# Dancing Around a Hollywood Square

**Michael Airington's *A Night With Paul Lynde***
by Libby Molyneaux

**"Wanna hear how I found this show** on eBay?" says Michael Airington, who must be described as cute, blond and bubbly as he sails across the empty floor of Ultra Suede (where he's performing his one-man show, *A Night With Paul Lynde*) exactly 10 seconds late for this interview. I ask him to back up a bit and tell the story from the very beginning about how he came to perform as — make that reincarnate — the late comic actor who once held a reserved box seat in one of the *Hollywood Squares*.



**Airington as Airington (left);
Airington as Lynde (right)**

"I've been doing Paul Lynde since I was a kid," he recounts. To hear Airington's biography is, as he puts it, "a sad *People* magazine story." The part he'd rather not talk about is losing both his parents by age 5, moving in with his grandmother and taking jobs as a minor at Chinese restaurants to help with the rent.

Airington recalls, as a child, being both an artist and a con artist, of doing uncanny impressions of Lynde, Jim Nabors, Katharine Hepburn, and Mr. Haney from *Green Acres*. In 1975, he lied his way into an opening slot for country music star Mel Tillis after answering a call for talent on a local radio station in Norfolk, Virginia. Airington was 14 but told the promoter he was 16.

On the strength of Airington's impressions, Tillis hired him to go on tour. The Tillis gig led to summers opening for Rosemary Clooney, telling jokes that he memorized from library books — "you know, library jokes."

Airington hit L.A. in the late '70s, and it hit him back. Though he dove into acting, a cabaret show and film producing, he also dove into cocaine. Then, on to Nashville as host of a successful morning radio show, where he developed his Esther Goldberg character, who later became the toast of Washington, D.C., with a citywide declaration of Esther Goldberg Day.

Now, to his opening remark: In April, while he was back in L.A., a friend sent Airington an e-mail with an eBay link for a storage unit containing all the music from Lynde's 1976 touring show, including sheet music and notes for the 16-piece orchestra. It was the raw material he needed to put together *A Night With*

*Paul Lynde.* One very nervous online-bidding session later, the box was his, for $112. "It's worth $30,000 for the sheet music alone," he insists.

The next challenge was getting Lynde's heirs to give their cooperation. "I flew to Phoenix and met with his sister's daughters in Margarita's bar at the airport. I'm acting out the whole show and they're cracking up," he laughs. "And they gave me everything — movie rights, merchandise, everything. I was almost teary."

Looking more like a boyish Kato Kaelin than a middle-aged Paul Lynde, Airington credits his pal and Emmy Award–winning makeup artist Debbie Zoller for the impeccable physical transformation he undergoes, down to the splayed polyester collars and gold chains. But it's the voice that makes any impersonation either a cheap joke or a rich tribute, and Airington's got the Paul Lynde persona in his leisure-pants pocket. Of course, Lynde's nervy, maniacal laugh is all over the place, but Airington's mastered the subtler moments as well. And as far as Lynde's material, which ranges from kinky one-liners to what we now call "offensive," nothing's off-limits in the live show.

The hardest thing about playing Paul Lynde is "bringing him down. If I did the whole show over the top, you'd get sick of him," he says.

"He used to shop at the old Safeway that's now a Pavilions on Santa Monica. I saw him there once. He was wearing a beret with a denim shirt studded with silver, driving a Bentley with a Scotch in one hand and Alfred, his standard poodle," Airington recalls and throws back his head with that nervy cackle.

A Night With Paul Lynde *performs at Ultra Suede, 661 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood, Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m., through August 27. Call (800) 595-4849 or go to www.tix.com. Also, see New Theater Reviews in Calendar.*