

# Sgt Bilko at 70...still able to make people laugh to order



AGELESS...the irascible Phil Silvers today, and (inset) as the lovable rascal Ernie Bilko

# Solid Gold Silvers

HUP! Hup! Hup! Fifteen floors above the Los Angeles smog Sergeant Bilko is barking orders again and I, knowing better than to argue with the master, fall in line.

"You got 10 minutes," he snaps, "sit there, shut up, and pay attention."

At 70, Phil Silvers is still sarcastic, bossy and bumptious, though he's been in civvies for nearly 25 years. Today the old vaudevillian is playing to an audience of two: myself and his 21-year-old actress daughter Cathy, one of five Silvers children.

But it could have been to a packed house. Silvers is the kind of guy who can do an hour's monologue every time the refrigerator light goes on.

And it's all vintage Ernie Bilko, though the waist has expanded considerably and the always bald head has only a monkish fringe of grey.

## Classic

He peers through those perennial owlish glasses in the same irascible way that he rode hard on fat man Doberman and the rest of the poor saps that ran the motor pool in that make believe U.S. Army base somewhere in America.

The show has not been seen in the States for years, but it is still going strong in Britain. It was shot from 1955-59 under the title "You'll Never Get Rich" but from the very beginning it became the Phil Silvers Show.

There has never been the likes of Bilko since — a classic comic character that even today is ageless. The show is still playing around the world.

Silvers lives alone in considerably grander style than his alter ego...in a spacious apartment



By **IVOR DAVIS**  
in Hollywood

in an elegant, guarded high rise building in a fashionable area of Los Angeles.

Several years ago he had a catastrophic stroke which left him speechless — a terrible irony for a man whose speedy tongue was his fortune. Plagued by a variety of other ailments since, he struggled back to something like his former acerbic, but loveable, self.

The flat is jammed with shelves full of Emmys (the TV industry's Oscars). The walls are papered with awards and the Silvers photo-gallery of old mates from Crosby to Jack Benny, Danny Kaye to Muhammad Ali.

Suddenly he leaps up from the leather armchair as if struck by lightning and points to his slender, pretty daughter who plays Jenny Piccolo — a kind of female Bilko and con artist of the first order — on the Happy Days show.

"Did I produce something as beautiful as you?" he asks in mock amazement.

Cathy Silvers blushes. "No," says her Dad, "your mother must have fooled me."

Silvers was married to former Revlon TV model Evelyn Patrick for seven years, during which they had five daughters. "Every time I looked at her she got pregnant," he says.

The girls, who range from late teens to late twenties, are all close to their father.

Since his bouts with illness he's worked infrequently; a guest appearance on "Happy Days" with

his daughter, and a few films.

Like most veterans, he gets irritable that he's not working more and that some consider him a poor health risk.

"Sometimes I look up and say: 'God...why did you hit me where I work?'"

Most of the old Bilko gang are dead, now including Doberman (Maurice Gosfield), the daffy colonel Hall (Paul Ford) and recently Harvey Lembeck (Rocco Barbello) one of the two corporals. Alan Melvin, the other Bilko henchman (Corporal Henshaw), is still around and, says Silvers: "He's making more goddam money doing commercials than I ever made."

## Contact

The two corporals, he says, were what made the show work.

"They looked up to me with such an admiration when I was cooking up my schemes. They were my contact with the audience.

"They wanted so to be like me. I was wise enough to take advantage of that. You're only as good as the people you're with.

"Now, Paul Ford...I should have got a special award for working with him. He never knew his lines, that's why I talked so much.

"I'd see a little bead of perspiration pop out on his upper lip and I knew he was in trouble. So I'd say anything 'til he could think of his lines.

"And Doberman — we picked him for his appearance. He

thought he was Cary Grant, playing the part of a fat man. He spent all his time going to parties and playing the star. But if you look at the shows, you'll see we never gave him more than one line."

Despite his willingness to give credit to the others, it was Bilko who captured viewers hearts.

"I knocked down authority and I carried the little man's cudgel. Everybody would love to be a swindler like me. But we were very careful; I never won unless the man deserved it."

## Subtle

"I never could take compliments well. When I'm good you don't have to tell me. There's no orgasm in the world like making 'em laugh. But as loud as I am, I'm very subtle."

He looked over at his daughter listening intently. "Honey," he said, "that dress is just beautiful."

"Did I pay for it?"

"I made a deal with my wife," he said. "If we had boys, I was going to bring them up Jewish. If they were girls, in her faith (Presbyterian). And you see what happened — five broads!"

Silvers no longer gets royalties from the Bilko show. He was paid off 15 years ago. But he does collect royalties for a song he wrote once for Frank Sinatra, "Nancy with the Laughing Face."

"We both had daughters called Nancy," he explained.

"Are you writing all this down?" he snaps. "I'm not going to give it to you again."

Then, to the photographer, he barks: "One more picture — then you can get the hell out of here."

He does, however, appreciate the fondness the British have for Bilko. "I wouldn't mind going there to live out my last days. But my responsibilities are here."

It was time to go, Silvers was getting tired and his voice hoarse.

He kissed his daughter goodbye and wagging a finger at her admonished: "Call your father."

Cathy smiled fondly at him. "Everything my Dad says I take as gold," she said. "In Happy Days I feel I'm playing Bilko... and I've only seen the show three times."

Silvers hugged her. "I never told her how to deliver a line," he said, "but when I watch her on TV I say," and his voice broke, "there's my blood..."