



Van Johnson: MGM's Golden Boy (Hollywood Legends Series)

Ronald L. Davis

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Van Johnson's dazzling smile, shock of red hair, and suntanned freckled cheeks made him a movie-star icon. Among teenaged girls in the 1940s, he was popularized as the bobbysoxer's heartthrob.

He won the nation's heart, too, by appearing in a series of blockbuster war films--*A Guy Named Joe*, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, *Weekend at the Waldorf*, and *Battleground*. Perennially a leading man opposite June Allyson, Esther Williams, Judy Garland, and Janet Leigh, he rose to fame radiating the sunshine image Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer chose for him, that of an affable, wholesome boy-next-door. Legions of adoring moviegoers were captivated by this idealized persona that generated huge box-office profits for the studio.

However, Johnson's off-screen life was not so sunny. His mother had rejected him in childhood, and he lived his adult life dealing with sexual ambivalence. A marriage was arranged with the ex-wife of his best friend, the actor Keenan Wynn. During the waning years of Hollywood's Golden Age, she and Johnson lived amid the glow of Hollywood's A-crowd. Yet their private life was charged with tension and conflict.

Although morose and reclusive by nature, Johnson maintained a happy-go-lucky façade, even among co-workers who knew him as a congenial, dedicated professional. Once free of the golden-boy stereotype, he became a respected actor assigned stellar roles in such acclaimed films as *State of the Union*, *Command Decision*, *The Last Time I Saw Paris*, and *The Caine Mutiny*.

With the demise of the big studios, Johnson returned to the stage, where he had begun his career as a song-and-dance man. After this, he appeared frequently in television shows, performed in nightclubs, and became the legendary darling of older audiences on the dinner playhouse circuit. Johnson (1916-2008) spent his post-Hollywood years living in solitude in New York City.

This solid, thoroughly researched biography traces the career and influence of a favorite star and narrates a fascinating, sometimes troubled life story.

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