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Val Holley on Hollywood's Top Gossip: Mike Connolly

Interview by Raj Ayyar

Val Holley is the author of *Mike Connolly and the Manly Art of Hollywood Gossip* (2003) and *James Dean: The Biography* (1995).

Raj Ayyar: Val, it's a pleasure to interview you for *Gay Today*. Could you tell us a wee bit about yourself? Some of the highlights, rhythms and patterns of your life?

Val Holley: I've had a penchant for meticulous history since boyhood and am drawn to topics that others tend to overlook. My father is an authority on Mormon history and I think this kind of interest is a family characteristic. I was reared as a Mormon in Utah and was even a Mormon missionary in Brazil. Discovering my homosexuality later on had the wonderful effect of liberating me from the shackles of religion.

Raj Ayyar: I enjoyed your recent book *Mike Connolly and the Manly Art of Hollywood Gossip* (North Carolina and London: McFarland, 2003). In spite of the fact that Connolly was a McCarthyite commie-basher and a vitriolic, often scurrilous journalist, the book is a darned good read. What drew you to Mike Connolly? Why did you pick him up as a subject of biography?

Val Holley: When I was researching an earlier book, *James Dean: The Biography* (St. Martin's Press), it seemed expedient to read what all the Hollywood gossip columnists had written about Dean. Mike Connolly wrote for an industry trade paper, *The Hollywood Reporter*, and it was a revelation to me, after bushwhacking through reams of pedestrian prose by Hedda Hopper, Louella Parsons, and other Tinseltown scribes, to discover the



Val Holley, author of *Mike Connolly and the Manly Art of Hollywood Gossip*

Photo By: Sharon Holley



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Val Holley's biography of James Dean

breezy and engaging writing in Connolly's daily columns. If you can imagine gossip as literature, Connolly achieved it. He had a gift to entertain and dazzle. Almost immediately, it was clear that Connolly was gay. Although he took pains to tell his readers that he made the rounds of *Ciro's*, the *Mocambo*, and other glittering nightclubs with a girl on his arm, he could not muzzle the flamboyant diva worship in his reactions to Ethel Merman, Judy Garland, and Mae West or the fawning tone that crept in when he wrote about gorgeous male starlets.

Newsweek cited Connolly as the most influential columnist within the movie industry in the 1950s, and it dawned on me that Connolly's success as a gay man in McCarthy-era Hollywood was a story worth exploring.

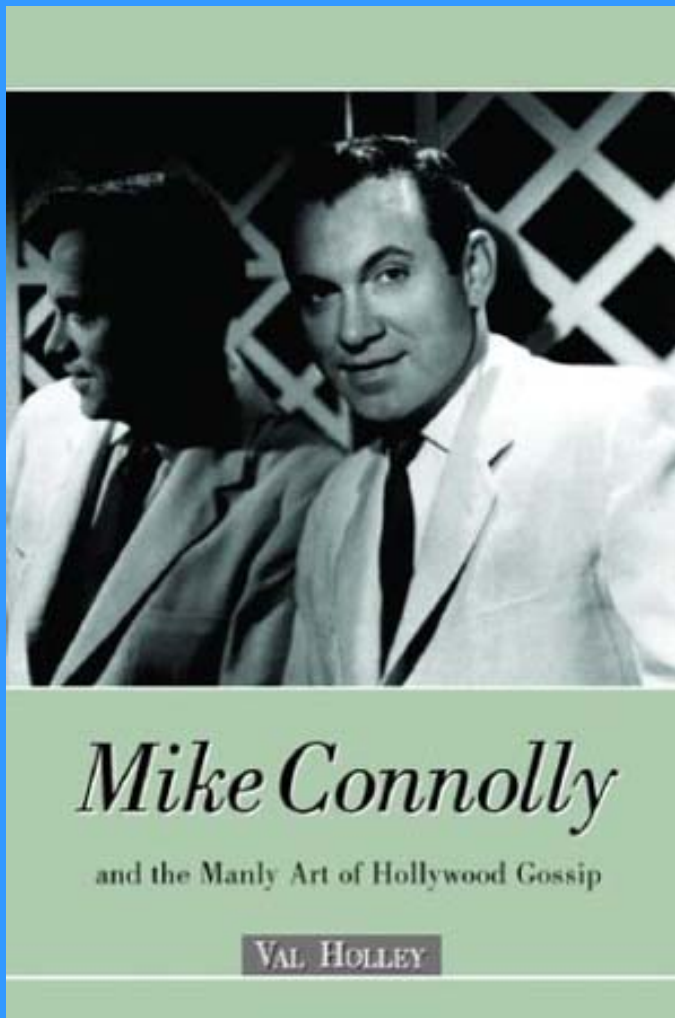
Raj Ayyar: Can you give me an idea of exactly what Mike Connolly's niche is in the annals of gay history?

Val Holley: What I find most remarkable is how Mike Connolly flourished as the top gossip columnist in Hollywood during a time in our history that was highly oppressive to most gay people. To the many gays and lesbians in Hollywood in the 1950s, the fact that the town's premiere gossip column was operated by one of their own was their dirty little secret, and believe me, they shoveled the news to Connolly. For those who could read between the lines, Connolly's daily **Rambling Reporter** column was a rather amazing chronicle of gay goings-on. Looking back from 2004, his collected writings constitute a priceless lode of gay Hollywood history.

There were many factors that allowed Connolly to get away with this. One was that he worked in a comparatively gay-friendly environment. **The Hollywood Reporter** staff was larded with homosexuals, in fact, because the publisher, William R. Wilkerson, found them to be loyal and hard-working. Another factor was Connolly's inherent cleverness. He wrote obliquely rather than explicitly about gay stars and events. While he did have a "gay agenda," that agenda was to obey rather than flout Hollywood's prevailing proprieties.

Raj Ayyar: I find it hard to believe that Mike Connolly managed to live a relatively un-persecuted life, given his often flamboyant gayness in select Hollywood circles during the heyday of McCarthyism. Do you think his strident anti-communist hysteria and his careful 'girl on my arm' hetero-posturing, saved him from the homophobic witch hunts of that period?

Val Holley: The principal reason that Connolly's anti-Communist tirades were printed is that publisher Wilkerson believed they sold papers. As well, Connolly was a right-wing conservative and his feelings about a "Communist menace" were sincerely held. It is tempting to assume he intended his highly visible anti-Communist crusade to distract his reading public



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from his homosexuality -- one publisher rejected my book proposal specifically because I didn't assert so "obvious" a fact! -- but the evidence just didn't lead to that conclusion.

Since Connolly was not an actor or director, there was less pressure on him to play it straight. The FBI did spy on hundreds of homosexuals and journalists during the 1950s, so imagine my surprise when I found they never compiled a file on Connolly, even though they kept files on Hedda Hopper, Walter Winchell, and Herb Caen, and even though Connolly once mocked J. Edgar Hoover in print for making a disparaging remark about Hollywood.

The real witch hunt for homosexuals in Hollywood back then was carried out by **Confidential** magazine. Connolly was fully aware of Rock Hudson's narrow escape from ruination only after Hudson's studio persuaded **Confidential** to publish a story on actor Rory Calhoun instead -- and Connolly was scared out of his wits that **Confidential** might run a piece about his sexual dabblings with male starlets who needed to be mentioned in his column. So for awhile, Connolly became "engaged" to his closest female friend.

Raj Ayyar: You know, Val, I didn't realize that Mike Connolly was one of the ghost writers of Lillian Roth's autobiography *I'll Cry Tomorrow* till I read your book. I remember watching the movie (with Susan Hayward playing Lillian Roth) at the ripe age of 7, munching buttered popcorn in the auditorium of a decaying colonial country club on the banks of the Ganges. Connolly had a stormy relationship with Ms. Roth, didn't he? Was the book a convenient camouflage for Connolly's own 'I'll quit tomorrow' alcoholism?

Val Holley: It was a blatant case of the pot calling the kettle black. Connolly's eyes were wide open to the ravages that alcohol brought about in Lillian Roth's life. But his failure to see the obvious parallels to his own alcohol abuse has to be a really first-rate case of denial. Connolly always could and did point to someone who was drunker than he was, which spared him, so he thought, from being a lush. His printing of the names of newcomers to AA was widely criticized, but he brushed it off by observing that the same names "never minded at all when their drunken scrapes smeared them across Page One."

If he never experienced delirium tremens, as Lillian Roth did, his inebriation nonetheless resulted in such unseemly spectacles as public urination into potted plants and being carried out of restaurants or evicted from parties. Essentially, he drank himself to death. After his open-heart surgery in 1966, which he didn't survive, the surgeon said he never would have opened Connolly up if he had realized how debauched his internal organs were.

Raj Ayyar: Can you share some of the ups and downs of Mike's relationship with Shirley Maclaine?

Val Holley: The 1963 incident where Shirley MacLaine went to Connolly's office and bashed him with her purse because of something he'd written has been blown all out of proportion; to this day, MacLaine still gets mileage out of the story when she recounts it at banquets and ceremonies. What is ignored is that Connolly was one of MacLaine's earliest and most avid boosters, calling her "nothing but sensational" in her first film and gushing, "Hey, [I] want to be president of her fan club!" It's true that he needled her for her high-profile opposition to capital punishment, but back then, at least, it was expected that a top gossip columnist

would take a stand on issues.

Connolly handled MacLaine's battery like the media pro he was, telling reporters that it had been just a love tap and "I'll never wash this shoulder again!" Soon, however, he grew angry at her frequent exaggerations of the fracas, printed a point-by-point rebuttal, and embargoed her name from his column. He could dish it out but, clearly, couldn't take it.



Mike Connolly and Tallulah Bankhead in the book *Mike Connolly and the Manly Art of Hollywood Gossip*

Raj Ayyar: In general, despite his anti-communist tirades, Connolly seems to have been protective of Hollywood gay closets, including Rock Hudson's roomy one. Would you say that Connolly had less self-hatred and internalized homophobia than, let's say, J. Edgar Hoover?

Val Holley: Good question. What made me suspect there might be some internalized homophobia was Connolly's constant extolling of long-married Hollywood couples (regardless of whether those marriages were not really happy) and passion for hosting receptions for Hollywood newlyweds. When Gracie Allen died, Connolly's long eulogy noted George Burns's having had so many years "with that enchanting woman ... how [I] envy him!"

Self-hatred could be inferred from Connolly's obvious dissatisfaction with his impoverished Irish Catholic Chicago Democrat background, which led to his eventual crush on Richard Nixon as the kind of WASP he aspired to be.

The evidence doesn't point to Connolly's being closeted, however. He lived openly with his life partner, Joseph Zappia, a/k/a Joe Russell, and instead of keeping Zappia in the shadows, hired him as the column's legman, in spite of resentment from the rest of the Hollywood press over Zappia's lack of journalistic experience. As a point of comparison with J. Edgar Hoover, Connolly and Zappia rarely went out in public together, whereas Clyde Tolson seemed to go everywhere with Hoover.

Raj Ayyar: Val, something struck me as curious. Mike Connolly was almost a Republican caricature, writing fan letters to Richard Nixon and what not. Yet, there was a part of him that adored JFK. Was this just a knee jerk Irish Catholic loyalty?

Val Holley: Exactly. Connolly would have voted for no one but Nixon in 1960, but in spite of his rabid Republicanism and drunken mash notes to Nixon, Connolly was susceptible to JFK's charisma. Connolly was terribly proud of being Irish, constantly tubthumping for Irish actors such as Richard Egan and Ann Blyth in his column. (I suspect the dynamic here was that if Connolly was not free to proclaim his homosexuality, he was at least free to proclaim his Irishness.) So his usual nastiness to Democrats was held at bay in JFK's case, always. They

met only once, at a party in L.A. during the 1960 Democratic National Convention. JFK's assassination moved Connolly to eulogize the slain President more movingly than perhaps any other columnist. I should note that no one did eulogies better than Connolly; death in Hollywood evoked what was finest in him.

Raj Ayyar: Mike Connolly lived in Hollywood for many years with his longtime companion Joseph Zappia. Wasn't there a right royal queenly triangle when Zappia's former lover Don LaMarr came out to Hollywood to stay with them? Particularly since Connolly aggressively stole Zappia away from Don in Chicago?

Val Holley: None of their friends ever suggested that Connolly, Zappia, and LaMarr were living as a menage a trois in Hollywood. The situation certainly sounds odd, but my impression is that LaMarr had moved on with his romantic life by the time he joined the other two as a roommate. Connolly and Zappia, despite lots of extramarital sexual activity on both sides, were a genuine love match. It was simply Connolly's nature to marry for life. Throughout his career, Connolly was off in his own literary world, while Zappia handled the business side of their life, much like Howard Austen to Gore Vidal. They kept upgrading to grander houses, which Connolly owned but Zappia (with assistance from LaMarr) would remodel and decorate.

Raj Ayyar: One of Connolly's funnier lines in the book is quoted by Lawrence Quirk--the scene where Connolly peers down at Quirk from an adjoining urinal and says "The mighty oak from a little acorn grows, and if that's the acorn, the oak must be great!" (*Mike Connolly*, p. 21). Did Connolly frequent 'tearooms' during his Hollywood years?

Val Holley: Quirk told me he saw Connolly at bathhouses both in Hollywood and New York. Although Connolly was known to cruise for trade on Hollywood Boulevard, he didn't really need to haunt the trashier venues because young men who needed their names in print, whether straight or gay, sought him out and threw themselves at him.

Raj Ayyar: You say that Mike Connolly over-compensated for not being the good Irish Catholic paterfamilias by adopting this stridently moralistic, extreme Republican national chauvinist persona. Did he ever realize the family resemblances between the anti-commie witch hunt and the oppression of gays and lesbians? Was there ever a sense on his part that both categories--alleged 'communists' and gays, were ridiculed, blacklisted, jailed and marginalized by mainstream America in the McCarthyite era?



Mike Connolly

Val Holley: It's possible that Connolly wasn't much aware of how homosexuals were suffering under the purge from federal jobs happening on the opposite coast in the 1950s. His gay and lesbian friends in Hollywood were all prospering from their work in film and show business. As

an "Establishment" homosexual, Connolly may well have thought that gays who were arrested or jailed should have been smart enough to stay out of trouble.

Raj Ayyar: Val, one of Mike Connolly's many cruelties that made me queasy, was his active participation in the denigration of Elia Kazan. I admired Kazan's work and still recall Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois (in *Streetcar Named Desire*) with fond nostalgia. Apparently, Mike went out of his way to pillory Kazan's lack of co-operation with HUAC (the House Committee on Un-American Activities). Any comments?

Val Holley: This is an example of Connolly's shaping of history not only in his own time but half a century later. In Kazan's initial appearance before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, he refused to identify others who, like himself, had flirted briefly with Communist Party membership in the 1930s. Kazan had been told this session would be kept confidential. Imagine his shock when he arrived in Hollywood soon after, expecting to win the Best Picture Oscar for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but picking up *The Hollywood Reporter* and finding that Connolly began that day's column revealing Kazan's "confidential" testimony and refusal to cooperate. Kazan not only did not win the Oscar but a deal between him and Warner Brothers suddenly fell through.

Kazan reversed course and gave the HUAC the information they wanted. Hollywood rewarded him with plumb directing projects and accolades over the next two decades. However, a sizeable portion of the movie and theater world never forgave Kazan, and there was a huge brouhaha when Kazan was put up for a special Lifetime Achievement Oscar in 1999. In the end, the Academy did give the special Oscar to Kazan, but many in the audience refused to applaud or stand for him. This chain of events had been set in motion by Connolly.

Raj Ayyar: You quote Liz Smith as saying that at the height of his 'commie-baiting career', Connolly "was intent on ruining people's lives just because he could" (*Mike Connolly* p. 108). Was this an accurate perception?

Val Holley: It's fair to say Connolly was reckless in naming names in his column. He was well-trained as a reporter and knew the importance of fact-checking, but in spite of that, he was so eager to expose Communists that several times he rushed names into print based only on flimsy rumors, forcing *The Hollywood Reporter* to carry retractions the following day. Some Hollywood figures so libeled were screenwriter Garson Kanin and composer Frank Loesser.

Raj Ayyar: Did Connolly ever realize that there was a strange Shadow mirror image similarity between McCarthyism and Stalinist Marxism of the kind that the McCarthyites loathed and dreaded?

Val Holley: Connolly certainly had his blind spots. Once, after someone's prudish attack on Victor Hugo's morals, Connolly wrote, "The point was not that Victor Hugo ran after young girls but that this runner after young girls wrote a masterpiece called *Les Miserables*." It's too bad Connolly couldn't grasp the parallel point that certain people with Communist pasts had given Hollywood many outstanding screenplays and performances.

Raj Ayyar: Do you believe Connolly's career has any relevance to gays working in Hollywood today?

Val Holley: The cornerstone of Mike Connolly's success in Hollywood was talent and hard work, commodities that are as important today as they were in the 1950s. I thought of this while watching *AMC's Gay Hollywood* documentary last year. One segment showed an older gay producer critiquing a sitcom script by a young aspiring gay writer. The producer felt that as gays grow older, they often diverge from the mainstream world of families and kids, so

they must work harder if they want to sell on the basis of mainstream appeal.

Raj Ayyar: Val, is there life after Mike Connolly? Are you working on any new projects?

Val Holley: I'm exploring the possibilities of writing about the Frank Sinatra-JFK friendship. At present no one knows anything but the myths about their association. No biographer has ever shown how and when they met and whether they actually had much to do with each other. The real Sinatra-Kennedy story may actually be with the father, Joseph P. Kennedy.

Raj Ayyar: Thank you, Val. I've enjoyed interviewing you.

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