

The Oscar Party No One Knows



The Brooklyn-born Norby Walters, 83, is hosting his 26th annual viewing party. Jake Michaels for The New York Times

By Paul Brownfield
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LOS ANGELES — Bryan Cranston, Lou Gossett Jr., Harry Hamlin, Lou Diamond Phillips, Patrick Warburton, Dan Lauria, Samm Levine and Alex Trebek were sitting at a large oval table in the dining nook of a Westside condo on a recent Wednesday night, playing seven-card stud poker.

Their host, **Norby Walters**, was barefoot and wearing slacks with a short-sleeved cabana shirt, the top buttons unfastened to reveal a scar from heart surgery. Mr. **Walters**, 83, was playing but also worrying the time.

He cut off the game (low-stakes, which keeps the mood convivial) at 10:30, and this night, he and his wife, Irene, were presenting Mr. Cranston with a cake for his best actor nomination in “Trumbo.”

Around 10, the game stopped and everyone sang “Happy nomination to you.” Mr. Cranston, abashed, began to make a faux acceptance speech. “You know, when I was a child ...” Mr. Phillips repeated a joke, slightly raunchy, that Harvey Korman used to tell at the game. Mr. **Walters** asked Mr. Cranston if he would like a glass of milk.

On Sunday, Mr. **Walters** will host another gathering: an annual Oscar viewing party that he calls Night of 100 Stars.

Let us get this out of the way: Night of 100 Stars (estimates vary) is not as hot a ticket as Graydon Carter’s party for Vanity Fair (outside the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills) or Elton John’s with InStyle at the Pacific Design Center.

Mr. **Walters’s** event occupies the grand International Ballroom at the Beverly Hilton (after years at the Crystal Ballroom at the Beverly Hills Hotel), and the party’s publicist, Edward Lozzi, is this

year confirming Vince Vaughn, Rumer Willis and Cloris Leachman.

True, Night of 100 Stars lacks the product-promotional opportunities that have become Oscar night's overarching purpose. The event's chief underwriter and title sponsor is not a Hollywood power broker but Peter Nygard, a Finnish-born Canadian retail tycoon and aging playboy who has lately been [at war](#) with a hedge-fund billionaire over their neighboring manses in the Bahamas.

Mr. Nygard is among the more outré figures strutting a red carpet that tends also to feature Oscar royalty (Jon Voight, Shirley Jones, Martin Landau), actor stalwarts, former sitcom parents (Alan Thicke), a gadfly civil rights lawyer (Gloria Allred), a man who went to the moon (Buzz Aldrin), and qualified eye candy — because a party without beautiful women is a dud, Mr. Lozzi said.

Mr. [Walters](#) not only advertises his Oscar party, now in its 26th year, as the longest-running one in town, but also the most accessible: to civilian interlopers willing to spend \$1,000 for a seat at the table and as much as \$25,000 for a V.I.P. table package. “You can't get into the Vanity Fair party unless you're Tom Cruise or Tom Hanks or Tom Mix,” he pointed out pragmatically.



Harry Hamlin attended the [Norby](#) Walters 25th Annual Night of 100 Stars Oscar viewing gala at the Beverly Hilton Hotel in 2015. Robin Marchant/FilmMagic

Night of 100 Stars's raison d'être — charitable until an investigation of the financing by the California attorney general's office in 2004 — is now, for all intents and purposes, Mr. [Walters](#) himself.

His particular place in the entertainment industry constellation eludes easy metaphors, the shorthand of “superagent” or “uber manager.” “I'm bottom of the totem pole, to them,” Mr. [Walters](#) said. “But I know who I am, and I know what I am.” He added: “As I always say to my wife, ‘I used to be important.’”

Mr. [Walters](#)'s son, Gary Michael [Walters](#), chief executive of Bold Films, which had “Whiplash” in Oscar contention last year, called his father a cult figure in Hollywood. “You're in a town of strivers who are looking for the next job,” the younger Mr. [Walters](#) said. “[Norby](#) is never going to give you a job. He's going to give you a cookie.”

In late January, in his living room, Mr. [Walters](#) offered not cookies but reminiscences about his life, surrounded by pictures of his actor friends in 8-by-10 frames, alive (Lolita Davidovich, Mimi Rogers, Bruce Davison) and no longer with us (Rod Steiger, Charles Durning). In every group picture, someone was holding a straight flush.

The weekend before, from a disadvantaged table at the back of the same ballroom he will command on Oscar night, Mr. Walters had attended the Golden Globes. "I got ahold of Jon Hamm and reminded him to come to the poker game," Mr. Walters said. "I got ahold of Terrence Howard, whose number I had lost. Who is one of my players." Also Mark Ruffalo.

Another recent poker lineup included Richard Dreyfuss, Jason Alexander, James Woods, Diane Lane and Joe Bologna. "I mean, everybody there is Academy Award winners and nominees," Mr. Walters said.

The stakes are lower, as it were, for Night of 100 Stars. "It's my party, that's all it is," he said. "It has nothing to do with the stars, it has nothing to do with the Oscars."

It's just: "That's the night that everybody's hot to go out."

In the 1960s, Irving Paul Lazar, the famed literary agent and dealmaker known as Swifty, had the same thought, inviting a coterie of the Hollywood elite to dine with him while watching the Oscar broadcast live. Lasting nearly three decades, until Lazar died in December 1993, and long residing at Wolfgang Puck's original Spago restaurant above Sunset Boulevard, this party is now held up as a bygone example of true Oscar glamour.

On the night Lazar was holding what turned out to be his last Spago party, Mr. Walters was a dinner chairman (along with Donald J. Trump and Anthony Quinn) of a rival Oscar party in Century City put on by Michael Bass, the son of a Beverly Hills dentist.

The previous year, Mr. Bass had promised a cultural moment: the Oscar-winning actor Jack Lemmon helping to bestow a humanitarian award on Boris Yeltsin, then president of Russia. Mr. Lemmon didn't show. Mr. Yeltsin beamed in.

But Mr. Walters has accumulated more respect. His actor associates invariably recall meeting him at some party or charity function. Mr. Landau couldn't remember what the occasion was. Mr. Hamlin figured it must have been an awards show. Mr. Thicke thought it probably had something to do with a golf or tennis charity tournament.

"There are so many promoters, as you know, in Hollywood, people who round up celebrities for one purpose or another," Mr. Thicke said. "And you come to know who the good ones are and who the fly-by-night ones are. And you put the good ones on your calendar every year. You know that if a certain promoter calls you to come and do a charity golf tournament, it's going to be done first class, and it's going to be what they promised, and no surprises. Norby delivers that way."

Norbert Meyer came of age in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. His father, a Polish immigrant, served and boxed in the Army through World War I and then opened a bar and nightclub in the neighborhood. When Mr. Walters and his brother, Walter Meyer, took it over, they rechristened the place Norby & Walter's Bel Air. As Mr. Walters tells the story, the sign lacked the ampersand. Norby Walters was born.

In the 1950s and '60s, Mr. Walters opened a series of mambo joints and pizzerias and a Chinese restaurant named House of Wong in Howard Beach, Queens.

He soon took over a small, struggling nightclub in the shadows of Manhattan's Copacabana on East 60th Street, calling it Norby Walters's Supper Club. "What was I going to do?" Mr. Walters said. "Become a bank robber?" He and his wife had "three rabbits at home," all boys.

Mr. Walters says the club was forced to shut down after two mobsters began harassing an African-American patron, who returned and shot both mobsters dead. "Everybody hit the floor," Mr. Walters said. "And this guy was very calm about it. He sat down at the bar, put the pistol down and waited to be taken."

Mr. Walters, down again but never out, gratefully left what he calls "the saloon business" and went into the music business as a booking agent. At first, he built his roster with regional lounge acts, until a singer from New Jersey, Gloria Gaynor, soon to reach the stratosphere with "I Will Survive," scored her first hit record with "Never Can Say Goodbye." Mr. Walters, more a jazz and standards man than a disco man, followed the money nonetheless. He became a "chart chaser," hustling disco-era track dates.

With two young partners, Jerry Ade and Sal Michaels, he formed Norby Walters Associates, later General Talent International. "It was a mentoring situation in the early days, and then it was more me mentoring him, trying to hold on to him because he was a wild man," Mr. Ade said of Mr. Walters.

The hip-hop pioneers Eric B. & Rakim would name-check Mr. Walters in a lyric. The booking agency had Teena Marie, Frankie Beverly, the Bar-Kays, Peaches and Herb, the Commodores, the Four Tops, Luther Vandross, Patti LaBelle, George Clinton, Rick James, Kool and the Gang and the Gap Band.

According to Mr. Ade, General Talent represented 80 percent of the R&B and funk charts. "If they wanted to make it big and get on the right tours and grow their business," he said of the performers, "they had to be with us."



From left, Stefanie Powers, Norby Walters and Bo Derek attend the Annual Norby Walters Holiday Party at the Friars Club in 2002. Frederick M. Brown/Getty Images

Mr. Ade said he wanted to expand the business into the white mainstream charts, while Mr. Walters had his sights set on a different kind of black entertainers: athletes. With trademark flamboyance, Mr. Walters and a young partner named Lloyd Bloom barnstormed the world of big-time college sports, flashing cash at dozens of star football players under their World Sports & Entertainment banner.

Signed to postdated contracts to circumvent National Collegiate Athletic Association regulations, many of the players abandoned Mr. Walters and Mr. Bloom for more established agents when it came time to go professional. Mr. Walters, not to be outdone, sued six of the players for breach of contract.

When players reported being threatened over their betrayals and an associate of a rival agent was found beaten in her Chicago office, the F.B.I. initiated a criminal investigation that came to paint Mr. Walters and Mr. Bloom as mob-connected arrivistes despoiling the college game.

In 1988, both were charged with racketeering and fraud (unrelated to the beating of the agent). Mr. Walters denied being in business with mafia figures; if anything, he saw himself as the victim of his own success.

“What you have is a conspiracy of agents trying to drive me out of the business because I’m a superagent,” he told [The New York Times](#) back then. Found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison, Mr. Walters was nonetheless allowed by the judge to remain free pending appeal. To celebrate, he gave a party at his Hamptons summer home, an event covered by Jimmy Breslin in [Newsday](#).

While the convictions were later overturned on appeal — cleared of racketeering, Mr. Walters and Mr. Bloom entered conditional guilty pleas to mail fraud, also later overturned — Mr. Walters sold his share of the booking agency to Mr. Ade and came to Los Angeles for early retirement.

As it happened, Mr. Bloom was already in Los Angeles, trying his hand at movie industry dealmaking. In the summer of 1993, he was shot to death in his rented Malibu home.

But with apologies to his onetime client, Ms. Gaynor, Mr. Walters has survived. In transforming what used to be Mr. Bass’s party into Night of 100 Stars, he adroitly borrowed the name and charitable concept of a trio of network TV variety specials put on by the theatrical impresario Alexander H. Cohen at Radio City Music Hall.

The first “Night of 100 Stars” aired on ABC in 1982, to celebrate the centennial of the Actors Fund. That night, Liza Minnelli performed “New York, New York” with Yankees holding bats, Princess Grace of Monaco gave a speech, a young David Letterman did stand-up and the child star Melissa Gilbert modeled Perry Ellis during a celebrity fashion show.

The contemporary Night of 100 Stars cannot claim such luster. In 2004, around the time the fund-raiser was being looked at by a state attorney general’s office that was toughening disclosure rules for charitable organizations, Martin Scorsese’s Film Foundation cut ties with Night of 100 Stars. Mr. Walters subsequently settled a lawsuit for failing to register as a commercial fund-raiser and file financial reports with the state.

This matters not a whit to those who find in it a blessed refuge from Instagramming and mani-camming, or just Somewhere to Be on a night as fraught for Hollywood as New Year’s Eve.

“It’s a party that’s being thrown by Norby for his own reasons,” Mr. Hamlin said. “I’ve never even gotten into trying to figure out what they are. But I can go to that party and I can look at a table next to me and I’ll see somebody that I worked with 25 years ago. Or I’ll see somebody I worked with a year ago.”

A correction was made on Feb. 24, 2016: An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misspelled the given name of an actress shown with Norby Walters. She is Stefanie Powers, not Stephanie.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com.

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