what you do. But a lot of chorus people can't do that. They just freeze when they get by themselves. So that worked out nice.

And then we went to Vancouver and played up there for a month. We followed The Supremes in a place called The Cave, which is a famous place in Vancouver. It used to be a nightclub and looks exactly like a cave when you get in it and everything. And the highlight of that, if you can call it that, was -- did you ever hear of the Bernard Brothers?

No.

Well, that was a comedy act that had been around forever. They were a really funny comedy act in drag. They did it in drag. So they were the stars of the show everywhere they went. They were our stars up there. On Saturday night I came down and sang the finale, the opening. And there we had no backstage. You had to go up some stairs -- and upstairs was your dressing room and everything -- and back down the other side. I go up there and they had just finished. And a woman took a picture of them, the greatest picture ever. I walked upstairs and he dropped dead, one of them. Just as I came up there this wardrobe lady was having such a fit. And he was turning blue on the floor and all this stuff in a crazy little, silly little apron, one of the costumes they had. So I ran back downstairs and asked for a doctor and stuff. But he was gone. The next day was Sunday. We were planning to go to Victoria Island that day, the whole cast, just for the fun of it. Instead the boy that had been studying the act to replace the other man who wanted to get out came up and replaced this one and the show went on Monday night like nothing ever happened. And George got buried, of course, along the way. Just those kinds of things happened. The old "show must go on" thing, you know.

So that's really true.

Yeah.

Where else did you perform on the road at that point?

Well, not much on the road, fortunately. That was about it. And then I came back here. And I went into the Bonanza. You know, where the MGM was and now Bally's. Well, the Bonanza hotel -- a good friend of mine who I had grown up with in Chattanooga in the meantime had gone to New York. He was a comedy writer. He put together this revue called "Like It Is." It was a

revue. And he brought it out here. I got him introduced to show it and they hired us. I was a singer and comedy stuff in this revue called "Like It Is." It was numbers that were contemporary. It was 1970. So it was Bob, Carol, Ted and Alice—there was a movie by that same name.

And then the thing that came out of that – my friend wrote and did industrial shows, you know, for the big companies, which was a big thing back in the 50s, 60s and 70s. They traveled all over. I went to Chicago as a, quote, assistant producer just to see the show one time. He had me in "Mr. Peanut." a show about Planter's Peanuts. He would write it like it was a Broadway musical. He had this gal, sort of an Auntie Mame type, who was always his leading lady. And so she was with us at the Bonanza. She got hired by Frederic Apcar to star in "Viva le Girls" across the street from the Dunes. The big number was "I'm the Oldest Living Showgirl in Las Vegas" that Bob had written. It was a really funny thing. Of course, she came out draggy looking; she looked a little like that anyway. She was kind of over the hill. So that was another trademark thing, see. But everybody knew that.

And then let's see. Oh, then I went to the lounge in the Tropicana, Blue Room. A friend of mine was a pianist here—everybody knew him, too, forever. He has since passed away. But he had put together this act with these two girls and a guy, but they didn't like the guy. He wasn't doing right. So I was put me into that, which didn't suit me that well. It was a gig for a month, and we played at the Tropicana Blue Room, opposite Cugat and Charo. Talking about the red-headed stepchildren—we had an organist and a drummer and that was our music. And when Cugat and Charo would go off, the place would empty out and we'd have about 45 minutes practically of nobody until they started coming back in for their next show. So we learned to mark time and save our good material till the very end. I hated that month. It wasn't very much fun.

I can image.

Next Barry Ashton hired me at the Silver Slipper.

What was the Silver Slipper like?

Oh, it was a big thing here. It was a joint.

Everybody knows "The Shoe."

Yes. Well, it was a cowboy kind of a place, you know, as the Bonanza was, too. The Bonanza was a little bit higher class, if you want to call it that. But the Slipper, everybody loved it. It was

down-home right next to the Stardust there and the Frontier. That's where it was.

There I was a straight man for a comic. I was dressed in tails and this baggie pants comic and I did an act together. Actually, to make a long story short: I was the singer in the show with the girls. And then this little guy about so big, Charlie Vespia, who'd been around, before the show started he was out in the audience selling peanuts and making jokes and making everybody laugh, spilling trays and all that kind of stuff. Then the show started and we came out and did our opening thing. Next the comic went off and left me there. I'm the featured singer, you see. As I started singing, he drops a tray pretty quick. Everybody starts laughing. And I'm like what the hell is this going on? So he says you think you're such a good singer? And I say who is this person? Get him out of here and all that kind of stuff. And he says I'll come up and show you how to do it. And I say, all right, if you're so smart. He comes up and he's an operatic singer. And he goes (singing). I went oh, my god. So then we end up doing a big duet and it brought the house down.

That was our act. And then I worked off and on with the comic Irving Benson on skits and stuff, too. Milton Berle was his claim to fame. He was in the balcony when Milton Berle used to have a show. He was the man in the balcony that Milton always talked to. And the guy kind of got a little name from that. But anyway, then they moved us to the Aladdin hotel when they expanded the show. So I did that for a while.

And then, I haven't thought of all this for a long time, this friend of mine who had been here as a dancer, who I hardly knew him, knew another friend of mine, who called me from L.A. He said would you like to do some traveling? I said, oh, yeah. So it turns out that he worked for a travel agency in Hollywood like American Express. It wasn't that one. That was another big one. But because I had done that stint at United Airlines all those years ago, that's why they hired me in September—that's their busy month and all their regular people are out. They have to take a chance on somebody, see. So I went down and met with them. And that was a minor part. But what happens is you go often to Japan. So for the next eight years I went around the world doing tours. And we'd always meet in L.A. And I would have gotten pictures and resumes of all the people. The people would have bought their tickets from different travel agencies from all over the country. And then they'd meet. And there'd usually be from 20 to 25 people. And I was their

tour manager. So I'd meet them there and kind of get acquainted. And then we'd fly to Tokyo, which is quite a long flight. I became was like a glorified nursemaid. All I had to do was make sure everything worked because the Japanese meet you and they're the guides and everything else. I'd just make sure they get everything they're supposed to get on the tour and all that. Of course, we always had fine hotel rooms and got paid. We went there. We went to Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore and Manila.

So you stepped away from show business during those years.

Well, actually I was kind of finished. Oh, I worked for a little while before that in the worst job of all. I was on the phone sales. I had to get a job. I was getting ulcers. And Barry Ashton called me and said you've been to Japan, haven't you? And I said yeah, because I had been on all my trips before that. He says, well, would you like to take a show to Tokyo for six months as a manager? And I said yes. So that's when I went there. And I took the girls on the bullet train down to Kyoto and through Japan. Up in northern Japan, we did a couple of shows up there. It was a storybook, the whole thing.

Yes. What made you decide to step away from show business?

I'm trying to think. At that time I must have been probably in my late 40s. Although my age wasn't a factor. I had done sort of what you call production singer jobs here. And then I did my own thing at the Tropicana Blue Room albeit not exactly the way I would have planned with those two girls, but it was okay.

So before Japan?

Yes, before Japan. Well, that was Barry Ashton's thing. No. That was after because '74 -- no. I know. I worked for Barry in '73 and '74. And I had taken my first tour in '71 after I finished something before -- oh, the Tropicana Blue Room thing. That's when the job offer came up about traveling. So I went in '71 and '72. And then in '73 I got a chance to audition for Barry. So I did that and I got that show. It lasted a year. Then we moved to the Aladdin for another year. So that was a nice little gig.

Oh, and then a little while after that the same comic that I didn't particularly like was doing a show at the Hacienda. So we went there. I have a picture on the wall. I'll show you that. That was the last gig of that type that I did when I was a foil for this comic. It would have been fun



ABOVE: Jim performing at Bonanza Hotel/Casino. BELOW: Jim with Janet McDonald.



except he was -- I could have made it really funny if I could have commented on it. I would say things like "what he means, folks." See, he wouldn't let me do that. He was too uptight about his craft.

But anyway, the traveling picked up after that. Like the shows, I'd travel awhile and then come home. But then when I did the first tour with those people -- and we ended up in Hong Kong usually we'd have a big dinner party. My mother was always good at poetry. And so I picked that up in the form of a roast, you know. Over a three-week period you get to know these people pretty well and all their little foibles and everything. So I would write these bits about them, four or five lines each all in rhymes and nail them to the wall. They loved it. So at dessert at the last dinner I'd walk around behind each person and stand there and nail them to the wall with this. And everybody fell out. So then I gave them copies. And then when they wrote in about the tour, they said, oh, god, you know, how much fun they had. So the guy called me and said I don't know what you did, but you can travel with me anytime. So he moved to another company and hired me there.

In the meantime, the person that took his place hired me back there. I ended up traveling with about four different companies. I ended up going everywhere in the world except South America, just one thing after another. I went to India and China. Oh, and finally -- I was singing along the way, see, a little bit because I didn't -- most of those people that do those tours, you know, they're showing off all the time. I laid back and let them get comfortable, you know. And then finally when we'd get someplace like Taiwan and there was a good pianist at a place and we'd go to a club or something, they'd call me up to sing. So I'd sing and then I had it made. So those places started offering me jobs around the Orient. I sang in Manila and those places.

My father was getting ill in Chattanooga at that time and I didn't want to leave the country. So I went to real estate school. And when I was part way through I got a call to go to Red China, which was first open, with a group of doctors. I opted out of school and did that. It was all about acupuncture, people with their throats wide open looking at us while they're getting goiters removed, etc. They have a lot of goiters in China. I went all over China. Came on back and back into school and got my real estate license.

So was that in Las Vegas?

Uh-huh, right here. That reminds me I was writing to my mother all the time. In the meantime, there was a lady that I met who lived up on the golf course up here. Her man that worked for her was from the island of Tonga down in the South Pacific, Joe. And he was a good tennis player and we'd play all the time. It turns out she was an old society dame here and would have these big parties. So she invited me to those. And I got to know her and she liked me very much. And she was like Ethel Barrymore, a big red-haired lady. She knew the man who owned the MGM at that time, which is where Bally's is now. So the day I got my real estate license in March of '79 -- so that's 30 years ago; yeah, 30 years ago last month -- she set me up with an audition at the MGM Grand through him.

So I went over there that afternoon. And I had about three or four charts. That was all I had. I was in my tux and everything. We were in the lounge, which is right in front of the front desk back then, sort of out in the middle of everything. People didn't come to see me. They just stopped to have a drink and enjoy whoever's playing. But I said, well, Mister whatever-his-name was, I said I have three or four selections from my act. Is that enough? Of course, that's all I had. He said that's fine. So I sang those and he hired me. That was in March. And he hired me to come in August, which was perfect because I had time to finish executing the act. Plus, I started in real estate and I started doing real well in that. And I thought, I don't know about this. But, of course, I wanted to do it. I did three shows a night there. That was hard because like I said I learned how to work the room like Wayne Newton. I was used to doing Perry Como sitting on the stool and singing. But, you know, you have to adjust. I had a big medley of Oklahoma songs that my three musicians said, oh, man, that's old hat. I said, listen, I want to do it. That was the hit of the thing. Five songs and you go from one to the other. (Singing.) That was the finale thing. They loved it. So I know what I can do better than some other people do. I was always a little old hat compared to what's really current because I'm just not like that. So that was a nice month. I realized then I didn't want to do that because it's too much work. I like to go in a show and work awhile and then go on. And I love rehearsals.

Then Steve Wynn's birthday came up. His 50th birthday. And his wife put together a show with a director from New York who came out. We rehearsed for three weeks.

How did you get in that show?

Somebody called me and I went and auditioned for it. By then I'm like a secondary name. Everybody knew who I was more or less. So if it's the right thing, I usually got a call. So we went and rehearsed for three weeks with the director from New York, the man that had done the L.A. Olympics and was a director of big shows on Broadway. They didn't spare any expense. Oh, I've got a picture of the cast. The show was called "Bingo." It was an original musical about his life and we rehearsed all over town so it would be a surprise. They did up one of the big ballrooms like a theater in New York with all the big posters of who's appearing and all that and invited icons from around the world and movie stars, etc. I played the banker that owned the Valley Bank and loaned him his first money.

Oh, that's great.

Yeah. And that was great. I mean we had a sensational time and got paid really good money. And then at the end of that night -- we used to have a lot of those nights, not this big, but where after the show you go out and mix with the people and especially these names -- comic, stars and governors and all that. So it was like a four-in-the-morning thing, but it was so much fun. And that was a great thing.

Next I started doing shows out at the Spring Mountain Ranch. I did *Funny Girl* out there. What else? Oh, I did *Chicago*, the show, at the campus over on Cheyenne. And I did *South Pacific* with Robert Goulet at UNLV. I was the Navy captain in that. I didn't get to sing. I told him you're lucky I didn't get to sing. He was so nice. We had the best time. He had a real good sense of humor.

Oh, that's so good. Now, did you do some local community theater also?

Yes. I was trying to think. Oh, on Maryland Parkway down there where there's now a deli it used to be a theater. I'm trying to think of what's next to it there. You know where the In-N-Out burger place is?

Yes. Near UNLV?

Yes. Well, right next to it going south is a wood building there that's now something else. That used to be a theater. And I did a show called *Tribute*, which was something that Jack Lemmon had starred in, in New York. It was about a guy who was dying of cancer, but funny. It was a really good show. And I was the lead in that. You didn't know I was this big star.

Oh, no. This is wonderful. This is fantastic.

So tell me after all of that, how did it feel going from that kind of attention into real estate?

Well, believe it or not I'm not about the attention. My mother used to say to me you get an inordinate amount of attention, you know that? Finally I said, mother, stop. I mean I don't care about that. I do not think about things that way. Real estate, I loved it because I got a big kick out of putting the right people with the right house. The other thing, if you're not counting on how much money can I make, the money comes. And so I did very well. I had a good time with it. I found out I had to dress down like this because everybody thought I owned the company if I dressed like I did when I go to church. And back then some of the people did. That was in 1979 when I first started. Then as I say I was gone off and on during the 80s. Well, no. I finished in '82. My last trip was to Africa.

Where in Africa did you go?

I went to Johannesburg and Cape Town and then went on safari up in Kenya from Nairobi. I also went to North Africa into Cairo and to the big dam, Aswan Dam.

Oh, and the other highlight, I took 125 nurses on a trip to Europe including Moscow in 1974 I think it was. That was a trip. I said, man, you all are the biggest bunch of hypochondriacs I've ever seen. They had cases like this of every pill in the world that you might need for something. It was fun. I had another guy, not just me. But the two of us shepherded these women. We went to London, Paris, Sweden, Moscow, Vienna and Rome—and Germany. I was supposed to go on a trip to Ireland and Portugal one time that was canceled. I wanted to do that. And the same with South America. The one trip I was going on there, which would have been the whole continent, was canceled for some reason or another. So I never got there.

So South America is the only place you really never got.

Only big continent, yes. And I've really been all the way around the world because I went to the Middle East two or three times. I went as far as Syria and Jordan. I skipped Iraq and Iran, of course. This was back in the 70s. But then from the other side, I came to India and was almost there. I went to Nepal and top of the world. I mean it is sensational what all happened. Islands of Fiji and Australia and New Zealand and of all things Honolulu, which was the biggest let down

after all those places. I had never been there before I had been to Fiji and Tahiti. But Fiji is much more fun than Tahiti. Tahiti is sort of commercialized like Hawaii. It's nice and pretty. But the Fijians are the laziest people in the world. We sat on the terrace out there at this place and the service was so terrible. I called the manager because, you know, I was supposed to make my people have a good time. He said, listen, these people are used to picking fruit off trees and I'm getting them to hop around serving drinks. He said if I fire them the next ones will be just the same. He said can you please be patient? I said okay.

Well, at least he told you.

In Fiji, though, they love it. They're island people, really. They rent little motorbikes and you go on motorbike trips. And they have a nude beach, which was something I never experienced before. That was a trip. It was wonderful. Fiji, I went several times. Tahiti only once I think. From Bangkok, Thailand, I went to the kingdom where one man rules—Singapore is what I was trying to think of. Singapore and then the other country next to it, Malaysia. Anyway, same kind of thing.

I would have to look at a map.

Yeah. But when I think back I think it was something.

It's amazing.

It was. When I first came to Hollywood, by the way, I had somebody tell my fortune.

Oh. And what did they say?

They said to me you're the luckiest person I've ever seen. And if you were in a cave like Jesus with a rock in front of you and you're about to die somebody would move the rock and reach in and pull you out. You never have to worry. I said, oh, I bet you tell that to everybody. Dr. Carlo, who used to be here, does astrology. He said that's true. He doesn't read your palm, but he does astrology. Well, of course, it hasn't been 100 percent like that. But it's really been very lucky. Everything happened so nicely for me.

Tell me more about your real estate career. Was your favorite thing selling private homes?

Uh-huh. Yes.

Did you get to sell any to any of the stars that you had met along the way?

No, I didn't. Again, what happened there -- see, in 1979 the interest rates were 18 percent when I

got my license. And, of course, it's that old thing if you don't know any better or don't pay any attention to it. I sold an apartment building the very first year, first few months. My broker was Marilyn Worthington, a woman I had met at the church before and had rented the first house I lived in from her. And when I got my real estate license -- you really sort of go around and choose which real estate company you want -- she just said you're coming to work for me. And I said okay. I thought she was wonderful. She's one of those great people. We're joined at the hip for all these years. So that's how I started. And her husband at that time had just built a bunch of condos out off of Jones and Lake Mead, out in that area. And so I got to sit those two or three days a week, which is like a guarantee of making some money. Plus I sold two or three big pieces of property through somebody else in the office who was teaching me how to sell property. So I started off real nice. And I also tell that story about the church where --

Yes. Would you tell it, please?

With Richard Walter talking about tithing?

Yes, please.

Well, that's when that happened. And I got a 15,000-dollar commission check. So I tithed on it and it paid the power bill at the church the next day, which was going to be cut off. That's a true story.

I love everything to work out for people. Like the British say, the play is the thing. I used to coach the singers at the church for years till several years ago. I loved doing that.

Well, tell us a little bit more about your church. So you used to book talent. And which church are you talking about?

Our church, which is formerly First Church of Religious Science. It's now called Center of Spiritual Living. It's a brand-new name.

Well, I've been there for 40 years. And I started that in Hollywood before I came at another Science of Mind church back then. Plus this girlfriend of mine back then, a girl from Knoxville, Tennessee, and I was from Chattanooga, she came out to be an actress. She lived in the garage part of this home that I had been in that had been made into apartments right off Sunset and La Brea down towards Beverly Hills, nice old section in there. But to make a long story short, she was from a rather wealthy family in Knoxville. And she was a Ms. Southern bell type and

everything, but a real nice gal, fun. And she got to be very good friends with Yvonne Lime, who was the young actress who was in Elvis' pictures and dated him some, a real pretty little blond. And they went on a USO tour to the Far East in 1959. I took them to the airport. It must have been a little later in '59 right after I had done the Grable thing.

And while they were there a typhoon happened. And when the tour left they stayed and rounded up all the half Japanese, half American people. They let them go. I mean people were looking after their own. Those kids were not treated very well. So they rounded all those up and got them some sort of temporary shelter. And they formed what is now called Child Help USA, which has been in effect for 50 years this year. She and I are still real close friends. On the way home from that particular trip she went home on a military plane and sat with a colonel, whom she married. And she talked him into getting stuff together. They sent a shipload of washing machines and stuff like that over to start that thing there. It is now worldwide. Their headquarters is in Phoenix. They were on the Today Show last week. And I got the note about it, but it was the day after. I didn't get to see it. But I know her like this.

Oh, that's great.

Then she married another guy after that. She's married three different guys. And I told her that's good because the last one was an old man anyway. And I said now you've got all the money so now we can probably get married. Oh, Jimbo, she said. Oh, she's something else. She came over here to visit me when I was with Betty Grable one weekend. And we sat up practically all night talking because she was telling me about she had begun having these visions. You know, she literally was told what to do. She said, I'd wake up and it would come out of my fingers. I'd write all these things down. It all had to do with spiritual things. And she could practically predict the future. She didn't plan on doing that. But she became actually a very well-known person. In any kind of spiritual circles they know Sara Buckner, Sara O'Meara was her next husband.

I was trying to think of the point of that. It was always like that. And they did these miraculous things. She and Yvonne on a shoestring got all these things going. And it always worked. She'd go to speak to these businesspeople and all that and bat her eyes and everything. She was sincere, though. But she'd get whatever she wanted. And they bought this place down outside of -- well, near Palm Springs. There was a boys' Catholic school there that was for sale.

And they had I think \$50,000 they could spend on something. And they wanted 200 for this place. Sara went down there and she got it for 50 after visiting and talking to them because she's always saying, well, it's not me. It's God that does everything through me and all this stuff. So they established the first Child Help center. And now there's one in Europe. There are several in Europe and all over the country in different states. It's incredible what they've done.

So you were talking about the church when you started talking about her.

Oh, yeah. Well, this church was not upscale, but the next step from what I was doing in Hollywood. There was a rather famous church right down the corner from me on Sunset Boulevard that was a Science of Mind church. And there was an old preacher there, Dr. Bixer was his name. Everybody knows him from way back. He preached until he was about 95 or something. He was a piece of work. But some movie people came to that, too. So I liked that. It was right down the street from where I lived, too.

So then when I came here my lady that I told you about that put me in touch with the head of MGM, she went to our church at that time. So that's how I started. And, of course, I liked it.

So anyway, that became a big part of my life and has been all these years, you know. And I've been on the board there probably this is the sixth time I think. I was in charge of getting the singers.

Yes. That's what we were talking about, talent.

It was just sort of a volunteer job because I knew so many people that had been in the shows and everything. And we never paid them or anything. I'd just get them to come. I never made a dime and neither did any of them. They did it as --

Oh, I didn't know that we didn't pay them.

Oh, no. Back then we didn't pay them at all.

Oh, back then we didn't.

Huh-uh. And Pierre Marini, the pianist, was the only paid music person then. But I got Robert Goulet. I got Joe Williams. Nancy Wilson, blues singer.

Ruth Brown?

Well, Ruth Brown, also, several times. Then people from the shows like me that were all good singers and not big names, but they were good. So I did that all along. Then I keep telling, well,

now that you put me out to pasture, you know, I'll do the best I can. I'll be singing once again on my birthday maybe, which is coming up next month.

What do you think was the best era for musicians here in Las Vegas?

Well, for musicians I'd say the 50s and 60s. But the 50s was a total heyday. Everybody worked two or three jobs. They'd work a lounge and then a main show. The showroom bands were always 15 to 20 people back then. And then those same people worked gigs in the afternoons or weddings or lounge shows afterwards at night. It was heaven for musicians. So they all came here, of course.

Yes. Everybody wanted to be here.

And to be a headliner in Las Vegas back then -- now when I look in the Neon and those papers, I hardly know any names of any of those groups.

We always had big stars at every hotel back then. They always stayed a month and they always did a third show on one of those nights for everybody that worked in other shows. We'd all go to their third show. And Sammy would always have a big party on stage afterwards. He was a big one for throwing that. Oh, we went to -- oh, you name it -- Ginger Rogers, just about everybody. I'm trying to think. Mitzi Gaynor.

What about Steve and Eydie?

Steve and Eydie Gorme? I got to know them a little bit.

They used to come to the church every once in a while.

Oh, did they?

Didn't they?

I don't know that they did at our church. They might have gone to one of ours. I don't remember seeing them anyway. It could have been when I was out of town for a while, too.

But they lived right up here at the foot of the tower building up here, the Regency. And my friend Bob that wrote "Oldest Living Showgirl" that I was telling you about, lived in the tower building. And this is the irony. He and I went to the restaurant right up here that just burned, Capazoli's. We went there quite a bit. And he had never actually met Steve and Eydie. He wanted to meet them to give them his music rather than trying to do it some other mechanical way. And they lived at the foot of the tower. Bob was walking around there one day and Steve backed

out and almost ran over him. And they had a little exchange, very nice. So he would have known him if he had seen him the next time. But the night that I was there, one night that I was up at Capazoli's with another friend of mine, I could hear Steve and Eydie talking in the booth behind me. So when I got up about ready to leave, I turned around and spoke to them. They were really nice and I talked to them for 20 minutes. And Bob was not there of all things. It would have been the perfect chance because anybody who met him would have remembered him. He was very vocal and fun and witty. And that would have been a good entree to get some material to them.

Yes.

Their act is just heaven even now. I saw her the first time she was here at the place that burned right across from the Sahara.

Not the Bingo Club?

No, no. Oh, El Rancho Vegas. They're building something there. It's been a vacant lot all these years. Well, Betty Grable was there. After we did our act, she did another act later and she played there, too. She was there the night it burned. But I was there, of course, before that. And Joe E. Lewis, who was this big comic, and Lili St. Cyr, who was this famous stripper, were the stars. And this little girl named Eydie Gormé was first appearing in Las Vegas. Joe E. Lewis was a big old dower kind of comic. He says, honey, what are you doing here? Didn't you just get married? And she said yes, sir. He said when? She said yesterday. And he said and you left your wedding bed to come out here to sing for these damn people? She was so nervous. And she obviously made it really big.

Yes. What do you think the future of entertainment is for Las Vegas?

I hope it reverts to some nice names. I hate to say it like they're not nice names, but you know what I mean. The whole country is so different and changing that everything is sort of leveling out to me. The individuals and the stars that made it big a in the movies and in show business are kind of buried in groups or they're not given the chances anymore or something. I don't know. The kind of movies that they're doing are all about spectacular events and very few real, real stories that makes a star out of somebody. One of those types like Doris Day, for instance, she never came here, but she could have ruled this town. She was kind of shy and never would work other places. You know, Judy Garland, of course, I saw her up here. Oh, I saw her a couple of

different times, and Liza and those kinds of people that made it otherwise, but then they're huge here, Bill Cosby and Sarah Vaughan. Oh, you name it. They were all here at one time or another and usually at least eight or ten big stars at one time up and down the strip. And most of them stayed a month at a time back then as I say, which was really nice. Now they stay weekends. I'm not sure if that's for the financial end of it or whether -- I don't know what. But the entertainment directors, too, see, are young kids so to speak compared to the --

So they're bringing in the acts.

Yeah, the people that they know about. Of course, I'm at the end of the age thing. But people in their 60s are still over the hill to most of these people. And they don't realize what a drawing power they still have. Of course, it pops up once in a while.

Yes. Every once in a while one gets through.

They get through and they do really well and it makes a new career for them more or less. I can't recall a name right this second.

Right now if you could perform with anybody you wanted to and never did in the past who would it be?

Somebody still alive you mean?

Yeah. Let's go with somebody still alive. No. Let's just say what person would you have performed with?

Oh, that's hard to say. My style and everything would work really well with like Judy Garland. Oh, who else like that? Well, of course, Betty Grable. But she didn't really need anybody. Betty was a thing unto herself. Her opening act was "I sing just a little." And we'd go she sings like a bird. And I act just a bit. (Singing). That was her opening number. And that was her in a nutshell. She would say I don't know how the hell I got here. So she was that self-effacing, which was very unusual for a big star.

But Judy Garland, her kind of humor would have worked well with me. I can think on my feet better than I can sitting here. I like being a host or an emcee because to me as I say "the play the thing." I'd rather interview a big star than to be the person being interviewed almost because it's so much fun. And I can easily work off of what they're talking about. I can think about things that will fit the occasion or jokes or whatever. So I'm sort of an oddball. When I first came up

here, all the showgirls treated me like I was a gentleman. And all the people in the stock brokerage business thought I was a show person. I'm a little flaky for them, a bit glitzy or something. So I'm somewhere in between.

But they probably learned after a while.

Well, I guess so. I tell people I don't believe it; I'm getting as many people hitting on me now as I ever did. It's amazing. It really is. And what I'm doing now, which has been the last year or two -- in fact, come on over and I'll show you something. Just one second.

Peggy Ryan.

Well, she was in the movies years ago with Donald O'Connor. And they were teenage as would put on shows etc. Peggy moved here a few years ago and started teaching dancing. She was pretty well known and a fine dancer for all these years. I was in her shows occasionally. And these three girls I'm showing you were three of her top dancers. I want you to see this -- they call themselves Fine Wine. From left to right they are 70, 70 and 63 years old.

I've got another picture of her and me taken another night at the opening of the M Hotel/Casino. I'll show you that. Isn't that incredible? So now we do an act. They're essentially tap dancers. And they can sing a little bit. But they tap dance and then they bring me out and I sing a little bit. Then we start doing some stuff together like "The Best is Yet to Come." And we're doing a little choreography.

So where have you been performing?

Well, I'm doing a show Wednesday at the Winchester Theater over here, not with them however. There's another group however called the Encore Dancers, which is a group of women from 65 to 94. The 94-year-old is the cutest thing you ever saw. She does high kicks. She wears leotards and all that.

Are they tap dancers?

Yes among many other styles. These Encore Dancers, there are seven of them and the woman that runs it is 71. She has a beautiful figure and is a beautiful dancer. They asked me to come up to Summerlin where they were appearing to see their full show that they were doing a few nights later and see if it liked it. They wanted me to be in their next one. So I went and it was very good. So I've been doing that ever since. We did the Alexis Park a couple of weeks ago. We went to

Laughlin about a month ago. This will be the second or third time at the Winchester, although that particular group is not in the Winchester, just these.

But still.

McDonald Ranch a couple weeks ago. I've done about eight shows since the beginning of December with them.

Oh, that's fabulous.

Yes. It's wonderful. I usually sing three songs and once in a while four. And I tell a joke in the middle. I tell about Betty Grable real quick and tell the joke that works like a charm. I attribute it to her. It really isn't. But I'd say she said this every night. You know, anybody here having a birthday? I'm sure somebody always was. And she'd say it reminds me of a story a few years ago here. This gentleman was taking his 21-year-old son to one of the topless shows for the first time as he turned 21. The whole family went including his sister who was a nun. And back then the nuns wore habits, you know. So they all go into the showroom and the waitress comes around. She's taking drink orders. What are you having? Scotch and soda for everyone. When she gets to the nun, she goes what will you have, sister? And she says, oh, I don't think I better have a drink. Her father says, for Pete's sake, it's your brother's 21st birthday, have a drink. She says, well, all right. She says I think they call it a martini, but could you serve it in a coffee cup please? The waitress says okay. And she goes back to the service bar and she says give me three scotch and waters and a martini in a coffee cup. And the bartender says is that nun here again? That works like a charm.

That's great. Yes.

And then I have the music and I do my last song, see.

That is very good.

It's a non-failing joke. It always works.

Do you advertise some of the things that you're doing now? Do you advertise at church?

Actually no, as a matter of fact. It's hard to say exactly how we would do that.

Well, you know we have that table where people put all kinds of fliers and everything.

Yeah. I got some new ones I just had made that turned out well.

Yes. I want one of this. But that's really a nice looking one.

Yeah, it's a nice picture. Well, this is in the house here. He took the one of me and this girl here out in the back as we were preparing to go to the M.

Now, was this your Easter outfit yesterday?

This was yesterday, yes. You weren't there yesterday, were you?

Yes, I was.

Oh, yeah, I saw you. I saw you so briefly and so many people. We didn't have any time to talk.

Yes, because I rushed off to go to lunch at Town Square. We had lunch at the Brio out on the patio. It was nice.

You know that Justin, the bass player, plays out there, not the Brio, but at one of those places. I went out to hear him one night.

Oh, I didn't know that. That's good.

He is a really nice man. We've gotten to be really great friends.

Oh, I'm glad.

I only got two tickets. This show we're doing is free, but the tickets are all gone. And it's not our regular thing. I just happened to be in it. So there are a lot of other people in it and I guess everybody got a couple of tickets. So it took care of it.

Wow. That's nice.

I always use my wonderful line -- don't you know who I was? I need more than that.

Oh, this is great. My very last question, would you encourage or discourage children today to go into show business?

Well, if they want to you couldn't discourage them probably. And it depends. You know, the glamour is what usually attracts people. But it's hard work. If you do your homework, if you study dancing or study singing and all of that and prepare yourself, you have such a much better chance. So many people and the ones you always read about they find them in a nightclub or something and next you know they're a star. And that works sometimes but not that often.

Usually there's a much bigger background to it all than what it seems like. But young kids think that's all there is to it. If they just get seen or doing something, they'll become famous. And that isn't the case usually. But the business has changed a lot, too. It's oriented towards the sleazy in a lot of cases much more than it used to be. But anybody that's really serious about it and has a real

talent, if they work hard enough, then you can't be discouraged.

You know, you're treated like a piece of meat at auditions and interviews. You can't just think, oh, my god, they don't like me. You're not the right type for certain things. If you're not they just have to say next and keep going. You have to not mind objection in other words. It's true in anything, of course. But show business it's mostly your appearance and everything. And, therefore, they take it personally if they're not liked. But some people that are not good looking at all have a look that they like.

This is that picture that we took out back.

Oh, this is beautiful.

Isn't that nice? Just a snapshot. Yeah.

Oh, that's really a nice picture of you. Who did this?

Alex, the guy that just came in.

Now, this is the lady in this picture, the one on the left.

Yeah, she's the one on the left. She's 70 years old and never had any work done. She was a lady cop was her career.

She looks like she's 25. She cannot be 70.

She is 70.

She has never had any plastic surgery?

Absolutely not. The one on the other side has had a little bit. But she's only 63. But not so you'd see it. But I can tell because I know. But Jackie is the one on the left and Teresa is in the middle.

I have to have a copy of this picture.

All right. I have an extra one. You can have it.

Okay, good. This is great. And, now, you have to put her name. Her name is?

Jackie McDonald.

M-A-C?

M-c-D-O-N-A-L-D. And if you want to see the headshot of the century, look at this.

Oh, that's great.

I had that made about three or four weeks ago.

Oh, that's great. That is wonderful. Which one do you want to you as a front piece in your

interview?

Well, I would say that one. I'm going to see if I have another. I'm getting some more copies made.

Now, is this just a copy that I can have?

Yeah.

Or do you want to have some more made?

I'm going to get more done. So, yes, you can have that one.

Okay. Because we're just going to scan it and we'll bring your originals back.

Oh, all right. That's fine. I'll show you something --

I want a couple of those when you were in the business.

Let me go to the archives and see what I can come up with.

That's the girl who used to sing in church. And I had one like this of me and Joe Williams outside the church. It's not a big eight by ten, but I've got it someplace.

Oh, that would be nice. So do you and Jillian know each other well?

Oh, yes. This was at the MGM in the lounge when I was there that time. This is my first scrapbook. And all of these pictures are out of context now. That's all the stuff in Chattanooga, way back. That was my first publicity picture in Hollywood. And this thing, too, in Time magazine was the inside cover. It was taken at a hotel in Hollywood.

And if you have one of those doing a commercial here in Las Vegas, I'd love to have one of those.

Here's our program, Desert Inn, 1958. This is an album cover I did for Capitol Records. They spent all morning graying my hair. This is when I didn't have gray hair. And then it didn't even show. That's Sara, the girl I told you that I took to the airport and who became a big star. Molly Bee, Gary Crosby, a lot of these kids that became stars are in there.

That was a hayride I was on at one time.

That's Sara. We went out to Knoxville to her hometown, and they came out and took these pictures of us for the paper and stuff.

There's another girlfriend of mine. This was a composite, 1961. But wait a minute. The stuff I want to show you -- that's Dorothy Shay here. Remember her? She was called the "Park

Avenue Hillbilly." She was a wonderful gal and she came to the Hesperia Inn once when I was there. That was one of my first good close-ups. That's over in Bangkok. I got a bunch of those somewhere, too. This is not what I'm looking for, though.

What are those small snapshots?

These? Well, that's just a girlfriend of mine. It was in her house. She and I used to sing together. That was in 1948. This is one of those little theater plays that a girl came to see me in. That's me way back there.

In fact, I've got one of Betty Grable that I'll give you a copy of that. I know I've got two of them.

This was my first big presentation book that started giving me a lot of work because of the way it was done. This was taken at the beach in California. I haven't looked at these in a while, but it's still not what I'm looking for. These are the kind you put in your book when you go for modeling interviews to show different ways you can look and so forth. This, I was lying in the grass. And that's grass between me and the photographer that photographed that one. Let me think just a minute.

Here's a picture of Betty here. Here, this is what I'm looking for. This is Betty and me and my mother and dad in Miami in 1959.

Oh. Do you have another one of these?

Yes, I do. I think.

Do you ever go anyplace where you can scan things? Do you have a scanner?

No. But I can scan a picture of it easy.

Would you scan one of these for me?

If I can't find it, I will.

Yes, please. If you'll scan one of those, that would be great.

And I have one of us with her and the four boys, which was good too.

Oh, that would be a nice one. And what is the other photograph?

That's my girls. That was at my 80th birthday party.

So is this Fine Wine?

Yeah. See, that's close up. You can tell there.

I just cannot believe that this woman is 70. She looks like she's 20.

I know it. I'll show you something. I haven't even thought about this. But if nothing else I want to show you a picture about the Dunes. On my 80th birthday this good friend of mine who owns the property where the M is now, used to have a club out there. And I had my birthday done there. And this was what was made for it.

Oh, that is wonderful.

Here's the one I'm talking about with me and Betty. Here, that's my entrance at the Dunes show.

Oh, yes.

And he said you never look worse.

Well, we know he was lying.

That was that first one in Hollywood.

Oh, this is great. So this is what they had up on the wall?

Yeah.

So where are you going to put it up?

I'm going to put it in the garage I think on the side of the wall. That's the only place I've got a space. And I don't want to hang it in the house. That would be a little much.

Oh, that is wonderful. That is wonderful. Well, this is great. So if you will get me a copy of this one.

Here's another good one. After I came down those stairs, that's what happened with a couple of showgirls.

Oh, and the showgirls' outfits are beautiful. So do you have a smaller photograph of that?

I do somewhere if I can find it. Let me see if anything else is in here. Oh, this was at the rehearsal studio with the girls last year.

Oh, that's a nice picture. But I like that one at the bottom after you've come down.

Oh, yeah. I have a snapshot of it that these were made from. So it's somewhere.

Yes. Good. And if you happen to find the snapshots and all of these snapshots are together, I would love to have the one with you coming down the steps also.

Okay.

Oh, those are great. Your mother, father, Betty Grable. Oh, that's nice.

And the funny story about that just for the heck of it. When I was a kid I told you all I talked about was Betty Grable. And when I was about 13 or 14, I took this movie magazine home. I said look here, mother. It says her figure is so perfect she doesn't have to wear a bra or a girdle. She said that's not the kind of woman you should be looking at. So I told Betty that story. And when they came to Miami to see -- when I was a kid I was called Buddy Hodge all the time. So in her act when we came out, she said I want you to meet my boys. And we would go out. I'm Tom. I'm John. I'm Jim. I'm Gene. When it got to me, I said I'm Jim. She said hold it. She said his name is not Jim, it's Buddy. And I know that because his parents are sitting right out there. My mother said what a wonderful woman. We went backstage and had this picture made.

Oh, that is great.

Isn't that a kick?

Oh, yeah. I would love to have a copy of that. So I'm taking three -- the one with you in the black suit with Jackie McDonald, the headshot, and the one of you at the Bonanza.

All right. These are separated because they were put all up on the wall and taken down and I repositioned them and haven't hung them up again yet. This was, by the way, the last one I was talking about at the Hacienda with the comic.

Oh, yes. Minsky's. Yeah, we've heard a lot about Minsky's.

That was like 1980 or something like that, '85, somewhere in there. This is the little guy that I didn't like. But you can see the contrast. We walked out on the stage together. And I would do takes while he said these things. But if I could said what I wanted to, we would have brought the house down. He was a little odd.

That is wonderful, Jim. Thank you so much.

Well, thank you.

For all your time and everything.

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