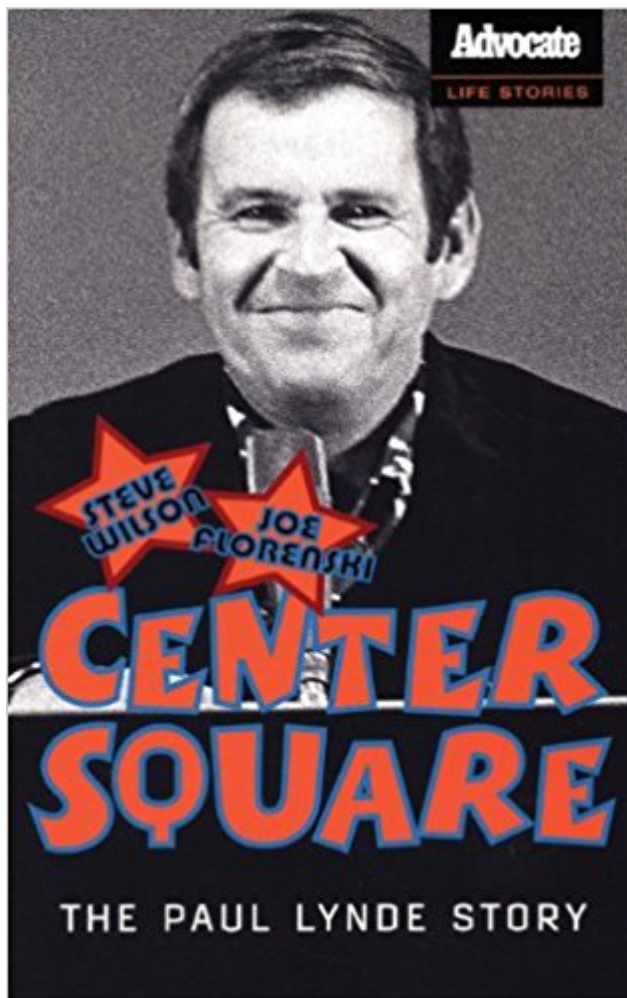


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# Center Square: The Paul Lynde Story



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The sarcastic, wise-cracking Lynde, primarily remembered for his quick (and scripted) double-entendres on the TV game show *Hollywood Squares* and his 10 appearances as Uncle Arthur on *Bewitched*, is sympathetically profiled in this well-researched biography of a demon-plagued performer who, after a few drinks, used the same razor-sharp barbs that amused TV viewers to alienate and devastate friends and foes. It's a sad tale of an entertainer who achieved great financial success (in the 1970s, he made \$50,000 a week performing in summer stock), but always thought his supporting roles were beneath him. Lynde's self-destructive drinking magnified his insecurities and frustrations, and fueled rages. Although trim, handsome and out about his homosexuality to everyone but the oblivious home viewers, he never forgot his fat childhood ("I looked like Kate Smith's niece") and preferred to buy sexual escorts rather than risk relationships. One reason Wilson and Florenski (who co-wrote a piece on Lynde for *Out*) have difficulty making Lynde come alive is that he let so few people get close to him. Still, fans of the gay icon will appreciate this appraisal (which debunks the sensational rumors surrounding his death in 1982 from a heart attack). Photos. (Aug.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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I purchased this book in hopes of learning a great deal more about the man, Paul Lynde. Instead, I learned a mountain of material about the people he worked with, and very little about him. I also got the impression that the authors of the book were NO friends of Paul Lynde's, and it seemed they took every opportunity to kick him while he was down., Paul Lynde's star will continue to shine for years and years to come---long after the time when people have forgotten the two nameless men who attempted to write the book. Paul Lynde was uniquely talented and ahead of his time. The world is a far better place for him having been here for a short time.

Paul Lynde has always been intriguing. His *Hollywood Squares* clips are making the Youtube

rounds and I realized I had forgotten about him. Hence my purchase of this book. I can't imagine a better biography. Interviews (interior decorators, hustlers, agents, stars, friends), rigorous research of decades worth of reviews and writings, and thoughtful integration of the various milieus through which Lynde traveled, converge in this small book (with not enough pictures) that tells us all we need to know. Also interesting were parallels between Lynde and Allan Sherman (see "Overweight Sensation") - Problems with weight, talent emerging in high school and college outlets, self-hatred, substance abuse problems, edgy sexuality, early deaths. One importance difference - Sherman appeared to have been a nice guy. Paul Lynde wasn't.

Sad well written book

My friend wanted to discuss the problems of gay men, so I read this book as one instance of the problems gay men face. What was noteworthy about Lynde was that he successfully navigated the anti-gay bias so strongly held at the time. He was, in short, acceptable to straight American viewers. For contemporary TV views it may seem irrelevant, but it does show the resiliency that one man can have in the face of ambivalence.

For those of us who grew up watching Paul Lynde on "The Hollywood Squares", this is a difficult book to read. As I remember Paul's wit and delivery, "Center Square" pulls back the curtain and reveals a comedian who not only had a dark side, but a viciously dark side at that. It seems that Paul Lynde was earmarked for misery from the beginning. Overweight as a child he became a brooding heavy drinker, well aware of his sexuality at a time when homosexuality was in a different state of affairs than it is today. While Paul edged his way out of the closet and sobered up (at least from alcohol) the demons in his life seemed destined to carry him along and they did almost right to the end. "Center Square" does have its lighter moments and oft-quoted lines from "Squares" and other shows in which Paul starred, or was a part of, help the book along. It gets off to a slow start with too many friends, co-stars and experiences listed (it's hard to keep track of them all!) but the book picks up when Paul begins his run in "Bye Bye Birdie". The authors have done a thorough job and to their credit this is a worthwhile endeavor. But the caveat is reading about Paul Lynde, himself. Tragic and funny, Paul Lynde will nonetheless remain a wonderful comic memory of decades gone by.

Like Bewitched and love Paul

I guess I wanted to hear more of his personal life, the book was well written, but not enough "juicy" tidbits of his life.....the book did give some, but I expected more....I would still buy the book again.

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. The Acknowledgment section does not indicate if the authors conducted any original interviews with those who knew Lynde. As Lynde's fellow actors and friends are getting older, the time is now to try to get any more info they might be willing and/or ready to reveal. It seems there is some info in here that may have been garnered by interviews, but it is not noted. Still, it is a credit to these authors for pouring through the resources and putting together a thorough account of Paul Lynde. They rush through the early years (probably due to lack of material) but paint a revealing portrait of Lynde's troubling childhood spent eating and fantasizing about a life of fame and fortune, and his wild years spent as a college student at Northwestern. His relationship with high school sweetheart Marilyn Organ (nee Surlas) is described as being much more serious here than in other accounts. Surprisingly, Organ does not think Lynde was originally gay but became that way due to theatre life (14). More in depth coverage begins with Lynde's start in New York and New Faces of 1952. Of course, his big successes are detailed: Bye, Bye Birdie,

the variety show circuit including the Perry Como Show and Dean Martin Show, his stint as Uncle Arthur on Bewitched, and, of course, Hollywood Squares. As well, his less-than-stellar television projects are covered like the favorite of Lynde's that did not see the light of day (Sedgewick Hawke-Styles: Prince of Danger) and the ones that, unfortunately, did (The Paul Lynde Show). The string of films in which Lynde appeared (most of which were panned by the critics) are covered as well as his stage tours as a Kenley Player. The authors are no sycophants and sometimes use some excellent wit to deflate some of the weaker projects of their subject: "the laugh track was highly amused" (172). They also demonstrate a thorough understanding of the entertainment industry at the time and drop a lot of names of people who worked with Lynde (many of whom I've never heard, but this, for me, did not detract from the book). One interesting tidbit, for example, threw new light on Lucille Ball's recommendation that Lynde star in the family-related sitcom rather than his favorite Victorian-era Sedgewick [something I had read in a 1973 issue of TV Guide]: "Paul should have been more dubious; at the time Ball also thought she was perfectly suited to play Auntie Mame in her disastrous film version of the Broadway musical" (139). I do not know a thing about that film or play, but it shows that Wilson and Florenski know their stuff. Of course, the main selling point to the Paul Lynde story is his life outside the camera and stage, and Center Square covers it in all its inglorious details: the young actor who fell out of Lynde's 18th floor hotel window (the authors do a fairly convincing job explaining how this happened, pp. 98-9), the alcohol-soaked venom he spewed at friends and fellow actors, his drunk driving incidents where he'd drive "erratically down a L.A. street...and sidewalk" (90), his arrests for public intoxication, his hiring of temporary companions from escort services, the ugly Burger King incident during a return to Northwestern involving a 6'9 African American professor and racist epithets, etc. Of course, no book on Lynde can be written without examples of what the authors call "poof proof" (the book is published by the gay magazine The Advocate). After reading all these stories, one gets the feeling they are just the tip of the ice berg. Even with his efforts at the end to stop drinking, it is difficult to have sympathy for Lynde once his death is described. On that subject, Center Square provides a convincing and revealing account of how the actor's body was discovered perhaps finally putting to bed the seedy rumors in cyberspace involving a hustler who left Lynde to die. Details of Lynde's corpse told by the one witness who seems the most credible is quite horrifying (p. 228). The book includes four pages of b&w photos which seems very skimpy to me but, considering the extremely reasonable price of this book, it is understandable. There are tons of Lynde photos available on the Internet, anyway. After reading this book, it seems to me that the definitive account of Lynde's life and career is still yet to be written. The apparent lack of original interviews would prevent this book

from being the last say. If there were original interviews, referencing them as such would enhance the book's credibility. Getting more depth out of the interviews would also help. I hope the authors are wrong in their prediction that a time when Lynde is forgotten "approaches far too quickly" (p. 236). If they are correct, that definitive book may never be written, and that would be unfortunate. Still, we have Center Square, which all Lynde fans cannot be without.

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