

By AGNES MCKENNA

By all appearances Tommy Hunter should be nowhere in rockland '71.

No long hair. Or beard. Or sideburns. No denims. In fact, shined shoes yet. No salacious or hophead lyrics. No gimmicky group names. No drugs or busts by the police.

Just a clean-cut, all-Canadian boy image that has been out of it for half a decade, at least. Or was it?

At 34, Tommy is one of CBC's hottest properties. His half-hour country and western show was expanded to an hour this past year. At the end of the season his viewers are estimated in excess of three million, and he has a solid contract for next season. He could spend the summer playing out-of-town dates but this summer, at least, he doesn't choose to.

Tommy credits his popularity to the enduring popularity of western music itself.

ALWAYS POPULAR

"Western music has always been popular," he says, "and even when it fluctuates it always returns to a certain level."

It has merely become more complicated with many more nuances and variations possible today, he continues. Tommy has steered clear of most of them. He says he plays "commercial western music" and is going to keep it that way.

"When the show was expanded and moved from its early Sunday evening spot to 9 p.m. Friday evening I was apprehensive," says Hunter. "We tried more modern, more sophisticated stuff. But we felt awkward doing it; it wasn't us. So we stopped it."

Andy Griffith had a similar problem when he tried to change his image from homespun sheriff to philosophical headmaster and bombed.

Tommy says the new time slot has worked out "fine" though he admits he would still prefer the old Sunday spot.

"You start to lose the young

people later in the evening," he explains, "and you are up against the big Friday night movies."

Western music is on an upswing right now, continues Tommy. "Even Ringo Starr's latest album called *Beaucoup de Blues* features top Nashville names," he points out.

Tommy has done several stints in the United States, notably on the old Arthur Godfrey show, an appearance at Madison Square Garden and with Johnny Cash but he doesn't want to take his talents southwards as so many other Canadian entertainers have done.

A JUNGLE

"California and New York are about the only two states for a singer," he says. "California seems to attract a lot of weirdos and I thought New York was a concrete jungle as long as 12 years ago." Nashville is out, too.

I have worked too hard for what I have got," says Tommy "and am not about to pull up everything on the chance that I might make it in Nashville. I know a Canadian singer who has been sitting in Nashville six years and I don't think he'll ever make it. I don't have the guts to try."

Tommy still remembers what it took to get where he is. He was hooked on country music as a kid in London, Ontario and wheedled a \$12 guitar and dollar-a-week lessons out of his parents.

At 16 he decided the world was ready for him and left school to become a singer. He did get one-night stands and worked on Main Street Jamboree on Hamilton's radio station CHML.

In 1956 he heard CBC was planning a show called *Country Hoedown* and he moved to Toronto. However, his first job was selling paint in a department store for \$33 a week. One week he lived on a loaf of bread, a quart of milk and a jar of peanut butter so he would have money to send out photos.

He was finally hired as a band guitarist on *Country Hoedown* and later became a featured singer. In 1960 when CBC was looking for a replacement for the *Happy Gang*, Tommy got his own show and after that it was green light all the way. It is estimated his income is now about \$90,000 a year. At least it keeps him in \$200 suits, \$40 shoes and gold Cadillacs.

HEAVY GOING

This is the end of the first season for the hour-long format and Tommy has found it heavy going. Those who envy an entertainer who works "only an hour a week" should follow Tommy for a week.

He rehearses 9 to 5 Monday through Wednesday and as late as 2 a.m. on Thursday when the orchestra is pre-recorded. It's another late night on Friday and on Saturday the dress rehearsal and taping before a live audience in CBC's big Studio 7 can last past midnight.

"Our social life this past year has been nil," says Shirley Hunter, the tall, blonde telephone operator he married in London nine years ago. "The only day we have together is Sunday and Tommy likes to spend it at home with our three sons."

Home is a rambling, brown brick, Spanish split level in Clarkson which the Hunters built from "a hole in the ground" for nearly a year before they moved in 13 months ago.

Tommy is accustomed to being recognized by fans on planes, on the street, in the stores and he accepts it.

"It is when they stop recognizing you that you worry," he observes.

However, when he closes the door of his house he would like his fans to respect his normal desire to have privacy with his family. The fans don't always see it that way, though.

"I have had people come to the door and walk in and start looking around the house," says Tommy. "A strange drunk tried to join our family gathering on Christmas Eve. Would-be singers land on the doorstep demanding instant auditions."

So far the children, with a top age of nearly eight, have not been affected by their father's unusual method of making a living.

"The neighbors are just neighbors," says Shirley gratefully, "and even the children's friends don't come around asking for autographs."

The Hunter home is opulent with crimson carpeting, carved furniture, chandeliers and music piped into even the bathroom on the intercom system, but there are no indications that "a star lives here".

HIS OFFICE

The few show business mementos, records, a standing microphone, tape playback system are confined to Tommy's office at the back of the house on the ground floor.

Tommy would rather talk about and play the records of other singers than hold forth about himself. And if he gets started on his hero Red Skelton he's good for an hour and a half.

He has no "on" and "off" personalities. He's just himself. "It's easier that way," says Tommy simply, "and I can't be anything but what I am."

An all-day observation of a show rehearsal bears him out. The atmosphere among two dozen crew and staff is casually relaxed, almost indifferent. A mistake or a minor accident is an occasion for a laugh or a joke, not a panic. There is no "awe-of-the-star" attitude. Tommy lays his guitar on a bench; someone trips over it and walks on. Tommy blows a line. He blushes. Everybody laughs. He sounds as if he means it when he finishes his show with the hope that he'll be back next week "the good Lord willing".

"We're like a family," says studio director Steve Hyde who has been on the show three years. "It's never uptight. You can go home at night and sleep."

The Tommy Hunter Show ended its regular season this month but the final windup was a slick, out-of-character special, a salute to women, which was telecast June 11.

Despite the show's theme, Tommy is no exponent of Women's Lib. When asked what he thought about the movement he said he didn't know.

"I would have to think about that," he said. He stared off into space for a couple of minutes and said he still didn't know. He allowed that if it meant women wanted equal pay for equal work he could go along with that. However, he thinks women "lose respect" with demonstrations and other forms of extremism.

Former secretary of state Judy LaMarsh was special guest on the salute to women but despite such notable names Tommy's favorite guest was another country singer with the improbable name of Jebb Strunk.

"He's making pilots in the U.S. now," says Tommy. "If he gets his own show in the fall he will be the sensation of the season."

Tommy says he wants to do some records with Strunk for his own company Tommy Hunter Productions which was

formed last fall but hasn't done much yet.

I haven't had time," explains Tommy, "but we would like to produce records and act as a talent agency. So much Canadian talent could

be better managed." No names mentioned, of course.

This summer Tommy will entertain Canadian troops in Germany as he has done on other occasions in various parts of the world. He'll make appearances in Winnipeg, Ot-

tawa and Ontario Place. A vacation fishing with the kids, then back to rehearsals in August for the fall program.

He has no elaborate plans for the future. He hopes his show will be popular for a long time.

"Many of my fans are teenagers," he says. "I seem to lose them in the 20s but get them back after 30."

At the last rehearsal three 12-year-olds managed to get into the studio. They followed

Tommy around and he gave them autographs on scraps of paper. What did they think of him? "He's great," said one. "I could listen to him for years and years."

He'll be able to do just that — the good Lord willin'.