

## arts/entertainment

## Capote plays self in 'Music for Chameleons'

By Pat Higgins

*Music for Chameleons* is a fascinating collection of non-fiction short stories that is perhaps the finest work Truman Capote has done since his highly regarded *In Cold Blood* was released in 1966.

Capote, despite a tendency toward self-parody in his talk show appearances and movie cameos, must be taken quite seriously as a quality artist dating back to his first novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, which was a bestseller in 1948. Since then he has written plays, film scripts, essays and a lot of factual reporting chiefly for the *New Yorker*.

## book review

*In Cold Blood* was a watershed event for the New Journalism in vogue some years back. Capote's technique was considered quite daring: He used all the stylistic devices of a novelist to describe an actual event. *In Cold Blood* was successful both commercially and artistically and helped Capote's career immensely.

In the preface to *Music for Chameleons* Capote has some rather caustic comments about Norman Mailer, who said a non-fiction novel was a "failure of imagination." But shortly after *In Cold Blood*, Mailer began his own journalistic career as shown by *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song*. Capote says he is interested in journalism as a literary art form because it has never been used by novelists who considered journalism somewhat beneath their dignity.

In *Music for Chameleons* Capote uses an interesting style because he includes himself as a key character in each story. And it comes off quite well. Capote's writing style is spare and unadorned at times. It is reminiscent of Hemingway in its economy of language and straight-forwardness.

There is wildy divergent subject matter in the short pieces included here. The longest is entitled "Handcarve Coffins: A Non-fiction account of an American Crime." Capote has long had a fascination with the criminal mind and "Handcarved Coffins"

reads somewhat like Raymond Chandler's terse detective fiction. In this story Capote becomes interested in a series of murders that takes place over a long interval of time. Capote meets and interviews the suspects, the investigators and even some of the eventual victims. Capote becomes quite involved with all the characters, but the conclusion is somewhat enigmatic and frustrating. Also in the criminal vein, Capote does an interview with convict Bobby Beauosil who Capote claims is the real mystery figure behind the Charles Manson cult. Capote then presents a heretofore unheard theory concerning the sinister Beauosil and the Manson family.

From the lowlife of Beauosil, Capote reaches for the sublime in a description of his friendship with Marilyn Monroe in a piece called "Beautiful Child." Capote has more interesting comments to make about Monroe in a few pages than Mailer has been able to manage in several books. A particular highlight of "Beautiful Child" is some rather ribald comments exchanged between the two characters.

"Derring Do" reads like a Keystone Cops caper as Capote is fleeing the California Highway Patrol with the assistance of Pearl Bailey who disguises Capote as a chorus boy. It is just as absurd as it sounds.

The conclusion of *Music for Chameleons* is a revealing self-interview in which Capote concludes, "I'm an alcoholic, I'm a drug addict, I'm homosexual, I'm a genius."



Truman Capote

## entertainment notes

A \$38,500 action grant has been awarded to the Nebraska Educational Television Network to finance a new statewide volunteer program associated with "The Grand Generation," a Nebraska ETV weekly series.

"The Grand Generation" volunteer program will operate in 11 areas of Nebraska, offering a variety of opportunities for local volunteer involvement. Participants in the program will work with older Nebraskans and others on fixed incomes to provide consumer information and reports to "The

Grand Generation" television series concerning local issues.

"The purpose of this demonstration project is to link community volunteers and television in an effort to educate and inform thousands of viewers," said Valerie Marino, volunteer program director.

"We are attempting two-day television here. Ideas go out on "The Grand Generation" weekly television program and feedback becomes available immediately

through the volunteer program. We can report on an issue and refer visitors to local and state agencies to actually receive assistance," she said.

The television series is produced cooperatively by the Nebraska Commission on Aging and the Nebraska ETV Network. Created in 1973, "The Grand Generation" is one of the few public television series in the nation to focus on the needs of the elderly on a statewide basis.

## Benny Hill dominates limelight in nominal comedy

By Pat Clark

The best thing about *The Benny Hill Show* is that it is well named. Benny Hill dominates this show much more than, say, Mary Tyler Moore dominated *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. If the show fills a 30-minute time slot, Benny Hill will be on screen for the entire 30 minutes.

It doesn't seem to matter much what Benny Hill does while he's on the screen; he is satisfied as long as he is the star.

The show is nominally a comedy, and occasionally it is comical in fact. The show works well when Benny Hill is confined to the dictates of a script; with dialogue, other characters and the accompanying interaction. The show also can be good when the humor rests on political jokes or on satirical characterizations.

More often, though, the show is simply a forum for Benny Hill to act like Benny Hill. The scripts give him ample room to ad-lib and improvise, and when he does so, the show rapidly disintegrates into a review of all of the sexual (and often sexist) jokes that got big chuckles in the locker room in junior high school.

## Suggestive little song

One gets the impression that many of the routines and skits on the show are designed for the sole purpose of allowing Benny Hill to fondle gorgeous women. Benny Hill dresses like a Spanish flamenco dancer, sings a somewhat suggestive little song and women come onto the stage and swoon over him.

Scene change: Benny Hill dresses like an American cowboy, sings a somewhat suggestive song (not even a song really, more like limericks set to music) and women come onto the stage and swoon over him.

Scene change: Benny Hill comes out on stage dressed as a guard at Buckingham Palace, sings a little song and so on and so on until they roll the closing credits. One starts to believe that this middle-age, chubby Englishman has turned the show into his own version of Fantasy Island, and he is his own Mr. Rourke.

If Benny Hill is his own Mr. Rourke, he needs a Tattoo. He has one. There is a short, elderly man on the show (whose name I don't think has ever been revealed) who makes his living by allowing Benny Hill to thrash him about the head and shoulders with his hands, with rolled up newspapers, with boards and wooden chairs or with anything else that happens to be on the set.

## Share the spotlight

His reward for withstanding this kind of abuse is an occasional chance to share the spotlight with Benny

Hill for a brief moment. In these instances, he usually takes the role of a shorter, older version of Benny Hill without the singing. Kind of a guest lecher.

And he is given plenty of cause to act the lecher, because all of the women are gorgeous. That is all they are, though. In most of the routines, the women don't even have any lines. (In many of the routines, *nobody* has any lines except Benny Hill.) If a particular routine absolutely demands the presence of a woman who is not beautiful, Benny Hill will simply change clothes and take the role himself.

It would be simple, and accurate, to dismiss this kind of casting and this show in general as sexist. Sexist it surely is, but sexist is not all that it is, I don't think. It seems more the product of a person who lives in constant fear of being upstaged. It is as though if somebody else on the show was discovered to have any talent, the audience would soon realize how little talent Benny Hill has.

## Note inspires misty memories

This is an open letter of sorts to scattered miscellaneous friends, and to *Catie* on her 25th birthday.

I can still remember staring self-consciously at my shoes as your blue paisley mini-dress crept magically up your legs. What was it, '72? '73? You were leaning over

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the sink spooning some sort of lip gloss onto your mouth and telling me through pouted lips that you felt something big coming. The neo-Nazi whom you would toss your virginity to later that night was gunning the engine of his chocolate Cougar in the driveway, the party in the other room ebbing and flowing with the conversation.

What was that old song? I can never remember any of the lyrics, just the background vocals. It was going through my head again the last time I saw you. Little Anthony and the Imperials. It was good to see you again.

When I think about seeing you now, it is mostly shaded in grey tones. Must have been the weather. You were standing on the bluff with your hands in your pockets, watching them dredge the river below. There was a flat grey mist in the air, and you were very quiet; that goofy Peter Pan hat was pushed over your ears for warmth. You told me the hat was functional. I smiled.

Your breath, condensed in the cold, came out in long slow trains. I remember the reality of your cracked lips in the cold. Not a hint of make-up you used to wear, just the fine lines of your face, strong, your eyes clearer than I ever remember them. An earthly mandala of ocean and sky swirling around deep pupils.

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