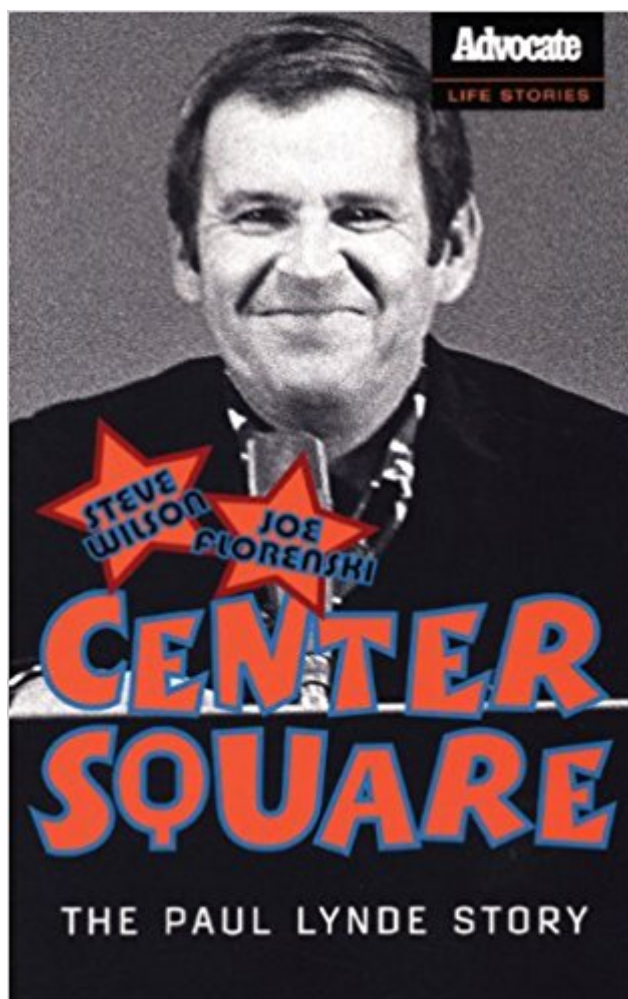


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Center Square: The Paul Lynde Story



Synopsis

Advocate Books Life Stories In an age when celebrities have turned the act of coming out into an empowering media event, Paul Lynde certainly seems like a campy relic of less-liberated times. This view of Lynde as an out-of-step, self-loathing queen of queens overlooks the man's great, if accidental, achievement: getting away with being gay on TV on an almost daily basis for years. During his three decades as a popular character actor on television, film and the stage, this fairy forefather's arch and bitchy wit snuck regular doses of the queer world into that bastion of intolerance, the American living room. Lynde showed mainstream viewers that a gay man could deliver the jokes, not just be the butt of them. In doing so, he helped make homosexuality more palatable to unwitting viewers who simply saw him as a stylish, funny man. Biographers Steve Wilson and Joe Florenski draw on revealing interviews with friends from Lynde's childhood, college days and adult years—including stars such as Phyllis Diller, Charlotte Rae, Cloris Leachman and Peter Marshall, who worked with Lynde in Broadway productions and in film and television. What emerges is a memorable portrait of a man who reaped his share of wealth, enjoyed a fair amount of fame and basked in the adoration of thousands of fans—but paid a price in hardship, heartbreak and hangovers. Steve Wilson met co-biographer Joe Florenski while researching an article on Paul Lynde for Out magazine in 2000. He ran across Florenski's website devoted to Lynde. Begun in 1997, the site contains exhaustive resources on Lynde, and Florenski has lent research support to both E! and A&E's Biography for their segments on the comedian. Wilson and Florenski worked so well together on the piece for Out that they decided to collaborate on a book.

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Customer Reviews

I was reminded of comedic actor Paul Lynde through a special on TV Land called "Tickled Pink" that aired a few months back. I was not quite 8 when Lynde died in January 1982, but I still remembered him from his many television guests spots and Hollywood Squares. I recall him being one of the funniest people I've ever seen (on TV, or anywhere else for that matter) as well as a man who did not act all that masculine (not knowing at the time what that was all about). After the TV Land special jogged my memory, I located a copy of the A&E biography which detailed his upbringing (I was shocked the thin actor was once so over weight), career, and tawdry lifestyle. It seemed the documentary was just scratching the surface, so, thinking, 'I've got to read a book about this guy,' I searched for a book expecting to find at least a couple of biographies. Alas, nothing. I was very surprised as Lynde's life is meant to be written if not for the intrigue and seediness alone. I was very happy to find out that, finally, a book on Lynde called Center Square was coming out [so to speak] in August 2005. Center Square was written by Steve Wilson and Joe Florenski, who I remembered seeing on the A&E Biography. This book reads like an extension of the program. It does not dive as deeply into Lynde's life as I expected. I've only read a few contemporary articles on Lynde while waiting for the book to be released (People magazine, TV Guide, etc.) and found that I already knew a lot that is in this book just from that small amount of Lynde exposure. The authors, at the beginning, note that they encountered "scant press coverage" on Lynde that was "mostly fluff pieces in forgotten TV magazines and unflattering bits in the gossip rags of the era" (viii), so maybe there is not a lot of sources available.

Warning: This book is written in a sassy/sarcastic Entertainment Weekly house style knockoff that is something of an acquired taste (call it straining to be ironic and hip and funny and only occasionally succeeding at any of the above). One is tempted to shrug it off and say the style perfectly fits the subject, a past master at cutting sarcasm and the tangy retort, but I think far better of Paul Lynde than that. When HE tried to be funny, he usually hit bullseye. (Note to the authors: That's because he didn't really have to try.) Ultimately, because of the style in which it is told, the telling of this tale doesn't grow on you, it wears on you. That out of the way, I fault Center Square more for being an unsympathetic and overly gossip-reliant portrait of a true comic original than for being gratingly written. The authors preface their book with a note of gratitude to Lynde for always being true to

himself. Sounds promising -- and reasonably respectful. But very quickly, the grim and peevish bio devolves into umpteen stories of "club crawls" and posh dinner parties turned into ugly drunken scenes, with Lynde making a fool of himself before falling down drunk in the gutter, or alienating some friend for the last time. If you take the authors at their word, this seems to be all Lynde was about. Which raises a question: if that's true, why write the book, why read the book? Why would we even care if this is all there really was to Lynde the man? We are subjected to the dark side, the miserable, insecure, nervous, neurotic, alcoholic side, in cascades of blunt and bruising detail.

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