

TV's First Son



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By JOE RHODES

For most of his life Desi Arnaz Jr. avoided these types of things, masses of people who worship his parents like gods, still mesmerized by a television show that ended 44 years ago. He spent a lot of angry years trying to escape the shadow of his parents' fame, resentful that, no matter what he did – whether it was becoming a pre-adolescent pop star or a successful actor – people always thought of him, first, as Lucy and Desi's son.

It drove him, in his teens, into a near-suicidal addiction to drugs, alcohol and trouble, a tabloid life of excesses and affairs with rich and famous older women – Patty Duke and Liza Minelli among them. He sobered up nearly 20 years ago but, unlike his older sister, Lucie, he kept his distance, at least publicly, from anything to do with "I Love Lucy" and its rerun-fueled fan base. When his father died of cancer in 1986 and his mother from heart failure in 1989, it was Lucie who served as the family's public face, Lucie who kept in touch with the fans. Desi Jr. stayed away.

"After my parents passed away, I felt like there wasn't any time or space for grieving and I wasn't really interested in doing those kinds of (public) things," he says. "I needed to take some time to sort out of my feelings and that's what I did."

After years away from a high-profile Hollywood life – he hasn't made a movie since 1992's "Mambo Kings (in which he portrayed his father) and lives in Boulder City, Nevada, where he owns a theater and helps his wife, Amy,

run a children's dance studio – Arnaz is now ready to embrace his parents legacy in a very public way, producing, along with his sister, a two-hour 50th anniversary tribute to “I Love Lucy” that will air November 11 on CBS.

Which is why he is here, in the midst of “Loving Lucy 2001” a swirling pastel mob of “I Love Lucy” fans that has taken over the convention center of the Burbank Hilton (right by the airport) to indulge their obsession -- to buy, sell and wear, anything they can find that is connected to Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz.. And most of it seems to be pink.

There are “I Love Lucy” t-shirts and “I Love Lucy” pajamas. There are ceramic figurines of Lucy stomping on grapes or popping assembly line chocolates into her mouth. There's a miniature Desi doll, with congas. There are calendars and address books, salt and pepper shakers, bathrobes, shower curtains and “Predica-mints”. There are bottles of Vitameatavegamin, which turn out to contain candy red hots. There is even an “I Love Lucy” Monopoly game (suggested retail price: only \$34.95).

At first they don't notice that he is walking among them and they might not have recognized him at all if he wasn't alongside a man named Adrian Israel, who makes a living as a Desi Arnaz (circa 1954) impersonator, putting pomade in his jet-black hair, wearing big-shouldered suits and, whenever asked, putting his hands on his hips and shouting, “Looocccc? You got some splainin' to do!”

It takes a while for them to realize that. Desi Jr. , trim and skittish, with a still-boyish face and gray,

receding hair is standing there, too. The whispers start and the word quickly spreads that it's Desi, the real Desi, the son. The fans gather around and slowly, politely, close in. Some of them want autographs or a picture, some of them want to chat and some of them want simply to touch him, to confirm that he's really there.

“It's not about me,” he will say later, having worked his way out of the convention hall and into the relative privacy of a nearby hotel hallway. “It's not really even about mom or dad. It's that the show reflects something in their own lives, certain timeless values – the nobility of families, forgiveness, the comedy of it all. They feel a connection.”

But then, as he often does, Desi Arnaz Jr., stops himself, editing his thoughts out loud. “But actually it did have to do with me in real life ,” he says, “because when my mother was pregnant on the show, I was in her stomach. I was actually born on a Monday morning (January 19, 1953) and then Little Ricky was born on the show that night. They planned it that way. They planned the Caesarean. So when people ask me, “Are you Little Ricky?,” and they've been asking that my whole life, it's actually a pretty good question.”

And, 47 years later, Arnaz. still doesn't seem quite sure of the answer. He knows, of course that he wasn't actually Little Ricky, that the part of Ricky and Lucy Ricardo's only child was played by others – first by a series of twin babies and then by child actor and drum prodigy Keith Thibodeaux, who was three years older than Desi and would later become a close friend. But,

for most of Desi Jr.'s childhood, people who didn't know better would call him "Little Ricky" and it took a while before he figured out that the baby he saw on the television screen, cradled in his mother's arms, wasn't actually him.

"I didn't think about it much at the time," says Lucie Arnaz, who was born in 1951 -- two months before "I Love Lucy" hit the air -- and never had to grapple with the idea of a tv alter ego. "But it must start to really tick you off. I think it did disturb him."

"In a strange way, it got me interested in certain things early on," Desi Jr. says, of his childhood identity crisis. "What is life about? Who are we? Where are we going? Why are we here? I think everyone questions who they are and I started asking myself those questions at a very early age. And I'm still questioning."

It was, to say the least, a confusing way to grow up, made even more complicated, by the fact that he has been a celebrity from the moment he was born, famous just because he exists. He was such a source of national curiosity that, when he was only three months old, his photo was on the cover of the first-ever issue of TV Guide. His parents were the royal couple of American television and he was everyone's little prince.

"What I saw growing up," he says of his privileged Beverly Hills upbringing, "was people who had all of the fame, all of the success, all of the money, all of the things that the world says, 'if you get this, then you'll be happy.' But what I found, at an early

age, was that it really didn't make me happy."

"It turned out to be a blessing. Because I think it spurred me on, eventually, to understanding that, even if you're in the spotlight, so what?"

He still doesn't like talking about the details ("People have been asking me about my private life since I was three years old," he says) but his parents' marriage was, at best, turbulent, finally collapsing under the weight of his mother's unyielding perfectionism and his father's drinking and womanizing when Desi Jr. was 7 years old.

His childhood escape was music, playing drums -- often with Keith Thibodeaux -- performing for family and neighbors whenever he got the chance. He was 12 when he started playing in a garage band with some older schoolmates -- Dino Martin (Dean Martin's oldest son, who died in a 1987 plane crash) and Billy Hinsche.

"We played at people's parties. Rory Calhoun's daughter had a birthday party and they hired us and paid us twenty bucks," Hinsche says. "I know it was twenty dollars because I remember thinking at the time, 'How are we going to split this three ways.'"

What started out as a neighborhood lark -- three rich kids with well-connected fathers -- turned into a national phenomenon when Dino, Desi & Billy had a top 40 hit in 1965 and soon found themselves on tour with groups like The Beach Boys and Paul Revere & The Raiders. "We were so young our voices hadn't even changed," Desi says, recalling what it was like to

be on the road at 12 years old, pursued by screaming girls. “We’re lucky nobody got hurt. I passed out once, running down a corridor in Washington, D.C., because they’d torn the stage apart. We were like New Kids on the Block.

“We saw a lot,” he says. “We were out in the adult world at a very early age.”

By the time he was 16, Arnaz was living on his own, performing in his mother’s second sitcom (“Here’s Lucy”) and already abusing cocaine. “I think maybe it was all coming too quick,” Lucie Arnaz says, “and that drugs and alcohol was his way of opting out.”

“I’ve learned a lot about, you know, what doesn’t work,” says Desi Jr., who successfully went through rehab in 1982. “There were times when I was irresponsible in my life and I learned how much that would hurt me. It didn’t happen overnight, but I learned. “

Even before he got sober, Arnaz was looking for more spiritual solutions, answers to those questions about who he really was. He read eastern philosophers, attended seminars and retreats, studied yoga and meditation. And then, in 1978, he came across the writings of Vernon Howard, a plain-speaking American guru whose New Life Foundation stressed self-reliance as the key to inner peace. “He had a way of putting things in very practical, down-to-earth way,” Arnaz says. “It was all about the answers to everything lie within us, to stop looking elsewhere for the answers. He used to say, ‘permitting your life to be taken over by another person is like letting the waiter eat your dinner.’”

Arnaz began attending Howard’s classes in Boulder City, which is where he met Amy Bargiel, (who he married in 1987) and in 1980 became the Foundation’s full time spokesman, a position he relinquished when Howard died in 1993. Arnaz would later discover that Amy’s roommate from her days as a student at the Joffrey Ballet had also married a drummer, none other than Keith Thibodeaux.

“I spent a long time out in the world,” Arnaz says, explaining why he prefers to spend most of his time in Boulder City, running his theater. “I’d rather be here with my wife. I didn’t care if I had to dig ditches, I wasn’t going to live in L.A. anymore.”

He’s also playing music again, re-uniting with his old pal Billy Hinsche and Dean Martin’s youngest son, Ricci for a middle-aged version of his old pre-teen band. Ricci, Desi & Billy have only played a few gigs, recording a live album at Desi’s refurbished Boulder Theater and earlier this year, performing at an “I Love Lucy” anniversary celebration in Jamestown, N.Y., Lucille Ball’s hometown, on what would have been her 90th birthday.

It was the first time Desi had been there, the first time he saw the house where his mother grew up. There were lilacs in the yard, just like the lilacs his mother had planted in Beverly Hills. “Lucie said, ‘Remember the lilacs?’ and it was just like we were kids again,” he says. “I felt quiet and peaceful for most of the day, not upset or depressed at all. And then I touched the lilacs and I just lost it. I had no idea that was going to happen. I wasn’t expecting that.”

For most of the conversation, Desi Jr. has seemed twitchy, fragile, like he's trying too hard, asking over and over again, "Do you understand? Seriously. Do you?" But he's grown calmer talking about Jamestown, how he happened to turn on the tv that night and "I Love Lucy" was on. It was the one where Desi is saying to Lucy "I don't understand why you want to be in show business." It was 1 in the morning and Desi Jr. called his sister, who was staying just down the hall. She came in the room and they watched the show together, just like they were kids again.

"There's a saying that if you take the easy road you perpetuate the hard life," he'd said earlier, "and if you take the hard road you eventually come upon the easy life. I'm there. But I'm on the way. It's easier now than it used to be. Because, I don't know, I'm not at odds with myself anymore."