



DORAL CHENOWETH III | DISPATCH

From a stool at the Ruby Hill Bar, Tom Harmon takes in an episode of *Jerry Springer*.

CHANNELING

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began working on televisions in the mid-1960s (after electronics-school training covered by the GI Bill).

Why more people are showing up with sets hanging out of trunks or held by bungee cords to pickup beds, well, Harmon isn't sure.

"More lightning strikes, maybe," he speculated in his melodious West Virginia-bred drawl. "I've had a lot of sets in here struck by lightning."

Sentimentalists, too, have contributed to his workload — as they always have.

"It was Mom's TV; I don't want to part with it yet" — you know," he said as a muted *Family Feud* played on two sets awaiting retrieval. "They'll put \$200 into a set that isn't worth \$100 to most people just because 'It was Mom's TV.'"

His modest fees might also have something to do with the business uptick.

The recent cost of a tube replacement and tuneup for Sharma Rochester's late-'90s, 52-inch RCA — figured on a piece of masking tape atop the set — totaled \$96.30.

Travel time for a technician dispatched by most electronics chains in central Ohio costs almost \$100 — and a repairman is sent only if the set remains under warranty. (Harmon doesn't make house calls, but he might send a gofer.)

Rochester, 57, was as pleased with the repair work as she was with the tab.

"I know he's reasonable because my son had a TV worked on," the Groveport resident said. "When mine stopped working, I thought, 'What am I going to do with this?' And then I remembered the shop by the bar."

Harmon — who grew up in "a place they called Mud Fork" — is a one-time brakeman for the Pennsylvania Railroad, a former soda deliveryman (Sun Crest), an ex-owner of a carryout and a former semi-serious musician.

He's also a husband, a father of three and a grandfather of three who enjoys talking about TV repair as much as he does country and bluegrass music or zucchini and tomato cultivation.

Gardening calls most afternoons, but TV troubleshooting begins about 6:30 most mornings (excluding Sundays).

Getting to the shop early guarantees time to tinker.

Harmon sniffs out coffee at the bar about 7 — and might linger awhile if it's going down smoothly.

The shop officially opens at 8, but *Jerry Springer* airs at 9 — so, depending on his interest in whatever mayhem the former Cincinnati mayor has orchestrated, televisions might not be tended during the next hour.

By noon, friends straggle into the garage out back to shoot the breeze, drink a little beer and maybe cook up a jam session with Harmon.

"Everybody loves Tommy," said Michele Crider, a bartender at the Ruby Hill for six years. "He's like the mayor. He walks in, and everybody's buying him drinks: 'I got it, Tommy. I got it.'"

Harmon takes TV repair seriously — but not seriously enough to let it interfere with his day. That's the way he has always worked.

If something sidetracks him, he simply lets customers know with one of his familiar notes, written with a Sharpie on well-worn manila folders and taped to the

Others who repair

Besides Obetz TV, here are some other independent shops in central Ohio:

► Advanced Television Service Center, Columbus Square Shopping Center, Cleveland Avenue and E. Dublin-Granville Road (614-865-9990)

► Audio-Video Service, 2025 W. Henderson Rd. (614-459-4355)

► Electra-Sound, 3330 Urbancrest Industrial Dr. (614-265-9010)

► Fulton Electronics, 3931 Front St., Grove City (614-886-7598)

► KMT, Mill Run Shopping Center, 3786 Fishingier Blvd. (614-777-7770)

► Lincoln TV, 2151 E. Dublin-Granville Rd. (614-890-2600)

► Mercury-Keller TV Service, 1452 E. Livingston Ave. (614-258-9577)

► Purpura Television Service, 522 S. Waverly St. (614-237-8875)

► Rainbow TV-VCR, 3476 S. Hamilton Rd. (614-837-0407)

► S&J Radio & TV, 225 E. 5th Ave. (614-297-1455)

► Snyder's TV Sales & Service, 2238 Harrisburg Pike (614-875-2703)

► Suburban Electronics, 5316 Center St., Hilliard (614-876-7713)

► Thompson Electronics Service Center, 4315 E. Main St. (614-235-6850)

► TV-VCR Repair Shop, 10164 Busey Rd. N.W., Canal Winchester (614-833-0550)

door: "On Call . . . Back ½ HR"; "Check Around Back"; "Dr Appmt . . . Open 12 pm"; "Out for lunch next door"; "Back in 5 min."

When he does get around to the sets, he doesn't charge for a diagnosis or an estimate on parts and labor.

"I can do that because I don't have much overhead — none, really," he said. "I take care of the place for the landlady, so she barely charges me rent, and I don't make many service calls."

Sue Harmon calls her husband of 52 years "the most unmaterialist person I have ever met."

"If he's got a little money to buy whatever he needs," she said, "he is happy."

Mostly, then, Harmon does the work for the same reason he still plays the fiddle, grows vegetables and watches Jerry Springer — to entertain himself.

"If people want a second opinion, they can go out and pay someone for it," Harmon said. "But if they do that, they're still going to have to come back and get their TV."

Appliances abandoned at Obetz TV are eventually scrapped or donated to the trash bin out back.

Through the years, the bin has known many brands: Zenith, Philco, RCA, Curtis Mathes, Sony — all high-quality sets.

But time eventually claims every piece of machinery, said Harmon, who has three Zeniths at his South Side home.

"Now, every kind, . . . they're all pretty much the same," he said. "You're lucky to get two, three years out of anything, no matter what you paid."

These days, TV quality isn't much of a concern for him personally.

"I don't see much to watch on TV anymore, anyway. At night, I just like to go to sleep."

abeck@dispatch.com

PROFILE | KATHARINE MCPHEE

'Idol' singer begins transition to acting

By Nicky Loomis
LOS ANGELES TIMES

HOLLYWOOD — When she talks about her recent switch from singing to acting, *American Idol* finalist Katharine McPhee boils down her role in *The House Bunny* to two words: preggie suit.

"That's what they call it," she says, laughing at the memory of playing Harmony, a pregnant hippie throwback who totes around a tub of peanut

butter, spoon at the ready, and wears flower-child dresses.

The movie stars Anna Faris as Shelley, a Playboy bunny who gets kicked out of the mansion and becomes housemother to the uncool Zeta Alpha Zeta sorority.

"It's kind of like *Revenge of the Nerds*, but we're not really nerds," McPhee says.

Characters are more in the slacker mold. "We just don't really care that much; my character is pregnant, so I really don't feel like doing anything."

Three years ago, McPhee was belting her way through her *American Idol* audition in San Francisco and was brought to tears as Simon Cowell told her, "You are sailing through to Hollywood, young lady."

She finished the fifth season of the Fox talent competition as runner-up, signed with RCA and recorded an album that hit the Billboard 200 chart at No. 2.

McPhee, 24, says acting was the goal all along, even though she is still making music.

The transition, she says, comes with challenges.

"There's still a lot of proving to do on my part," she says.

McPhee might not have

► *The House Bunny*, rated PG-13, is showing in central Ohio theaters.

many lines, but she does sing twice — once in a karaoke performance and once doing a modified cover of the Waitresses hit *I Know What Boys Like*, which plays over the credits.

On the set, McPhee was able to improvise and came up with some funny moments that stayed in the movie, including one in which she squeegees her character's pregnant belly during a sexy carwash scene.

"Surprisingly, Katharine could throw down and was excellent at throwing in improv stuff," director Fred Wolf says. "She was riffing for a good five minutes with the squeegee in hand."

In a summer of male-driven comedies such as *Pineapple Express* and *Tropic Thunder*, where the language is vulgar and the humor is broad and raunchy, the

laughs in *House Bunny* arise from the gentler, deadpan awkwardness when the girls try to talk to boys — including one who will communicate only via text messages.

McPhee never made her *Idol* stardom a big deal to anyone, says Wolf, who was impressed by her composure.

"I had to be reminded that she's a big star in her world," he says, adding that he would often see paparazzi lurking behind craft services hoping for shots of McPhee.

In a few weeks, McPhee will begin shooting *The Storyteller*, a psychological drama in which she stars alongside Wes Bentley (*American Beauty*), and from there it's off to more auditions.

"I'm not going to say this business is easy, because it's not, but I'm definitely grateful that I'm a part of it," she says. "If that's because of *Idol*, then that's because of *Idol*."

"I'm not afraid to look back to where I got my start. Everyone needs to get their start somewhere."

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