

# Tom Jones, the Singer, Is Also a Human Being

BY DAN KNAPP

● Out beyond the garish, hot-pink billboard announcing that pelvic pop-rock singer Tom Jones has transformed Las Vegas into "fever country," shimmering desert heat played tricks on your eyes. Sculpted mountains 50 miles away danced within walking distance. Nearer, the flatlands bounced and bubbled like a prehistoric cauldron. But here, behind the burnished metal fence

bordering the International Hotel pool, plastic reality intruded on nature as clearly as ice in a tepid tub.

"Calling Mr. Karas . . . Mr. George Karas . . . Calling Miss Klemenfeld . . . Miss Natalie Klemenfeld . . . Calling Mr. Kerkorian . . . Mr.—uh—Kerkorian . . ." the paging operator chirped, like a cricket in heat. Over by the pool, a woman with the skin of a lizard and

hairline facelift scars beneath her ears strutted past young things cooling their dainty feet. *Just wait*, the older woman's narrowed eyes said. *Your time for the knife and the silicone will come. And then Tom Jones and the rest of these young studs won't look at you either.*

Narrow-Eyes passed a short, balding man with a protruding stomach. Dis-

playing it as though it were a Charles Atlas chest, he announced to strangers and acquaintances alike that he flew in from Chicago "at least 18 times a year." Four rows of cabana chairs away, you couldn't miss the drift. He was in the music business. And he had Tom Jones pegged, "performancewise."

"Oh, he's good," said Self-appointed

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Expert. "And he works. He sweats up there. You can't take that away from him. But Streisand . . . I was in town for her opening. They gave her a standing ovation. Not this guy. He's good and they applaud. But Streisand . . ."

You knew, now that the sun was low over the mountains, that all those women by the pool had disappeared. They were already up in their rooms primping and spraying for the Tom Jones dinner show. You knew it even though you were sitting in a Cadillac crawling toward Jones' hideaway five blocks from the hotel. Nine-to-fivers were going home from work at this hour. But Jones was just getting up.

Three sales and promotion men from the N.Y. offices of London Records, parent company of Jones' Parrot label, were in the car. In order of executive rank and in deference to their innocent families, call them Silverlips, Judas and Flunky.

"He's as tough tuh see as a Mafia don," said Judas.

"All kindsa people around him," said Flunky.

"But the key man is Mills," said Silverlips. "Gordon Mills, his manager. He picked Tom up when he couldn't even earn the price of a meal in Wales. Wrote 'It's Not Unusual' for him, and the rest is history."

"Yeah," said Flunky. "Jones don't even go to tuh bathroom 'less Mills says it's all right."

"But don't worry," Silverlips said. "It's all set for you to see Tom. Everything's going to be fine."

Judas turned around. "Just keep in mind that this guy is a coal miner. He's

an animal. He can be very crude. So don't take offense."

"You gotta have empathy for the guy," said Flunky. "He can hardly read."

Silverlips frowned as we pulled into the driveway of a modest but thoroughly sequestered house. "You'll like him, though," he said, undoubtedly remembering that Jones will sell an estimated 3,600,000 records this year for London. "It'll be a great interview."

Flunky appeared in the front doorway and beckoned. Now Judas disappeared behind the compound walls. "Don't worry about a thing," Silverlips said. Then he was called in himself. "It's all set," he said. "Just wait here."

Three minutes later they came back in reverse order.

"Uh, there's been a little mixup," Judas said. "Mills didn't know Tom was going to have a couple guests in for breakfast." Judas laughed knowingly, leaving little doubt as to the gender and dimensions of the "guests."

Not until long after the car had pulled back to the International did it prove that Mills hadn't even bothered to return their calls that afternoon regarding the interview.

More than 2,000 people packed the International's main show room like pickled hearts of palm. You remember that Jones, who will gross an estimated \$6 million on his four-month 1970 tour of U.S. nighteries, is taking three-quarters of a million out of the International till. So while you can't forgive the leathery steak and the lobster tails drowned in garlic, you can understand the noisome proximity of other elbows and other knees.

Jones, as lithe and muscular as a middleweight champion, has just start-

Chris Hutchens (Jones' personal publicity man), another visitor and a willowy blonde.

In the other room, Jones is relaxing between shows in a beige terrycloth lounging suit. He wears a heavy gold bracelet from which dangles a Welsh symbol. Around his neck is a gold cross on a chain. His manner is as soft and easy as the slippers he is wearing. And as he listens attentively and answers the questions, you realize that while he is far from a physics professor, he is nothing like the churlish near-cretin Judas has painted him to be.

The facts of life in Pontypridd and its environs instilled in him an early desire to break away. "I'd see old men working alongside me on building sites and I didn't want to end up like that," he says. "It seems okay to a lot of them when they're young and strong, but they don't seem to notice the older ones, or recognize what the future holds for them in work like that."

Until Jones broke the Sterling bar-

rier, his father worked in the mines. "One time," he says, "after I'd had my first hit record, I'm in the back of the car, headed somewhere on a tour, and I heard over the radio that there had been a mining disaster right around where I'd lived. Quite a few people had been killed and many others injured. Right then and there I knew I had to get him out. My mother and I had to coax him a bit—after all, it was his whole life until then—but we finally got him settled in a house near us in Surrey. I knew if I didn't get him out when I was able, and he'd gotten hurt or killed, I couldn't have lived with myself."

## 30 This Month

Thirty this month, Jones has come a long way since the days when he was a brawling, suede-shoed Teddy Boy in peg pants. The hits, the spiraling record sales, the sell-out concert tours and his TV series earned him more than \$2 mil-

ed his act, dipping and rocking into a medley of "I Can't Turn You Loose," "Fly Me to the Moon" and "In Other Words," in a fashion familiar to millions of television viewers. He's dressed in a skin-tight black tux and vest.

The songs come rolling out with little chatter in between: "I Can't Stop Loving You," "Delilah," "Daughter of Darkness." The voice box has to be made of boilerplate, you think, as he breaks away from the melody with shouts and screams. But each time, he comes back right on pitch and you begin to realize that he is indeed a singer as well as a performer. The pistoning and pumping of the legs and booted feet, the head and neatly trimmed bush of black lamb's wool tossed side to side, forward and back, the male go-go dancing and the gagging with the ladies, the pulling off of the tie are all part of the act. But they tend to distract from Jones' voice. It is a strong and supple baritone with surprising extensions into the tenor range and, apparently, almost no lower limit. A blues singer with a capital B.

## All for the Ladies

The act is conceived as though there weren't a man in the house but Jones. From the selection of the numbers—"We Who Have Nothing," "Try a Little Tenderness," "I Can't Get No Satisfaction,"—to the howling, weeping, pleading, frontally sexual delivery, it is all for the ladies. And they lap it up.

Jones stops between numbers. He sips a little of one woman's champagne. Borrows another's napkin. Bends down and kisses a third as at least three shapely chicks on the other side of the audience scream, "Over here, Tom! What's the matter with over here?"

Sooner or later, Jones will give everyone equal time. But now, sweat

pouring down his face and through his shirt, he turns his powerful voice to "If I Ruled the World," and the women know that things would be better if he did. An elderly woman gazes at him transfixed. He is the son her own son never could be. The mixture of chord-straining vocal energy and velvet-soft phrasing that he invests in the number characterizes his entire act. It is rough, just as Jones was as a miner, laborer, pub-singer, boozier and brawler in the early days around Pontypridd, Wales. But the diamond has since been cut and polished. All the sensuality, all the raw masculinity are sheathed in an unexpected gentleness and control. Above all, control. Jones works the emotions of the women in the audience until they are ready to leap over matrimonial contracts as well as the gap between them and the stage. But just when things have heated to a catalytic point, he executes the right smile, the right movement, the right gesture to keep things in hand.

Only once in recent memory has the control failed. This year at the Copa in N.Y., a brawl near the bar drew away the line of guards separating the women in the audience from the stamp-sized, same-level dance floor upon which he was working. The human barrier removed, a horde of mini-skirted enthusiasts swamped Jones, hugging and kissing him and tearing at his clothes. By the time the guards came to the rescue, Jones could scarcely finish his act. Out among the toppled tables and scattered chairs, several people required medical attention—among them Silverlips' heavy-set wife, who had suffered a broken ankle in the stampede.

Down in the catacombs beneath the International's main stage, a small group of people gather in Jones' dressing room. Behind the bar, Rocky Seddon, an ex-fighter and Jones' personal bodyguard, mixes drinks for Mills,

Non last year. There is no telling what his income will be in 1970, but even after taxes and fees to managers and agents, it will surely be no less. Even Silverlips, handing him a sheaf of photographs to sign, and saying with a laugh, "we just want to show them you can write," doesn't dampen Jones' unalloyed enjoyment of his work.

"What I do I like to do," Jones says. "I'm in the music business all the time. When I'm on, I work, and when I'm off, I relax by listening to other singers on record or I go to see them perform. The only thing that bothers me occasionally is that there is so little time to do some of the things I want to do. There are so many wonderful places to see, and there just isn't time."

Upstairs, the suckers are throwing good money after bad at a variety of tables. Judas is playing craps and the expression on his face spells "loser." There is a lineup along one side of the casino—people with reservations jock-

eying for the maitre d's benediction, making sure they will see the midnight version of the hottest show in town.

The object of their interest is resting now, reading, despite reports to the contrary, a London newspaper. Rocky mixes him a light drink. Jones doesn't smoke anymore and the necessity for smoking pot or taking drugs makes him laugh. The music, baby, is more than enough.

After the late show, he'll unwind for an hour or so, then have something to eat before going home about 4:30. He loves to sleep 10-12 hours a day, and the energy expended in two performances a night provides ample reason to indulge. Along the neon-lit path from dressing room to front door, the women will be waiting. Old or young, conservative or wild, they can't seem to get enough of him. But what he does about that situation, as Silverlips, Judas and Flunky will sooner or later learn, is nobody's business but his own.