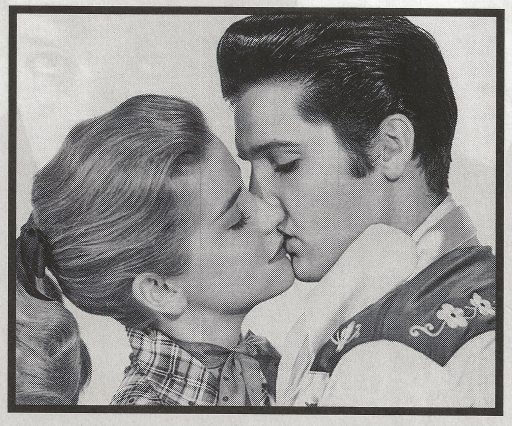
A HEAVENLY OSCAR VOTER

The NUN WHO KISSED ELVIS



Nearly half a century ago, Mother Dolores Hart left a flourishing Hollywood career to become a Roman Catholic nun. Meet the most unlikely voting member of the Academy.

BY THOM GEIER

PHOTOGRAPH BY GILLIAN LAUB

DOLORES HART APPEARED in 10 movies in the late 1950s and early '60s, starring opposite some of the biggest stars of the era: Anthony Quinn, Myrna Loy, and Montgomery Clift. She was one of Elvis Presley's first onscreen kisses. At age 20, she earned a Tony nomination for her Broadway debut in *The Pleasure of His Company*. She was an above-the-title star of 1960's spring-break romp *Where the Boys Are*, which led to an invitation to join the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

And then in June of 1963, the striking starlet with the dark blond hair and piercing blue eyes left it all behind. She packed a single suitcase and attended one last autograph-signing session in New York City for *Come Fly With Me*, an MGM comedy about three husband-hunting air hostesses. "I remember I had makeup on from some photography that they were doing," she recalls. Then a man working for the studio approached her. "He wanted to know if he could take me somewhere when it was over, so I said, 'It's a long way. You could just take me to the bus.'" But he insisted, and so he drove her just over two hours north of the city and deposited her at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Conn., where she has lived the quiet life of a cloistered Benedictine nun ever since.

(Above) Dolores Hart and Elvis Presley from 1957's *Loving You*

It's not every nun who enters the convent in the back of a chauffeured limo, admits Mother Dolores Hart, now 72. "Well, if that's in the script, then why not?"

There are 40 nuns at the abbey now, ranging in age from 29 to 90, but none has garnered as much notoriety or curiosity as the woman who gave up a lucrative and promising Hollywood career for God. On a recent snowy day in Connecticut, Mother Dolores gripped a visitor's hands with a strength somewhat surprising for a woman afflicted with peripheral neuropathy, a nerve disorder



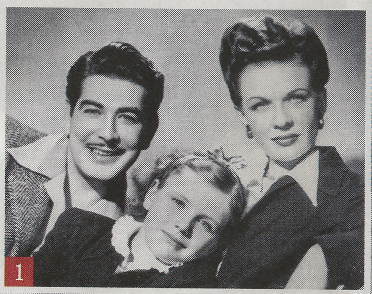
"I had always wanted to be an actress, from the time I was 7 years old. But I realized very concretely it was not the call."

—MOTHER DOLORES HART, photographed on Jan. 19, 2011, at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Conn.

she's had since 1997. She's a slight woman, dressed in a black habit that drapes to her feet, with a black knit cardigan wrapped over it and an oversize beret perched rakishly atop the veil that frames her face.

Over the course of nearly half a century as a Roman Catholic nun, Mother Dolores has had many jobs: choir member, baker, and coffin maker. She's served as prioress, the convent's second in command, for nine years. But for the past two decades, she has spent a good deal of time each winter on another assignment that harks back to her earlier, pre-monastic life: Oscar voter.

Even after all these years, there's something about Hollywood that still carries an almost magnetic pull.


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FROM THE TIME she was a little girl, Dolores Hart wanted to act in movies like her father. Bert Hicks was a Clark Gable look-alike who'd been discovered while working as an usher at a Chicago movie theater, then moved his wife, Harriett, and his young daughter to L.A. to chase his dreams of stardust. He signed as a contract player at Twentieth Century Fox in the 1940s, playing small roles and never quite graduating to leading ones.

Growing up in Hollywood had its advantages. Mother Dolores remembers her father taking her on a film set to meet Vincent Price. Her father pulled her aside before the meeting and told her, "I want you to know we did see his last picture, it was called *Shock*. Just between you and me, Dolores, I thought it stank." When they got on the set, she says, "I was so excited to meet a real movie star. We get there, and Daddy said, 'Dolores, here is Mr. Price.' And I said, 'How do you do, Mr. Price? Daddy said that *Shock* stank.' It was a dead, dead moment in the room. And finally Mr. Price said, 'Well, you're not the first one to have said it.'"

Bert and Harriett divorced when Dolores was about 6, and Dolores was sent to live during the school year with her maternal grandparents in Chicago. Though neither of her parents was Catholic, she attended St. Gregory elementary school in Chicago—and converted to the faith under the watchful eyes of the nuns there. Her grandfather Fred was a movie projectionist, and she recalls spending many a day with him watching movies, typically with the sound off in the booth so he could nap between the times he had to change the reels. "I saw hundreds of movies without sound," she says, "but it was an amazing way of learning what actors do."

By the time she was 12 her mother had remarried, and Dolores moved back to L.A. full-time. "I went to high school in the Valley and got my first taste of acting," she says. She seldom saw her father anymore: "He had married a couple of times, and his life had gone into many different ins and outs." Pursuing a Hollywood career was her attempt to forge a connection. "I did have a great admiration for him even though he wasn't doting on me and I didn't see much of him," she says. "He was very appealing and handsome. And every little girl has a desire to please her father."

At 17, she got her wish. When she was a freshman at L.A.'s Marymount College with a scholarship in drama, a scout for Paramount saw her star in George Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan* at nearby Loyola University. He invited her to audition for a new musical, 1957's *Loving You*, but there was a hitch: The screen test fell on the same day as her drama class' final exam. Worse, her instructor regarded cinema as a "bastard art" and vowed to fail her if she skipped out. But Dolores won the blessing of Marymount's dean, did the screen test, and landed the part: a young country singer touring the South with an upstart musician played by Elvis Presley. Dolores, who took the stage name Hart, wasn't as thrilled about meeting the pop idol as you might imagine. In fact, she had never heard of him. "I was in school and doing other things—I never turned on the radio," she explains. But when she went back to school after the screen test, "everyone said, 'Did you meet him? Did you get a lock of his hair?' And I said, 'Are you crazy? I wouldn't go up to a stranger—well, he wasn't a stranger, I was introduced—but I wouldn't just go up and take a lock of somebody's hair.'"

Naturally, the film was a hit—and featured a rather innocent lip-lock with Presley just before the end credits. Mother Dolores still remembers shooting the scene. "There were hundreds of people all around and when we got to the kiss, the director, Hal Kanter, said, 'Cut! Get me makeup! She's blushing. It's on both cheeks and there's too much red.' So they came over, and we started again, and he yelled, 'Cut! It's over on the neck now!' We started again and then, 'Cut! It's him! He's blushing!' " she recalls, laughing. "It wasn't that you're embarrassed. You just wanted to get the thing over with."

OVER THE NEXT seven years, Dolores Hart shot nine more movies and developed a reputation as a talented and professional leading lady with a forthright screen presence. Her films ranged from Oscar bait like George Cukor's 1957 drama *Wild Is the Wind*, which earned nominations for stars Anthony Quinn and Anna Magnani, to the youth-oriented 1960 blockbuster *Where the Boys Are*, in which she had top billing as one of four

(PAGE 84) EVERETT COLLECTION; (PAGE 85) MAKEUP: KYRA DORMAN/ARTISTSBYTIMOTHYPRIANO.COM; (THIS SPREAD) HICKS FAMILY: COURTESY OF MOTHER DOLORES HART; PRESLEY AND HART: SUNSET BOULEVARD/CORBIS; *LONELYHEARTS*, *WHERE THE BOYS ARE*: EVERETT COLLECTION (3)







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1 Bert and Harriett Hicks with their daughter, Dolores, around 1943 2 With Presley in 1957 3 With Montgomery Clift rehearsing for 1958's *Lonelyhearts* 4 Paula Prentiss Benjamin, Hart, and Connie Francis in 1960's *Where the Boys Are* 5 With George Hamilton in *Where the Boys Are*

Midwestern coeds looking for a good time—and perhaps an Ivy League husband—during spring break in Fort Lauderdale. (Early on in the film, Hart's character, Merritt, horrifies her college professor by extolling the idea of premarital sex, though in the end Merritt can't bring herself to go all the way with the handsome millionaire/Brown senior played by George Hamilton.)

Paula Prentiss Benjamin, who made her film debut in *Where the Boys Are*, remembers bonding with Hart almost instantly on the set. "Dolores is totally without guile," she says. "She's got a really funny sense of humor—sometimes it's kind of bawdy." Donald Robinson, an L.A. native who dated Hart at the time, agrees. "She does have a raunchy sense of humor," says Robinson. "That's part of her charm."

That humor came in handy when she was on sets dominated by men, as in the 1961 comedy *Sail a Crooked Ship* starring Ernie Kovacs, Robert Wagner, and Frankie Avalon. "We were locked into that set, and there's not much you can do when you're on a ship," says Wagner. As a result, there were a lot of between-scenes high jinks. "They would kind of tease Dolores," says Avalon, "and she would play it off very well. She went right along with the gang." One episode stands out for Mother Dolores. "There was a scene in which Robert used a bra as a slingshot, and it was supposed to be my bra. So everyone wanted to know what size it was. I said it was a 40, of course," she laughs.

Even as she was making her name as an actress, she was beginning to question her future. She made her first visit to the Abbey of Regina Laudis while performing in Broadway's *The Pleasure of His Company* in 1959. The 20-year-old Tony nominee was feeling burned-out. "I was standing on the corner of Madison Avenue and one of the 50s, and a policeman came up to me and said, 'Lady, you know you've been looking at that stoplight going on and off for the last 10 minutes. Are you all right?'" she says. Her roommate at the time suggested that she spend her day off at a convent in Connecticut. "I said, 'Absolutely not! I'm not going to any place where there's nuns. I finished my course in elementary school.'" Reluctantly, she decided to go—and found a refuge from the Broadway grind of eight shows a week. "No one even asked to see me, they just let me be. I came up and walked around and slept," she says. "I began coming up often enough and soon I asked to speak to Mother Placid"—the head of the abbey at the time. "I began to communicate with her about theater because she was a theater buff." In one of those early conversations, she remembers asking if she should be a nun. "No, you go back and do your Hollywood thing," Mother Placid told her. "And I said, 'Thank God!' I was so relieved."

She returned to her Hollywood thing with gusto. It was the waning days of the studio system, but she was enjoying many of its perks. She attended the Oscars in 1960 and 1961, and watched Liz Taylor win her first statuette, for *BUtterfield 8*: "I thought I was in heaven." In a bit of foreshadowing, she was cast as St. Clare in the 1961 biopic *Francis of Assisi*—though she denies the role triggered her later decision to enter the convent. "I can understand why people would think that, because the movie shows me getting my hair cut and all the things you go through to become a nun. But that wasn't the time of crystallization for me." A greater influence was 1962's *Lisa*, in which she played a Jewish concentration-camp survivor struggling to get from postwar Amsterdam

"When we got to the kiss, the director said, 'Cut! Get me makeup! She's blushing.'"

—MOTHER DOLORES ON SHOOTING HER ROMANTIC SCENE WITH ELVIS PRESLEY

to Palestine. "Taking on the part of that young woman who had been so deeply scarred by the Nazi invasion of her body in the Second World War, that really penetrated my heart."

But making that ultimate leap of faith was no simple matter. After she shot what would be her final film, 1963's *Come Fly With Me*, Fox and MGM both offered her a contract. "My career was sailing," she says. "I had always wanted to be an actress, from the time I was 7 years old. To have it happen, and to have it really come true in such an amazing, gifted way, was beyond anything I could have hoped for." And she had another earthly commitment to consider: By now, she was engaged to Donald Robinson. The wedding was set for Feb. 23, 1963, with eight-time Oscar-winning costume designer Edith Head making her gown.

Continuing the life of a Hollywood starlet was tempting, she concedes. "But I realized very concretely it was not the call," she says. "And if anyone asks me how you can explain that, I can't—any more than one can say how do you know you're in love. You can't *not* do it." After attending an engagement party thrown for them in L.A. in December 1962, she remembers Robinson telling her, "You just weren't with this party at all. I think you'd better go to that monastery and think some things over." She booked a flight the next day. "When I got here, and got up into the woods, the snow stopped and there was a beautiful stone altar there, and I said, 'Could this really be my calling?' " The head of the convent agreed to accept her, but not until the following June, and asked her not to tell anyone about her decision—except for Robinson, of course. "The Mother Abbess did not want this to be another splash in the newspapers," she explains. About a decade earlier, the movie star June Haver had entered a convent and then left again after just eight months, causing the Church a good deal of embarrassment. (Haver later married *Double Indemnity* star Fred MacMurray.)

When Hart flew back to L.A., Robinson met her at the airport and she broke the news. "I knew it, I knew it," he told her. After spending the spring of 1963 promoting *Come Fly With Me*, she closed the door on her showbiz career for good and took that long limo ride to the abbey.

The cloistered sisters at the Abbey of Regina Laudis may seem to have withdrawn from the outside world, but that's not entirely true. In addition to attending prayer services eight times a day, Mother Dolores has spent time with visitors to the compound's guesthouse, including the late Oscar-winning actress Patricia Neal, who started coming to the abbey in 1979 when her tumultuous 30-year marriage to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* author Roald Dahl was unraveling. (Neal converted to Catholicism four months before her death last August and is buried at the abbey.) "Monastic life is impossible for most people to understand," says Mother Dolores. "People think that it is a life that is shut off, or you're gone from the world, but it's exactly opposite. You are more embedded into the world. It's a way of love that includes everyone that you've ever loved."

Making connections with visitors to the abbey, she says, is a kind of extension of the work she began in Hollywood. She fondly remembers former costars like *Lisa*'s Stephen Boyd, with whom she made two movies. "I'll never stop loving him. Because we shared time together every night for five months, you got to know what is in a person's heart. I don't know Elvis in that way. But you do cross a person's path, and there's a soul-to-soul communication, and when that clicks, it's never gone."

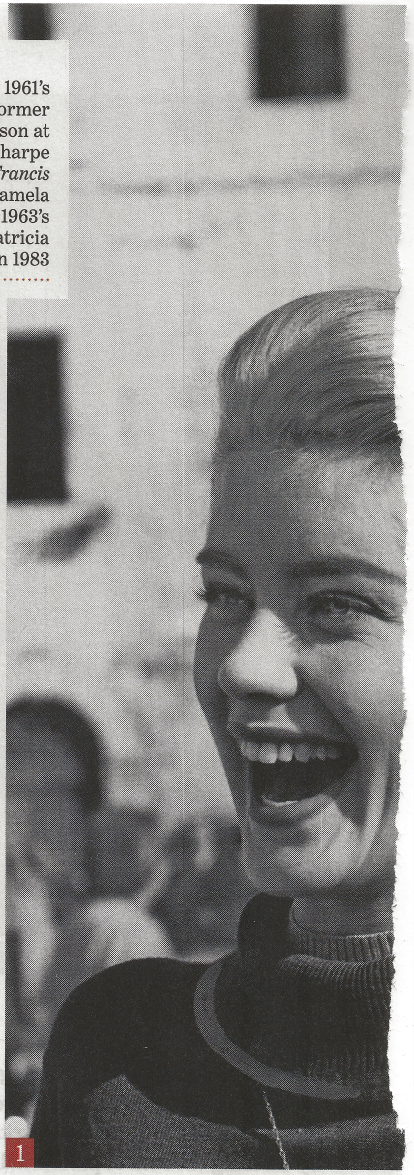
ONE LOVE WHO HAS never left her is Don Robinson, her former fiancé. At the time that he urged her to visit the abbey and work out her feelings about their engagement, Robinson expected a happy ending. "To be very, very honest with you, I really thought that she would be coming home and that we would be married," says Robinson, a handsome, fit fellow of 77 with a well-groomed crop of grayish white hair. When she decided to become a nun, he says, "it was a great shock to me." Robinson's older brother, Arthur, had been set to marry a woman who'd also broken off their engagement to join a convent—in South Bend, Ind., near the University of Notre Dame—but she left after six months and returned to L.A. They wound up marrying and having five children. So even in the midst of his disappointment over Dolores' choice, Don Robinson had reason to hope for a final-reel reconciliation.

"It was step-by-step, knowing what to do," says Robinson. At first, he visited the abbey, maintaining the connection...just in case. "I told Dolores she had to stay at least six months to outlast my brother's wife," he says. She did. And gradually, he came to understand her decision—and to support it. "Down the road, I accepted that she was doing the right thing," he says. "It took a while. It was a long ordeal."

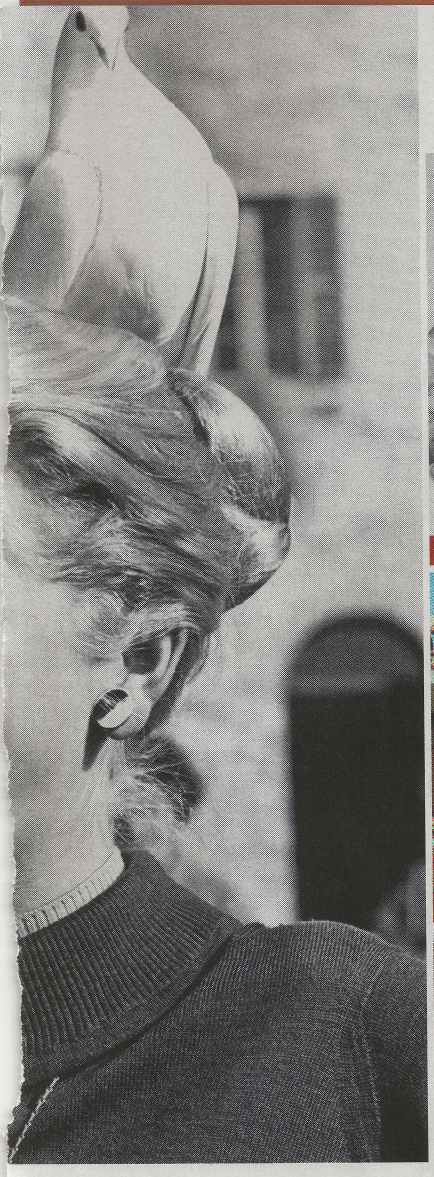
Robinson, who sells real estate for Sotheby's in L.A., dated several women over the years. But he never married. "I came close a couple times," he says. "But I never felt the satisfaction of another person as I did with Dolores. I never regretted not marrying. I think that was all God's plan." He and Mother Dolores remain close, close friends. They talk by phone frequently, and he visits the abbey several times a year. "He's a much better Catholic than I am," she says, eagerly pulling an iPhone from a pocket at her waist and scrolling through it to find recent photos of Robinson. "He has made me to be who I am."

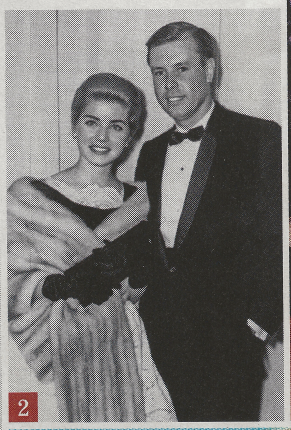
Occasionally, though, both of them still ponder what might have been. "Sometime last June, I was in my room and I was in that kind of a mood where I was wondering what it would be like," Mother Dolores recalls. "And the phone rang and Don was on the other line and he said, 'This may sound strange, but I just wanted to call you because I wanted to let you know that I am very, very happy that you are there and that you're doing what you're doing. I wanted you to know

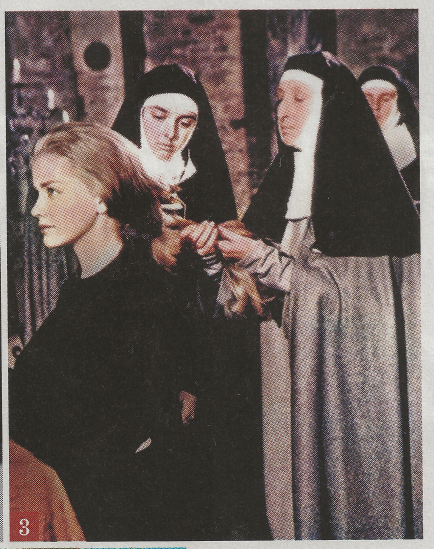
"Movies reflect the time. It's not so much that movies are ugly, it's the ugliness of the time that is reflected."
—MOTHER DOLORES ON TODAY'S RACIER FILMS



1 Hart on location in Italy for 1961's *Francis of Assisi* 2 With former fiancé Donald Robinson at the 1961 Oscars 3 Edith Sharpe holding Hart's hair in *Francis of Assisi* 4 Lois Nettleton, Pamela Tiffin, and Hart in 1963's *Come Fly With Me* 5 With Patricia Neal at the abbey in 1983




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that you did the right thing. Don't ever think differently.' I said, 'Why did you just call me now?' He said, 'I don't know, but something in me told me I need to call you now.'"

"Things like that have happened through the years for the two of us," admits Robinson. "We have hit high notes, much more than the average person would."

EVERY DAY FOR the past several weeks, Mother Dolores has spent her free time watching dozens of screeners of 2010 releases and preparing her Oscar ballot. As a member of the actors' branch, she must rank her choices of nominees in both the acting categories and Best Picture. She resumed her status as a voting member of the Academy in 1990, when her friend (and *Come Fly With Me* costar) Karl Malden was president. She watches the films in her basement office, a 12-by-12-foot room with high ceilings and a slanted floor that was once the art studio of one of the order's founders. From a filmmaker's perspective, her viewing experience is less than ideal. The Academy sent her a piracy-proof DVD player, but her TV is a 20-year-old model that sits on a stand. "It's a tiny little thing, maybe eight inches," she says. "I never got past to the big stuff."

She still sees the pictures and performances quite clearly, thank you very much—though she admits that last year she was delighted to receive tickets to see *Avatar* on the big screen in 3-D. "That was the most incredible thing," she marvels, noting that she selected it for Best Picture—over the objections of her fellow nuns. "The whole place was up in arms because I was on the side of *Avatar*," she says. As it happens, the sisters had been rooting for the eventual winner, *The Hurt Locker*, which she had screened for the community to great acclaim. "If there's something really good, I'll mention it to Mother Abbess," she explains, and a larger viewing is arranged. For the most part, though, Mother Dolores watches the movies alone in the privacy of her office: "I don't think that they would be shocked by the gore and the sex and the violence in the movies as much as they would just feel that their time had been wasted."

This year, she counts herself a big fan of *The Social Network* ("extraordinary"), *The King's Speech* ("incredibly beautiful"), and *Toy Story 3* ("brilliant"). But not everything has impressed her. "I was shocked by some of the ones that I couldn't imagine were Academy-worthy," she says, politely declining to name names. "But that's life. I don't think a horror film is really acting. I think you can get away with too much."

She quickly dismisses the notion that there's anything incongruous about a Catholic nun watching R-rated movies such as *Black Swan*. "Movies reflect the time. It's not so much that movies are ugly, it's the ugliness of the time that is reflected. To me that indicates what we have to pray for and pray about," she says. She's certainly no prude, and like many Benedictines has been taught to reconcile the flawed culture of the outside world with the loftier ambitions of religious life. Plus, she's had plenty of contact with outsiders who've faced many of the issues she sees on screen. "When I see Natalie Portman masturbating [in *Black Swan*], I hear the kids come in and talk about their problems with masturbating," she says. "What offends me is, Is the movie itself going to leave people without hope? You have to help them know that there is a way through their grief and their pain."

Even though she hasn't appeared on a soundstage in nearly 50 years, Mother Dolores still considers herself an actress. Only now, she says, she channels her training into being a better Christian, more empathetic and attuned to the lives of others. "If you're an actor, you have to have that freedom of being able to give yourself over to the experience of another being. You've got to get that truth and you've got to find it within yourself."

At the Abbey of Regina Laudis, Mother Dolores believes she has found the role of a lifetime, performing daily for an audience of One. ■

FRANCIS OF ASSISI: 20TH CENTURY FOX/EVERETT COLLECTION (2); HART WITH ROBINSON: PHOTOFEST; *COME FLY WITH ME:* EVERETT COLLECTION; WITH NEAL: COURTESY OF MOTHER DOLORES HART