

# BACKSTAGE WITH ANDY WILLIAMS

By PETE MARTIN

A visit with a popular recording star who is riding the wave of his nightclub success to a top slot in television.

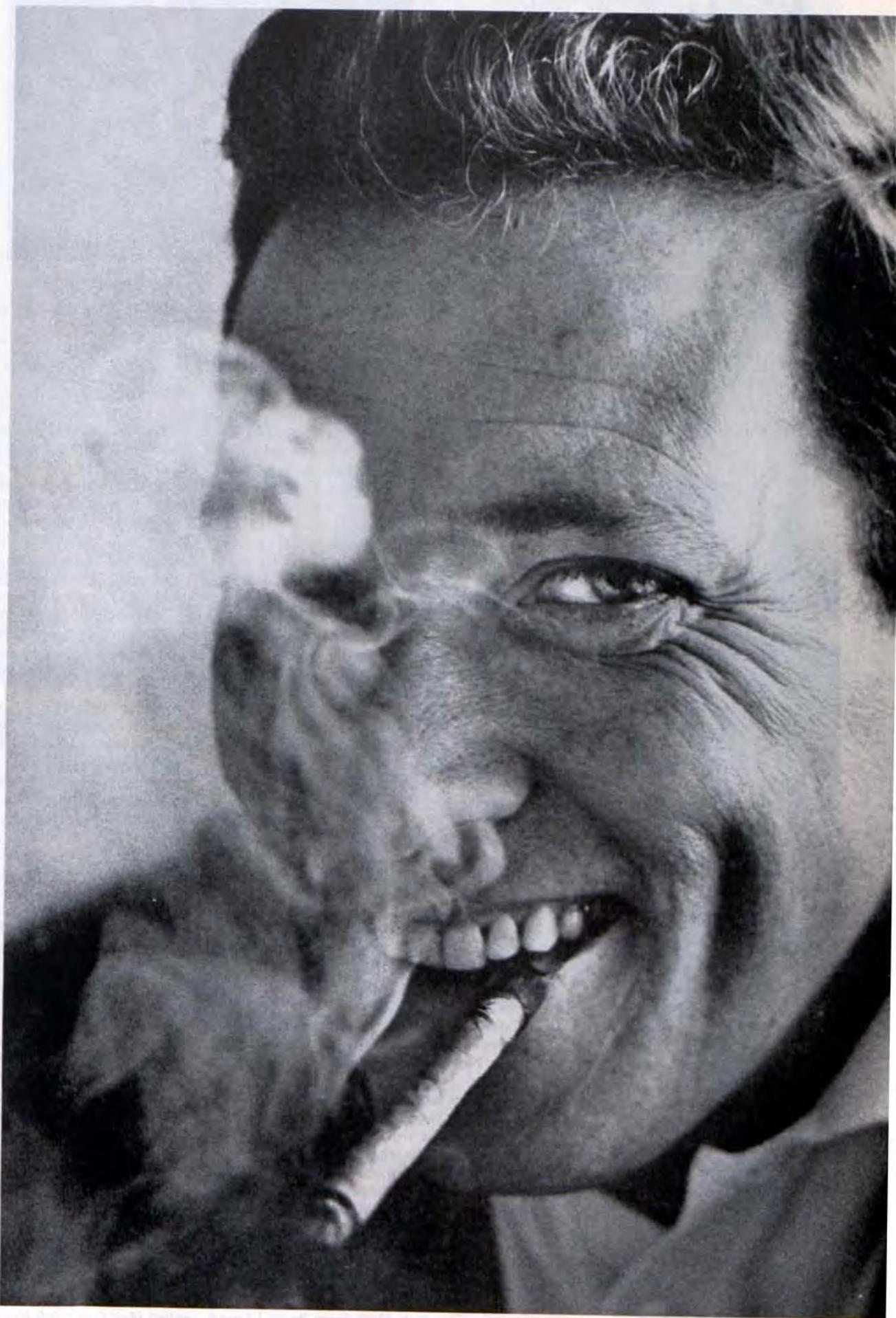
Nice guys in show business usually have a modest way of explaining success. They call their good breaks "accidents." When I interviewed Garry Moore, Bing Crosby, Perry Como, Jimmy Stewart and Fred MacMurray, they wanted me to believe that they are among the most-accident-prone entertainers who ever lived. Good fortune, so it seemed, hit them as inescapably as a falling ceiling.

Now I have discovered a nice-guy entertainer whose life story is a switch. Andy Williams is not accident prone but "assistance prone." He is so likable that all manner of people rush to further his career. That odd fact dawned on me while listening to Andy, a singer noted for his *Hawaiian Wedding Song* and other recordings, in his small New York apartment. Almost from his birth thirty-one years ago in Wall Lake, Iowa (pop. 749), Andy's friendliness has brought him dividends of kindly help. His father and three older brothers helped him. Production and vocal-department executives of movies rallied to his cause. So did booking agents, nightclub impresarios and a multitude of others not ordinarily identified as aiding their fellow man purely for his own sake.

Andy, a small-boned, slightly horse-faced vocalist, happily acknowledges all his benefactors. Unless prodded, he says hardly a word about the grinding rehearsals which pushed him along, perhaps more than any individual assists, into perfecting his easy, casual style. The wholesome naïveté of the small-town boy still comes through strong and clear despite the years spent in Las Vegas, Miami Beach, lesser nightclub circuits, sweaty recording sessions, fierce competition for record sales and mortal combat for prime TV time. At no time did Andy appear to be battling anybody or anything. He smiled his way along.

With a frankness devoid of press-agent phraseology, the Variety Club of Washington, D.C., analyzed Andy to a "T" in bestowing its Personality of the Year Award on him in 1959. It honored him for "possessing an agreeable personality rather than a dynamic one."

Andy agrees. "I guess I've never really been aggressive," he admitted, "although



Andy's easy charm has won him a nice-guy reputation. "I guess I've never really been aggressive," he says.

Photographs by John Bryson

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Andy onstage. He shuns finger-snapping and rock-'n'-roll hysterics for a warm, straightforward style.

## WILLIAMS

almost everybody else in show business fights and gouges and knees to get where they want to be. My trouble is, I'm not constructed temperamentally along those lines. If I hadn't been brought up as a performer, I would have done something else remote from show business. I don't mind doing a nightclub act or a TV show when I'm prepared for it, but I'm no good at bobbing up at a party like a Halloween apple and performing for the other guests, like some people I know.

"I guess that's why my favorite workbench is Las Vegas, not only because my bride, Claudine, and I became engaged there, but because Vegas is an easy place for a singer to play. In Vegas they don't have what we in the trade call 'Sunday-night audiences.' Sunday-night audiences are quiet. They go home early. A performer has to work too hard to get a reaction out of them. Every night in Vegas is Saturday night, New Year's Eve in Vegas is Saturday night doubled and redoubled. If you're a singer, you use all your up-tempoed stuff on New Year's Eve. Last year I sang *Hawaiian Wedding Song* and *Just in Time* with the same beat that night. No one was listening anyhow. At the end of each number the band hit a big whammy chord. That was the only way anyone could tell I had finished. I don't blame them. I wouldn't listen either. But nothing can drag me to a nightclub on New Year's Eve unless I'm working there.

"You can make a lot of money that way, but money isn't the most important thing in the world. The most important thing is to do what you want to do and be where you want to be. That's one of the reasons I hope my wife doesn't have a baby right away. We both like to travel."

A door in Andy Williams's apartment opened a few inches, and large, dark, long-lashed eyes regarded us. Andy said, "Come in," then said to me, "This is my wife, Claudine. She's from Paris. I found her there when I was doing an album,

*Under Paris Skies*. After that we met again in Vegas."

"You look sixteen or less," I said to Claudine Williams. "Mostly less. How old are you really?"

She said proudly, "Twenty," then she protested to Andy, "He thinks I am a little girl."

Andy said, "He's right. You don't look like a little French boy."

She said, "I should hope not. Also, I heard what you told him about hoping that Claudine doesn't have a baby right away." Turning to me, she announced, "Someday we'll have many babies."

"Nowadays," Andy said, "all young married girls are going to have eight or ten babies tomorrow. I'm not against babies or motherhood. I'm a real cornball about both of them, but there are a couple of places we'd like to see before we settle down and start a family."

Claudine told me, "I've been in Vegas for the past year and a half. That's the only part of your country I really know. I expected them to have slot machines in New York on Fifth Avenue when I reach here. Since I arrive I gave a cab driver a five-dollar chip from a gambling table at the Tropicana Hotel, but he wouldn't accept it although they are accepted everywhere in Vegas. I buy food at the supermarket there with them. I paid my rent with them."

"I told you," Andy said, "I met her in Paris briefly. I saw her next in Vegas working the Tropicana. She had short hair like a boy's, and offstage she's likely to wear long black stockings and a pinafore tunic. But being very discerning, I knew that under it all was a grown woman. After all, I had seen her in the *Folies Bergères*."

Claudine informed me primly, "I was not one of the ones with no clothes on. I always wore something even if only a handkerchief. I did solo dancing, mostly modern ballet. I sang a little, too, but I'm glad I didn't have to sing the things that Andy has to sing. He sings a song called *How Can I Tell Her It's Over?* I cry when I listen to it because in it he's telling

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## WILLIAMS

a girl he doesn't love her anymore and he's going to leave her."

"Claudine injects herself personally into every play or movie she sees," Andy explained to me. "She's sad or happy, depending on what television soap opera she's just looked at. Not long ago she saw a woman on TV whose husband had a broken leg. When I came home, I noticed that she was looking at my leg anxiously."

Andy resumed his self-analysis. "In addition to not being very aggressive, I once said that all I want out of life is to be comfortable. I try, but I don't know if it's possible to make the business I'm in comfortable. The ideal setup for me would be to have my own weekly TV show during the regular season, but only if it's a show in which I'm allowed to do what I want to do and if I'm given enough money to do it with. In addition it would be pleasant to have a few successful recording dates and

a couple of nice long nightclub engagements at Vegas set on an annual basis. I'd be interested in a top-drawer movie, too, but there's none in my immediate future. While I've signed three-year contracts to appear in Vegas and a few other spots year in and year out, the biggest thing in my life is recording."

I asked him if he ever made a record that had sold more than a million copies. He grinned and shook his head. "You've been reading my publicity releases," he

said. "You should know better than to believe them. My recording of *Canadian Sunset* would have sold a million if I had made the first recording pressed of it, but the first version was instrumental, and that shrunk the sales of my vocal. I still think my platter of *Hawaiian Wedding Song* will sell a million. It's sold eight or nine hundred thousand to date, and it's still selling."

"As a singer I spend most of my time trying to find songs that are honest, and by honest I mean songs whose words I can mean when I sing them. Not long ago I ended an album with the standard, *Danny Boy*. I think that will appeal to kids. It doesn't jump, but it's honest. Young people can smell things that are phony quicker than adults. They know whether words written to be sung are true or not. If they're phony, they call them icky."

"What happens to you if you're a rock-'n'-roll singer and your audience grows up?" I asked Andy.

"You retire a rich man at twenty-two," he told me. He added seriously, "That's a problem which faces all young singers with a teen-age following. If they fail to grow up with their fans, they're in trouble. The twist has made rock-'n'-roll almost unnecessary, but although it has changed, it is still with us."

"Changed how?" I asked.

"The music is softer," Andy told me. "Not as noisy as it was. Strings are popular again. They're using violins behind rock-'n'-roll singers. It tones them down. They're not so screammy. Some ex-bobby-sox blitzers like Elvis Presley try for a new career in movies. A few of them, like Sinatra in *From Here to Eternity*, Dean Martin in *The Young Lions* and Sal Mineo in *Exodus*, really make it, although Sal was never a singer. He was a teen-age idol who more or less carried a tune. Somebody said, 'He's got to make a record.' So he made a record, *Start Movin'*. The record didn't do well, but Sal went into movies. His best work is the fine, sensitive job he did in *Exodus*."

In contrast to the "accident" that catapulted others into the entertainment world, Andy was almost literally pushed. The prime mover was his dad, Jay E. Williams, a railway mail clerk on the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad and an enthusiastic church-organ player and amateur singer. When Andy was born, Jay and Florence Bell Finley Williams already had three sons, Richard, Robert and Donald. Their father recognized a ready-made quartet when he heard one. Andy began singing at age eight.

"What my brothers and I did best together was sing," he told me. "Our voices blended. That's a family trait. The King Sisters have it. The McGuire Sisters have it. And we began so young that we could sing like the King Sisters when we tried."

"We sang first in the Presbyterian Church choir loft. The congregation wasn't big enough to produce a choir, so the elders turned to my father. He had one—the four Williams brothers. He accompanied us during rehearsals."

The crowning moment of Andy's early boyhood, however, had nothing to do with music. His father playfully "delivered" him like parcel post. The father's mail train stopped at Wall Lake going one way, but not coming back. Andy once hopped a ride on it. To get his son home, the senior Williams popped him into a mailbag, arranged with the locomotive engineer to slow to ten miles an hour in passing through Wall Lake on the way back, and hung the mail bag from the side

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of the train on a swing-out bar. A metal hook in the side of the station at Wall Lake snatched the bag safely with Andy inside. The postmaster helped him out. His mother ran to greet him. "That happened only once," he says. "It was too risky even for my chance-taking father. But I haven't forgotten even one second of that bag being snatched up by the metal hook. I even remember how the canvas inside the bag smelled."

To further his singing sons, Williams took lesser postal jobs in larger cities with bigger radio stations. First stop was Des Moines, home of 50,000-watt WHO. From there, the Williamses moved to Chicago, where the boys sang over WLS, the *Prairie Farmer* Station. Their dad recorded song arrangements used by the Merry Macs and the Modernaires, and the boys imitated them patly. They had no arranger—the recordings did their arranging.

By that time the four boys worked thirteen radio shows a week for a grand total of \$100. In those lean days it seemed like big money. But AFRA, the Associated Federation of Radio Artists, cried "exploitation" and demanded \$500 a week for them. The station dropped them. Jay Williams, no whit downcast, moved them to Cincinnati and station WLW. AFRA soon intervened again, so in 1944 the Williamses moved to California. Jay Williams felt that his sons were ready for the movies. Hundreds of thousands of other parents have felt the same way about their children, only to be ignored.

But when the boys sang at the Hollywood Canteen, they got a quick "assist" from Ida Koverman, whose boss headed production at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. She heard them and set up an audition. M-G-M signed the boys almost instantly.

World War II put an end to their harmonizing. The draft took Don, the oldest. Next Bob and Dick went into the service. Andy, meanwhile, attended high school in Los Angeles. In 1946, when Andy was fifteen, his brothers came home, and the Williamses' career received a mighty push from a talented woman named Kay Thompson, plus others. Kay, who had coached M-G-M singers and written vocals as head of the studio's vocal department, wanted to get back to performing. She aimed at nightclubs.

An agent, Baron Polan, a former Army Special Services producer for whom the uniformed Williamses had sung, suggested that Kay get together with the boys. She did. Aided by Bob Alton, M-G-M's choreographer, Kay created a nightclub act. It was billed as Kay Thompson and the Williams Brothers. Kay wrote the songs. Alton styled a few simple steps to go with the music. They practiced ten to twelve hours a day for three months. When the boys, singing as loud as they could, added their harmonies to Kay's strong voice, the effect was overpowering.

"You're ready," Alton finally told them. "We'll have an audition. I'll ask the press over to my place for it." And a whole new crop of Williams pushers sprouted. "The fastest-paced nightclub routine ever put together," one critic proclaimed. Another hailed it as "the first intimate capsule revue." An agent booked them for the El Rancho Room in Las Vegas at \$2500 a week.

The Williams boys were utter strangers to a nightclub, even as customers. "We didn't know the facts of nightclub life," Andy told me. "On our second night at El Rancho, my brother Dick jumped off-

stage and belted a guy who kept talking while we were on. Alton grabbed Dick and said, 'You can't do that! You're performers. These people pay their money.' Dick blazed. 'That guy was talking while Kay sang.' 'Ignore him,' Alton said. I'll never forget Dick's reply, 'It doesn't seem enough.'

"That was a long time ago, so perhaps I can discuss it without sounding like an egotistical jerk," Andy continued. "But the truth is, people didn't know what hit

them on our opening night. They stood up and cheered when we were through. Looking back, the main thing that made us click must have been our pace. Somehow we managed to work up and sustain an almost unbearable pitch of speed and rhythm."

The act held together for five years, and its price zoomed to \$15,000 a week. But Andy and the others found it harder and harder "to do exactly the same things exactly the same way in places we

had done them many times before." With a deep sigh of relief they abandoned the act. "A more practical reason for calling it quits," Andy adds, "was that TV was just coming in strong. Many places suited for our act had closed up."

Don Williams decided to try acting. Brother Bob went into a business disconnected from entertainment so he could stay home and get acquainted with his family. Jay Williams, the boys' father, already had gone into real estate. Kay

## An Open Letter to the Tire Industry

# McCREARY ASKS AMERICA'S TIRE MANUFACTURERS TO SET STANDARDS FOR TIRE GRADING, ADVERTISING AND GUARANTEES

While American tire manufacturers make the finest product in the world, certain practices have cropped up in recent years that tend to blight our industry. We refer to practices of tire grading, pricing and advertising that confuse and can even endanger the customer.

### LET'S SET MANUFACTURING STANDARDS

Though McCreary makes only premium and first line tires (of original equipment quality or better),\* we are concerned, as are many responsible tire executives, about the lack of industry standards for grading *all* tires—premium, first, second, third and fourth line.

We know that what one manufacturer lists as his "first line" tire may be no higher in quality than another manufacturer's "second line" tire.

We are also concerned about the recent epidemic of poorly made promotional tires, known to the trade as "cheapies." This situation is particularly disturbing because most manufacturers do not identify the conditions under which these tires should or should not be used—if minimum safety requirements are to be met.

In the interests of safety, we therefore ask the entire industry to set *uniform* standards for tire grading and to clearly define the performance capabilities of each grade. *Only by the setting of such standards may the consumer know exactly what he's getting and how safe he can expect to be under given driving conditions.*

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### WHAT ABOUT GUARANTEES?

Let's see to it that all guarantees are exactly what they seem to be. We ask that manufacturers carefully examine each guarantee to make certain that the customer will fully understand its meaning. While the wording may be correct, all too often there are errors of omission. For example, how many guarantees plainly state that a cost is involved in the replacement of a tire before the expiration of the guarantee—and that this cost is determined by how much tread rubber is left and the condition of the casing?

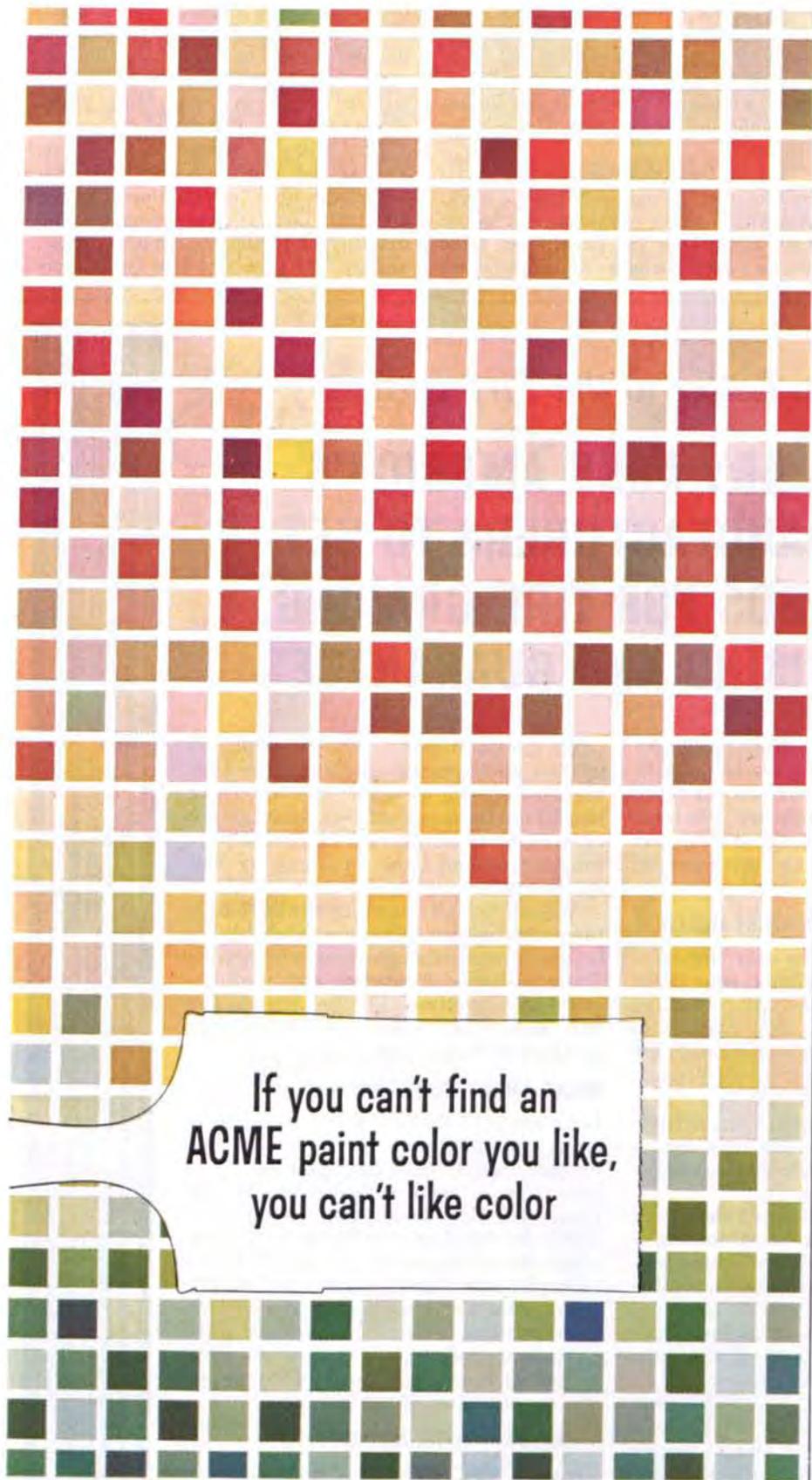
### WHAT CAN McCREARY DO?

Though McCreary is a comparatively small tire manufacturer, we do feel impelled to sound a warning to our industry. And we do intend to continue the ethical practices that have kept our customers loyal since 1915.

### WHAT CAN OTHER MANUFACTURERS DO?

We know there are many among you who wholeheartedly agree with our proposals. We hope that you, too, will speak out to encourage uniform grading and more explicit advertising so that we may safeguard the high standards which should characterize our business.

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## WILLIAMS

Thompson later turned her many-faceted talents to writing a book about a girl named Eloise who lived in a New York hotel with a nurse while her mother jaunted around Europe with a series of gents known to Eloise as "mother's lawyers." The book, *Eloise*, exploded with a sonic bang of laughter that landed it among the best sellers.

Andy began recording. He made his first record in 1954 and went to New York to market it. There he auditioned for Steve Allen's *Tonight* show. He was signed on for two weeks, but nobody told him to stop, so he sang on the Allen show for two and a half years. In 1958 he did a thirteen-week summer replacement for Pat Boone—a lazy, good-natured show in which he made no attempts to overpower with his personality. In 1959 his one-hour variety program, *The Andy Williams Show*, summer-subbed for *The Garry Moore Show*.

Both of Andy's summer efforts brought plaudits. Replacement-show ratings usually plummet; people are outdoors, traveling. "But my ratings kept climbing," Andy says. "Near the end of that 1959 summer they were very good indeed. NBC wanted to slot me opposite *Gunsmoke*, but I had sense enough to know I wasn't ready to take on the champ. Come summer they'd drop me and I'd be through at the tender age of twenty-eight. There's still talk of my having my own regular TV show, but I'm not fretting."

As it turned out after our interview, Andy saved himself a lot of nerve strain by not fretting. What happened to him recently should be a wholesome restorative of faith for those who want to believe that nice guys in show biz can still finish first.

On Friday evening of this week Andy is due to stroll toward a TV camera pouring out soothing words in his own hour-long NBC Chrysler-special show. They will be warm, schmaltzy, upbeat words. The song will be *Now Is the Time*. Few vocalists can mix these ingredients just right, but Andy will deliver with ease. It will be the hard-earned ease that comes from unrelenting rehearsal, at one point forty-eight hours at a stretch.

More emphatic proof that nice guys can succeed came from Music Corporation of America, Andy's agent, on March fifth. MCA announced a deal with NBC-TV whereby next fall Andy, heading a variety show, will take over Mitch Miller's *Sing Along* slot at ten to eleven P.M. Thursdays. Miller is moving to a Friday hour.

Whenever Williams sings on his own programs, his viewers can count on him to refrain from belting his listeners over their heads with his voice. Andy has achieved success without eardrum beating and without such gimmickry as rock-'n'-roll howling, finger snapping and pelvic writhing.

In a New York restaurant not long ago I met a gravelly-voiced entertainment spokesman who knows singers the way racetrack handicappers know horses. I asked what he thought of Andy and his chances for staying on top.

"Sinatra and Andy," he told me, "are the only two singers I know who can make the verse of a song as exciting as its chorus. Then there's the matter of class. Hope has class. Sinatra has class. Benny has class. Entertainers who have it instinctively do and say the right thing at the right time. Andy Williams has class."

THE END



With his French wife Claudine. They became engaged while she was in Las Vegas with the Folies Bergères.



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