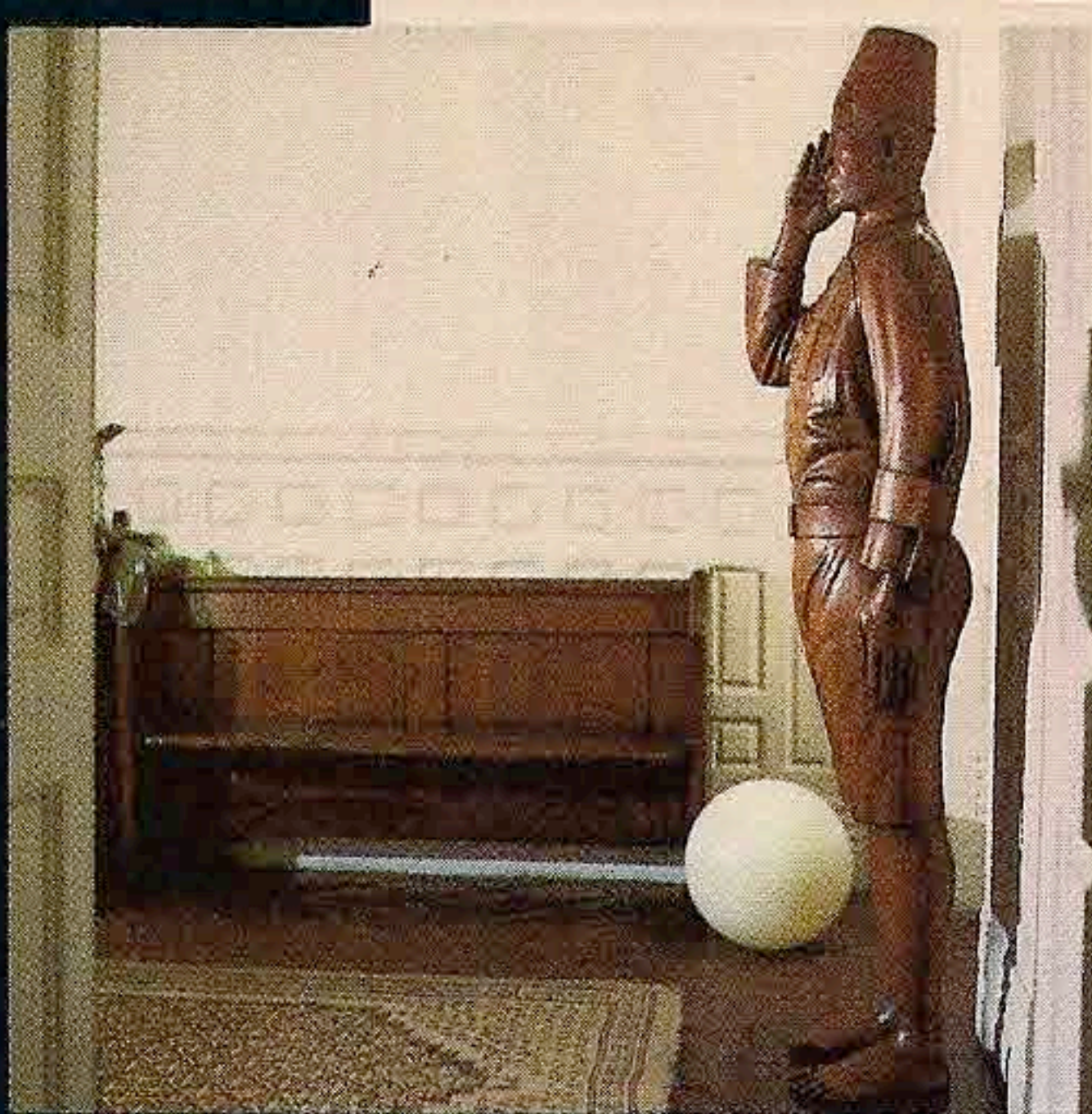


A life-size wooden African in British khakis greets visitors entering Bobby Short's apartment. Bobby first saw the carving in London when he couldn't afford it. Years later, he could.



Be It Cole Porter,
or Rodgers and Hart,
His Singing and Playing,
Are State of the Art

LADIES
AND
GENTLEMEN, **MIST**
BOBBY SH



ER ORT

The main living room features a canvas by Ronaldo de Juan and a Bechstein piano of such a luster that elves must polish it daily.

BY AIMEE LEE BALL

Bobby Short was standing at the bar of the Russian Tea Room, waiting for *blini*. Such a classy New York restaurant does not normally do much of a take-out trade, mind you, but Bobby Short lives down the block, and he had a lot of caviar around the house. And when you have caviar hanging

around the house, and the house is down the block from the Russian Tea Room, you go get *blini*. Two tourists were at the bar, talking about their weekend plans, "...and we're going to so-and-so's for lunch and to such-and-such for dinner, and oh yes, on Friday night we're going to hear Bobby Short at the Carlyle." Bobby Short, not six inches away, unshaven and wearing jeans, began pulling up the collar of his jacket and looking around for cocktail napkins to hide behind. When you have built a reputation and a career on your style and sophistication, you do not let your public see you looking grungy, with a doggy bag of pancakes, even fancy pancakes. It wouldn't do.

He has become, as the tourists at the bar knew, a genuine piece of the Big Apple, a New York thing to do. Years ago, people stopped going to nightclubs, and clever analysts of social behavior explained the decline in terms of the rising crime rate and the migration to the suburbs and the newfound fun of color TV. Bobby Short brought the people back almost single-handed, and in such force that if he ever left the Café Carlyle, some joke, the place would be turned into a parking garage, the only equally profitable use of Manhattan real estate. He works there on a rather leisurely, deftly negotiated schedule of six months a year, ten shows a week ("You have to do what you have to do, don't you?"), and he's always threatening to leave. He has no proper dressing room ("I change in the banquet manager's office. If I were to leave the Carlyle Hotel next week and go somewhere else, I'd be offered a suite"). He has no chauffeured limousine ("I go out in the street and I hail a taxi and I go to work. Two years ago there were some nights when the weather was so awful that the Carlyle called and said, 'We'll send a car for you if you'll come to work'"). But everyone knows his threats are idle—because he gets a reported \$9000 a week, and because it is *his room*. He puts on a tuxedo and sings Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hart, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Noël Coward, and Arthur Schwartz, as well as obscure show tunes from long-forgotten or never-produced plays. He performs these nearly lost songs in the nearly lost art of singing to his own piano accompaniment, and he doesn't do modern, blasphemous things with the lyrics—he sings the song the way the composer intended it to be sung. And yet, says Ahmet Ertegun, chairman of the board of Atlantic Records, who has put out his albums and put him in the Carlyle: "He might make a hit single, but it's highly unlikely. People have often told me his records don't sound as good as he sounds in person. He is what he is—that is his greatest asset and his greatest limitation.

Bobby Short has in him parts of all sorts of people. He's a little bit Fred Astaire, a little bit Billy Strayhorn, who was Duke Ellington's right hand, a little bit Noël Coward, a little bit old-time black vaudevillian at the Apollo

Theatre, a little bit Duke of Windsor. If you sat down, you couldn't invent a character like that."

There are satyrs and wood nymphs dancing across the walls of the Café Carlyle. The crowd is more sedate: prosperous out-of-towners, women who spent the day having their hair done, 12-year-old blond boys eating cheesecake with their grandmothers. There's still the clink of silverware on Villeroy & Boch china when Bobby Short enters in darkness, takes his place beside the bass and the drums and plays a little unobtrusive instrumental—"Satin Doll" or "Honeysuckle Rose." But when the spotlight comes on, there is reverential silence. You can hear every word of "At Long Last Love" ("Is it an earthquake or simply a shock?/Is it the good turtle soup or merely the mock?"). At the first applause he stands, mopping his brow with a white handkerchief plucked from a jacket pocket, demonstrating what a reviewer once called "his dental flashing on completing a tricky keyboard passage," his eyebrows arched in a look of perpetual surprise. He's in a mood tonight, he confesses. "I'm into songs about money. I learned these songs during what they laughingly called the first American depression." He does "Speaking of Love" ("I'd be compassionate/If there were cash in it"*). The crowd, he insists, looks wonderful—"Of course, the lights *do* help, and we *do* have coral tablecloths. But I think you're rich. I can smell it up here—*riche, riche, riche*." He's flirting with them now, talking about a Magic Fairy Godperson who could provide a nice Savile Row explorer's outfit ("C'mon, MFGP, do your thing"), and it turns out to be a cue for "On the Amazon." He does "And Her Mother Came Too" ("We lunch at Maxim's/How large a snack seems/When her mother comes too"), and several threesomes in the audience stiffen visibly. He wins them back with audience participation—a sing-along to "There's a Small Hotel"—coaching them on the lyrics, putting his hand to his head like an Indian scout to elicit the word *looking*. He warms them with "I've Got a Crush on You, Sweetie Pie," and when the set is done, he works the room like the father of the bride, shaking hands and accepting congratulations. It is all very comfy and informal—this is not Tom Selleck meeting the adoring hordes. The regulars he greets by name ("Hello there, Mrs. P. *Comment ça va?*"), and no one would dare to ask for an autograph, but they do offer drinks, which he declines. His eye is on the glass door to the lobby—his exit; from there he'll go upstairs and drink tea and change his shirt for the midnight show. He has just worked for an hour and made close to a thousand dollars. He can afford to sweat a little.

"There used to be a time," says Bobby, "when the second show could be a real down. They'd been out, and they were tired, and they just wanted to sit there and hear some pretty songs. Now the kind of second-show patron we get has changed. You don't just drop by the Carlyle, because you might be told there's no place for you. If you take the time and trouble to reserve a table, you come because you want to hear the entertainment. You don't come to have a conversation and hold somebody in your arms. But sometimes I think at the late show a lot of smooching goes on—upper-class smooching. 'Here I am holding you and kissing you and caressing you in this expensive, chic room.' That's a lot of points, isn't it?"

By midnight the tables have filled with white-haired men who look as if they might have invented penicillin and women with such pulled-up faces that you find yourself looking for the surgical scars—women in Ultrasuede, drinking Perrier. The conversations go like this: "He's fired and NBC still gives him a parking space on the lot"; "Have you ever actually *done* a telethon?"; "My closest friends don't know how old I am"; and,

**MISTER
BOBBY
SHORT**

An upright Yamaha piano occupies center stage in the master bedroom. The sheet music is just for show (he doesn't read music unless he's learning a new song). He has separate closets for his summer and winter wardrobes. There is a whole compartment for tuxedos. The glass tabletop in the foreground is cluttered with memorabilia and photographs of family and friends. The sheets are cotton; the walls are linen. Part of Bobby's candlestick collection—they're all spiral—is on display in the main living room (below). The library (bottom) features a collage by Richard Merkin titled *Bobby Short at the Moving Picture Ball*. The artist assembled it as a fan, then gave it to Bobby on a London street years later.



There are fifteen-foot ceilings, stained-glass windows, and five fireplaces on the first floor.



"You want to talk Jewish princesses? Neil Sedaka." These are the heavy drinkers, the men who have spent the past four hours in an uptown restaurant eating a \$200 dinner while their wives pushed the food around their plate. On a given night you might spot Frank Sinatra, Craig Claiborne, Rex Reed, the fashion plates from *Women's Wear Daily*, Gerry Stutz and Bunny Mellon, Norman Mailer and the writers and show folk who come crosstown from Elaine's, musicians like Miles Davis and Cy Coleman, singers like Leontyne Price, U.S. Senators, or members of the New York Jets football team with Wilhelmina models. These are Bobby's people. "The moment I walk in," he says, "I look around for friendly faces. If they're friends I see too often, it's not nice at all because they don't always applaud. It's proprietary. Sometimes my closest friends feel their very presence is enough."

His repertoire is uncounted—"What piano player knows how many songs he's got?" he says—but it must be in the hundreds, at least. (*New York Times* jazz critic John S. Wilson says he could name perhaps fifteen or twenty composers, and Bobby Short would know every one of their songs.) What he sings each night is determined by his gauging of the audience. "I used to go on stage and amuse myself by reaching into a grab bag of songs, relying on the elements of surprise and familiarity. Now it's more routine." There are lots of love songs—no sad songs, not even for a friend who was to die just weeks later. "Ethel Merman is just around the corner," he tells the crowd, "so I thought I'd do my Ethel Merman medley, if that's all right with you." Who's going to argue? He does a good Merman too, an enunciated, husky baritone instead of a brassy belting on "I Get a Kick Out of You" and "They're Writing Songs of Love But Not for Me." He gets a big laugh on "I've Got the Four-Walls-and-One-Dirty-Window Blues" ("If I'd saved my money when I was young and well/I wouldn't be up here sweating in this *cheap* hotel"). He announces, unexpectedly, "I'm going to sing some sweet Shirley Temple songs for you," and he signs off with "Goodnight My Love." No callbacks, no encores. When the room clears, he will have a drink at the bar, and tomorrow he will sleep till ten.

The speaking voice of Bobby Short sounds like Newport Beach, Grosse Pointe Farms and Shaker Heights, but it is, he admits, something he affected. "I go back to Danville, Illinois," he says, "and in fifteen minutes, if I'm not really careful,



I'm talking with my brothers and sisters like we talked fifty years ago." He will, in fact, turn 60 this year. He grew up in the Depression with an outhouse called "Mrs. Hoover" next to the coal shed ("I'm going out back to visit Mrs. Hoover") and a house so cold that the goldfish sometimes froze in their bowl on winter nights when there was no coal for the furnace. Myrtle and Rodman Short had ten children, but Myrtle brought them up herself after Rodman left to find work in the mines. Mother fed the family on a line of credit extended at the Piggly-Wiggly store, and for years Father was simply P.O. Box 573 in Lynch, Kentucky, but his visits home were marked by dandelion wine and applejack in the cellar (and words like "damn" and "hell" in the house). Eventually he came home in a pine box.

There was always singing in the house ("If the man in the moon was a coon, coon, coon") and at the African Methodist Episcopal Church ("Jesus wants me for a sunbeam, a sunbeam"). And despite hard times, almost every parlor in Danville had a piano. Not long after Bobby started walking, he trundled over to the upright and began banging on the keys, and by the time he was 8 or 9 he would wander the neighborhood, getting invited into one home after another to play the piano while the lady of the house swept the porch or washed the windows, and going home stuffed with cupcakes and soda. By the time he was entertaining for the Kiwanis and the Elks, he had his own white tuxedo. He was in the fifth grade.

During an engagement at the American Legion convention in Danville, Leonard Rosen, a singer, and Bookie Levin, his agent, heard Bobby Short sing and offered to take him on the road. His sister Mildred wrote out the contract in longhand—it lasted from age 11 to 21—and before he left, his mother said, "Don't forget: These men are Jews." To skirt the child-labor laws his managers flashed the birth certificate of a dead 16-year-old boy. Most of the time he was singing in the wrong key for his voice—he hadn't yet learned how to transpose on the piano—leading to endless bouts of sore throat and laryngitis, which one doctor attributed to excessive masturbation. He played in Chicago at the black-and-tan clubs where the races mingled, singing "It's a Sin to Tell a Lie." He played in New York, singing "Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup," and got reviewed by *Variety* as "Bobby Short, pickaninny type." And he played at Laurel-in-the-Pines, a kosher resort hotel, singing "My Yiddishe Mama," eating jelly omelettes, working with a young comic named Henny Youngman.

Being a young entertainer meant missing out on some of his childhood. "I was not taken to one museum or one legitimate show," he says. "I didn't hear a symphony orchestra, I didn't get to the ocean, didn't get to the zoo. Many things I didn't get to see and hear that I would take a child of mine to see and hear." He got back some of his childhood when he took four years off the road to go home and go to high school, but a month after graduation he was back at work. The coming years would find him playing in Omaha opposite Nat "King" Cole, who teased the upstart 18 year old, saying, "What are you *doing* to these people?"; playing in Milwaukee opposite his idol, Art Tatum, the great blind jazz pianist; playing in Los Angeles in a shack on Wilshire Boulevard and at the Café Gala, where a one-week engagement turned into a three-year stay. These were lean years. He lived with

Bobby's extensive collection of busts and statues includes this wooden likeness of Jean Jacques Dessalines, the first emperor of Haiti.



(and by the generosity of) a California couple who just took him in. "I don't know how it is with people who are not colored," says Bobby, "because I think it comes out of the South, in the days that followed slavery, but Negroes befriended each

other in a very interesting and kind of special way. If a couple met a young man or woman who had any promise at all, they reached right out and helped that person. You were swept into the arms of a family and protected and fed."

Another couple disapproved of Bobby's first car as unbecoming a rising star: "They said, 'It's just not good enough,' and they were leaving town and had a nearly new Cadillac convertible, and they said, 'Here, take this car and pay it off as you feel like it.' A few years later they came to me and said, 'What's your career like?' and I said, 'It's stuck here in this saloon.' And they said, 'Go to France.' And I said, 'Go to France on what?' And they said, 'Sell the car.'" A better life began on the plane—first class—and continued in Paris: an atelier in the best arrondissement, a maid, a private French tutor, and all the cassoulet he could eat. He played in the cafes frequented by Noël Coward and Ernest Hemingway.

All the years as a child performer, all the later years, somebody was always going to make Bobby Short a big star. "Can you imagine all the smart talkers I've had to deal with?" he asks. "Goodness, when I was 9 years old, there were people around Danville who were going to do marvelous things for me. I learned that was big talk at the country club on a Saturday night, but Monday morning they'd forgotten what they said. Years ago I was performing in Los Angeles, and two enormously successful lady performers were in my audience, arguing over which of the two was going to call the man who runs the Palladium in London and tell him how brilliant I was. They were at it tooth and nail. Of course, nobody ever called. It's a very difficult thing to go along year after year with nothing but compliments. You've got to have a success, you've got to make some money.

"In the Sixties I couldn't get a job in New York. Nobody wanted to hire me because of rock music and discotheques and God knows what else. I was considered old-fashioned and passé, and why didn't I change my act around and learn some new songs? But I believed in what I believed in, I thought it was what I did best, and I didn't see any reason why I should alter my performance for the moment."

The one who finally turned the tables was Ahmet Ertegun, who founded his company to record the great jazz and blues musicians he loved, who took the woman he eventually married to hear Bobby Short on their first date and courted her to requests for "Gimme a Pig Foot and a Bottle of Beer." When his best friend Peter Sharp bought the Carlyle Hotel, which then had a Hungarian cocktail pianist playing in the Café, Ertegun suggested Bobby Short as a summer replacement, and the rest, as they say, is history. Two shows a night, twenty bucks a head, reservations essential.

Willie Nelson, with whom Bobby Short has about as much in common as a rutabaga with a rose, which is not to denigrate either of them—anyway, Willie Nelson has a song that goes: "Life don't owe me a living, but a Lear and a limo will do," and Bobby Short would agree. (continued on page 236)

**MISTER
BOBBY
SHORT**

Bobby Short

(continued from page 220) In one of the oldest apartment buildings in New York, a building decorated like a Fabergé egg, half of one floor has been chopped into apartments AA, AB, AC, AD; the other half, behind massive mahogany double doors, is just plain apartment B, and it is Bobby Short's. There are five fireplaces on the first floor, Tiffany stained-glass windows beneath fifteen-foot ceilings, quarry tiles, and elaborately inlaid floors. There is splendid art everywhere—a room-sized abstract canvas and a paneled room divider by Ronaldo de Juan, a collage called *Bobby Short at the Moving Picture Ball* by Richard Merkin, who assembled it as a Bobby Short fan and then gave it to him on a London street years later, bronze good-luck lizards on the hearths, antlers above the mantle, and in the foyer, a life-size wooden barefoot African in British khakis. It was the custom of British colonials to have their servants painted, photographed or, in this case, sculpted. Bobby first saw the carving in London when he couldn't afford it and rediscovered it years later when he could.

The piano is a black Bechstein, of such a lacquer that elves must polish it daily, and Bobby listens to music almost all the time (he hates rock). But he doesn't practice, and the sheet music is just for show—Bobby Short doesn't read music except when he's learning a song. The library has show-biz biographies (Tallulah, Garbo, Groucho), *Celebrity Register* and *Smart Set* and several copies of Bobby Short's own *Black and White Baby*, but there are also *Blacks in Antiquity*, *From Sambo to Superspade* and *Sexual Life Between Blacks and Whites*. A few paperbacks. In the kitchen is a collection of wooden and ceramic Aunt Jemimas and watermelons, and a sign on the wall that once hung in a southern coffee shop: WE SERVE COLORED—CARRYOUT ONLY.

Bobby Short does not have the word *black* in his vocabulary; to describe himself or his race he uses the now archaic-sounding term *colored* because when he was a child, *black* was only pejorative, as in "Shut your black mouth." There was also special attention paid to the infinite variety of skin tone in people of color, with special favors for the lighter varieties. (During a photography session, Bobby applied an antishine powder to his face, saying, "I'll be a raving mulatto.") His young life was remarkably untouched by ugly prejudice—the local Ku Klux Klan entertained at prayer meetings and barbecues—but he traveled the country and got a good dose. "I think that being colored is just damned inconvenient," he says. "I had no desire to settle down in Phoenix, Arizona, or to seduce a white lady. All I wanted to do in

Phoenix was to earn my living and get the hell out. But there was no place to stay, no place to eat—I could eat downtown in the train station. I worked in a hotel in Chicago where I was not welcome to use the coffee shop. In St. Louis I wasn't allowed to use the front door of the hotel and wasn't allowed to be seen in the club when I wasn't working in it. There was that kind of craziness. I can recall a time in the Fifties in New York when a number of my friends felt they had to call certain restaurants to see if they could bring me."

Plus ça change... A couple of years ago, Gloria Vanderbilt tried to buy an apartment in a New York co-op, and nasty rumors had it that she was rejected because of her friendship with Bobby. She sued. "We'll never know what that was about," says Bobby. "She never found out, and she dropped the case."

Gloria has a photograph of Bobby—

"I can recall a time in the Fifties in New York when a number of my friends felt they had to call certain restaurants to see if they could bring me."

age 12, in white tux—in a family grouping on a round table in her living room. Bobby has a picture of Gloria and himself in a Cartier frame on the dressing table in his bathroom. He's been invited to Mick Jagger's birthday party, to Richard Nixon's White House, and to Oscar de la Renta's place in the Dominican Republic. He's hung out with Diana Ross and with Julio Iglesias. But he says, "I've never considered myself part of society. Even though my audience is aglitter with social names and café-society figures night after night, I don't consider myself part of that. I'm certainly invited to enough parties and dinners and weekends to make myself feel attractive and wanted, but I don't seek it out. I don't want it. I think belonging to a group is the biggest bore in the world. I've always disapproved of fraternal organizations and private clubs—I have no use for any of that. It's as if I don't want to leave myself open for the chance to be rejected. I'm not in society, and I have friends from every conceivable walk of life, on all kinds of social levels. I like it that way."

In crisscrossing the country, Bobby Short says he has become something of a "minor anthropologist," and here is one of his observations: "I think what we deprecate most is middle-class thinking. We like to think of ourselves as dressing beyond the middle class, eating beyond the middle class. 'Middle class' suggests steak and potatoes and a good iceberg-lettuce salad." He uses the word *attrac-*

tive a lot, unconsciously, as if it were a shining beacon to sail toward: about making a studio recording ("It's not attractive work"); about a concert offer ("Now, that would be attractive, wouldn't it?"); about losing his cool in a business meeting ("He stopped me cold in my tracks by saying, 'I can't talk to you any longer, Bobby—you've become emotional,' and I thought, that's my lesson for today. That was something very unattractive"); and, with a careless laugh, "Of course, I'd like my friends to all be attractive and witty and generous and rich." He speaks of what he would do "if I were a rich person" with such sincerity that it is hard to keep a straight face, since the conversation might be interrupted by a secretary announcing: "The sheets are here, but they're 100 percent cotton, which means Madame Clement is going to be ironing sheets."

The man knows grooming. There are a dozen pairs of tweezers and scissors laid out like objets d'art on a bathroom table, Elixir de Guerlain and initialed linen towels. "I have a summer closet and a winter closet. My clothes are hung up and my shoes are put away, these suits here and these suits there." There is a whole compartment for tuxedos. ("A tuxedo has got to be in perfect condition," he says. "It can't be pressed or cleaned too often—the fabric loses all of its life. Of course, I perspire, and silk and sweat are not a good combination.") There is an exercycle and an electric shoe polisher. And there is, as a reminder of why all this other stuff exists, a black upright piano at the foot of his bed. "One's body is one's means of earning one's living," he says. "I sing, I sit down to play the piano, and I use my feet for the pedals, so my entire body is involved in my performance. I ask a great deal of my body, and I have to give some attention to it. I don't pamper myself, except sometimes I do get sick and then I have to stay in bed and shut up. All performers are hypochondriacs. There are a lot of casualties of the profession—the laryngitis, the broken fingernails. I have to really take care of myself, and at the same time I must present what I do to the audience as something that's totally offhand. They don't want it to be a labored look."

An old-fashioned word suits him: *dapper*. His taste is classic if not downright conservative—red bow ties with a tux are awful; the wing collar is ridiculous—although he's more up-to-date in other areas of his life ("I think the fact that I can cook my own lunch is not old-fashioned"). When photographed he instructs, "I want to look tall and thin—I'll suck in," and he responds to the idea of paying someone else to lose weight for

Bobby Short

him, "In the old days, money bought everything—religion, service in the army." Money doesn't buy happiness, and security comes from the inside, but there are compensations: "Material things can make you feel secure. If you're going on an interview, you wear your very best underclothing, you wear a good scent and a good suit. You're doing the very best you can, and then even if you're turned down, you don't feel awful. I'm a great believer in that.

"When I came to New York in 1945, a friend of mine introduced me to Vuitton luggage, the Museum of Modern Art, and a very posh barber named André Pace. Little things like that mean a great deal when you're 20, and you begin to take off from there. I grew up going to the movies a lot, and it's awfully hard to beat the style those gents had, the clothes Cary Grant wore. I think my father liked to dress up, my mother did too. Everybody in my family has a penchant for clothing and grooming, depending on what they've been exposed to. My mother and father were both people who would have been quite extravagant, had they had the means. My mother always preached a pretty good gospel to us about being good to ourselves, and whenever I feel extravagant or feel I've overstepped the limits, I think about my mother because she would have approved. My extravagance is not on a grand scale. I think performers want a lot of gratification, sometimes instantly, because what we do for a living requires giving up a lot of things we'd like to do for ourselves. So you go through the

Cartier syndrome, where you pop in after lunch and buy yourself something pretty—new cuff links or a key ring or something nice. Or you walk into the tailor and order yourself a couple of new suits. These are all things to do when you've had a little wine at lunch and you're thinking, 'I'd better just have myself something because I've worked so hard.' And I've worked for as long as I've lived, it seems."

When he was 10 years old, Bobby Short was introduced at an Elks Club dinner by the master of ceremonies as Bobby Black, and he refused to go on-stage. The MC announced to the audience with a big grin, "The young man says he's not black—he's short."

Look back not in anger. "It does give you a certain measure of comfort," he says, "to think about all the people who kicked you about when you were beginning, who somehow couldn't recognize what you had to give, who made short and unattractive work of you. It pleases me now that I've been successful enough that I can tell them all to go to hell." Mind you, he is making these confessions in front of a blazing fire, wearing a red cashmere sweater, having just returned from his new home in the south of France, and having polished off a lunch at which, he said, "we ate caviar like it was Hellmann's Mayonnaise spread."

Living well is the best revenge. ■

Aimee Lee Ball's work has appeared in The New York Times, Redbook, and Mademoiselle.