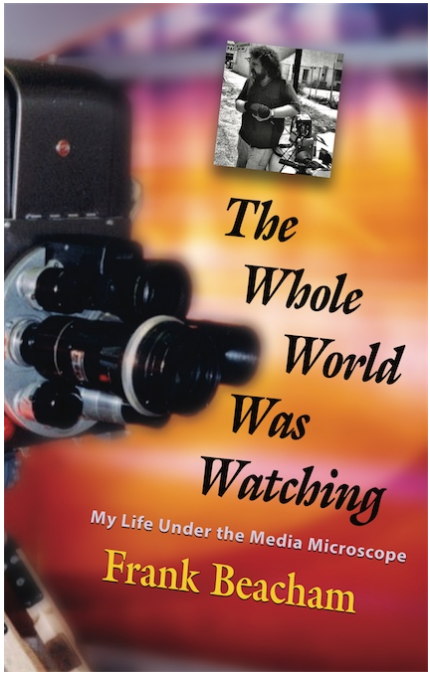

Frank Beacham's autobiography tells of coming of age in the turbulent 1960s and his compelling lifetime adventures as an independent media storyteller.

The Whole World Was Watching:

My Life Under the Media Microscope

by Frank Beacham

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The Whole World Was Watching

My Life Under the Media Microscope

Frank Beacham

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Chapter 11

Orson Welles and the Betacam

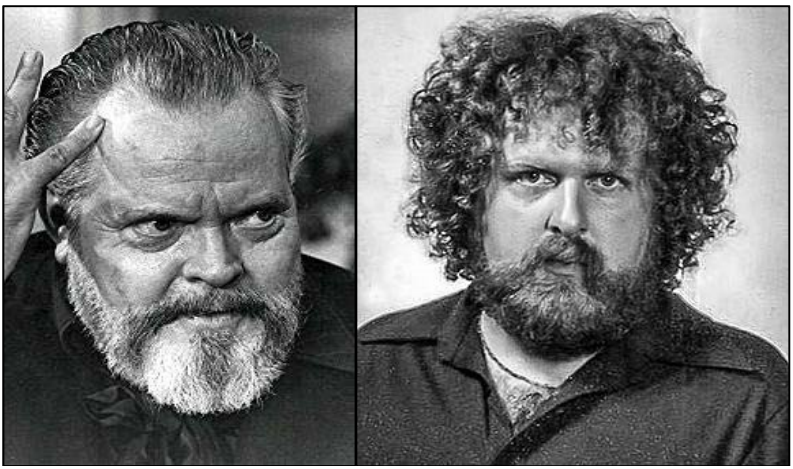
As a child of the 60s, I grew up with the simple, naive belief that the power of television could — and would — be eventually used to make the world a better place. I was wrong — totally wrong! The ride I was on cured me of that childish notion forever.

What I learned during the period between 1984 and 1986 was that sometimes, just sometimes, one has to step into a sewer in order to reach nirvana in the entertainment business. It became clear to me that the journeys we take through this life begin and end in the most odd and unexpected ways. While I labored in misery on Robin Leach's television show, I simultaneously had one of my greatest adventures — all over one great man's fascination with Sony's Betacam.

At the time, I was running the day-to-day production operations for *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* at the studio. Success added a new crisis almost every minute to the daily workload and dozens of people came to visit each day. Sony had successfully built the first interformat ENG edit bay in the country and it drew massive attention. For me, I was in a daze. All I knew is I was being pulled from all directions.

A freelance editor I hired for the show, Paul Hunt, also did some sound work for Orson Welles, the legendary actor/director/producer/genius. Hunt told Welles about our

new Betacam facility and from that moment on the great man's insatiable curiosity about every new sound and imaging technology took over. Welles wanted to meet me. Hunt warned I might be getting a call from Welles, but it was a genuine shock and surprise when it actually came.



It was a normal, but hectic day in January, 1985, when the phone rang at my desk in Sunset-Gower Studios. The caller, in his unmistakable sonorous voice, announced he was Orson Welles. Though it wasn't completely unexpected, I wasn't prepared for it either. It was like getting a phone call from God. The man wanted to have lunch with me. Of course, I said yes. He set the time and place for the next day. With that simple phone exchange began one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life.

The lunch, any film buff's dream, was at Welles's favorite haunt, Ma Maison, a restaurant so private that it had an

unlisted phone number. When I arrived, Welles was waiting. He rose, extended his hand and I said something like, "it is an honor to meet you, Mr. Welles." At this moment, he snapped that I was never to call him "Mr. Welles." It was Orson. Always Orson. Like every utterance from his mouth, he said it like he meant it. I remember gulping as I sheepishly spit out the word…."Orson." As a Southerner, it seemed so disrespectful to drop the mister. But I did it…however uncomfortably.

Orson quickly made me feel at ease. He was friendly and charming. We were in the midst of some banter when I felt a sharp bite on my ankle. I jumped and yelped, realizing that something had bitten me. Orson quickly recognized what happened. His nasty little dog, Kiki — normally at Orson's side — had bitten me on the leg. Rather than admonish Kiki, Orson petted her, laughed and informed me that an empty chair across the way was for her. I stayed cool and unnerved, as I would learn to always do in Orson's presence. Normally, one might kick or snap at a dog that had just bitten you. In this case, I could not only not kick Orson Welles's dog, but I couldn't even appear to be upset by it. It was my first experience with Orson's bizarre sense of humor, which I would learn to appreciate.

The lunch that day was long and rambling. Orson didn't drink wine at the time but kept ordering it for me. He preferred French wine over the California variety and made sure I had plenty of it. I don't remember what I ate, but it was some kind of fresh fish. We talked about cigars (he gave me one), our common love of radio and, of course,

video. Orson made it clear that he loved technology and always had. He adopted new technology into his storytelling, whether it was radio, theatre or the movies. Now, he wanted to work with video. He referred to the Betacam as "an Arriflex without film." For reasons I don't completely understand to this day, we actually hit it off. I knew about Welles' industry reputation in general, but not in detail. That lack of knowledge served me well, I would learn later. Welles despised people who tried to take him "down memory lane" with specific questions about his past. I didn't know enough to even ask!

Orson liked to look forward to the future, not back, which was — in his view — littered with disappointment and failure. Instinctively, I tried to focus only on areas I had worked in and where we shared a common interest. One of those areas was radio. I had begun working in radio and knew of Welles through his historic innovations in the medium. I gently broached the subject with him and he warmed to it. Welles told me he should have stayed with radio, since it had not been polluted by all the vultures trying to make the big money in movies and television. From the wonderful stories he told, Welles clearly enjoyed looking back at his radio days where he had found real joy in his work.

One story he told made us both laugh heartedly. He did so many radio dramas during each day in New York City during the 1930s that he had trouble getting from studio to studio on time. Doing some research on the subject, he discovered that it was not illegal to move around Manhattan

in an ambulance. So Welles hired an ambulance, with sirens screeching, as it raced through city traffic to ferry him from studio to studio in record time. Often, John Houseman, his producer, would sit in the ambulance as Welles lay on the cot — the two rehearsing lines for the next broadcast.

The lunch lasted a couple of hours. It ended with Orson comfortable enough with me to suggest that we might work together on a video project. I responded with an enthusiastic yes. He insisted that we have lunch again in a couple of days. I agreed. When the check came, I tried to pay it. In fact, Paul Hunt had insisted that I pay before he even set up the lunch. Orson wouldn't allow it. I persisted. At this point, that "voice of God" thing prevailed. It was NO to me paying the check and that was it. I abided by the edict, though Hunt was furious with me when I told of it later.

That first lunch led to many others throughout 1985. It always amazed me during this time that Welles was being pursued by some of the finest filmmakers in the world for lunch and he decided to spend his time with me. There was no doubt what he wanted and I had it. So while trying to avoid the stench of Robin Leach, Orson Welles was like breath of fresh air. My colleagues back at Television Matrix expressed disbelief and a bit of trepidation over my increasing involvement with Welles. There was a bit of fear, I sensed, that I would go crazy and abandon them. After all, I was just a glorified babysitter at the company anyway. When you preside over a group of freelancers you quickly learn they care about only two things: How much will they be paid and when do they get the money.

Of course, I understood their fear. They had moved across the country on a bet with me and it had paid off. They wanted it to continue. For me, however, Leach was becoming continually more difficult to work with. From "run and gun" video shooting without the proper permits to making fake promises to soap opera actress in exchange for "favors," Leach became more egotistical by the day. I knew there was no future working with him.

Though I continued to play a game of assurances with the crews, in fact, my heart was in another place. It's a terrible thing to say, but I was so fed up with the monster that I had created at that time that I would have gladly shut down the entire operation if I'd had the money to do so. The fact was that I didn't have the money, so things would have to continue. Working with Welles and Leach simultaneously would become the biggest financial high wire act of my life.

All along the way there was the loud sucking sound of Welles pulling me further under his magical spell. It was mostly cordial and friendly, but always businesslike. By businesslike, I mean that Welles was not one for idol chitchat. If you made a statement to him, it was best that you had previously thought it through. He demanded details and expected that you could defend any comment you made to him. I learned early on there was no cheap bar talk with Orson. He could and would hang people in their own contradictions.

During the time I knew him, Orson was working on a project for a Japanese company that involved his recording of

favored literary stories on audio tape. The Japanese loved Orson's voice for learning English and he loved the freedom to create new versions of works he most liked. Some days, after lunch, he would go to a voice-over studio called Tele-Talent in Hollywood. He would also record in his bedroom above Stanley Avenue late at night after the nearby traffic quieted down. Working alone, he would record his voice using his personal Nagra tape recorder.

This home recording ritual led to one of the early "tests" he had for me. It was very late one night when my phone rang at home. I was asleep, but I grabbed the phone anyway. It was Orson with a question. He told me he was hearing little bumps in his audio after editing the sound on his Nagra. He said he didn't know why. I asked if he was using a razor blade to cut the tape for editing. He said "yes." I quickly responded that the razor blade was magnetized — that was causing the audible bump on playback. He responded "exactly." Then he apologized for calling so late and reminded me we were having lunch the following day. I knew instantly he was testing me. It's the last I heard about the issue.

Another "test" involved Paul Rothchild, the record producer. I had met Paul through his girlfriend, a production assistant on the *Lifestyles* show. Paul had produced The Doors, Janis Joplin and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and had become quite wealthy doing it. He lived in a magnificent estate high above Laurel Canyon. We had become friends and he was fascinated that I was going to do a project with Orson Welles. He wanted to be involved and even offered to help finance it.

I visited Paul regularly at his Laurel Canyon house, where we continuously smoked the best weed available anywhere. When spending time with Paul, you learned to write off the rest of your day! Though I didn't know Paul when he wasn't high, he was always a stickler for detail. I sat with him as he edited videotapes of The Doors. This was video not used earlier because of technical problems that now, thanks to new technology, could be fixed.

I was at Paul's house when the first shipment of books of Jim Morrison's poetry arrived. We read poems from them, and I took home a set of copies, which I still have to this day. Though Paul had known and been friends with Bob Dylan in his early days, he detested Dylan's religious period. He asked me to take his younger girlfriend, who had never seen Dylan, to a Dylan concert in LA, which I did. Paul said he could not stand the "born again" Dylan.

Like most everyone else I knew in the Los Angeles creative community, Rothchild figured Welles was a renegade who would ultimately destroy me on this project. He had successfully wrestled with Jim Morrison, the erratic lead singer for The Doors, in the recording studio and figured if he could get a record out of Morrison, he could most certainly handle Orson. So I brought Paul to a lunch with Orson one day and introduced him as my "producing partner."

Talk about great mistakes! From the second they met, it was like two cats fighting for the same bowl of food. The meeting was a complete and total disaster. The two uber egos were

like oil and water. Paul was slightly arrogant and Welles was antagonistic at the lunch. As they barked at each other, I was slinking under the table. It clearly wasn't going to work.

Hours after the lunch finally ended, I got a call from Count Alessandro Tasca, a former film producer who was Orson's friend and "enforcer." Tasca let me know in no uncertain terms that Paul Rothschild was gone or Orson would no longer have anything to do with me. Orson even demanded a written legal document from me that Rothchild would have no role in any production in which he was involved.

I called Paul and told him what had happened. He laughed, conceded he had met his match and told me to give Orson anything he wanted. I called my lawyer and we prepared such a document to placate Orson. The chastised Rothchild went along and we remained friends.

—

Now working alone, I began to discuss a complex project with Orson. As things evolved, I learned that Orson had accumulated a lot of film over the years of him performing magic tricks. Things like sawing his former wife, the actress Rita Hayworth, in half. He wanted to use those old clips as segments in a new show that he would perform before a live audience. The new show would be recorded on video using Betacams. Orson wanted a chance to experiment with the new medium. I was only too pleased to oblige.

For short, we called it "the magic show," though the official working title was to be *Orson Welles Solo*. Either way, Orson needed money. Not a lot by production standards of the time. About $300,000, he estimated. HBO offered the money to Orson, but he didn't want "the suits" there to interfere with his work. He wanted to work completely independently, without accountants and what he called "bean counters" looking over his shoulder. He detested what he called "the dog and pony show" of raising money. I could do that for him, he said.

Orson told me a story about Pablo Picasso, a friend he considered a contemporary with talent comparable to his own. He noted that late in his life Picasso commanded millions of dollars for a painting sight unseen. Orson asked why he shouldn't be accorded the same respect? Why did he have to submit a production budget when Picasso did not? It was an interesting point and I used the Picasso story as a method to try to raise $300,000 for Orson. Most people I pitched were receptive to the Picasso pitch.

I told potential investors they would have to lay out the money without seeing a budget, script or anything. They would hold me personally responsible for everything. I would protect their investment from any irresponsible spending by Orson. (Like I had that power!) Not only that, they could not meet Orson, visit the set or get any special treatment. All they got was a credit on the show and the knowledge they had contributed to a work of art by one of the great creative geniuses of the 20th century. I started

making fundraising calls as Orson learned more about video camcorders and nonlinear editing.

During this period, we visited New England Digital in Hollywood for a demo of nonlinear sound editing on the Synclavier, a tapeless audio system mainly used at the time for music production. Doing anything like this with Orson was always a challenge. He made a grand entrance with an entourage of several associates at New England Digital's Hollywood office. This is where the strangeness began. Orson would enter only through the back door, declaring at the last minute that he wouldn't walk through the lobby to get to the demo. There was no one in the lobby and they told me to tell Orson that the back door was blocked with some big boxes to be shipped that day. It didn't matter. Orson refused to enter through the front door and threatened to leave if he couldn't use the back door. So they had to move the big boxes blocking the door to accommodate his request. I'll leave that one to you to figure out. I never did!

Once inside, Orson sat through the demo. He smiled and appeared to be delighted by what he was hearing. He even recorded his voice into the system, saying "this is the era of sonic magic." When it was over, he had "a few questions." At this point, he put the poor demo guy through pure hell, asking incredibly astute and difficult questions. He challenged the authenticity of a sound effect of a breaking wine glass, observing that this was a sound he "knew well" and the quality of the sound effects was not quite there yet. He suggested they work on it some more.

Through his questions, Orson revealed not only an incredibly astute understanding of this very new technology, but of the infrastructure of computers, storage systems and digital sampling rates. This was 1985. Everyone in the room was astounded. He knew more than many of them! The term "senior moment" didn't apply to Orson. He showed none of the normal mental lapses of a 70-year-old man. He had more the mind of a very smart 20-year-old. No con man would ever get one past Orson!

As for video post-production, Orson wasn't content with just experimenting with a Montage Picture Processor, an early tapeless nonlinear editing system that emulated a flatbed film edit system. He wanted his own, and he wanted it to sit next to his flatbed film editor at home. Though he never came right out and asked, I'm certain Orson wanted me to raise the money for him to buy one. Orson's interest in new technology was insatiable. He followed every new development with glee. When I look back, I only wish he could have lived to have seen applications like Apple's Logic and Final Cut Pro on a Macintosh. It would have been a miraculous thing for him and his audience.

At first, one thing I didn't realize about Orson was how politically savvy he had been his entire life. I would later learn while working on his radio collection how Orson helped President Franklin Roosevelt write his "Fireside Chats" and the cutting-edge eloquence of his own political commentary. In 1985, not a single day went by when Orson wasn't ridiculing Ronald Reagan, who was president at the time. Orson simply couldn't stand Reagan, "the actor," as he

referred to him with total disdain. The country was going to hell under Reagan's rule, Orson repeatedly said.

Looking back, he was pretty much dead-on accurate. Orson believed deeply in freedom and racial equality and simply couldn't stand powerful, arrogant clowns like Reagan. But, at least in LA, circa 1985, everyone I knew felt this way. So it didn't stand out and I didn't particularly notice Orson's disdain for Reagan as being anything special.

As our lunches proceeded, I got to better know and understand Orson. First of all, he was not part of "the industry," as far as motion pictures were concerned. He felt the industry abandoned him long ago. I don't think he particularly liked Los Angeles, either. It was just where movies were made in America. Though I never heard him say it, I suspect he liked Europe better than the United States. He was treated better there and liked their customs and tastes.

It was quite funny, but Orson liked the idea that Ma Maison had mice that occasionally scampered through the restaurant. It was, he said, like other fine establishments he knew in Europe. One day, when some ladies screamed at the sight of a mouse scurrying across the floor at Ma Maison, he told everyone to calm down and enjoy the fact that the restaurant they were in had such a high European authenticity.

Outside of his home, the only places I knew Orson to frequent were Ma Maison, where he sometimes ate both

lunch and dinner, and the Magic Castle, the private clubhouse for the Academy of Magical Arts. Orson sometimes went there to see magicians perform and to perform himself. He also used to frequent Musso and Franks Grill, the oldest restaurant in Hollywood. But I don't remember him going there when I knew him. He also patronized a couple of cigar shops, where he made stops for his supply of cigars.

As I sweated over raising the money, Orson focused on how he'd use the three Betacams we'd secured to shoot the show. I had entered the magical door with Orson now and there was no turning back. He made the assumption that I would have the money when he was ready to shoot. Just as he had accepted no conventional technical limitations when he made *Citizen Kane* in 1940, Orson approached video in the same unrelenting way. In 1985, Betacams had tubes, not chips, and their ability to sync to one another via time code was, to put it mildly, a bit crude. Orson didn't care about any of these limitations. His vision was beyond that.

He demanded that the handheld Betacams float around the set wirelessly and to always be in perfect sync. He also wanted to shoot directly into bright lights and he didn't want to hear about any problems with camera lag. He wanted to use the flaws and he demanded that I protect him from all the naysayers. "Call Sony and tell them to make it work," Orson demanded. "Don't ever tell me 'no.'" I did call my old friends at Sony, and Sony responded by assigning two engineers to help Orson push the video envelope on the

project. Everyone knew the stakes and how important it was for this project to be successful.

The time window to the first day of shooting was closing in and I still didn't have the money. Though I had done many pitches, I was meeting resistance. I was a nervous wreck. One day, during lunch at Ma Maison, Orson and I had a moment of truth...well not really truth...more like a meeting of the minds. Orson had added a $35,000 illusion to the show. I panicked. Things were now out of control. I was in so deep now that I had no idea how I was to pull any of this off.

Orson must have sensed my fear. He casually asked how things were going on my end. I told him things were going well, but I needed a little more time with the investors. He gave me a sharp look and then, without warning, slammed his fist down on the table so hard that plates and silverware leaped into the air. "Do you have the money or don't you?" he demanded to know in that intimidating voice that one could associate only with God's fury. At that second my life flashed before my eyes. If I told him NO — the truth — it would have been over. I would be out on the street in seconds. I instinctively knew that.

So, adopting what I had learned in my brief time among the players in Hollywood, I opted to do what every worthy producer eventually learns to do. I lied. Big time! "Of course, I have the money," I told Orson with utter confidence. "There's no problem. I'm ready to go when you are." At that moment, Orson's demeanor completely changed. He smiled, laughed and ordered me some more wine. He proceeded as

if his question had never been asked. I have no idea what he said the rest of the meal. I was numb and stayed that way for hours afterward. What I do remember is that on this day he allowed me to pay the check for lunch.

Back at the office, I kept making calls trying to raise the money. I was also dealing with an increasing list of technical demands. On a daily basis, I dealt with Alessandro Tasca, who was Orson's detail man. He was very professional, but reasonable, and we got along quite well.

Finally, after looking at facilities all over town, we found a place to tape the show...at the right price. Free! An auditorium on the UCLA campus. The university would let Orson use the facility in exchange for a promise that he would teach a class there. A promise, by the way, that Orson never intended to keep. Once all the facilities and technical planning was in place, we were thankfully held up by Orson. He hadn't written the script. But now he was working on it and we set a shooting date for October 10, 1985.

Miraculously, at the very last minute, I received the phone call I had been hoping for. A group of investors, led by a banker, had set up a $300,000 line of credit for the production. I had the money. I couldn't believe it. I had rolled the dice big time and won. It was as if a giant burden had been removed from my shoulders. I was on cloud nine.

The day before the shoot was to begin, the Betacams were tweaked to the max. The jury-rigs — and there were a lot of them — were tested and re-tested. Every engineer that was

to be in Orson's field of view was told that the words "you can't do that" were to be stricken from their vocabulary. With this project, I demanded, we will find a way to do any and everything Orson wants to do. All the old excuses were to be left at the front door.

It must be remembered that in 1985 video was still a relatively new thing and we were pioneers. I owned a one of a kind, handmade video facility. You couldn't just run to a store when you needed something. Stuff had to be invented, then pieced together and tested. "Features" on gear that were sold to work often didn't really work. You couldn't believe the equipment brochures. There were a lot of con men in early video.

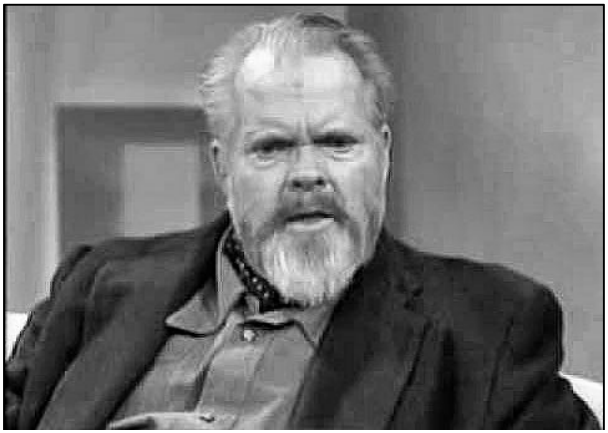
Orson's concept was simple — at least in his mind. He wanted to use three handheld Betacams that wandered around the studio during the show. No wires connecting them. Every camera independent of the others. In order to synchronize those cameras for editing, it required that their time code generators be locked to each other. The first Betacams had that capability. You could lock them, but they drifted and went out of sync in a matter of only a few minutes. When the cameras went out of sync with one another, it became a mess in editing. Orson, of course, didn't want to hear about this sort of annoying detail.

Orson counted on synchronous cameras because he was going to use them for illusions. If the cameras didn't sync, the illusion didn't work. Sony was there to make it work. I trusted them (well, sort of) to rise to the occasion, drop the

sales hype and face reality. That kind of trust was necessary for an Orson Welles project.

But the truth is we were all flying by the seat of our pants. The odds were against us in every direction. With Orson, chaos was the way it had always been. Somehow, he always pulled a rabbit out of the hat. I just figured — or at least hoped and prayed — that he would do it again.

As the technical preparations for the shoot continued around the clock, Orson taped an appearance in the evening, Oct. 9, 1985, on Merv Griffin's syndicated talk show. Normally, Orson disdained conversations about his past. But, uncharacteristically, he did go down memory lane that evening with his old friend, Merv. Orson charmed the audience, both with stories and magic tricks. He seemed to be in a very good mood in advance of our show and we were pleased about his state of mind.



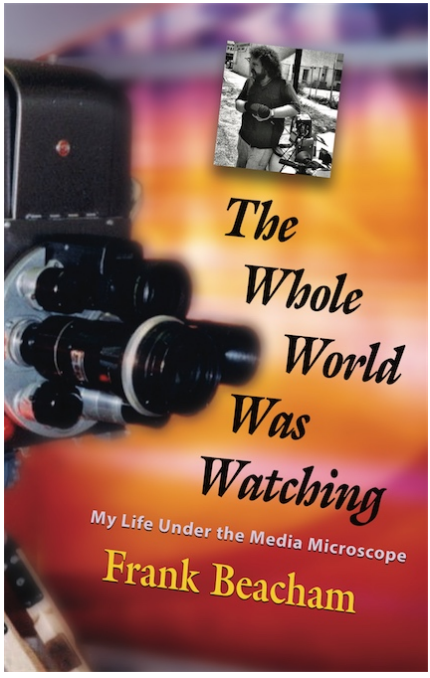
Orson's final TV appearance on
Merv Griffin's show hours before his death

After the taping at Merv's studio, Orson had dinner at Ma Maison. He then headed home to finish writing the script for our first taping, now only hours away. I was content that the money issues were under control. My nervousness had now shifted to whether the technology would actually work. After a sleepless night, I went into the office early. Everything was ready. Orson was to call when he was ready to go to the shooting location.

As I sipped a cup of coffee in my office, the phone rang. It was Paul Rothchild. "Did you hear the news," he asked gently. "What news?" "Orson Welles is dead."

Orson had died of a heart attack during the night. He was found slumped over his typewriter, as he worked on our script. I was stunned, in total disbelief. It was the last thing I could imagine happening.

Minutes later, Alessandro Tasca called. Without mentioning Orson's death at all, he said bluntly: "Frank, the project has been canceled."



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