



Parks with director Jean Renoir.

If there weren't so many other people vying for the honor, you might say Michael Parks is his own worst enemy.

How many young actors do you know who have told producer Sam ("Lawrence of Arabia") Spiegel exactly where to go, Universal's Lew Wasserman what he could do with his studio, and director John Huston where he could dispose of his camera? Sound like someone with a career death wish? Meet Michael Parks, who now is playing a motorcycling wanderer in NBC's . . . *Then Came Bronson*.

He was born about 29 years ago in Corona, Cal., one of five children. He attended 21 different schools without ever getting a high school diploma, because his father, an itinerant laborer, went wherever the work was. This helps explain why Parks feels that if you're not willing to work and starve for it—whatever your *it* happens to

The angriest young man on two wheels has turned the corner

By Burt Prelutsky

be—you don't deserve it.

Mike was 15 when he was married for the first time. "I didn't really want to get married, but I felt it was the right thing to do." He still supports his 13-year-old daughter, although her mother has subsequently remarried.

While he was still a teenager Parks ran off to North Beach, the Bohemian section of San Francisco, where he did concert readings in the coffee houses when he wasn't washing dishes.

For the next four years he wandered all over the state, performing with small theater groups—as he simultaneously followed the crops, working as a migratory fruit picker. As his agent, Jack Fields, points out, "In many ways he's very self-indulgent, but you can't find a better son or brother. He was sending virtually all the money he earned, picking crops, back to his family."

Fields took him on in 1960, and for a while things looked great. Universal signed him to a long-term contract, and people began to compare him with James Dean, Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift. It's not the sort of thing that Parks appreciates—believing, as all artists must, that he's someone special and unique. Still and all, it beats being compared with Rod Cameron, Jon Hall or Wayne Morris. He wasn't, in short, just another pretty face. He was an exciting young actor going places.

In 1964 Universal put him in "Wild Seed," a low-budget sleeper that gassed the critics and the other four or five people who saw it. He then did several TV guest shots, the most notable being a *Channing* episode called "An Obelisk for Benny." Unfortunately, somewhere along the line, Parks got a reputation as a big-mouth and a troublemaker. He worked more on loan-out to other studios than he did for Universal. But the movies were bad, and Parks was invariably miscast. Among the turkeys to his credit, or discredit, were "Bus Riley's Back in Town," "The Idol," "It's What's Happening" and "The

Bible"—in which he got to run around as Adam, sans fig leaf.

His problem has been that he thinks he knows it all. Of course, he may. But in Hollywood you're allowed to know it all and get away with it only when you've got the box-office receipts to back you up. Otherwise, the stock answer to everything is: if you're so smart, why ain't you rich? And Lord knows Parks isn't rich.

He comes on brash, arrogant, defensive and insecure. He is also undeniably talented. If he were half as talented and twice as diplomatic, he would have had this town by the tail.

How undiplomatic is he? By comparison, Don Rickles is shy and retiring. Lew Wasserman, who rules Universal, is probably the single most influential man in Hollywood. He was also, for more than five years, Parks' boss. There is a joke that suggests his status: "Did you hear about Wasserman's accident?" "No, what happened?" "He was out taking a walk this morning and got hit by a motorboat."

You and I can chuckle about it, but if you're under contract to Universal you'd better believe that Wasserman walks on water if you know what's good for you. Parks, however, is the sort of guy who would not only point out that the emperor is naked but would comment on his physique. He made no secret of the fact that he despised Universal; Universal felt the same about him. And they were not at all reluctant to let the young actor's prospective employers know it. To hear some of the people at Universal talk about him, you'd guess Parks was responsible for every calamity from World War II to "The Loves of Isadora."

When I called his agent to set up our first interview, for another story, Jack Fields suggested that Parks meet me at my office. I explained that I had no office but would be happy to meet him at my house. Although Parks makes his home in the hills of Santa Barbara, →

more than 100 miles from my place, he rang my doorbell promptly at 11 the following morning. At 5-feet-10, he was a good four inches shorter than I had imagined. He was wearing blue jeans, a black shirt, desert boots and socks that drooped stylishly around his ankles.

We adjourned to my back yard, where I promptly took a disliking to him. In fact, within 10 minutes I was ready to invite him to climb back in his VW and return to the hills.

Half the time he was boasting about the fact that he didn't have a publicist, as though that was supposed to convince me he was a great and pure talent, uncorrupted by Hollywood's value system. The rest of the time he seemed to have his little heart set on picking a fight. "Why do you want to interview me?" he wanted to know. "Did someone tell you I was a bad, bad boy?"

"Are you?"

"No, mother," he cooed. "Well, why do you want to interview me?"

"It's an assignment. I'm a free-lance writer. A better question is why you want me to interview you. I'm only doing my job. All I've done so far is walk from my bedroom to my back yard; you're the one who's driven 120 miles. Obviously this is a hell of a lot more important to you than it is to me."

Subdued, he replied, "Do you think it's fair for a writer who doesn't like his subject to write about him?"

Teed-off, I answered, "I didn't know you from Adam—pardon the joke—when you rang my doorbell. I didn't dislike you; I had no reason to. But, believe me, I'm working on it now."

That apparently satisfied him. We spent the next six hours quite compatibly. We discovered we were both cigarette fiends. I discovered it about him when he began to rifle through all my ashtrays, looking for butts.

He is married to his third wife. His second, Jan Moriarty, a lovely young actress, died in 1964 of an overdose of pills. He didn't talk about it, but Fields did: "They had been married

only five weeks, and three of those weeks he was on location, shooting 'Wild Seed.' A lot of people like to think he drove her to it, but it was an accident. They were very much in love."

There is no easy way to understand Parks. He is not a typical actor, or a typical 29-year-old, or a typical anything, for that matter. Not being a pigeon, he can't be pigeonholed. For instance, I knew he had just finished producing an anti-capital-punishment film for the American Civil Liberties Union the day before I met him. So I assumed he was a liberal. Nothing of the sort. About the Pope's banning of the pill: "I'm very happy about it. I'm opposed to birth control. People are beginning to look at children as a plague. That's terrible." Welfare: "I'm against it the way it is now. Too many people collecting it own new cars and go to the race track all the time." The Supreme Court: "It's a laugh; it's not a good laugh. They're undermining justice and destroying the Constitution." Gun registration: "I'm opposed to it. In 1936 Hitler made the Germans register their guns, and in 1939 he just went around and collected them with no trouble." His candidate in 1968: "George Corley Wallace. He knew what he believed in, and he wasn't afraid to speak out."

You may disagree with him, but unlike many of his fellow actors, he does more than pay lip service to his basic beliefs. He believes that most of the stuff churned out for the movie and TV cameras is slop unfit for swine, and, as a result, when he appeared in the video version of "A Hatful of Rain," it was his first acting job in six months. "They paid me \$5000, but then I didn't work again for nearly five months. That's less than the average working man earns in a year," he says in amazement, as if that financial fact of life hadn't occurred to him until that very moment.

He's against the welfare state, the →

idea of getting something for nothing, but unlike most people who are against the public dole only when they're not on it, Parks had recent opportunity to prove the sincerity of his convictions. TV-producer Quinn Martin (*The F.B.I.*, *The Fugitive*, etc.) had planned to branch out into feature production in conjunction with ABC-TV. It was his intention to feature Parks in his initial production. They signed contracts, but that was before Martin and ABC reached their much-publicized parting of the ways. Parks, an innocent bystander, got paid off in full.

Harboring guilt feelings about the pay-off, he discussed the matter with his agent. As a result, Fields paid a highly unusual visit to Mr. Martin. He explained that while Parks had severe financial burdens (support of his separated parents, his present wife and her two children by a previous marriage, and his own 13-year-old daughter), he didn't, in point of fact, lose any opportunities to work simply because he had signed on the dotted line. Or, as Fields puts it, "No one was breaking down our door." On the other hand, "He needed the money desperately, so I told Martin that, as far as Mike was concerned, it was only a loan, and as soon as he makes three more movies he'll pay it back in full."

Will he make three more movies? Probably. He is determined, at least, to make one for the great director Jean Renoir, who is a friend and second father to Parks. As Fields says, "If a studio called tomorrow and said, 'We want Mike for a picture with Liz Taylor, Richard Burton and Marlon Brando, and we'll give him top billing, a million dollars and 10 percent of the gross,' I can swear to you that Mike wouldn't equivocate if the deal conflicted with Jean's movie. Jean means too much to him."

Will he make it big in Hollywood? Parks believes he will. But, as Fields confesses, "There are still people in

this town who'd like to cut his heart out and make a salad of it."

Early last year Mike's younger brother, Jimmy, died. He was skin-diving on his birthday, when he got tangled in kelp. By the time he was cut free, it was too late. He died on his way to the hospital. "Mike," a friend recalls, "went up to the mountains by himself and just waited for days."

Fields believes that the tragedy altered him greatly. "Whoever uses him now will get a great talent in its most cooperative form. He's matured since Jimmy's death. He knows he has all these responsibilities to bear by himself. He wants to work. He needs to work. I told him all along, you closed doors with Spiegel and Huston and Wasserman; I told him, you're winning Pyrrhic victories, but you're really losing the war. It's finally beginning to sink in."

Years ago, Parks had an interview with Sandy Meisner, who was then head of casting at 20th Century-Fox. "I entered the outer office," he recalls, "and the place was full of young actors and actresses. I felt like a freak; all the guys looked like Gardner McKay and all the girls looked like Millie Perkins. I hadn't yet had my two front teeth capped, and they looked like fangs. Plus, I had a couple of real good zitzes—pimples—on my face. Meisner took one look at me and said I'd never work in pictures. He told me to go to New York, where, I guess, zitzes are appreciated."

Well, the fangs are gone, the zitzes are gone, Meisner's gone, and whatever happened to Gardner McKay?

The last thing Parks did for Universal was a two-hour movie for TV titled "An Act of Piracy." Happily burning his Universal bridges behind him, he laughs, "I was forced to play a fat, bald, gold-toothed, 40-year-old Mexican revolutionary. They say I came across like a cross between Fernando Lamas and Marlon Brando; I think it's more →

like Alfonso Bedoya and Dame May Whitty. When I finished it, Universal asked me if I wanted out of my contract. Well, it was like asking a slave if he wants his freedom."

When, more than a year ago, I asked him to take a guess as to what freedom might mean to him, he shook his head: "In 'Dante's Inferno,' Dante asked his guide who those people were who were being punished so severely, and the answer was, they are those who dared to predict the future."

In the time since he refused to hazard a guess, Parks has stepped into . . . Then Came Bronson and cut a country-and-Western album, "Closing the Gap."

I called Fields to find out how this career turnaround had taken place in one short year. "As you know, we had a history of trouble with Mike, but—knock wood—he's turned into the most cooperative kid in the world. Maybe for the first time in his life, he's happy. We've heard nothing but nice things from the actors and the directors who've been working with him. You know what the key is with that kid? Don't ever give him orders; if you just take the time to talk to him, he'll deliver the goods."

Recently I caught up with Parks in

Wyoming. He was enjoying the series—and enjoyed having his wife and kids with him—"That's the only way to do it."

About the motorcycling, he says, "I do my own riding—but not the stunts. Beating death that way doesn't turn me on. I don't need *that*; I'm an actor."

His only regret with the series is that the role is so demanding in terms of time. "I'm in nearly every scene—and, so, there's no chance I'll get to direct this season. Maybe next year."

Finally, mustering up the courage, I put it to him: Why a TV series? Was he just fed up with earning "less than the average working man"? When we had discussed his future career a year before, he had dismissed a series as virtually unthinkable.

He first answered the question with a laugh. Then: "I think *Bronson* can be very good. I mean, there's a lot of freedom in the concept; *Bronson's* not locked into a place or a job. But let's face it, TV wasn't my first choice. When we talked about it last time, I said a series is out—unless there's nothing else. And there wasn't. I had no other offers. No one wanted me. Herb Solow, over at MGM, couldn't get any of the networks to take a chance on me. He finally gave them 24 hours to make a decision: either they could pick up the series or he was going to put up a million dollars of his own money and make *Bronson* as a feature. I guessed that convinced them; the next morning NBC had a change of heart—and here we are."

Here we are. Wyoming. A TV series which seems to be doing okay in the ratings. Maybe a chance to direct next season, if there is a next season. Maybe a million dollars of his own, if *Bronson* keeps cycling long enough. Maybe an Emmy this year. Maybe an Oscar some other year. Whatever his future, it should be interesting to watch it unfold.

As for those of us who have been bedeviled by fangs and zitzes of our own, we can only wish him well. END

TV GUIDE



'I learned something about myself. I like mediocrity.'