



"The Boston Globe" • April 17, 1977

"Evening" co-hosts Marty Sender and Robin Young interview Johnny Carson.

THE COVER

Robin Young and Marty Sender (foreground) hope to become as recognizable to New England TV viewers through their new show, "Evening," as the other popular local "hosts" and hostesses with whom they share the cover. Others are, clockwise from upper left, Bob Gamere, Elliot Norton, Jim Crockett, Dr. Tim Johnson and Sonya Hamlin.

Rubbing elbows with celebrities

By William A. Henry 3d
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Society is celebrity: in late 20th century America, the people whom even the Brahmins want to lure to their parties are the famous. Leading the social lists, at opera openings and benefit balls and little Beacon Hill cocktail parties, are TV performers.

They are attractive, poised, at ease in public. Their jobs give them money, power, access to interesting places and ideas. But most important is their fame — and it can be acquired practically overnight.

Everyone in America can spot Walter Cronkite, Johnny Carson, Barbara Walters in an airport crowd. In the echelon below them, most people in Boston would throng in greeting around Jack Cole, Tony Pepper or Natalie Jacobson, would shout in recognition to Sonya Hamlin or Elliot Norton or Sharon King.

This week WBZ-TV Channel 4 launches a new magazine show, "Evening," featuring two young "personalities" who hope it will make them famous. The first two shows, not entirely by accident, feature segments about the drive for fame.

The format guarantees that the show will continue to be about celebrity, and it will help make celebrities of more than a dozen performers who give "tips," hints and lessons.

News shows star anchor-men, whom the less infatuated British call "news readers." Talk shows star, and let the conversation be dominated by, "hosts" and "hostesses" like John Willis and Janet Langhart of Channel 5's morning "Good Day," Norm Nathan and Sonya Hamlin of Channel 5's Sunday "Open House," Sharon King of Channel 4's "Woman '77," Tanya Hart of Channel 7's Saturday "Womankind." By nature hosts and hostesses are professional amateurs, asking gee-whiz questions and joining expert guests in an isn't-this-fun sampling of hobbies and pursuits.

Documentary and news-magazine shows use reporters as referees, as in Channel 7's "Mass Reaction," or as narrator-guides, as in Channel 4's "Action 4" with Gene Pell. In news and special-interest shows, the TV personality, usually someone with a second career, is permitted to instruct rather than to imitate an uninformed viewer — thus the explicit savvy of Elliot Norton about theater on Channel 2 or of Dr. Tim Johnson about medicine on Channel 5's syndicated "House Call" and medical specials. Occasionally the specialty show becomes the primary career, particularly for a reporter. Bob Gamere of Channel 7 is now best known not for sportscasting but for the popular lead-in to the news, "Candlepins for Cash."

"Evening," a departure in that it is five nights a week, in what used to be network prime time, Monday through Friday from 7:30 to 8, is also a departure in that it is about aspiration, upward striving, how to be hip. Its intended audience is young and mobile, and the role of the hosts, subtly, is to guide the audience through a shared elbow-rubbing with scenes of glamour.

Robin Young and Marty Sender launch themselves and their show with a deferential, almost pious interview with Johnny Carson, whom they plainly envy and would like to emulate. Carson, a notoriously difficult interview subject, wrestled for about 45 minutes with such questions as: Is the private Johnny Carson different from the showman? His wife was asked, after elaborate on-air apologies by Sender, whether she was in love with the public man or the private man or both.

Carson is the "Evening Person" of the opening show. In the second show the "Evening Person" and "Evening Story" segments are alike — one is a hilarious if savage send-up of the Miss Massachusetts beauty pageant for the Miss USA title; the other a clip borrowed from the San Francisco prototype for "Evening," about competitors for Mr. Universe.

"Evening" is the sort of local program that all stations expect praise merely for

doing. WBZ, in fact, based its early sell not on the show's content but on the theme that it was dropping five nights a week of syndicated game shows, at substantial cost and risk. WBZ's owner, Westinghouse Broadcasting, was a principal agitator for having the FCC return the half-hour from 7:30 to 8 p.m. weeknights to local stations for local programming. Practically everywhere, including at the five Westinghouse stations, the half-hour was used for syndicated shows, most often cheaply produced games, and the local stations basked in the extra hours of advertising income.

Westinghouse's San Francisco outlet, however, launched "Evening" a year and a half ago, and when ratings were satisfactory the Group W Broadcasting hierarchy decided to start "Evening" at all four of their other stations, beginning with Boston.

The best entertainment producer Tom Houghton has said in several interviews, is celebrity. "We're going to find the most interesting people in New England, and maybe in the country," he said. "That's what 'Evening' is all about. And we're particularly interested in television people — how about whatever-happened-to-Tom Ellis, or what has become of Jay Scott? Those are great stories, people will like them, and that's the kind of thing you'll be seeing."