

# My stint with 'Tonight'

By Barbara Shotel

SOME MONTHS back, I found myself in Wellington, sitting across from Armistead I. Selden, Jr., who was then the United States Ambassador to New Zealand. Signed photographs of several Prime Ministers and four American Presidents (Carter, Ford, Nixon, and Johnson) lined the walls of his plush embassy office. I was there because, before I'd left home, I had requested that the Ambassador meet with me during my visit to New Zealand. And, to my surprise, he granted my request for an interview.

At first, I wondered why an American ambassador would agree to meet with an American woman he didn't even know. After all, ambassadors couldn't possibly accommodate all those who request interviews. It's probably true, on the other hand, that not many private citizens would ask for such a meeting—I did, but I am used to going to the top. Allow me to explain and, in an attempt to put everything in perspective, to tell you what Ambassador Selden chose to ask me at the start of our private, hour-long session. What he immediately blurted out was: "What are Johnny and Ed really like?"

It seemed ridiculous. There I was, 6,000 miles from home, ensconced in the Ambassador's office atop an imposing and costly concrete building guarded by United States Marines in full dress, and this high-ranking American diplomat was asking me about Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon. (I thought about asking him what Jimmy and his brother Billy were really like but decided that it would not have been in the best of taste.) Somehow, despite my stint as talent coordinator for *The Tonight Show*, I still hadn't gotten used to being associated with the two television celebrities that so many Americans laugh with and go to sleep with five nights a week.

So what are Johnny and Ed really like? (If only I had a dollar for every time I've

## What it was like lining up stars and others for Johnny Carson to talk with on the telly

been asked that question.) My answer begins with this caveat: it's very hard to get to know Johnny Carson.

Veteran writer Kenneth Tynan found that out when he wrote a lengthy *New Yorker* profile of the star of *The Tonight Show*. Incidentally, copies of Tynan's piece were sent to our offices a few days before it appeared on the newstands. That evening, following the taping of the show, Johnny Carson and his wife were entertaining some close friends in their Bel-Air home. The next day, I found out that Johnny couldn't wait for his dinner guests to leave so he could read the profile. His reaction to it: "Why do people want to know about me, and why do they think I'm complex?"

That may seem like an incredibly naive and much too humble reaction; it is certainly one that makes him appear to be out of touch with the fact that he is who he is. People want to know about Johnny Carson because he's not merely a celebrity, he's an American institution; and because he values and protects his privacy when he's not in front of television cameras, he does seem somewhat complex.

Much of what I learned about Johnny Carson filtered into the daily 11:00 a.m. meeting attended by myself, the other four talent coordinators, the associate producer, and the producer of *The Tonight Show*. This meeting, held in producer Fred de Cordova's office, was convened by the ringing of a bell which Fred activated with a button on the wall next to his desk. (After my first few weeks there, I de-

veloped a Pavlovian response to that bell, as did my colleagues.) Once summoned, we would proceed to design each show by discussing which guests should be booked (a day, a week, or even a month ahead) and which should not be booked.

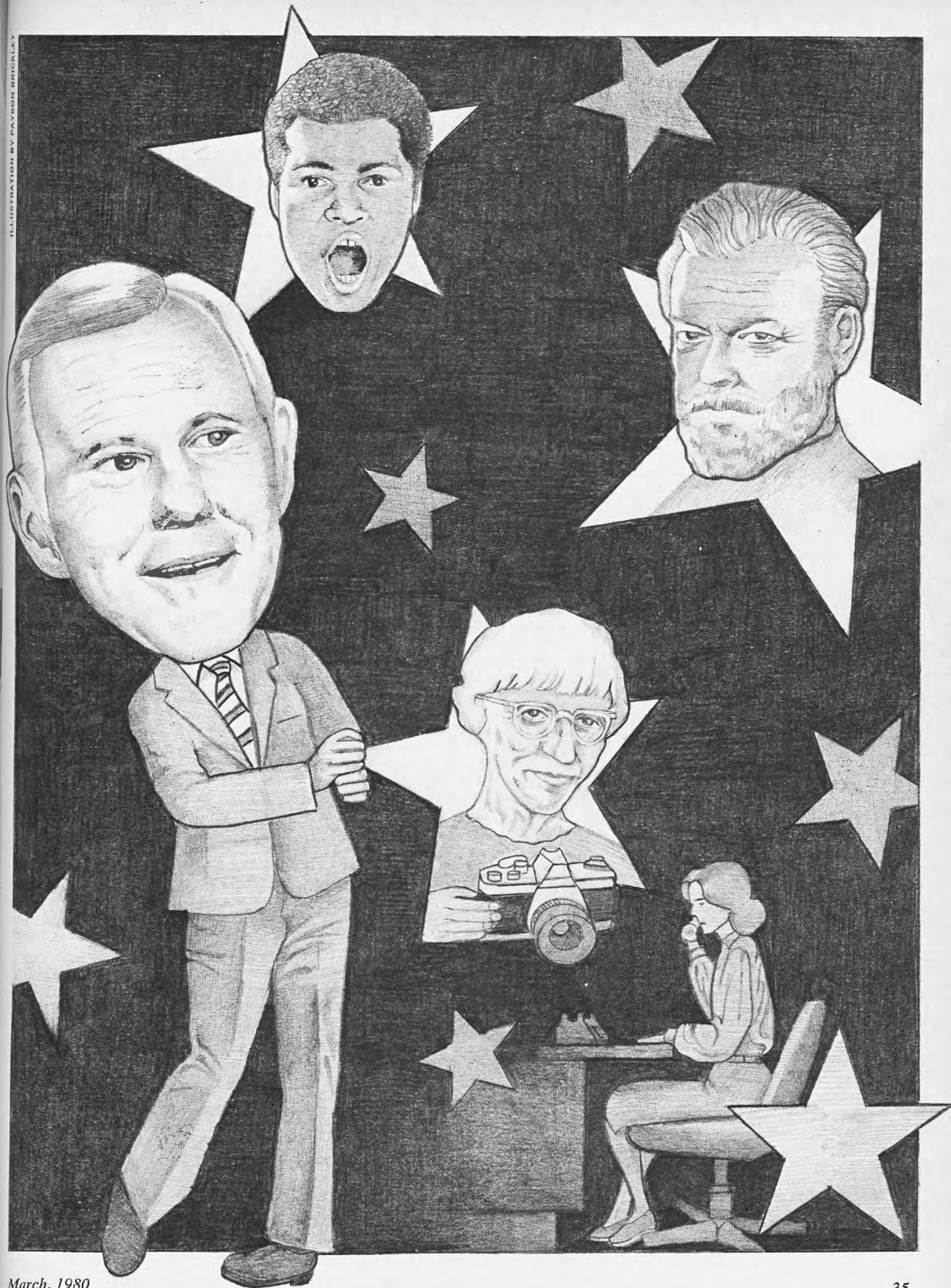
The producer's reactions to suggestions for guests were often based on his estimation of how Johnny would respond to the idea and how Johnny would work with the proposed guest on the air. Johnny had strong opinions about guests—not necessarily opinions we all agreed with, but ones we abided by. It was never easy to book a new guest on *The Tonight Show*. If a suggestion sparked some interest on the producer's part but we couldn't give absolute assurance that the guest would "work" with Johnny, we would forget about it or consider the guest for booking as a substitute host. This would give us a chance to see how the person worked on the air and whether or not the dynamics would be right for Johnny.

One person I brought to *The Tonight Show*, Merie Earle, had never been on a talk show before. She was one of my most successful discoveries. Merie is funny, outspoken, and what *The Tonight Show* calls one of the "real people." Johnny loves working with "real people," and it often seemed he was more relaxed and more comfortable with the unknown guests than with famous ones. Merie, who is now 92 years old, started her acting career just 15 years ago. I discovered her five years ago, when the late Will Geer (Grandpa Walton) came to talk to my 20 broadcasting students at the University of Southern California. I screened a *Waltons* tape for the class, and Merie was in one of its scenes. I was immediately taken with her. She was a cute little lady with a saucy manner.

Since you can't really audition someone for the kind of spontaneous conversation that is common on *The Tonight Show*, the show's talent coordinators invite people to come in for chats (called "pre-interviews"). Merie came in and we chatted about her, her experiences, and her impressions of life. I knew she was a

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rare find. I also suspected that Johnny would enjoy her because he has an affinity for elderly women and maintains a marvelous and loving manner toward them. It was, indeed, love at first sight for 87-year-old Merie and 50-some-year-old Johnny. Merie returned almost monthly, and I received an unprecedented phone call from Johnny thanking me for finding such an exceptional guest.

After each taping of *The Tonight Show*, Fred de Cordova would listen to Johnny's reactions to the show. Those reactions were passed along to us the next morning during our meeting. We would hear, for example, when, in Johnny's opinion, the chemistry between himself and the guest may not have worked or the guest may have appeared to be running out of steam. Those reports and the questions we posed—"Will Johnny like it?" or "Will Johnny take so-and-so?"—evoked the star's presence in our daily gathering. The feeling was reinforced when Johnny phoned the producer, generally to touch base, since he wasn't expected in his office until 2:00 p.m. He usually revealed in those phone calls what he had done so far that morning. Often, he had played a game of tennis on his court at home, frequently with singer Steve Lawrence; or he had had a session on the drums; or he read a book on science. However he entertained himself in the morning, he would arrive like clockwork at NBC, driving his small dark green 450 SL Mercedes, license plate 360 GUY (for "all-around guy") and park in the number one studio spot allocated to him.

If, during our morning meetings, I proposed a new idea and it was not accepted by the producer but I felt strongly about it, I would hold it aside and bring it to Johnny's attention in our semi-annual meeting with him. These meetings were the only time I ever saw Johnny in our offices; his own office was located over the studio, far away from the production offices. Aside from the scant, formal contact of the meetings, our personal contact was limited to a daily hello backstage before the taping or an occasional short conversation in the studio during a rehearsal. Most of my chats with him were on the subject of tennis, since we both played and followed the sport.

In fact, Johnny and I pooled our efforts to book the outspoken Rumanian tennis star, Ilie Nastase. We concluded the booking at a tennis tournament in which Nastase was participating, at U.C.L.A. I had made a number of phone calls to Nastase's agent in Cleveland, and it turned out that Nastase was interested in being on *The Tonight Show*, but his often erratic behavior seemed to prevent him from making a firm commitment. Johnny and I were attending the tennis matches one evening. (We were attending separately; with the exception of his director, Johnny

## As a good talent coordinator, I learned semantic tricks to assuage those hurt by late positioning

doesn't socialize or fraternize with the staff.) I spoke with the public relations officials for the tournament as soon as I arrived in the building to see if there had yet been a commitment from the tennis player, but there hadn't been. Johnny took a more direct route and approached Nastase himself during the tournament, and I guess the court star couldn't refuse the television star.

There were doubts that Nastase would show up as planned, but he did. I think Johnny was particularly pleased, since he had come up with an idea for a comedy sketch to precede Nastase's appearance. In the sketch, Johnny, dressed in tennis clothes, would imitate the world-renowned bad boy's court behavior by reacting to a linesman's call. There was much concern about whether "Nasty" Nastase's reaction to the sketch might indeed be nasty. Johnny's imitation was genuinely funny and, fortunately, Nastase took it in good humor—even laughed—and better yet, he didn't walk off the show.

During the last five minutes of each 11:00 a.m. meeting, the order in which guests will appear on a given evening is discussed with the full production and directorial staff. The first guest on *The Tonight Show* is usually a famous celebrity. Paul Newman and Robert Redford would unquestionably appear first—if they appeared at all on talk shows (they don't). Our first guests were, among many others, Burt Reynolds, Robert Mitchum, Jane Fonda, James Stewart, Robert Blake, and Bob Hope. The positioning of the guests always created some tension in the lives of the five talent coordinators because several of us often had procured a guest for the evening and, obviously, only one could appear first. Even though millions are still watching, the size of the audiences diminishes as the late evening turns into the wee hours of the morning; consequently, guests appearing second, third, or fourth get progressively less exposure. As a good talent coordinator, I learned many tricks in semantics to assuage any hurt feelings created by late positioning.

Most guests, of course, knew which position on the show was best. One night, Orson Welles and an actress of equal marquee stature were scheduled to appear on the same show, and both took it for

granted that they were the first guest since that had been the arrangement with each in the past. No one had bothered to tell the rather intimidating Orson Welles that he was scheduled to be the second guest, so he just marched himself backstage as he had done so many times before and was standing behind the curtain alone when a talent coordinator arrived with the actress who was supposed to be first. A harried stage manager quickly warned the producer to tell Carson to introduce Welles and not the actress. Welles marched out barely announced and almost incorrectly introduced.

I welcomed the opportunity to work with the rare guest who didn't want, let alone expect, to be first. One such person was comedian and director (and occasional yachtsman) Charles Nelson Reilly. On the contrary, if he were first guest, he'd go into something approximating a panic seizure. He loved being third on the show because it gave him a chance to play off those guests who preceded him.

My association with the show afforded me the chance to get to know a few celebrities on a personal level. I include in that small list two best-selling authors, Erma Bombeck (*The Grass Is Always Greener Over The Septic Tank*) and Dr. Wayne Dyer (*Your Erroneous Zones*). Erma and I had actually met briefly a couple of years before I began working for *The Tonight Show*, when I was with *The Mike Douglas Show* as associate producer. Shortly after we became reacquainted, I spent a few days with my parents at an Arizona resort not far from Erma's home. Erma insisted on taking us all to lunch, and she kept us in stitches. It was that lunch that started a series of not-easily-forgotten ones in Los Angeles. Erma, her publicist Betty Shapian (the woman who promoted her books on the West Coast), and I would spoil ourselves with marvelously fattening expense-account lunches the day Erma was appearing on the show.

That kind of lunch was not very frequent since my lunch usually came late. At noon following the daily meeting, I would head for the typewriter and write my notes. The notes consisted of an introduction and a refined and edited list of the questions and answers that I had culled from a discussion with the guest on the telephone or in a pre-interview. Each coordinator worked differently, but I liked knowing as much as possible about a guest because I felt that it enabled me to get interesting stories from them.

Once I had written my notes, my secretary would re-type them. The original went to Johnny, hand-carried by the producer. Of the five shows taped each week, each coordinator was responsible for guests on an average of four shows. There were days when I had two guests to handle on one show, and thus two sets

of notes to prepare. Then there were the occasions I had three guests on one show. It happened when Virginia Wade won the tennis championship at Wimbledon and we booked her for her first television appearance following the victory. I already had two guests lined up for that show. It was a hassle getting three sets of notes done in time, especially when the Wade interview was settled upon only a couple of hours prior to the 2:30 p.m. deadline for delivering the notes. Sometimes, I spent hours waiting for a celebrity to return my phone call, and missed the mid-afternoon deadline.

Phone calls that came late were not quite as bad as celebrities who never came at all. It happened once in the two and a half years I was with *The Tonight Show*. The culprit was comedian Flip Wilson. It was our practice to talk to every guest on the phone before the show, if only to remind them of their arrival time when they chose not to discuss their interview in advance. There were a few who not only refused to discuss interviews but refused to accept phone calls as well. Muhammad Ali (a story about him comes later) was one of them. So was Flip Wilson.

I had done the next best thing—talked to Flip's manager and secretary and prepared notes based on what they told me he was doing professionally and personally. I was prepared. So were his manager, conductor, and dresser; they arrived on time. But as the time for taping approached, and then the taping began, and then the show continued, there was no Flip and no phone call. His manager insisted that he had spoken to Flip that afternoon to remind him. We never did find out what happened, only that he didn't show up for a lot of things the next few weeks, some of which paid a lot more than the standard fee of \$310 (plus 10% for agents) *The Tonight Show* paid.

Once my notes were done for the day, I spent my afternoons at rehearsal if I was working with a musical guest, or writing interview material for the next day, or in a pre-interview with a potential new guest. The show's policy is that every new guest must be personally met, pre-interviewed, and evaluated by a coordinator before being considered for a booking. That is an ideal, though; sometimes, a person lives 3,000 miles from California and a pre-interview in person is not practical. I recruited three very successful guests via long-distance phone calls.

Imogen Cunningham, an artist, a photographer, and a cult figure, was virtually unknown to the public. Shortly after I joined *The Tonight Show*, I read a story about her in *Esquire*. At that time, she was in her early nineties, but during her twenties, just after she had married, she had photographed her husband in the

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nude on Mt. Rainier. Even though it wasn't frontal nudity, it had caused a sensation. As I read on, I discovered she was as avant-garde in her nineties as she had been in her twenties, and I was convinced that I had to find Imogen Cunningham and talk to her. The author of the article led me to her publisher, who confirmed my feeling that Imogen would make an outstanding and outspoken guest. There was only one catch: He said that she would never agree to take part in *The Tonight Show* and, furthermore, she probably had no idea what the show was or who Johnny was. This attracted me to the idea even more.

The publisher pointed out that I was facing a very determined and eccentric artist who had no time for the frills of the commercial world. He offered to encourage Imogen to cooperate with me once I wrote her a letter introducing myself and explaining the show. I wrote the letter and included a list of subjects that she might talk about on the show—if she were to accept the invitation. I also suggested that she might tune into the show so that when I phoned her she would have some idea of what I was talking about.

The first phone conversation I had with her was priceless, as were subsequent conversations and the letters I received from her. She did watch the show and, during our first phone conversation, mentioned that "the young man at the beginning who talked about politics was quite amusing" (she was referring, of course, to Johnny's opening monologue). After that, she said, she became bored and turned the show off—but she didn't say that she wouldn't appear on the show. A good sign.

Now all I had to do was convince two factions that I had a sensational booking. I knew that Johnny would love Imogen's honesty, wit, and intelligence—as well as her sarcasm—and would respect her accomplishments as an artist. I also knew that during the interview on the air she would be feisty, since at her age she could get away with saying just about anything, and she knew it. If I could have gone right to Johnny and told him of my idea to book her, there would be no problem, but that wasn't the way

our system worked, so I knew I had my work cut out for me.

The first hurdle was the producer. Like dance, photography was one of those allegedly esoteric areas I had been told was not for *The Tonight Show*. The notion was that you couldn't show photographs and make them interesting to the millions of people watching.

I decided to present Imogen Cunningham not as a photographer but as an outspoken, accomplished, and very unique elderly woman. I suggested that we should only show a few of her photographs, including the famous one of her husband and one of Cary Grant (clothed) that she had done years before for a fashion magazine. I pointed out that it was what Imogen had to say rather than what she had to show that was important. I must have been convincing, because I was told to proceed.

Now I only had the other side to convince: Imogen herself. It wasn't easy. Many phone calls and letters later, she agreed to leave her work and studio in San Francisco for a couple of days and come to Los Angeles.

There were certain guests who, my instincts told me, wouldn't fail. She was one of them. The chemistry between Johnny and Imogen was wonderful. She was everything I'd hoped for. Johnny seemed ecstatic with her. At the end of the interview, he asked her to return to the show, but she would make no commitment. He also mentioned he'd like to visit her at her studio if he were in the vicinity (something I had never heard him say before or after to another guest). She promptly told him he'd "better call first and not just show up."

I was very saddened that her second appearance (and my chance to spend more time with her) never came to be. About two months after her *Tonight Show* visit, Imogen died while completing work on a book of photographs entitled "After Ninety." It was a compilation of works the 93-year-old photographer had taken of her contemporaries, along with one of her own father when he was in his nineties.

My second success with a guest pre-interviewed by phone involved Dorothy Fuldheim of Cleveland. She is an octogenarian who has been on radio and television in a continuous capacity longer than any other broadcast personality in the United States. Candid and opinionated, she has interviewed many world figures and has colorful stories to boot. After many phone conversations, I suggested her as a guest to producer de Cordova. He approved. I then submitted Dorothy Fuldheim's name for a "green check." This was a procedure that we had to go through for each and every guest, regardless of how many times they had been on the show previously. We followed this routine because NBC insisted on it. Since

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it was routine, I never thought anything about it, until I submitted the name of Dorothy Fuldheim.

The procedure for obtaining (or not obtaining) a green check began when a talent coordinator wrote the name of a potential guest on a 3x5 card and tacked it to the board in the producer's office during the 11:00 a.m. meeting. A secretary eventually typed up a list and submitted it to the NBC vice president in charge of green checks. He would then approve or disapprove of them, based on a set of unknown (at least to us) criteria. If approved, the secretary would put a green felt-tip pen checkmark on the 3x5 card. That was a green check. (There really is no business like show business!)

I was astonished to learn that Dorothy Fuldheim had been refused a green check because she was on a television station in Cleveland that had a superior rating to the NBC-owned station there. The vice president in charge of green checks reasoned: "Why help promote the competition by booking one of their leading personalities on *The Tonight Show*?" Of course, this made no sense because if he really believed that argument, then there would have been very few guests getting booked on the show.

Then, as now, NBC was in third place in the network ratings war. If we followed his approach, then every personality seen on either ABC or CBS would have been persona non grata on the show. I argued with the producer that this was ridiculous since we were always booking performers who were associated with the other two networks. He obviously didn't want to make waves and told me to forget the booking.

I could have forgotten the booking and all the time I'd spent trying to secure it. I could have dealt with my own frustration over this stupid drawing of the line. I could have dropped the idea and buried it in my own files and the green-check cemetery. But I still had to explain to Dorothy Fuldheim why she had been turned down for *The Tonight Show* after I had taken so much of her precious time and had convinced her to consider coming to Los Angeles to do the show. (From our very first phone conversation, she told me that at her age, 83, she didn't need the publicity of *The Tonight Show* and that her time was so booked up that it would be difficult for her to make the trip.) My feelings of frustration and paranoia and even reminders of blacklisting were difficult to suppress as I apologized to her and tried to explain.

Almost a year later, something made me decide to experiment with the old green-check system that had been functioning without a hitch since the Fuldheim incident. I submitted the name again, and, to my amazement, I got a green check—with absolutely no question. It seemed as

## The same vice president who turned down a guest from a competing network later approved her

if I had imagined the other experience. The green check was given by the same executive who had denied it previously. That experience confirmed the theory that nothing in television goes the way of common sense. Dorothy Fuldheim was booked and was an instant success. The notes I compiled from our original phone conversations a year before offered a wealth of stories. There were pages and pages of them, and they carried Dorothy, Johnny, and me through several guest appearances.

I had a reputation among the guest hosts for supplying thorough and lengthy interview notes. McLean Stevenson, a frequent guest host, affectionately called me "Notes Shotel." Comedian David Brenner, another frequent guest host, always complimented me by telling me I gave him the best notes. I would return that compliment by crediting him with teaching me how to produce, since he was the first producer I ever worked with in television. It was right after my graduate work at the Annenberg School of Communications at Penn, when I was an assistant to one David N. Brenner, then producer-director-writer of documentary films at KYW-TV in Philadelphia. He taught me discipline and organization, abilities he used himself to go from a career as a filmmaker to the popular comedian he is today.

The third guest I brought successfully to *The Tonight Show* based on just a telephone contact was Sheriff Katherine Crumbley of Belmont County, Ohio. Besides being the first woman elected to such a position, Sheriff Crumbley was a natural for Johnny Carson. Well over six feet tall and weighing nearly 250 pounds, the sheriff was twice Johnny's size. She was funny, straightforward about her "no-one-better-cross-me" politics, and full of colorful anecdotes. During the show, Sheriff Crumbley, dressed in full uniform, offered Johnny her gun and holster to try on. Being half her size, he couldn't keep it on his waist—or even on his hips—and it landed on the floor at his feet. The audience howled. Sheriff Crumbley returned to the show a number of times to keep Johnny apprised of how she was maintaining law and order in Belmont County. I discovered her through a newspaper article; because the associate producer had

also seen the off-beat story, my task of convincing him and the producer that she'd be right for the show was much easier than in the cases of Imogen Cunningham and Dorothy Fuldheim.

Johnny and I would never discuss the notes that I wrote in the form of introduction and interview. But I would often attach to the notes my insights into the guest. I would suggest ways he might best handle the personality involved. The questions from my interview were typed on a separate sheet of paper so that Johnny could have a copy of them on his desk for reference while taping the show and talking to the guest. Sometimes, Johnny followed the questions, but most often he would select certain ones, skipping others or going off on another subject.

Like all talent coordinators, I became protective and possessive of my notes. I would often rewrite a question to get it just the way I wanted it so that it gave the guest the proper introduction to a story. I would cringe at a rewording—and thus a redefining—of a question. Regardless, it was always a thrill to stand behind the chair of the producer just a few feet away from Ed McMahon and Johnny Carson during the taping and be the silent coach who knew just how and where the interview might be going. That is, if things were going well, it was a thrill. If they weren't, I would want to curl up and crawl away.

The path of eye contact with Johnny was perfect, if he chose to use it. A smile, a wink, a nod from the star to the producer's area (during a commercial break) was always a good sign. Fred de Cordova would walk up to Johnny during the commercial breaks to remind Johnny what was coming up next. They usually exchanged comments on the previous segment. Good or bad, it filtered back to the coordinators upon Fred's return to his ringside seat.

Many more times than I would like to recall, a guest had to be "bumped"—left off the show that night because other guests had run beyond their allotted time. Often, there might be just a few minutes left in the show, and Johnny always felt that to bring someone on for such a short period of time was more of an insult than not to put them on the air at all. If bumped, a guest was usually rescheduled immediately for another spot as soon as the booking schedule would allow. Coordinators tend to be even more protective of their guest than their notes, so this sort of last-minute cancellation was as traumatic for the coordinator as it was for the guest.

Of course, it was the coordinator's job to tell the guests they weren't going on the show. I dreaded those times. There is so much anticipation, anxiety, or whatever you wish to label it that goes into the preparation of an appearance by a guest that the letdown is tremendous. Standing

ringside and watching the official clock, we were all very aware when a guest's appearance was being jeopardized because time was running out. It was actually quite comical to see two coordinators, each handling one of the two remaining guests, trying to justify to the producer why his or her guest should not be bumped while the other one should. The decision was often based on how much time was left, which of the two guests could be most easily rescheduled, and which was visiting from out of town and had other commitments that might make a rebooking difficult or even impossible.

I had guests bumped many times, and it never got any easier to accept or any easier to explain. One guest was Tim Severin, an author/adventurer from Ireland who was in the United States to promote his book. I had done an enormous amount of research, a tremendous amount of convincing to obtain the booking, and an awful lot of work putting together the interview and the film he made available to me for his appearance. The author of *The Brendan Voyage*, he was booked to tell of his experience sailing through the Arctic in a leather boat re-creating St. Brendan's voyage of the 17th century. It was fascinating. But the time was running short, and I knew what was going to happen. Fortunately, there was a happy ending to the Severin story: he was rebooked and turned out to be a really good guest.

To many outsiders in the studio, the taping must have looked like a party. Fred would always have a couple of drinks during the show. It was the second drink that he usually offered to Ed McMahon for a sip, during a commercial break near the end of the show. Contrary to all the drinking jokes made about Ed, I think he really does limit his intake. We were free to help ourselves at the bar as we offered our guests a drink. I preferred drinking fruit juice. Most of my guests did, too. There were frequently requests for white wine and less frequent requests for something more potent. It was the coordinator's job to discreetly watch the guests' drinking, if they were drinking anything hard, to avoid any tipsy appearances.

The physical proximity I maintained to on-the-air activity usually gave me a chance to have a word or two with Ed McMahon. One of the things we talked about was rafting on the Colorado River. I had decided to take such a trip and discovered that Ed had taken the same trip just about two years before. We talked in Ed's office so he could give me a few pointers, and he relived the highlights of his experience for me. When I returned, I couldn't wait to tell him of my trip, and I knew he genuinely wanted to know about it. Ed's interest in the people he worked with, or so it seemed to me, added a personal dimension to our professional relationship.

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Backstage at Studio 1 was like backstage at any other television studio. Without the lights and the stars, there was no glamour. The area came alive twice each day. The first time was at 3:15 p.m. as the musicians, led by Doc Severinsen, filed in. While that happened, technicians started readying cameras and lights. As daily technicalities were worked out, guests would rehearse at the piano and then on camera so that the lights, sets, and staging could be checked. Following rehearsal, the guests went to their dressing rooms, the musicians went on break (as did the crew), while the production staff (including the talent coordinators) met in the producer's office for a brief summary of that night's show, to be taped at 5:30 p.m.

At 5:00 p.m., the studio came alive for a second time. Guests not already in arrived, cameras and technical positions were manned, musicians came in (this time wearing jackets and ties, except for Doc, of course—he was usually decked out in one of his sparkling specials), the audience was seated, and the pre-show warm-up begun. The warm-up was designed to make the audience comfortable, ready to respond, and laugh. The audience sometimes waited outside for hours in rain or 100° temperatures. The warm-up started with Fred, who introduced Doc, who introduced Ed. Each had his own little prepared routine. The jokes worked mostly because the audience didn't care what they were saying at that point. They seemed to be a part of the excitement and glamour which came to its full potential when exactly at 5.30 p.m., Ed McMahon billboarded the show and then, with those well-known words, announced "Here's Johnny!"

During the warm-ups, I would prepare my guests by going over certain aspects of the proposed interview or performance, making sure they would be dressed and ready to go when the time came. As the taping proceeded, I periodically checked on my guests to ensure their comfort and readiness. All of the talent coordinators have experienced that horrendous moment when the guests they were responsible for were not behind the curtain ready to walk out when Johnny introduced them. It almost happened to me with none other

than The Greatest, Muhammad Ali. I worked with Ali when he was on the show—but that statement in itself needs explanation. The Greatest was never available for a pre-interview and just didn't do them. I didn't expect it. I just did my homework by keeping up with his career between visits. When he arrived at Studio 1, he'd enter his dressing room—always followed by an entourage much too large to fit into the dressing room itself, so the overspill would head for the so-called green room, a place for the guests to wait their turn, watch the show, and relax if possible.

Once Ali was in his dressing room, I would enter, greet him, and give him a copy of the interview, a routine I followed with all my guests. Some guests would devour the notes, others just glance at them, and some would ignore them. Ali was in the last category. I told him what time he should expect to be introduced. He always came dressed and ready to go on stage and never had make-up, so he was usually ready at a moment's notice. But not this time. I went to his dressing room to remind him he would be on in 10 minutes and then 10 minutes later announced it was time to go backstage. I stood by while he continued a conversation which I assumed he was finishing at every word. He wasn't.

I started to get nervous. Somehow, he must have gotten the message as pain and panic crossed my face, for with not a second to spare, he started to walk the few steps down the hall, another few steps through the studio door, some more steps behind the stage to the curtain, and the last remaining steps to the curtain (with me at his heels the entire time), just as Johnny was saying "... the one and only Muhammad Ali." I repeated silently, "Yes, the one and only, Muhammad Ali!"

It is astounding to me when I think about the people I have met, worked with, and even advised (on the subject of their interviews). And yet, with some, it's such a fleeting acquaintance. I won't forget meeting many of them: Alfred Hitchcock (he told a dirty joke while he waited to go on *The Mike Douglas Show*); the late actor Peter Finch (just a few nights before his sudden death and just about his last public appearance); John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono (when they co-hosted the Douglas show and managed to take years off my life; that would make a chapter in a book); Bette Davis (I'd say the same about her as the Lennons); Anthony Quinn (a lovely man and a good tennis partner, I found out); the late Robert Shaw (pre-*Jaws*; I had to apologize to him for the rude behavior of a comedienne whose little girl routine was a classic but whose manners were atrocious). No, I won't forget these people, but I am aware enough to know that very shortly after our meetings, I was forgotten.