

"NOBODY LOVES ME BUT THE PEOPLE"

LIBERACE: The Power of Love

"I was sure that once I got a chance to look into the camera real hard, the country would know me for a friend," declares television's first authentic matinee idol. "And it did . . ."

By
RICHARD DONOVAN

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN was certainly not itself on the evening of May 26, 1954. More than 13,000 excited, laughing, largely middle-aged women, herding before them a weak force of about 3,000 men and boys, surged powerfully in at all doorways. Inside, on a flag-draped platform, a symphony orchestra tuned up. The natural odors of the place—sweat, ammonia, cigar fumes, horse fragrance—had been fastidiously sprayed away by workmen, using a perfumed disinfectant. The blood cry of the fight fan was stilled and in its place rose a most unusual sound—a kind of multi-mother sigh.

Then, with a burst of orchestral arpeggios and glissandi, Wladziu Valentino Liberace, the people's pianist, bounded onto the platform. He was a remarkable sight. His glossy, graying hair gleamed in deep waves in the spotlight. His large, handsomely dimpled face smiled so intimately that the fumigated fieldhouse seemed a cozy little living room. His stocky, bowing figure, clad entirely in white, looked several feet taller than it was, and his teeth, when he turned them up to the light, were blinding.

With the flashbulbs of camera-bearing fans flaring all around, the maestro, who is the nation's first undisputed TV matinee idol and also its foremost all-around showman of the moment, grabbed a microphone and began to communicate with his people. "Isn't it great, George?" he breathed passionately. "Did you count them, George?"

At this witticism, such a roar of approval rose from the largest indoor crowd ever to pay a \$6 top to hear an American piano player that Liberace and his brother, George, who was conducting the orchestra, seemed slightly startled by it. Recovering hastily, however, the maestro launched into a program of music, song, soft-shoe dancing and humorous and sentimental sayings that kept the audience veering from laughter to tears. Hundreds of bifocals steamed with emotion as the maestro's gaze swept the house, seeming to settle on every face, personally, as though he were looking at Miss America. When the show was over, the power of love, which Liberace had been shooting at the audience all evening, seemed to have melted even the grimmest ladies present. It was as though each one of them and the maestro had been alone.

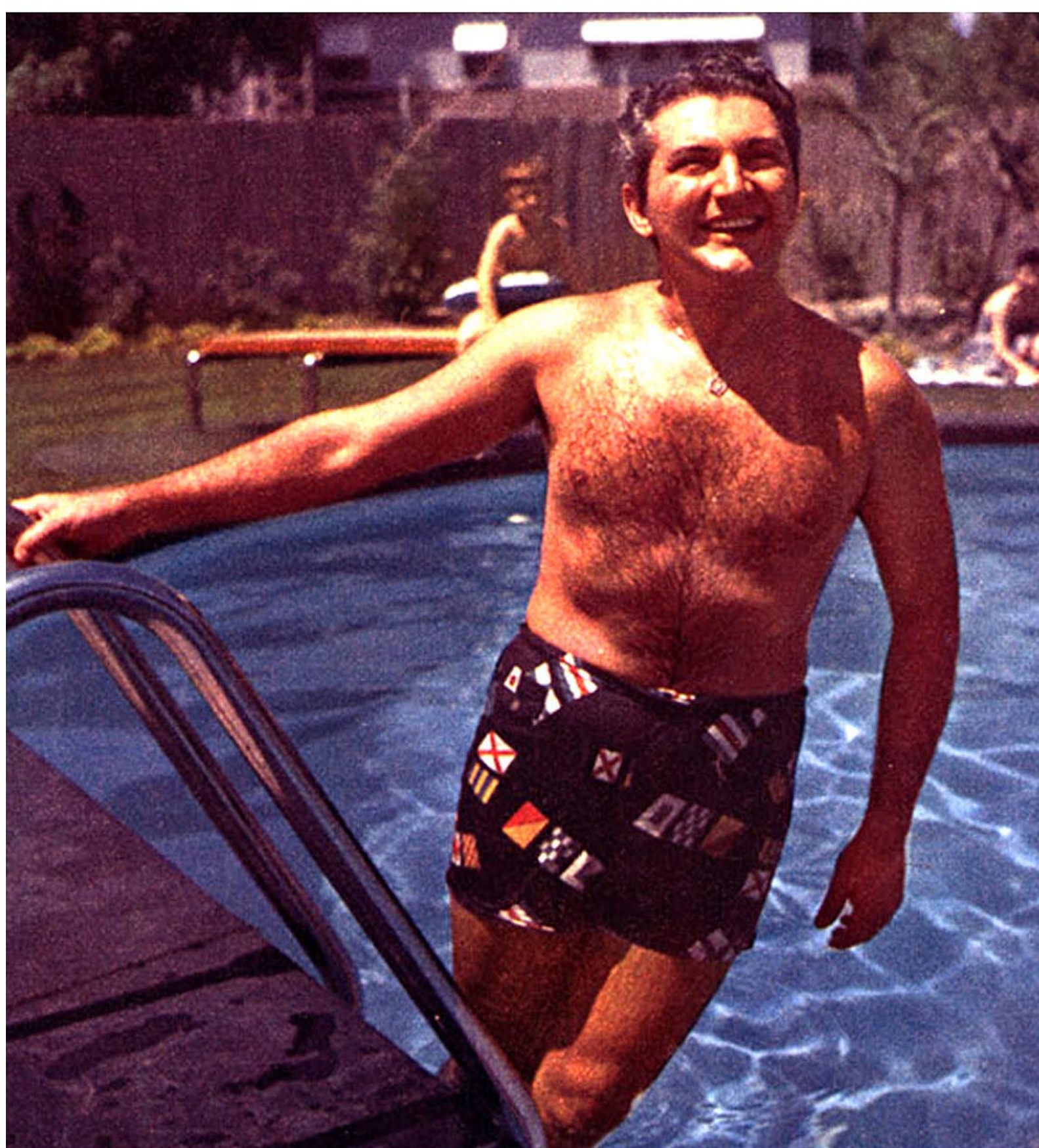
As 3,000 matrons charged simultaneously into a rear runway to collect Liberace's autograph, however, it became annoyingly clear that nobody was alone. Somewhere a spike heel ground down on an open toe. Somebody swung a handbag. Instantly, the whole runway began to heave and bellow in a contagion of brawls as love flew out the window. When the maestro finally appeared, two fighting Bronx housewives broke through to get the first autographs. As they emerged from the melee in triumph and dishevelment, they were engaged by an amazed reporter who asked them, point-blank, what they could see in a piano player like Liberace.

The ladies gave the reporter a long, incredulous stare.

"What do I see?" snorted one of them, finally. "I see a little pleasant relief from what I have to look at every day: Loudmouths! Chest-beaters!"

The other lady took a calmer tone. "Liberace is the sympathetic type," she said, thoughtfully. "He looks at you and you feel beautiful. For that alone, I believe in him."

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"Lee" makes frequent use of piano-shaped pool behind his \$100,000 house. In background are his sister Angelina (r.) and her young son



Liberace relaxes in bedroom, surrounded by reminders of himself—like initial on his bedspread and the picture hanging on his wall



The maestro's flamboyant California mailbox displays his house number, signature, piano



Photo by Philippe Halsman, 1959

(Added image)

"But as a ladies' man," said the reporter, pressing for more intimate details, "how does he hit you in that respect?"

The ladies exchanged quick glances, as though they were now dealing with classified information.

"Well, I'll tell you," said one, eventually, in confidence. "The main thing about Mr. Liberace, as he hits me, is that he is through and through a Continental. When he kisses your hand, you know he ain't going to chew up your arm."

Because he controls himself on arm chewing, and for other reasons as yet unexplored, millions of women all over the United States are currently believing in Liberace. Some women—like the one known as the Green Hornet, because she dresses

exclusively in that color, and the young widow who brings along her mother and child—have followed him all over the country. In New Orleans, another woman who calls herself the Lady in White and who once rushed into his dressing room and snipped off a lock of his hair, is waiting for him to pass on, she says, so she can visit his grave every year, like Rudolph Valentino's Lady in Black. Female belief in Liberace is so strong, in short, that it is probably exceeded only by his belief in himself.

According to the maestro's count, he has been believing intensely in himself since the age of three. His belief is a calm, settled, almost religious conviction that what he wishes to happen must happen.

It always has. While he was a nameless, \$350-a-week night-club entertainer, for example, the belief that he could fill great concert halls seized him. Since then, he has broken most existing box-office and attendance records for concert performers in most principal U.S. cities. Record companies once would not even listen to him on the ground that he was just one more piano player, and one who couldn't hold his tempo, at that. At the moment, he is the number one seller of record albums in the country.

Take the Business Manager's Word

As for television, he had a very strong shot of belief about that medium when it came along. Last month, Liberace's half-hour, non-network, filmed TV program was being seen on more stations (192) than either *Dragnet* or *I Love Lucy*.

Salesmen, who for all their bravado are among the most abysmal self-doubters alive, might examine Liberace, the peddler, with profit. How is it, salesmen, that the maestro's annual sales volume has, on the solemn word of his business manager, exceeded \$50,000,000 for the last two years?

"If I'm selling tuna fish, I believe deeply in tuna fish," says the maestro in explanation. "I have faith. And faith is highly contagious."

In early 1952, when salesman Liberace first began to believe publicly on the new medium, the Citizen's National Trust & Savings Bank, of Los Angeles, decided to sponsor him. "We wanted a TV program with dignity and an entertainer whose character was above reproach," says one of Citizen's vice-presidents, Henry E. Petersen. The bank offered a Liberace record free to all who opened a \$10 savings account. In three months, says Petersen, the records brought in \$600,000; in two years, more than \$1,400,000.

Delighted, Petersen spread the news among other bankers. The maestro now has 57 local bank sponsors. One of the chief beneficiaries is Cleveland's Society for Savings, whose officers still find it somewhat difficult to credit what has happened. But using a similar record come-on, the Society for Savings took in \$9,216,000 in new accounts and additions to old accounts in the first seven months of 1954, according to president Mervin B. France. This rush of new business is possibly unparalleled in the history of American banking.

What has happened in banking has happened in other fields. When Liber-

ace has advised his followers to buy certain paper products, drive certain cars, drink a certain beer, bury their dead via certain funeral parlors or hasten to patronize any one of his 100-odd other nonbanking sponsors, they have hastened to take the advice.

"Faith is catching," Liberace says.

It should not be presumed, of course, that all of the maestro's self-belief just came to him out of the air, like a floating virus. He got a lot of it out of a book by a man named Claude M. Bristol. This book, a self-help treatise entitled *The Magic of Believing*, counsels the faithless wretch to gaze at himself in a mirror every day and begin talking out loud to his image in a ruthless way. The maestro recalls several nasty sessions with the shifty, self-pitying fellow in the mirror before complete objectivity was reached—particularly the first talk, which was conducted in private a few years ago, just before the maestro shot into the show-business stratosphere.

"Liberace," Liberace asked bluntly on that occasion, "are you as good a pianist as Horowitz?"

There was a long, embarrassing silence. "No-o-o," Liberace replied, finally, "but I'm very probably better in other respects."

"Your new television show," the inquiring, or outside-the-looking-glass, Liberace went on, inexorably. "Do you honestly think it will be as good as *I Love Lucy*?"

"Ah, hum," Liberace replied. "Well, if I'm never too self-important to bring entertainment to everybody, I don't see why not."

This reply pleased the maestro, as he recalls. In fact the whole interview seemed to be going rather well. He got encouraging answers to queries about his intelligence, earning power, health, morals, fearlessness and personal magnetism, for example. Had he not got snarled up on the question of whether he should stick to piano playing, and give up singing and making witty remarks on his programs, he might have settled most of his problems in that one interview, he feels.

"Even as it was, I found out a great deal about myself," Liberace says.

Few people, especially the Liberace nonbelievers, who are said to include the majority of men, teen-agers and music critics, can say as much. The professional critics, in particular, have shown what to Liberace's fans is an astonishing confusion about the sources of the maestro's success. Various of these joy killers, writing at many times, have pronounced him a "shining mediocrity" whose "pianistic pretenses have lowered national music standards," and whose "bounciness, sweet smile . . . (and) my-oh-my prose style" have "incited thousands of rampant moms to violence" in the belief that he is "just a big little boy . . . and a good boy, too, who would never swear or drink or leave his poor old mother . . ."

Liberace tries to be fair about the critics but it is clear that they lie on his spirit like mustard plasters. "I'm not lowering musical standards," he often complains bitterly. "I'm raising those of people who never had any." The critics also blister the spirits of most Liberace fans. Time and again, these people have been amazed and enraptured by some movie or other cultural

exercise, only to read the next day that the whole affair was a "staggering fiasco"—and themselves, by implication, lumber rooms of ignorance and bad taste. Thus, when the maestro sails into such reviewers as New York Herald Tribune TV columnist John Crosby—who once risked violence by calling Liberace's female idolators "plips," (meaning goof-balls)—the fans begin to low like water buffalo scenting a missionary.

Mission Is to Bring Happiness

Actually, Liberace just wants to be loved by all living things. An earnest, generous, often sentimental, thirty-four-year-old man, he says his mission is to bring a little happiness to simple, unsophisticated people (as he feels himself to be), even those who may dwell in the hill passes of Tibet.

Physically, Liberace is a strong, square-cut fellow with flat feet and wide, hairy hands capable of stretching an octave and a half or of tearing telephone books in two. When one of his two huge grand pianos has to be moved a short distance, a job normally requiring the services of four men, the maestro moves it alone by crawling underneath with a pillow on his back, hunching the 1,200-pound instrument off the floor, and inching over to the new location.

Spiritually, Liberace is a gentle fellow who has rarely shown fear—except, perhaps, for the time a middle-aged Cleveland woman grabbed his shining locks and began banging his head against a car window and yelling "I got him!" or the time some New Orleans ladies chased him through a bank lobby and into a safe-deposit cage where he had to be locked in, like an animal.

With dozens of marriage proposals coming in by mail every month or so, the maestro lives an aseptic, celibate life, buttressed round by his family, his managers or staff musicians. He thinks of marriage as some men think of rheumatism—as something that will probably overtake him someday.

When he gets any time to himself in the handsome, sprawling, \$100,000 home which he shares with his mother at Sherman Oaks, near Los Angeles, Liberace often just walks around gazing at the structure in surprise and admiration, for he was once a poor Milwaukee boy and can still hardly credit all his good fortune.

Display Comes to Him Naturally

The depression left several lumps on Liberace, whose father, a temperamental Italian who played the French horn, could never quite seem to make ends meet. In consequence of early drabness, perhaps, Liberace tends toward display in his many working suits and his numberless fancy vests, slacks, sport shirts and bird-of-paradise ties. Depression memories may also cause him to feature the symbols of his success on his new cruiser-length Cadillac convertible, which has candelabra insignia on the sides, or in his house, which has 188 miniature pianos in the living room, or in his landscaped backyard, which has a clef-shaped fountain and outdoor candelabra besides his piano-shaped pool (complete with black-and-white cement keys). As for the tremendous, diamond-encrusted, pi-

ano-shaped ring that gleams from his little finger, watering his viewers' eyes, that was given him by some Texans whom the depression did not presume to inconvenience.

A determined and imaginative cook, Liberace often probes chefs and housewives for their recipes and then improvises until he satisfies his own taste, which is still keen despite years of hotel food. His Liberace Salad, and Liberace Flambeau (both made with toasted shaved almonds, among other ingredients) and Liberace Hamburgers (broiled on a halved roll, with bacon and sometimes cheese on top) have found their way onto some restaurant menus.

The maestro is a veteran trencherman whose taste runs to such exotic items as frogs' legs, turtle soup and royal squab. When really hungry, however, he sometimes eats two complete meals, one after the other, besides sampling the food on all his dinner partners' plates.

To keep his weight down, the maestro plunges resoundingly into his pool, usually late at night, and swims vigorously about, congratulating himself on getting exercise. "I've solved many problems floating on my back while the neighborhood slept," he says. If the problems are too knotty, he sometimes goes for lonely midnight drives, with the top down.

A fiscal conservative, Liberace never gambles. Cards bore him insufferably. All show-business people interest him, but he admires only "performers with heart," like Jimmy Durante and Judy Garland. No hand pumper, he has few close friends among entertainment celebrities, and never visits their homes, invites them to his home or appears at night clubs with them. Social leaders who wish to exhibit him rarely get to; recently, he threatened to cancel a concert being promoted by a society matron unless she quit pressuring him to appear at her soirees.

A public man by profession, Liberace keeps his private life on his side of the footlights. His ranking pleasures, he says, are to drift around his house in bare feet, to give orders which his gray miniature poodle, Suzette, ignores or just to lie down in a beach chair beside his pool.

Lying down is just a fond dream to the maestro, of course. He works 60 to 80 hours a week some 45 weeks a year, practicing three hours a day, or longer. A few weeks ago, while preparing an album for Columbia, he put in two eight-hour days at the piano—a performance that left him with swollen hands, a ripped nail and two index fingers bloodied from being scraped along the keyboard, running arpeggios.

Although heroically even-tempered, the maestro sometimes grows grim under pressure. He has taken to avoiding all people not directly associated with his work. Occasionally, when he gets worn down and edgy in some tour town, he jolts his managers by disappearing for an afternoon of secret movie-going, shopping or goofing around. He usually returns from such expeditions sheepish and vowing to reform.

The maestro can be tough when he feels he's being pushed around, as one Hollywood night-club owner discovered when he ordered him to stop indulging the customers by playing 45 minutes, instead of 30 minutes, thus costing the house a profit in drinks. Al-

though the owner threatened to sue for \$25,000, the maestro stared him down and kept on indulging the customers.

A Very Cagey Fellow

Because television shot him to the top in less than two years, Liberace is thought by many people to be a highly mercurial fellow. Instead, he is the cagiest of long-term planners, who has been picking up bits of general business for his act from movies, plays, radio programs or other acts for eighteen years.

His concerts are typically shrewd examples of how to control an audience. As soon as he rushes into the spotlight in his all-white suit of tails, Liberace uses the head-counting gag. This move hints that he is secretly commercial, like everybody else, and the recognition factor begins to work on the audience. Then, adding flattery to recognition, he calls for the house lights to be turned up "so I can see all these wonderful people."

Since some of the customers may suspect that Liberace is secretly a classical musician, and thus be hostile toward him, he gets to work on the music right away. Before he begins his first number, a movie theme entitled Cornish Rhapsody, he raises the seat of his piano bench, because "this is a pretty high-class number." This sally lowers the rhapsody's lorgnette in a hurry.

Next, it is time to tilt with the forbidden. The maestro announces that he will have to play a request from a newly married couple right away because "they probably won't be able to stay until the end of the show."

To this point, the maestro has been commercial, flattering and risqué, and has demonstrated that he will not be overawed by high-class numbers. He has hit almost everybody somewhere. In case there are some he has missed, he begins to belabor the critics, announcing that *he* doesn't mind what they say but that poor George "cried all the way to the bank." He then plays The Rosary, "because every man is entitled to a little religious feeling," and he escapes from this composition by launching recklessly into the Beer Barrel Polka, a transition few if any other performers could get away with. By intermission time—when he puts such sincerity into his thanks to the people for listening to him, a simple Italian-Polish boy, that tears start all over the house—there is no audience resistance left.

"They say that my concert audiences are all sold on me ahead of time because of my TV programs," the maestro says. "But anybody who has ever played a concert knows better than that. Every audience is a new obstacle to be overcome."

Recordings Set Records

In making his recordings, which outsell even those of multimillion record-seller Eddie Fisher, the maestro whips along briskly, often knocking off from four to six sides a day. He makes all his own piano arrangements, a fact the critics, who are constantly whaling him for cutting the masterworks, have long suspected. (One movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata takes Horowitz eight minutes to play, for example; Liberace does it in three.)

"My whole trick," says Liberace, "is to keep the tune well out in front. If I

play Tchaikovsky, I play his melodies and skip his spiritual struggles. Naturally, I condense. I have to know just how many notes my audience will stand for. If there's any time left over, I fill in with a lot of runs up and down the keys."

The only branch of the Liberace entertainment industry for which he seems to have no plan at all is the most important branch—his one-and-a-half-year-old television program. There have been times when his yearly output of 39 half-hour TV films has been no more than four shows ahead of schedule. Although he is a windmill of activity in other respects, a strange lassitude seems to seize Liberace when he's faced with making a new film. Oftentimes, in fact, he may be found puttering around his house, perhaps doing a little minor repair carpentry (at a cost, as his time is valued, of around \$1,000 an hour).

The show has no paid actors, writers, idea men or other costly folderol. The idea is always just to show Liberace and his adventures. The themes for most shows just come to him. During a recent squeeze, for example, he got the idea for a program featuring a day in the country with Liberace after meeting the widow of the composer of *In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree*.

"Apple trees are usually in the country" he explains.

Liberace's travels form many of his show themes. Thus, a visit to Miami prompts a show about Miami. It has sunshine, a beach, big hotels, a Continental air and a powerful moon. Out of these materials, Liberace and his director, Duke Goldstone, rough out a continuity of talk, scenes and music. Notes are made in lieu of a script, and the set is selected.

It will, they decide, be the living-room set used in dozens of other shows and will depict a hotel room overlooking Miami Beach. In the background, a big prop moon will be staring in through the French windows, which will open on a balcony and the passionate night. On the piano will be the electric candelabra (Liberace had a dozen made after he got the idea out of a movie about Frederic Chopin). Liberace will be sitting at the piano in a suit of tails with the night obviously working at his soul, while the rest of him fiddles around, tinkering with the keys, instead of rushing out and grabbing some doll, as he seems often to be seething to do. With all these tested ingredients, the show, they figure, ought to be a big success.

As a matter of fact, it was. The Miami-moon program came in well under the average Liberace TV show cost, which is a low \$10,000. The maestro, who arrived at 9:00 A.M. at the Beverly Hills theater where the films are shot, ran through his numbers with the usual few retakes and the usual abundance of calm and deferential good humor. He enjoyed the big lunch packed by Mother Liberace and listened to the applause as though it were absolutely genuine. Brother George, a patient, matter-of-fact, forty-three-year-old veteran of the big-band circuit, got to play some moody violin backgrounds on the program, and Liberace's twenty-four-year-old brother, Rudy, a nonmusical Korean veteran who is a film cutter with the show, learned a few tricks of the trade.

Better yet, Liberace's 170 sponsors, with whom the show has almost \$2,000,000 in contracts, all liked the show, as did the estimated 30,000,000 Liberace viewers in the U.S., Canada, Hawaii, Alaska and Cuba.

"The big secret of my show," says Liberace, "is that I always do the things the smart directors told me not to do. For example, there's a flat taboo against looking straight into the camera. I always look into the camera. That's how I get the feeling of intimacy that puts the show over."

Although the maestro now has to hold his income down to \$750,000 a year (both to get some rest from concert playing and for tax reasons), he still has moving memories of hauling his coaster wagon to the relief agency in Milwaukee to pick up food for the family. (Among his expenditures last year was a check for \$130 to the State of Wisconsin in repayment for depression aid to the Liberaces.)

"My childhood was not a nightmare, like the ones described by the psychiatrists," Liberace says. "I had affection and good care. But it was no idyl, either. I had to wear George's cut-down suits, and duck the school bullies. My sister Angelina had a lot more talent than I had and always got first crack at the piano lessons and practice time. My allowance then was about \$5 a year."

A Great One for Woolgathering

Many children whose families are poor get a worm's-eye view of life. Not so Wladziu. "When I didn't like what I saw," the maestro recalls, "I retired into daydreams of a beautiful future life, full of applause and glittering people and big cars and mink shorts—a life where I wouldn't always be running from drabness." Spurred by these woolgatherings, Wladziu worked so hard, studying and practicing, that sophistication escaped him and he rounded into puberty in an astonishing state of general innocence.

Unlike most innocents, however, the young maestro did not confine himself to woolgathering. Possessed of a cold, practical streak, he got B grades in high school, influenced his classmates by leading the school jazz band and began playing Milwaukee roadhouses with a five-piece schoolboy combination. His fee was a dollar a session, and since his parents thought he was entertaining politely in an ice-cream parlor, they did not object.

Roadhouse life was rough on Wladziu, whose blooming cheeks and pure-hearted air caused some ladies to chase him around the piano with wild cries, and other, more businesslike, ladies to try to get him to let them drive him home. (He refused.) So many customers sent drinks to him at the piano that he might have hit skid row instead of Olympus had he not arranged with the bartender always to make his ginger ale.

Daydreams of someday playing in Carnegie Hall kept Wladziu from taint in these vulgar surroundings, and the juvenile authorities, who finally ordered him to stop playing in dives, got him out of the surroundings altogether and into a life of playing longhair music on a tour of Wisconsin high schools. Wladziu was a tender, sixteen-year-old

minstrel boy when he left home, never to return to stay. For reasons he can't recall, he took the name of Walter Busterkeys. He sailed into his tour with great zeal and promptly found that his impresario, a bookstore operator, was holding out some \$475 of his \$600 weekly earnings. That opened his eyes, but he made an even more illuminating discovery on the tour.

Culture Like a Tight Shoe

Culture, he discovered, was like a tight, high-heeled shoe to most people. It made the foot look smaller but it also cramped the toes. Whenever Busterkeys had a request session after a concert, he observed that the people never asked for the classics or high jazz, but always for the sweet, sentimental music in between—numbers like O Promise Me, for example. Gradually, it dawned on him that what the majority wanted was comfortable middle-music, not cramping culture. As soon as that revelation hit him, Busterkeys began to practice musical chiropody as the housewives' friend, dealing only in sensible shoes. It was a moment the critics regret.

Whatever his natural bent for middle-music, Busterkeys, who resumed his own name after the tour, could not shake the dreams of Carnegie Hall. These dreams took him to New York, in fact, but unfortunately nothing was open but short-term jobs at small hotels and upstate summer places. As for the bookers and agents, they were insulting, always advising him to imitate some other piano player instead of being himself.

The question to be or not to be Liberace was settled in early 1942, when the maestro was offered the chance to take over the Eddy Duchin orchestra. Duchin was going into the Navy; Liberace, who had a disabling spinal growth (recently exorcised by major surgery), was not.

"I turned it down with my heart in my mouth," the maestro says. "I said I knew I had something of my own to offer and that someday everybody would know it. My agents thought I was crazy."

Always the practical fellow, Liberace table-hopped at every hotel room he played, gathering addresses which he put into a growing file. The next time he played the town, he sent out stacks of post cards announcing his arrival, thus stimulating a heavy attendance. He also sent cards and clippings of his good reviews to most big hotels and night clubs around the country. The cards inquired simply: "Have you heard Liberace?" Few had. Still, this mail campaign brought better jobs.

Still running from drabness as an itinerant hotel minstrel and dweller, Liberace always redecorated the rooms he had to live in.

"I remember the room at one Chicago hotel, where I played almost eight months," he says. "I disliked the wild floral drapes so I put up my own plain fawn-gray ones. The Stag-at-Eve pictures revolted me so I hung some of my own Degas and Dufys. I installed an exercycle, which looked well, and I hung about 50 suits on a salesman's rack in the bedroom, where people could see them. I also lined 32 pairs of my shoes along the living-room wall."

Liberace Very Versatile

To make the room even more homey, Liberace installed hot plates and a portable refrigerator in an extra bathroom and often whipped up meals for himself and his callers. Since he sometimes diverts himself with a little creative textile painting, he hand-painted a blouse for his friend, Hildegarde, in the living room. Because he hated to be alone, he had a soft-drink machine set up in the foyer with a large sign over it saying, "Help Yourself!"

After the war, when his act (which was a shorter version of his present concerts) and his mailing system had made him a big draw on the hotel and night-club circuit, the maestro suggested that his brother George, who was fresh from Pacific duty as a band leader with the Seabees, join him as his personal manager. When Liberace pointed out that he was now making \$850 a week and needed help, George agreed. Actually, what moved the maestro was the fiercely loyal and protective feeling he has toward all members of his family, including Papa Liberace, who was divorced from his mother in 1941.

When Liberace began to work George into the act, hotel managers, suspicious of innovations, yelled that they'd lose customers. George, on the other hand, often grew speechless when the maestro tried to ring him in on a little repartee—a situation now exploited to the hilt by Liberace and George, who has become a national personality by never speaking on a Liberace TV program.

Whatever the problems, by 1946 Liberace was established as one of the nation's leading piano acts. He was playing top hotels and night clubs regularly. He had played for President Truman, as he was later to play for President Eisenhower. In theater dates, people were beginning to think him a distinguished wit. Even when he had to follow a piano-playing ape that ran around screaming at the mention of late big-game trapper Frank Buck, he usually sounded at least as funny as performers like Jack Benny and Fred Allen.

"The reason," says the maestro, with customary candor, "is that I'd listen to these gentlemen's radio programs Sunday evenings and then use their best jokes on my late show."

But then, when his long-term planning was beginning to pay off, a strange moral malaise suddenly seized the maestro. His very success seemed drab. Out of a clear sky, he saw himself dragging through time as a \$40,000-a-year entertainer—a night crawler living in smoky places where drunks hollered at their wives in the middle of *The Rosary* and rubber-legged ladies tried to write on his tuxedo shirt with lipstick. Revolted, he threw up the whole deal one day and went to Los Angeles, where he lived for a year with some people he had met via the post cards.

Back in the old, gilded rut, the maestro tried valiantly to get a recording contract, a movie contract or a TV show—anything that would pull him into the big time. Everywhere, he was met with yawns. He did land a part as a beachcomber pianist in a Universal International movie with Shelley Winters called *South Sea Sinner*, but that was all.

At the low point, feeling utterly becalmed, the maestro went out to Hollywood Bowl one afternoon when that vast amphitheater was deserted. Walking on stage, he placed a chair near the center footlights, bowed, smiled luminously up at the thousands of empty seats, seated himself and began to play spectacularly upon an imaginary piano. His mind had not snapped. He was merely feeling the first returning shots of a long-dormant belief in himself and was trying out the Bowl for size. (He has since filled it twice, causing hideous traffic jams.)

Fate must have been sitting in the fifty-cent seats, because soon after the Bowl trip Liberace discovered his guidebook, *The Magic of Believing*. That was a moment roughly comparable to Aladdin's discovery of the lamp. A few chapters digested and up popped the genie, scattering all kinds of boons.

Pressured mercilessly by Liberace's personal managers, Los Angeles' independent station KLAC decided to take a flier on the much-rejected maestro. Before his first program was over, KLAC's switchboard was ablaze. Then Citizen's Trust & Savings picked up the program tab and Liberace began to sell.

With the show riding high in Los Angeles, Columbia Records decided to make a few Liberace trial sides. They sold more than 15,000 in Los Angeles in a week, and the maestro got his long-term record contract. The filmed show was then offered for national sale and, to the astonishment of almost everyone but the maestro, who was believing furiously by this time, the Los Angeles phenomenon was repeated.

"I knew that once I got the chance to look into that camera real hard, the country would know me for a friend," Liberace says. "And it did."

Besides bringing the maestro the success he yearned for, the genie also brought him one of the sharpest and tightest-knit business setups in existence to look after his interests. Gabbe, Lutz & Heller, Liberace's personal management firm, sets up his concerts, deals with Columbia Records, handles Liberace's endorsements and has a finger in all phases of the maestro's career. Guild Films Company, Inc., one of the nation's principal peddlers of canned TV shows, produces and distributes the Liberace television program.

Both of these organizations work closely with International Artists Ltd., an entertainment promotion corporation in which Liberace owns 51 per cent of the stock, and which is managed by his lawyer, John R. Jacobs, Jr. When checks arrive, I. A. Ltd. pays a percentage to Liberace Enterprises (a partnership composed of Liberace and George), and puts the rest into various Liberace investments or promotional or charitable funds—particularly polio foundations, in which the maestro is greatly interested. It also pays the maestro's bills and handles the taxes (which run to about ninety cents on the dollar) thus leaving the maestro, who is the foundation stone on which all rests, free to probe deeper into the national soul.

The Figures and the Facts

Last year, Liberace grossed \$450,000. This year, his \$750,000 net income will include \$400,000 from concerts, \$200,000 from TV, \$100,000 from records and \$50,000 from endorsements of Liberace songbooks, programs, miniature plastic pianos, charm bracelets, a wide-smiling Liberace mask for the kiddies, and so on and on.

With a growing corporate bank roll, I. A. Ltd. may soon start managing other artists, or it may make movies, probably starring the chief stockholder. At the moment, it is supervising the production and distribution of a recorded Liberace program to 150 or more radio stations, to gather in all those who do not own TV sets. It also oversees a brand-new, ghostwritten, Liberace newspaper column, called Liberace Speaking, which has already been sold to two dozen papers, and in which the maestro comments weekly on the joys of middle-music, and other matters.

Success, fame, money, a business organization—all these gifts the genie has brought the maestro in less than two years. Still, he is not entirely satisfied with its production.

At a giant patriotic celebration in the Los Angeles Coliseum the night of last July 4th, 70,000 loyal Americans were suddenly confronted by a sizzling, multicolored replica of a human figure which burst into life on a huge, 60-by-40-foot fireworks screen. The subject of this pyrotechnic display, apparently chosen over all other national leaders to represent the indomitable American spirit on this Independence Day, was not Washington crossing the Delaware, nor Lincoln at Gettysburg, nor Eisenhower scanning the troubled world.

Blazing and popping magnificently amid deafening cheers, the figure was that of none other than Liberace himself, smiling from the soul, flinging his hands high over a piano on which a candelabra burned and joyously rump-bouncing in the face of all the dark tomorrows.

"That Fourth of July tie-in was a very great tribute," said the maestro, when he heard the news. "But do you know, it completely surprised me? Perhaps I'd better run through that Claude M. Bristol book again," he said, reflectively. "There seem to be possibilities in it I entirely overlooked." ▲▲▲



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