

Tribute to Art Linkletter
Monte Rio Show – July 29, 2010
By Adam Felber

Good evening. I am Jamie Widdoes. As many of you know, Art Linkletter passed away on March 26th at the age of 97. Tonight we'd like to pay tribute to a man that meant so much to us and who cared so deeply about this Community,

Here's the dirty little secret behind Art Linkletter's success: Kids actually *don't* say the darndest things. I'll get to that in a minute.

Obviously, you can't do a thumbnail biography of a man who lived 97 years and was productive through all of them. And many of you know the rough outline – in 1933, 21 year-old Art Linkletter abandoned a burgeoning career as the maker of Waldorf salads, as well as the slightly less profitable prospect of studying to become an English professor. Instead he answered the call to work as a radio host. Finding himself with hours of airtime to fill up at state fairs, he began to do the things that would soon make him a national celebrity: Goofing around, coming up with diverting stunts, and just talking to regular people, more or less inventing the idea of the man-on-the-street interview. Which means that in some ways we all get to blame Art Linkletter for reality television.

What followed was a modest little career as a TV and radio star, author, storyteller, and philanthropist. All this makes him number one on the list of successful abandoned children from Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan who were adopted by preachers and subsequently uprooted and moved to San Diego during World War 1. That's not a long list, perhaps, but it is an impressive accomplishment.

When most people think of Art Linkletter, of course, they think about his relationship with kids. Seen for decades on shows like "House Party," and "People are Funny," and "Kids Say the Darndest Things," Art became a curator and collector of juvenile wisdom.

Art once asked a little blonde girl what would make a perfect husband. “Well,” she said, “A man that provides a lot of money, loves horses, will let you have 22 kids, and doesn’t put up a fight.” Art considered this, and then asked, “What do you think you’re going to be when you grow up?” Without a moment’s pause, she said, “A nun.”

Art did not shy away from taking on religious controversy on air. He once drew a little girl out on the subject of Jesus, and learned all about how our savior turned water into wine at a wedding. After getting as many details from the girl as he could, Art asked, “What do we learn from that story?” Her response: “We learned the more wine we get, the better the wedding is.”

Another little boy was asked to recount the story of Adam and Eve. When he got to the part about them eating the apple, Art said, “Boy, I bet god was mad.” “Yeah, then God sent them to hell, and then they transferred on to Los Angeles.” Art did not contest this point, partly because it is so inarguably true.

The Bohemians have been doing this Monte Rio show for the last 99 years, and it seems like Art was the sire of all of them. After careful calculation, it turns out that this is in fact mathematically impossible. But only barely. He was first a guest at the Grove nearly 60 years ago, in 1951, performing in The Friday Night with a cast that included Hoagy Carmichael and Rube Goldberg. Ten years later, he became a professional member, and he became an institution both on the Grove’s stage and here in Monte Rio.

A couple of years ago, the show’s director, Chris Zupsic, called Art to see if he was on for the Monte Rio Show. He never missed one, because the show and the Monte Rio community were so important to Art, and he enjoyed it so deeply. But on this occasion he said he couldn’t make it. He told Chris, “I’m sorry, but I have a paying gig. And at my age, if I can get a paying gig, I am going to take it.” I don’t think any of us could argue with that.

But that's another part of the art of Art. He was *good* at old age. In fact, the later of the two Lakeside Talks Art gave in Bohemia was entitled "Successful aging: Getting the most out of your old age." He wrote a book on the subject. And he toured around giving talk and performing shows for the elderly. One of his favorite lines from those shows is when he would get asked about the sex life of the elderly. His response was that there was nothing to be concerned about. "In fact," he would say, "Lois and I have sex almost every day of the week. Almost on Monday, almost on Tuesday, almost on Wednesday..."

Art had a gift for talking to the very old and the very young alike. Back in the 50s, he said "I've found that the most interesting and the best interviews are with ladies over 80 and with children under 10. And for the same reason: They tell you the truth."

Well, I don't know about you, but I for one have been lied to by several old ladies. Most notably outside of Tulsa in an incident involving a brand new Chrysler LeBaron that I never saw again. You know, come to think of it, I don't even think she was really woman. But I digress. At least the old ladies and the children told Art Linkletter the truth.

And that's the dirty little secret that I alluded to. Kids do *not* say the darndest things. Not to just anyone. If most of us were to take a few random children onto a soundstage and try to interview them, what we would get would not be priceless, hilarious pearls of precocious wisdom. We would get silence. We would get a few monosyllabic answers. We would get a veritable festival of surly looks, downcast eyes, shy foot-shuffling, and that always entertaining crowd-pleaser known as "staring into space and mumbling." Imagine it - "Tonight, on ABC: *Kids Say Practically Nothing While Looking Desperately Uncomfortable*. You'll believe a boy can weep softly while wetting himself!"

But not with Art Linkletter. Kids said the darndest things to Art Linkletter because he asked them questions they were genuinely interested in answering. And he did it in an easy, friendly way that conveyed to them without words that they were safe, and they were cared-for, and - above all - that what they had to say was important.

Art made kids believe that because *he* believed it. What made us love Art Linkletter is that he so clearly believed, deep in his heart, that what people had to say was important. All people, young and old alike. For all his talent, wit, and kindness, perhaps Art's greatest attribute was how much he valued people, and how he was able to make them feel it.

Art always ended with his "Friends are Gold" poem, written by Joseph Parry. I can't pretend to be able to deliver this as well as Art did, but I know that he'd want to listen to me try.

MAKE NEW FRIENDS, BUT KEEP THE OLD;
THOSE ARE SILVER, THESE ARE GOLD.
NEW-MADE FRIENDSHIPS, LIKE NEW WINE,
AGE WILL MELLOW AND REFINE.
FRIENDSHIPS THAT HAVE STOOD THE TEST
TIME AND CHANGE ARE SURELY BEST;
BROW MAY WRINKLE, HAIR GROW GRAY,
FRIENDSHIP NEVER KNOWS DECAY.
FOR 'MID OLD FRIENDS TRIED AND TRUE,
ONCE MORE WE OUR YOUTH RENEW.
BUT OLD FRIENDS, ALAS MAY DIE,
NEW FRIENDS MUST THEIR PLACE SUPPLY.
CHERISH FRIENDSHIP IN YOUR BREAST
NEW IS GOOD, BUT OLD IS BEST;
MAKE NEW FRIENDS, BUT KEEP THE OLD;
THOSE ARE SILVER, THESE ARE GOLD.

Goodbye, old friend.