

**JOHN O'DOWD interviewed by noted author and editor of the Canyon News TOMMY GARRETT:**

\* An edited version of this interview can be found in Tommy's March 2, 2008 column in the Canyon News:  
[http://www.canyon-news.com/artman2/publish/On\\_the\\_Industry\\_1168/Barbara\\_Immortal.php](http://www.canyon-news.com/artman2/publish/On_the_Industry_1168/Barbara_Immortal.php)

Tommy: When did you become a fan of Barbara Payton's?

John: I first became a fan of Barbara's when I was just a child. I saw her film "Bride of the Gorilla" one Saturday afternoon on TV and I remember being *awestruck* by her beauty. At seven or eight years old I remember feeling that I had seen the most beautiful and sexy woman in the whole wide world. Barbara made a lasting impression on me, and at the risk of sounding New Age, I believe we made some kind of cosmic connection that day as she never totally left my consciousness after that. Later on, when I was a teenager, I started reading about her life and when I learned what had happened to her I recall feeling this tremendous sense of sadness, concern and empathy wash over me...almost like I was responding as if I had known her personally...like she was a relative, or a friend of the family's.

Tommy: What movie is your favorite of hers?

John: As a result of "Bride of the Gorilla" being the catalyst for my becoming aware of Barbara in the first place, that film will always hold a special place in my heart. But then again, so does "Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye", as it showed her standing at the threshold of what could and should have been a long and wonderful career. So, those two films are, by far, my favorites of hers.

Tommy: Did your parents encourage your artistic and writing skills?

John: Yes, my parents were always encouraging to me, however I can't say they ever pushed me in any one direction. I clearly had some learning disabilities as a child (as in Attention Deficit Disorder, which in the 1970s had yet to be recognized or diagnosed), so I struggled a lot in school—specifically, in math and science. I always excelled in spelling and grammar, though, and began reading comic books at about the age of four and writing short stories by age six. So, while I think my parents always knew I had challenges, I never recall them ever calling me stupid or lazy, or anything like that. In fact, I can remember my father telling me many times when I was growing up, "Always remember, Johnny, you're as good as everyone else, but you're no better than anybody." I lucked out when it came to my parents, I really did. The world never welcomed me nearly as warmly as my parents did, and it was a rude awakening when I found out later that support and friendliness should not be automatically expected from everyone you meet.

Tommy: What new project are you working on?

John: I recently finished an interview project with actress Janette Lane Bradbury that is now online at my website: [www.hollywoodstarletbarbarapayton.com](http://www.hollywoodstarletbarbarapayton.com). Lane has worked a lot in TV, films and onstage, and she is just a beautiful human being. She is a sweet, kind and gentle woman, and she is doing some truly great things in her life. Lane runs the Valkyrie Theater of Dance, Drama and Film in Pasadena

<http://valkyrietheater.org/>, which is a non-profit organization that utilizes the arts to benefit at-risk teenagers, and she has put her entire heart and soul into this endeavor. So, I recently finished that interview and have just begun my next book project, which has the working title “They Chased Their Dreams from Nashville to L.A.: Interviews with Country Music Artists of the 1970s and 80s.” If everything works out the way I hope it will, the book will focus on the lives and recording careers of both major label and independent label country music performers whose 45s and albums charted in Billboard magazine in the pre-and-post Urban Cowboy era. As you can probably tell, I love both music and films.

Tommy: Why did you choose Miss Payton as your first biographical subject to work on?

John: I chose Barbara to write about because I felt she had been maligned for far too long in the media and I thought she deserved to finally have a complete and truthful account written of her life. In the nearly nine years it took me to research and write Barbara’s story, my driving motivation has always been to try to restore some of her dignity and humanity. I hope I have succeeded. I also hope there are people who read her story who will have a newfound respect for Barbara. She didn’t have many people’s respect (or much *self*-respect, for that matter) while she was alive, but she *can* have it now. That is very important to me...to think I can possibly bring her some respect and some dignity with my book.

Tommy: What inspires you in your writing life and career?

John: My inspiration comes from my being a perfectionist, as well as from my almost obsessive need to document whatever I am writing about as fully and completely as I can. I take that responsibility *very* seriously. Since the craft of writing doesn’t always come easily to me (in part, due to my lifelong battle with ADD), I have to really care about a subject in order to take the often long amount of time I usually need to fully research and write a story.

As for Barbara’s book, she was, by far, my most important inspiration. I needed to write the book for her, as well as for myself. I felt a huge responsibility to Barbara as no one had ever written about her like she was a decent and worthwhile *human being*. She has always been depicted as a kind of evil, black hearted harlot. You know, a voracious destroyer of men who used every man she ever met for her own despicable greed. I would like to go up to some of the writers who have trashed Barbara so terribly in the past, look them right in the eye, and ask them, “How *could* you? How could you not have wanted to research her life more responsibly so that you could have found out what people who really knew her, *loved* about her?” There are one or two guys out there who have written about Barbara like she was a worthless piece of dirt. Although one of them is in fact very celebrated and has a large cult following, I feel that he and the other writer are nothing more than cruel and heartless snakes in the grass.

Tommy: What was your childhood like?

John: Thanks to my parents, my childhood was, on the whole, comfortable, happy and secure. We lived in a ranch house in the suburbs with a swimming pool and a big field for a back yard, and it was actually more of a rural setting than suburban. My mother, although a very beautiful and glamorous woman (she somewhat resembled the 1960s film actress Nancy Kovack), was a stay-at-home mom. She was warm, loving, and was happiest, I think, when she was cooking or otherwise taking care of people. Of Italian and Slovak descent, Mom was a gourmet cook who routinely made delicious meals for everyone in the neighborhood. She was extremely nurturing, and our family and neighbors loved her.

My father was without a doubt, the kindest and most decent and down-to-earth man I have ever known. A light-hearted Irishman with an easygoing smile and a perennial twinkle in his eyes, Dad was a brilliant businessman in the dairy business (and later on, in real estate), and he gave our family a beautiful home and lifestyle. He was devoted to my mother, my two older sisters and me, he loved our family pets, and he sealed most of his business deals, not with his signature, but with a handshake. One of Dad's most famous business partners was a Texas real estate developer named Trammel Crow, who owned the glass building shown in the opening credits of the old TV show, "Dallas".

My parents were sort of suburban socialites in the 1960s and 70s and one of their closest friends was a very colorful elderly man named Richie "The Boot" Boiardo, who lived on a sprawling estate in Livingston, NJ. Mr. Boiardo was almost like a surrogate grandfather to my sisters and me and our family dined with him and a large group of his family and friends every Thursday night for several years. Through Mr. Boiardo, my parents met several famous celebrities, like George Raft (who told my mother upon meeting her that she looked like "a blonde Sophia Loren") and Connie Francis. Although my mother and father were active socially, they were not "partyers", per se (my Dad, in fact, was a teetotaler), but rather very conservative and classy people. They have both passed away, and sadly, neither of them got to see the publication of my first book. I know they would have been very proud of me. I know I am proud of *them*.

Tommy: Your parents were very close to you and your sisters. What is your greatest familial memory as a child?

John: Probably just being in my Dad's presence. I saw how people who knew him would react so positively when he entered a store or a diner in our hometown, and I liked the way that made *me* feel. He had a good-natured way of teasing people (he had endearing nicknames for everyone), and people responded to that like you wouldn't believe. Dad would show the same respect to a hobo on the street as he would to the president of a bank. When I was really young, I remember my father pushing me in a swing in our back yard *for hours*, and he would sometimes push me so high I felt like I was on top of the world and that I could touch the clouds. My father's reputation and legacy in our hometown was so powerful that when he passed away, his funeral procession was over a mile long. I miss my parents a lot. They were my strongest advocates and I was very lucky to have them in my life—VERY lucky.

Tommy: Since you lived such a different childhood than Barbara did, how was writing about her life and youth to you? Sad?

John: Writing about Barbara's life, from her early years to her final, tragic decade, was grueling and often very depressing for me. I often felt haunted by the reality of what happened to her (especially by what happened to her in Hollywood in the 1960s) and it sometimes interfered with my sleep and with my physical health, too. However, I should also point out that although I had a terrific childhood, I, too, went off the rails for a time. As a young person in the late 1980s I was a rather mindless and irresponsible "party boy", and much of what I did in those years remains a blur to me. Drugs...shady people I had no business even knowing...off the wall antics that I'm *still* embarrassed by. I became a completely different person from who I was growing up, and who I am now. It's almost like I was *possessed* and the real me was buried for ten years. But I think that experience of my totally screwing up allowed me to understand how easily it could have happened to Barbara, as well. The most sickening thing about it to me (by far) is the total lack of appreciation and gratitude I had for the tremendous life I had been given. My lost years remain my life's biggest regret, and I will always feel a great deal of remorse for many of the things I did back then. But, God bless my folks, they never disowned me. There were times I'm sure they *should* have, but for some reason, they didn't. Thank God I was able to come back to my senses and give them both, before they passed away, a little bit of the decent and loving son I should have been all along.

Tommy: What about Barbara's life on the big or small screen? Do you think today's stars could learn from her life and career?

John: I am not entirely convinced that many of today's stars and starlets can (or will) be moved by Barbara's story. So many of today's younger celebrities are carrying on today like Barbara did 50 years ago, which is both scary and disheartening. I mean, has nothing been learned in all that time from all the lives destroyed by drugs and alcohol? The major difference between a lot of today's troubled young Hollywood stars and Barbara is that most of them have such immense wealth and countless opportunities to get help, they will never end up on Skid Row like Barbara did. Still, I see a lot of these people making a lot of the same mistakes in their lives and careers as Barbara, and it leaves me with a very sick feeling inside. I also see that same lack of gratitude and appreciation that I had in my youth in many of Hollywood's younger celebrities, and that, to me, is also unfortunate. As someone who didn't always appreciate all the gifts and blessings that I'd been given, I can tell you that having a lack of gratitude is a *terrible* mistake (one that Barbara admittedly made, as well).

If a film is made on Barbara's life I hope the actress that plays her will take the time to really get into the core of who she really was. Barbara was an extremely complex person and if there's a screenwriter out there that can capture all her flaws *and* strengths, maybe one day there *will* be a film based on her life. I hope so and I also hope to have the opportunity to be a big part of it. Barbara's family and several of her friends tell me they are convinced that I know who she really

was, and I would be very happy if I were able to contribute something of value, should the film project come to pass.