

Jonathan Winters characters: "There's a certain amount of pain with every hunk of comedy," says the comedian. "It's based on sensitivity. I try to take the sting off things."

JOYCE HABER

The Many Faces of Jonathan Winters

● There is a legend at least in publishing circles, that Life magazine once sent a female reporter to interview Jonathan Winters. She rang the door of his hotel suite and Jonathan opened it. He was completely nude.

Legend or not, Mr. Winters has long been one of the zaniest, most original nuts around. Of late his stock has gone public, so to speak, with The Wacky World of Jonathan Winters, his own highly syndicated TV series (some 80 U.S. cities). But Jonathan does wear clothes in the marketplace, if only at the insistence of the FCC, his producer Greg Garrison, his sponsor, Chevrolet and the DAR.

His autobiography, started in the last decade and still unfinished, is called "I Couldn't Wait for Success: I Went Ahead With It." I would say the successful Mr. Winters should change the title; "I'm doing now: exactly what I've wanted to do for 25 years," he declares.

He's also doing what others want him to do. He is funny, offscreen as well as on: "I'm an only child. That way you're first in the will," he told me as we sat in his authentic California Colonial house in the San Fernando Valley. (It's just around the corner from Robert Hope's, and may be the only land thereabouts that Hope doesn't own.) He has had his problems: Legend has it, again, that Jon was once an alcoholic and/or had several nervous breakdowns. He's loath to discuss the matter because, according to his press agent, Bill Barron, "It's too painful." But Winters no longer drinks, and the likable, spontaneous humorist with the Kewpie doll face has clearly got it together.

That includes his family—his wife, Eileen, his son Jay, 24, his daughter Lucinda, 17—his animals—a sheepdog, a cat—and his own "surrealist" paintings. Thirty-five of his works are on display in the house: He'll exhibit them (at prices ranging from \$300 to \$1,500) along with the work of Jane (Mrs. Vernon) Scott at Los Angeles's Ankrum Gallery in November.

Winters was born in Dayton on Nov. 11, 1925. His late father founded Dayton's Winters National Bank; his late mother was a radio personality and newscaster in nearby Springfield. Winters attended Kenyon College, studied to be a cartoonist at the Dayton Art Institute, acted as a disc jockey in Ohio—and headed for New York. He

landed there with \$56.46. Ohio haberdasher P. H. Rosenfield recalls sending clothes to the struggling comedian, who is still a customer. Like Nichols and May, Mort Sahl, Bob Newhart and others, Jon gained recognition at Manhattan's top performers' break-in nightspot, the Blue Angel.

From there, he replaced Orson Bean in John Murray Anderson's "Almanac" on Broadway. He accepted an invitation to appear on Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts show, but didn't win. He became an almost-regular on Jack Paar's CBS Morning Show, a frequent guest with Garry Moore and Steve Allen—and rose to national prominence when Paar took over the Tonight show. Gore Vidal took Winters on one night and Winters topped that Kennedy cousin. The only stand-up comedian to appear on Alistair Cooke's Omnibus, he has always written his own material—when he writes it. Wacky World is unrehearsed.

Successfully cast as George Gobel's summer replacement by NBC and signed by that network for a 15-minute spot of his own that ran a year, Jon represented the new, cerebral humor as opposed to oldtime storytellers like Sam Levenson or Henny Youngman. Before Flip Wilson or Lily Tomlin, he pioneered unforgettable characters: Maude Frickert, Chester Honeyhugger and such.

Inevitably Hollywood—or Stanley Kramer—found him: he played the browbeaten furniture van-driver in "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World." Two years later, in 1965, he played the owner of the cemetery and his brother, a dual role in Tony Richardson's disastrous production of Evelyn Waugh's "The Loved One." His most notable film was Norman Jewison's "The Russians Are Coming," which costarred such auspicious talents as Alan Arkin and Carl Reiner. Five years ago, he returned to TV with The Jonathan Winters Show which ran for two seasons on CBS.

He has an abiding passion for the American Indian, reflected in his Indian belt and the Shoshoni moccasins he's sported for 20 years. In those nonstar trappings, a pair of khaki slacks and a red LaCoste shirt, he could only be what he is. Which is quite enough: He's Jonathan Winters.

Q: When did painting become such an important part of your life?

WINTERS: I've been drawing and painting for 25 years, seriously painting for the last two years. People think a star has a studio with a chic northern light and a model pouting on a robe. Well, mine's in the basement adjacent to the furnace with a neon light hanging on the wall. It's depressing, but it's the only place I can muster up the work.

I have many artist friends. Dong Kingman is a friend of mine. Three artists have influenced me the most: Dali, Paul Klee, and Rene Magritts. I don't own any Old Masters. At \$200,000 apiece, that's for people like Norton Simon who live behind iron bars, hoping and praying.

Q: Even in this time of Watergate, you avoid political humor. Why?

WINTERS: I'm not a political satirist. I don't get involved in politics. For the most part, politicians bore the hell out of me. Those funky little people who sit in Washington aren't colorful or exciting. There's not one of them I'd want to spend time with. I did do a political album once though, called "Whistle Stopping with Jonathan Winters."

Q: What makes people laugh?

WINTERS: I can't tell you. I can only get close. It's an attitude. You just hope seriously that everybody has your sense of humor. You create a verbal picture that they can instantly identify with.

My chief worry is offending someone. I never go out with the intention of getting somebody. But you just walk onstage and immediately you offend somebody. If you're talking about cowboys and Indians and the Indians win, you're offending the non-Indian. There's a certain amount of pain with every hunk of comedy. It's based on sensitivity. I always take the sting off things. I always know what's cruel and what's macabre. But I worry.

Q: Many comedians name you as their favorite. Who are some of yours?

WINTERS: Two of the funniest men who ever lived were Laurel and Hardy. And W. C. Fields. He was one of the most original of modern-day guys. Louis Nye. And Newhart, when he's doing his thing. On his series he's not doing what he's noted for—being an extremely

bright monologist. I like Cheech and Chong and George Carlin. Don Rickles destroys me because he destroys everybody else. I'm-as good an audience as any. I used to go see Lenny Bruce and I'd be on the floor.

Q: How did your characters develop?

WINTERS: Maudie Frickert is based on Aunt Lu Perks and my mother. Aunt Lu had white hair, was crippled since she was a young girl and had a fantastic sense of humor. She taught me how to play poker. She was a shut-in, but she always had candy and a glass of wine when you'd visit her. "Have a little," she'd say. She was feisty. She lived to be 82.

Chester Honeyhugger is me as a little kid.

Q: How did your involvement with the Indians begin?

WINTERS: I've been interested in Indians ever since I visited the burial ground in Enon, Ohio, as a kid. I loved the artifacts and relics. But my real interest in Indians didn't start until I moved out here. Jay Silverheels has an all-Indian workshop in central L.A. I go out there to teach a class in directing and writing. I've also been working with the Yakima tribe up in LeGrand, Ore. We're trying to build a museum up there; we've already broken ground. I work very quietly. I don't do publicity. Jay calls me and says they need help. And I go.

If you look at the box, the tube, the TV, you see one of the tragic notes. Put yourself in the shoes of a little Indian child. He doesn't see anyone to identify with. Other minorities can look and say, "We've got a doctor or a congressman or a man on second base." But the Indian, who does he have?

On the plus side, the Indian is the first American. People always point back at the fantastic heritage of Indian art. Because I'm an artist I speak out on that. Silver, Cocine rugs, Shoshoni moccasins, fabulous pottery.

Q: Will you discuss the troubled period in your life a few years ago?

WINTERS: Oh, I had a period where the pressure got to me and I had to sit down and kind of get my gourd in order. I went through a rather difficult

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time, but I survived it. But to be honest I rarely talk about problems. It's not that I don't face them or live with them. I know many celebrities talk about black periods in their life. That's their prerogative.

The reason I don't? How many people can truly identify with you and your problems? Here I am doing very well as a person, making a damn good living. What reason do I have to complain? Many people are living hand-to-mouth with enormous problems. Who am I to say, "Hey, I had a few problems" My favorite line is, "I quit complaining because I found too many people who could top me."

So many people say, "I bleed." Well, if you're ever crippled—physically or mentally—people enjoy keeping you crippled. They like to pigeonhole: "Let's keep him crippled."

People in and out of the industry eyeball me. I sat with a guy, a top columnist in a big city, and we talked as we're talking now. About the war, people, painting. Then in print I see, "Jonathan Winters has changed. He's not the funnyman I remember. He's a very serious man." Well, we talked about serious things. I don't live in a

basketful of funnies. I'm sometimes dark, moody, serious.

People expect me to put shades on, make faces, and dance around like I was auditioning. Well, I like to think that I've matured. It's terribly immature at close to 50 to still be "on," to still be standing on my head.

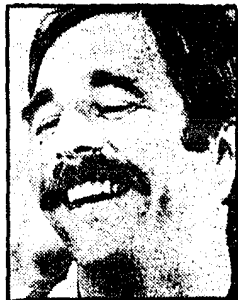
I'm very content. I've had some bitter things, who hasn't? But I got up off the floor and pulled myself together. I'm having a pretty good time.

Q: *Your social life is relatively quiet, isn't it?*

WINTERS: I'm not out a lot, but I'm not a hermit. I'm not hanging out at Pips or Nicky Blairs. What would I do? Pretend to be having a hilarious time? I went through that stage when I would go to joints.

I don't have a great many friends. I don't know anyone who does. I'll tell you exactly who I see in the industry. Robert Clary, Louis Nye, Ronnie Graham, who does those Mr. Dirt routines, Jim Cagney, when he's here every fall. I've painted with him. He's a quiet, private man. He's got enough coins: I can understand his retirement.

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Beau Bridges, above, and Ron Leibman are featured in "Your Three Minutes Are Up," which will open a citywide run on Wednesday.



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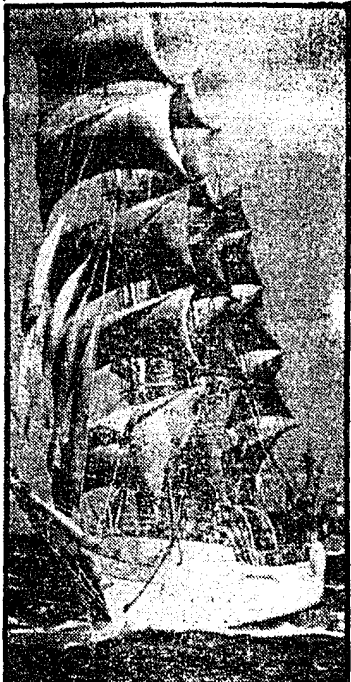
When you decide to hang it up, you hang it up. He's 72, and a damned good painter. I enjoy Jim Cagney.

There was a time when I felt 'I've gotta be funny or I'm in trouble.' That's part of paying your dues. Today I am what I am.

Q: What's there left that you'd like to do?

WINTERS: A western movie where I'd play a drunk in jail. I'd like to do a good dramatic role before I go to the great lot in the sky. Not necessarily Shakespeare. And I'd like to do a one-man show. But that takes a lot of time and I've got a rough schedule.

Oh, I have to tell you about this guy who had a project for me. He approached me in Musso & Franks and asked me if I'd heard of "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." He said, "I'd love to do a book on you. You'd dress up as a seagull, and we'd take pictures. At the beach, in restaurants, on Hollywood Blvd. And there would be captions." Now that's about as funny as a spastic in the deep end of the pool. That's terrible.



"Windjammer," drama of an around-the-world voyage, opens engagement Wednesday at Pacific's Cinerama Dome.