

don francks full circle

by jim bearden
and linda jean butler

For multi-talented Don Francks, the show must go on — but with a difference. And only a deepening modern awareness can hope to turn the tide in time.

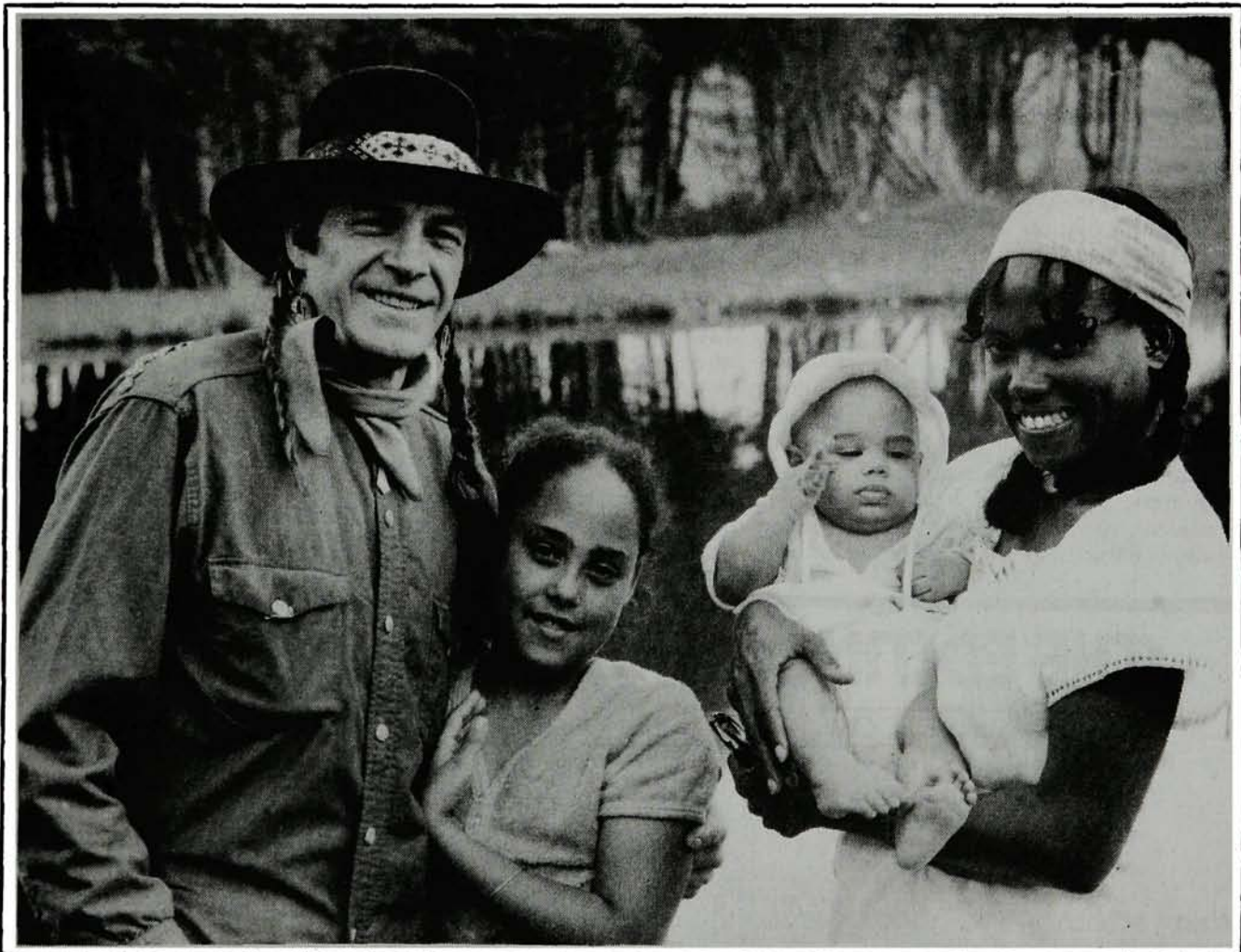


photo : Fred Phipps

Actor Don Francks is also a family man : here, his daughter Cree Summer ; his son, Rainbow Sun ; and his wife Lili, a former Texan, and an actress/dancer who is part Indian

Canada's Don Francks has been described as an "entertainer extraordinaire." In fact, years ago, Jackie Gleason said, "No one in this world is like Don Francks." Kapp Records promptly used that quote for the title of a Don Francks album.

Francks' long and varied career — which includes impressive international credits in the fields of acting, writing, singing, producing and directing — is newly abloom. After a period spent primarily living and working on the Red Pheasant Indian Reserve in Saskatchewan, Francks has made a highly successful return to professional activity. This spring, after a day's shooting on CBC-TV's new series, *The Phoenix Team* — in which he co-stars — Francks rushed to the ACTRA Awards ceremonies still wearing his Phoenix Team costume, which included a wig to cover his long braids. He arrived just in time to collect the Nellie for "Best Actor in a Major Role." The year 1980 also witnesses Don Francks' second season as host/narrator of CBC-TV's prestigious and long-running series, *This Land*.

In the following interview, this controversial and outspoken Canadian speaks of his motivations and convictions, focusing his ideas on the relationship of life to show business.

"When are we going to stop recording man's folly and start making films about how to exist on this planet?"

Don Francks asked the question on nationwide T.V., while accepting the Nellie for his performance in CBC's television drama *Drying Up The Streets*.

Asked to expand on the remark he had made at the ACTRA ceremony, he replies, "It's nice to have a chance to expand on something that will undoubtedly never come true. That was a pure dreamer's remark, you know... I guess sooner or later we try to reach out as best we can — anyway the dreamers do. That

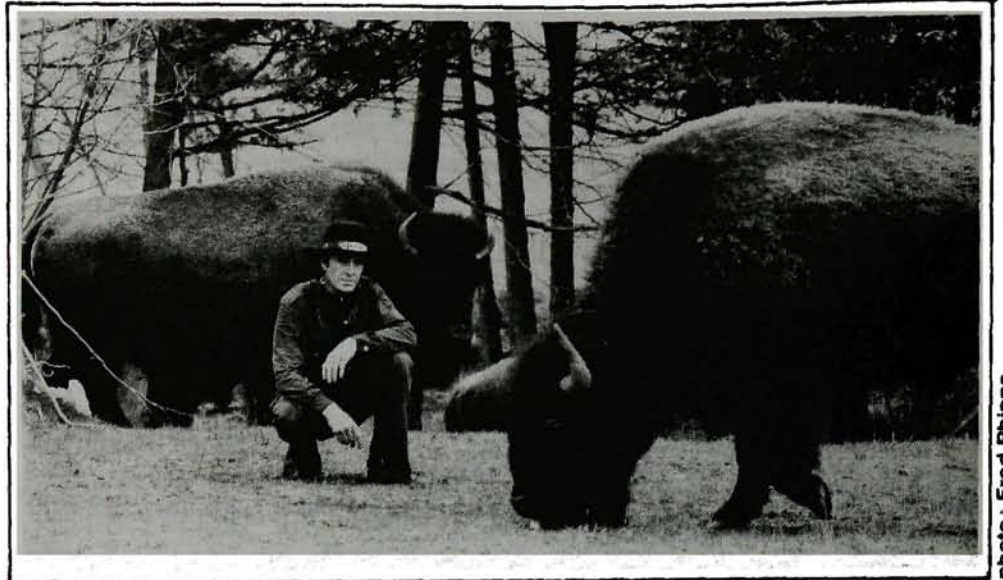


Photo: Fred Phipps

Francks and his co-stars in a program from the CBC-TV series, *This Land*

doesn't make us any better or worse than anybody else, it's literally just a little label we hook on ourselves. . . A label which is very fitting in a world so full of librium-oriented people with valium ways of life, where the soap opera existence of mankind is the thing that takes the most importance. To try and understand whether Uncle Fred is talking to Aunt Marge, or whether your carburator can be fixed by Thursday, is a very stupid world...

"They don't really know that when the tree breathes out, I breathe in, and when I breathe out the tree breathes in. They don't know too much about those things which are called unwritten laws. Therefore, mankind spends a great deal of time writing more and more laws — subsection four of article three of act five to ratify footnote seven — while constantly desecrating the unwritten laws. Not really knowing, but taking it for granted that the sun will come up every day. . ."

Francks is convinced that more attention should be paid to what he calls, "Giving equal time to the planet." Asked for some examples of what should be

done to accomplish this, he comments, "If people were really paying attention, you wouldn't have to ask for answers to that from a little whiz-bang like me." By way of illustration, he cites several programs on CBC-TV — *This Land*, *The Nature of Things*, and *Man Alive* — which he believes are more in line with the goal of giving equal time to the planet: a goal which, he says, no other networks are considering.

"... I think that there have been a few attempts to try and alert the people. But the people really don't want to hear about it. It's bad for business. You cannot alert people to what gives them life when they are afraid of death. You have to... love life, instead of being afraid of death.

"Those that really love life are dreamers; but those who are afraid of dying are cramming in what they can... It's like the word 'almighty.' You know, it's

Jim Bearden has worked professionally in Canadian theatre, film, radio and television for ten years as an actor and singer/composer. He is co-author and illustrator of the book Shadd; The Life and Times of Mary Shadd Cary, as well as a co-writer of plays and film scripts. He has produced and directed for stage, radio and television in Canada and the U.S.

Linda Jean Butler is a Toronto-based writer/actress. With Jim Bearden she is co-author of Shadd, The Life and Times of Mary Shadd Cary, which was also presented by Bearden & Butler as a radio musical on CBC radio's Morningside — winning a 1979 ACTRA nomination from the Toronto Branch for "Best Radio Variety Script."

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been left to the 'almighty dollar' now, not the 'Almighty,' meaning the creator, or the great mystery — which it is.

"We spend a lot of time trying to figure out how many thimblefuls of water there are in the English Channel, how many footsteps it is to Saturn. Nobody really needs to know that. It is of no consequence whatsoever.

"How to maintain this place — I think of all the holy books, of which there are so many I can't read them all, I've tried. . . The unwritten laws are just knowing that, as my friend Druid says, 'No matter where you go, there you are.' And here we are. This is our place, right here. This is my home. This is *my* home! It's your home, too, but it's *my* home, so I have the right to say what's going on in my own home.

"We have critics who say, 'I thought in the second act she was absolutely terrible, but I loved her during the intermission.' There they are, criticizing all of these

petty, picayune things. Meanwhile, right outside their door, the birds are falling, and the frogs are sinking, and they sit there typing — *thinking* they're thinking. . .

"In other words, why don't they criticize that which affects us all? Which affects every living thing on this planet. I think one of the holy books said, 'I give you dominion over all this,' and somebody went out and opened a Dominion Bank, and somebody else opened a Dominion Store. That isn't quite what it meant, I don't think. If it was. . . nobody would have to come into this madness, into this madhouse, into this place where we have no relevance for old people. Like Mork (of *Mork and Mindy*) once said, . . . 'This is a strange place we have here; when furniture and things and antiques get older, they're worth lots, except the people when they get old.'

"Whereas on the Indian Reserve, old

people are cared for. . . We revere our old people. We take care of our old people, and our children, too!"

Francks proceeds to describe his life on the Indian reservation, his long affinity for the Indian people and their way of life, and the variety of his experiences both within and outside the entertainment industry.

"I keep *living* my life, you know? I like to devote time to my children: which a lot of people — maybe some people in the business — don't do. I don't mean actors, but people in other positions who like to do as much as possible and spend a lot of time just being in the business. But I like to raise my children — spend twenty-four hours a day with them if possible. I like that. I like what it gives me.

"There are going to be some people who say, 'Why is he back at all then?'

"Well, we came back, my wife Lili and I, because we had thought that maybe it

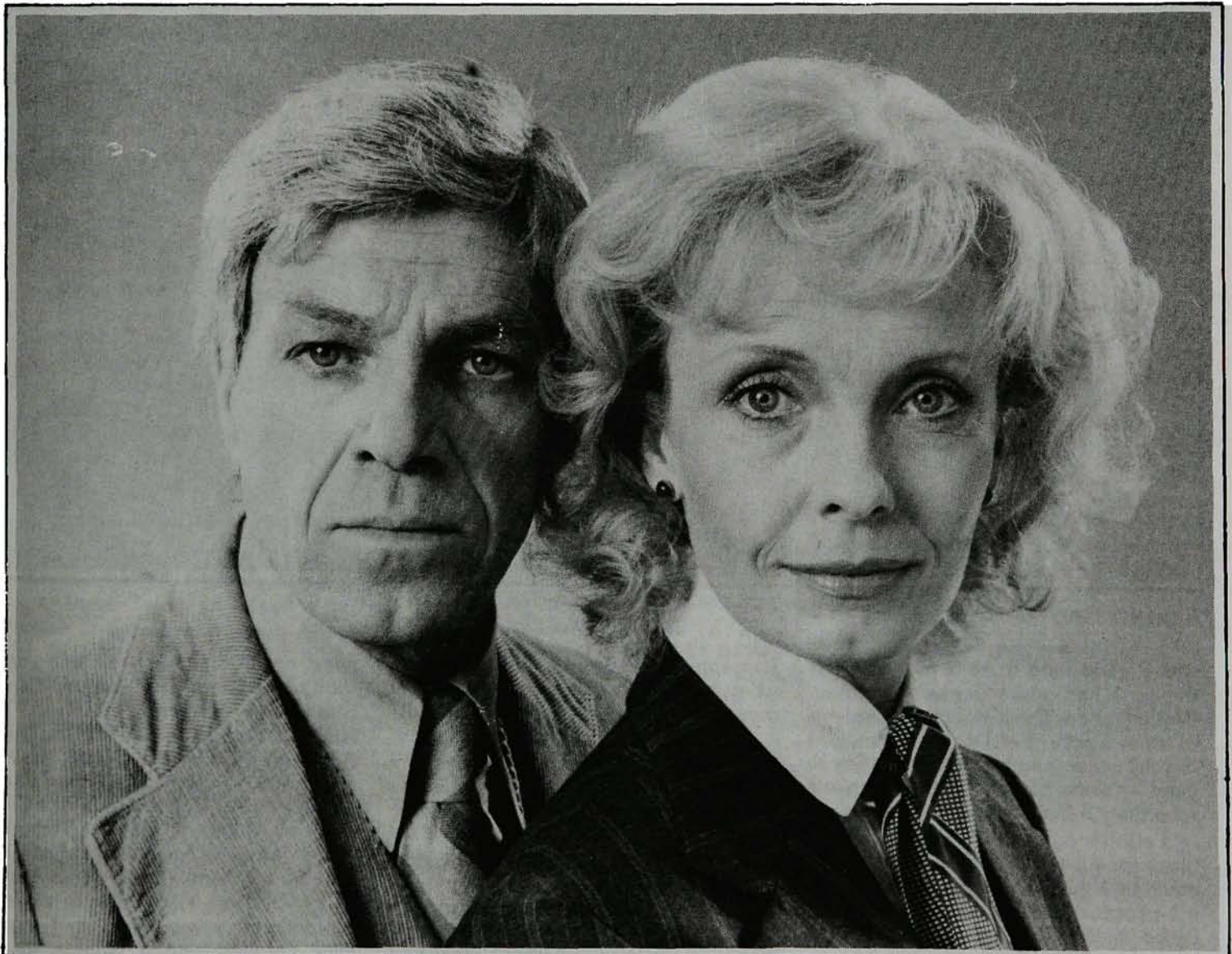


photo: Fred Phipps

Don Francks and Elizabeth Shepherd co-star in CBC-TV's new spy-fi series *The Phoenix Team*. (Francks' transformation into a team member requires a wig to conceal his braids)

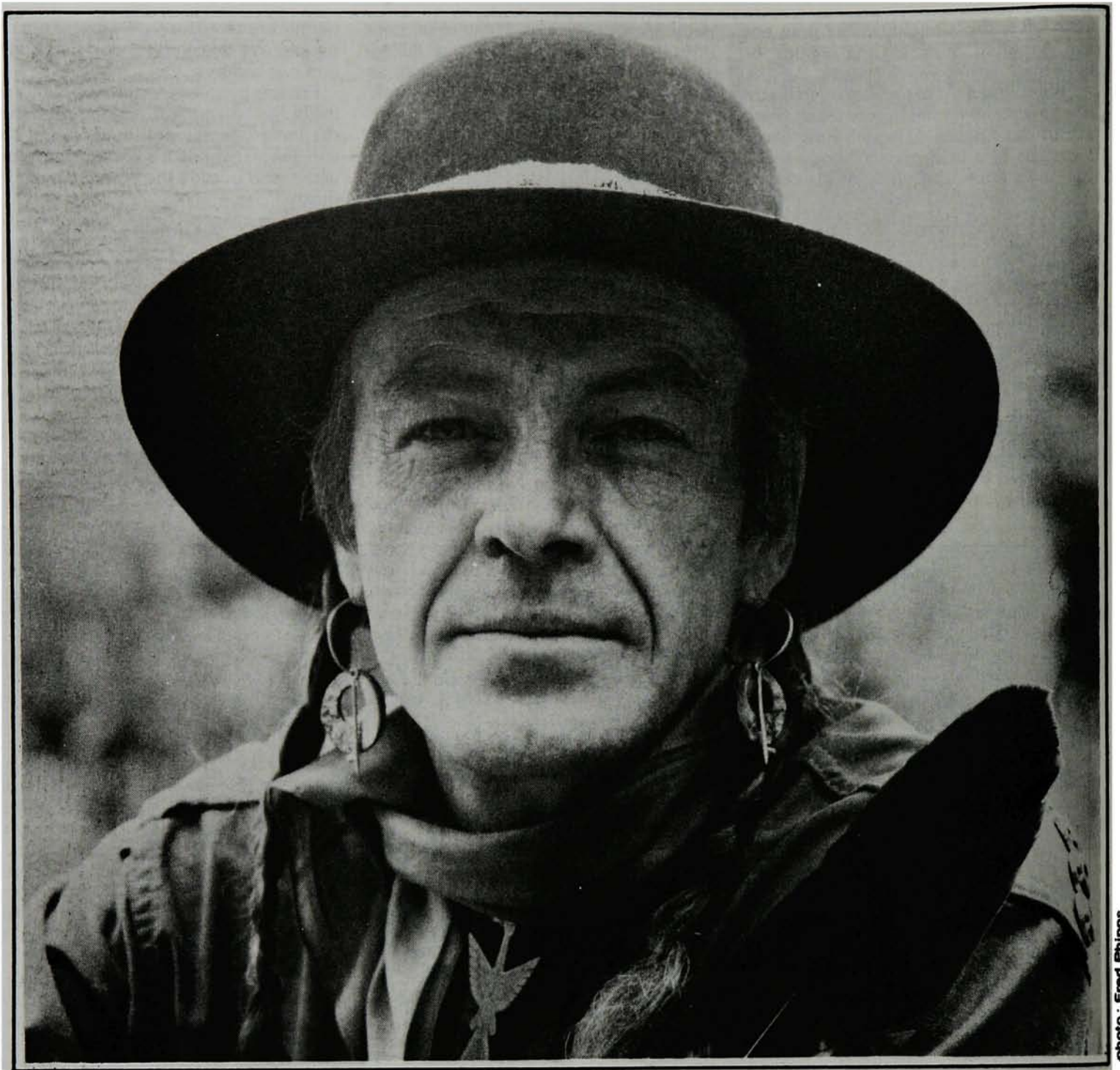


photo: Fred Phipps

A man who believes in "giving equal time to the planet."

was a good time to be a part of a few things. I had some books to publish. Which I still do. There are some recordings of some songs that I'd like to make. I haven't made any recordings for fifteen years — since '65. So, I'd like to make a recording; I like music very much.

"I also thought that maybe it would be nice to possibly figure out whether or not I could be a part of a communication with the people of this nation. . . Sharing. It's called share business instead of show business.

"I guess we're getting right around back full circle to what you initially asked. when

I accepted that Award. . . You hope that what you can do is give people encouragement for life, encouragement to live..."

So Don Francks has returned, to take an active part in the critical years of the industry's expansion. In this, he is evidently determined to share not only his public talents, but his private visions as well.

The man who has had featured roles in no less than ten Canadian and American television series (from *Other Voices* and *Jericho* to *This Land* and *The Phoenix Team*), the man who has been a frequent

guest on international talk and variety shows (including *The Johnny Carson Show*, *The Merv Griffin Show*, *The Andy Williams Show*, *The Ian Tyson Show* and *Touch the Earth*), the man whose film credits include *Finian's Rainbow*, *Old Fish Hawk*, *Summer's Children*, *Fast Company* and *The Tomorrow Man*), has come back to an industry that desperately needs the very combination of qualities he is so eager to share — professional competence and experience coupled with a passion for the quality of content.