

When the Leader  
of the Free World  
comes home after a  
hard month of summitry,  
he likes nothing better  
than to swap compliments  
with his cronies.

# All the President's Friends

**O**UR YELLOW DATSUN 210 WAS wedged into a parade of limousines and Rolls-Royces several blocks long, waiting its turn to be valet-parked. Stepping out of the stretched white affair just ahead was Donna Mills, sporting her signature mane of blonde curls, a full-length silver fox coat and, at her arm, a dark-haired, slightly pudgy, vaguely petulant fellow. An electrical storm of paparazzi bulbs greeted her entrance to NBC's Studio 2 in Burbank. We were up next. It was kind of like being on a ski lift without any skis.

*continued*

By Nancy Spiller



For the life of me, I didn't know how I had got on the guest list for the "All-Star Party for 'Dutch' Reagan." The letter of invitation had come on Frank Sinatra's personal stationery. "Dear Nancy," Frank said, "It is my joy to invite you . . ." and went on to describe a celebrity-filled evening honoring "Dutch" (as he was known to friends in his Hollywood days) and Nancy Reagan. Variety Clubs International was sponsoring the event, which CBS would later broadcast. The license fee paid by the network for putting the show on the air would go toward a hospital wing to be dedicated in the president's name. The letter ended with "Much Love," a felt-tipped rendition of "Francis Albert" and a P.S. that he'd be glad to pick us up should we be "stuck" for a ride: "Just be outside your place at 5 o'clock sharp." It was this last line that led me to believe this might be a joke.

Upon investigation, I discovered it wasn't. Variety Clubs has done nine such television specials over the years, honoring the likes of John Wayne, Burt Reynolds and Lucille Ball.

This was the first time the organization had chosen to focus on a political figure, but then, this was our first Hollywood president.

I took the invitation even more seriously when I RSVPed for my husband and myself. The Secret Service had a few questions for us in its standard security check. We declined the kind offer of the limo—which, sans Sinatra, we could have reserved. We wanted the Datsun to see this.

**T**HE SHOW WAS BEING TAPED SUNDAY EVENING, Dec. 1, the last day of a Thanksgiving weekend the Reagans had spent at their Santa Barbara ranch. They would fly in by helicopter armada shortly before taping time. The rest of the guests would arrive early for an hour of cocktails and mingling in the chill studio air.

The warehouse-sized soundstage of Studio 2 had been transformed into your basic Pantheon of the Gods garden party. There were terraced arrangements of tables bound by low hedges and shaded by white-columned arbors;

lights twinkled in a forest of potted trees and several hothouses' worth of poinsettias set the room ablaze in the First Lady's favorite color. The back-terrace facade of a classically styled mansion anchored one end of the set while an orchestra stage held down the other. Two painted backdrops contributed to the rarefied atmosphere: one with the San Fernando Valley falling away to the left, and the other with the Los Angeles basin, rimmed by the Hollywood Hills complete with white lettered sign, on the right.

The faces, however, grabbed our attention first. Every other one in the logjam feeding into the garden was recognizable: Red Skelton, Art Linkletter, Zsa Zsa Gabor with Merv Griffin, Dionne Warwick, Phyllis Diller, Liberace, Morey Amsterdam, Paul Williams. It was everyone who'd ever been squeezed into a Hollywood Square. Robert Mitchum, June Allyson, Dorothy Lamour, Angie Dickinson, Florence Henderson, Carol Lawrence, Rory Calhoun. It was an after-hours party at the Hollywood Wax Museum. Fred MacMurray, Gregory Peck, Glenn Ford, John Forsythe, Gary Collins with Mary Ann Mobley, Cliff Robertson, Robert Wagner with Jill St. John.

Seeing Jimmy Stewart made me contemplate a self-introduction, but I couldn't think of anything to say that he hadn't heard a billion times before. Stewart was the man Jack Warner would have cast as governor of California when Reagan was elected in 1966. "Jimmy Stewart for governor," he had quipped. "Ronald Reagan for best friend." *It's a Wonderful Life* was playing that night on television. Mention it and he'd probably just be made to feel terribly old.

There were 105 celebrities in all. They brought friends, and then the guest list of 300 to 350 was filled out with a number of invited "incidentals," human equivalents to the poinsettias. As "incidentals" my husband and I went without introductions. We took great pleasure in not having to talk, playing instead a private game of Trivial Pursuit. Picking out and identifying faces was like counting out-of-state license plates. One Chuck Connors, one Linda Evans, one Rich Little.

For the most part, this was the old-guard, conservative Hollywood, the Chasen's crowd. (Indeed, the Reagans' favorite Los Angeles restaurant would be catering the affair.) Of the truly legendary Hollywood faces, many looked pallid beneath their pancake makeup, and dye couldn't hide the unsubtle texture of their aging hair. And those, as the old joke goes, were just the men.

As cronies bumped into cronies, the most often-heard line of the evening was, "You look great—but how do you feel?"

**O**NCE I STOPPED WORRYING ABOUT WHY I was there, I started worrying about why Reagan was. What was the president of the United States, leader of the wealthiest, most powerful nation on Earth, doing at one of those schmaltzy march-out-the-faces-and-forget-the-content



**Featured entertainers Eydie Gorme and Steve Lawrence told Vic Damone stories to Burt Reynolds and date Loni Anderson, who looked like a Disneyland ride: all curves, big eyes and a happy face.**

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television shows? Particularly since this would be his first major public appearance since he'd met with Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva to discuss the fate of the earth. Now he was coming to Burbank to trade quips with Burt Reynolds. I'd prefer to think that Gorbachev did not go home, drop his briefcase and face his nation in a comedy/variety special on Russian TV.

No one was discussing the fate of the earth tonight. At our table a gentleman who apparently had been a child actor and had grown to be a producer was telling the Arthur Hills the story of his life from birth to middle age with little prompting on their part. Sitting to my left was Chad Everett in a black-leather tuxedo jacket and ruffled black shirt. He had campaigned for Reagan twice, he said, and his wife, Shelby, "corresponds" with Nancy. The next table over, Eydie Gorme and Steve Lawrence told Vic Damone stories to Burt Reynolds and date Loni Anderson, who looked like a Disneyland ride: all curves, big eyes and a happy face. Charles Bronson squinted merrily, but said nary a word all night, while wife Jill Ireland glittered under the weight of the world's diamonds.

Monty Hall, emcee for the evening and president of Variety Clubs International, noted that when jokes are told to people in the entertainment business, they don't laugh, they say, "That's funny." We were asked not to do that, but to laugh and applaud loudly in all the right places.

With the studio lights on high and the orchestra striking up "Nancy With the Laughing Face," Nancy Reagan entered through the mansion door. She took her place at the table on an elevated platform in the center of the room, sitting alongside First Stepson Mike Reagan and his wife. Given reports of a family tiff last year at holiday time, this seating arrangement seemed a nice touch.

The president was next, bounding into the room with a healthy stride to "Hail to the Chief." He took his seat beside his wife and his daughter, Maureen Reagan. Reagan's older brother, Neil, and his wife, filled out the table.

The evening's casual tone was established at the outset. Monty Hall introduced the president as "Dutch," the name by which he was known while a radio announcer in the Midwest and later in Hollywood. Frank Sinatra gave a gangland intonation to his greeting to Nancy, "First Lady of the United States, and might I add, First Lady of Geneva, too." He referred to Reagan as the first member of their community to wind up in "public housing."

Sinatra's performance was taken as tipsiness by some and arrogance by others. This party was for the President of the United States, but the Chairman of the Board hadn't bothered to rehearse a line or otherwise prepare. He missed his marks and flubbed simple lines. When he sang, weakly, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," he glanced around uncomfortably, as though he were looking for someone to hand him a glass of voice.

Reagan proved the most professional performer of them all when Vin Scully lured him out for a retelling of a famous anecdote from his sports broadcasting days. Reagan had been a sports announcer at WHO Radio in Des Moines, recreating baseball games from

*continued*

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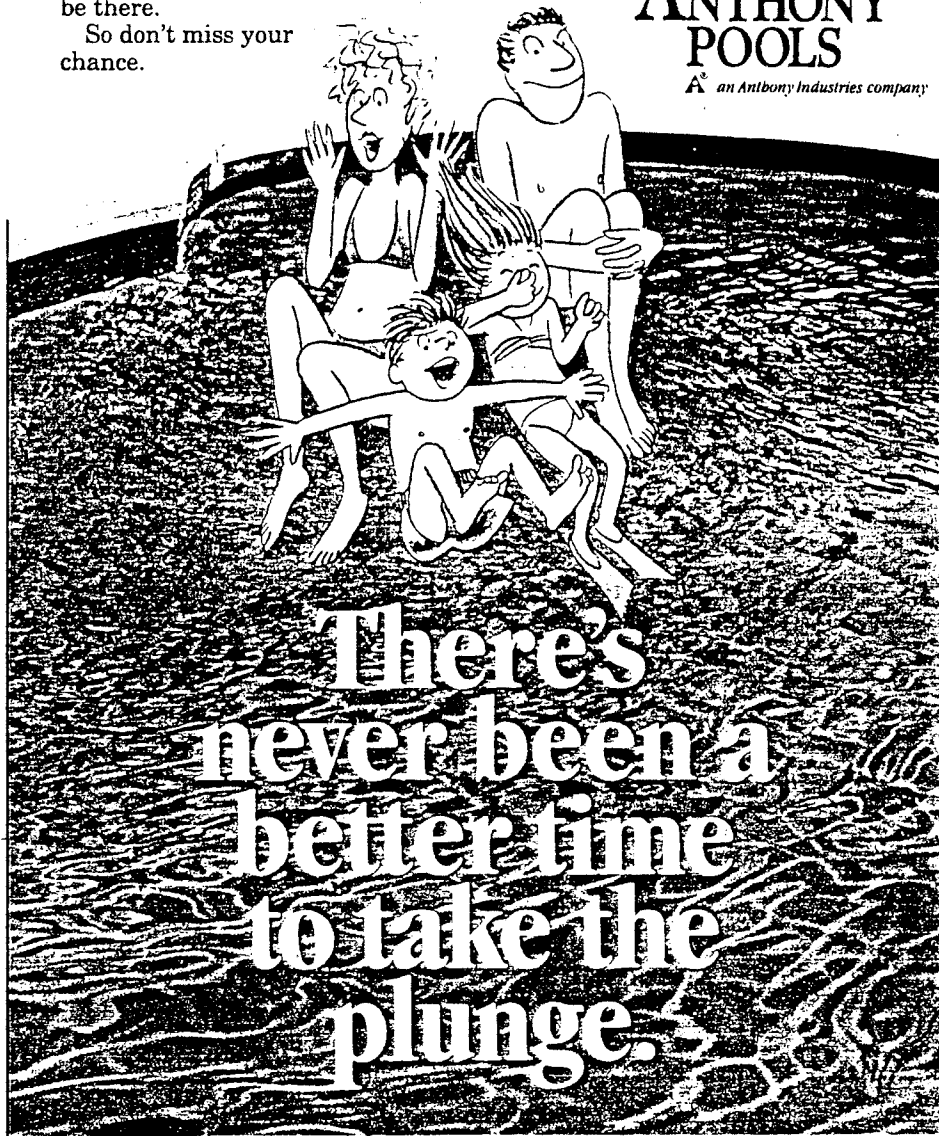
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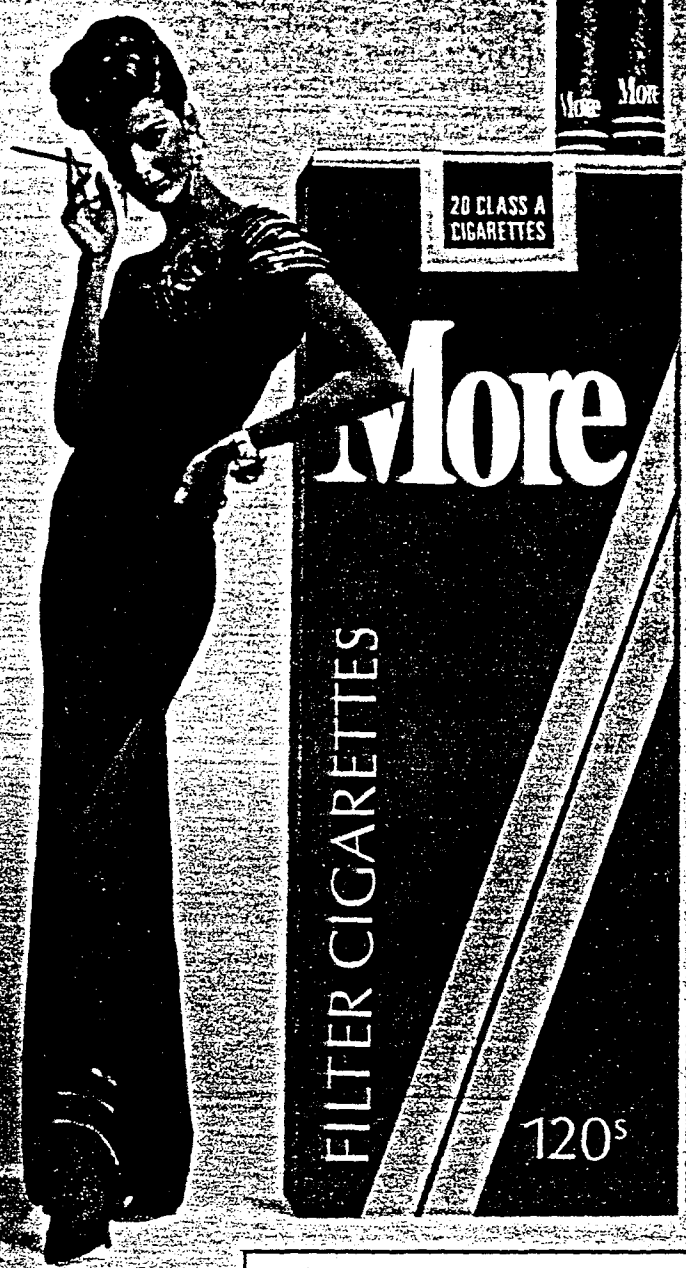


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telegraph bulletins. He found himself right in the midst of an exciting play when his technician handed him a bulletin that said the wire had gone dead. Rather than interrupt the game with that message and have "everyone change to another station" he continued the play-by-play, making the game up until the wire was restored.

The International Children's Choir was trotted out—50 kids from 50 countries, dressed in native costumes, singing "Let There Be Peace on Earth." Reagan was charmed. "Would you like to go to Geneva with me?" he asked them at the finish. "I think you could do the job."

Next Steve and Eydie bounced out with a Vegas-style medley of love songs to America. "... America is changing back into what she used to be ... glory, glory hallelujah ... light the torch of Liberty ..."

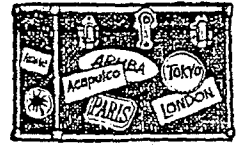
Charlton Heston was introduced by Sinatra as "the man who parted the Red Sea." His remarks praised Reagan as "the lineal descendant of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson, Roosevelt. ..." He added something about Reagan carrying "the torch that was flamed by Patrick Henry's passion for liberty, Tom Paine's *Common Sense* and Thomas Jefferson's most uncommon wisdom" as he led us into a "beleaguered future" and a whole lot of other things. His benediction to the president was intended to stir: "God shed his grace on thee."

So there was Heston/Moses pinning Reagan on the wall of history with Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln. Just before, Burt Reynolds had offered a possible reason for Reagan's current gig, "You switched agents, didn't you?"

Monty Hall handled the announcement about the Ronald Reagan wing for children that would be dedicated at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. Taking the microphone, Reagan did his classic "Well," and then went into a routine, read from cue cards with professional smoothness, about his ideal Cabinet, "You know, Jack Benny as secretary of the treasury, John Wayne for secretary of state, Clint Eastwood in defense, Groucho Marx in education." If it weren't for three of

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them being dead, it would have all sounded very plausible.

**T**HE GUESTS GATHERED AFTER the show for handshakes and hellos with the hometown boy made good. There was Virginia Mayo, his co-star in *The Girl From Jones Beach*; Dale Robertson, the man who succeeded him in 1966 as host of *Death Valley Days* after Reagan left to take office as governor of California; Angie Dickinson, with whom he'd starred in *The Killers*, his last film role.

One '50s film superstar whose light is now faded reached his hand through the crowd to shake the president's hand and say, "It's good to see you and thank you for that exchange of letters. I think you know what I mean." This was one of those ironic turn-of-phrase men's lives sometimes take. If Reagan had enjoyed anything near this man's Hollywood success, he would probably never have gone into politics. But when the studio system receded, Reagan was one of the primates pushed out of the tree-tops and forced to evolve elsewhere. As a politician, Reagan had been able to perform some favor for which the man appeared truly grateful.

It was Reagan's actor's presence and public-speaking ability that got him—the self-proclaimed "Errol Flynn of the B movies"—elected to office. He was the first to leave town and carry the power of a media image to its logical extreme. He has become one of the most wildly popular presidents because of his ability to calm us with simple answers in the face of an increasingly complex world.

The Constitution deals with the separation of church and state, but it doesn't say anything about the separation of fantasy and reality. Indeed, when presented with the possibility of a make-believe president, a lot of people simply refuse to consider it. *60 Minutes* recently ran a piece, "Ronald Reagan: The Movie," based on research done by a UC-Berkeley professor. Film clips were intercut with news clips to show how Reagan has lifted verbatim dialogue from such movies as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and how he's taken film scenarios and presented them as dramatic, real-life incidents. The next week's mail brought an overwhelmingly angry response

from viewers who simply didn't want to hear about it.

When Reagan bounded onto the garden party set of Studio 2, with the glamour below and the light grids above, it was with the walk of a man far younger than his soon-to-be 75 years. His hair is black, and his cheeks are rosy. Rather than identify with the traditional image of gray hair and wisdom, he emulates the Hollywood fantasy of eternal youth. On camera, he looks more alive than a lot of people half his age.

He came to Hollywood after the Geneva summit because this is his home. Contrary to popular

belief, he has never left Hollywood. Instead the American public has joined him there. We all look great and it really doesn't matter how we feel anymore.

**T**HE ALL-STAR PARTY FOR DUTCH Reagan was broadcast on CBS Sunday night, Dec. 8 at 8 p.m., pre-empting *Murder, She Wrote*. Sinatra's flubs were clipped out, as was Mike Reagan. Despite his prominent position alongside stepmother Nancy, the camera's family portrait featured only her, Ronald and Maureen.

The show placed 10th for the week in the Nielsen ratings and

proved a strong lead-in for *Circus of the Stars*, which featured some of the same celebrity guests. It took 12th place for the week.

Producer Paul Keyes considered the show a success, though last year's Variety Clubs International tribute to Lucille Ball had done better. "You're never going to go through the ratings roof with a political figure," he said. "There's always gonna be those diehards who'll say, 'I'm not gonna watch that bum.'"

NANCY SPILLER, who writes about television in *Hollywood*, last wrote for *West* about trekking in Nepal.

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