

Ricky Nelson Rides High

But does this teen-age idol possess the talent and ambition to stay on top?

by Peer J. Oppenheimer



THREE WEEKS before producer-director Howard Hawks signed Eric Hilliard Nelson for the part of "Colorado" in "Rio Bravo," he had never heard of the tall, 18-year-old, brown-haired youngster—known to millions of fans as just plain "Ricky."

Yet he paid a fantastic price for his services. Why?

"I'd never heard of Ricky because I never watch his family's TV show, 'The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet,' and I don't read fan magazines. I got interested in him only after I heard that his appearance at a midjet auto race held up proceedings for half an hour while he was mobbed by fans. I figured that anyone that popular must have a terrific drawing attraction with the younger set. Rick isn't expected to act; his appearance in the picture will sell at least an additional 500,000 tickets."

However, before he was willing to pay as much money as Ozzie Nelson demands for his youngest son, Hawks made a few more inquiries to assure himself that Ricky would be a safe investment. Hawks learned that Rick already has three gold disks to his credit (which means three of his recordings topped the million mark in sales), appeared on every movie magazine popularity poll, and has four permanent secretaries answering up to 10,000 fan letters a week.

If Hawks needed any further assurance, he got it while the "Rio Bravo" company was on location at Tucson, Ariz. Few people in town seemed conscious of other stars in the picture—including John Wayne and Dean Martin—but Rick was mobbed by fans to such an extent he had to change hotels three times.

What makes Ricky Nelson so popular?

Next to a pleasing voice and good manners, Rick's greatest asset is that he's completely unimpressed by his tremendous popularity. This modesty comes across in his relationship with everybody—even those critical of his talent. He is well-liked because he's never been heard to make a caustic remark; because he's a good-natured kid; because he can take a joke without getting mad about it.

Ricky acts as if his success is as much a surprise to him as to everyone else, and that it can't last. According to one of his publicists, the latter opinion is shared by Ozzie, who gives Rick two years at the most—though he may have revised his estimate upward in recent weeks.

Ricky may not be clever, well-educated, or even talented, but he has an inborn feeling for what young people like. And what they like is rock 'n' roll à la Elvis Presley—complete with hip swinging, sideburns, unclipped hair, garish clothes, and stand-up collar.

Although Rick never went quite as far, he readily admits that he set out to imitate Presley. Even his manner of speech has begun to resemble that of the young Tennessean who became almost as famous as Andrew Jackson.

It wasn't only commercialism that made Rick follow in Elvis' footsteps. From the day they first shook hands, it was a case of hero worship.

(Continued on page 23)