Slideshow: In Memoriam Dawn Wells, Mary Ann of ‘Gilligan’s Island’

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on January 1, 2021 - 1:32pm

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Dawn Wells in a 2017 salute to her Gilligan’s Island past.

CHICAGO – To top off the end of 2020, it was announced on December 30th that Dawn Wells, best known for the girl-next-door role she had as Mary Ann on the 1960s sitcom “Gilligan’s Island,” had passed away due to COVID complications. She was 82. Dawn Wells was also a friend of HollywoodChicago.com, and had posed for the camera of photographer Joe Arce on several occasions.

Wells was born in Nevada, and eventually represented that state in the Miss America pageant in 1960. She moved to Los Angeles from there and made her TV debut on ABC-TV’s “The Roaring 20s” (1960-61). After several TV guest roles, she landed the part of Mary Ann for “Gilligan’s Island” in 1964. The show – about a group of seven stranded castaways on a tropical island – ran for three seasons on CBS-TV, and then in perpetuity through rerun syndication.

Post Gilligan, she continued to appear in TV and film roles – most notably in the cult classic “The Town That Dreaded Sundown” (1976) – and a series of Gilligan reunion TV movies in the 1970s. She never shied away from her Mary Ann persona, and even reveled in the eternal question of “Mary Ann versus Ginger” (on Gilligan’s Island, Ginger was the sexy movie star) as a barometer for female personalities.

Photographer Joe Arce shot photos of Dawn Wells in 2010, 2017 and 2019 at the “Hollywood Show” autograph and memorabilia convention. Click “Next” and “Previous” to scan through the slideshow or jump directly to individual photos with the captioned links below. All photos © Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com, except fourth photo CBS-TV.

1. DAWNW1 [27]: Dawn Wells in a 2017 salute to her Gilligan’s Island past.
2. DAWNW2 [28]: Dawn Wells at the 2017 Hollywood Show.
3. DAWNW3 [29]: Dawn Wells, Chicago, 2010.
4. DAWNW4 [30]: Dawn Wells on ‘Gilligan’s Island’ in a 1964 publicity picture (CBS-TV).
5. DAWNW5 [31]: Mary Ann or Ginger? Wells with adult film star Ginger Lynn Allen, 2010.
6. DAWNW6 [32]: Dawn Wells, Shirley Jones and Loretta Swit in Chicago, 2019.

Click on PAGE TWO for a 2010 Dawn Wells interview with Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were in the Miss America pageant during another era in America. Since you lived through the modern feminist movement, are you glad to see those types of pageants become less relevant, or do you see them as a way for a woman to still advance their careers?

Dawn Wells: The Miss America in my day focused on college education, talent and scholarship, which was very different than just a beauty pageant with women parading around in bathing suits. The Miss America pageant is a classic, and should be held up as such. But they were in Las Vegas last year, but I don’t know what that means.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your journey from the Miss America pageant as Miss Nevada to the decision to become an actress and go to Los Angeles?

Wells: Actually I was pre-med, I wanted originally to be a pediatric surgeon. I was also studying drama, and transferred from a woman’s college to the University of Washington as a drama major. I was tiny and short, and I just wanted to see if I could get up in front of a bunch of people. In fact, I did Rosalind from Shakespeare’s “As You Like It” in the Miss America Pageant, which was a big mistake. [laughs]

When I went to Los Angeles, after the first three or four interviews I stopped saying I was Miss Nevada because then they thought I was just a beauty pageant winner and I came to Hollywood just because I was pretty. I was theatrically trained with an MFA in theater.

HollywoodChicago.com: What role or person paved the way for you to get the audition for Gilligan’s Island?

Wells: I had a little agent named Bob Payton, he handled about eight people, and he sent me on the audition. There was about 300 people testing. I kept going back five, six, seven times. Today I’d be totally intimidated. But I was at CBS Television City for one solid week testing with all the different Gingers and all the different Professors.

HollywoodChicago.com: I know you were basically a ‘straight man’ on the show, but what Mary Ann comedy moment on the show is your favorite?

Wells: The dream sequences, for example when I did the Eliza Doolittle character with a cockney accent or I played Ginger. We all liked doing the dream sequences because we got out of our characters.

HollywoodChicago.com: ‘Gilligan’s Island’ was sexier than that many of the sitcoms of that era – guys in my generation still use the Ginger vs. Mary Ann comparison for types of women – was that intentional from the producers or did it just come naturally because you and Tina Louise projected that sexiness?

Wells: Producer Sherwood Schwartz wanted a glamorous girl and a farm girl, but I don’t think he had any idea it would become that comparison. I think the short-shorts did it. Had I just been a normal country girl in a country skirt, it wouldn’t have worked as well, there was a sex appeal to Mary Ann because of the way she dressed. So then it became, what did you want, a Ginger or a Mary Ann? I cannot tell you how many men have told me, ‘I married a Mary Ann.’

HollywoodChicago.com: Were you satisfied with the sequels made in the 1970s or would you have approached them differently if you could do them again?

Wells: Ninety minutes of Gilligan’s Island is waaaay too long. [laughs] Thirty minutes in and out with the Harlem Globetrotters would have been fine. Although it was the highest rated program of the year, the only two things that beat us was a Muhammad Ali fight and the World Series. That’s how high the rating was.

HC: Finally, tell us something about Gilligan Bob Denver that nobody knows.

Wells: I don’t think anybody realized how bright and intellectual he was, he was a genius. He disliked the celebrity part of it, he was a creative soul and it was hard for him to be in the public eye. I think he just didn’t like it, even though he was great with the fans. He was a wonderful guy.

Source for this article from wikipedia.com. Dawn Wells, 1938-2020

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By PATRICK McDONALD [34]
Editor and Film Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [33]

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