

T H E F E A T U R E

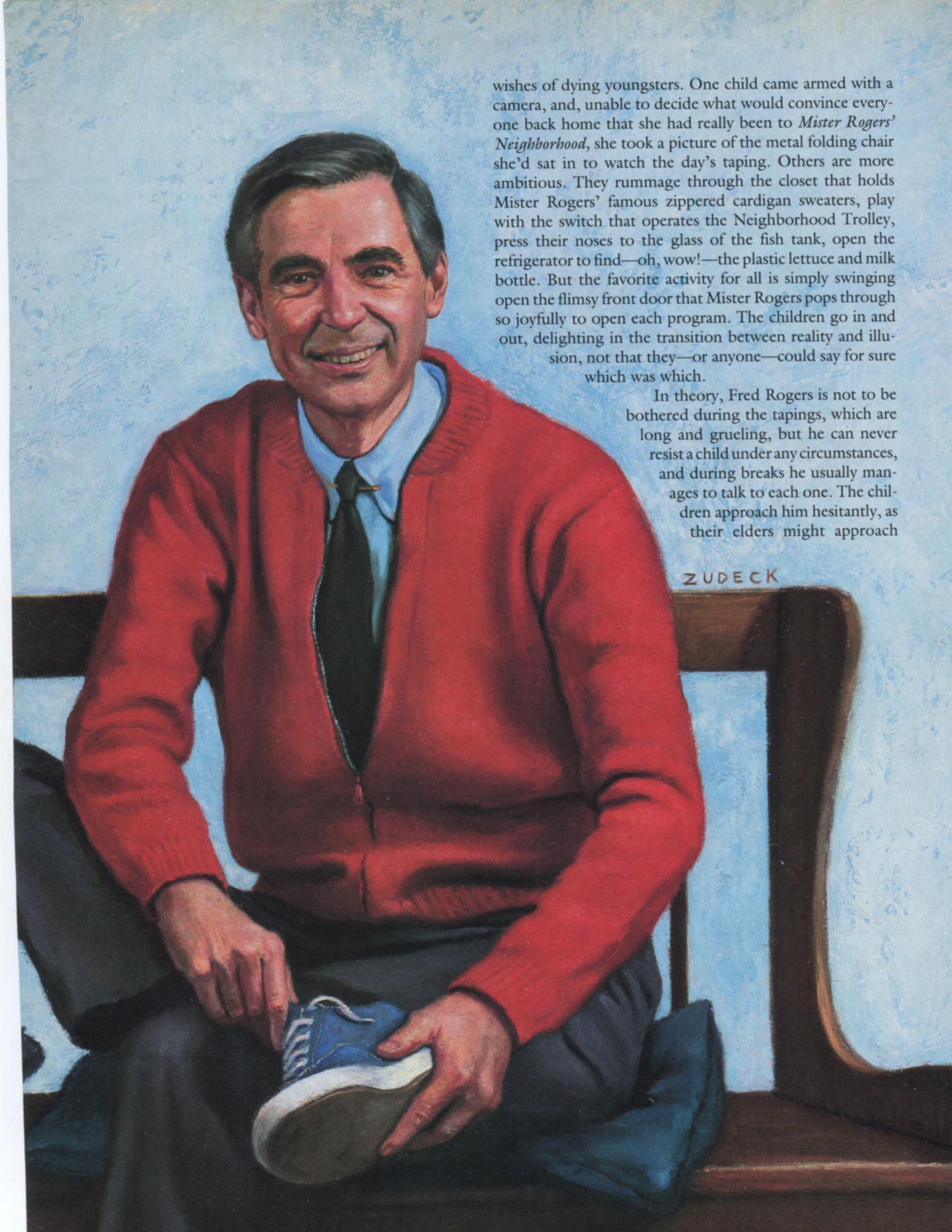
# Who the Devil Is Fred Rogers?

**Earnest, sweet,  
even a little sappy—  
he's not exactly a man of our  
times, or even our planet.  
But he's your kid's best friend.  
JOHN SEDGWICK visits  
the Neighborhood,  
and reports that  
Mister Rogers is no act.**

Up close, the set for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* seems to belong to a high school stage production, not to a television show beamed out to 290 stations across the United States. Erected in spacious Studio A of Pittsburgh's public television station WQED, it consists of the porch, living room, and kitchen of a suburban house and it is shamelessly out of date. With its rumpus room furniture, garish fabrics, and incongruous traffic light, the house might have been decorated by Pee-wee's square East Coast parents sometime in the pre-Beatles sixties.

Nevertheless, children who visit the set regard it as Oz. Many of them are seriously ill, sent by charities like the Make-A-Wish Foundation, which specializes in granting the





wishes of dying youngsters. One child came armed with a camera, and, unable to decide what would convince everyone back home that she had really been to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, she took a picture of the metal folding chair she'd sat in to watch the day's taping. Others are more ambitious. They rummage through the closet that holds Mister Rogers' famous zippered cardigan sweaters, play with the switch that operates the Neighborhood Trolley, press their noses to the glass of the fish tank, open the refrigerator to find—oh, wow!—the plastic lettuce and milk bottle. But the favorite activity for all is simply swinging open the flimsy front door that Mister Rogers pops through so joyfully to open each program. The children go in and out, delighting in the transition between reality and illusion, not that they—or anyone—could say for sure which was which.

In theory, Fred Rogers is not to be bothered during the tapings, which are long and grueling, but he can never resist a child under any circumstances, and during breaks he usually manages to talk to each one. The children approach him hesitantly, as their elders might approach

ZUDECK



God. Rogers crouches down to their level, gently extends a hand, and, when the child takes it, says in that slow, earnest voice, "You are so brave to shake my hand." The child smiles bashfully; Rogers beams. The two are friends forever.

At sixty-one, Rogers looks pretty much the way he always has—lean and fit, with a childlike sparkle around his eyes. He weighs himself every day after he swims his half mile at the nearby Pittsburgh Athletic Association pool, and he always gets the same result: exactly 143 pounds. "I sometimes wonder why I do it," he says. He is an inch under six feet, but he has become slightly stooped with age—from bending over, one imagines, to talk with so many small children. Reviewing one episode of this week's taping, he muttered that he looked "like the hunchback of Notre Dame" and made a point of straightening up.

While Rogers maintains a staff of sixteen at his nonprofit production company, Family Communications, Inc., he does most of the work for each show himself, just as he always has. Started in 1966, his is the longest-running children's show on PBS, and one of the longest-running shows of any kind on television. He is executive producer, writer, composer, lyricist, chief puppeteer, and star.

But he is a bashful star, an unusual creature in a medium that encourages so many self-promoters. For the first seven years he was on the air, doing an earlier children's show (a Pittsburgh program called *The Children's Corner*), he was never once seen by viewers: he worked the puppets from behind the scenery. He must wish he'd stayed invisible. He says that the hardest thing he ever did was walk across the set on camera when he started the Neighborhood. Truth to tell, he's still a little gawky up there. His elbows cling a little too

tightly to his sides, and when he stands he often lines up his toes like a little boy on his best behavior—on TV, say.

Unlike the hosts of other children's programs through the years, from Bob Keeshan's Captain Kangaroo to Pee-wee Herman, Fred Rogers is not an actor. He is an ordained Presbyterian minister, with the unusual "charge," as the Presbyterians say, of spreading the gospel via children's television. Rogers, of course, is no televangelist, but his religion accounts for a good deal of the show's no-frills solemnity and not a little of its structure. In a sense, Rogers' "television house," as he calls it, is a children's church, and the program—he never calls it a "show"—is a children's service, with its own rituals (the donning of the sneakers and cardigan sweater, the feeding of the fish), readings (from the gospel of King Friday from the Neighborhood of Make-Believe), hymns (the many Neighborhood songs he composes), and sermons (the show's "important talk," about, say, the death of a goldfish). But the central object of Rogers' reverence is not God; it is God's children. He strives to make them feel loved, feel special. Rogers himself is leery of pushing this religious interpretation too far. "I am so concerned about exclusivity when it comes to kids," he says. "So it scares me if somebody should say, 'This is a church service' or 'This is a synagogue service' or 'This is a Knights Templars service' or this is any kind of service, because in so doing there are some people who would feel excluded, and I just don't like that." But he does think of the space between the child and the television set, when tuned to his program, as "holy ground," because it allows him a means to give the children something of spiritual value.

And, to answer the question most often asked about Fred Rogers, yes, he really *is* like that. That is another consequence of not being an actor: his is not an act. He scorns *Pee-wee's Playhouse*—which, as one associate observed, sometimes seems like the Neighborhood "gone wild"—because Pee-wee Herman isn't genuine. Rogers notes that the Playhouse seems more like a takeoff of a children's show than a children's show itself. "If you were planning to choose a surgeon for your child," he asks, "would you choose a comedian who specialized in brain surgery skits?"

The only difference between the Mister Rogers of the show and the Fred Rogers of reality is that Fred Rogers is somewhat more intense, speaks a little faster, and he does occasionally get mad. He says, "Oh, brother." He works out his anger by playing the piano, a habit he developed as a child. Nonetheless, the anger can come as a surprise. I saw him drop his arm in frustration when somebody flubbed a line, spoiling an otherwise perfect taping, and I nearly jumped.

He is also funnier than one might expect, although, as one staff member said, "Fred's jokes aren't anything you'd ever laugh at." It's dry Midwestern humor. As he was watching a tape of himself delivering one of his homilies to the children, he cocked an eyebrow and said, "Oh, *really*, Mister Rogers?" And he is invariably amused by the many jokes and pranks of the Neighborhood staff. Every few years,

someone will stuff paper towels into his sneakers so he won't be able to slide his feet into them to open the show, and Rogers will always crack up. He listens to the dirty jokes, too, but he won't repeat them. However, he will direct the teller of a particularly good one to repeat it to someone he figures would enjoy it. "He's cool that way," says a colleague.

Once, during a taping, his floor manager, Nicky Tallo, dressed an inflatable female doll in a bridal gown and hung her in the closet among Mister Rogers' cardigans. The floor crew watched breathlessly as Rogers opened the closet door, singing the usual "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" song, and, to his great surprise, found a plastic sex object hanging there. Rogers laughed uproariously, then took the inflatable bride out of the closet and, smiling broadly, waltzed all around the set with her. "He got a big charge out of it," Tallo recalls. "Thank God."

Michael Keaton used to work on the show's technical staff in the early seventies, when he was still known as Michael Douglas. Once, as Rogers was crossing the set during a taping, the slot to receive movies for projection on his "Picture-Picture" screen suddenly snapped open, and Rogers heard a deep ministerial voice calling to him. "I will hear your confession now, son," it said. It was Keaton, of course. Rogers thought that was hilarious. "I've told a lot of people about Michael over the years," Rogers says. "He was one sure thing."

Alone in his television house, with its one hideaway bed in the living room, Mister Rogers is a nuclear family all by himself: father, mother, and child. So it can come as a shock to know that he has a real house and a real family elsewhere. He lives in a small apartment near the television station with his wife, Joanne. They've been married for thirty-seven years. A concert pianist, she has performed a few times on the show. Even though she is introduced as his wife, she somehow remains a visitor all the same. (In a way, she is more fully realized on the Make-Believe portion of the show, where she reappears as the puppet Queen Sara; Sara is Joanne's unused first name.) The couple met during his sophomore year at Rollins College, in Florida, from which Rogers graduated with a degree in music composition. Fred says Joanne hasn't stopped laughing since the day they met. "Because she is such a joyful person," he explains. They own a summer place called the Crooked House on Nantucket, which is Rogers' favorite place on earth. He has a map of the island in needlepoint on his office wall.

The couple has two grown sons. James, thirty, is a hospital technician in Pittsburgh. He is married and has an infant son, Alexander. Fred Rogers carries photos of his grandson in his wallet and shows them off at every opportunity. John, twenty-eight, has gone through life more circuitously; after a brief career as a real estate broker and a stint renting air conditioners, he has returned to college.

Although Rogers walks everywhere around the Neighborhood, he does own a car, a black Olds with power windows, which he bought from the son of his musical director, Johnny Costa. He did not try to bargain. "I knew John would give me the best possible price," he says.

Colleagues say that he occasionally drives a little fast, but nothing worrisome. "He tries to do everything efficiently," a crew member says. "That's how he gets so much done."

Each new week of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* tackles a different theme—nighttime or superheroes, divorce or death. Taken altogether, the 550 programs now in repertory constitute a kind of kid-vid Dr. Spock, calmly telling small children everything they need to know to handle their young lives. In former days, Rogers recorded sixty-five shows a year; now he does fifteen, or three weeks' worth. The rest are drawn from as far back as 1970; before that the reproduction quality is poor. The week being recorded today at WQED, near Carnegie Mellon in the university section of Pittsburgh, is about "When Parents Go to Work."

Many children of working parents go to preschool, where, among other things, they may have to use the bathroom. For the Thursday show, Rogers begins the program with the usual song, pulls on a raspberry-colored cardigan (since he is color-blind, his staff puts today's sweater clear to the left end of the closet, so that he can find it), then settles onto the couch to read a short book he has written for children on the charged subject of toilet use.

With its admirably straight talk about "BMs," the toilet book makes one wonder what all the fuss was about. The volume has in fact been published by G. P. Putnam's as part of Rogers' First Experiences series (he has written twenty books), but for the show Rogers has concealed the published book's actual cover behind a false cover labeled, simply, Potty. He says it "wouldn't be fair" to show the real cover. It would be commercial, and the Neighborhood is not commercial.

While he reads, Johnny Costa supplies some light background music on the studio's Steinway piano. And he pops a whistle in his mouth to provide the toot-toot of the Neighborhood Trolley. He is a chipper sixtyish man who might be a Marx Brother. "What did the man say to the girl with one leg?" he once asked me impishly. "Peg o' my heart," he sang. "Oh, hey, want to hear a stuttering piano

**Mister Rogers was the richest kid in town when he was growing up in Latrobe, Pa. He had a huge playroom on the top floor of a house on a hill, and seven pairs of corduroy pants.**

player?" He played "Für Elise" as though the needle were stuck. "Oh, I got a million of 'em," he said. It would be a very different Neighborhood without Johnny Costa. His repertory runs freely from ragtime to Rachmaninoff, all of it played with quick hands and a light touch. Unusually for television, the Neighborhood shows are all taped live to Costa's music, making him the program's true director, to the actual director's occasional frustration. Costa supplies much of the show's timing, and, with his improvisations, he catches the mood of each segment. When a piece goes just right, he kisses his hands in gratitude. I once suggested to Rogers that Costa's music is the Holy Spirit. "That's a very sensitive observation," he replied.

Now Rogers wants to show his "television neighbors" something important about the toilet, and he gets up off the couch to head to the bathroom, which has been laboriously constructed for this tiny segment, at full scale, complete with running water. The bathroom is off to the right. Like most things on the program, the toilet's location is no fluke: the program generally runs from left to right to accustom the children's eyes to reading.

The bathroom has been visited only a few times in the long history of the Neighborhood, and, since Rogers likes to be consistent, he remembers to go to it the same way he did last time: around the upstage end of the couch, past the fish tank, and through the kitchen. There the frame will dissolve before picking Rogers up again at the bathroom door.

Other television shows might have jump-cut to the bathroom, but Rogers always takes pains over each of the show's transitions. The show's current director, Bob Muens, says that stylistically the Neighborhood can best be understood as the opposite of MTV. "Everything has to be explained," he says. Each scene begins with a wide setup shot; the disembodied heads of extreme closeups are avoided to preserve what psychologists call "body integrity"; and comings and goings are always elaborately staged. The neighbors rarely appear without telephoning first, then are greeted extravagantly when they arrive. And no one leaves without saying goodbye. Topics come and go in the same deliberate way—introduced, explained, restated, and finally dismissed. This gives the show a languid pacing that can be infuriating to adults but is reassuring to children. Rogers was

trained in child psychology at Pittsburgh's Arsenal Family and Children Center—co-founded by such luminaries as Dr. Benjamin Spock and Erik Erikson—but he himself thinks of the transitions in musical terms. (He thinks of a lot of things in musical terms: instead of the twelve hours of the clock, his watch bears the notes of the musical scale.) He likens a transition to the modulation between two keys. "You always want to work with the three or four or five common notes for a while before you get from one to the other," he says.

In setting up the bathroom shot, Rogers opens the bathroom door wide and tells his cameramen to take note: "The children and I are not coming in here to do any funny stuff." During the rehearsal, the toilet fails to drain after Rogers pushes the plunger. Worse, the water is a muddy brown, as though, Rogers says, it has come "right straight from the Monongahela." He patiently waits by the set, occasionally touching the sides of his face with his fingertips to try to relieve the pressure of his contacts on his eyes without smudging his makeup. I stand nearby, watching. Our eyes meet. I approach him and tell him I like the raspberry color of his sweater. "Oh, I love raspberries, don't you?" he says, smiling. I nod, my mouth suddenly watering. "They're sort of . . . furry, though," he adds, scrunching up his nose.

Around him, about two dozen members of his technical crew scurry to put things in order, and a few jokes fly. But no one jokes about the essential importance of this bathroom visit. Rogers has worked with most of this crew for the better part of twenty years, and if you listen closely you can hear a bit of Mister Rogers in all of them. A certain earnest tone, a fundamental sincerity. As Johnny Costa says, explaining why he once refused a lucrative offer to be musical director for *The Mike Douglas Show*, "These people are real; those people"—he waves a hand toward the sharks on *Mike Douglas*—"are not." The staffers are all in this Neighborhood to stay. One by one, the lighting director, members of the floor crew, various actors, and staffers at Family Communications all come up to me, take me aside, and quietly offer me their own private theory about why they stay, and each time it's the same thing: They are part of Fred's ministry. They are his disciples, you might even say.

"O.K., Freddy," Nicky Tallo shouts, "let's give it a whirl, so to speak." Tallo holds a slate before a camera to note what is being taped, then incants, "Slate on. . . . Slate out. . . . Stand by, please. . . . Action."

Rogers comes briskly into the bathroom, lifts up the toilet lid. "I want to show you something," he says. He looks straight at the camera, as though he really is addressing someone. "You see that drain? You see how small it is? Nobody could ever go down that drain." He flushes the toilet, and the water starts to swirl. "You hear that whoosh, and it might give you ideas. But I want you to know that no one could ever go down that drain." Then, in silence, he watches the water drain away down the

**Mister Rogers was voted  
Most Likely to Succeed  
when he graduated  
from high school.  
His girlfriend  
was valedictorian.**

toilet. Later, a hand-held camera will come in for a child's-eye view into the toilet. Again, no one laughs; no one thinks of laughing. If Fred Rogers takes it seriously, the staff takes it seriously. Finally the phone rings, drawing Rogers away.

Fred Rogers has often spoken of a piece of advice that he received from Gabby Hayes, the rootin' tootin' TV cowboy on whose show Rogers apprenticed when he first took an interest in television. He asked Hayes how he managed to address his huge audience through the camera. "Freddy," Hayes said, "I just think about one little buckaroo out there." Rogers likes to do the same. When he first started the Neighborhood, he used to peer into the camera as though he could actually see the viewers watching at home. "Stand up so I can see how tall you are," he would say. "Oh, you really *are* growing, aren't you?" Recognizing that small children might be discomfited by the idea that Mister Rogers was really watching, he has painstakingly edited out all those segments from the repertory of shows. Now he says that before he goes on he feels the keenness one feels before seeing a friend. And he leaves it at that.

In truth, however, the face closest to the camera is that of his floor manager, Nicky Tallo. Tallo looks like a Hell's Angel. He dresses exclusively in black T-shirts (today's is from Pleasure Chest, Ltd., and shows a couple in sexual congress) and jeans. He wears a ponytail and a half-moon earring. One of his life's goals is to cover his body completely with tattoos, and he is about halfway there. "But this is just how I *look*," he says. Approaching forty, Tallo says that he has gone through some difficulties in his life, and he has always been impressed with how Rogers senses exactly when to get in touch. "I'll be having some hard time, and the phone will ring," he says. "Afterwards, I'll hang up and say, 'I'll be goddamned. That was Fred Rogers.'" Tallo returns Rogers' devotion. As Rogers speaks to his television neighbors, Tallo brings his face close to the camera so Rogers will be sure to see him, and tries to give Fred encouragement. "If he looks uncertain," Tallo says, "I'll smile so he knows everything's O.K."

As Rogers looks at the tape of his performance on the monitor, he nods approvingly at the pace of the segment. "The trick is to do it quickly and make it seem like it's really slow," he says.

"That's what I try to do with sex," replies a member of the floor crew. Everybody guffaws. Fred Rogers smiles, covers his face with his hand, and shakes his head. Nicky Tallo gives him a hug. "That's O.K., Freddy," he says.

Fred Rogers has been spoofed by Johnny Carson, Dan Aykroyd, Harvey Korman, Cheech and Chong, and, most memorably, Eddie Murphy. For a couple of years in the early eighties, Murphy did a skit on *Saturday Night Live* called "Mister Robinson's Neighborhood," which shifted *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* to the house of a drug dealer in the black ghetto. There Murphy's Mister Robinson addressed the viewer and, in the all too imitable Rogers manner, asked "Can you say . . . scumbag?" Instead of exiting with Mister

Rogers' "Such a Good Feeling" song, Murphy jumped out the window, two steps ahead of the cops.

Rogers once met Eddie Murphy. He arrived early for an appearance on the David Letterman show and surprised Murphy upstairs in his *Saturday Night Live* dressing room. "Well, the real Mister Rogers!" Murphy exclaimed. "The real Mister Robinson!" Rogers replied. Murphy smiled broadly and gave Fred a big hug. A cast member took a Polaroid, and Fred Rogers proudly took it onto the Letterman show with him to display to the nation. The skits continued.

Rogers was less forgiving when Burger King ran its "Mister Rodney's Neighborhood" ad a few years ago. Associates advised him to sue, but he called up the senior vice president in charge of advertising and asked him if he had any children. The VP said that he had an eight-year-old girl. Did she ever watch the Neighborhood? Rogers asked. "Oh yes," the man replied, "she has reaped so much from your program." Rogers let that hang there. The commercial was not seen again.

Rogers is a tempting target for comedians because many adults think he hails from another planet. They find him peculiar, if not positively unnerving. Some suspect he is homosexual. Rogers himself doesn't know how to account for this reaction, but it may be a testament to his unswerving devotion to children that so many adults end up wondering about him. He puts himself at a child's level—the knee-high elevation that few adults can truly appreciate. What adults, in their blundering fashion, take for homosexuality is more likely something that might be called pre-sexuality, the sexual nature of children. Adults don't get that. But then they aren't meant to.

As a rule, adults are more comfortable with glitzier shows, like *Sesame Street*, which keep their interests in mind. Among other things, *Sesame Street* tries to amuse parents (and thereby attract the children through them) with occa-



**Mister Rogers is a  
Presbyterian minister  
who has studied child psychology.  
Unlike Pee-wee Herman  
(Paul Reubens) and  
Captain Kangaroo  
(Bob Keeshan),  
Mister Rogers is not  
an actor.**

sional Hollywood-insider jokes that no child would ever get. But kids respond to Mister Rogers. Dorothy and Jerome Singer, two Yale psychologists who direct the Family Television Research and Consultation Center, once did a study comparing the Neighborhood with *Sesame Street*, and they found that children follow the Neighborhood stories better than the razzle-dazzle of *Sesame Street*. And the Neighborhood improved the children's imaginative play as well.

Rogers himself regards *Sesame Street* as his own show's little brother, and says he's grateful that it has grown up to get all the attention. "I don't know how to say this," he begins, "but I think that becoming very rich and very famous can be exceedingly seductive. Who knows what would have happened if we had continued to be the only children's program that was national?" Rogers is good at downplaying hard feelings, but they occasionally sneak out. He had Big Bird to the Neighborhood once. It was during the week he was discussing competition—a circumstance he first dismisses as coincidence. "Well," he says, "maybe it was unconscious."

Eight million households tune in every week to the Neighborhood (compared with over eleven million for *Sesame Street*). The show has been nominated for eighteen Emmys, and it has received two—one for Rogers' writing, the other for his performing. Rogers stashed the trophies on top of the filing cabinet in the cramped hallway outside his office. There is a plaque from a national puppeteers' association up there, and some Sylvania trophies from the early days of television as well.

He has received over twenty-five honorary degrees from universities. He usually brings pianist Johnny Costa along with him and sings a few songs from the Neighborhood when he gives his acceptance speech. The halls are invariably packed, and even at Yale the attendees get misty-eyed. He receives on average a hundred letters a week, and he answers each one personally, usually sending two letters back—one to the parent, which he signs Fred Rogers, and one to the child, which he signs Mister Rogers. The staff's own intel-

ligence indicates that the show may be reaching a wider audience than the intended two-to-five-year-olds. One woman said that she watched the Neighborhood instead of taking Valium. But he has obviously connected with his target audience, too, as one sees from the stacks of adoring mail from young children and, more touchingly, the gifts they make for him. One child sent in a model of the Neighborhood Trolley made out of a generic sandwich-bag box with random letters along the top where the words "Neighborhood Trolley" should go. "The child knew there should be some letters up there," an assistant explained. "He just didn't know which ones."

After my first visit to WQED, Rogers insisted on inscribing a Neighborhood poster for my five-year-old daughter, Sara. I had mentioned to him earlier that lately Sara had taken to adding an "h" onto the end of her name. Rogers got down on his hands and knees to spread the poster out across his office floor—about the only space big enough in the cramped Family Communications headquarters—and wrote out a message in his careful, nearly calligraphic script. When he was done, he handed me the poster, then placed his pen in my hand, too. "I want you to take this pen in case Sara wants to add an 'h,'" he explained. "This way, she can do it in matching ink." Sara never did add an "h," but she was touched by the gesture, and treasures the pen.

When Rogers makes one of his rare public speaking appearances, he usually plays a clip from the Neighborhood in which he is talking to a remarkably self-possessed little boy named Jeff Erlanger, whom he met one day in a restaurant. Jeff is confined to a wheelchair, and because the wheelchair won't fit onto the living-room set, he is positioned on the studio set's sidewalk, while Rogers sits beside him on a step. In the clip, Rogers gently asks him why he is in the wheelchair, and Jeff explains that he had a tumor that "broke the nerve that tells my hands and legs what to do." Then, together, the two of them sing one of Jeff's favorite songs from the Neighborhood, the tender one that begins:

It's you I like,  
It's not the things you wear,  
It's not the way you do your hair—  
But it's you I like,  
The way you are right now,  
The way down deep inside you—  
Not the things that hide you.

It is an extraordinary moment, and Rogers' staff has gotten used to seeing the audience's reaction. P.R. assistant Lisa Belcher-Hamilton says, "Everybody always cries. I've seen it over and over, and I always cry. When you're there in the hall, though, you can see the power of it. Everybody's face suddenly goes all soft. It's almost like you're watching people through a special lens."

Dr. Margaret McFarland, the Neighborhood's long-time child-psychology consultant, used to say that Rogers'

uniqueness lay in his ability to stay in touch with his own childhood. Asked about this, Rogers thinks for a moment and says that he has simply held on to “some kind of vulnerability.” Then he adds, “I think we’re all vulnerable, but so many of us cover it up. And children are certainly vulnerable.”

As a child, Fred Rogers was more vulnerable than most, partly due to his own sensitive nature and partly to the unusual circumstances of his childhood. He grew up in the small industrial town of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, fifty miles east of Pittsburgh. “In 1940, it had a population of 11,111,” Rogers says. “I was thrilled with all those ones.” It was a cozy sort of place, rather like the Neighborhood, where everyone knew everyone else—from “Aunt” Sarah McComb, the town librarian, to Birdie Albert, the elementary school teacher. And everyone knew the Rogers family, too. “Fred was the richest kid in town,” says his high-school classmate Richard Jim. Such was the Rogerses’ old-money gentility, however, that the only sign Jim can recall of Fred’s privilege was his owning seven pairs of corduroy trousers.

Fred’s maternal grandfather, Fred McFeely, owned the McFeely Brick Company, which manufactured silica brick used for lining steel furnaces; the factory was one of Latrobe’s largest employers. (Fred later recycled the name as the Speedy Deliveryman, Mr. McFeely.) Fred’s father, James Rogers, worked at the brick company and, as Fred candidly says, “married the boss’s daughter.” Fred is convinced the marriage was a love match, however, because he has read a suitcaseful of his parents’ love letters. Were they romantic? “Oh,” he sighs, “just beautiful.”

James Rogers eventually became president of the company, and later ran a bank in town; Fred has happy memories of playing with the adding machine in his father’s office. “Dad was one of those busy fathers,” Rogers says. James Rogers did take movies of young Fred nearly from birth with one of Latrobe’s first 16-mm. movie cameras. “So maybe it’s Dad who’s the one little buckaroo I’m seeing behind the camera on the Neighborhood,” Rogers muses. Fred’s first memories come from these movies, as he recalls delightedly plucking his father’s hat off his head at about one year old.

Fred’s mother, Nancy, was known for her generosity. Her Christmas present list ran to five hundred names. “She would begin in June,” Rogers says. “It was really a business.” One of her choicest presents was a cardigan sweater, twelve of which she knitted every year. Fred always got one, and for many years they were her cardigans that he wore on the show. One of them is now in the Smithsonian, along with Archie Bunker’s chair.

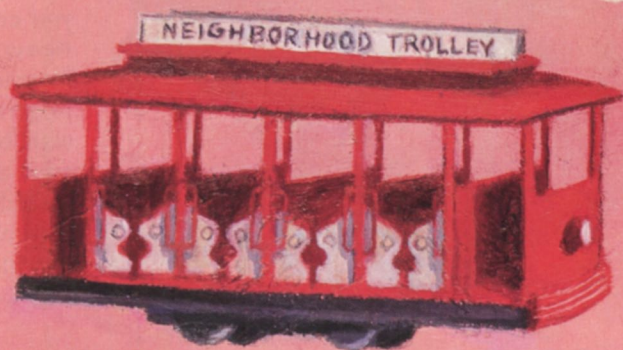
The Rogerses lived in a large brick house with white trim on Weldon Street, in the most fashionable part of Latrobe: on the crest of a hill that

rose up from the train tracks near the center of town. Fred’s bedroom was on the second floor, and it was hung with yellow wallpaper showing Parisian scenes. He also had a huge playroom on the top floor, next to the servants’ quarters. The Rogerses usually employed a chauffeur and a cook. The family had a stately country house on the outskirts of town, with Latrobe’s first in-ground swimming pool. The pool later increased Fred’s popularity with his high-school friends. In winters, his parents whisked him down to Florida for a few months to stay at the McFeelys’ vacation house, even though it meant uprooting Fred from his friends at school.

Rogers was an only child until he was eleven, when his parents finally adopted his baby sister, Nancy Elaine. He was also the McFeelys’ only grandchild during that period. When I ask if he would have liked to have had brothers or sisters, he nods his head vigorously. As it was, his best friend was his dog, Mitzi.

He was a sickly child as well. “I had every childhood disease that came down the pike,” Rogers says, “even scarlet fever.” One of his afflictions was hay fever. The son of the family doctor had asthma, and the two families teamed up to buy Latrobe’s first air conditioner, which was installed in a spare bedroom at the doctor’s house. Fred was confined to that room all during ragweed season.

His parents plainly doted on young Fred, but they were possibly overprotective. To them, Fred must have seemed frighteningly frail, and they didn’t want to lose their only child. The Lindbergh kidnapping of 1932—when Fred was four—gave them something else to worry about, and they wouldn’t let him go outdoors by himself until he was nearly a teenager. Rogers recalls that at his grandfather’s farm he always wanted to walk along the tops of the stone walls that crisscrossed the property. His parents thought that was too dangerous, but finally, when he was eight, old Mr. McFeely—whom Fred still lovingly calls Ding-Dong after the first song his grandfather sang to him—stood up to Fred’s parents and told the boy to go ahead. Fred had the time of his life scrambling over the walls. And Fred always remembered what Ding-Dong told him afterward. “Fred,” he said, “you made this day a special day by being yourself. Always remember there’s just one person in this world like you . . . and I like you just the way you are!” This is the essential message of the Neighborhood; it’s





significant that Fred did not hear it from his own parents.

Fred made the most of his solitude. "You make things out of challenges like that," he says. "If you have any seeds of creativity, you'd jolly well better use them, otherwise it could be desperately lonely." When he was released from his air-conditioned confinement that first year at age five, his McFeely grandparents rewarded him with a toy organ, which he quickly learned to play. He likes to say he "laughed and cried through his fingers," which may have been the sole acceptable emotional display for an only child of such prominent parents. He also started playing with puppets at a young age; he learned to operate a ventriloquist's dummy named Hischer Boptrunk; and he created a kind of miniature Neighborhood from some figures he molded out of hot lead.

A childhood friend, Peggy McFeaters, lived a little ways down the hill and often came to play at the house. "Fred had more of everything than I did—especially toys," McFeaters recalls. "Soldiers, castles, forts, and things like that. We spread them all out in his huge playroom and played with them for hours. Fred was always so imaginative. Looking back on it, I sometimes think it was Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, and he was showing me around." Fred was thrilled to have a real neighbor for once. "The thing that always struck me," McFeaters says, "was how he used to look at me. It was more like he was watching *me* play than he was playing himself."

Fred Rogers entered Latrobe High School a year ahead of Arnold Palmer, Latrobe's other distinguished citizen. Rogers remembers that "Arnie" took up golf only because he was too small to play football. Rogers himself didn't do any sports, but he did play a lot of music. He used to sing a

rather raucous song during intermission at school dances, about the beheading of Anne Boleyn. He fell in with the go-getters. His best friend, Jim Stumbaugh, was class president. He had a steady girlfriend named Doris Stewart, who was class valedictorian. She grew up on Weldon Street, a few blocks from Rogers. She, too, was an only child, and her father had died when she was in elementary school. Now Dr. Doris Pennoyer, she remembers Fred as a "very determined person. Whatever he decided to do got done." Fred himself was president of the student council and editor of his class yearbook, and on graduation he was voted Most Likely to Succeed.

It wasn't until his senior year at Rollins, though, that the determined Fred Rogers knew what he wanted to succeed at. He had started at Dartmouth, majoring in Romance languages (he speaks French, and also knows Greek and Hebrew, which he learned at the seminary). But he found the place "cold in every way." His Romance languages professor frightened him, and he wanted to switch to music. Since the music department was not fully established, the department head recommended that Fred consider transferring to Rollins College, which he himself had just left. A group of students showed up at the school to give him a tour of the campus that first day; one of them was Sara Joanne Byrd, now Mrs. Rogers.

As graduation approached in the spring of 1951, he planned to enroll in Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. But when he went home for Easter vacation, he switched on his parents' brand-new television set and he was astonished. "Here was a medium that used music and drama and fantasy and all of the things that used to be so natural for me," he says. But he was aghast at one children's show—*The Pinky Lee Show*, he thinks it was—which consisted largely of grown men throwing pies at each other. "I have real trouble with any kind of demeaning behavior," he says. "Always have." Maybe he would do something in children's television, he thought.

It is something of a miracle that I know this much about Fred Rogers, because he hates to talk about himself. He avoids the word "I," preferring to refer to himself in the third person, as "this one." In conversation, whenever he does assert something, he is liable to say, "Oh, Mister Rogers, get down off your soapbox." He is far happier listening than talking, and to that end most of his answers have a question attached—a "Don't you think?" or a "Have you ever had that experience?"—which, unless the interviewer is very, very careful, can quickly turn him into the interviewee. This isn't a defensive ploy, I think, so much as Rogers' determination to connect with the person he is with, to make each moment come alive. After we talked for a bit about his childhood, Rogers stopped abruptly and looked at me. "John," he asked, "did you ever think of becoming a therapist?" I told him no, and asked him why he should ask. "I just think you have keen insights," he said. "The connections that you make are so *deep*." I told him he



was making me feel shy. “Well, I don’t mean to do that,” he said. “But who knows whether we’ll ever meet again, and I need to tell you what I feel about you while we do meet.”

The first time Fred Rogers appeared on television he descended on wires from the ceiling wearing a tuxedo, a mask, and a crown of black velvet. He played Prince Charming, and, without saying a word, he was supposed to teach the children of *The Children’s Corner* the jitterbug, the foxtrot, and all the other ballroom dances he had learned at dancing school in Latrobe. That was in 1962, the eighth and last year of *The Children’s Corner*.

Rogers had been in television eleven years at that point. After graduating from Rollins, he had worked as an assistant on *The Voice of Firestone*, *The Kate Smith Hour*, *The Gabby Hayes Show*, and other NBC shows in New York. He says he was just a gofer, but he must have caught somebody’s eye, because he was a candidate to star in a possible variety show for the network. A proposal for the program pictured a grand indoor set, and the cover line read: “Who the devil is Fred Rogers?” That show never flew, and Fred moved back to Pittsburgh, which had just instituted the first community-sponsored public television station in the country.

He was meant to have a desk job there, but he happened to wander into the office of Josie Carey one day. Carey was a spunky twenty-three-year-old who had gotten approval to develop a late-afternoon children’s show. One day, she lured Rogers into a conversation about the show and ended up enlisting him as her partner. The two would split \$150 a week. While she would host the show, he would produce it and play the organ. But his more important role wasn’t defined until a few days before *The Children’s Corner* was to air, when the producer, Dorothy Daniels, threw a cast party. Daniels happened to put a tiger puppet out on the table as a party favor, and Rogers fell in love with it. He named the puppet Daniel Striped Tiger, after Dorothy Daniels. Daniel is now a mainstay of the Neighborhood’s Make-Believe segment. On *The Children’s Corner* the tiger’s role was to pop out like a cuckoo from behind a clock and name an important historical date. “It’s 5:02 and Columbus discovered America in 1492,” Daniel might say. This was problematic, because Rogers also had to play the show’s introduction on the organ, and the organ was practically in another studio. To make his way silently and speedily across the set to take up his position behind the clock, he grabbed his pockets with each hand to keep his change from jingling, and he wore a pair of pale blue sneakers he’d bought on Nantucket.

*The Children’s Corner* was inspired in part by the frequently zany antics of the puppets on *Kukla, Fran & Ollie*, which Fred had seen in New York. But neither co-host had time to watch any of the current shows. The two took off from Daniel’s remarks, and they often went quite a distance, joking about the “Gramma Phone,” inventing yet another recipe for enlarging the wart on the puppet Lady Elaine Fairchild’s nose, or discussing the Millard Fillmore

**Mister Rogers  
always got a  
hand-knitted cardigan  
sweater from his mother  
for Christmas.  
Now one of them is in the  
Smithsonian, along with  
Archie Bunker’s chair.**

party, at which hamburger was served a different way each time—à la mode, with cream sauce. “All of it completely ad-libbed,” Carey says. “I never knew what Fred was going to say, and he never knew what I was going to say. I tell you, the liveness of the thing would be unheard of today.” Together the two of them invented the other puppet characters that are now well known to Neighborhood viewers: King Friday, Lady Elaine Fairchild (named for Rogers’ sister), Henrietta Pussycat (after Josie’s husband Henry).

Since they weren’t monitored in the ratings, they had no idea how well the show was doing until one day they announced a meeting of the Tame Tiger Torganization. Anyone who could sing Daniel Striped Tiger’s personal anthem, “Je Suis un Tigre Apprivoisé,” in French earned the four stripes necessary for Torganization membership. To the station’s astonishment, hundreds and hundreds of Torganization members showed up, and not just children either. They all squeezed into the studio and stood at attention to sing Daniel’s anthem in unison, in proud and flawless French. “I still get goose bumps when I think about it,” Rogers says.

Rogers and Carey did the show nationally on NBC for a few months in the winter of 1955-56, but *The Children’s Corner* otherwise remained a local program until it finally went off the air in 1962 over an essential difference in philosophy. Rogers had been earning his divinity degree during his lunch hour and taking morning classes in children’s psychology at the Arsenal Center. He wanted the show to be more serious. “Fred always was different,” Carey says. “He was the only grown man I ever knew who looked forward to church on Sunday. He was becoming increasingly religious, and he just hated show business. What we were doing was *Alice in Wonderland* come to life. I didn’t want to say, ‘The . . . grass . . . is . . . green.’ I thought straight-out instruction was gross.” She also found it difficult to resolve their differences. “The hardest thing with Fred is that you just could not argue with him. ‘Oh, no’ is all he will give you. Then he’ll wander out of the room. I’m a screamer and a yeller. I want a real discussion, but not

Fred. He doesn't like confrontation and negative vibes."

Rogers was about to go into the Presbyterian ministry when Fred Rainsberry of the Canadian Broadcasting Company called to ask if he'd be interested in doing a children's show in Toronto. Rogers readily agreed. The show was called *Misterogers' Neighborhood* (it was later emended in deference to children's early reading skills). Rogers spoke directly to the camera from a window seat. The show picked up from *The Children's Corner*, but refocused its attention on younger children; it ran fifteen minutes a day.

After two years of it, Rogers longed to return to America. He accepted an invitation from WQED to bring the show back to Pittsburgh. In the beginning, he recycled many of the original Canadian shows, providing a fifteen-minute wraparound to make the shows a half hour. The program was syndicated on the Eastern Educational Network, but nearly went off the air in 1967 for want of a sponsor. In Boston, however, some distressed parents organized a Mothers' March to protest the planned cancellation. The Sears Roebuck Foundation saw photographs of the march in the newspaper, and agreed to help support the program and make it available to all public television stations coast-to-coast. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* has been on the air ever since.

Fred Rogers is crouched uncomfortably on a stool inside King Friday the XIII's castle, his hand manipulating Henrietta Pussycat. The inside of the castle might be a tree house, everything is so makeshift and topsy-turvy. Daniel's clock from *The Children's Corner* stands across the way, and a miniature Eiffel Tower from the same show rises up incongruously beside the castle. The Neighborhood is built out of Fred Rogers' past.

Rogers wears a puppeteer's black shirt, khaki trousers, and, as always, sneakers. To his left, producer Sam Newbury is manipulating Prince Tuesday, who today is threatening to get sick so his parents won't leave him at the day-care center when they go off to work. The Prince was born about a year and a half after the show went national. He was a baby puppet on Queen Sara's hand back then, but he has grown up to be a freestanding puppet of his own.

There's a monitor in front of Rogers, presenting the action outside, and he has to reverse the image mentally to see it from his perspective, which he has no trouble doing. Rogers is a wonderful puppeteer, a fact that sometimes gets lost on the show amid his many other talents. The puppets have no moving parts, yet Rogers gives them a range of expression by the slightest leaning or turning of their bodies.

It's late in the afternoon—cues are missed, lines are flubbed, and nerves are fraying. To revive everyone's spirits, Johnny Costa plays "Stella by Starlight." Rogers stops dead, listening. It might as well be the music of the spheres. "You know," he says, "sometimes I can't sleep because there's a song going around in my head. Every once in a while, I'll hear something and I'll just go 'Oh, boy!'" Costa finishes

the song, and Rogers sings a few bars of "Stella" to himself. "I wish I'd written that," he says. "That's just so beautiful."

Every once in a while, Fred Rogers gets a faraway look in his eye and says that he'd like to die on the set of the Neighborhood. "I can't think of a better place to do that," he declares. It is talk the members of his staff would just as soon not hear. They don't even want to think about his retirement. There are no plans to replace Mister Rogers; one might as easily change the heads on Mount Rushmore. Besides, there is no need. There are enough shows in the library that they could go on forever, each show a new one for the next wave of two-year-olds coming to replace the five-year-olds who have moved on, a little more secure about themselves and their place in the world, into the more turbulent waters of *Sesame Street* or network TV.

It would be fitting, perhaps, for Mister Rogers to die on the set, because that is where he has lived. "There and at home," he adds. "That's been pretty much it." It is hard to imagine a show that is a fuller embodiment of one person than the Neighborhood is of Fred Rogers. Except when the show makes an occasional foray to, say, a balloon factory on "Picture-Picture," Fred Rogers is the dominating presence. Staffers could recall only one time when Rogers was not on screen, and that was when Chuck Aber, a longtime Neighbor, sat for a minute alone in his living room. It gave everyone a strange feeling.

The character of Mister Rogers has a fullness that only a child can completely appreciate. During the Make-Believe portions, Rogers' character refracts into its component parts for all to see. King Friday is his assertive, fatherly self; Queen Sara his maternal side, although he'd argue "she is probably more Joanne"; Prince Tuesday the only child he once was; X the owl—so named because he "X-caped" from Pittsburgh's Highland Park Zoo—is, he says, "an adolescent me." Cornflake S. Pecially, owner of the Rokit rocking chair factory, is his manufacturing side—"the Dad part of me, and the Ding-Dong part of me," he says, referring to his father and grandfather. "And Daniel is really the shy me." But the living characters each capture a part of him, too: the loving Lady Aberlin, the efficient Mr. McFeely, the darling Bob Dog, the merry Chef Brockett. So, presumably, do the children watching from that "holy ground" at home. They take away something of Mister Rogers as well.

At the end of each show, Rogers ritually dons his street shoes and suit jacket while he sings the peppy "It's Such a Good Feeling" song, and he always snaps his fingers as he wishes the children a "snappy new day."

In the studio, each day of tapings concludes with its own ritual. As the floor crew gathers around the Steinway, Fred Rogers takes over from Johnny Costa to play the swelling cadenza from the old Pathé newsreels. Today, Betty Aberlin sings along in a diva's high soprano, as if this were some soaring aria of *The End*. Rogers finishes the piece with a flourish and turns away smiling, filled with good feeling that life should be so grand. 