

# THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT **MARY**

**W**hen Mary Hart made her *Entertainment Tonight* debut back on June 24, 1982, *Dallas* was the number one show in the country, 3-D movies were making an abortive comeback and new wavers like A Flock of Seagulls were assaulting the pop music charts. Today, they're all dusty relics, consigned to the same pop culture scrap heap as Pac-Man, Rubik's Cube and Member's Only jackets, save for Hart, who's still on *E.T.* five nights a week, bringing America the hottest in entertainment news and gossip with the same sunshine-y smile, million-dollar legs and, yes, gosh-darn perkiness she had when she presented her first celebrity exclusive.

"On the one hand, it feels like yesterday that I first interviewed for the job," Hart says wistfully. "And, on the other hand, it seems like it's been a lifetime. And, in show business terms, it really has been several lifetimes. If you had asked me 20 years ago, I would've said, 'I can't imagine myself being on an entertainment news show for that long.'"

Oddly enough, it was failure that first brought Hart to *Entertainment Tonight*. She had been co-hosting the new NBC morning talker *The Regis Philbin Show* for four months when it was abruptly yanked from the air in the spring of 1982. Producers from *E.T.*, which debuted Sept. 14, 1981, called her and asked if she'd like to appear on the show and talk about how it felt to be canceled.

"I did that interview," recalls Hart, "and the next day my agent called and said, 'They would like to talk to you about coming over there to work.'"

Hart started off as an *E.T.* correspondent, but after just 13 weeks was moved into the co-anchor chair opposite original host Ron Hendren. Over the following years, she shared the news desk with a variety of male co-anchors, most notably Robb Weller, John Tesh and current on-air partner Bob Goen.

Today, *Entertainment Tonight* coverage is highly coveted by Hollywood publicists, but in the early days the show was a tough sell.

"Nobody had done entertainment news for television on a daily basis, so people didn't know what to

**AFTER 20 YEARS ON ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT, MARY HART IS STILL AT THE TOP OF HER GAME... AND AS PERKY AS EVER**

COURTESY ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT

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think,” says Hart. “It was, ‘What’s *E.T.*?’ Everybody thought it was *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*. The big stars were staying away in droves at first, because they didn’t know what to think of this little upstart show.”

In the years since, Hart has interviewed countless stars for *E.T.* “Some of my favorites are probably the people I grew up watching, whether it was Gregory Peck or Kirk Douglas,” observes the South Dakota native, who cut her teeth as a celebrity interviewer during a three-year stint as co-host of the Oklahoma City morning TV show *Danny’s Day* in the late ‘70s. “But I’ve had great times with Tom Cruise, Sandra Bullock and John Travolta and even some of the younger stars who are really popular today.”

When forced to pick an absolute favorite, Hart chooses Frank Sinatra, a man notorious for his prickly relations with the press. “I didn’t know what to expect,” Hart admits. “I had of course heard nightmares about how gruff he could be, and if you didn’t know your business, he had no time. I flew to Atlantic City and he was performing there with his son, Frank Jr. I waited. And waited and waited. And the anticipation built. He finally showed up and he was really fun to talk to. It ended up being a very interesting interview, and I felt like he didn’t skirt questions.”

Hart has no trouble singling out her most harrowing celebrity interview: *Falcon Crest* star Jane Wyman, whom she dared to ask about her former husband (and then President) Ronald Reagan.

“I guess everybody assumed that I knew that you *never* ask about Ronald Reagan,” recalls Hart. “And when I did, I’ve never heard silence like I did at that moment, probably because it was preceded by everybody in the room around us *gasping* and wanting to run!” she laughs.

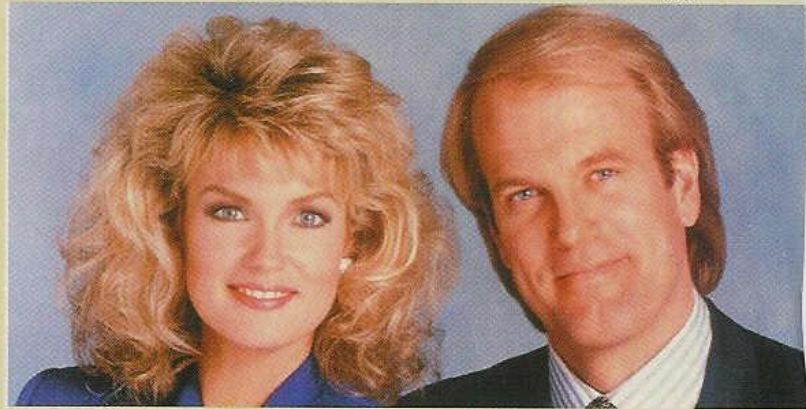
Although Hart had dreamed of a life in show business since she was a child, she never knew exactly what she wanted to do, and that ambiguity of ambition made her question her career path during her early years with *E.T.*

“I was studying acting at the time,” recalls Hart. “I thought I’d probably like to do a sitcom or dramatic series and be an actress.”

She eventually gave it a shot, spending a year and a half in the late ‘80s developing a failed sitcom pilot for CBS. She then put together a Las Vegas cabaret act that was harshly panned by critics. Other side projects, including a pair of hit exercise videos (1989’s *Shape Up with Mary Hart* and 1990’s *Mary Hart: Fit & Firm*), a series of prime time interview specials and an album of lullabies (1994’s *Songs from the Heart*), proved more satisfying, but today Hart’s content to let *E.T.* be the focus of her professional life.

“It took me a few years to realize that I had the best darn job in the business,” says Hart, who recently signed a new five-year deal with *E.T.* that’ll keep her with the show until September 2007. “I thank my lucky stars every single day.”

Although a slew of imitators have popped up in



PHOTOFEST

Mary Hart in 1990 with then *E.T.* co-host John Tesh.

recent years (*Extra*, *Access Hollywood*), Hart doesn’t feel threatened by the competition—not too surprising considering the fact that *E.T.* consistently trounces them in the ratings. And she refuses to let people like David Letterman, who kid her for being “too damn perky,” bring her down.

“If I didn’t have a lot of energy in projecting what I’m doing, it just wouldn’t be me,” Hart asserts proudly. “I guess I am perky. There’s nothing wrong with that. And there’s a lot of perk left.”

By Todd Longwell

## RANDOM FACTOIDS

- Voted Miss South Dakota 1970 and finished in the top ten in that year’s Miss America pageant.
- The July 11, 1991, *New England Journal of Medicine* reported that the sound of Mary Hart’s voice triggered epileptic seizures in a 45-year-old New York woman. The phenomenon was later spoofed on *Seinfeld*.
- In 1985, Hart’s then-manager Jay Bernstein insured her legs with Lloyd’s of London for \$1 million each, but it was only a one-day policy.
- Mary enjoys cross-country motorcycle road trips with husband Burt, and spending time at their ranch in Montana.

## VITAL STATS

- Born Mary Johanna Harum, Nov. 8, 1950, in Madison, South Dakota.
- 1st Husband: Terry Hart (1972-79).
- Current Husband: Burt Sugarman, producer, (1989-present).
- Son: Alec Jay “A.J.” Sugarman, born Dec. 24, 1991.