

**EXCLUSIVE:** THE SHOCKING DETAILS OF A 1978 MURDER MYSTERY  
The Valley's Old-Time TV Pitchmen • San Diego's Best Restaurants

# PHOENIX

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'DUCK'  
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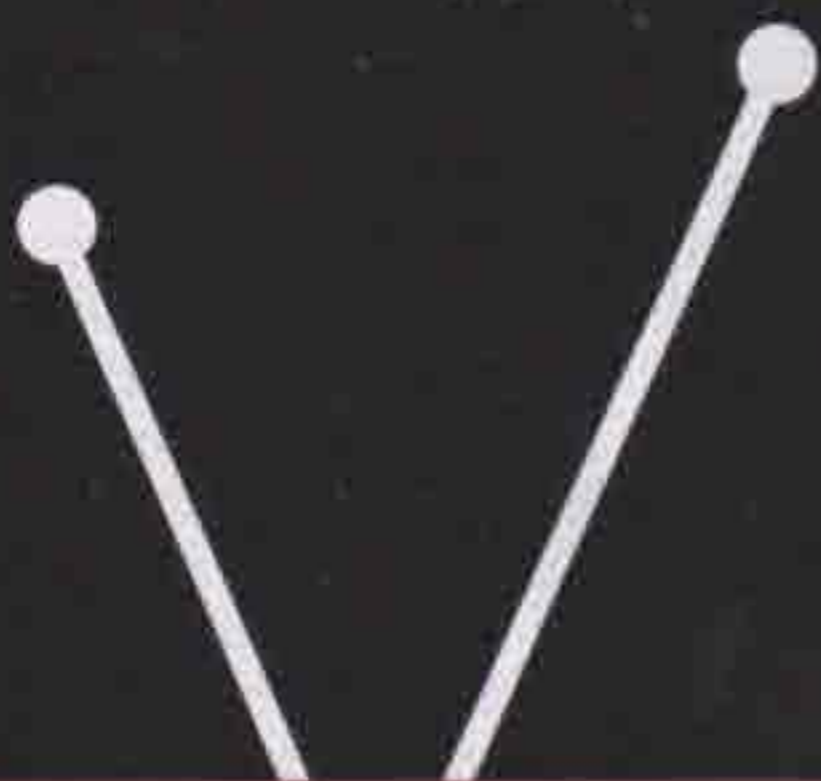
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**AS SEEN  
ON TV**





TV PITCHMEN NEVER DIE. AT LEAST THAT'S THE GOAL FOR LOCAL AD LEGENDS LIKE DAVE PIZER, TONY CAVOLO AND RUSSELL SHAW, WHO YOU MAY REMEMBER AS THE FITWELL SEAT COVERS GUY, THE PETER PIPER PIZZA CHEF AND THE "NO HASSLE LISTINGS" REALTOR. WHETHER IT'S THROUGH A NEW ERA OF COMMERCIALS, OR CRYOGENICS, THESE TELEVISION IMMORTALS ARE WORKING TO STAY ALIVE FOREVER.

BY JIMMY MAGAHERN  
PHOTOS BY BRANDON SULLIVAN

**F**or years, the faint line drawing of Dave Pizer and his dog, Woofy, were etched in chipped white paint near the bottom of the faded red Fitwell Seat Covers building. Located along the old Sunnyslope stretch of Cave Creek Road, the image provided longtime Valley residents with an odd blast from the past as they drove by. A sobering flash of a once familiar "As Seen on TV" face that is no longer seen on TV.

In their time, they seem inescapable, shouting and selling on every TV screen, their fame bought in commercial blocks. After months – or even years – of seeing their mugs between breaks on the morning news, we feel as if we know our local TV pitchmen and women – or at least we learn to endure them.

Hi, Brad from Whitfill Nurseries. Hey, Hastings & Hastings guy. Uh, which one are you again?

The ones who stay on TV perpetually became the legends. Tex Earnhardt. Henry Brown. Debbie Gaby. Don Luke, from Bill Luke Chrysler.

Some, like consignment furniture maven Terri Bowersock, drop into our living rooms so often we come to share in their personal tragedies, like when Bowersock's mother was killed two years ago, allegedly by her boyfriend, and buried in the desert south of Phoenix. Others, like murdered auto glass mogul Rick Chance, turn into ill-fated examples of self-made household names gone too far.

But what becomes of those pitchmen we're eventually relieved of? For a long time during the '70s and '80s, the sight of burly, bearded Dave Pizer and his loyal Great Dane hawking car-seat covers was as constant an irritant as Gaby's Southern belle accent and lawyer Jeffrey Phillips' greased-back hair are today.

Eventually, though, the commercials did stop. Pizer and pooch did go away. The upholstery shops remained in business for years, only to dwindle in time from a chain of nine stores to one in Sunnyslope, which finally sold last year.

When the last Fitwell building was repainted and turned into another anonymous furniture shop, it seemed Pizer's once-omnipresent visage was gone for good.

But if Dave Pizer has his way, he'll be back someday.

Many miles north of Phoenix, from his office overlooking the 34-acre Creekside Preserve Lodge in Mayer, Arizona, which Pizer now runs as a resort, the former TV pitchman has been busy working on a plan that will, at least in theory, guarantee that his mug remains around for eternity. Literally.

Pizer spent his first decade out of the TV spotlight working in various capacities at Alcor, the Scottsdale-based cryonics facility that is now one of the nation's leading proponents of the controversial science. The company aims to freeze bodies that can no longer be kept alive with current medicine, with the goal that they'll eventually be resuscitated and cured by future advances.

He may have gotten into cryonics too late to preserve Woofy, who passed away more than 15 years ago, but he and his wife, Trudy, are signed up. This might explain why Pizer insists he felt little sadness over seeing his last caricature painted over after having adorned stores from Sun City to Apache Junction.

"People who think that they're achieving immortality through their fame, what book they wrote or their works... no," says the 64-year-old Pizer, who, like most of those on the cryonics waiting list, never had kids. "When you're dead, and your neurons stop firing, it doesn't help if other people remember you. There was a line in the Woody Allen movie *Sleeper*, where someone asked him, 'Do you hope to live on in your work?' And Woody says, 'No, I hope to live on in my apartment.'"

Pizer laughs. "That is really what it's all about. Sure, a lot of people remember me from the commercials. But so what? That's not immortality. Not dying is immortality."

**H**is face is so well known to Valley residents that when Russell Shaw turns sideways, the unfamiliar angle can be a bit jarring, like catching a glimpse of the dark side of the moon. From the side, Shaw's bug eyes, rounded face and short, gray hair oddly resemble the late Rodney Dangerfield's. But when he turns back to smile at you, you instantly see the billboard, the realty signs, the face on TV that airs on four locally run stations at a cost of more than \$600,000 a year. He's the Realtor famous for his "No Hassle Listings."

"I'm on TV a lot," says Shaw from his surprisingly modest ranch-style home in one of the cozy neighborhoods north of Paradise Valley Mall. (His home office, staffed today by four women – including his radiant wife, Wendy – is located in an add-on room.)

"And I get recognized all the time. Usually it's this stuck attention thing. Someone looks at me for a long time, and you can just feel it. Next thing you know, they're walking over saying, 'Aren't you that real estate guy from TV?'"

Shaw understands the fascination. After all, he once called his wife, practically out of breath with excitement, to tell her he had just passed car dealer Lou Grubb on Camelback Road.

"I called Wendy and said, 'You're not gonna believe this, but I just drove past Lou Grubb!'" Shaw remembers, laughing jovially. "She was like, 'Yeah, I can see what you've got going on today.' But hey, I mean, Lou Grubb! He's an icon."

There is something iconic about our local TV hucksters – particularly the ones who rose to fame during the pre-cable days, back when business owners with a few bucks and an inclination toward the spotlight could dominate the tube with their refreshingly amateurish shtick.

"Those were the good old days in TV," says former Phoenix ad agency man Ray Lindstrom, renowned for being the guy who first put Tex Earnhardt on TV in 1969. "We had four television channels... and man, if you bought time on one channel, everybody knew who you were. It was so easy to get huge back then. There was no technology to skip the commercials – heck, there were no remote controls. And boy, did Phoenix have its share of commercial stars."

People like Carpetime's Walter Selinger, dragging a saw across a roll of carpet and extolling the toughness of his floor coverings in a thick German burr. Or, unforgettably, B-movie goddess Acquafetta, applying her faded Hollywood glamour to husband Jack Ross' Lincoln-Mercury ads. Even tire peddler Charlie Case and his barbershop quartet, crooning, "Charlie my boy... oh, Charlie my boy," had their share of fans.

"They were our local celebrities," says actor and fledgling screenwriter Cait Brennan, who once tried out for a role in a Sonoyta Subaru commercial alongside owner Pat Gibbons.

Gibbons, accompanied by his trusty mule, E-Z Credit, became famous by squeezing his hefty frame into an undersized Lone Ranger costume that Brennan cracks "stretched the limits of fabric and good taste" and by proclaiming himself "The Loan Arranger."

Gibbons "jumped the shark," Brennan says, when he brought in his hefty female sidekick, Carlotta Sales.

"The best of them were unique characters that helped define Phoenix as a special



**DAVE PIZER PURCHASED \$5 TV ADS AND BECAME ONE OF THE CITY'S MOST RECOGNIZABLE PITCHMEN.**

place, back when localism meant something," Brennan adds. "They had an ironic sense of humor and an 'average guy' demeanor that made them really likeable." Brennan feels there was a "loose cannon, low-rent quality" to the early Phoenix ad stars that few advertisers can afford to gamble on today.

Dave Otto, one of the top Phoenix radio deejays of the late '70s, remembers his own foray into Valley TV commercials, when he donned a cowboy suit and dragged around a rotting frozen turkey in a series of ads for United Waterbeds as Hal Barnyard and his turkey, Bruce.

"Everybody was doing crazy stuff then," says Otto, whose character was a not-so-hidden jab at Tex Earnhardt and his neutered "No Bull" steer. "Nowadays, everything's so steeped in legalities, you could never get away with that kind of stuff. Back then, the wackier, the better."

Russell Shaw got his start in commercials by making fun of them. His distinctive baritone voice was first heard on the hippy-dippy early '70s FM station KDKB, where, as the self-made celebrity "Wonderful Russ," Shaw heartily endorsed a moving company he'd never used (which happened to share a parking lot with KDKB's broadcasting towers) and gave his authoritative-sounding stamp of approval to the various stereo stores and head shops hip enough to advertise on the station.

In the mid-'80s, Wonderful Russ resurfaced, doing joke commercials on KSLX for his pal Bob Boze Bell, and, as part of the bargain, sneaking in a couple of genuine commercials for his new realty business.

Initially, a lot of longtime residents scratched their heads upon hearing Shaw's own spots, failing to find any of the usual Firesign Theater-like humor in the bits.

"People would literally be calling the station, saying, 'I don't get the joke,'" says Shaw, whose well-modulated tones still trigger warm flashbacks for legions of former Valley hippies. "Like, 'There's something funny there, but I don't know what it is.'"

"I suppose there is something funny about me doing my own TV ads now, with this huge media budget," Shaw adds, bursting into one of his infectious belly laughs. "Not that funny. But funny."

**T**ony Cavolo, realizing there was already an abundance of pizza joints with Italian surnames, christened his chain of pizza restaurants after a familiar children's tongue twister. He opened his initial Peter Piper Pizza store

just eight months after landing in Phoenix in 1973.

The transplanted New Yorker still remembers the first commercial he made for the chain, albeit reluctantly.

"I wanted somebody else to do [the commercials] at first," Cavolo says. "I figured, nah, I don't know anything about commercials."

But ad man Ray Lindstrom, who five years earlier had discovered the potent charisma of Tex Earnhardt, thought the then-50-year-old Cavolo would be the perfect pizza salesman. After all, he was fresh from the Bronx and bursting with moxie.

Lindstrom was right. Cavolo, with his squat frame squeezed into a chef's hat and apron (think Chef on *South Park*, only Italian), was an instant hit. Week after week, he simply pounded a roll of King Kaiser flour dough while saying the things about pizza everyone only thought.

"It's not gold. It's not steak. It's just a thin piece of bread with some tomatoes and cheese on it," Cavolo would say in his easygoing *Goodfellas* voice. And his pitch was that Peter Piper sold for half of Pizza Hut's price — \$1.70 for a large cheese while the Hut was soaking families for \$3.40. He then ended each commercial with what

FOR YEARS, TONY CAVOLO URGED VALLEY RESIDENTS TO "COME ON OVER TO PETER PIPER PIZZA."

would eventually become his slogan, and later his commercial jingle: "Come on over! To Peter Piper Pizza."

"I think it was the accent that sold the pizza," Cavolo says. "Even now, when I meet someone who doesn't know me, I go, 'I'll give you a little hint about who I am.' And I say, 'Come on ovah!' And they go, 'Oh, yeah!'"

Although Cavolo sold the business for several million in 1992 to an Arizona-based investment company that opted to discontinue using Tony in its ads, the 83-year-old retiree still finds that his former fame as "that pizza guy" opens doors.

"I have these little business cards with a picture of me when I had the hat and apron," he says. "And I have on it, 'Founder of Peter Piper Pizza.' So I get a kick out of that. Hey, it's nice to be recognized."

Cavolo, who reportedly lost much of the cash fortune he received from the sale to some bad stock investments, says he was recently approached by the discount Eatza Pizza chain to revive his dough-kneading, straight-talking pizza chef for a new series of TV commercials.

"They wanted to pay me well," Cavolo says. "But I thought about it, and I said, 'Nah.' Even though I'm not with Peter Piper anymore, Peter Piper is still my baby."

After all, the chain does still use Cavolo's original recipe (it's got something to do with the crispy crust). And the veteran pitchman, who lives just around the corner from Peter Piper's headquarters near Kierland Commons, says he's currently working on a concept he might one day present to them.

"I've got an idea for a new way of selling pizza that I would really like to do, but I'm not physically capable right now," says Cavolo, fighting off a bad cough that he assures is just from a cold.

"But I'm always thinking. I was always more of a marketer than a pizza maker. And I'm still that way."

**A**s the owner and spokesman of the *Video Professor*, the extremely successful series of PC tutorial CDs, John Scherer's face is seen nationally on TV between 300 and 400 times a month, in over 65 million homes.

In the classically straightforward commercials, the genial Scherer—Sean Connery bald with a gray mustache topping a perfect

set of smiling white teeth – patiently walks his computer-challenged audience (seniors and country music fans are among his devotees) through even the arcane science of loading a CD and clicking buttons. “The simple controls work just like a VCR,” he reassures.

The spots have already become fodder for *Saturday Night Live* parodies and Jay Leno monologues. On the internet, Scherer’s earnest *Idiot’s Guide* approach has made him a sitting-duck target for snobby tech geeks.

But one look around Scherer’s palatial estate, edging up on the Paradise Valley side of Camelback Mountain, and all of the nerdy laughter immediately subsides. If there is an Elvis among the Valley’s rube-tube pitchmen, John Scherer is definitely today’s King.

Scherer’s expansive Santa Barbara-style home is but one of the digs the confirmed bachelor shuttles between. Distinguished by grand stone archways and pillars, the house overlooks a generous guesthouse and a resort-sized pool in the lushly landscaped backyard. He recently sold a 5,600-square-foot house in the Valley’s Troon North golf community, and maintains another pad, modeled after a French castle, near the company’s headquarters in Lakewood, Colorado, where his 350-member staff ships out over 300,000 CD packages a month – each adorned with Scherer’s sincere mug.

“All of this is due to the *Video Professor*,” Scherer says with a bemused smile over morning coffee in his king-sized kitchen nook. As in his commercials, he manages to acknowledge his success without sounding boastful or haughty – a key to his appeal. “I’ve been very fortunate.”

A former assembler of IBM clone PCs, Scherer struggled for years to get his ingenious product – a knob-friendly CD-ROM that mimicked the controls of a VCR – designed and onto the already crowded retail shelves. His main audience? People like his mom, who complained that even running the available CD-ROM computer tutorials required too much working knowledge of those danged gizmos.

The turning point came, Scherer says, when he went on television with his own infomercial, which was later trimmed down to snappy 60-second spots. “After working our butts off and being near bankruptcy at one point, all of a sudden it was like throwing on the light switch,” he recalls. “It was like magic. Suddenly, we were making money. And it was all because of television.”

Scherer remains a reluctant celebrity. “I was introduced on *Fox & Friends* awhile back as ‘One of the most recognizable people in the country,’” he says. “And it hit me that I probably am. But I don’t feel like a celebrity. To me, I’m just a 1-800 guy trying to make a company go.”

Nevertheless, Scherer is frequently treated as a genuine star. At this year’s Sundance Film Festival, where he set up a display, Scherer found himself being approached for autographs more than a lot of the indie actors haunting Park City. After meeting lifelong idol Muhammad Ali in March at *Celebrity Fight Night* in Phoenix, Scherer says he was embarrassed when people backstage acted as star-struck to see him, as he was to see Ali.

“I have a friend who was starting a business, but his whole motivation was, he wanted to be famous,” Scherer says. “He’d say, ‘Maybe when we’re out, people will ask for my autograph.’ I tried to tell him that’s the wrong way to go about it. My fame came as a result of running a good business and doing a good marketing job. I never would have made it if I’d said, ‘Hey, I want to be famous.’”

Scherer laughs. “I mean, I can’t even read a teleprompter. I am terrible. But I am sincere. I believe in my product. And that is what works.”

It’s been only a few months since Dave Pizer shaved his trademark wooly beard. After wearing it since his teens, when he grew it to add some years to a baby face, he says he’d simply grown tired of the old crumb-catcher.

Without it, however, he’s virtually unrecognizable as the guy who used to come into Valley living rooms through the seemingly endless stream of low-budget TV commercials, sitting beside his big dog and touting the high-grade Naugahyde in his custom-fitted car-seat covers.

But this, Pizer insists, is altogether fine with him.

“Back when I used to have the beard, I’d get recognized a lot,” he says, gazing out through the arcadia door of his unassuming home in northeast Phoenix where one of his two current Great Danes, Albert, slobbers to be let in.

“I can remember several restaurants that we liked to eat in. And they would recognize me, and the owner would take us past the other 50 people waiting in line, and we’d be

seated immediately. But they’d usually put us out in the middle of the room, where other people could see us. People would be like, ‘Isn’t that the Fitwell Seat Covers guy? Well, if he eats here, it must be a good place!’ I always thought that was funny.”

Once, upon arriving at Durant’s, Pizer ran into Tony Cavolo – whom he had never met – and the rest of the restaurant went wild.

“People couldn’t believe they were seeing the seat cover guy and the pizza guy together,” Pizer says with a chuckle. “They thought they were in heaven, with these big celebrities there. And I thought, ‘What have we done? We’re just a couple of businessmen who happened to get lucky.’”

Pizer, who took a couple philosophy courses at ASU during his reign as a top Valley pitchman, says the first time he was approached for an autograph, he actually felt physically ill.

“I thought it was an indictment of the American public, to be so frickin’ stupid that they wanted some TV huckster’s autograph,” he says, literally grimacing over the memory. “Philosophically, ethically and morally, it just didn’t seem right that some guy who’s buying spots on TV should have the same type of recognition as somebody like a serviceman, who’s gone to fight for his country, or a fireman, who’s done something heroic.”

If anything, Pizer says, he was merely brilliant enough to buy thousands of cheap “pre-emptable” commercial spots a month – most at the unbelievable price of \$5 a shot – in the gamble that the station ad reps wouldn’t be able to sell them to a higher bidder by the time the shows aired.

“That is why you saw me on TV so much,” Pizer reveals. “I’d offer them five bucks for a spot Lou Grubb or Tex Earnhardt would pay 100 bucks for. And if they didn’t buy the time, they’d have to run my ads. And, by God, about half of the time, they ran mine.”

Pretty clever, Pizer admits. But nothing worth signing autographs over.

“I mean, it’s not like I raised the flag on Iwo Jima or something,” he says, with a scowl.

“I bought a bunch of cheap commercial spots, and got my face on TV a lot. Big whoopy-do!”

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