

Young, Gifted & Businesslike

Michael L. Winslow

Michael L. Winslow is not gonna get pushed around.

"I'm not afraid — because I'm a Winslow. My father, Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Winslow told me:

"Michael, if you are having a problem with somebody who's pushing or threatening you, you tell 'em, you turn them in. You go to the United States government and you take your evidence and you turn them in."

Winslow's in the country to promote the *Police Academy 2* film, in which he co-stars. But his beef is with Island Records. Island Records has yet to release his debut single, 'I'm My Own Walkman', he says, and the promise that Chris Blackwell himself would turn up as executive producer on an album has come to nothing. The way Winslow tells it, Island's approach has been less than straight up and down.

"But, you see, as well as being an actor and a comic and a musician and a singer and a producer ... I'm a businessman," the slim young black man smiles.

The cement has barely hardened in the foundations of the Winslow Empire, but the plans have been drawn up. The first venture will exploit the talent he displays as Larvelle Jones in the *Police Academy* films — the ability to create a bewildering range of sounds with only mouth and microphone. The audio enterprise will be called Vocalvision.

"I'm going to sample all the sounds onto disc, computerised, so that I can go ahead and use it as a business. Because each sound is a unit of commercial value and I will treat it as such. So if they want certain sounds I have to treat them like units of commercial value, just like Hanna Barbera treats every voice they have. I can't allow anybody to treat me any less."

Winslow's repertoire of sounds is now fully catalogued, under divisions like "Animal", "Electronic", "Machinery" ... Music is divided into 10 or more categories — jazz, rock 'n' roll, funk; and specific instruments, drums, bass, guitar, synth, harmonica, saxophone ...

Winslow explains that these sounds are a far more attractive proposition than what might be whipped up with, say, a Fairlight Computer: "It's human, it has more freshness. Because with most sounds you can tell they're out of a can. Whereas the sounds that I have are new, you can tell they're just done. There's the feeling that

PHOTO BY KERRY BROWN



Michael Winslow in 'Police Academy 2'.

maybe that is a gunshot, maybe that is for real. That's Vocalvision — you take the vocal to create a vision."

But when your voice is a business, you have to look after it: "Each sound has a stress analysis sheet. In other words, the amount of recommended usage before danger occurs. Like you only run an engine at so many rpms for so many hours and you don't redline the engine. And that's the way I treat my voice, stay out of the red zone. I'll also have to get insurance for my voice now, seeing as it's a business. Probably Lloyd's — we'll

have to negotiate."

Exactly how his dextrous vocal chords will be assessed for value isn't quite clear yet, but Michael L. Winslow knows how they won't: "I will not allow anyone to X-ray my voice, because I would not want those X-rays to bombard my vocal chords and cause cancerous problems. They can do ultrasound or anything else they want, but they will not touch my voice with X-rays."

Although Winslow's Larvelle Jones is the typical streetwise, funky dude, the actor himself has staunchly middle class roots. His father was a career air force officer and Winslow speaks with pride of the United States of America. He aligns himself with the new wave of black performers who are beginning to take control of their own careers. Like Prince ...

"I'm probably going to put my own organisation together, the way Prince did his system. I already have my own group, which is World Class Boogie, which is actually Winslow, Cunningham and Bell, W.C.B. And we all wear t-shirts that say 'Frankie Go Home (And Take Boy With You)'. It's funny — everybody wants a 'Frankie Go Home' t-shirt! I'm amazed! I think we're gonna start selling a lot of those.

"But Prince — have you heard the new Prince album? Phew! He understands what typecasting can do. The record company would like to have him doing funk forever, until they can use him and just wring him out and throw him away. But Prince is a businessman. And so is Jamie Starr."

Larvelle Jones was not in the original *Police Academy* script and the character was only added after the director spotted Winslow doing a routine as an opening act for Count Basie. Consequently, the part involved a lot of face-pulling and noise-making but not many good lines. He expected the situation to be remedied in the sequel, but: "I don't know what happened. I really don't know what happened. I just hope everybody buys the record, that's all."

But Winslow's role is not atypical of those being handed to black actors at present — short on script and long on space for visual humour. It's no accident that Eddie Murphy's killer line in *Beverly Hills Cop* is a lip-flappin' "Get the fuck outta here!" Less than dazzling on paper.

Murphy, the hot young man of the moment, has acknowledged a debt to earlier black comedians like Bill Cosby (who is currently staging a remarkable comeback on TV) and Richard Pryor. And Winslow?

"Richard Pryor, I think, more captivated my heart. His humanness, that's what got me, more than just his routines. Richard did the same thing I want to do — he fulfilled a need. There was a gap to be filled and he did it. Plus at the same time Richard took the trouble to do dramatic films too. He still did them, no matter how hard

they tried to push him into doing the same thing over and over again, he still exhibited that sort of control.

"And by seeing that I have now learned the lesson that I have to exhibit that kind of control as well, or else it would be career suicide on my part. You learn that if you do not proliferate your talents, you end up becoming like Paul Simon said, a one trick pony."

Since his film debut, performing a Jimi Hendrix guitar solo in *Cheech and Chong's Next Movie*, Winslow has made half a dozen or so screen appearances, including a dramatic role in *Alphabet City*. *Police Academy* has done good business, its sequel considerably better — but does he consider any of his films so far to be "major" movies?

"That's a tough question ... do you mean major literary or major box office? You gotta discern the two. Because I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. If I make a major literary film it might not make any money. At the same time, if I make a *Police Academy* genre film I might get picked on by the critics. I don't read much of my press."

But it is still possible to break ground and be box office — look at *Star Wars* ...

"And it still turned out to be a major literary classic because of the story behind it. I'm probably going to do films along that genre. I guess I prefer it that way."

While Lou Reed was in this country, he described *Police Academy* as the ideal movie "if you've got nothing else to do at two o'clock on a Thursday afternoon." Winslow's face lights up at the description.

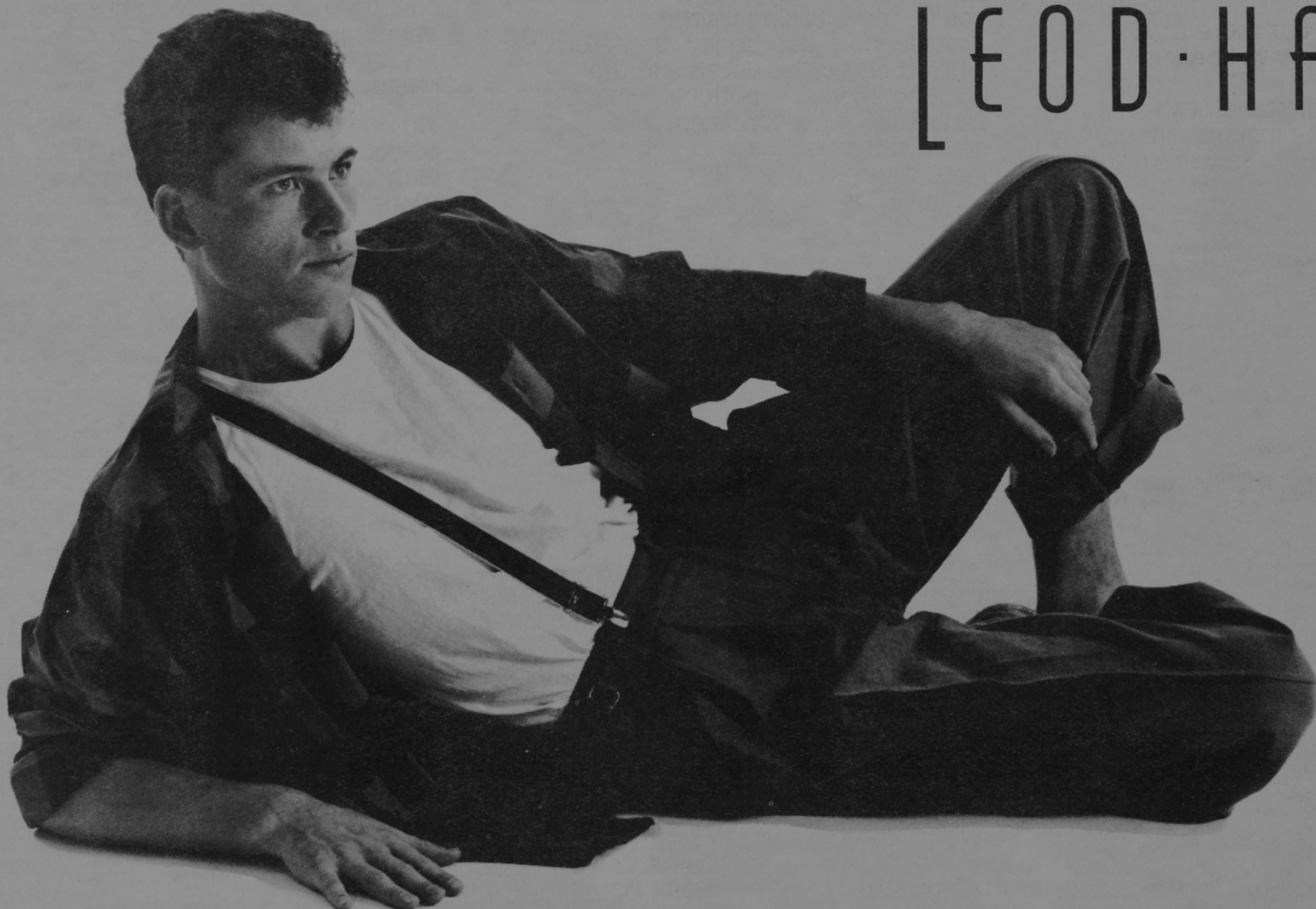
"He's basically right. Because usually you are sitting there watching stupid soap operas at two o'clock on a Thursday afternoon; and you go 'Goddamn, I'm bored! Hey! Let's go see *Academy 2!*' He's right! Thankyou Lou! Mr Reed, you have the perfect analogy of *Police Academy*. Because Thursday at two is a perfect box office."

"For the last five weeks *Academy 2* has been number one. Leonard Maltin of *Entertainment Tonight* gave it a One, which is his way of saying Number One. Thankyou Leonard Maltin!"

Which brings us to Michael Winslow's troubled recording career. He says he recorded 'I'm My Own Walkman' back in June of last year. He hasn't heard of the Bobby McFerrin song of the same name (which dates back further), but he's been very wary of people stealing his ideas.

"After I wrote 'Walkman', the word got out and everybody wanted to do it. For some reason nobody can go out and think of their own ideas, they have to take mine. Everybody wants to steal my songs — like 'Breakdog'. 'Breakdog and the Record Scratch Cat' is about a dog and a cat that dance together and the cat scratches records

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