



To David
Many thanks to
a special friend
and great guy -
Wayne

Nov. 3, 1985----

LAS VEGAS - Shooting screaming-green lasers through show-biz smoke, a silver spaceship emerges from the hinterland of the spacious stage in the Celebrity Room of the MGM Grand Hotel. A sacramental spaceman marches out of the ship to the sound of deafening synthesizers before a sudden blast of wind rips off his spacesuit.

It's Wayne Newton.

And he's out of this world.

Known in this cosmic city as "The King of the Strip," the 42-year-old Newton is the highest paid entertainer in the country, making between \$15 and \$20 million a year. He wears a diamond ring the size of a billiard ball, an immense white-eagle belt buckle and a six-pack of Paco Rabanne cologne.

Newton wears it well, for he is a luxurious product of his abundant environment.

It's a highly conservative Vegas crowd that is shelling out \$27.50 per person to hear Newton sing in front of a 33-piece orchestra and three background singers on a Friday evening in the 1,400-seat theater. They plug their ears when the synthesizers get too loud and they let their hair down when Newton sings songs such as "Promised Land" and "Good Hearted Woman." The dichotomy is as obvious as the black dye in Newton's brown hair: A conservative tourist community thrives in a blatant liberal environment.

"That's absolutely right because this is a town that is growing up," says Newton in a backstage interview between shows. "No one ever thought that Vegas was going to last in the early '50s. I mean, the Desert Inn was built from Army barracks up until they remodeled it in '76. There's that faction that is part of old Las Vegas, like many of the newspaper columnists. Then there's the new group that has come in that knows that Vegas is here to stay. And that group is probably in its embryonic stage.

"So you have the old control and the old power penetrating the new younger people coming in who don't have the same ideas about how the city should be run. That rears its head almost everywhere you go, particularly in the press. The reviewers and columnists I know have been covering this town for 25 or 30 years. That's the way they look at Vegas."

Even though Wayne Newton is regarded as Mr. Las Vegas here, he maintains an objective view of the glitzy evolution of the community in which he lives.

"As with any kind of evolution, with every positive comes a negative," he says. "The

town is turning into a sophisticated city, and I literally can't think of any place I'd rather live.

"I believe the great corporate influx over the individual hotel and casino owner has brought on the greatest change here," Newton explains. "There were years here that you knew who the boss was. You got a problem, you know where to go. Today, with the corporate setup, many times it's 'Who's the president this week?' With the corporate setup, you're always subject to having the number of stage hands cut or the number of band members cut, because the first place they want to cut is entertainment. They don't understand it, and if they could do without it they certainly would.

"I've seen the town go from what we call a la carte customers - people who fly in from L.A. or drive in from anywhere - to being a convention town. By being a convention town it is a much earlier town. The town starts jumping earlier. In Vegas it used to be the first show was a light crowd, but the second show was packed. Now it is inverted because the conventioners have their meetings in the morning. Louis Prima and Don Rickles would go on until 6 in the morning, and that would be their biggest show."

It's 99-cent breakfast time at 3 a.m. on a Friday at the Flamingo Hotel when I look up from my eggs and see a scrambled fat woman playing three slot machines at once. Even though her rear end is melting over the sides of the stool she has developed a neat left-to-right system of throwing quarters into the machines. She has the blazing eyes of a gunner on a reconnaissance mission and the blind faith of a first marriage. The woman later tells me she been coming to Vegas since she divorced her first husband in 1959.

When Wayne Newton first hit Vegas in 1959, the starry-eyed 16-year-old was weaned on the swaggering saloon-singing styles of Louis Prima and Bobby Darin. In the early and mid-'60s, Darin and Prima applied a schmaltzy vocal style and stage presence to homogenized pop music that was colored by flashy big band arrangements.

"Louis Prima was the premier lounge act when I was a loungist here," Newton recalls. "I was appearing at a lounge in Lake Tahoe when I was 17 and Louis Prima and Keely Smith were across the street at Harrah's. I used to sneak in to watch their midnight shows. I loved the way she sang voice, and I found their act humorous and enlightening at the same time." Newton does a pure '60s version of "Just A Gigolo/I Ain't Got Nobody" in concert.

While Newton learned much of his stage savvy from Prima and Smith, he was cast in the artistic shadow of Darin - most obvious when Newton sings material like "Red Roses for a Blue Lady" or "When the Saints Go Marching in," his concert finale. If Darin were alive today, he no doubt would be on the same megasuccessful level as Newton.

"In my mind, Bobby Darin will remain not only as one of the dearest friends I'll ever have, but probably as one of the most brilliant talents I've ever known," Newton says. "He was so damn good at everything he decided to do - his singing, playing instruments like the xylophone and the drums. Newton handles fiddle, banjo and trumpet on 'Saints.' It probably deterred somewhat from his over-all acceptance - the fact that he was so talented. He could sing the blues, the big-band stuff, country and rock, and be believable and innovative in every aspect of it. If I had to characterize one guy I could relate to it would be Darin."

Darin discovered Newton when Wayne sang "Danke Schoen" with his brother in 1963 at the Copacabana in New York. "He came up to me after the show and said, 'Are you recording, kid?' I said no, and he said, 'How about next week?' I was shocked. The next week I was in a recording session. He was the A&R man, I was the singer. 'Danke Schoen,' 'Red Roses,' 'Summer Wind,' 'Dreams of the Everyday Housewife' - all my early hits were picked by Bobby."

After absorbing Darin's influence, Newton grew into "The Midnight Idol" on the Vegas strip, ironically receiving the intense type of adulation that passed Darin by. During the show I saw, Newton was handed dozens of notes on napkins from the female members of the audience, and one woman offered the singer a beautifully sketched portrait of himself. Newton says he could easily fill a warehouse with the gifts that have been given to him.

"The time, effort and energy that people put into that has always been kind of astounding to me for someone they don't even know," Newton says, eyeing the framed black-and-white sketch on the dressing room floor. "I guess it's probably that bit of fantasy within the people themselves. When I say they don't know you, knowing you is almost irrelevant. You are to them what they need you to be. Whether or not you are really that is irrelevant."

Arrows of affection indirectly shot down the likes of Judy Garland, John Belushi and Elvis Presley. How did Newton escape?

"I do think I've got a lot of the same following that Elvis had," Newton says. "It's the same type of mid-America, and they do have a deep loyalty. Elvis and I were very good friends, and to see a friend go through that without being able to handle it is a very difficult thing. I think the fact that I was able to observe people I loved not being able to cope is how I escaped."

"Not coping is a very interesting disease," Newton says before a lonesome sigh. "And the disease falls into the category of 'I don't understand why people are coming to see me' or 'Why do people like me?' so 'How can I possibly perpetuate that in order to sustain any type of longevity?' So the fear sets in, and when that sets in, so does the booze and the drugs - all in order to alleviate that great insecurity."

"I think if anything kept me sane through all of it, it is the fact that I never was unknown one day and the next day I was the Beatles," Newton says. "It was kind of a gradual thing - 'Well, he's always been around, so here he is again.' It was such a gradual climb to the extent that I didn't even realize what was going on. Therefore I never deviated from what I was doing because I never had to think about it. Then I'd go home and walk around my barn and if a mare was foaling or a horse was sick, you realize you're not as important as other people think you are."

Newton also credits his humble beginnings for his ability to cope.

"My father was an auto mechanic and my mother was a housewife and I became very ill with bronchial asthma, but my parents couldn't afford the penicillin shots I had to take," Newton says. "It got to the point where the doctors told my parents that if we moved to Arizona from his native Norfolk, Va. it would probably save my life; I couldn't make it through another winter without the shots.

"So I watched my mother sell and give away furniture that she had from her grandmother. We came to Phoenix because my mother had a brother there. In Phoenix is where I started to work. I was on a local television show from the time I was 10 until I was 15 and then came to Vegas for the first time when I was 16."

Did Vegas live up to his image of it?

"I've often thought about that. We came up on the bus and I had a guaranteed two weeks at the Fremont Hotel. I remember thinking the Showboat Hotel was a showboat," Newton recalls with a whimsical look. "And that the Flamingo was a giant bird standing in the sand and the Dunes should have been like a dune.

"I didn't like it when it wasn't what I thought it would be."

There is no respite from the visionary reverie of Las Vegas unless you return to Wayne Newton's point of arrival - the Greyhound Bus station.

Located a crap roll away from Union Plaza on the fringe of the downtown strip, the bus station is the only place in town where the slot machines are silent at midnight.

Wounded soldiers fill the waiting room.

A silver-haired woman is sleeping with her head bent over a silver walker. Behind her a young man with a three-day growth of beard rests his head on a New Orleans Saints duffle bag. On the other side of the aisle a smooth-skinned woman in a wrinkled black dress looks over the sleeping child in the next chair. You assume he is her son, but assumptions don't make it in Vegas.

A tan 10-gallon cowboy hat rests on a turquoise suitcase from the '60s, and farther on down the floor there is spilled sugar. You've become addicted to the cheery

cling and clang of the coins falling from the slots, and without it you're going through a wicked withdrawal from rapacity.

"Most of the people that come through here are hard-core gamblers from Southern California," says Bill, the ticket clerk who came to Vegas from St. Louis to start a new life after an old wife. "I've been here 10 years and I know people who never make it back. They'll sit around the bus station or sit on the benches outside. I'd advise anybody who comes to this town not to get excited and throw all their money away.

"Every week I get people from California who cash in their \$49 ticket, knowing they'll only get \$14.10 back. But they take it and go gamble it away," Bill continues. "There's been a couple of people who have jumped off the top of the Mint Hotel down the street. They get very depressed because Las Vegas is a depressing illusion."

An illusion that remains out of this world and very rarely down to earth.