

Eulogy For Don McLean

A Class Act Ends Its Run

A Personal Remembrance

By Carl Driver

Don McLean, known professionally as Lori Shannon and to millions of fans of *All In the Family* as the drag queen Beverly LaSalle, the only man Archie Bunker kissed, died last Saturday evening at Mission Emergency Hospital of an apparent heart attack.

The cause of death, according to Dave LeNowe of the County Coroner's office, "probably won't be determined for three to six weeks because of a number of toxicology tests."

I remember Don headlining at the old Country Club (now Le Domino) in 1971. Tall and majestic, with great natural talent and tremendous



Donald as Lori Shannon

innate comic timing. He was, I thought, foolish to have a back-up drag who was much younger, extremely pretty and sexy. In 1983, Don won the Cabaret Gold Award as outstanding stand-up comic of the year as well as playing an eight-week gig at a major club in Provincetown on Cape Cod. Today I do not even remember the name of

the pretty young thing who worked with him at the Country Club.

Don's list of credits encompassed most aspects of the entertainment world. He won coveted awards as an entertainer (Cabaret Gold), as a director (BATCC), and as a critic (Cable Car), yet I think his greatest contribution to the entertainment industry and to gays everywhere is more subtle. Never feeling it necessary to be vocal or in the forefront of Gay Lib, he still had an enormous impact on attitudes in this country toward homosexuality. The sensitivity and sympathy with which he portrayed the first transvestite to be shown realistically on national television had an untold effect on countless viewers who, often for the first time, realized that drag queens were not just "funny" men who liked to dress up in skirts but were real and even likable human beings.

I first met Don shortly after he came to San Francisco. At that time, most cross-over entertainers were vociferous in calling themselves "female impersonators." Not Don, he was a drag queen and proud of it. Also, unlike the then popular fad, he never tried to mold himself into a vapid Marilyn Monroe/Jane Mansfield imitation, but created the character Lori Shannon who dominated her material and who won over countless audiences with biting wit, great charm, and always a class act.

As dean of local gay newspaper theater critics (he was Entertainment Editor here at CALIFORNIA VOICE from April 1980 to October 1982 after having previously held the same assignment at BAR and was holding that position at the *Sentinel* at the time of his death), he was equally individualistic. An insightful reviewer, he wrote with a barbed wit that often left readers laughing while producers, directors, or actors cringed. . . . He referred to one much ballyhooed touring show as being "as American as apple pie and as exciting as a cold mashed potato sandwich." He was a



Donald McLean in a recent photo session for Atherton Hotel advertisements

founding member of the Bay Area Theatre Critics' Circle, yet he later resigned over policy differences. Never one to court popularity, Don could be depended upon to say what he really thought.

Although we were not close friends, we never had a meal or even a drink together, I always looked forward to seeing him at an opening, knowing he would soon have me laughing at his caustic one-liners.

While he and I often differed in our assessment of shows, I respected his opinions and always admired his constancy in invariably being himself. Perhaps it seems strange to refer to a drag queen as rugged, but in his way Don McLean was as rugged an individualist as those legendary characters who opened up the West. Today, there are too few true individualists and he will be missed... but not forgotten.