

Excerpt from John Barbour's YOUR MOTHER'S NOT A VIRGIN

## Critic-At-Large

I called Chuck Young, General Manager of KTTV, the man who'd given me my first full talk show, if only for thirteen weeks.

"John, how are you? What are you up to?"

"Job hunting!"

Chuck laughed. "Is it not going too well?"

"I'll let you know after this brief conversation."

"Well, we're not looking to do any sort of show, unless you could convince us otherwise. What'd you have in mind?"

"I'd like to do movie and television reviews on your eleven o'clock news. They were really popular when I did them on the *AM Show* and my afternoon show. They're really popular in *LA Magazine*. There is no one on any news show doing them."

"I'm not sure there'd be room for something like that."

"I'm not talking about every night. I'm not sure I could do them every night. I'm just talking about three times a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday."

"John, you know this is not a company that likes to spend money."

"Reviews would be a lot more interesting and entertaining than the bloody weather. No one needs a weather girl. All they have to do is look out the window. The only interesting thing about your weather girl is that she does it in sign language that only eight people can understand."

"You do sound like a critic. Look, wait a day, then call Riley, our news director. I'll tell him to expect your call. I'll just tell him you have an interesting notion that I'd like him to hear."

Two days later I was in Riley's office with two copies of *LA Magazine*. Riley was in his late forties, a slender six feet or more, greying hair around the ears, and, thankfully, a face that was easy to look at. He always looked pleased about something.

After the introductions, he pointed at the magazines. "I see you brought your portfolio."

"Just in case you wanted to see how I write."

"I've already read them. And do so every month. My wife and I fight over who gets them first. Nobody's done anything like that on a news show yet. Do you think it'd work?"

"*AM* was a news show and they worked great there. Bob Irvine, the news director, will tell you he wanted them on the news, but McMahan, his boss, didn't think they'd work."

"Let's give it a shot, but we don't have extra money budgeted for another feature. You said you only wanted to do this thing three times a week. All I can give you is a hundred dollars a show. It's not much."

"I'd be glad to do it for that."

"We'll feature you as our Critic-At-Large. Next Monday you can start."

As predicted, I almost became as popular as the weather girl. Three months in, Riley asked if I'd like to anchor their new noon news.



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"I'm not an anchorman. I'd rather comment on the news than report it. Besides, I don't have that kind of voice."

"Just read it the way you read your reviews. It's simple. It's an extra five hundred a week. You start Monday."

For a week, at noon, I sat in front of two cameras and a teleprompter reading copy I had no hand in writing. I felt like a robot, embarrassed about taking the extra money. Friday, my fifth day, Riley poked his head out of his office and motioned for me. "You know, John, you really are a wonderful, honest critic. You were right. You were awful. It's back to eleven o'clock."

"Thank you," I said, meaning it.

Arriving every evening to polish my copy, the one diversion the entire staff had was stopping to watch NBC's live feed of *The Tonight Show* from Burbank to New York. When that familiar theme song played, everyone would pause at his or her desk, lean back and listen to Johnny Carson's monologue. It was a ritual.

On September 6, 1972, though, when the music played, no one was seated. They had rushed to the monitors, not to hear jokes, but to hear what Johnny would have to say about the horror we and the world had been witnessing for a day. A hooded Palestinian terrorist group calling itself Black September had somehow stormed the Israeli athletes' Olympic compound, taking hostages. They were demanding Israel release 234 Palestinian prisoners. The Israeli government refused to negotiate. They said they never do. Ever.

For hours the world was held spellbound and horrified by the sickening reality of this barbaric intrusion into the world's celebration of amateur sports. Cameras with long-distance lenses followed the gunmen pacing on balconies, weapons held high, peering through eye-slits in their black woolen hoods, screaming at the Israelis. At the world. To Allah.

When this unfolding disaster suddenly interrupted the camaraderie of the world's togetherness, ABC, which was broadcasting the Olympics was fortunate, as were we, that their lead commentator was Jim McKay. This professional, polished commentator was abruptly forced from being a cheery sportscaster into a subdued, reasoned, calming journalist; listening to him and watching the pictures unfold, no one could move. It was television at its best. Humanity at its worst.

Israel repeated their stance on not dealing with terrorists. Black September shot their first victim. Gasps filled the room and the airways. Then they shot a second. And a third. Eleven in total. The world had gone mad!

Later, gathering around *The Tonight Show* live feed, everyone was silent. A few placed their palms together, raising them to their lips as in prayer. Doc Severinson played the theme. Ed McMahon's powerful, salesman's voice announced the always happy, "Heeere's Johnny!"

Johnny, as usual, pushed his way through the center of the billowy curtains moving with his quick gait toward the audience. He was smiling.

*Jesus Christ*, I thought. *Why is he smiling?* Jack Paar wouldn't be smiling. He wouldn't even have music or an announcer. He'd just come out cold and give you his thoughts on the massacre we'd had just witnessed. Johnny patted his jacket as he often did, then looked at Doc. Jesus Christ, it was a repeat of his saying not a word about Bobby Kennedy's murder the day after. What a cold bastard.

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"Have you seen that plaid jacket Doc is wearing?" The audience laughed. Then he made some feeble joke about it, about maybe looking like the inside of Ed's head. Then another weak joke about Ed's drinking. That was it. And a few jokes about meaningless news. We all stood and stared. Waiting. He had to say something. Anything. But not a word. Or a hint of one. As he went to commercial, one of the news writers muttered, "What the fuck was that?" We returned to our desks.

I sat staring at my review. It was about a movie I loved and was eager to tell the audience about. But on such a night and day, who wanted to talk about a movie or hear about a movie? I was repulsed by Carson's indifference. Maybe it wasn't his doing. Maybe he wanted to say something, but management told him not to. He was an entertainer. He was there to help people forget their troubles. Paar would have told them to screw off or quit.

Like a corny scene in a Hollywood movie out of the forties, I tore up the review and started to type. The following poured out of me in a matter of a few minutes. This would be my review, unseen and unapproved by Riley.

KTTV: Critic-At Large ... John Barbour ... September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1972. "Because of what has happened in Munich I've found it impossible to think about anything else. All of us are constantly bombarded by the horrors of death and brutality with which man infects his world, and in order to maintain a sense of sanity and purpose we each go about our business looking at that side of us which is optimistic and cheerful. But the horror and senselessness of Munich is so real there is no escape into optimism, because when you think of it, the whole world is Munich.

"Violent death of man at the hands of another man has become so acceptable and commonplace it may one day be listed as death by natural causes. And you think about the irony of how the Olympic Games, a celebration of life, are called off even temporarily by the death of those athletes, and yet a half a world away hundreds of thousands can die in Vietnam and no one calls off the war.

"There is something else, though, that bothers me about Munich. When you see a Vietnamese mother, it hurts, but you know at least there was somebody, some country on her side. When you see an American soldier die in Vietnam, it hurts, but, you also know there was someone on his side. However, when a Jew dies, in Munich, or in Auschwitz, it seems he dies alone, and when he fights, he fights alone. These killings took place not too many days before Yom Kippur, the holiest of Jewish holidays, the Day of Atonement, the day Jews ask forgiveness for their sins. Why is it in a world where historically the Jew has been more sinned against than sinner, would he ask forgiveness for his transgressions? Why, while his fellow man has been cruel, would a Jew talk about his fellow man's kindness? Why? Because a Jew is special. The Jew is different, a difference that all too often was used as an excuse by others to suppress him. And in spite of that suppression, the Jew has become the yeast in the bread of civilization that caused it to rise. Because they were so frequently near death themselves, they developed, as Dr. Albert Schweitzer said, a reverence for life. They became the healers, the philosophers, the scientists, and even if he became an unknown tailor in some small haberdashery, he invested it with dignity. And, most importantly, he invested it with hope. For the Jew knows without that hope there can be no survival, and if there is one thing the Jew has learned, it is the bitter art of survival. On his own, the Jew managed to maintain and strengthen his difference and his individuality. In the respect that we're all struggling to maintain

Excerpt from John Barbour's YOUR MOTHER'S NOT A VIRGIN individuality, and we are struggling to maintain hope. In that respect, regardless of our national origin or religious affiliation, we are all spiritually Jews.

"What happened in Munich must have brought home to Jews of every nationality, even to those that never thought about it, a sense of their own Jewishness. To the rest of the world, this horror should stir in them some reflections about their own Day of Atonement. Because in the long run, if a Jew is not safe in Munich or Tel Aviv or Moscow or anywhere, then none of us are safe."

There was a long silence in the newsroom. Everyone was standing or sitting still. Going to commercial, they rose and applauded. Hearing it, the tears flowed harder. Then, as almost never happened after the news, the phones began to ring. One of the calls was for me. It was from Riley, calling from his home.

"John, tomorrow you're on the noon news again. You're not going to anchor. You have to repeat what you just said. Get in before noon!" He hung up.

I was in before noon, copy in hand. "Sorry I didn't run it by you before going on the air, but it was a last-minute impulse."

"If I'd seen it, you know what I'd've changed?" he said straight faced.

"What?"

"I'd have had it taped. Today it will be. We have already received over 500 requests for copies, and when you're done, you need to call this guy in Century City. His name is Carter."

He handed me a piece of paper with the name and number.

"Why?"

"How would I know? He's a billionaire philanthropist, friend of Chuck's. He says he wants to talk to you."

On the air, I again choked up, barely getting through it. Immediately after I called the mysterious Mr. Carter.

"Young man," he said, "you have no idea of the impact you've had on us with what you said." He paused.

"Who is *us*?" I asked.

"Jews. The Jews."

"Mr. Carter, that never, ever once occurred to me. I was just getting it out of my system. Really."

"Thousands of people in your business, and most of them Jews, and others, probably felt the same. But nobody said it. I would like permission to reprint it, and distribute it, to transfer it to film and make it this year's fundraising film for the United Jewish Appeal."

"Absolutely. I'm honored!"

"And I would like to make you an honorary member of The Guardians."

"What is that?"

"The leading group of Jewish philanthropists. And I'd like you to speak at our next function, where we'll honor you, and at a few other gatherings where they already want to hear you."

"Anything you want, sir, and anything I can do."

"Come and see me. I'm in Century City."

It was the busiest month I ever had. I met with Mr. Carter. He had 5,000 reprints and recordings made; they were the only non-Jewish items sold at a massive Israeli memorial fair held that year at the LA



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convention center. The proceeds went to the families of the athletes. As he said, it became the fundraising film for two consecutive years. It raised thirty-five million dollars.

At the Guardians' major annual function, I was embraced by Neil Simon. I was made an honorary Jew. I still have the statue. I told them that prior to the night I did my commentary, about once a month, as a former comic, I would do modest speaking gigs before one or two hundred people for three hundred dollars each. But since doing that piece, once every few nights, I'm speaking to thousands of Jews for nothing. They loved it! I told them also that I was making a five-thousand-dollar pledge to Israel, then added, "Paying it off, fifty dollars a year." They loved that. It was a heady month. What a wonderful feeling my work meant something. Another phone call indicated it might also mean something to someone else.

"John Barbour?" the edgy voice asked. "This is Irwin Safchik, KNBC New Director. We're thinking of doing something like you're doing on our six o'clock news with Tom Snyder. Tom Brokaw suggested I talk to you. Would you be interested in auditioning for us?"

"Auditioning? Can't you just watch me at eleven or I could tape it for you?"

"We prefer to see how you might look in our surroundings."

I mulled it over. Jesus. *Audition?* Again?

"Can you come by Tuesday, bring one or two reviews?" he asked.

"Yes. I'll be there." I was on my way to sitting next to NBC's Burbank Peacock, Tom Snyder.