

I protested that it was embarrassing to myself and my family, but she replied, "You're a commodity. If your mother feels bad about it, send her the \$1,000 check you couldn't have afforded otherwise—see?"

I don't, and I never will. My father was a good man. While he wasn't the most patient person in the world, he was never unkind.

Actually, I don't know much about my father. He joined the Army when I was 10. Till he was assigned to a post in the New York area a few months before he died of a heart attack—I was 14 then—he was home only a few weeks a year.

His sergeant's pay barely supported us when he was still alive. After he was gone, it became a bitter struggle for survival.

Because Mom's Army pension was small, she accepted a part-time job and was gone most of the day, leaving us to look after ourselves as best we could. To help out, I held a lot of jobs before I finished high school.

Because I never cared for formal learning, I didn't mind leaving school to go to work full time as a drill and lathe operator at 85 cents an hour, and, a few months later, as a roofer for \$1 an hour.

Through a friend, a ballet dancer, I eventually became interested in the theater. But I never thought I had a chance till she encouraged me to try out for Joe E. Brown's "Buick Circus Hour." To my surprise, I was cast as an Indian at \$125 for the day's work! That was the beginning of a slow but steady uphill climb.

Three years ago I took my total savings of \$203 and invested it on a trip to California. I was down to less than \$1 when I got a part in a little-theater production of "Tea and Sympathy" for \$22 a week—which proved the turning point. It resulted in an increasing number of TV shows and then a Warner Brothers contract.

BY HOLLYWOOD'S standards, I'm far from having made the grade in spite of getting star billing in feature films and living in what to me are luxurious circumstances. I'm sure that to old-time movie stars my modest one-bedroom home in Beverly Hills must seem little better than their servants' quarters.

But I'm doing well enough now to be able to invest in my family's and my own future, specifically in much-needed clothing, a car I'm not ashamed to pick up a date in, and the best of medical and dental care.

Even more important, I can make it easier for Mom, my sister Jo-Ann—who still lives at home—and my brother Vincent, whom I'm helping through college.

Professionally I'd like to remain Kookie for a long time—provided I can play other types, too, as I do in films. I'm also looking forward to making more records and albums, although I have no illusions about my voice. When Hugh Benson, executive assistant of Warner Brothers' TV department, first asked me to cut a record, I said, "Are you kidding? I can't sing a note!"

He insisted I could simply talk my way through the record—which is exactly what I did. When "Kookie, Kookie, Lend Me Your Comb" sold nearly two million records, believe me, I was as surprised as anyone! But it has become so profitable—after I signed a new contract which gives me royalties—that I'd be foolish not to try it again.

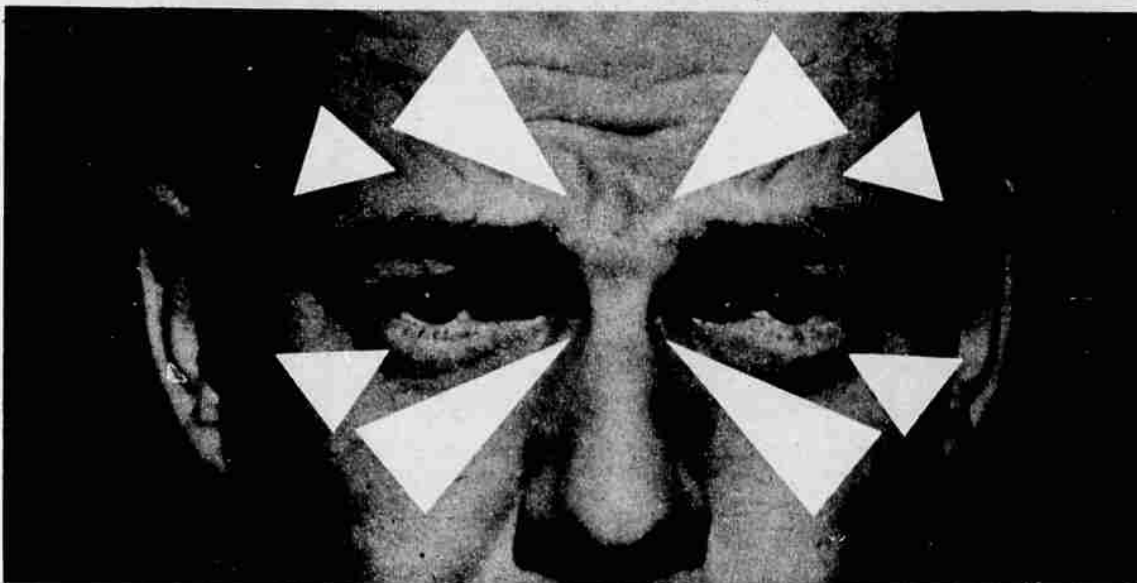
As for my personal life, nothing is further from my mind than marriage, because for the first time I can have the kind of fun I missed as a teen-ager.

To tie in with "Kookie," a lot of magazines have glorified my teens by writing about my many "romances." I actually had few dates as a boy. I seldom had the money to take out a girl. I never attended a prom. An occasional movie, a couple of hamburgers, and a walk through Central Park were all I could afford. Consequently, and quite unlike Kookie, I was extremely shy.

So before settling down I want to become more sure of myself, catch up with the many dates I missed as a boy—and put money in the bank. But I don't want to wait till I'm too old to enjoy my children, either.

If that sounds confusing, forgive me. In this respect, I'm not sure of the real me.

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