

Interview: Anson ‘Potsie’ Williams on His Book ‘Singing to a Bulldog’

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CHICAGO – When it comes to appreciating life, one great practitioner is Anson Williams, better known as the character “Potsie” from the 1970s TV series “Happy Days.” Williams wants to remind everybody to “pay it forward,” as he does in highlighting his unlikely mentor in his new book, “Singing to a Bulldog.”

The focus for Anson Williams is on Willie Turner, a custodian he worked with in a department store. Willie gave the 15-year-old Williams life lessons, as he was navigating the road to being an actor. Even though Turner was illiterate and a drinker, he stuck with and guided Williams, which provided the impetus for the young actor and singer to find his path.



Anson Williams at Anderson's Bookshop in Naperville, November 16th, 2104

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

And that path led to TV stardom in the sitcom "Happy Days," which premiered in 1974. The set-in-the-1950s series defined popular culture during the era, as Henry Winkler broke out as the character Fonzie, with Ron Howard, Williams and Donny Most co-starring as teenagers growing up in Milwaukee during a more innocent time. "Happy Days" lasted an unprecedented 11 seasons, ending in 1984, and Williams stayed with the show through the run. He also showed off his singing chops on the series, which led to recording and touring at the same time.

After "Happy Days," Williams pursued a similar path as Ron Howard, and became a director, mostly in television. He has helmed many well-known 1980s and '90s TV shows, including "L.A. Law," "Diagnosis Murder," "Xena: Warrior Princess." "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine," "Melrose Place," "7th Heaven," "Baywatch," "Beverly Hills 90210," and "Sabrina, the Teenage Witch." He most recently directed 31 episodes of the ABC Family series "The Secret Life of the American Teenager," which featured break-out star Shailene Woodley.

Anson Williams was interviewed by HollywoodChicago.com via phone from California, and posed for some Exclusive Portraits with photographer Joe Arce at Anderson's Bookshop in Naperville, Ill. He spoke of appreciation for his lucky life and his book "Singing to a Bulldog" – the title that originated from "Happy Days" producer Garry Marshall (story below).

HollywoodChicago.com: Obviously the life lessons of your friend Willie resonated with you your entire life. When did it occur to you that thematically that would be the basis for your memoir?

Anson Williams: I'd never written a book, but someone I knew at Readers Digest suggested that I write some short stories about my Forrest

Gump-like experiences – in the sense of 'what am I doing here?' I thought that would be fun, and as I was outlining those adventures, the first sentence came to me. 'There would be no story without Willie Turner.'

I was 15 years old, with a difficult upbringing, and was not a confident kid. I was working part-time as a assistant janitor at Leonard's Department Store in Burbank, California. And my boss was Willie Turner, an African American man in his fifties, illiterate and a functional alcoholic. Without that man, in my life at that time, there would be no story. When we weren't working, we were talking, and he helped me find me.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did that lead to the book?

Williams: I wrote the outline and sent it back to Reader's Digest, and they called me back and told me it was a book. That's how it all happened. And all the stories in the book – from working with Bette Davis, to meeting Elvis Presley and John Lennon – have a bigger story, that pays Willie's lessons forward. I feel it's more than a memoir, it is motivational. And if I can create a connection with the reader, and help them, then I can move Willie forward.

HollywoodChicago.com: So what is the origin of the title, 'Singing to a Bulldog'?

Williams: I see the title as the polar opposite of the term 'jumping the shark' [the point where a TV show success starts to decline], which of course 'Happy Days' helped to inspire. 'Singing to a Bulldog' is the precise moment when you start to climb. What's your 'Bulldog' moment?

It had to do with an entrepreneurial opportunity. It was the first year of 'Happy Days' and we weren't being paid anywhere near the type of money of a top TV show. So I was looking for another angle. It occurred to me that David Cassidy of 'The Partridge Family' and 'The Brady Bunch' had record deals and tours because they sang on the show. I had sung in nightclubs, and if I could sing on the show, I could get some outside income and maybe a record deal and touring gig.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you convince the producers to do it?

Williams: I went straight to series creator Garry Marshall, and he gave me one minute to change my life. It was an 'elevator pitch.' I told him you have girls on the show, cars on the show, but he didn't have music. I told him Richie could play, Ralph Malph could play. He looked at me and said, 'that's a good idea, we're going to do it.'

He came back later and told me, 'good news, you will sing on the next show, but you're singing to a bulldog.' And I asked 'why'? He just said, 'since I don't know what you sound like, if you're good, it get laughs. If you're bad, it's gets laughs.' I sang 'All Shook Up' to a bulldog. But that moment changed my life. It was my 'Singing to a Bulldog' moment, when my career started to climb.

HollywoodChicago.com: What influenced your journey as a performer in the crucial years from the time The Beatles performed on the Ed Sullivan Show to doing the pilot episode for 'Happy Days' on 'Love, American Style'?



Photo credit: Reader's Digest

Williams: When I first heard The Beatles, I was 12 years old, and I was listening to them with my buddy Howie, which is who I based the Potsie character on. The whole Ed Sullivan thing, and then the explosion of songs, was mesmerizing. That became a big part of my culture. The second part was using Willie’s lessons in pursuing my show business career. He taught me all the instincts, and the book points out how I used those instincts to get an agent, and how I got the audition.

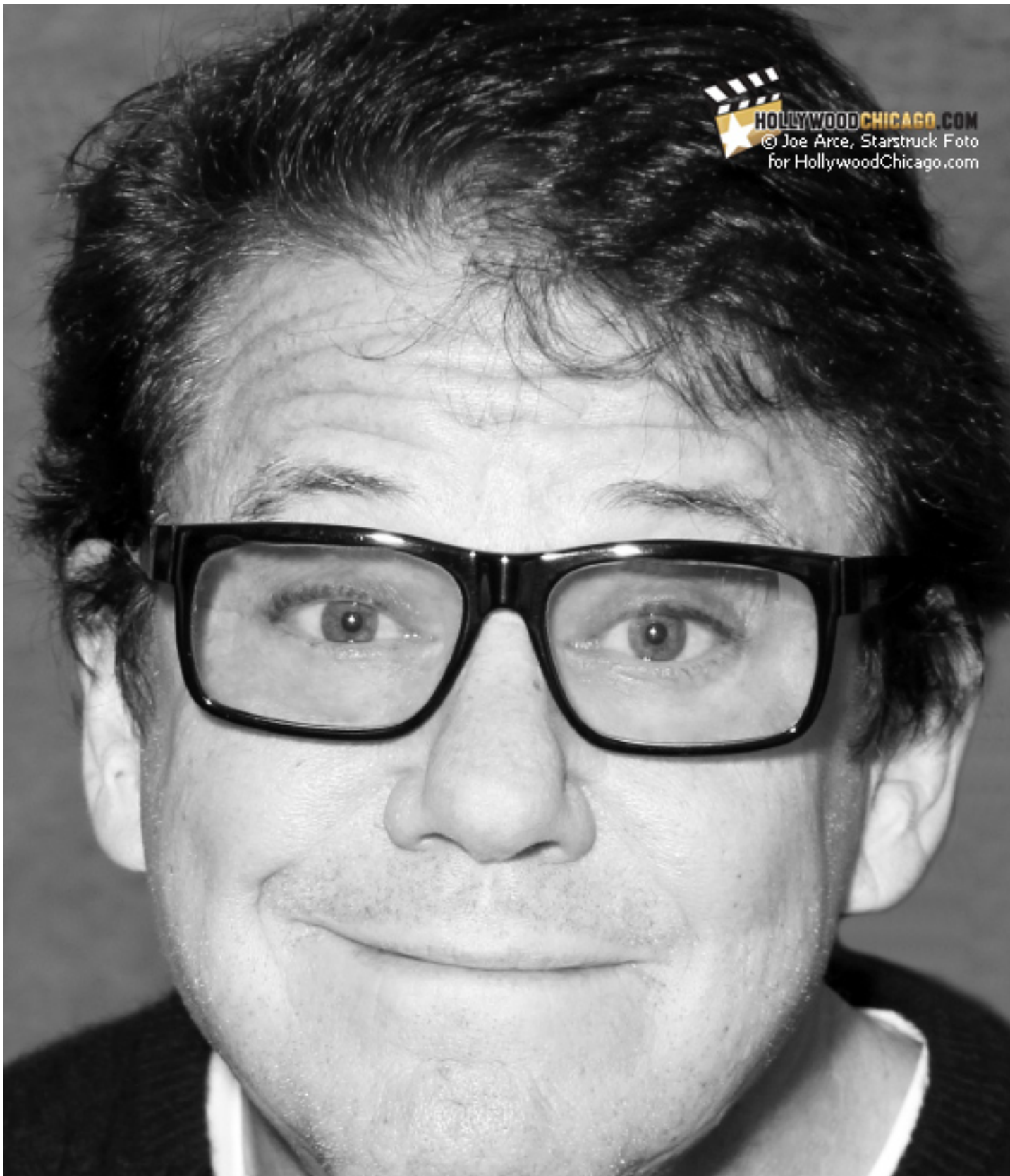
HollywoodChicago.com: In the intro to your book, you spoke of your father’s resentment towards you in regards to the dreams he had to give up. How did you reconcile those frustrations later in your life, and what do you understand about the old man more than ever right now?

Williams: We did make up years later, and we did bond. When I was younger, he had issues with his own upbringing, and had lingering effects from his service in World War II. He spent his 21st birthday in a trench getting shot at – the man saw hell. His transition into the real life after the army was really difficult for him, and I came along when he was in his mid-twenties. I don’t blame him for being frustrated. It came out of his own desperate needs.

HollywoodChicago.com: You sang a variety of songs of the series, but you first started with the 1950s classics in which the show’s era was set. What is it about that particular era that you connect to, and what vocalization techniques in singing those hits made you a different singer?

Williams: I think I was more of a performer than a singer, less a recording artist and more a live singer. The 1950s songs, honestly, just made me feel good. I’d hear that music, I’d sing that music, and I just felt better. Everything that was down, went up – it was the feeling, I didn’t analyze it, and there was something that connected to the audience in a positive way.

NEXT PAGE: Anson Williams talks ‘Happy Days,’ the term ‘jumping the shark,’ a close encounter with John Lennon, directing, and the Vietnam War.



Another View of Anson Williams, Promoting His New Book, ‘Singing to a Bulldog.’

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: ‘Happy Days’ began as a tougher, harder edged show and morphed into more of a domestic comedy. What show

from the first season really defined that edge before the show entered into the other direction?

Williams: It was still comedic all the way through, but from the early days there were the car race episodes, the stripper one and Ritchie getting drunk. It was more of the tone of those 1950s films. At the end of the second season, we were almost canceled, and that's when they put the show up in front of a live audience. The next season Henry [Winkler] broke out, and it became a domestic comedy, and then it went to Number One.

HollywoodChicago.com: Henry Winkler rose to be the main driver of the show's popularity almost overnight, pushing you and Ron Howard from headliners to the ensemble cast. Was there any on-set tension regarding that evolution?

Williams: Ron had control of that, contractually, and he was the first one to back off when the Fonzie character went through the roof. We all felt that. As far as I was concerned, Fonzie was buying me a house. [laughs] 'Ayyyyyyyye, Woah,' whatever, I was hanging onto his coattails. Go bro go.

HollywoodChicago.com: I've always been curious, and maybe you'd know this. What specific years did 'Happy Days' cover during its 11 season run?

Williams: I don't think anyone ever knew. [laughs] It wasn't historically specific. It started out being accurate, but loosened up after that.

HollywoodChicago.com: So we all know that famously, the Fonz literally 'jumped the shark' in the fifth season premiere of 'Happy Days,' but in your opinion when do you think the series really jumped the shark?

Williams: I think when Ron and Donny [Most] left the show. There was an 'it' factor to that casting. You can't create it, it just happens. It was the magic with the people involved. If you take some of those pieces out and try to replace them, that to me is jumping the shark.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you like any of the post-Ron Howard episodes?

Williams: Not really, but there were a couple that I thought were interesting. There was the one that was a whole half hour musical, and the episodes when Ron came back also had some good moments. It was just a different feeling when the transition of the cast was made.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the anecdotes in the book is the day you spent some time with John Lennon. Do you remember where you were when you heard John Lennon had been killed in 1980, and your reaction to it?

Williams: I remember I was at home, and actually heard it on the radio. And because I had met him, I just started bawling, because I knew what kind of man he was. The 12 hours we had during that on set visit [pictured], brought me back to that 12 year old kid hearing The Beatles the first time. I got to spend a day with him? That meant everything to me, it was totally special.



John Lennon – with Son Julian – and the Cast of 'Happy Days' in 1974

Photo credit: Anson Williams

HollywoodChicago.com: Ron Howard made his first feature, 'Grand Theft Auto,' which also featured Marion Ross, while he was doing 'Happy Days.' As his friend, what was your reaction to the film and did you feel and/or know the potential that Ron was heading for in that directorial debut?

Williams: Even before that. Just as a regular person at 12 years old, Ron entered and won first place in a Kodak contest for ‘Best Film Edited in Camera.’ He was already on his way. Ron Howard, no question he was going to be great.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your own directorial debut occurred in the 1980s, and flourished in the 1990s. What do you find different about the pacing of series directing now as opposed to when you were doing it in the 1990s?

Williams: When I started directing, it was my stuff – an ‘ABC Afterschool Special’ and a TV movie I wrote – so it’s a much different experience when it’s your ‘island,’ then when you come into the island of somebody else. That’s series TV directing, the director himself becomes the odd person out. The actors think they know everything, the Director of Photography thinks they should be directing. It’s a real psychological challenge in segment television. The pressure is huge. I found a way to handle it – I knew what I was doing, I respected everybody there and I was always clear about what I needed. It’s been a good run.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve done so many genres during your directorial run – sitcoms, sci-fi and nighttime soap operas – how do you create the atmosphere for those different genres?

Williams: It’s different storytelling. The camera works differently in each genre as well, so you have to know your craft. In the end, it’s being true to the story and the characters. And then play the moment.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your friend Willie lived through a difficult era for African Americans, and I’m sure was partially defined through that journey. In what you know about him, what advice do you think he would give to a young African American male who is frustrated with the decisions of Ferguson and New York City?

Williams: Willie had a hard life, but he’d tell them what he told me – ‘Stop getting in the way of yourself.’ Move forward. The Ferguson incident reminds me of a 1950s movie that Billy Wilder directed – ‘Ace in the Hole.’ It was about a reporter who intentionally extended a crisis in a story he was covering, because it was selling newspapers. That to me is a parallel to Ferguson. The media companies are getting something out of it. They are using emotions, ignorance and past difficulties – and instead of moving forward, it’s being manipulated, and that’s destructive.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your relationship with the Vietnam War draft, since you were of the age to be drafted?

Williams: At the time, I was scared to death, because I had lost my student deferment. I had to do the physical, and passed. My draft lottery number was 149, and the previous year they took everybody up to 175. The year I passed the physical, it went up to 125. I missed it by 24 numbers. I had friends who died over there. There was a lot of blame at the time on the military, but that was just another manipulated situation during a bogus war.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what endures in you from the character of Potsie, and what do you like most about what the character represents in television history or ‘Happy Days’ in general?

Williams: There is a little ‘Potsie’ in everyone, the insecure, vulnerable person with a good heart. That’s what I liked about the character, he was flawed in the best way. They loved the character because he was real.

“Singing to a Bulldog” by Anson Williams, is available at Anderson’s Bookshop in Naperville, Illinois, or wherever books are sold.



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [22]
Writer, Editorial Coordinator
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [21]

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