

MIKE WALLACE

tv's master of the third degree



Junking sweetness and light, he's won renown with his technique: a cunning mixture of flattery, sympathy—then the sudden barbed question—that traps guests into "full confession"

by IRWIN ROSS

OF MIKE WALLACE it has been said, "Before the TV camera he could ask a 79-year-old spinster how many sweethearts she had had—and she would probably tell him. Her least likely response would be to slap Mike's face."

This ingratiating talent made Mike Wallace one of the hottest properties in television. Last fall, over New York's WABD, he quietly inaugurated a remarkable interview show—blunt, searching, with no holds barred. Wallace's interrogation had the intensity of a third degree, often the candor of a psychoanalytic session. Nothing like it had ever been known on TV.

Within a month, "Night Beat" was the talk of the town. Thereafter, the irrepressible Wallace was snapped up by the ABC network—at a salary of at least \$100,000—and last April his free-wheeling sessions were exposed to a nation-wide television audience on Sunday nights, 10 to 10:30 EDST.

Wallace's setting and methods are deceptively simple. In a bare, darkened studio, he sits facing his subject. The glare of a spotlight picks out the guest; another illuminates Wallace, a handsome, somewhat solemn, and occasionally dour young man.

Wallace, whose confidential man-

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ner can seemingly shut out the unseen audience, is alternately cosy, flattering, sharply inquisitive—and persistent. He is especially deft at asking an embarrassing question in the most casual, matter-of-fact manner.

“Toots, why do people call you a slob?” he remarked genially to famed restaurateur Toots Shor—and got this jovial reply: “Me? Jiminy crickets, they must have been talking about Jackie Gleason” (Toots’ best friend).

Wallace had no hesitancy in asking Mary Margaret McBride how much she weighed. (“Well, I’ve just lost 40 pounds.”) Or Elsa Maxwell how old she was. (73.)

To Wallace, no guest is sacred, and he frankly dotes on controversy. Apart from probing the lives of his guests, he has explored American sex mores, censorship, politics, Zionism, trade union policy, psychoanalysis, the exposé magazines, and many other topics.

During the time that each guest is on, the audience is treated to an “interview in depth”—which often results in a surprisingly detailed and unvarnished view of the individual concerned.

Steve Allen, for example, presented a candid self-portrait thoroughly unlike the easy-going personality he mounts before his own TV cameras. Wallace questioned him about a newspaper article which had characterized Allen as a sad and introspective fellow. Instead of disposing of the matter with a bright quip, Allen rambled on endlessly, denying that he was introverted or sad or ever hated anybody. The tedium of this performance could only lead to the view that the man did protest too much.

Later, Wallace asked Allen about his controversy with Ed Sullivan over who was stealing the other’s ideas. Allen delivered himself of a mild assault on Sullivan, then observed that the whole thing hardly mattered. “You know there are important things going on in the world. My program is not one of them . . . it’ll be forgotten ten, 20, 30 years from now.”

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ONE of the innovations of Wallace's interviews is the prolonged close-up; the camera often remains fixed on the subject's face for five minutes or more. Under a drumbeat of tough questions, the swift play of facial expressions is highly revealing. Even a refusal to answer can be a damning comment.

Wallace gives much credit to the physical setup of the show in explaining why his guests talk freely. With guest and interviewer facing each other, it is much easier to get involved in candid conversation. ("How often on TV will you see an interviewer with his back to the camera?" Wallace asks.)

The darkened studio also encourages a frank exchange, as does the lateness of the hour. Wallace believes that his guests are more relaxed and agreeable to intimate chatter after the tensions of the workday are over. And the time he devotes to each interview allows him to explore promising themes at length.

Moreover, Wallace knows where he is going. Before each guest comes on the show, he is exhaustively researched and then interviewed by a staff reporter. Wallace has a list of typed questions before him, but the responses are often unexpected and then the dialogue veers off into uncharted terrain.

Wallace's ability to draw people out is remarkable. He is effortlessly sympathetic and seems genuinely engrossed in the problems of whomever he is talking to. Like a psychiatrist, nothing shocks or dismays him—an attitude which entices a subject into even greater self-revelation. He uses flattery disarmingly, building up the guest's confidence before the dissection begins. And Wallace knows how to listen, thereby discerning unexpected avenues of inquiry.

Frequently guests say more than they intended. Some inadvertent remarks by Siobhan McKenna, the celebrated Irish actress, caused a tremendous outcry. In a discussion about the Jewish Mayor of Dublin, Wallace asked whether there was a large Jewish community in Ireland. Only in Cork and Dublin, Miss McKenna replied, adding, "They have

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all the businesses. Maybe that's why there's an economic depression elsewhere." She made another similar remark later on in the show.

Bedlam broke loose on the station switchboard; some 1,500 calls, telegrams and letters protesting Miss McKenna's comments arrived in a 24-hour period.

Next night she returned, a taut and nervous figure, to deny any anti-Semitic implications. What she had meant, she said, was that "we could do with more Jewish enterprise in other parts of the country."

Wallace, himself a Jew, exonerated her of any intolerant sentiment. Congratulatory calls flooded the switchboard.

Last spring, Wallace had just gotten launched on the ABC network when he found himself in deep trouble. On his fourth program he presented Mickey Cohen, the ex-gambling czar of Los Angeles. The chunky Mr. Cohen, a decidedly opinionated as well as remarkably candid man, conceded that he had killed more than one man in his professional life—but "no man that in the first place didn't deserve killing by the standards of our way of life."

What made the headlines next day, however, was the uninhibited and avowedly libelous assault which Cohen directed against West Coast police officials. Instead of swiftly changing the subject, Wallace had prodded Cohen on. Reaction was swift: denunciation of the show in West Coast newspapers, threats of libel suits, a complaint to the Federal Communications Commission.

The following week, an ABC vice-president came on the show to deliver a lengthy apology to all concerned, and Wallace added his own regrets. Then he interviewed the sulfurous Senator Wayne Morse, who seemed positively mild in comparison to Mickey Cohen.

The good humor of his guests under Wallace's probing is surprising. Only occasionally does his quarry turn on him; only twice has he been topped.

Once he was questioning Fannie Hurst as to whether she was satisfied with her work, whether she felt she had fulfilled herself as a writer. Miss

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Hurst parried the questions, and then went over to the offensive. "I'm going to ask you an embarrassing question, Mr. Wallace. Have you ever read my books?"

Wallace had to confess that he had only read one—"Back Street." Miss Hurst had scored a clean hit.

On another occasion, with sports writer Jimmy Cannon in the guest's seat, Wallace suddenly asked: "Why have you never married, Jimmy?"

Bachelor Cannon quickly responded: "I guess for the same reason you've been divorced twice, Mike."

"Simple and straightforward answer," Wallace replied gallantly, "and, I guess, a good one."

The trade knows Wallace as an amiable, straightforward young man, burdened neither by an overblown ego nor pretensions to omniscience. In an industry populated by exuberant personalities, he is distinctly not a "character." His only known claim to eccentricity is a passion for clam juice, which he can drink at all hours. Otherwise, his tastes in food, drink, attire and conveyance (Ford convertible) are conventional; his manner is even-tempered and moderate.

Off camera, he bears no resemblance to the tough, prodding interrogator that has become his public role. Indeed, some observers find him a trifle insecure—largely because of his eagerness for constructive criticism, his friends say.

The youngest child of an insurance broker, Myron Wallace was born 39 years ago in Brookline, Massachusetts. He went to school there and entered the University of Michigan in the fall of 1935. "I was a rather naïve kid," he recalls. "It seems to me that my contemporaries knew their way around much better than I did, socially and otherwise."

He had been active in high school dramatics, he had won a prize for public speaking, and he threw himself into college radio with a passion that denoted, he felt sure, a true vocation. He wrote, directed, produced, performed and announced. And he spent hundreds of hours training his voice until it became a fine instrument—supple and resonant, under a control that never wavers.

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After graduation from Michigan, Wallace was selected—from among five applicants—for a \$20-a-week announcer's job on a small station in Grand Rapids. He was announcer, news commentator and salesman; he also swept out the studio.

After a year in Grand Rapids, he was hired at \$50 a week by a Detroit station, where he made his dramatic debut in soap opera—and was soon affluent enough to marry Norma Kaphan, a young lady whom he had begun to court at the University of Michigan. The union was to endure seven years and produce two children.

In 1941, the Wallaces went on to Chicago. In competition with four veteran Chicago announcers, Wallace landed a job handling the "Road of Life" show. The pay was munificent for a 23-year-old: \$150 a week, plus \$10 a day for a "hitch-hike" announcement between shows.

Mike relaxed and enjoyed Chicago until June, 1942, when his sponsor dropped "Road of Life" and with it, of course, its star announcer. He resolved that he would never again be dependent on one source of employment.

Soon afterward, Wallace was handling three jobs at once: a dramatic show, on which he starred; an eight-times-a-day news show; and a Navy recruiting program, which he narrated. He found the latter so persuasive that he enlisted. He returned from the Pacific in 1946 and was discharged as a lieutenant.

Back in Chicago, apart from his acting, newscasting and announcing jobs, he got his first interview show—"Famous Names." This greatly pleased him—for he wanted to become a serious personality on radio and not a mere "performer." For a time his wife wrote the show, then the marriage, which had long been under strain, broke up. Years later, Wallace explained that they had both been too young and immature when they married.

In March, 1949, Wallace married actress Buff Cobb. Together they ran another interview show in Chicago, later put on the daily TV program "Mike and Buff" for CBS in New York. Wallace is proud that

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they interrogated their guests on a wide range of controversial subjects —“but the trouble was that the show was in the afternoon, it had a kind of women’s club, coffee-klatch atmosphere.”

Mike and Buff’s television partnership ended with the disruption of their marriage late in 1954. (Unbridgeable temperamental differences, friends gathered.) Wallace was hard hit emotionally by the failure of his two marriages. For a brief period he consulted a psychoanalyst; and was reassured to learn that he did not need therapy.

In the spring of 1956, Ted Cott, WABD’s general manager, suggested “Night Beat” to Wallace (he had, meanwhile, married artist Lorraine Perigord). In September, Wallace, Cott and producer Ted Yates, Jr. whipped the program into shape for its October debut.

“People said we were crazy,” Cott recalls. “Nobody thought we could sell such an outspoken show. Well—it took us two months.”

To everyone’s surprise, their first sponsor was the Hawthorne Bible, which Wallace plugged earnestly for a week and a half before Christmas. Then the august Chase Manhattan Bank came in, followed by a flock of consumer products.

As the indiscretions of his guests made headlines, Wallace was asked why people appeared on his show. “There seem to be three reasons,” he said recently. “Some people come on because they like the challenge; they are bright, articulate and think they can handle themselves under all circumstances. Others want a forum, which wouldn’t otherwise be available. And finally you have the *enfants terribles*, the exhibitionists—I won’t name names.”

Wallace himself can be as surprised at what emerges on his show as is his audience. He once asked New York criminologist Donal McNamara whether he had any theories about the unsolved murder of the notorious Serge Rubinstein. McNamara offered his theory, adding parenthetically that the murderer “probably did the world a favor in the bargain.”

Wallace was so startled that it took him a few moments to pose the

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next question. But most of his guests seem to take his probing in stride. So far, at least, no one has thrown the water pitcher at him.



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