Ted Allan

Interviewing the famous photographer Ted Allan in his studio in Hollywood, California. Ted, tell me just enough about your own personal background so that we get a sense of what turned you into what you became. Where were you born?

Well, I guess it all starts at that point. Where you were born. I was born in Arizona in a mining town and like depicted in Last Picture Show we had a little movie theatre and I lived there until I was about 11. Intrigued by movies of course, as all kids were. But that was broken into by my father getting sick and I had to move with my uncle out in a ranch in New Mexico. Which cut into it by about three years. But eventually I wound up with my mother after my father died in Long Beach, California.

And it just so happened that about five blocks from where I lived with my aunt was a deserted original motional picture studio. So help me, I don’t know the name of it. But it stood there, covered about half a block and it was deserted, closed up, boarded up. The scenery was still there, the sets. Some sets were standing. And on the way to the beach to go swimming every other day or so, I would
drop into this little studio and just sit there. And it seemed as though the ghosts would come in from all around. There even were some old fashioned lights that they used.

GREEN: How old were you?

ALLAN: At this point I'm about 12 or 13. So if we want to skip through a lot of the uninteresting part, I call it, I arrived at a point where I thought I was an artist and evidently a few other people thought I could do sketching and drawing and [02:00] painting naturally, no painting. And I got a job in my teens as -- in an art department that did lobby displays. It was called the art guild and we did displays for all the big downtown Neapolitan theatres in Los Angeles. And the lobbies for the big theatres were all custom done at that point. They consisted of oil paintings, tempera work, line sketches, characters. Whatever the picture called for we were called upon to deliver. And I became as a pot cleaner and brush washer and they allowed me to do a few ads because I was pretty good at Higgins -- with Higgins ink. And went from there into doing oil portraits and tempera [03:00] and quite a few pastels. I liked that because I could blend everything in with my thumb and make it look more photographic than some of the other art. Then along came a chap to town who threatening the business that I was
working in. He was a photographer, so called. He would take the stills from the movie, copy them and make life size blow-ups. Well, he could do a whole lobby display overnight that way. So he was cutting into our business, he was a threat to the business. He would blow up these pictures, they would put a little flesh color on them and put a little tone in the background and they looked pretty much like artwork when they got through with them. But it was a shortcut that we didn’t have. So I am, at this point, about 17 and the boss said, “Well, I am afraid we are going to have to cut down on our staff [04:00] because of this inroads of the photographic type lobby.” So I said, “Oh, I see the reason is -- you know, he’s going to take over, I presume.” I said, “I do that sort of thing.” This brash 17-year-old. And they evidently believed me because the next two weeks, three weeks they spent putting a complete darkroom in the basement. Well, when it came time to deliver, my knees were knocking and I had to deliver. I called Eastman-Kodak and I called [Amsco?] and lowered my voice a bit and said, “I am now opening a photo department for the art guild and would like to have someone come over and demonstrate the chemicals. I don’t know whether I am going to use Eastman or what.” So Eastman sent this wonderful guy over. He was with me for five or
six years, [05:00] in and out of Eastman buying things from him. But he came over, brought the chemicals and brought the type of paper that he thought I would need for the big blowups and he mixed the chemicals for me and I followed and he left me the formula. And he made my first test for me. I’ll never forget it. It was a picture of Sally Eilers and James Dunn. Ancient. I think Sally Eilers is still around. It was called Bad Girl and, of course, my post-photographic print, first photographic print was kind of unforgettable because it wasn’t eight by ten inches, it was eight by ten feet.

GREEN: Do you remember the year, Ted?

ALLAN: Oh it was, before the crash. So, you know, 17, so it was a couple years before the crash. We still had that to look forward to. But at any rate here was this picture on the marquee of [06:00] big theatre downtown is no longer in existence and one of the theatre is no longer in existence either, the Paramount theatre has been destroyed, is now a parking lot. But this photograph stuck up there on the marquee as long as the run of the picture. They didn’t run very long in those days. Most of the theatres changed them every week but this was a specialty theatre, they held them for about three or four weeks so I was able to view my handiwork for a very long period of time very proudly. So
it saved the business for this company and also it saved my
neck as I didn’t get fired. And they were very happy that
I had this knowledge which I did a lot of bluffing on but
when I used the camera to copy the stills to make the
blowups of the movie stars, I realized that most of the
stills I was copying were very flat and very uninteresting
[07:00] and it kind of irked me that I would have to take a
flat still and make it even flatter by copying it. So my
objective photographically, when I finally got into doing
portraits, was try to get a third dimension as possible.
That would be if someone said, “What do you try to achieve
in photography?” I would say, “With a flat two-dimensional
picture, I try to give it stages of lighting -- the
background and the foreground and the backlighting -- so
that it gives it as much of a third dimension as possible.”
So, that kind of made my work unique to begin with. The
arc knowledge helps in the retouching. To do just enough
retouching to kill dissipation but not kill character. So
that when I aimed my camera at all the artists there that
worked at the guild and did portraits of them and their
families and my own family [08:00] and my wife. Why, I
tried to light it in a certain way. Fortunately later on,
when I was shooting some stage actors at the El Capitan
Theatre which was called in those days, now it’s called the
Henry Fonda theatre at this point. It’s been through about four names. They gave me four little spotlights to use and I don’t know whether I insisted on accepting spotlights rather than floodlights. I still think back, being an artist, I did feel that I could paint with light and that in order to do that you had to control the light and if you used a floodlight like most of the photographers were doing -- they were using skylights and they were using the huge sort of a florescent light in those days -- it was purple light that made people look hideous. They were using all these non-controllable lights which comes to a point where I did open a little studio on Hollywood Boulevard later. All the old time photographers come by and look at my pictures in the display case and say, “Hey, what kind of paper are you using? How do you get those deep shadows?” I said, “Well, it’s kind of a special paper and I treat it with the chemicals and I achieve that mostly with Eastman paper, but it’s the way I treat it.” And I kept them thinking that that was the way it was done, I don’t know how long -- because eventually everyone started using huge spotlights in their photography but in this way I even put snoots on the lights, we call them. I took little coffee cans or little soup cans and put them so they would fit on the light so it would control the art, control
the light spread so I could just throw a light on the persons eyes, I could throw it across the face or if it was a buxom gal you’d throw it across the thoracic development and then that way you’d give it more [10:00] voluptuous and more three dimensional look. And then you’d light the background separately and you could light it hotter or colder or darker. So that the person stood away from the background at least. And then the backlight on the people also cut them away from the background. So I noticed that in movies, when they shot scenes, they threw light on the bottom part of the set and let the top part kind of go dark and that impressed me because that allowed the backlight on the light hair or blonde hair or anybody to cut them away from the background. And also keep from throwing shadows on the background of the people. So I always avoid any connection of the foreground person to the background as much as possible. Keep them in separation as much. You didn’t ask me about my technique but that happens to be the basic. That was the basic reason for my photography at the time being different from the usual. To me it was just a natural thing [11:00] because now I had been doing it off and on for about four or five years. I took and elaborate sitting of my wife in all kinds of poses and costumes and improvisations and she took around and put them in
displays. She put them in the bank window across the street and the library was a nice place so they had these pictures all around the library and this caused a chap called [Otto Dieret Fox?] to be walking down the boulevard one day and see the pictures and dropped in to see me and we formed a friendship so one day when he needed a still photographer at Fox, I was kind of a cross between doing my studio and working for the WPA in those days. You know, you had to have a few bucks because even the actors didn’t have any money. So I was building, we were building the road up along [12:00] Mulholland drive, I’ll never forget it and filling in the pass over here where they now have a freeway and this friend came over and said, Otto Dieter is calling from fox so I jumped out of the mud, got home, took a shower, put on my one pair of flannels, white flannels. And so he jumped in the car and he drove me to the studio and I worked until the finish of the picture at Fox. So after the picture was finished I had a little taste of working on a movie set and of course from then on you’re through. Your star struck or whatever it is. And nothing else will work.

GREEN: Who were the stars in that first movie?

ALLAN: That was a Charlie Chan picture. I’ll never forget it. I loved those mysterious --
GREEN: Warner Orland was playing?
ALLAN: Warner Orland.
GREEN: Was Anna May Wong in it?
ALLAN: I don’t know, they only had two weeks to go and the picture finished and I didn’t wait for Otto to give me another call. I got right into a little jalopy, a little Model T I had and sailed out to the closest place, which happened to be Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, few curves around in there from Fox Studios. They had moved from Western Avenue out to their present location. So I went over to the camera department and said I’ve been working at Fox and they didn’t ask me how long or how much I knew or anything, it just happened to hit. They needed a photographer to work on the Tarzan picture and when I was at Fox I had shot some pictures of -- what’s his name -- [14:00] [Turly McTassot?].
GREEN: Rogers?
ALLAN: Will Rogers. Which he wouldn’t sit for anybody but I had my Graflex, my handy Graflex, and managed to catch a couple of shots and that impressed everyone that I photographed Will Rogers and was able to freeze him in action for a few seconds. So they needed someone for an action picture and the Tarzan picture, swinging through the trees and carrying Maureen O’Sullivan in his arms while he
was doing it. Called for a young guy who could get out in
the weeds and in the jungle and do that. So that was one
of my first pictures at Metro. Now when I was
photographing Maureen O’ Sullivan of course she was in her
Tarzan outfit which, I understand the second picture they
covered her up a little more but she just had a little g-
string and so did [15:00] Johnny Weissmuller and it was
great until somebody complained that it was a little too
sexy so then they put a whole skirt on her which was
disappointing. I’m glad I didn’t work on the second one.
In the meantime I was working on some of those girly
pictures. One of them was Student Tour, which I was
shooting stills on and I think that was Betty Grable’s
first picture. She had a little role on it. They hadn’t
discovered her really at that point. But all the little
gals from Metro, all the contract gals were in this picture
called Student Tour, so here is a kid photographing kids,
so to speak. Teenager practically shooting teenagers, who
seemed to fit into their idea of things pretty much. Then
-- oh, the Maureen O’Sullivan thing, there was one scene
where she had on a silver lame evening gown. It was some
gag in the picture where she’s [16:00] primping and putting
this on. I don’t know how -- they discovered it in an old
trunk some place in the jungle and Johnny doesn’t like it
very much -- Weissmuller -- and they have a little scuffle in the trees and he grabs at her and she jumps out of the tree and as a consequence, flies out of the dress and goes into this beautiful nude underwater sequence. Which I guess that maybe upset -- during that period upset somebody a little bit and that’s why they clothed her a little better. But having this dress in the wardrobe and on the set, I sold Maureen O’Sullivan on the idea -- the back lot, there was one stage near the back lot, near the jungle place where were shooting -- other than shooting up north -- than actually the big jungle that is now a real estate development. We went [17:00] and shot most of the stuff exterior and -- pardon me. (phone ringing) Hello. Uh -- well, to make a long story short we were shooting in the studio, in the jungle compound, it was on the back lot but next to the back lot was a sound stage with some beautiful columns, which I love anyway, and you can see by some of the pictures. So I sold her on the idea of going in and doing some glamour stuff, a little bit different from the jungle stuff that she had been doing with a chimp. So Howard Strickling, I showed Howard Strickling the portraits that I had done of Maureen and then, in the meantime, later I did some portraits of these young gals in the Student Tour film and mounted them up [18:00] beautifully and took
them up to the head of publicity, Howard Strickling, who was in charge then. I think went through about a dozen different regimes there and --

GREEN: Yeah, he had a long career.

ALLAN: -- until he retired finally. He could tell some stories, you know what I mean?

GREEN: I bet.

ALLAN: Anyway, pardon me. (coughs) Howard says, “You do this sort of thing.” I said, “Yeah.” Because portraits for me, that was photography. Stills I loved doing because of the contact with the people and using your ingenuity to stop production while you set up and took stills. You know, if you had a few jokes to tell and you were charming enough and made them lose sight that they were losing time every time you set up and took 10 minutes or 15 minutes. [19:00] The more you could do that and the better you were, the more you were sought after with work. But when he said, do you do that sort of thing, it kind of amazed me because I didn’t separate the two. Photography was photography and portraits were -- and he said, “We’ll have to give you a shot at the gallery.” So I didn’t know what they had in mind at the time but they -- Clarence Bull had a gallery and there was a smaller gallery that the transient photographers and special photographers and magazine
photographers would come in and use. So they turned that little gallery over to me and had me shoot portraits of all the contract people. And I guess they’re feeling their way to see if I could do it but really what they had in mind was -- one day they came to me and said, “Jean Harlow is looking for a photographer [20:00] and we’d like you to audition using --” And I said, “Audition? I thought actors audition.” They said, “No, we’ve got three photographers who we are going to try out. A guy named Ball, Russell Ball; Tommy Evans, who’s Madge Evan’s brother who is doing photography; and you. So you are going to be competing, so we might as well tell you that.” So I said, “All right, fine.” I was younger and I guess I had a little bit more charm and personality than the older guy who was a very sweet guy but he had been in the business for 45 years and still was a little old-fashioned, and Tommy didn’t have the experience, he was artistic enough, some of his work was very good. But I made it the point to find out a few things about Ms. Harlow before I photographed her. I found out that she wore very few underthings and as a result when she went in the dressing room she’d [21:00] practically come out immediately. She’d throw on the dress and the shoes and if there was a hat, the hat. And that’s all she had to worry about because as a matter of fact I think when
she had gotten in a little row with L.B. Mayer one day about salaries, that usually was the problem, she said, “Look, if I don’t get a raise I am going to start wearing a brassiere.” You know what I mean? So I think she got the raise. So at any rate, she wore just the outer garments and of course had the body to do that. And so I said, “Of course I want to have a stage or I’ll use the big gallery.” So they let me have the big gallery. And sent Clarence and [Clair Bull?] home, I guess for the afternoon. But I had a set up in the four corners of the gallery. I had lights all set and a background. When I had a pier background, I’ll never forget with a big fishnet hanging over the end of the pier [22:00] and one was a very classic kind of baroque plaster thing that was photographed very well and whatever else, pardon me. (cough) When I’m talking like that I get that tickle in my throat. Anyway, I was ready for her when she got out of the dressing room and --

GREEN: You had made four different set-ups?

ALLAN: Four different set-ups and all I had to was turn my camera and hit a light. All the lights were on and the key light--

GREEN: One was a pier, what were the other three?

ALLAN: One was this baroque thing with mirrors and stuff.

And one had a few columns in and this plaster thing you see
there. And a couple of gobos on either side, black gobos and just that panel in the center so when she dressed, that dress was just -- I was trying to shoot right through it but it was so thick you couldn’t but it still gave a nice indication of her body as you see it. The fluted [23:00] skirt was just beautiful, you could just spread that all around. I got some with her sitting with it all spread out in and all she had to do was stand there and smile and boom and she thought, “Is that it?” and I said, when she said is that it, that was a compliment to me because ordinarily she would say that’s enough, you know? Anyway. I shot more and I shot better and I got the job so the audition turned out pretty good.

GREEN: What did it mean really? What did the success mean? ALLAN: It meant that a big star was asking for my services. So that meant either a steady job or an increase in salary or just a fulfillment of whatever artistic ideas I had because -- like, later on when I worked with Frank Sinatra, all I would say is “Frank wants it.” And at this point, I would say “Harlow needs this or Harlow needs that” [24:00] and she was --

GREEN: Does that mean you worked exclusively for her? ALLAN: That meant that whenever she had to have, or wanted a sitting I dropped everything. The rest of the people were,
well, people like John Barrymore and Bob Taylor and all those people you see on photographed were (inaudible) and so forth were kind of second to her because she was the one. And that was the important thing, that was the ego builder.

GREEN: She knew it.

ALLAN: She owned you. She had me and she owned me. Which was a nice feeling, you know? Others tried it. Eleanor Powell wanted to have me exclusively but she wasn’t a big enough star and her mother was always with her. [25:00] Funny to see her always chaperoning and so whenever she could get away from her she would come over to the studio and I’d shoot a few pictures if I wasn’t shooting Jean Harlow. As a matter of fact, one day she said, “Let’s get married” and I thought, “My god, is she kidding?” And actually she wasn’t kidding.

GREEN: You were a devil.

ALLAN: Well I said to her, I said, “I don’t think my wife would understand.” That’s how much I thought she was kidding. I never saw her again for 20 -- for 30 years, and she called me one day and said, “My children don’t know who I am or what I’ve done. They see me occasionally on television. But,” she said, “I’m going back to do a little show, I’m going to Vegas. Would you please do a sitting of
me?” I said, “Would I please do a sitting of you? Of course! I’ll do it in color. Nowadays —”

GREEN: What a great compliment.

ALLAN: Oh yeah, yeah. I was so flattered, you know. So that just shows how the stars wanted to have you exclusively. Harlow, of course, she owned her hairdresser, she owned the makeup man. Everyone that pleased her was hers. So I was very happy with that because it allowed me to do work in the gallery and be chosen by a few other people. Norma [Shiver?] and have course John Barrymore was a character. You didn’t have to entertain him when you were photographing. You know, ordinarily a photographer has to kind of keep them feeling unconscious, un-self-conscious because the bigger star they are, the more awkward — Spencer Tracy felt like a fool in front of the camera.

GREEN: Really?

ALLAN: The way he showed that was his dislike for the whole idea and he would get out of there as soon as he could. I’d have to get him 15-minute sessions [27:00] rather than an all-afternoon session. Robert Taylor would be there all day long changing into whatever clothes I picked for him to look rough and tumble. So that he, Tracy, would just say, “That’s it, see you later.” I said, “Well, we need a couple more.” So he’d give you a couple more. He said,
“All I have to do really is put on a -- make a movie, do a performance, that’s my job. These pictures are just…” You know. But he did them, but it was under protest. And John would -- John Barrymore -- came in and would tell story after story of his experiences and just a fascinating guy. And he’d sit there as long as -- you know. And you’d have an occasional drink with him. Oh Harlow would sit down, would bring two bottles of gin. It wasn’t vodka in those days, it was gin. And she liked (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). I’d take one drink out of those two bottles [28:00] and you know those two bottles were finished by the end of the day and you wouldn’t know it. Of course she had the limousine there to drive her around three blocks or whatever it was. It wasn’t actually three blocks, it was three sound stages away to her dressing room. And this car would wait there for her all day. And she’d crawl in with her maid, her colored maid, wonderful gal. That I called one day when Jean was in the hospital, I called to find out how Jean was and the maid evidently was just cleaning out the room in the hospital and was there and answered the phone and said, “Jean’s dead.” What a shocker.
GREEN: Oddly enough, I can remember where I was when her death was announced and I burst into tears. It’s the only time that’s ever happened to me.

ALLAN: Is that right? I burst into tears when she hit that mountain, Carole Lombard. [29:00] Because she was a charmer. What a gal. Those four-letter words out of this baby face. It was just fascinating. First time I’ve ever used -- heard a movie star use four-letter words of that sort. The (inaudible) sex and four letters and she made them sound like regular dialogue. And of course, she and Gable were so much in love. So much. She would stop everything and go on a fishing trip with him. Or Jean Harlow told me once, she said, “Look, I think that --” I had a little brochure made out, you’ll have to take a look at it, that had some things that Harlow had to say about her leading man. You didn’t ever see that?

GREEN: No, I’d love to see it.

ALLAN: And, well, she said, “Gable, yeah I think that fishing and hunting isn’t [30:00] my thing.” She said, “I think sometimes Gable wants me more as a buddy than a body.” So that made me start thinking about what she said about Bob Taylor, Franchot Tone, and Cary Grant. So I just took some of my pictures and made a little brochure of what Jean
Harlow thought about her leading men, you know? But that was of course --

GREEN: Was Taylor a problem to photograph? Because to me he was always so pretty.

ALLAN: Well, he came to me one day and said, “Hey” -- when I first photographed him and said -- “What about this bump on my nose here, kind of a Roman nose. You know?” And I said -- he said, “You think I should have anything done?” And I said, “My god, look at Johnny Weissmuller, photographs, well but up close Johnny Weissmuller’s nose is a mess from a standpoint of surgeon’s scalpel. Photographs great, gives a great impression.” But I said, “They can butcher” -- I said, “Besides that, you’d be more beautiful than your leading ladies.” So he dropped the idea and still had that nose but the widow’s peak was what made him look -- came down real sharp and his hair was glistening and healthy looking and he had the completion -- just after he shaved he was so beautiful, so good looking. When he started growing a beard, I took a few shots of him that way to give him a little virility and I would put him in sweatshirts and I had some old ragged things that I had, T-shirts and that sort of thing that I told him to put on -- scarves and he’d do it. [32:00] He says, “I want to look like a man.” And I said, “Well, maybe we can --” Oh, Harlow comes, she
said -- we were shooting on the back lot one time and I had the greatest urge to push him on the grass and mess him up when we were on location shooting, you know. But he was no problem because you could photograph him from any angle. And Douglas Fairbanks Junior was a great photographic face. This one right on top over there, you see that one? He had a dynamic face then. But, then, and of course Jimmy Stewart was a subj-- I never thought that Jimmy Stewart would be a terrific actor. You know, John Barrymore was my idea of an actor, you know? Or any of the -- Tone I thought was pretty terrific. He was kind of effete and all and kind of New York Theatre type. But, you know, I thought Jimmy Stewart was just a gawky kid that might do a few things and then be forgotten about. But he’s the one who’s lasted, you know what I mean? That’s John. He was great to photograph. Anyway, they --

GREEN: How long did the Harlow thing last for you? Because she didn’t --

ALLAN: She died a year later. So I went to work for Selznick at that point and left MGM and of course, I didn’t know it at the time but L.B. Mayer blackballed me from the lot because I went to work for Selznick. [34:00] I got to work two days a week for Selznick and make three times as much money as I was making at Metro. And I thought there’s a
son-in-law so why not? But I guess it was the abruptness. Selznick started making movies right away on his own, his own studio and I did about five pictures for him, special photography on them. *A Star is Born, Nothing Sacred,* and, just before he made the big one, I always had the habit of leaving a place just before all hell broke loose. He did *Gone with the Wind* after I left and went to Columbia Broadcasting to be the head of their photo department. But I had a chance to do Ronald Coleman and people like that when I went over with Selznick. And Joe Cotton and some of those people who were just new, beginning. So I didn’t know until I went back to MGM to [35:00] 15 years later, somebody said, “What are you doing? Oh yeah, L.B. is dead now so I guess it’s all right for you to be here.” And I said, “Are you kidding?” And he said, “I am sort of kidding but he was pretty mad at you for a long time.”

GREEN: Isn’t that interesting?

ALLAN: Yeah, he had a -- L.B. had a habit of screwing people’s lives up. Later on I had a chance to work with Francis X. Bushman, you remember him? And he was on radio, he was trying to make a living when I was working with CBS, he was doing a show and he also had a hamburger stand down at the beach. What’s the guy’s name in *Ben-Hur?* What part did he play?
GREEN: Messala.

ALLAN: (phone ringing) and all because of L.B. Mayer throwing a wrench in his career. Just screwed him up terribly. But it didn’t bother me because I didn’t even know about it because I had spent nine of those years with Columbia Broadcasting [36:00], in charge of their photography here in Hollywood. That’s where I met DeMille, and DeMille thought I was pretty terrific, and I realized later that he told somebody, he said, overheard him saying, “He makes me look less like an egg than other photographers.” And I suddenly realized -- I use shadows a lot with the spots that I spoke of with the little snoots on them, I still do that. And so in some of the shots it looks like he almost had a head of hair. But he gave me quite a bit of work after he left CBS, he was doing Lux Radio Theatre. He said, “You know, it’s a shame you lost that job.” It seems funny to say it’s a shame DeMille lost the job --

F1: Dad, John [Gobals?] 

ALLAN: God Dean Enfield I don’t know who he is. Anyways, so -- where were we? We were talking about?

GREEN: You started talking about Cecil DeMille’s losing a job.

ALLAN: Oh yes, before we get into DeMille, did you see that shot up there of Samson and Delilah? Oh first off after I
spent all the time at CBS, they hired me because they heard I’d photographed all these big movie stars and at this point in 1938, all the movie stars were crowding into radio. The Lux Theatre, Orson Wells was coming out, Frank Sinatra was going to come out here and do a 15-minute show every day or something like that. And [38:00] so they heard that I was photographer to the stars and said, “Come on, we’ll build a studio for you.” So while I was waiting for them to build a penthouse studio for me at Columbia Square, they put me in this little theatre where I started photography with Ms. Leslie Carter and the Shanghai Gesture. They had a roof garden, this theatre and they were just using it for broadcast purposes and so they didn’t utilize all the things that a legitimate theatre usually does. You know, with parties and garden parties and that sort of thing. So I had this whole roof for a couple of years while they were building the CBS building here. And that’s where I used to -- they used to broadcast the Lux Radio Theatre from there and the [Texico?] Star Theatre and every big show --

GREEN: It was your job to photograph the stills on the --?

[39:00]

ALLAN: I had two cameramen to shoot wild stuff and action stuff, which I felt for some reason, that -- I would do it
whenever a holiday came around and they wanted time off, but I did the portraits and they did the news stuff. Now all those pictures, I don’t know where they are, I’d like to have some of the portraits I did of Stuckowski, they were beautiful with his flaring hair and his white tie and tails, against these colored backgrounds, [Edlodie Layman?] and all the people for Columbia Records, I did all their portraits, everything too. That was included in the job. Nelson Eddie, I did him at Metro but then I did him for Columbia Records. Who else? Bruno Walter, you know, the conductor? And those were great shots because they were posed and there was a little thought [40:00] behind them but those -- same way when I worked for Columbi-- when I worked for NBC, I did all their big stars after I left CBS, I just did it on a daily basis and shot the Jack [Bunny’s?] and those people. All those negatives were just discarded. Can you believe that? And that’s why the John [Cobal?] chap I was just talking to on the phone from New York, he ran across these negatives that you see right here. He said, “I’ve got some negatives of yours, I’d like to have you make some prints. I understand you are still alive.” I said, “Very much so. I think.” And he said, “We are going to put a big display in the Museum of Modern Art and I’d like to have some of your pictures there and I’m
sending your negatives.” Well, you imagine when I opened that envelope and the first negatives fell out on the desk and here are these negatives of Harlow and Taylor, of 50 years [41:00] ago. And they still had my fingerprints on the negatives.

GREEN: Isn’t that incredible.

ALLAN: And I said, when I saw John, I said, “There are my fingerprints. If you think that’s not my negative, match the prints.” Because I sat down as a teenager with old retouches, have been retouching these pictures at Metro for 15 years and showed them how to retouch them, and they really resented it. They didn’t know of my background, they didn’t know that I had learned to etch a negative from this little Maltese character that taught me how to carefully shave the emulsion of a negatives so I could reduce the negative rather than scratching it. Whenever they, the studio retouchers, would etch on a negative which makes a shadow on a negative, the opposite of artwork, it would always have sort of scratches in it because the knife would catch in the emulsion where it shouldn’t and scrape it. [42:00] So all I had to do was sit down and show them that I knew how to do that and then from then on they said, “OK, you’re OK, you can tell us whatever you want to tell us. They are your pictures. We’ll do the other
photographers the way we want to. You’ll do yours the way you want to.” So that worked out very well and that’s why my fingerprints happen to be on those negatives. And also they had my name on the side, which MGM is the only place that did that. All the negatives that I did from then on, we never bothered to identify in that fashion, even when I was in charge of the department, I never thought to put my name on it or anything. So those are long gone. Somebody has them maybe someplace and maybe they have been destroyed. Like, NBC just emptied a whole room to use it as an office and it was full of these beautiful eight-by-ten negatives. And they just said, “Toss them” and off they went. OK. Now we are up to leaving CBS and [43:00] I went back to movie business because I wanted to get my card as a cinematographer which had been my -- that was motive all along, all these pictures you see on the wall that I’m appreciating and a lot of people seem to be were simply a means to an end. They were a starting point.

GREEN: I should break in at this point and just indicate that pictures that Mr. Allan is referring to are large blowups of -- and I am just going to go around the list -- of Jean Harlow looking extraordinarily seductive and glamorous and attractive, Clark Gable, Ann Sothern, Spencer Tracy, Shirley Temple, Carole Lombard.
ALLAN: And more recent one, the comedian, Jerry Lewis.

GREEN: Jerry Lewis, it’s a picture of Jerry Lewis that makes him look like a great dramatic actor. Like leading man. It’s extraordinary. And that apparently that personal shots of Jean Harlow [44:00] going back to that first shooting where you were auditioning. It’s breathtaking and then on --

ALLAN: And in back of you.

GREEN: Oh I hadn’t turned around to see that. Oh Groucho, of course, Groucho Marx. And then John Barrymore and Franchot Tone and Douglas Fairbanks and Mickey Rooney?

ALLAN: Yep, William Powell and Meryl Lie. All the rest. Yep. Those were done just to become a cinematographer or producer or director. And then of course when you remain peripheral all these years, you figure, well, if someone appreciated what you did fifty years ago, maybe it was all worth it. But all this stuff that you see except the more recent things and the DeMille stuff and things that I am pointing to around that you just mentioned, those are all done with a two-year period.

GREEN: Really?

ALLAN: Yeah. That whole stack over there. [45:00] Two-year period, which looks like a body of work but really isn’t compared to the photographers who have been going ever
since. You know, there is George Hurrell and couple of other guy’s couple of other that is still sort of working. Most of them have said to heck with it and gone off to Palm Springs if they are still alive. And Laszlo Willinger still shooting now and again. So in that way it makes me appreciate what I did that I didn’t really appreciate at the time.

GREEN: I suppose that’s inevitable though. Don’t you think. I mean all of us in our creative work, you just take it for granted as part of your growth and development. If there is a job that you have to do, you do it. And you don’t think of it as a place in history. It’s like receiving letters from friends of yours who turn out to be very famous. But I had to I had to [fade?] the letters. I would answer them, tear up the letter that I answered. That was done.

ALLAN: You don’t know at the time.

GREEN: Of course, I also think you have to have a certain kind of mind to think historically when you are 19.

ALLAN: Some people do it but I didn’t do it. I could have had a complete record of everything I did and what everybody said and --

GREEN: What was Shirley Temple like? She is such a strange lady when you see her today.
ALLAN: Yeah, she was kind of quiet and unassuming and then I was photographing her when -- I don’t know how to say it -- anyway, she married a young actor about that --

GREEN: John Edgar.

ALLAN: -- John Edgar about that period.

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ALLAN: [00:00] Put two of them on at one time, this recording.

GREEN: Right, just to backtrack a little bit you were talking about the fact that it was a body of work over a two-year period. We discussed the fact that one doesn’t appreciate that time what it is that one is doing and how that work is --

ALLAN: No, but particularly I didn’t appreciate it because I thought it was just temporary until I made another step up the ladder which would be cinematography, if you skipped that then you became an assistant director or something and then worked until you became a director. Like many at Metro came from assistant directors which now a days isn’t quite as true. They remain assistant directors all their lives, that’s a career for them.
GREEN: You were talking about Shirley Temple having married John Edgar.

ALLAN: Yeah, I don’t know if she was kind of coerced into that or not. But [01:00] that didn’t mean that when I saw her and saw them together, they were working in this picture, they were very lovey-dovey and looked very happy. I don’t know what happened later on but evidentially it didn’t pan out to well. But she was a quiet little gal. I didn’t know her when she was the tap-dancing Shirley.

GREEN: The moppet.

ALLAN: The moppet. I thought that she was pretty clever to be able to carry a tune and tap dance at the same time, you know?

GREEN: She was totally enchanting, she absolutely captured everyone’s heart. It didn’t work as she got older.

ALLAN: Yeah, but in this picture she’s got a certain charm and then shortly after that she did the TV -- radio series. You know the -- I’ve forgotten the name about it but something about sweet sixteen or -- Am I [02:00] terrible not to remember the name of that because we had to photograph for -- quite often, whenever they need a picture for radio guide. We had to do a new sitting on her. She was quiet and unassuming and evidentially very talented and very intelligent, which is the important thing I think. A
lot of the actors nowadays, I notice are able to interview and sound pretty intelligent which a lot of them in those days, during the Betty Grable period, sometimes sounded a little inane. They, I think, were more of a manufactured type --

GREEN: You called it the Betty Grable period. Are we to imply that she wasn’t terribly bright?

ALLAN: Well, she didn’t try to espouse any great theories or thoughts or anything. She was just happy going along with being a movie star. And, of course, I talked to her [03:00] before she ever had that big break at Fox, but things at Metro were just little bit parts, it’s hard to tell what happened later. But the picture of her that someone snapped incidentally during the war has become very famous, hasn’t it?

GREEN: Yes, her looking over her shoulder with her legs together. I guess one of the great pin-ups of World War II. Did you ever photograph any of those pin-up ladies? Rita or --

ALLAN: No, I missed but my assistant, Eric Carpenter, who is now gone and I think was younger than I and was my assistant for years. He worked for Clarence Bull and then he worked for me and I taught him a few things. We got him in the union and he went on to become quite a glamour
photographer. So you’ll be probably seeing shots by Eric Carpenter of -- who’s the sweater girl? She thought --

[04:00]

GREEN: Ann Charter?

ALLAN: No.

GREEN: Lana Turner?

ALLAN: -- Lana Turner. He was her favorite photographer it turned out. So I was very happy with Eric Carpenter because when he came to me he was a cement man, he had been plastering. Doing plasterwork. But he used to go out and pick up the props and take care of -- be sure the wardrobe is delivered and all do all kinds of things that a photo assistant wouldn’t really have to do but he wanted know the whole business. So as a result, after we got him in the union, he went great guns and did a lot --

GREEN: That’s a gratifying thing to do because you’ve --

ALLAN: I’ve had quite a few apprentices and helpers and I’ve kind of, I felt, sent them on their way doing what I think is quite a noble thing. [05:00] Making people feel at ease and relaxed so you could peak in on a little intimate part of their lives, their souls, whatever it is. And they all, three or four of them, have become quite successful.

GREEN: I always find that there are certain people that when you see them in person, none of that quality that you see
on the screen comes across at all. It’s as though the camera takes a special delight in making it all work. Can you remember stars like that?

ALLAN: Well, I think that’s what makes it difficult to find a star. Because they don’t present themselves right there on a platter for you. That was a beautiful part about MGM. L.B. Mayer knew that you didn’t know immediately and he gave them time to nurture. He gave them time to develop. It was a family really. [06:00] It was a very -- MGM was the place to be. Both for me photography, cinematographers too. They gave James Wong Howe a chance to do develop into quite a cinematographer. He started as a portrait photographer and he made a big mistake one day and they fired him off the picture but that didn’t mean they fired him out of the studio. He was shooting a shot of a -- the girl of The Thin Man, Myrna Loy and she -- he was doing something that was way in advance of what they were doing in those days. He was inventive, you see. And that’s what made MGM what it was, the actors could improvise and show what they had to offer and he would allow them to develop. [07:00] Well, to go back to the photography, James Wong was shooting this bedroom scene and Myrna Loy comes into the bedroom with a beautiful satin negligee on -- it was just magnificent -- and they had to put a very deep makeup on
Myrna Loy because of her freckles. It was like Crawford had to have a very deep pancake. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) before they invented pancake.

GREEN: For the same reason?

ALLAN: For the same reason, Crawford was covered with freckles, terribly freckled. And you never realized that. There are a couple of shots of George Hurrell that are taken without any retouching and they are really classic because there she is in all her freckles. So anyway, here is this deep makeup on Myrna Loy coming into this kind of low-lit bedroom scene and it’s powdered down beautifully and her hair was kind of the same color -- her hair was a kind of blondish brunette-ish. [08:00] And she walks in and James Wong had lit the set with indirect lighting. They were using a bounce light all the time now, they call it. And here the lights all shot up on a sheet stretched across the top of the set. And these lights bounce down in and make a beautiful glow in the room. Well the film wasn’t quite fast enough and he didn’t have a fast enough lens, didn’t have a big enough opening and Myrna Loy’s gown absorbed every bit and reflected every bit of the down light. So here was a headless woman walking around the bedroom. All you could see was the negligee. You couldn’t see her face at all and her hair disappeared also because
it was the same color. James Wong How was doing something that every cinematographer does today with bounce light, to get a soft light spread all over the place, no shadows. And he was at least 20 years ahead -- and they fired him, [09:00] off the picture the next day. Well, he hung around sitting, I’ll never forget, sitting in the camera room there for a couple of days until another picture started. But they said, “None of that.” But that was allowed. Mistakes were allowed. The director got you fired but you got another picture right away. I suppose the same thing happens to portrait photographers. If Harlow hadn’t liked me, if she had said, “Forget it.” They’d put me back on stills. You know, I’d still be at Metro. But that’s how we got into that nurturing and you ask -- you can’t tell whether they’ve got it or not until they step in front of the camera. It’s like we all go to a party and we are all lively and our charm is all on and everything and we come home [10:00] and we slump in the chair and we watch television. It’s probably when the camera turns on you, you exude just that much that you don’t otherwise. Or you keep it in reserve until that moment, maybe. Maybe that’s the reason.

GREEN: That’s part of it. I also think there must be something --
ALLAN: But you don’t dig in. I don’t put it that they are getting to the soul of the person. It is just an exterior thing. If it comes across, maybe it’s the depth of the eyes. Maybe what you’re seeing --

GREEN: And I go along with that. I think it has more to do with --

ALLAN: I never said, “I’m capturing your soul.” Jesus, voodoo or something. But I try to get a third dimension. I have my lights very mobile. That’s why when I’m shooting with strobe you never quite know, you are doing that for other reasons. Sinatra I did a lot of strobe shooting with because he is moving all the time or he was moving all the time. Nowadays, he’s slowing up a little I think. [11:00] But portraits of him, sometimes I had to use strobes to stop -- where he needs of a thousandth of second to stop him, other people you can give a half a second exposure and get them. But with lighting I keep the key light mobile. It’s always on a fulcrum, always on a boom. In fact, while I was at Metro they used to build all these special things for me. Anything I wanted. And Harlow, if I’m shooting Harlow, anything I wanted I got. With Sinatra, anything I wanted with Sinatra album covers, whatever I did for him, you know -- Frank wants it or Frank needs it or something and it goes.
GREEN: Who were you working for at that time when you did Sinatra?

ALLAN: I was under contract to Sinatra.

GREEN: Oh, tell me about that, how did that happen?

ALLAN: Well, at CBS I had photographed Frank in 1945 when he was the scrawny --

GREEN: Bobby soxers’ delight.

ALLAN: Yeah, the bobby soxers’ delight, [12:00] they wanted to monitor him. And, so I dug up five beautiful gals around CBS there to surround him for a magazine cover. And when he left after the sitting he took all the girls with him, didn’t leave any for me. But I don’t think he ever forgot that. But even so, I didn’t see him then. He went off to Metro and did those pictures and then of course the thing at Columbia when he made his comeback and all that. I didn’t see him in all those years. And one day a friend of mine, publicity man, called me and he said, “Hey, Sinatra’s forming a company and he needs somebody like you to do everything and you can do it.” And this fellow had worked half a day for him, this publicity man. Oh, months previously I hadn’t [13:00] thought one second about the job I had done. I was disappointed because it was an action show and potraits were more to my liking. But I took out my trusty Nikon speed cameras with the motor drive
and the whole thing and captured a lot of stuff in that half a day that I might not have gotten had I been saying to somebody, “I just want to sit around and do portraits.” But that half a day’s work caused him to call me and say — and then he gave my name along with some other names to Frank and then Frank said, “Ted Allan.” You know. So putting the finger like that was all he had to say and they got Ted Allan, you know. So it was a verbal contract for a couple of years and then finally I was down in South America shooting some production stills and poster art on a picture called Taras Bulba made in Argentina. And that went on and on and Frank wanted me for Manchurian Candidate. And I had to -- so I wasn’t through with Taras Bulba though -- and he got so made and he said, “When I want him, I want him.” You know so he assigned me a contract. So then in between pictures I did album covers for him or shot Nancy’s birthday party or --

GREEN: How long did that -- How long were you involved with that?
ALLAN: Seven years. It was a total of seven years starting with X15.
GREEN: Was he a generous employer?
ALLAN: If you could only have one friend, I’d pick Frank Sinatra.
GREEN: Really? That’s nice to hear.

ALLAN: Yeah, because if he likes you -- if your in -- your in. I went around and spent three months with him going around the world, you know? And then when Jean, my wife’s birthday, I was saying, “Oh boy, I wish I were there, Jean’s birthday is June the second when we were in London.” And what did he do but one day he said to me, he says, [15:00] “Go down to the airport there and pick -- get somebody, make sure they get back here to the hotel we are staying at.” We are staying at -- what the hell is the fancy --

GREEN: Dorchester?

ALLAN: Hm?

GREEN: The Dorchester? (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) on the river there.

GREEN: In London? The Savoy.

ALLAN: The Savoy. He said, “Make sure they get back to the Savoy.” And I said, “Who’s coming?” And he said, “Well, someone but you’ll know him when you’ll see him. Getting off the plane.” I went down and my wife was getting off the plane on her birthday. So we spent a lot of time in London there, Frank had his private plane there and his pilot and everything. So we flew -- we didn’t have to through customs or anything. We went over to France and
landed there and we went down to the Riviera and the Cannes and Jean had a wonderful time. So that’s the kind of surprises he was doing. [16:00] And every year he would send me a Christmas tree, fully decorated of all things. (inaudible) would come with a Christmas tree with all the decorations. I said one day, “You certainly saved me a lot of trouble because I hate decorating a Christmas tree.” I would say he has been generous to all the people I know that he makes producers out of. He wanted to make me a producer and I didn’t push it so -- Highhedhohi -- because he turned right around and made Bill Daniels a producer that same month and Bill produced a couple of pictures. Bill Daniels, you know? The movie cameraman who was doing our pictures and it only -- for Bill I think it only meant that he got a little extra money because when you are a producer with Sinatra, he always had a line producer to do all the work. He reserved, I guess, the right to [17:00] make any changes or alterations of anything.

GREEN: What was the last year of your contract with Sinatra?
ALLAN: Um, seventy-something.
GREEN: Do you see him at all?
ALLAN: I haven’t seen him since he was remarried but I -- he used to call here every once and a while. He wanted a shout to give to Groucho Marx who was -- just bought a
yacht and he wanted a picture in a Capitan’s cap, yachting cap, to give to him. So I ran down to his place and did it just for kicks. And he had this -- like Edward G. Robinson -- he had this beautiful gallery of these original paintings, beautiful stuff down at Palm Springs. And I went down and did color photographs of all these paintings and then I blew them up to the size of the painting and when he would lend one, he would stick my copy, [18:00] the color copy, up in its place.

GREEN: That’s a nice idea.

ALLAN: Yeah, which was (inaudible) because the copies were -- they weren’t any better -- but they were just as good and you would have to go up and touch them to know that they were copies because I gave a transparency to the printer, so he could copy the color mark. So it’s stuff like that I carried on after we were through with our contract but --

GREEN: Where did you go after Sinatra?

ALLAN: I went back to making backstage films. See I -- the last pictures I shot stills on Sinatra was called the detective. I have forgotten what year that was but then I worked on his other pictures doing the TV five minute backstage, the fun and foibles of making movies. So I did about a dozen of those for various people, for [19:00] Universal mostly and that was a kick because that got me
back to my cinematography. And sort of producing and directing. On Tora Tora, I did half an hour on that show. The story about the pilots and how they hired them and how they had to train them to fly the Japanese zeros and various -- the bombing planes that they used in Pearl Harbor. So that got me away from shooting anything more for Frank. I don’t think I did any album covers after that but it was a great joy because allowed me to go around the world in one trip for three months. And also every location was a delight. Imagine going to Hawaii for six months, on None but the Brave [20:00] where he was directing it. And we had a situation there where everyone though he would stay up so late that he would be dragging in at ten, eleven to do his directing job but boy he was up to four or five in the morning telling stories to all of us but he was there before any of the crew was there in the morning, figuring out what the setups were going to be. And when the camera --

GREEN: Is that (inaudible)?

ALLAN: Yeah, when that camera crew came there he said, “The camera crew’s there and the actors are there and get them out of makeup and let’s go, roll them.” You know? And -- so he was right on the job. I don’t know why he didn’t because the picture was a neat little movie. It was half
Jap— the Japanese produced their half of it and he produced the American half but he did the whole — it was his production all together. He had the full say about it. He used Tommy Sands and [21:00] his daughters --

GREEN:  Nancy’s first (inaudible)

ALLAN:  Nancy’s first (inaudible). So then going and living in Hawaii for all that time and just having a ball. That’s where he almost drowned, you know? One of his actor friends saved his life because he was a little plumper, a little more buoyant.

GREEN:  Brad?

ALLAN:  Brad Dexter.

GREEN:  They need to remember that.

ALLAN:  So he made Brad Dexter producer after that. If I had known I could have saved his life and become a producer. So living on location. And then he would let me go if I wanted to do another movie or something and he wasn’t busy. He’d let me go do it, so that’s one of the — I went off on the verbal contract and went to Argentina to do Taras Bulba and wasn’t ready to do Manchurian Candidate when I came back. So that’s when he said, [22:00] “Let’s pin him down.” And then he let me do Raquel Welch’s first picture. It was Fantastic Voyage, I guess it was the first picture here. She had done something in Europe I think. And he
let me go do Sand Pebbles. And that was a year in China, in Taiwan.

GREEN: How was Steven McQueen?

ALLAN: Oh, great. Difficult but great. I mean, I -- they were difficult with me because they didn’t want to do something, I never pushed it, I never -- you know. And he had his own ideas about it. But you know how to use that. He would ride a water buffalo where he wouldn’t sit for portraits. So something like that, you know? He thought that was cute, a gag. Or anything he would do with motorcycles, he’d do anything he wanted. Off stage publicity, you know?

GREEN: That’s interesting. Do you think there is any connection between the [23:00] macho quality of some of these guys like Spencer Tracy and Steve McQueen that makes them feel that sitting for a portrait is sissy work?

ALLAN: Yes, yes, I feel that. They are not moving, they are not expressing themselves. And they are being directed by somebody they don’t even know. In most cases that’s true. A one-time photographer might make them feel terrible. But we live with them practically when we’re on the set, you know. And --

GREEN: Tell us a little bit about directing a photograph. I mean, did you direct Harlow for instance?
ALLAN: Oh yeah, sure, sure.

GREEN: Give me an example of how.

ALLAN: Well, for instance in this pose I know what the lights, the pose I’m alluding to is that beautiful gown with that voluminous fluted skirt and the full buxom and the tight waistline, you know? Now I want to show her but I also [24:00] want to show the gown, you know?

GREEN: And a hint of the body underneath.

ALLAN: And a hint of the body which I know I am going to light it. But also after she picked the gown up with her hand and spread it open, then my assistant, I have to tell him, “Hit that with a cross light to show the fluting.” And for her to tilt her head a certain way in keeping. Now with men I always had to direct them in some fashion because they had a tendency to sit back and be relaxed. Well that shows a double chin, it shows shooting up on the face, a round broad face looks terrible that way. A man has to look like, we used to call, the radiator cap.

Forging ahead.

GREEN: The intensity of the --

ALLAN: They had to lean forward most of the time, or grabs something or hold something [25:00] or make like doing something.
GREEN: Now when you directed them, apart from physical directions, did you use concepts? Would you try to get them to think about something?

ALLAN: Yeah, with women. With men I never felt I could get away with that, you know? I would never tell Clark Gable what to think about because he was a pro in the first place. When he is sitting in front of you he is thinking about something already and you see it in his face. He’s looking askance, he’s looking -- you can tell him, “This is looking off into the future.” If you dare. Or “This is in reflection.” Or “This is in retrospect.” Or whatever. You can give them that general direction and lean forward. You know? Always, I think -- I don’t know. Seeing, lean, well. So you use [guile?] while doing something. And Jerry, these are all candid. There are four shots of him and they all look similar. [26:00] They all look very handsome. He’s never seen them. I did them for Rolling Stone and then there was a change in things and I just forgot about it.

GREEN: Oh he’s never seen these before?

ALLAN: He’s never seen them and they are four magnificent shots if I do say so -- from a standpoint of not looking like Jerry Lewis. If you want to look like Jerry Lewis.

GREEN: They look like a handsome leading man.
ALLAN: Right. And he did a dramatic scene, I understand, on television recently and people liked it and of course, *The King of Comedy*, I thought was a quite good picture. I don’t know if you saw it or not. OK, women, you can fantasize a little bit or have them fantasize. You know, come hither, petulant. Just tell them what to do and then the dialogue goes along with whatever you’ve indicated. So -- and where to bend the knee in [faction?] shots, the upstage knee. It keeps it from being a masculine stance.

GREEN: Were there any people who just knew how to do it automatically?

ALLAN: Yeah, all the dancers of course. Tilly Losch, you know. And the gal we were just talking about earlier.

GREEN: Eleanor Powell?

ALLAN: Eleanor Powell. They know the basic facts that -- in those days particularly -- shoulders were broad, hips were narrow. And you posed with that in mind so that that cut down a lot of poses. Nowadays, they fall all over the place and the clothes are baggy and they are running and jumping leaping and it’s interesting. I like it. If I were doing fashions today, I’d do similar action stuff. Because it did get to be pretty confining to say, “Bend the upstage knee and turn the shoulder broad.”
GREEN: We are now returning to exactly that period though.

[28:00] It’s back to glamour again.

ALLAN: Is it? I hope so. Maybe I might -- as I always tell interviewers --

GREEN: Re-enter the field.

ALLAN: -- I always say it’s great to be a part of history and to be around to enjoy it. But -- So I’m enjoying it. And I wish I could tap dance again and do my [adagio?]. I have a collection of pictures that -- when we are testing strobes and flash strobes years ago, we always -- I think the one guy that did that most famously -- the photographer who did Nixon jumping up in the air and fluttering his feet like a dancer. I’ve forgotten who that was but a famous photographer. But always before we would do a sitting somebody would jump up in the air and we’d grab an action shot out of it. I’d find myself jumping through heart shaped things on Valentine’s Day, leaping up in the air to test whether the flash was in sync [28:01] or not. Harkening back to the time that I didn’t mention that I did [adagio?] dancing with a partner for a brief period of time.

GREEN: You did personally?

ALLAN: Yeah, and I think, when two of us did the turn around with the girl, feet and legs, what caused me to quit was I
think her face just scraped the floor a little bit when we did the dishrag thing. You know, wring the dishrag. But, anyway I got into photography after that so dancing... but Tilly Losch who was a famous dancer, I did some wonderful things of her during the MGM stay. And she said, “You used to be a dancer, didn’t you? You’re telling me how to dance!” I said, “Well, I’m not telling you how to dance, I’m just making a suggestion.” I said, “I’m very flattered that you think that, I hope you mean it.” So what else?

GREEN: Well, tell me, when you [30:00] worked with someone like DeMille on one of these big, enormous epic things -- whether, crowd scenes, a lot of people and so forth -- how much direction can you give to keep everything under control as a photographer?

ALLAN: Well with DeMille, I didn’t have to direct. He sat beside me in a big chair and directed every scene that I did and he called me in twice a week to do the big scenes. His office would call me whenever they had a big scene to do and they would try to give me a day preparation because I used a Lemma 14 camera. That’s a huge camera. He was sold on the idea because I had the big camera and because I was his favorite and only photographer at CBS. So he had me come in twice a week and he would sit there and direct and he would say, “Get that wristwatch off of that fellow
up there,” you know, in that scene there. [31:00] And he would see it out of a thousand people he would see something that wasn’t --

GREEN: Because it was a Bible epic.

ALLAN: Yeah. There is a story that I tell usually about working on The Ten Commandments where he hired me as an actor. I worked with him as an actor in a thing called Unconquered, I was still a ham enough to go out and think maybe I might try to act again after I’d left CBS and a few other things -- places. So he used me as an actor and then later when he was doing The Ten Commandments, I just -- it’s a long lurid story, I’d just lost a studio, movie studio that I was trying to make go for about five years and somebody stole it from me, a corporate thief. Which is a long other story but the fellow had all my furniture. We were down dressing the sets [32:00] on the last picture we made which was a feature picture and he -- at that time -- decided to lift the whole studio from me. You know, you see it in movies and all that. The dramatic thievery and stealing of corporate -- I made him president so it was my fault but that was his hobby, stealing corporations. Anyways, I was bereft and didn’t have a job so I went down to DeMille and told him a little bit, I didn’t give him the lurid story. But I said, “I’m broke and I need a job.”
And he said, “Well, we’ve been working on The Ten Commandments for a year so we don’t have any camera jobs but,” He said, “If you are still acting, why, of course, I can use you.” I said, “We’ll --”

GREEN: “Sure, I’m hungry.”

ALLAN: I said, “I haven’t paid my back SAG dues but I’d be glad to do it.” And I started to walk away because I hadn’t paid my dues and he [33:00] called his secretary and find out how much Allan owes SAG. So he did and he made a check out and paid all my back dues. And said come to work tomorrow morning if you can put in -- get some contact lenses to make your blue eyes brown for the picture. I said, “Well I don’t but -- fine, I’ll try that.” So long story, I got the lenses in but in speaking about and picking a wristwatch out of the guy up in the crowd where one thousand people are milling about and telling the prop man to take that watch away from that guy. Why he called me over one day and he said, “Look.” And I saw this still. And here I am in the middle of this still standing beside Edward J. Robinson and my blue eyes are just flashing like mad. And he said, “Allan, where are those contact lenses?” And I said, “I’ve got them but I couldn’t wear them, they were killing me.” He said, “Put them back in there.” [34:00] And so he pick little nits out of epic scenes and
that’s why he directed every one of my scenes that I shot
stills. He would sit there and tell them exactly what to
do. Where to put her hands, everything.
GREEN: And (inaudible) and (inaudible). She -- that was an
incredible face.
ALLAN: Yeah.
GREEN: It was extraordinary.
ALLAN: Wasn’t it.
GREEN: Because one of the things I remembered about camera
work was the way she was introduced to L.B. is -- remember
that opening scene where all you see are her lips and then
a light goes off and the camera comes up and then you see
the eyes, the nostrils, the eyes, the turban and this
extraordinary beauty and it was like peeling layers.
ALLAN: That’s what a cinematographer tries to do.
GREEN: It was a wonderful experience.
ALLAN: That’s what I wanted to apply. I wanted to apply my
experience in portraits and control lighting and doing the
backstage films never quite did that [35:00] for me. It
was fun doing a little movie. That was the joy of it. A
beginning, a middle and an end. Make it make sense, make
it look like they are having fun. On the Sinatra films
that I did, it looked they were having more fun than they
were, you know, which is a successful way to do these
things. Even though the film was just kind of an ordinary --

JEAN ALLAN: How are you?
ALLAN: Hey, that’s Jean right there.
GREEN: I am fine thank you.
ALLAN: Oh yeah. I can use --
JEAN ALLAN: This is diet slice.
ALLAN: Diet slice.
GREEN: Diet slice can’t hurt me at all. Thank you Jean. We are being entertained and our hostess has just arrived. Just a few more minutes Ted, I am very grateful for all this, it’s very wonderful. Well I think it’s fascinating that DeMille would take the time and trouble and -- plus it’s typical of creative people who really feel strongly about what it is they want to produce. Did you ever have anybody that hated the pictures you took of them? In a style that would simply say “These are terrible.” [36:00] Because they were getting old or --
ALLAN: Only once. And it wasn’t because the pictures were bad, it was because they didn’t want to pay for them because it was private sitting. A very famous European actress -- Russell Birdwell, I think, was the famous publicity man --
GREEN: Yes of course, I knew Russell.
ALLAN: -- sent her to me. And I thought he was paying for them and he thought she was paying for them. So the pictures were quite nice. They were very good as a matter of fact. They weren’t sensational but they were as good as anything I’d ever seen of her and they were more recent. So all of a sudden --

GREEN: Who was it? [Berner?]

ALLAN: Jean? Oh, wait a minute she has speakers. I can’t remember her name but her face is right there. I think she is still around, I think she recently did a television thing. But anyway [37:00] she was -- didn’t want to pay for them so she, she didn’t have to say the word terrible, she said, “Look, there has been a misunderstanding, forget it.”

GREEN: Well that’s understandable.

ALLAN: Or I’ll pay some expense money. But she went no, no thank-- So I think when they just want to cut it clean they say the pictures are terrible. But that’s the only time, I’ve been very lucky because I’ve worked -- I’m unfortunately the kind of a guy that works all night to do a thing and shows up in the morning and throws them on the table as if this is just easy, this is the way it’s done. It’s just magic. You know? But I’ve -- being a retoucher and an artist -- I’m able to deliver that sort of thing
without requiring any outside help or assistance. I can do the whole thing from developing to printing to retouching.

[38:00]

GREEN: Who was the easiest face to photograph, that you ever photographed?

ALLAN: I guess Lombard, really. Because of her animation and natural exuberance. When you’re ready, she could hold it. She seemed to remember the attitude she was purveying in action. And then when it would be frozen and you could get it in a twenty-fifth of a second which I tried to -- during that period of these pictures that you see, it was kind of -- I have it “open...close” type of exposure. But a lot of things can happen in a face during a half a second or a forth of a second or a fifth of second. So I tried to shoot a twenty-fifth of a second, even though the films were slow and the lenses weren’t fast and I managed to get away with it. And then I could push them a little in the developing, you know? So I did not only [39:00] direct the retouching but tell them how to develop these pictures. DeMille -- to get back to DeMille -- he saw these 11 by 14s when I brought them in and of course I built a little stand and a little shadow box to show them on -- it wasn’t a little stand because it was bigger than 11 by 14, which in a transparency was unheard of. Commercially they were
doing food shots and things like that with Lemma 14 film, KodaChrome, pure color, no grain. So when he first -- he knew he wanted some special type work and I told him what it was going to be but he had no way of knowing that these 11 by 14s were going to be like this. Luminous, just glowing. So when he saw the first day’s work -- you know, DeMille was a very reserved person but he just, was almost, speechless. He didn’t jump up and down or anything. He was speechless and he ran out of the room [40:00] with these two things and showed them to somebody. He has an assistant who -- so he took this shadow box I found out and he would go to the vault, he’d put these in the vault at night. He had all these famous painters doing all these paintings all over his office and never worried about anything happening to them but these photographs he put in the vault. And every board meeting of any kind -- these long tables -- I came in one time and he had, I wondered, they said DeMille is busy in there. And I peaked in through the door and this board meeting with it’s long board room with all these -- the various accountants and money man and everything and he’s at the head of the table with the shadow box doing a slideshow with these 11 by 14 photographs hanging down in front of his ground glass. This opal glass. And I thought, “My god, it is important
to him. He’s making a -- Nowadays, we can dupe and blow [41:00] those things up and do the same thing but in those days it was quite novel and it was the original colors so it was just sensational stuff. Kodachrome. Half way through the picture they stopped making Kodachrome and I had to go to Ektachrome and later on -- I think that print turned out pretty good. That was Kodachrome and this is ektachrome, which in the transparency you could tell a lot of difference, you know? But the big scene there in this two shot was Ektachrome, what you’re looking at. So at any rate, the color was so interesting that he, even more so then, sat down beside me and directed every scene. Which made me feel pretty much like a big shot. I’m the best cameraman. Well he hired me for The Ten Commandments, finally, and, as I said, to be down in the crowd with a movie camera, now I’m back to my cinematography [42:00] finally after 40, 35, 40 years. Doing cinematography for the biggest producer/director in Hollywood. And that was my idea for the two years, I thought after two or three years I would be doing it at Metro. But I got sidetracked of course and then CBS was a waste of time, away from achieving my goal that is. So now, this is what I am hired to do, the actor behind a post some place photographing the crowd in all its, whatever, agony or ecstasy or whatever.
Candidly doing this and Henry Wilcox is my director on these little units. So we work out what is to be done before -- you see, well, we keep waiting and there is no hand camera -- VistaVision hand camera. [43:00] The last day of the picture, the technician comes on the set and he says, “Here it is, Mr. DeMille.” And I said, “There it is Mr. DeMille.” I never got to shoot one foot of -- it’s VistaVison, it’s a special camera they were shooting the movie with. And the hand camera wasn’t in existence until we ordered it. And now they made it -- since then they made dozens of them and they were sold for all these special effects people to use.

GREEN: It’s funny how timing operates in our lives.

ALLAN: Yeah, so when I -- but it saved me from great despair, from losing my studio. And I always say he kept me from going to jail because eventually I might have really -- this character who stole the studio. Because stole into my automobile, took everything. Because I had put all this stuff in the corporation, [44:00] my automobile.

GREEN: One can be victimized, no question about it.

ALLAN: All my friends who were at the studio at the time, they called. And my attorney says, “You can’t hang around here. If you are going to sue the guy you’ve got to get out.” So I’m on the street and later on he took it as a
tax loss, this character. Millionaire, plenty of money. Angela Lansbury was very -- was playing the lead in the picture, the last picture, that I produced there called Life at Stake with Douglass Dumbrille and Keith Andes in it. I was very proud of that but the guy who financed it stole my studio so I never got a print of the picture.

GREEN: She’s a lovely lady, isn’t she?
ALLAN: Isn’t she charming?
GREEN: And it’s nice having this enormous success right --
ALLAN: This was in 1955. This was when she didn’t have a career and was willing to work in a B picture. But she was great in it and I photographed her beautifully. I never did, I haven’t seen her [45:00] since to talk about it but you keep thinking someday, you’ll talk to these people and tell them. I tried it with Myrna Loy and she didn’t know who the hell I was. Because you see them everyday in a movie or something or you read about them and you’ve known them so intimately. We had to go to dressing room and we used to have big time laughing and I was working on another picture and I came over and she was on a picture and the gag was -- I was working on this very funny picture with [Meady Christian?] and it was such a cornball dramatic, “Where you got Ed-head?” sort of dramatic thing, B picture at Metro. And I was having such fun working on it that I
came over and was giving her stories and we were just slapping thighs and everything, it’s so funny. Here’s Myrna Loy, a very reserved, very conservative actress, hearing about all this goings on on the next stage. So when I ran into her at -- august four years ago -- at a meeting at the, what is it? The producers... Arts and Sciences. I started to say, “Gee remember?” She thought I was some kook or something. You know? Oh god.

GREEN: Well, I think one of the things that does happen with all of us with living is that we get involved in projects. Movies are projects, plays are projects, magazine issues are projects. And everybody has a great intimacy at that

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GREEN: [00:00] What I wanted to ask you Ted -- as we sort of close this out -- and it’s a feeling that I get sitting here looking at all these portraits of stars. That because of my own age I suppose. Although I do discover that young people, because of television and late shows and cassettes, are equally aware of an awful lot of these people. Particularly the really good ones because they’ve reached -- but for me, of course, I’ve been through, as you did the same period of time and all of them had great meaning to
me. I’ve always talked about movies as being sort of a secret finishing school where you could fantasize whatever it was and you could learn whatever you had to learn by watching the taste and the manners and lifestyle and the approaches of any of these people. But here I sit in your office, essentially, surrounded by these extraordinary pictures of all of these people [01:00] and they are such stars -- I mean one is talking really about the kind of stars that are major forces in all of our lives and -- we were interrupted by the doorbell. Let me just briefly repeat. What I want you to think for a moment as to what all this means to you because I’m overwhelmed by seeing the major stars that effected the golden age of motion pictures and these extraordinary photographs that capture the very quality that made them great stars. But you did these pictures and they live with you and I can sense your disappointment at what didn’t happen in terms of cinematography or production or whatever. But think of how fabulous that you have given us all this [02:00] extraordinary treats. I mean these are wonderful pictures.

ALLAN: Well one someone suggested that if I was going to continue on and do more glamour photography, somebody should be able to see some of my work without having to go through magazines or go through piles and stacks of
pictures and why not put a few photographs on the walls here. If you are going to use this -- the studio that you’ve built on the roof here is now being used by my daughter as an apartment -- if you are going to shoot pictures in other parts of the house we should have some sort of display. And I said, “Oh, I don’t think I can do that. I’ve got some nice oil paintings on the walls here and I think it would be pretty grotesque to have all these dead people on the walls.” [03:00] And I relented because of all these magnificent negatives that were suddenly discovered one day. I got a shot of adrenaline and went down and blew these -- went out an bought a big roll of sensitized paper. And wouldn’t dare let anyone else print them. So I printed them and after I printed them, I thought, “My gosh, maybe I should put these on the walls and display them.” It might be kind of morose being. I might become very depressed and as much as these are all at least 50, 55 years ago. And that’s half a century. That’s about a fourth of the age of the United States and it’s a damn good part of my own life. So maybe it isn’t such a good idea. But I put them up on the walls and covered the oil paintings, [04:00] left the same frames that I have with the oil paintings. And put the portraits in them or over them, and this has been going on now for about five
years and everybody is so intrigued and interested and fascinated that I can’t res-- I’m living with them now and every day or so I look them over and appreciate them. So it worked out all right, it wasn’t a depressing point.

GREEN: Absolutely, I think it’s an extraordinary collection that you have. And the fact that they are all things you shot yourself. But it’s more than just the nature of the fact that you are fine artist and photographer. It’s also that you’ve captured a slice of some of the most significant history of the twentieth century. Motion pictures effected the world in a way that nobody ever dreamed could effect the world. All that -- the tribes in Africa that would be watching Charlie Chaplin or Garble or -- it’s quite extraordinary. [05:00] Anyway, on behalf of the fashion institute and the resource center in New York City, it’s a great honor and a great pleasure to deal with this particular experience. I am just overwhelmed by your talent and the beauty of these things and the magic of them and I just want to say, thank you very much.

ALLAN: Thank you.

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