

Unmasking the glitterati

That's the job of Amherst native Glenn Plaskin

By LOUISE CONTINELLI
News Staff Reporter

COUNTRY SUNSHINE gal Dolly Parton recalls the time she contemplated suicide: Alone in her bedroom one afternoon, she eyed the gun in her nightstand. Parton had been recovering from a hysterectomy, was 45 pounds overweight and deeply depressed.

"For about six months I woke up every morning feeling dead," she tells celebrity-interviewer Glenn Plaskin.

"I was sorrowing, depressed . . . very low."

The singer with the big bird-of-paradise hair — along with 121 of her glittering peers — peels off the emotional wig, eye-lashes and rhinestones for Plaskin in his new eye-opening candid collection, "Turning Point: Pivotal Moments in the Lives of America's Celebrities."

Plaskin, 40, from Amherst, is the male version of Barbara Walters in print. The witty writer gets the normally guarded famous and infamous — including Cher, Mia Farrow, Don Johnson, Joan Lunden, Paul Newman, Chuck Norris, Gene Wilder, Luciano Pavarotti, Carly Simon, Sylvester Stallone, Elizabeth Taylor — to expose themselves in a way that's far more revealing than anything you'll read in the supermarket scab-loids.

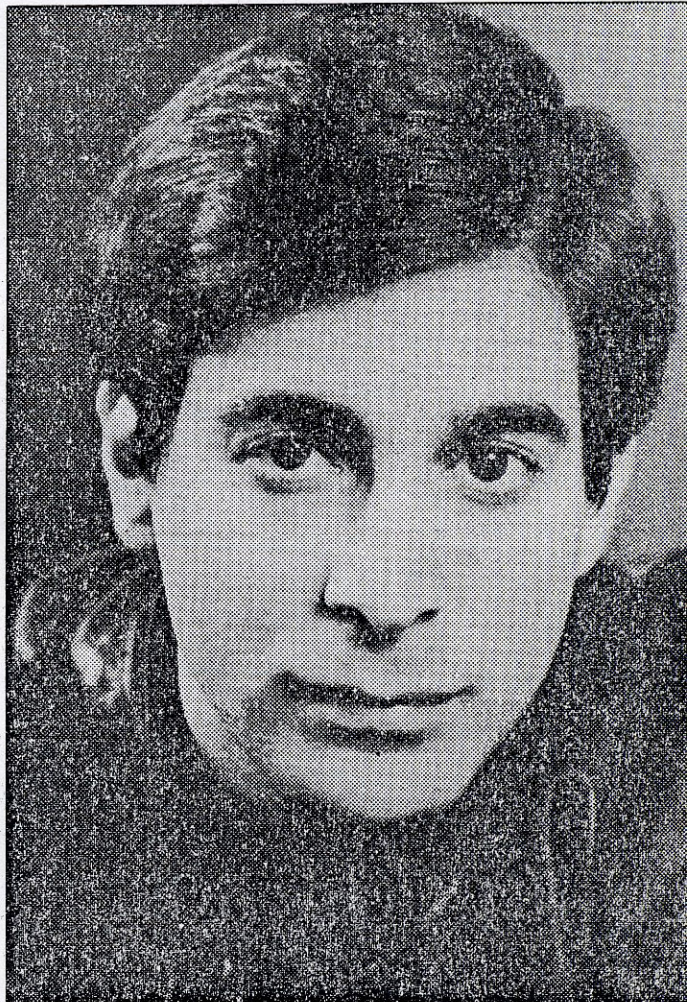
"Most celebrities are very vulnerable, and more open than you might expect them to be," Plaskin says in a telephone interview.

"I think they're also a little isolated. They *like* talking to somebody. I get the feeling that a lot of them are kind of lonely. Elizabeth Taylor is in a bubble. She's a bit of a prisoner of her own fame, as all the superstars are."

But Plaskin's no sleaze merchant, no mean-spirited gossip-monger. When he discloses the glitterati's problems with drug addiction, divorce, AIDS, prison, he looks for a message of hope rather than just an opportunity to gleefully dish the dirt. And the empathetic author is as willing to disclose as much about his own weaknesses as his stellar subjects. At the end of his book he confesses that, when growing up in the Buffalo area, he was once a "miserably unhappy child — paper-clip skinny, unathletic and constantly taunted."

Little Glenn turned to his piano. The Amherst High School graduate spent five years of study at the New England Conservatory of Music and four years at the Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University. But his hands and legs trembled during recitals.

While finishing his doctoral studies, he suffered a nervous collapse, was hospitalized, and decided to switch careers. He



Author Glenn Plaskin: Looks for a message of hope rather than just an opportunity to gleefully dish the dirt.

published in nine languages. The Washington Post hailed it a "the most spectacular musical biography of the 1980s."

"Pain yields progress," Plaskin philosophizes today.

"If somebody would have told me 20 years ago that I would be meeting these people, I would have thought, 'You are nuts. I was the shyest little kid from Buffalo.'"

Plaskin: 'I go for the emotional stuff'

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once we start talking, but that anticipation going there is difficult for me. I'm very, very nervous. Half the time I'll stand in the men's room before the interview and kind of comb my hair and pray for the best," he discloses with a small laugh.

Jacqueline Onassis, who has lunched a few times with Plaskin in her role as a publishing editor to discuss book possibilities, has referred to Plaskin's "uncanny ability to draw people out and gain their confidence."

Even though he admits that he has sometimes been criticized as not being "tough enough," he says he feels he's hard on his subjects.

"I go for the emotional stuff," he says.

"Tell me about your mother, not your movie."

His fans include gossip columnist Liz Smith and Barbara Walters. A Playboy magazine editor has been quoted as saying that Plaskin is one "of a very few interviewers whom we turn to with full confidence. He is thorough, competent and tough."

Plaskin was the star-chronicler who broke an early interview with Marla Maples a few years ago after months of near silence during the Trump-affair fiasco. In that story, Maples revealed her abortion at age 20, before she took up with The Donald.

Liz Taylor tearfully whispered to Plaskin about her visit to Rock Hudson a few days before the actor died from AIDS:

"I've never seen a more painful, cruel, degrading death," she told the writer.

Plaskin says he's most tenacious in pursuing his stories:

"I don't take no for an answer. We are a celebrity-driven society.

"I've learned that it's better to be rich than famous. If you're wealthy and not famous, you don't have many pressures, you have more freedom."

In the acknowledgments to "Turning Point," published by



Chronicler of the stars Glenn Plaskin was able to get model Marla Maples to speak out about her affair with Donald Trump.

Birch Lane Press, Plaskin first gives "heartfelt thanks to the therapists who have helped and loved me for the past 22 years." He's grateful to learn that "careers don't travel in straight lines, that turning points happen when they need to, that when one dream fails, another can take its place."

He tells his readers he hopes "that one day, when you're facing yet another turning point in your own life, something you read here might help, might comfort."

The book "Turning Point" is based on the nationally syndicated column of the same name by Plaskin, who is an entertainment reporter for the New York Daily News.

How does a turning point come

about?

"First comes the crisis — the physical disease, the car accident, the love affair, the ailing baby, the addiction, the divorce, the financial triumph, the whatever. The tears. The manic high — or low. The bad dream — and daydreams," he writes in his preface. "Your world is helplessly thrown into the air, your safe kingdom invaded for better or worse. What to do and how to do it?"

And here are some of the compelling details he uncovers in his emotional portraits of:

Stacy Keach — The actor tells Plaskin about getting busted for having two shaving-cream canisters with false bottoms, filled with \$6,000 worth of cocaine to feed

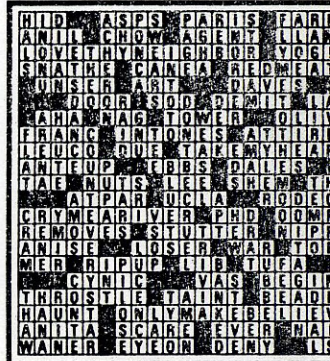
his \$250-a-day habit: "I was a continual user, trapped, convinced I couldn't survive without it. I needed it more and more to repeat the initial euphoria." Keach describes his months in "The loneliness was agonizing. I told myself: 'You've wrecked your life.' I was filled with self-loathing." Today the actor is convinced if he hadn't been arrested he wouldn't be alive now. He is now starring on Broadway in "Itary Confinement."

Sylvester Stallone — At birth, doctor severed little Michael Sylvester Stallone's facial nerve forces. "Half my tongue, lip, chin were paralyzed," says the actor of "Rocky." "I was like Potato Head with all the parts in the wrong places." Tortured by neighborhood bullies, he'd seethe with "the murderous rage of retribution." In school he discovered acting — "something not ill and yet soul-satisfying."

Mary Tyler Moore — Divorced her mother ill, Moore met her younger husband-to-be in a hospital: "Oh, God, here was this handsome gentlemen who was treating my mother so sweetly. I said to myself, 'Maaary, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.'" A few house calls later, the goading doctor said she should hesitate to call for any reason at all. So the actress asked him:

"Does extreme loneliness come under the heading of emergency?"

Puzzle answer



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