



Confessions of a Number One Son

I was born and last seen being carried off by alleycats into a dark neighborhood. William Bendix found me in the rubble of a village during a Japanese air raid at my dead momma's withered tit wailing hoarsely. The movie was *China*. I was the symbol of helpless, struggling China in the arms of William Bendix. He named me "Donald Duck."

The wail went from movie to movie. The Japs have tortured me into giving up the secret position and are driving the little life of me left in my little battered body in a truck full of Jap soldiers out to get the jump on John Wayne and my missionary

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teacher from Indiana and all my friends. I grabbed the wheel of the truck and pulled that truck right off the world and sent it down the darkness. My body rolled out to the burning truck to the feet of John Wayne and all my surprised friends working their stealthy way through the jungle. America saw my face by the flamelight of the burning truck full of Japs. They saw me trying not to cry out in pain while tears streamed down my cheeks.

"Don't try to talk," John Wayne said softly. And John Wayne and the Missionary teacher who'd failed to teach me how to properly spell A-M-E-R-I-C-A instead of A-M-E-L-I-C-A exchanged looks and sadly shook their heads. And all the soldiers and all my friends were getting

down on their knees around me. "I failed," I said. "I guess I'll never be promoted to sergeant now," and my eyes began to roll back into my skull and my breath, a quiet shriek from my lungs, was the sound of metal scraped with a long file. Now and then I coughed and blood rosebudded out of my mouth. John Wayne took the colonel's bird off his collar and pinned it on me.

By the light of burning Japs sputtering and sizzling in the background, women in the shopper's matinees with their paper sacks and red meat tokens saw tears in John Wayne's eyes. "You didn't fail," he said to me and had to gulp something back before he could say, "He-yeck! You got that promotion! I got orders from the Presi-

by Frank Chin



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 "China," starring Loretta Young and Alan Ladd, with William Bendix, and Philip Ahn. Directed by John Farrow. A Paramount Picture.

dent himself to promote you all the way to colonel." And the women in the shopper's matinee sighed at the vision of my face filling the darkness. My eyes opened up big and buzzed with an orchestra playing the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. And the missionary teacher from Indiana put her ear to my mouth as I agonized out my last words, "Ayeeee! Emmmm!" My eyes came open, shining gleaming silver like something crazy. She wiped the blood from my lips, from my eyes, and arranged my hair a bit at a time. "Eee," I continued. "Easy, champ," John Wayne said. He shrugged violently, suddenly, and looked into the flames of the burning truckful of Japs. "Eii! Eii!" I screamed. "Eye! See! Ayy! AMELLICA!" I cried struggling up to my elbows suddenly. The missionary teacher screamed. John Wayne said, "At ease, colonel," and I fell back into a shot of John Wayne with his mouth open and was dead in his arms.

One summer vacation from college I was Frank Sinatra's gunbearer in the jungle south of the Chinese border in World War II. The Japs ambushed us, wiped out the field hospital and Frank Sinatra stuck his gun out to me while continuing to glare off after the direction of the runoff Japs.

And his arm stayed out there awhile until he got the idea something was wrong. I hadn't taken the gun from him. He turned around to see I wasn't there. I was on the ground awhile back, been blinking sweat out of my eyes a long time now, on my back with a twenty two pound Browning Automatic Rifle and bipod, a six pound M-1 Garand rifle, a Thompson machine gun with a drum magazine and sack of hand grenades, spare parts and extra Zippo lighters. "I have failed you," I said. "Don't talk now," Frank Sinatra said. Then they were all around my cot. The doctor and Sinatra exchanged looks and shook their heads no at each other. I'm shuddering, trying not to cry. In this movie I'm as tall as Frank Sinatra. Breath comes whinneying from my lungs. Frank Sinatra draws his Colt forty-five and chambers a round. He tells everyone to leave the tent. "You can't do it!" someone says. "It's murder!"

"It's either this way, quick, or letting him scream all night," Sinatra said. "You wouldn't let a dog suffer like that." I was never heard from again in that movie. From the time I was born screaming in a bombed out railroad station in Shanghai through the days I was known on the lot as America's most loyal Chinese American, because the Japs I came up with on the screen were fouler than even the whiteman imagined, I always get

killed. I'm known in the industry as "The Chinese who dies." So I ask the question: Why me?

The answer is Charlie Chan of the movies. Our Father Which art in Hollywood, Charlie Chan be Thy Name. Amen. Everybody took to Charlie Chan, knew he was only passing but saw him as the real image of Chinaman anyway. That was in 1925. By 1936 the success of the Charlie Chan image filtered to the top, well-fixed in the minds of the finest people, including the first official Chinatown spokesman: Leong Gor Yun—a fake Chinatown author with a fake Chinese name, who wrote a fake book "Chinatown Inside Out."

America in its sinister wisdom invented a different movie form to irritate and mess on the minds of each of its minorities individually. For Indians it was the Western. The black movie was the courtroom drama where a black man would be accused of crime and then sit in a courtroom and listen to two white men discuss Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx. The Chinese movie was the Charlie Chan movie and the road movie. Whites like Gary Cooper in *The General Died at Dawn*, Barbara Stanwyck in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, Alan Ladd in *China* and James Stewart in *The Mountain Road* came to China out of Hollywood to get on a Chinese road over some mountains and discover that this road through China, bumping into love and hate, birth and death, is the road of life and runs into roadblocks, side-roads, and wham, a crossroads! But the beginning is Charlie Chan.

In the beginning there was Earl Derr Biggers, mild-mannered hack writer with a gift for cliches. In Hawaii, laying out on the lanai, sipping his Mai Tai and listening to the happy kanakas crooning harmoniously in the fields as they chopped the sugarcane, Derr Biggers was the picture of a contented Southern colonel sipping a julep on the verandah. He read about a Chinese detective before. And out of the void of this white man's mind, Charlie Chan was born.

In the tradition of 2100 feature films and stage productions with Chinese character leads, no Chinaman's ever played the role of Charlie Chan. Two Japanese in the early days

when the Chan part was so small it was at the small print end of the credits, but no Chinaman. Not even when the old men of Fox and Monogram's 44 features had passed. Warner Oland and Sidney Toler were both dead and Roland Winters retired from playing out the last days of his career as someone's grandfather in James Garner and Jerry Lewis movies. All the classic Chans are gone and NBC and Universal Studios did prophesy Chan's second coming in color and sent NBC vice president David Tebet out into the world saying he was looking for an "Oriental actor who spoke English in an accent understandable to U.S. audiences." Not even when they promised it out of the trade papers, gossip columns, and wire services did a Chinaman ever play Charlie Chan.

Keye Luke, the original Number One Son and still active in the post-midnight talk shows doing his Lionel Barrymore imitation, still looks in his forties and now and then shows up as a blind priest of Chinese mysticism who's overcome his handicap by reciting the drabber quotations of Kahlil Gibran on ABC's *Kung Fu*.

Keye spoke English in an accent good enough to be understood playing fools, converts to Catholicism and Oxford all with that same stiff, studied ineptitude of his Number One Son for over 40 years and was last seen renewing an old friendship with Gregory Peck that led directly to his being trampled to death by the Red Guard in *The Chairman*. Keye took a chance and auditioned for the part of his own father. He also had an idea of his own about playing Number One Son grown up. Keye Luke envisioned a television series featuring the adventures of Charlie Chan's Number One Son all grown up. A hip and modern Chinese American tough who might have been an All-American quarterback before a few years as a special agent of the F.B.I. "Charlie Chan worked for the police department," Keye notes, "This will be different. I will be a private detective." Keye Luke didn't get the part of Charlie Chan. And the Derr Biggers estate that owned Charlie Chan demanded the new Chan be just like the old ones. Keye's registered with Medicare now. Number One Son's in his sixties and still dreaming of going into private practice.



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"China," starring Loretta Young and Alan Ladd, with William Bendix, and Philip Ahn.
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Victor Sen Yung, Number Two Son, was Chinatown San Francisco born and raised himself up through high school as a live-in houseboy for a white uptown family where he learned to speak English like he was born in Chicago, Illinois. He's the most talented Asian-American actor there ever was. He stole the show from Bette Davis in *The Letter*, and drove the censors at Paramount nuts with his ability to make anything he said to Loretta Young, in *China*, sound lecherous and aggressive. Scenes between him and Alan Ladd were cut from the finished film because Victor's hornrimmed glasses, skinny, smartass Chinese student was too much for Alan Ladd, who was on the road of life. Among the Yellow actors in Hollywood, Victor Sen Yung is remembered for being moody, pushy, totally out of his mind. He's thought of as being jinxed. I got the impression people were avoiding him. The lines yellow actors are given to speak have been pretty much the same for fifty years. But with Victor Sen Yung's ability to talk any kind of white American and European accent and giving it a twirl and a question mark at the end of every phrase and pass it off as a Chinese accent, the lines took on some class.

Soon after Pearl Harbor, the United States Government in the form of the

Office of War Information (OWI)

notified Hollywood that Charlie Chan movies were now official anti-Jap propaganda. To signal the fact righteously to the Japs, Hollywood produced a grotesque parody of the Chan movies involving a Charlie Chan and his Number One Son who go from comic and lovable clowns to pitiful and loathsome reptiles, from comforting to sinister merely by going from Chinese to Japanese in *Across the Pacific*, John Huston's first big film after his smash *The Maltese Falcon*.

Sydney Greenstreet was a white man who's Jap at heart in Charlie Chan's white suit and white snapbrim ... unsnapped. And Victor Sen Yung was the gunzel Joe Tatsuiko. He was to parody himself.

As Charlie Chan's Number Two Son he dressed in the latest fads—pleated pants and two-tone shoes. He took double, wham wham with his eyes back on white girls, and be bop baree bopped all kinds of American slang all ineptly, making Americans laugh. They admired the dumb son of Charlie Chan for wanting to be like them. With instinctive genius Victor Sen Yung produced a most distasteful and sinister Joe Tatsuiko merely by doing what Number Two Son did badly for comic relief, but doing it well, so well

that except for the eyes, the skin and hair, he was immaculately, perfectly American. Whites couldn't stand it. The sincere fumbling Number Two Son who was so shy he was rarely seen talking to anyone other than his father or the black chauffeur was now cocky, backslapping Joe Tatsuiko, looking Humphrey Bogart in the eye and saying, "Boy, it's good to find someone on this boat who speaks my language!" He was the first one Bogart

of his movies and was last seen going to his maker in ABC's *Kung Fu*.

Benson Fong, Victor Sen Yung and Keye Luke were all in Ross Hunter's 1961 production of *Flower Drum Song*. The film's director, Henry Koster told me that musicals were usually the costliest form of Hollywood movie to make, because of the high salaries commanded by stars who were both actors and song and dance people. But *Flower Drum Song* didn't cost very much to make, Koster said, because "You don't have to pay

presence of whites. And to compound the offense, NBC trotted out their only black vice president, Stan Robertson, to say, "We don't think it's offensive," telling us what white men used to tell blacks a generation ago, "We wanted to cast an Oriental, and we looked here and in London and in Hong Kong. Unfortunately, we never found an Oriental actor who could carry the movie."

Stan Robertson was Birmingham's revenge. The Chan movies of the Forties and Fifties were on-screen/off-screen double-visioned parables of racist order with whites on top, blacks on the bottom and two kinds of Chinese in between. "I'm sure that any intelligent and proud Chinese would more or less resent the whole idea of Chan," Roland Winters, the last Chan, said. "Not so much Chan, because he wasn't too bad, but his, you know, the silly kids that did stupid things."

The Chinese and the silly kids that did stupid things had a servant, Birmingham. Birmingham was black—lowest fool on the totem pole and played by Mantan Moreland, last seen doing the same vaudeville routine he brought to the Chan films, in a Midas muffler commercial. Now in 1972, a black man speaking for NBC told us that being told not one of us was dynamic enough to play sleepy old Charlie Chan wasn't offensive.

Whites all over America weren't surprised to see a Chinaman with a black servant and talking nasty into the face of people like Willy Best in *Charlie Chan at the Race Track*. A film that featured Charlie Chan saying, "Murder without blood, like Amos without Andy." But it didn't look right to me. Word got around Hollywood that I was a troublemaker. A picture of Stepin Fetchit basking by his pool in Beverly Hills, had Chinese servants in Mandarin collars serving him drinks. I sensed a primitive message running to the blacks out of the Charlie Chan movies.

I went to a tape recording of my agent's voice, and talked to it—my agent, Bessie Loo, the agent handling most of us yellows. I discovered I was dealing with one of the powers behind Charlie Chan. She's the only agent ever permitted to work as a studio casting director while working



DARRYL F. ZANUCK'S PRODUCTION OF "THE PURPLE HEART" with Dana Andrews, Richard Conte, Farley Granger, Kevin O'Shea, Donald Barry, Rudy Marshall, Sam Levene

shot and killed in the climactic scenes.

When NBC was sniffing the watering holes of the world for an Oriental actor to play an Oriental role, Victor Sen Yung was showing up as Hop Sing, the Cartwright boys' cook on TV's *Bonanza*. Benson Fong, Charlie Chan's Number Three Son, used to be so young, with such a sincere, trusting, handsome face that he got viciously shot up by the Japs in almost every movie he was in outside of the Charlie Chan movies. Today Benson Fong runs a string of sweet'n'sour suey joints and boasts of buying a new Cadillac every two years. He still gets killed in most

Oriental actors much as you do regular actors."

NBC and Universal didn't cast a yellow lead in the role of Charlie Chan because they hadn't found an Oriental actor that was "dynamic," had "charisma" and "star quality"—in other words, "balls"—enough to play the part of Charlie Chan: . . . a decrepit, hunched over, mealy mouthed, sycophantic, clumsy, more-than-slightly-effeminate, limp-wristed, bucktoothed detective you could tell was Chinese because he never used first person pronouns "I", "Me" or "We" in the

as an agent. She dealt with herself, casting her clients. They were all yellows. She delivered the yellows to the studio. Bessie Loo is the source of every Asian, Oriental, gook, Jap, Chinaman, Nip, Chink, Slopehead, Chinese and Japanese you remember. And that lingering impression of bland indifference all of them mechanics, cooks, houseboys, orphans, honorable sons and Japanese soldiers combined leave you with, is the result of Bessie Loo's genius.

"Bessie," I said to the playback of her voice, "I can't do this Chan movie. Not another one. I'm too old to still be playing his son. And the other ones . . . they've been on my conscience, Bessie, ever since I read Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. And Bessie, he wrote up an account of a blackman down South who lets whitefolks kick him in the ass for a quarter, Bessie. And he just laughs and picks up the quarter off the scummy old floor with his lips! and wags his ass! And Shorty says he's going to the North, and they ask Shorty, 'Shorty, what're you gonna do up North?' And Shorty said, 'I'll pass for Chinese.' Listen, Bessie, they don't like us, and we're not even down South! I'm scared. I got a wife and kid."

And Bessie Loo, this ancient woman, a seventy-odd-year-old woman whose skin was like cocoons all over her, recorded on Mother's Day, "Well, of course, I'm not as sensitive as some of the other people. To me, I think it's sort of a comedy thing, you know."

"But, Bessie, the joke's on me."

"And I have no qualms about it because, after all, Charlie Chan was a good man. He represents the Chinese in a good light."

"But what about me? What about us? Our people?" I asked.

"All that is ignorance," Bessie shouted.

"Bessie, I'm going to kill Charlie Chan. I'm in this organization, you see . . ." I said, but Bessie's voice went on over mine. She didn't stop talking.

"When I first moved Among American! I've always lived Among American, ah, people! And I've gone into a higher level home!"

"Most of the time we go bowling once a week, but we all swore this blood oath, you know, Bessie? We all swore to kill Charlie Chan."

"You know at first they didn't accept us," Bessie said, and she should know. In the seventy-odd years of her life she's been through most of our history here. She remembers horse and buggies, and being the first Chinese-American public school teacher in San Francisco teaching in Chinatown's Commodore Stockton grammar school. "They didn't accept us. Why? I wore trousers and they laughed at us. Thinking, 'Ooooh, a girl wearing trousers!' And look at them now. And uh, at first they all seem to, you know,

Luckily, I lived in a home. An American home and they were nice to me. And gradually I felt the transition."

"Quit the science fiction, Bessie, and listen. I gotta kill Charlie Chan."

"And cuz they're human beings and I am too. And if they loved me, if they respect me, I'm sure others would."

"Way we got it figured, it's him or us, Bessie. No fooling."

"Now they have all the respect for me. And a large crowd. I'm the presi-



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"DRAGON SEED," An M-G-M Picture

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"My goodness, a Chinese coming to our neighborhood! They didn't like it. Even then I have an inferiority complex. Always, 'Aww gee, there's a white and I'm Oriental. I'm yellow.'"

"I'll walk onto that set tomorrow, Bessie. Walk up grinning my honorable son grin up to Charlie Chan and say, 'Geewhiz, pop, have I got a surprise for you!' and kill him dead. Then I will be a hero of my people."

"Awhile back I told you we were supposed to be seen and not heard, and it wasn't until I got away from home before I begin to express myself.

dent of this and that and they're all American people. I have gone through a lot of humiliation and yet I come up smelling like a rose. It's up to you, you younger generation now. *Put your best foot forward!* That's what I say. And I sincerely mean it."

"I'm tellin ya this, Bess, with Chan out of the way, the coast will be clear!" I said, and the next thing I knew instead of going to the Chan set in the morning I died in a movie where Spencer Tracy tells the pilots, everyone in his leather jacket, that the Jap planes can't bank left and that Jap pilots laugh out loud when they bomb hospitals but they go down gentle,

writing Haiku in their heads, singing them aloud breaking everybody's radio silence with a poetry reading around the American task force. The notion of Japanese kamikaze pilots going down, screaming engines whistling rivets out of the sky, mouthing original seventeen syllable poems about cherry blooms and frogdumpp for the radios of the American ships to intercept, struck me funny. I never trusted Spencer Tracy again.

It's no secret that Charlie Chan was official U.S. Government propaganda controlled by the Office of War Information during WW2. In the ten Chan films made in the war years, Charlie Chan and his sons weren't busy smashing Jap spy rings or even obviously involved in the war effort. He continued solving high society

murders. His effectiveness as an anti-Japanese tool depended not on his exploits but his being visibly and actively not Japanese with all his heart and soul. The lives of Chinese and Chinese-Americans on and off the screen were pushed by American pop culture as images of the ideal American minority. Our mere and very being encouraged Americans to hate Japanese. We wore buttons that read: "I am a loyal Chinese-American."

Later, as one of history's little ironies would have it, Chinamans and Japs were one in Hollywood's mind, and Chinese- and Japanese-Americans were used against the blacks now, the way Chinese-Americans had been used against Japanese-Americans. *U.S. News and World Report* threw us at the blacks with "Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S." "Still being taught," they wrote, "is the old idea that people should depend on their

own efforts—not a welfare check—in order to reach America's 'promised land.'" There are those in Chinatown who say the date of that story, December 26, 1966, was the day the San Francisco papers started their run of Negro gunman kills Chinese grocer stories. And with amazingly similar language, *Newsweek*, on June 21, 1971 ran a two-page spread headlined, *The Japanese American Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites*. Tom Wolfe said in *Esquire* that a Chinaman who was "loud, violent, sexually aggressive," was imitating blacks because "loud, violent, sexually aggressive" was "stuff that really stunned most Chinese." David Hilliard of the Black Panthers told the people of Chinatown they were "the Uncle Toms of the non-white peoples."

One of the masterminds behind bringing the Chinese- and Japanese-Americans together against the blacks was Phil Karlson. Having directed two Charlie Chan movies, *The Shanghai*



Cobra and *Dark Alibi*, Phil Karlson was an old hand at the subtle art of portraying yellows as defective, pitifully naive children.

In 1960 Karlson became overseer of Japanese-America's modern image by directing *Hell to Eternity*—a slick stock war movie about a quaint Japanese-American family in East L.A. taking in an orphan white boy who grows up to become Jeffrey Hunter. This was the first American film to feature the evacuation of the Japanese-Americans off the West Coast. It also included a scene inside a relocation camp that made the barracks look like a rustic honeymoon lodge, or a knotty pine old folks' home.

Hell to Eternity foreshadowed the day ABC-TV would make Romeo a Japanese-American boy, and Juliet a mungy-looking white girl, Patty Duke, who marry secretly, while their families are in church one Sunday morning, December seventh, nineteen forty one, call it *If Tomorrow Comes* (it was

originally titled *My Husband the Enemy*) and air it as the Movie of the Week on Pearl Harbor Day. And NBC's Robert Northshield told everyone a cheap sad story instead of telling the truth about the least understood and most touchily remembered period in Japanese-American history. These TV offerings rehabilitate the Japanese-American image by substituting one white racist stereotype for another white racist stereotype. As in previous times when white men transformed the hateful black stud into the lovable Aunt Jemima, so now the white racist that had seen mad dog Japs was now white racist love that saw helpless pregnant women and little babies.

In the white universe a white man gets thrown into a concentration camp and it's *Some Call it Courage*, *The Great Escape*, *Stalag 17*, *Hogan's Heroes*, and a skinny bombardier with

a cowlick quoting from William Faulkner's Nobel acceptance speech, "I believe man will not only endure, he will prevail," several years before he won the Nobel Prize in 1949. But we go to camp and it's either all mad dogs tearing our bodies apart on the barbed wire trying to get out and sabotage American factories, or it's all helpless pregnant women, little babies, withered old men having a long cry. My dying words to Richard Widmark in Lewis Milestone's *Halls of Montezuma*, come back to me like a child's prayer. On page 95, Scene 147 of the script, it looks like poetry:

(gently chiding)

*Sergeant, I am surprised at you.
You say you have been a long
time in my country,
and yet you*



seem to have forgotten that for generations my people think not of living well, but of dying well. Have you not studied our philosophy or military science, our judo wrestling? Do you not remember that we always take the obvious—and reverse it.

(he pauses; then vigorously)

So we reverse the role of life. To us, it is death that is desirable. It is the source of our strength.

The dying Jap officer I played and Robert Northshield's 1972 model Japanese-Americans are of the same mythical people. Whites were so sure they were right that hearing a Japanese say he thinks in backwards didn't shock them. I never heard John Wayne, explaining American thought to the Japanese, say anything like, "Have you not studied our philosophy, our baseball, our cowpunchin? Do you not remember that we always take the obvious—and reverse it?"

Death did become a way of life among Japanese-Americans, but not in the camps. Artists like Mine Okubo and writers like Toshio Mori, intellectuals and journalists that had been scattered around the country unaware or out of touch with each other, were thrown together in the camps and produced a Japanese-American cultural movement. There was life in those camps, bad as they were. Death after the camps, when Japanese-America came out of the desert killing themselves to be accepted by whites. America had shown them what it thought of Japanese things, so they set out to outwhite the whites. Toshio Mori wrote Japanese-America's epitaph:

... We will leave individually, one by one, to some other locality and some to unknown beyond ... Our world will be gone, and there will be no more little Tokyos. Yes, we shall see no more the lantern parades and the kimonos of the past. Our days of hightop boots, jeans, and the uniform mackinaws will be gone. The "Tojo" hats will become useless with wear and tear, and grotesque in new surroundings. We shall move on willingly into the melting world of our land, forever to lose our racial

identity, however impossible, and assuredly certain to drop our differences when we shall pass away from the earth of our mutual interest."

And by the late '60s Japanese-Americans were so proud of calling themselves, "The Quiet Americans," that their semi-official history, by Bill Hosokawa, was titled, *Nisei: The Quiet Americans*.

For the Charlie Chan of the '70s NBC and Universal Studios preserved a white racist tradition. Ross Martin, a white actor best known for playing grotesques on TV's *Wild Wild West*, became the fourth white man to play Charlie Chan in 40 years ... the fifth, if you count the short-lived TV series that starred J. Carroll Naish as Chan.

None of the Sons got the job as pop, and far from being bitter, Victor Sen Yung blames the blacks for the present scarcity of jobs for yellow actors and objects to Asian-Americans protesting against the casting practice because he fears white backlash in the form of no jobs at all for any yellow actor. Benson Fong doesn't talk about politics or religion or race. And the original Number One Son, Keye Luke, reveals that he has become resigned to white supremacy as a fact of life when he says, "There is one consideration that overrides all others, and that's box office. After all, this is not Oriental theatre, it's a white man's theatre. You have to cater to that."

When I wasn't Charlie Chan's son I was the Chinese who always dies. I died with funny last words, like looking at Alan Ladd and calling him Brother Number Four on my dying breath. "Goodbye, ... Brother Number Fourer ..." I said and went limp, and slipped off the raft into the river. This Spencer Tracy movie was the first movie in which I died off screen. I'd never been found dead in a movie before. I'd never died alone without a scene before. Always before I passed and went limp as a movie star was pinning a medal to my bloody shirt, or was shot in the head by the star. I always have a relationship with the star. Like my best friend, Steve McQueen in *The Sand Pebbles*, shooting off the top of my head with his Springfield rifle. Or sometimes I'd

die shouting something paradoxical. "The river does not content against the willow, yet the doorknob still turns," I'd say, and crash, I was dead. I've never been cut up by a boozier who wore a surgical mask made from one cup of a Chinese nurse's bra. He's sniffed the insides of the nurse's bras before boiling them, and the audience had laughed, as if the sniffing of a sock pulled off a Chinese tit had been sneaked in the movie. The audience laughed when he sniffed round and round the stitching down inside the cup of one large bra, moved to boil it, then did a double take with his nose and sniffed a long hissing sniff of something that made him groan. And he sighed and said, "This fits my face perfectly," bringing the audience out of the dark laughing. I'd never been treated like that in a movie before. I'd never been left alone in a movie, to die away from the Yanks. For me, William Bendix had pulled the pin on a hand grenade, laid his arms out back behind his head, and on the throw shouted, "This is for Donald Duck!"

My only consolation was that someday, all of them, Keye Luke, Victor Sen Yung, Benson Fong, Richard Loo, all of them will find themselves in a movie, dying without a scene and end up like me, seen fit only as a fanatically faithful Chinese-Catholic convert, cooking and dusting for Humphrey Bogart passing himself off as a priest, at an out-of-the-way Chinese village on the road of life. In a scene with a beautiful woman horny for Bogart, Bogart said I was like a woman to him. He said I took care of him, "like a good wife." Whatever it was I'd done, Hollywood hadn't forgiven me or forgotten. I stood up in the middle of the movies out of the seating section and asked the stars why I had to die and why they had to make me smile when Bogart likened me to a woman in front of a beautiful woman. I try to talk them out of leaving me alone to die. I'll die, but why do I have to be alone? If I could only be out of the room when Bogart likens me to a woman, or if I didn't understand English in this movie. And the people in the audience wait for Spencer Tracy and the airmen to leave me behind, see it becoming inevitable and weep for me, and they wait for the woman to knock on Bogart's door and come in and laugh. ■

Gay Rock: THE BOYS IN THE BAND

by Andrew Kopkind

The Rock Revolution may be less cataclysmic than its partisans claim, but if rock music has not detonated the social explosions of the last ten years, it has certainly transmitted them more clearly than any other media artifact. Political protest, easy riding, psychedelia—you heard it first in stereophonic sound. I don't think "Sergeant Pepper" invented the drug culture or Dylan singlehandedly caused the times to a-change. But they made mass what was only minor; they broadcast a sensibility of a few and created a sensation for the many.

That process of magnification is being repeated this season with the mass-marketing of gay rock, and the promotion to superstardom of its most prominent exponents, David Bowie and Lou Reed. There have been gay rock stars before—Little Richard leaps to mind—but the predictable commercial and social pressures always kept them closeted when recording or performing time rolled around. Some went through the oppressive process of rewriting their homosexual material in heterosexual terms; others cultivated a campy ambiguity in their public image and left the rest to gossip.

But those are old, sad songs. Bowie and Reed come out, in word and deed, in lyric and performance. Bowie's live show, which I caught in Boston on the winter tour of America, was about as flaming a performance as I've seen top-side of the caverns of the sexual netherworld. Many of his songs express gay love and its special pain. His glittery costumes fit somewhere be-

tween droog and drag. His movements across the stage are choreographed with a slippery lyricism that negates the sticky posturing of male rock musicians. He and his lead guitarist exchange erotic glances, gestures and grasps that are only barely acceptable between a man and a woman in a band under straighter circumstances.

Reed hasn't been around in his newest incarnation (he's due soon on a tour), although in the old days he would surface now and again as the star of the Velvet Underground on the Warhol/junk circuit. But Reed's latest album, *Transformer*, is both graphically and lyrically a gay turn-on. On the back cover he appears as an absurdly basketed biker and (do my eyes play tricks?) a bosomy siren. And in "Make Up" he promises:

*We're comin' out,
Yeah, we're comin' out,
Out of our closets . . .*

It's hard to be more explicit.

Bowie (who helped produce Reed's album, and also works with another coming-out group, Mott the Hoople) clings to more ambiguity, both in his work and in his life. His press agent seems obsessed with the fact that Bowie is married to a woman and has a child; in the next breath, he refers to Bowie's "bisexuality." Bowie's gay styles do not extend to his relationship with the press and public, to whom he (and his bodyguards and managers) is distant, somewhat authoritarian, and often nasty. His songs have more to do with the conflicts that exist around coming out than with the resolution of that process:

*"I still don't know what I was
waiting for
And my time was running wild
A million dead-end streets . . .
So I turned myself to face me
But I've never caught a glimpse
Of how the others must see the
faker . . .*

*Ch-ch-ch-Changes
Don't want to be a better man . . .
Ch-ch-ch-Changes
Don't tell them to grow up and
out of it . . ."*

Riding the front wave of sexual liberation rock, Bowie and his Savanarolan manager, Tony DeFries, have embarked upon a project to create not just any old superstar, but an exploding supernova as big as the Beatles, with a distinctly '70s gestalt. I'm not at all sure what they think they're doing (nor is it clear that they know for sure) but media flotsam like space and sex and multi-mix and The Show keep bobbing up. Bowie's show, called (like the record) "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars," was put together in his home-base, London, and launched on the American tour. The show and the shuck were successful, although in less than cosmic dimensions, and Bowie/aka/Ziggy is now a sweatshirt word.

Most of the straight critics of the tour passed over the question of Bowie's redefinition of rock sexuality with a condescending comment or two. "Not a limp wrist in the set," *Rolling Stone's* Tim Ferris reported, much relieved. They concentrated instead on Bowie musicianship, song-writing and showmanship—all of which were pronounced top-drawer. Some took with complete seriousness Bowie's neo-Apollonian spaceman imagery, and reported as literal truth Bowie's prediction that earthlings have but "Five Years" (a song title) on their planet before the Big Bang or Whimper ends it all.

It's probably unwise to engage in too close an *analyse du texte* of Bowie's songs or Ziggy's games. It's enough to recall that he has always been intrigued with extraterrestrial space, in a post-adolescent Kubrick way. His first album was called *Space Oddity*, and the title song was a charming romance about an astronaut called Major Tom who somehow drifts away from his space capsule and is lost in the Void. (Lately, Ziggy seems taken with Kubrick's most recent film; the Stardust show begins and ends with a recording of Walter Carlos's rendition of the electronic version of

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