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Interviewed/Written by Sally Soares
Thirty million people weekly enjoy Billy Blue Cannon in action. But how many know what Mark Slade is really like? C'mon...and meet Mark: the actor, the artist...the person!

Billy Blue Cannon is a famous name. In a way, Blue is a symbol of youth today: He is idealistic and anxious to do the right thing—but often confused by the situations he faces. And, since acting is often only formal make-believe, TEEN wondered what Mark Slade, the creator of this role, is really like himself.

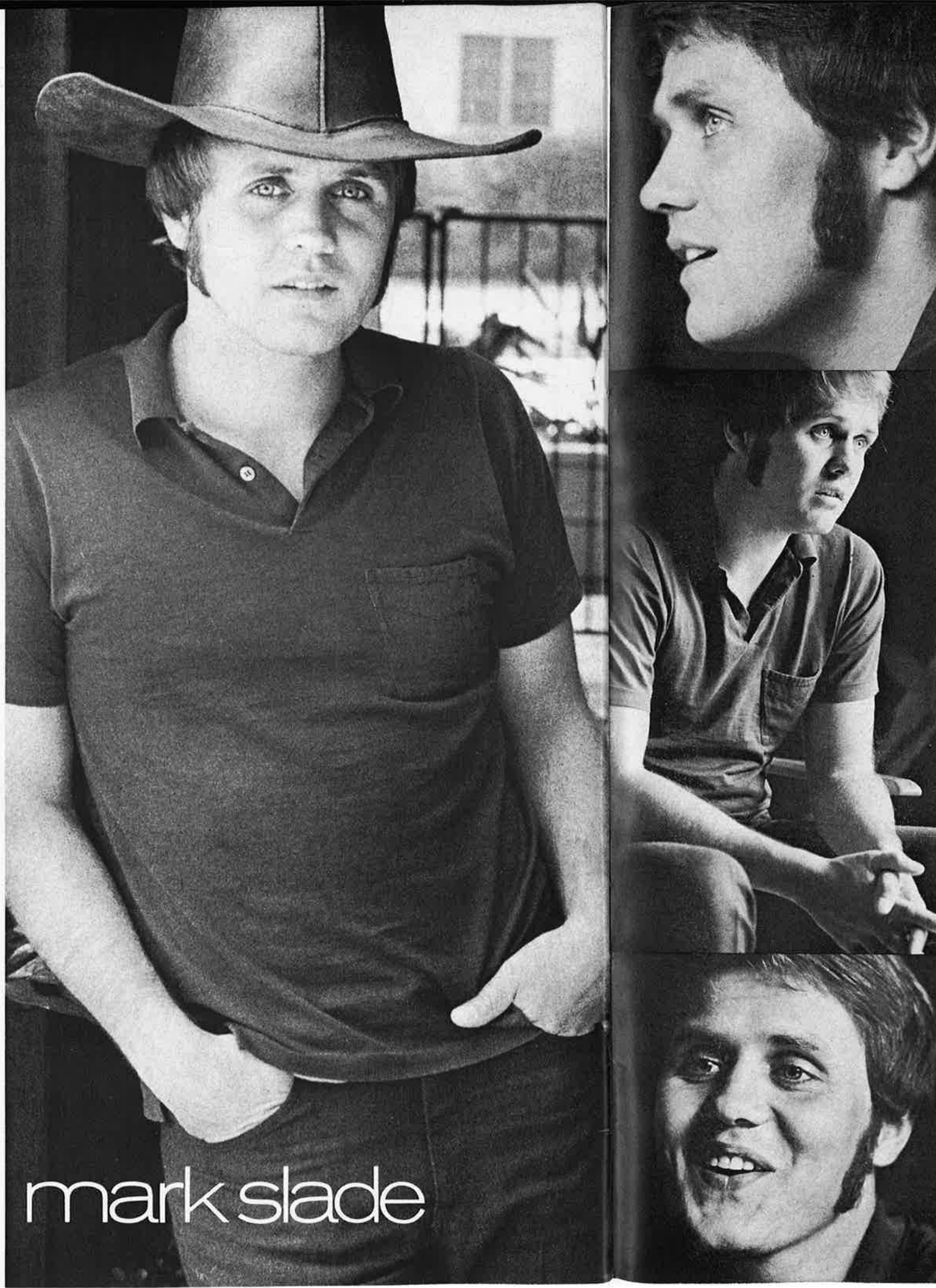
The first thing you notice when you meet Mark Slade is how very easygoing and soft-spoken he is.

His home in the San Fernando Valley (a comfortable suburban area of Los Angeles) is equally relaxed in appearance. It's furnished in warm colors of tawny beiges, gold and green with a lot of personal mementos used for decorating touches. Over in one corner is an antique spinning wheel. Mark's well-drawn cartoons are in the living room. Another wall shows the buggy whip that once belonged to Mark Slade the first, Mark's grandfather. The couch is of cut velvet with a subdued tapestry print, and the hi-fi is playing low. And you're struck by the fact that there is no fake glitter/glamour here: no show-off. It's an awfully nice place but it's meant for living—not just for impressing.

Mark is here only about a third of every year since the "High Chaparral" series started. The rest of the time he spends working on location at the Chaparral ranch in Tucson, Arizona, where the heat often gets up to 125°, or making public appearances around the country. How does Mark feel about the tremendous fame that's come to him? "Well, there are actually two sides to it," he answers. "You'd have to worry if no one asked you to go anywhere. So being asked to attend things is really a compliment. On the other hand, I try not to let it interfere too much with my family life." Usually his wife Melinda and their infant son Morgan accompany him when he travels. When he is home, Mark enjoys entertaining at home or going to friends' homes. He really doesn't dig the disco scene. "It all seems kind of shallow" is the way he puts it. "Everytime I've gone to a club, I've thought I would have a good time...but then I don't. So I try to stay away from the 'Hollywood scene.'"

The best way to put it is that Mark loves acting but not all the phony "glory"

the private world of mark slade



stuff. He's actually a rather modest guy who doesn't need to show off a lot to get his ego boosted. When asked what it took to be an actor, he joked, "I suppose you have to have a big ego." Does Mark feel he fits into this category? "Not really," he laughed. "I didn't ever look in the mirror and say, 'Gee, I'm pretty!' Because I'm not." (That's what he thinks!)

Unlike many actors, Mark did not always dream of being an actor. He was born in Salem, Massachusetts, and as a youngster developed a talent for ventriloquism. He was so good at it that he actually performed at dances and shows in nearby Putnamville and Hamilton, Massachusetts. But he didn't plan on acting then. His real interest was cartooning, and he thought that would be his career when he grew up.

When he attended Worcester Academy, a boys' prep school, he took part in a few plays, and that's when he first started thinking about acting. Not that he was all that good at it at first. One of the most embarrassing moments of his life involves one of those first experiences: "Worcester had a speech contest, and I entered it and won. But my winning wasn't really fair because we were supposed to give formal speeches, and I did a dramatic reading about a man who goes crazy from being in solitary confinement. I yelled the loudest, so I won. So then I got the reputation for being a great speaker...which I wasn't. Later I was asked to give a speech for about 500 people at their Memorial Day event. I decided to do a poem called 'Flanders Field' and to speak about what each line meant. Well, I thought I'd memorized it but I hadn't. I stood up in front of the audience and said the first four lines...then forgot all the rest of it. I didn't know what to do so I just went back to my chair and sat down. The teacher sitting next to me leaned over and whispered, 'Well, at least you could have read the poem.'"

Mark was also active on the school newspaper and president of the student council. He laughs when he remembers himself in those days: "I've got a photo of myself where I don't have a neck! We all played football, and it was a big deal to see who could look the strongest!"

When Mark graduated from Worcester, he talked his parents into letting him try to get into acting. "They gave me a year to try my luck," he recalls. "So I worked for my dad all that summer and saved my money to go to New York. I thought all you had to have was \$600 to live on and know how to talk. But it was much more difficult. I auditioned for the Academy of Dramatic Arts and, after a lot of worrying, got accepted. While studying there, I took odd jobs such as packing clothes in the garment business and checking hats at restaurants to keep going."

Mark describes that experience as very phony...and funny too. "All the acting students had a kind of contest going to see who could get more depressed than the other." Seems they were all trying to prove how sensitive they all were. "I was like the people who wear shades around at night until I looked around one night and saw 10 guys in shades who were just like me! Then I said to myself, 'Hey, what am I doing?'"

Then Mark's career really started taking off. He landed the lead in the dramatic school's touring company of a play called "Blue Denim." He toured for six months, and when he returned, he got a part in a Broadway play, "There Was A Little Girl," starring Jane Fonda. A famous director, Elia Kazan, saw him and asked him to audition for his play, "Splendor in the Grass." Mark was so nervous that he couldn't even concentrate on reading the lines during the audition. But Kazan gave him another chance and told him to come back the next day for a second try. This time Mark steeled his nerve, did a great audition and got the part.

One thing led to another—TV roles in "Coker Pyle," "Perry Mason," "Rawhide" and "High Chaparral." With "Chaparral" Mark has practically become a household word—30 million people watch it weekly. What many fans may not realize is that it is sometimes as dangerous as it looks to be an actor in a western series. As Mark describes it, "My aunt had a horse farm back east, so I had done some riding but for the series I had to learn to ride really well. It took about six weeks. At first I wanted to do all my own stunts but when I took a bad fall, I really got injured. I was out for two weeks. Since then, I've let the stuntman earn his money and do the trick falls. All the others of the cast have been injured in one way or another too." When you add all that to the incredible heat and long hours that the Chaparral cast works, "show biz" doesn't seem so easy.

Billy Blue Cannon is an enjoyable role for Mark to portray because they have some qualities in common. The teen audience identifies with the character, Mark says, because Blue himself is a young person with high ideals and a desire to solve the problems he comes up against. Blue has feelings—and isn't afraid to cry when he's upset.

As a matter of fact, Mark prefers acting roles that aren't superperfect. "I never did like the super-hero roles. And I see the anti-hero Dustin Hoffman and Steve McQueen types as another version of hero. What I really like are what you might call the 'sad sacks.' The best example of this is Jackie Gleason. He's so realistic."

In addition to looking forward to his acting future, Mark was recently "discovered" by a 15-year-old girl who thought he ought to do some recording. She wrote him a note and said, "If you can sing, call this phone number." Mark called, and it turned out the girl is the daughter of a record producer. She also "discovered" Leonard Nimoy. Strange as it sounds, that was the beginning of Mark's singing career. Mark's first album, "Mark Slade's New Hat," was recently released on the Tetragrammaton label. He has a contract to do several more and is really enthusiastic about it. "I'm planning to make a trip to Nashville and look into what's being done there. One of the most interesting things about making a record are the people in that business."

Melinda, Mark's wife, was the inspiration for the title of the LP. While they were thinking of titles, Mark had this immense leather hat on, and Melinda was

continued on page 95

teasing him about looking like a hippie with the put-down, "Well why don't you just call it your 'New Hat'?" The name stuck.

As busy as Mark is with his acting, singing and personal appearance careers, he still finds time to be interested in many other things. He still draws a lot of cartoons and has had them published in *TV Guide* and many newspapers. Amateur photography is another hobby. And he loves listening to music. His favorites include John Stewart, Bob Dylan, Glen Yarbrough and the Beatles. Another interest — which just sort of happened by accident — is making Mark's home seem almost like a private Mod Squad. Here's what happened:

"Some teenage boys broke into my home several months ago and stole my car. They were caught, but instead of bringing charges against them at court, I called up each of their parents and said, 'Come on over. We're going to talk this over.' Naturally, one of the parents was indignant and thought I was trying to be a big shot, but they came, and we got an informal discussion thing going. Some of these kids are finally able to communicate with their parents when they never could before. I'm just sort of the referee. And what's really satisfying is that none of them has been in any trouble since." It was amazing to hear about someone as busy as Mark finding time to try to straighten out some total strangers. Did he have any ideas of why they stole in the first place? "Boredom, mainly," he answered, "and a desire to be noticed and to impress each other."

What's really interesting is how these guys can put each other down now and be so honest. They've been meeting at his house about once a month ever since the theft, and Mark is really enthusiastic about how well it's been going.

"Pressure is causing a lot of problems for teens in general. They get so many 'have to do this and that's' that they just try to escape. Also, respect has broken down. I don't think kids want as much freedom as they're getting. The Beatles really lit the fuse on the whole thing, and it's more of a communication gap than a strictly generation-age problem." All of this means a lot to Mark. Like Blue, Mark is doing what he can to help improve things around him.

Maybe it's because Mark went through some phony stages when he himself was growing up. Or maybe it's because he's successful and wants to share his good fortune or because he has a young son to raise. Whatever the reason, it's truly refreshing to see someone who cares — and does something about it.

So ya see, the private world of Mark Slade is a busy, happy place. And to tell you the truth, it almost seems just a bit too good — except for the fact that it's Mark himself talking about it. 'Cause he's one of the most real people 'TEEN's ever met.

And one thing's sure — if it's dull to be so dedicated, you can bore us with Mark Slade just any old time. That would be some way to be bored — right? **T**

The second myth has to do with lessons (the Miss Agnes-hang-up, remember?). There are many ways to learn how to play an instrument. Many instruments you can teach yourself up to a certain point. There are many self-instruction books sold for piano, guitar, mandolin, recorder, xylophone and many others. Second, group teaching is an almost painless way to start out. You get all the advantages of a social thing and save money too. And, of course, there are school courses too which might surprise you. We hear music teachers all over the U.S. are really revamping their classes. They even admit the Beatles exist.

Okay, you're convinced. You've steeled your will, put away your childhood traumas and decided to try again. Now, how to choose an instrument and where to go for it. First, take a look at the popularity of various instruments today. Piano continues to be number one in popularity, but the appeal of guitar is rapidly rising in its number two slot. The organ is third. All of these may seem like too much of a luxury for you. (As culture-minded as Mom is, she's never going to buy you a baby grand.) One solution is to rent an instrument to see if you really do like playing. Often what you pay to rent can be applied toward the purchase price should you discover it really is fun and that you can make a melody! And, of course, in school courses you often can use the school equipment.

For all the temporary obstacles of finding out what instrument's right for you, where to take lessons, whether to buy one, actually performing music is one of the most enjoyable things ever. There are more than 44 million Americans who think so and play — just for fun. Here are some teens who tell why:

Patricia O'Malley, 14, Denver, Colo.: "I've been playing guitar for the past four years and like it's one of the greatest things I've ever done."

Rachel Thomas, 17, Manhattan, N.Y.: "I started playing piano at the age of eight because my brother was playing." What has music done for Rachel as a person? "If you go to parties, being able to play just seems good. You feel good inside. Your social life broadens."

They're two of seventeen million who play around — just for fun. Why don't you? If you do already — let us know! **T**

Answers:

1. "Music hath charms . . ." Old and comy as that saying is, it's still true you can really unwind by playing an instrument. Try accompanying your favorite (slow) song on a record. It's a gas.
2. Give a "Talent Scout" party. Each guest is required to perform either musically or dramatically. Talk about ice-breakers. Scared as you'll all be at first, it's really fun. Just take it on faith. Try it!
3. Try brushing up on that instrument your mother used to force you to practice. You might get good enough to join the school band (remember that cute trumpet player?) or even form a pop/rock group of your own at your church or Y. Confucius say: "You gotta get out to go out."



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