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STILL Super

Thirty years after 'Wallace and Ladmo,' Pat McMahon is still entertaining Arizona

BY JIMMY MAGAHERN

The banner picture on Pat McMahon's Facebook page features the Phoenix broadcasting legend sitting on the Wallace and Ladmo memorial bench at the Phoenix Zoo, taken on the day of its unveiling in August 2018.

To his right stand life-sized bronze statues of Bill "Wallace" Thompson and Ladimir "Ladmo" Kwiatkowski, his beloved late co-stars on "The Wallace and Ladmo Show," the longest-running locally-produced children's television show in history. To his right — with its back turned and arms crossed, a pose mirrored by McMahon — stands a bronze statue of his own unforgettable character on the show: the bratty, Lord Fauntleroy-dressed, spoiled rich kid, Gerald.

Five years after the passing of Thompson, and a full quarter-century after the death of Kwiatkowski, McMahon is still on the bench — and still in the game. While he no longer hosts the long-running Pat McMahon Show on 92.3 FM KTAR, McMahon can still be seen every weekday morning on independent station KAZT-TV and heard on a weekly podcast, The God Show, a continuation of his popular KTAR Sunday morning chats with local spiritual leaders, now hosted by Dave Pratt's Star Worldwide Networks.

As McMahon strolls up to Zinc Bistro at Kierland Commons, dressed casually in a jean jacket and snappy Karl Malden fedora, he's busy talking on his iPhone with what sounds like a movie producer pitching a biopic. "I'll only back it if you can get George Clooney to play me," he says, with a wink.

"That was somebody who's decided to make a Wallace and Ladmo movie," McMahon explains later. "Never mind that he's not a film producer or has never talked to us before."

Basically, just a fan pitching yet another W&L tribute idea, which McMahon gets a lot of these days. And why not: One such fan, Ben Tyler, now director of the Arizona Centennial Theatre Foundation, already produced a trilogy of successful plays about the adored show, and another, filmmaker Randy Murray, persuaded McMahon a few years ago to dust off his old Gerald costume and film a public service spot for the nonprofit education initiative Expect More Arizona.

"I respond to all requests," he explains, "except those involving my imminent arrest by the Social Security people."

Perhaps because of that accessibility — and the sheer fact that McMahon refuses to age, which surely causes the SSA to eye him suspiciously — it's easy to take his constant presence around the Valley for granted. While his departed costars continue to be rightfully lionized in the city, they entertained for so many decades, McMahon just keeps showing up at the dedications, forever cracking witty one-liners about the town's current affairs.

He busts out laughing himself when directly posed the inevitable question, "How can we miss you if you won't go away?"

"Well, I don't want to get like the Moody Blues, God bless 'em, where they're com-



Pat McMahon holds a picture of himself dressed in one of his characters. (Photo by Pablo Robles)

ing out on stage with walkers," he says. "To me, that gets a little sad. But as long as I can still do it, as long as I can drive, though the city I love, down to the television station and talk to some really interesting people — and get a check! I mean, that would be horribly ungrateful of me to give that up.

"So no, I've never thought about overstaying my welcome," he says, dipping into the crispy duck confit sandwich at Zinc while welcoming a gift of macaroons delivered to his table by the restaurant's owner, who appears as giddy to greet McMahon as any longtime Phoenician. "Because the audience will tell you — they'll let you know when it's time to move on to something else. And so far, they still haven't told me!"

Finding humor

McMahon doesn't like to reveal his age, although Wikipedia puts it at a frankly unbelievable 86, stating his birthdate only as "1933" (further Web scouring reveals the month and day as August 20).

"That's one of the few questions that I never answer," he says, cracking a sly grin. "Because people will put you in a niche — and it's usually dated around the pop culture you're familiar with. You know: If you're old enough to know about Duke Ellington, you can't possibly know about Chance the Rapper. Well, I happen to like both! So, I usually say my age is some-

where between Bruno Mars and the planet Mars."

His fandom of Bruno Mars is genuine, by the way. "I think he's the closest thing we have now to James Brown," McMahon says, once again crisscrossing touchstones from the eras he's lived through. "It's also kind of an obligation to stay current when you do what I do for a living. You have to know what's going on."

John Patrick Michael McMahon virtually grew up on stage, born to a pair of vaudeville performers from Leavenworth, Kansas, Jack and Adelaide McMahon, who began taking him on the road with them at age 5, homeschooling the young scene-stealer in reading and arithmetic, between teaching him songs and dance numbers.

"My father would say about this time of year, 'Where do you guys want to spend the winter? Miami? New Orleans? San Diego?' And we could just pick a spot — always a warm destination, we didn't spend a whole lot of time battling blizzards," he adds, with a laugh. "But it was like having a magic power. And I think it truly was that which allowed me to feel like a free spirit."

By age 12 he'd lived in "most U.S. states and a few other countries" before his parents decided it was time he experienced a chalkboard and some classmates. They enrolled him (a couple of grades early)

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at what is now Dowling Catholic High School in Des Moines, Iowa, which he followed up by attending St. Ambrose College in nearby Davenport, where he studied speech and drama before gravitating toward broadcasting. After working as a rock 'n' roll DJ at various AM radio stations throughout the Midwest, McMahon was drafted into the Army, where he still managed to remain an entertainer, putting on shows at the base where he was stationed in France.

After getting out of the service, he followed an Army buddy to Phoenix and decided to stay awhile, taking a job as an announcer at KPHO-TV in 1960. It was there he met Thompson and Kwiatkowski, who were already anchoring a children's show that McMahon found refreshingly subversive. The moment that sold him was when Thompson, as Wallace, became flummoxed on the live show trying to follow a stale script for a cornflakes commercial and finally just ripped open the box, honestly addressing the youngsters directly as savvy mini-adults in what would become his signature style. "He said, 'Look kids, they're cornflakes.

You like cornflakes,'" McMahon recalls. "There's a guy named Ruskettes that has a warehouse full of these things over on the coast. Why not have him unload some at your house?"

"Right then and there, I knew I had to work with these guys," he says. "I loved that they didn't talk down to kids."

McMahon came aboard adding his own myriad cast of characters: Gerald, the privileged private school brat who perfectly mirrored the growing elite class in Scottsdale; Aunt Maud, the crotchety retiree from Senior City (a poke at then-new Sun City), whose storytimes with the kids never had a warm Disney ending; Marshall Good, America's least toughest lawman (decades before Sheriff Joe would take up the opposite persona), who started out on the effeminate side until toned down to a has-been cowboy actor perpetually mooching money from Wallace.

More followed: the surly, burned-out Boffo the Clown; Hub Kapp, the mock rock star who, in a surreal twist, actually landed a Capitol Records contract after the songs he performed on the show became local hits; and of course Captain Su-

per, the caped crusader who'd boast he was strong enough to tear a phone book in half — providing it was a phone book from Heber, with only one yellow page.

"Captain Super would definitely be running for president today," McMahon says, picturing the narcissistic ultra-conservative blowhard he created for the show going up in a Republican primary against his current counterpart in the White House. "And he'd probably win!"

McMahon says he can imagine rebooted roles for all of his characters, although he's basically retired them since the show ended its 36-year run in 1989. The one exception was the Expect More Arizona PSA in 2013, for which McMahon donned the old Gerald costume and delivered a typically twisted take on why Arizona needs less education.

"The script read, 'If we continue to improve education in Arizona, then what are we going to wind up with? More doctors, attorneys or teachers? We don't need more of that, we need more minions. To take care of me!' Great premise," McMahon says. "Over the years, I've had scripts sent to me from people wanting to revive the characters and they're usual-

ly just dreadful because they don't know how to write the characters. But this one was different. Finally, I asked, 'Who wrote this?' And it turned out to be Cathy Dresbach" — the talented improv actor from the Ajo Repertory Company who became a writer and cast member of "Wallace & Ladmo" in its final years.

If Gerald was still on TV today, McMahon reckons he'd be embroiled in the college admissions scandal, with his well-off parents faking his athletic credentials to get him into an Ivy League school. "The news cycle would be a cornucopia of gifts if we were doing the show today," he says. "Because everywhere you look, there's something we could find humor in."

Counting his blessings

It's easy to assume McMahon never left Phoenix because the city remains the only place he's famous. Despite the "Wallace and Ladmo Show's" universal appeal to everyone who grew up in Valley between 1954 and 1989, it never broke out to other markets, and it remains to this day a local phenomenon.

Or so you'd think. "You want to hear about the exceptions?" McMahon asks.

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"Once I was in Jerusalem, standing on a street corner waiting for a taxicab. And somebody shouted, 'I didn't know Gerald was Jewish!' Another time I was walking down the Champs-Élysées in Paris, and somebody yelled something to Aunt Maud, in French. The wildest time was when my wife, Duffy, and I got into a cable car going up the lower Alps outside of Lucerne, Switzerland. When we got to the top, there was just one other couple sitting at an outdoor café, and I'm talking to Duffy and suddenly I hear, from that other couple, 'My God, I thought I left the radio on.' We're up on an Alp, near only two other people, and they know me from KTAR! When you're on TV and radio for as long as I've been, if you're in another city, someone who lived here for a while will spot you."

He's heard from Netflix's chief content officer Ted Sarandos, who was born in Phoenix, grew up on "Wallace and Ladmo" and recently released a reconstructed version of Orson Welles' unfinished film "The Other Side of the Wind," which happened to feature McMahon in a small role — a tidbit that insiders say drove Sarandos to take interest in the project. He occasionally runs into Steven Spielberg and Alice Cooper, two homegrown stars who have frequently credited "Wallace and Ladmo" for influencing their own distinct styles.

But what McMahon loves best is simply hearing from ordinary Phoenicians who thank him for bringing much-needed laughs to their lives.

"Many times when I'm out in public, somebody will lean in and say, 'When I was a kid,' and then they'll tell me a heart-breaking story about something they went through — a divorce, suicide in the family, a terrible illness or sometimes just loneliness. And then they'll always say, 'But for one hour every day, these three guys made me laugh.' Let me tell you, it doesn't get any better than that."

As for how McMahon manages to stay happy and healthy — at whatever age he is — he credits good genes and good family. "What in the hell do I have to be unhappy about?" he says, with a laugh. "I've been really fortunate to have not had any serious health problems. But if I've had to have a couple of surgeries, they worked! What can I say! I've been married for 35 years to Duffy, who's a doctor of human sexuality. Now, people always hear that and smirk, but I remind them of the old



proverb, 'the shoemaker's children often ran barefoot through town.' So don't draw any grand conclusions."

He counts his own kids as blessings, too.

"I have three splendid children who never write home for money," he says, ticking off their names, alma maters and careers. "Michael, Notre Dame, an aerospace computer engineer. Terri, USC, a highly respected stage actress and director, currently starring as Sarah Bernhardt in a production at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, and Kevin, USC, a freelance writer. And no, they never had to go into therapy because their father had a multiple personality disorder on television."

He doesn't count his remaining years and says the key to happiness is simply remaining passionate about life.

"You've got to still have something that excites you," he says. "I don't care if it's a ballgame or politics or maybe it's just those little things that you discover every day."

He also stresses the importance of staying plugged in to what's happening in the world.

"If you're in tune with today and if you're contemporary, then it doesn't matter what your driver's license says."

As I get up to leave and thank McMahon for the lunch, I mention that my wife

will be jealous she didn't get to meet him. McMahon only smiles, shakes my hand and says, with a wink, "Next time." ■

Pat McMahon hams it up in his Scottsdale home. (Photo by Pablo Robles)



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