

Who's The Man?

Billy Van!

EXCERPT

By Greg Oliver

with Stacey Case

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Published by OliverBooks

www.oliverbooks.ca

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isbn 978-1-7773440-0-9 (Canada, softcover)

Written with support from the Ontario Arts Council.

Printed and bound in Canada by ImageOn Print
(imageonprint.com).

Photos are courtesy the extended Van Evera family, unless noted.

Front cover image: June Sampson and Billy Van on *Nightcap*, Dale Barnes/CBC Still Photo Collection.

Back cover images: *Party Game*, Billy Van with Arte Johnson, by Dave Cremasco; *The Hilarious House of Frightenstein*, Dr. Pet Vet and Igor, by Dave Cremasco.

DEDICATION

For Billy. Thanks for the laughs.

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Stacey Case puts up a poster of Billy Van at a celebration of Van in Hamilton, Ontario, in June 2018. Photo by Greg Oliver

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1

Introduction

By Stacey Case

This isn't my story, but it comes about from my obsession, my love of *The Hilarious House of Frightenstein*. Hand in hand with that comes the man himself, Billy Van.

Back in 1994, I set out to find Billy, determined to interview him for my punk rock fanzine, *Rivet*. It took me a month—a whole crazy, exasperating month—before I finally got to him. To my mind, Billy Van is an icon, an unparalleled television star who I watched for years and years, both on *Frightenstein* but also on *Party Game*, that wacky, cheesy game of charades that aired daily.

CHCH TV, the Hamilton, Ontario, station where both shows had been filmed, just pointed me to a distributor. Direction Video in Toronto shared a five-page resume of Van's with me, and sent me to YTV, the youth television station in Canada that had recently re-broadcast *Frightenstein*. YTV was friendly, but didn't know where Billy was either. Arrgh. Then a pal remembered that there had been something in the *Toronto Star* newspaper about Billy not too long ago, so I called the *Star* and got the date that the

piece ran in its TV guide. Great story, no lead.

Finally, another buddy suggested calling ACTRA (Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists). Why hadn't I thought of that before? The helpful voice at ACTRA pointed me to Billy's company, Tracy Productions.

With trembling hands, I hesitantly dialled the number, readying myself for a brush with greatness. I was about to talk to Billy Van. And before I knew it, it was happening. I couldn't believe it—Billy Van, my childhood friend of the boob tube from the best damn children's show ever, *The Hilarious House of Frightenstein*.

I gave Billy my pitch, about my magazine (I didn't call it a zine, because old people didn't know what a zine was), and my desire to get some photos of Frightenstein. After listening to my story, Billy said, "Well, you sound legitimate, why don't I dig up photos from my show and you can come down to my office to talk?"

During our short chat, I learned that Billy was currently working on a show called *Bits & Bytes 2*, teaching the basics of computers, and that he kept in touch with the others from *Party Game*, "Captain" Jack Duffy and the beautiful Dinah Christie.

Man, I've never been so excited. This was been something that I'd dreamed of doing since I discovered *Frightenstein* around 1976, when I was eight years old. CHCH would start its broadcasting day at 5:30 a.m. with "O Canada" followed by a half-hour *Farm Report*, then the strange *Tales of the Wizard of Oz*. Up next was *The Hilarious House of Frightenstein*. *Frightenstein* combined everything I loved about TV and movies at the time—monsters, horror, puppets, comedy and rock 'n' roll. I never talked about my favorite show with anyone in school, as I honestly thought that *Frightenstein* was somehow magically broadcasting just for me!

Now I was going to meet Billy Van.

A few days later, I stopped by his office, really close to the iconic Maple Leaf Gardens at Church and Carlton Streets in Toronto, and ... Billy was not in the office. It turned out that he was at reunion / rehearsal for a show that happened only once a

year. Bad timing.

When I finally did meet Billy in his office, questions poured out of me. Where did this crazy *Hilarious House of Frigtenstein* come from? What kind of deranged mind would think up such a preposterous premise? A horror/education show for kids? What’s up with that?

He humored me. “The show was geared to 8-14 year-olds, and there was barely anything educational about it. I never met the Professor, he was added on later. The vast majority of mail we got, though, was from kids in high school and university. It was kinda like some cult thing.”

Billy then looked at me kinda weird.

I completely agreed with what he said because its true. It is some kind of “cult thing,” and if you have bought this book, then you’re in on the cult too. Billy Van is a national treasure, heck an international treasure! But he’s one that has been placed on the shelf and forgotten about. He could sing, he could dance, he could act, he could pitch products, he could, most importantly, make people laugh.

When I finished my copy of *Rivet*, issue #5, typewritten, then cut and pasted together with photos from Frigtenstein, I sent Billy one of the 200 copies I had printed. To my surprise, a week later, there was a letter from Billy in my Money Mart rental mailbox. I remember the day like it was yesterday—it was raining outside, and, like a dope, I ripped the envelope open and read it in the rain. It was written in pen, and the ink began to run. That letter is still among my most prized possessions, and I see the smudges from my tears of joy rather than raindrops.



The crowning glory of my University of Toronto radio show on CIUT 89.5, with its whopping 10,000 watts of power, was having Billy on air for a half-hour improv in 1995. I set it up that my tech, Serge, and I were going to Castle Frightenstein for its yearly Halloween party, and we spent a week just getting the sound effects ready. Though we had some challenges getting to the castle, including a car crash (close your eyes to imagine the smash-bang sound effects on radio), we did make it, and knocked on the imposing door. The Count answered, and we were off to the races. In the studio, with his wife Susan watching, Billy did all the *Frightenstein* voices for us. It was magical.

A few years later, in 2003, Billy died. The obituaries were pretty ho-hum, and barely scratched the surface of what he had achieved in his life, his career. There must be more, I told myself. That led me to his widow, Susan Demitrakopoulos, who shared his unpublished memoir, *Second Banana: The Five Stages of an Actor*, with me (and portions of it are shared with you here). Then I met his daughter, Tracy, and we struck up a friendship.

In May 2005, I ran a *Hilarious House of Frightenstein* fan fest at the 360 Bar on Queen Street in downtown Toronto, with special guests Dinah Christie and Jack Duffy, puppeteer Joe Torbay, CHCH staff members Dave Cremasco, Ken Smith and John Bradford, and Ben Kane of *Frightenstein.com*. It was frickin' magical, with 500 fans crammed into a bar that only held 350, and people turned away at the door. Insane. Then we all watched part of an episode together, and it gave me goosebumps to hear everyone laughing as one; after all, we had all always watched the show by ourselves as kids, and there was no Internet to go discuss the nuances of the episode with like-minded twisted minds. The band that I was the drummer for at the time, the Tijuana Bibles, played, and music legend Nash the Slash was there too.

At the Fest, I started a campaign—still on-going, alas—to get Billy a star on Canada's Walk of Fame in downtown Toronto. After all that, I thought I was all-in on Billy Van, but it was only the start.

During a road trip, Greg Oliver and I began mulling a

bigger project, maybe a *Frightenstein* book or a biography. Life got in the way, as it often does, and a decade later, Greg and I revisited the project, and we were off to the races. Complimenting the book was the Billy Van Museum, which happened on a whim, after I saw ad on Kijiji for a small storefront to rent on the east side of Hamilton, Ontario. It was inspired by the phenomenon of the Japanese tiny museum. I saw the space and thought I could do a Billy Van Museum there. While it is no longer in operation, it was such a great experience to share my love of Billy with others.

Before you journey off into the Wonderful World of Billy, I want to leave you with the advice he gave me upon that first meeting in his Toronto production office.

As I was leaving, I said, “This lowly publisher can’t thank you enough.”

His reply: “Don’t put yourself down, son. There’s enough others that’ll do it for you.”

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Billy Van points the way.

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Second Banana

“Banana,” was Cher’s answer. The question, though, was not about her favorite fruit. In writing a profile of the many Canadians working on the *Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*, both in front and behind the camera, *Weekend Magazine*’s Ernest Hillen simply asked, “Billy Van, Cher?”

No doubt Billy Van was pleased with the response. He considered himself a “second banana” in showbiz, to the point that his unpublished memoir, written in 1997, is titled *Second Banana: The Five Stages of an Actor*. He broke it down into five sections:

Who is Billy Van?

Get me Billy Van!

Get me a Billy Van look-alike!

Get me a young Billy Van.

Who is Billy Van?