

# Bogart and Garland: Legendary figures

By Bill Roberts

*Humphrey Bogart*, by Nathaniel Benchley, and *Judy*, by Gerold Frank, provide two examples of different ways to write a biography of a famous entertainer. Each one is only fairly successful because of the limitations of each approach.

Benchley's biography is written casually. The author encourages the reader to have a good time with the book. He keeps Bogart's memorable performances in the reader's mind, which is made easier by the generous supply of good photographs of Bogart's personal and public life.

The book is even printed to seem casual. The right margins are not squared off, and there's a double space between paragraphs. The effect is often similar to that of a big hard-cover fan magazine, written the best way it could be done.

#### Author too present

Unfortunately, such a thing can only be done so well. The reader sees and hears the author too much. Too many times the manner seems too casual, the author's opinions inaccurate, the author just seems to be showing off.

The reader wishes Benchley would have been more careful in his generalizations, especially about Bogart's "great intelligence" and "class," to make them square with specific incidents. Bogart comes across as a hard working actor, dedicated to his profession, but not particularly smart or dumb. And though Bogart sometimes does seem to have had grace and kindness, he would also be insulting and rude.

But Benchley's style can work well. He presents the beginning of Bogart's relationship with Laruen Bacall, his last wife and the only woman he really loved: "The first words he spoke to his leading lady, after their meeting the previous year, were, 'I saw your test,' and then he delivered himself of one of the thundering understatement of the century: 'We'll have a good time together'."

The reader can almost hear Bogart speaking. Benchley's hyperbolic pause re-creates the effect of watching 20-foot high faces on a movie screen.

Dissection, not re-creation, is the purpose of Frank's biography of Judy Garland. *Judy*, the reader should always keep in mind, is the authorized biography, with all the facts as remembered by those who knew Garland.

Whenever there were conflicting versions of some event, Frank recorded them all. The reader gets all sides of the story, but the effect is finally of no story at all. It's as if the index to the book were written first, and the author stepped in merely to make complete sentences.

There may have been mythic qualities to Garland's life. She was always in show business, rocketed to stardom but was dragged back down by the drugs she took to get there. She needed approval, needed privacy, all this could have been handled in some way so as not to exploit her life.

#### Boring

But Frank is content to make a detailed, exhausting study of her life and leave it at that. The reader is given all the facts, but no sense is made of them. Incredibly, a book about Judy Garland turns out to be boring.

Benchley's biography of Bogart is the better of the two books. Accuracy is certainly a virtue in a biography. But there is an accuracy more important than precise wordings of quotes and exact dates and places.

*Humphrey Bogart* recreates, revitalizes the life of its subject in a way that seems right. *Judy* is a dissection of the parts of a life, each properly labeled, but giving no clue to the shape of the person who lived it.

*Humphrey Bogart*/by Nathaniel Benchley/  
Little, Brown/\$12.50  
*Judy*/By Gerold Frank/Harper & Row/  
\$12.50



Photo by Karah

Humphrey Bogart



Judy Garland

Portrait by Roberto Garill

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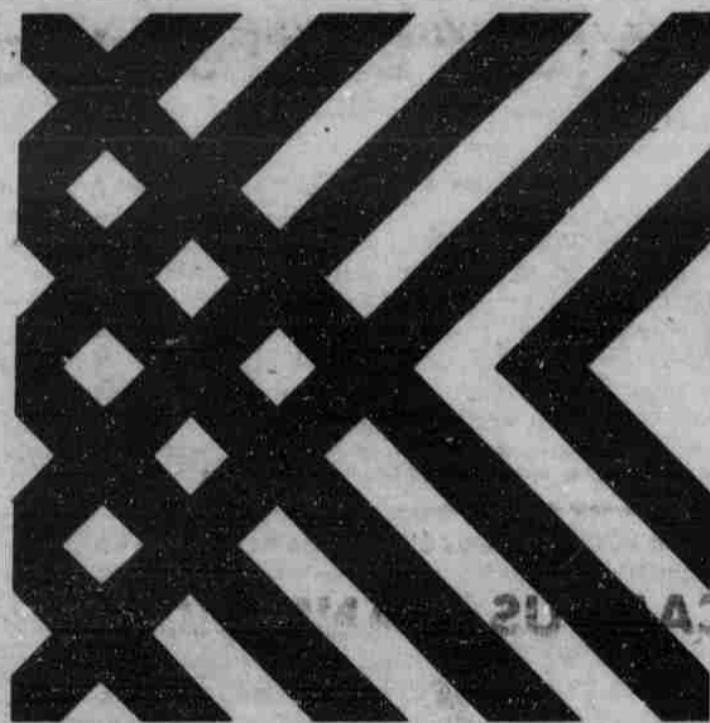
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