

**LENSMAN'S LEGACY:** Martha Raye (below), and (clockwise from top l. on facing page) Jimmy Durante, Perry Como, Guy Lombardo & Milton Berle caught photographer James Kriegsmann's eye.

# Glossy Days

*For two generations, the Kriegsmanns have been the definitive shooters of famous faces.*

BY STEVE DITLEA

## Head shots. Publicity stills.

Eight-by-10 glossies. Without such pictures none of the entertainers who distract and uplift us would get work, let alone be enshrined by the media.

Yet in an era when fashion photographers are as prominent as the supermodels they shoot, and paparazzi become as notorious as the celebrities they stalk, few of the commercial photographers capturing images of the famous and the wannabes for promotional purposes are known beyond the showbiz publications in which they advertise. The exception is the snapping Kriegsmanns — two generations of midtown photographers who have been the definitive practitioners of their craft through nearly 60 years of constant change in entertainment fads and fundamentals.

Family patriarch James J. Kriegsmann, now 84 and retired, created countless photographs by which we can remember yesterday's show-business greats. Cab Calloway beaming with spotlit white tie and tails; Benny Goodman spiffy in a sports jacket; Frank Sinatra casually sporting a curl across his forehead.

Kriegsmann senior, at his home in Forest Hills, recalls that he shot Sinatra just before the Paramount appearance that would launch the singer to legendary status. "His publicist — he's the one who thought of packing the front row with screaming girls — asked me to give Sinatra a new look. There was an architect in our building who always wore a big bow tie and it seemed right for Sinatra." The bow tie became Sinatra's signature.

Circus performers, burlesque queens, opera luminar-



Durante at the old Astor Hotel and he came out dressed from the waist up. All he wanted was a closeup, so he said, 'Why should I wrinkle my trousers?'"

Soon after he opened his midtown studio in 1935, Kriegsmann had a stroke of luck when the Cotton Club moved from Harlem to nearby 48th St. He photographed Bill (Bojangles) Robinson and the nightclub's other headliners. Having grown up in Vienna and emigrating to the U.S. after completing school, he didn't share the prejudice of his contemporaries, who often refused to shoot publicity pictures of African-Americans. The lustrous-skinned portraits he composed throughout his career became an invaluable record of many of the great black entertainers of this century.

Of all the people he met in his studio, the one Kriegsmann values most is his wife of 52 years, Jean. "She was stunning. She came in for a modeling job but it was filled, so I offered her a receptionist job. I fell in love and asked her to marry me three months later." They had three sons, two of whom would follow

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ies, Miss Subways, singing stars — from the Andrews Sisters to the Isley Brothers, Sophie Tucker to Stevie Wonder — all came to the Kriegsmann studios on W. 46th St. to be framed on the ground glass of his cabinet-sized 8 X 10 camera. "I never used a small camera; I never used a light meter," Kriegsmann declares. "I learned about lighting by going to the movies three or four times a week and studying how they did it." The result was a crisp, dramatic style — his subjects still seem to burst from the boundaries of the pictures.

He only left his studio to photograph three performers: singer Kate Smith, violinist Yehudi Menuhin and comedian Jimmy Durante. "I shot

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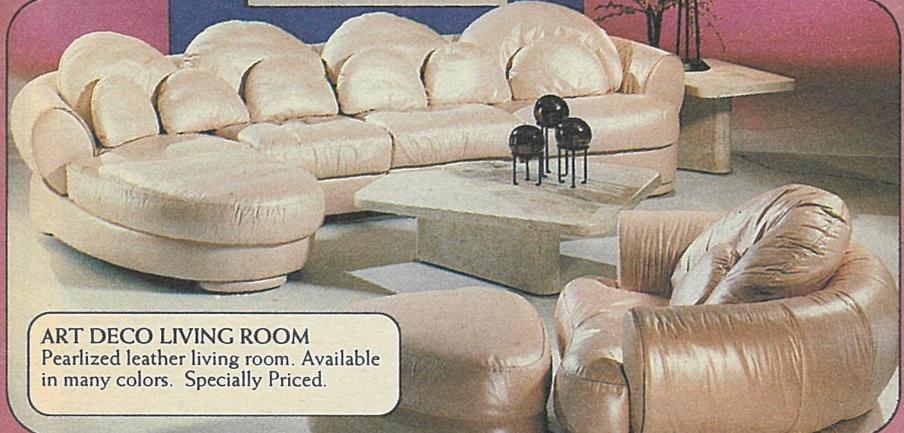
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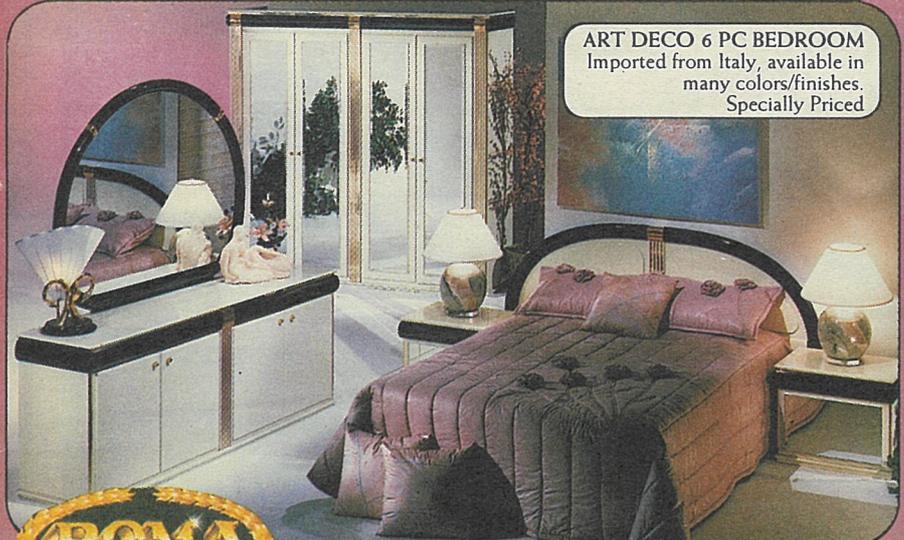
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their father into publicity photography. After more than 30 years of shooting a *who's who* of entertainment, "show business just wasn't the same," he laments, "so I started letting my sons take pictures while I ran the business." The middle son, Eugene, opted not to pursue the family business and lives on the West Coast.

To James J. Kriegsmann Jr., who was initiated into photography with his father's vintage equipment, "it's amazing that he got the shots he did." James Jr. eventually gave up the hot lights and bulky camera for cooler umbrella-diffused strobe lights and a more compact camera, along with a less formal shooting style. "People didn't like dramatic lighting anymore," he explains.

With the decline of newspaper publicity pictures and photos for display outside nightclubs, the promotional portrait largely became a medium for impressing casting agents. "Fifteen years ago, it was all white backgrounds because that was best for newspaper reproduction," says James Jr. "Then people wanted gray backgrounds. Fifteen years ago they still asked for full-length pictures, then it became just head shots." The biggest change in recent years? "Now they want three-quarter-length shots so casting agents can see more of their bodies and not be misled by just their faces."

After abandoning ambitions of playing tennis professionally, Kriegsmann Jr. started taking pictures for his father in 1968 at the age of 24. Twenty years later, he set up his own midtown shop where he packs in as many as a half-dozen sittings a day, offering a basic session of 48 shots for \$125. Each re-touched 8 X 10 photograph for reproduction is an additional \$25. Makeup is extra.

Lately, along with the usual crop of aspiring young performers, he is shooting more head shots of doctors, lawyers and engineers experiencing midlife crises and trying to break into

the entertainment business. "It happens that they get work. Not just the good-looking ones, either," he adds. "You can be plain or ugly and be a working actor." Having a striking Kriegsmann glossy obviously won't hurt your chances.

**"What we learned from our father** was to recognize the expression in a person's face and capture it," says youngest brother Thomas, who joined the family business in 1974, starting out in the photo lab and four years later taking on shooting sessions at night. Because of the hours they kept, musicians were often scheduled for his sessions. His previous work as a roadie for the Good Rats, a '60s New York rock band, added to his rapport with musicians.

Though both learned about lighting from their father and now use similar strobes, Thomas says that he can recognize subtle differences in how he and his brother shoot their subjects. Sometimes, managers or agents send showbiz aspirants to both for their head shots. "We may be competitors, but we're still friends," Thomas insists. "As long as people keep coming to New York to make it in show business, there's plenty of work for everybody."

Because of the time he spent in his father's lab supervising the quality of his prints, Thomas is the one most concerned with maintaining the Kriegsmann photographic legacy.

Five years ago, all of his father's negatives were bought by a West Coast archive. Nowadays, whenever one of these photos appears in print, it is credited to the archive, rather than Kriegsmann. Even the distinctive Kriegsmann corner logo with its oversized "K" (which reportedly inspired Eastman Kodak's logo) is often airbrushed out.

To make sure that the family's photo treasures are not forgotten, Thomas went into their private collection for the previously unpublished photos shown on these pages. ■

*(Steve Ditlea is a freelance writer.)*

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