

Interview: Tony Curtis is the Original Fantastic Mr. Fox

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 5, 2009 - 10:22am

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CHICAGO – Tony Curtis, who rolled into town to introduce his classic “Some Like it Hot” – December 5th and 6th, 2009, at the Hollywood Palms in Naperville, IL – has a sharp and voracious intelligence, plus the adventurous life story to share. In his new book, “The Making of Some Like it Hot,” Curtis relates the incredible Hollywood tale about how two big stars, he and Jack Lemmon, dressed up as women, and collided with the incomparable Marilyn Monroe and director Billy Wilder to create a true American film masterpiece.

Tony Curtis was born Bernard Schwartz in the Bronx, New York, the son of Hungarian and Slovak immigrants. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy after the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, and served submarine duty for the entire war. He witnessed, from about a mile way, the signing of the Japanese surrender. After doing time in New York acting schools and small stage roles after the war (see Chicago story below), he moved to Hollywood in 1948. After his film debut (uncredited) in “Criss Cross” in 1949, he went on to have an unprecedented string of box office hits in the 1950s and ’60s, including “Houdini” (1952), “The Black Shield of Falworth” (1954), “Sweet Smell of Success” (1957), “Some Like it Hot” (1959), “Spartacus” (1960), “Boeing, Boeing” (1965) and “The Boston Strangler” (1969). Although his career stalled after that period, he is still acknowledged as one of the great “Silver Age” movie stars. He’s been married six times, most famously to fellow movie star Janet Leigh, and currently to Jill Vandenberg. He is also the father of movie scream queen Jamie Lee Curtis.



Fantastic!: Tony Curtis in Chicago, December 3rd, 2009

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

Before the interview began, Curtis related the story of his first ever trip to Chicago, appearing in a play at the Yiddish Theater at the corner of Ogden and Kedzie. He was still calling himself Bernie Schwartz in those days. He said he had to temporarily change the name for the theater program to Bernie White, because his real last name was too close to “schvartze,” the Yiddish word meaning black, and the producers didn’t want the audience to think he was Italian. True story.

Asked whether he is still painting, “Every day,” he replied, “see what happens when I don’t make movies anymore. I paint every day and now I’m writing another book. Maybe in my spare time I should become a gynecologist.” The natural reply to that was, “From what I heard about you, Mr. Curtis, I would say you’re already qualified as an amateur gynecologist.” Tony Curtis roared with laughter.

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed Tony Curtis in general about “Some Like it Hot” and his miraculous movie star career. Photographer Joe Arce shot this portrait of the Fantastic Mr. Curtis, exclusive to HollywoodChicago.com.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve just written a book about the filming of ‘Some Like it Hot.’ What do you know about Jack Lemmon, either at the time or later in your friendship, that the rest of the world does not know?

Tony Curtis: Jack Lemmon was a rather frustrated gentleman, but he was so gifted he was able to hide it. If you look at his performances, you see a very erratic guy, a guy that moved quickly, but again that was part of his gift. If you knew him, you realized there was a lot of sadness, maybe depression within him, but there was a kind of a discontent.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did that make him difficult on the set?

Curtis: No, it made it easier. He was one of the easiest guys I ever worked with. He never involved himself with anybody, he never questioned anybody's intent. If it had to do with his work, he'd find a way to get around it. He was a very gifted and magnificent person. I loved him.

HollywoodChicago.com: You told me in our last interview that Billy Wilder was 'tough-as-nails' and quick to put people down, you even said if you crossed him 'you were liable to step on a barb.' What films of Wilder's besides 'Some Like it Hot' do you think stand the test of time, and did you ever want to work for him again?

Curtis: Yes, I would have worked with him again. There was something about him that was so interesting. He found ways to peel away parts of a movie, and find another 'room' to walk into. There was other ways he could see when we were doing the work, when in looking at it the beginning, you thought there was only one way. But that 'room' would give you the privilege of playing that scene while thinking about it in another way. As far as his other films, 'Sunset Boulevard' was a splendid film, it looked like it was about the movie people, but it wasn't. It really was about all of us.



American Prince: Tony Curtis in 'Sweet Smell of Success'

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

HollywoodChicago.com: You started your career in the midst of the studio system, nurtured it through the breakdown of that system in the 1960s, and saw it go into a whole new direction thereafter. Was the dream factory notion of the studio system better, or did it deserve to collapse under its own hubris?

Curtis: Well, if you were just starting out, that system was the best, because it gave potential film actors a way of showing what they had, and it was a chance to show themselves to a system where the cameras were rolling all the time, and they were constantly shooting scenes. There were 'A' and 'B' movies being done, so every actor got a chance to show their beauty or cleverness. Out of that film industry milieu, there were always a couple of people around who were hired for no other reason other than they could pick where the elusive gifted person was. The next thing you knew that guy or woman was picked by those people and signed to a contract... and really they didn't even know why.

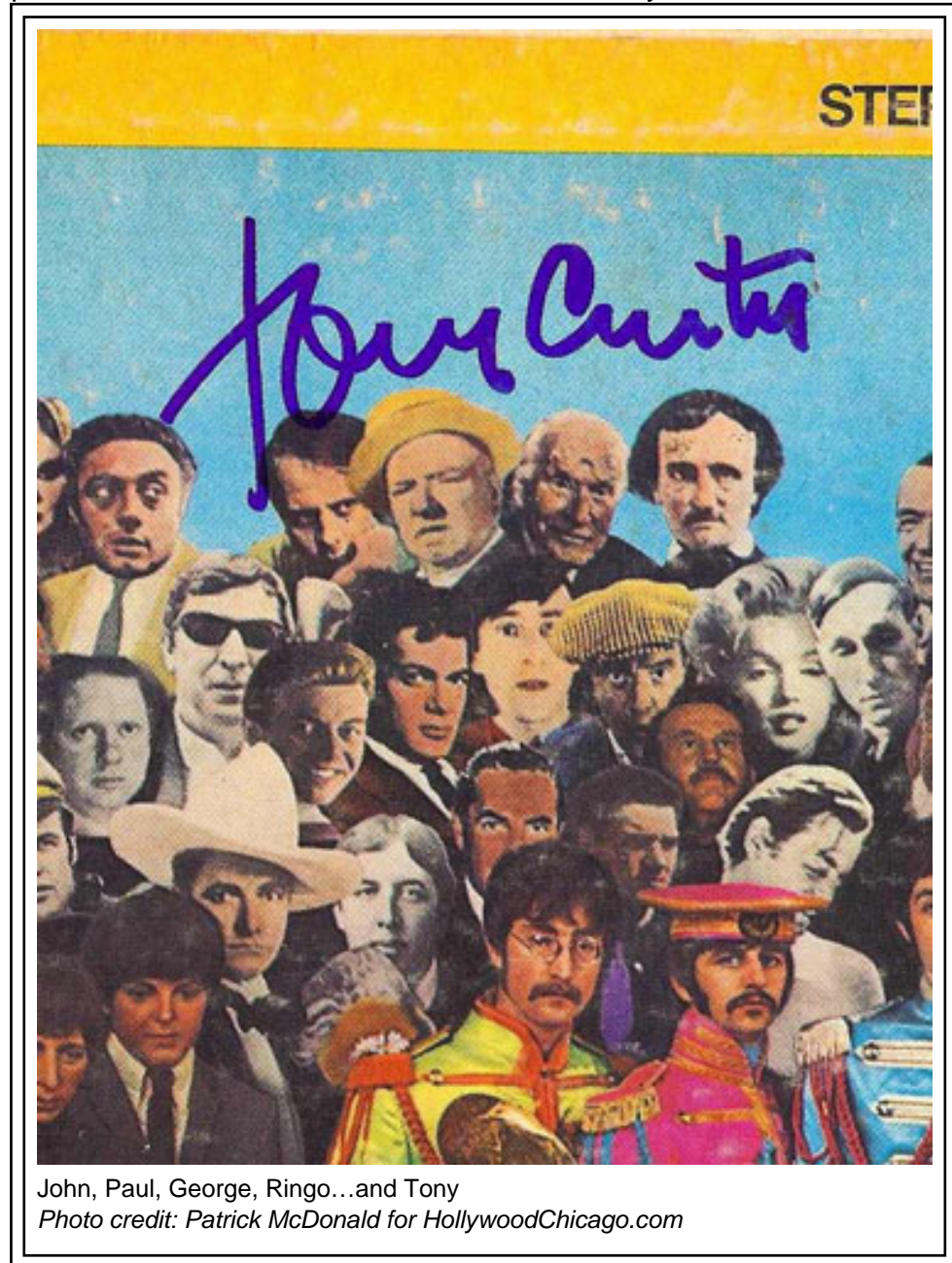
As far as the breakdown that occurred, the studio system was very tough – they never allowed anything to go by them that they didn't like. That was a slight, funny little attitude, and that's part of the reasons why the system broke under its own weight. Afterward, though, it got more difficult to break in as a new or potential movie actor. There were a whole new set of people to contend with, and more than likely they were just bottom-line business people.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was it like to revisit Spartacus by re-dubbing some of your lines in the restored version in 1991, and what was the experience like to work for the young Stanley Kubrick, considering his later legendary status?

Curtis: I had to re-dub the scene in the tub, working again with Lawrence Olivier. In the original scene, the water was noisy, and when I went in to re-dub it, the new production team told me they didn't like my accent. So I went in and did what I thought was the proper way, and it worked for them. Then I found out how Larry Olivier was re-doing it. He said he wasn't pronouncing the 'A's' like he wanted to. I didn't know what the f**k he was talking about. He didn't like the A's? Ahh, aay, eee, I don't know. [laughs]

Stanley Kubrick back then was a kick in the ass, and so was I. We were both from New York City. And speaking of which, he had a accent like I did, but nobody cared about him because he wasn't there for his accent, he was there for the ideas. Even during the original production, I had to ask Stanley 'why is everyone jumping on me and my speech accent?' He told me not to worry about it. He talked to me apart from the

production, and that's what he said, don't worry about it. So I knew then that I was covered by Stanley Kubrick. He was a fabulous man.



HollywoodChicago.com I'm going to switch gears. You were one of the iconic figures shown in the background on The Beatles "Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band" album. Can you remember the circumstances of the band contacting you about it, and how did you react?

Curtis: I was in Venice doing a film, and Paul McCartney was there doing two days of interviews. He was in charge of everything, or it seemed that way to me. So I went down to where he was, on a stage in a theater. In order to get down to him quickly, I cut through under the seats. That's when I heard Paul McCartney say, 'there's Tony Curtis, under your seats, coming over to see me.'

Later, the art director of the 'Sgt. Pepper' photo shoot – that designed the picture and organized it [artist Peter Blake] – was still deciding on the images, and I was in the mix. He mentioned me to the band, I was approved, and they put me in the shot. From what I hear, one of The Beatles said, 'Yeah, put him in the middle.'

HollywoodChicago.com: There was a unique credit sequence created for the picture 'Boeing, Boeing' to give you and Jerry Lewis top billing at the same time – propellers on a plane in the opening credits rotated your names – what do you remember from that shoot working with Lewis, and do you ever talk to him now?

Curtis: That arrangement shattered Jerry Lewis, he would take top billing in the men's room. [laughs] It was a very difficult shoot, but I learned enough by then to take care of my own business, and not to be affected by other people's idiosyncrasies or madness. Jerry and I were friendly for awhile after the picture, but even then I found it very difficult to be with him.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, as one of the true survivors of Hollywood, fame and life to this point, do you have an personal philosophy or advice to share regarding that survival?

Curtis: I do. Pay no attention to what is going around. Just make sure you are in an environment where you can be knowledgeable. If you know where you're at, and what the dialogue is – and you know as much as you can while you are there – no one can screw you up. Nobody. Someday, you'll be on the set with somebody who is very dictatorial, either a director or an actor. The key to that situation is just don't give up your spot. If you feel a certain way about things, just let that be the way it is. If you do that, they will leave you alone. One more thing... don't give up the ship, baby.

The Hollywood Palms in Naperville, Illinois, presents Tony Curtis, signing autographs and introducing the film "Some Like it Hot" Saturday, December 5th and Sunday, December 6th, 2009. [Click here for information and details.](#) [19]



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