



JOHN COLLIER/Detroit Free Press

Channel 7 anchor Bill Bonds looks larger than life on a monitor during a 5 p.m. newscast last week. "I get in trouble when I'm not busy," he says.

## *Mega-anchor describes the highs and lows of a high-octane life*

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Say what you will about Bill Bonds: You either love him or you hate him, plain and simple.

Channel 7's mega-anchor can be the baddest of bad boys, a rebellious child, a crazy cowboy who's hard to handle and harder to hold.

He can also be kind, open, warm and sweet: a generous mentor, doting dad, protective brother, caring friend and lover.

Sometimes he doesn't show up at the station, and his coworkers just shrug: "That's Billy." They don't apologize for this million-dollar baby anymore. But they'll also tell you he's an inspiration and works his butt off, too. They love their Billy. He loves them back.

Bonds is brilliant yet mercurial, hilarious yet tragic, the product of an alcoholic family who has battled the bottle all his life and still struggles with that demon today. When he's up, he's flying high and happy. When he's down, he doesn't want much to do with the world.

And most of the time, he wants nothing to do with the press. But we caught the 60-year-old Bonds in a rare interview mood this week and got him talking about Coleman, Clinton, his childhood, his girlfriend, his kids, his drinking, his dreams, himself.

"It's hard being Bill Bonds," he says. "You can't even imagine. ..."

**H**e sits in his tiny 5-by-8-foot makeup room in a custom-made, high-back leather swivel chair that, in the world of TV, is surely comparable to a throne.

Behind him, a giant mirror hot with white lights frames his head; to his right, filling all available shelf space, are lipsticks, cosmetic brushes, jars of orange- and bronze-colored Aveda makeup, white towels. He lights up a Newport, and the dissipating smoke creates a soft, surreal, almost gauzy feeling around the room.

That he has finally agreed to an interview is amazing; during the past month, he has either failed to show up or rescheduled a half dozen different times.

November was a roller-coaster ride for Bonds. His election coverage won him top honors in the all-important fall sweeps period. But after the adrenaline stopped pumping, he was blue.

"The trouble with me is I'm so comfortable with chaos and crisis," he says. "I get in trouble when I'm

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Says Bonds: "If you really start believing all this stuff, you're in big trouble."



not busy."

For Bonds, trouble can mean anything from a bar brawl to an unexplained leave of absence.

He fields the inevitable question about his alcoholism, widely reported for years and which he publicly admitted a few years ago.

"Some days it's hour by hour; most days it's day by day. Today's been a good day." He adds: "I've found that I really have to work on the gratitude — to be thankful."

He knows he probably did some good going public with his drinking; maybe he influenced a few people to quit. "But there's the flip side: If you fail, you disappoint a lot of people."

He's trying to avoid failing again: "It's hurt some people. I don't want to self-destruct."

The holidays are particularly stressful; he lost his daughter, Joanie, and brother, John, around this time of year to accidents involving drinking. So he's doing the best thing he knows.

"I worked Thanksgiving, I'm going to work Christmas and New Year's. You know, you can't divide grieving. You have to do it alone. It's a slow, long journey that you embark upon, and it never ends."

But Bonds isn't dwelling on his grief, at least not today. He talks about doing a syndicated interview show, something like "Larry King Live." "I think I ask more meaningful and tougher questions," Bonds quips.

"I think the experiences this year on the presidential campaign trail were very, very good for me."

Indeed, his appearance as a questioner in a Democratic debate in Chicago brought him national attention. A lively exchange among Bonds, Bill Clinton, Jerry Brown and Paul Tsongas was beamed all over the world by CNN.

"Everybody was saying, 'Who the hell is this guy?'" says Bonds. "I heard compliments because of that," including one from Washington Post political columnist David Broder, a big deal for Bonds. And great for the ego.

## Confronting dad

Of course, Bonds knows all about ego; detractors say his is the size of Mt. Rushmore. But others say he's all bluster. Perhaps understanding where he came from explains the difference.

The second of six children living on Detroit's west side, Bonds grew up in the shadow of his older brother Dick, now retired in California. Dick was a good student who had what Bonds calls "a privileged relationship" with their Irish-Scottish father, Richard, who

worked in Hollywood and later in Detroit as an industrial film writer.

"He was very creative," Bonds says of his father. "He danced — he was on Broadway with George Murphy. He could've gone into the movies — he was a writer, very creative. Almost made the Olympic diving team."

Bonds says he had a "marvelous, loving" childhood, thanks to his mother, Katherine, a bright, caring Catholic homemaker with the patience of Job and a master's degree. But he chokes back the pain when he talks about his early life.

"I came from a very, very alcoholic family. My dad would argue all night, and I'd be up... hadn't slept, and I'd go to school angry."

Bonds remembers as a small boy trying to comfort his mother after his father had hocked her diamond wedding ring.

"Of course, she was heartbroken, crying all night. That morning I started looking out at the nice new dew, and my brother said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'Those are diamonds out there. I'm going to get one for mom.'"

"He said, 'You're dumb, Bill. That's water.'"

Perhaps more telling was a confrontation with his father over his dog. "The dog got out and was hit by a car, and he put it on the back porch. It was the dead of winter, and it froze. My dad wanted to put it in the garbage."

"Throw that goddamn dog in the garbage!" And I had a shovel, and I said, 'It's my dog, and I'm going to bury him.'"

"It was the first time that I knew my father was afraid of me," Bonds says. "To know that, when you're a kid in first grade, puts traditional authority in a very special category — when you feel you've been betrayed by your own father on something as important as your dog."

After that, Bonds says he never feared his father again. "I didn't think of it as a victory. But I never worried about myself; I worried about my brothers and sisters. I finally had to kick him out of the house."

## Rebelling at school

Billy Bonds was a pretty boy with blond hair and a sweet face. But he was a rebellious student who became increasingly competitive when he got teased for "looking just like a girl."

He had an amazing memory and ability to read — today, he can read 1,450 words a minute. He claims he "never really had to study to learn anything," citing early success as a student at Blessed Sacrament in Detroit. But when he hit high school,

boredom — and unflinching rebelliousness — set in.

"I had a very checkered and grossly unsuccessful high school career," Bonds admits.

He was encouraged to leave Catholic Central, then Royal Oak Shrine, Berkley High, Royal Oak High, which he dropped out of. He joined the Air Force, where he passed high school equivalency tests. Later he enrolled at the University of Detroit, where he majored in political science and where his intellectual fires were rekindled.

It was there he met one of his mentors, Dr. Jack Dempsey, a political science professor. The late Dr. Dempsey felt Bonds had great charisma and political savvy. An assistant to Gov. George Romney, Dempsey told Bonds: "You know Bill, I could get you to the U.S. Senate, and after that, who knows what could happen?"

Yet even then Bonds knew what he wanted to do — report on the news. He graduated from U-D in 1960 and landed his first broadcast job at Albion's WALM-TV, where he earned a dollar an hour as reporter. After working at several radio and TV stations in Michigan and the Midwest, he finally got his big break in 1964.

Bonds was working at radio station WKNR-AM in Detroit. Then-Mayor Jerry Cavanagh, Bonds recalls, "was on a plane heading back from New York, and he's sitting next to a guy named Goldenson" — Leonard Goldenson, chairman of ABC. "And he said, 'Jerry, we're going to make some changes in our TV news department there. . . . Who are the best reporters in this town?'"

"He said, 'The best reporter in the Midwest is a kid named Bill Bonds, and he's working for a radio station, and he's going to be big.' This was about



staff. In fact, he makes a daily "spiritual" ritual of physically touching everybody on the set.

He adores anchors Robbie Timmons, Diana Lewis and Doris Biscoe, and they fawn over him.

Bonds also seems to have genuine affection for his male coworkers. He praises his writers, John Terry and Bill Becker. He's proud of the progress several of his proteges are making, like Guy Gordon, who follows his 5 p.m. newscast at 6, and reporter Frank Turner, as well as departed coworkers Rich Fisher and Chris Hansen at Channel 2.

Then there's assistant news director Al Upchurch, whom Bonds has admired ever since Upchurch had the guts to stand up to him. Bonds says he is one of the few people who can keep him in line. "I think he has a very good read on me. Bright guy. Kind of guy I'd like for my daughters to marry."

Upchurch, who's worked with Bonds for 14 years, returns the compliment: "He's the most interesting person I've ever worked with in broadcast journalism. He makes everyone's job here easier because he cares so much about the product we put on the air. And there are times he makes our job more difficult."

### Looking for love

It's nearly showtime, and makeup artist Robin Manoogian rushes into the room to apply Bonds' afternoon regimen. She sprays Evian water to hydrate his skin, then rubs in moisturizer and applies a foundation, some highlighting cream for his eyes, eyebrow pencil and mascara. She brushes on the latter as the smoke from Bonds' ever-present cigarette — he smokes about a pack a day — rises into her face. She's immune to the intrusion.

"We all want to be liked, we all want to be loved, we all want to do a good job," Bonds says as Manoogian massages his cheeks.

"You show that, Bill," she says to him. To us she says: "Bill's a nice man."

"If people love me, then we have something in common," Bonds laughs. "I love to make fun of myself. And I really try every day to make fun of myself, because if you really start believing all this stuff, you're in big trouble."

He turns philosophical: "I've worked my ass off, but I'm very blessed. I've got this voice, I've got the diction, I've got the ability to read so fast and remember so much, the blue eyes — I mean, I'm not Robert Redford, but I'm not chopped liver. My daughters think I'm a hunk."

One of his twin daughters, Krissy,

27, is back in Detroit from California. She's working with Atanas Ilitch, whom Bonds has known since infancy. (When Bonds was starting out in the business, he sold awnings on the side for Ilitch's dad, Mike.) The other twin, Mary, is a social worker in the area.

His son, John, 28, is an aspiring actor in New York who recently hosted some "Action News" segments on soap opera stars.

Bonds says he still cares about his ex-wife, Joanna, who divorced him in 1986 after 24 years of marriage. "Yeah, you never fall out of love."

He says his kids get along with his live-in love of two years, Karen Field, a manufacturer's sales rep. Asked if wedding plans are on the horizon, he just says, "I don't know."

### Knowing the script

It's now 4:55. Bonds steps on the "Action News" set, chatting and joking with the crew. Because of the interview, he hasn't seen his script yet. So he sits down at his desk, stares at the yellow sheets of paper, looks up and is totally at ease.

A fan blows on him from the right. He lights up a Newport, takes a drag, chats with Diana Lewis, takes another drag. He smokes throughout his newscasts. When he's on camera, the lit cigarette goes under the desk; the fan keeps the smoke dissipated.

A smiling Lewis looks over from the desk: "I know it's important to keep him happy — I learned everything I know from him."

"Ten seconds!" producer Glenn Therrien yells.

Total Recall Bonds doesn't even flinch. He knows what's in the script; he knows what's expected of him, at least for the next 60 minutes. He knows he's doing what he has always wanted to do, and he knows he's doing it better than almost anyone.

And he knows he's the king of local TV news.

spring of '64, and I was hired here in October '64. That's after I auditioned seven times." Except for brief stints in LA and New York, he's been there ever since. Last year, he signed a six-year, \$1 million-a-year contract that made him the only seven-figure local anchor outside LA and New York.

Despite his passion for reporting, the political arena was never far away.

"One night a group of guys from U of D got together at the Robin Hood Grill on Livernois," Bonds recalls. "They were putting together a committee to run Bill Bonds for mayor against Jerry Cavanagh, and a couple of Cavanagh cronies were sitting across at the other table."

"Later Jerry called me up and said, 'What's this?' . . . I said, 'Jerry I'd never run against you. I couldn't do the job, anyway.'"

"But several years later, Jim Blanchard was in Congress, and I get a phone call from him, and he said, 'Look, there's rumors you're going to run for governor.' I said, 'Well, no, why do you ask?' He says, 'My research people have done all their research, and the research shows if I run for governor, the one guy I couldn't beat is Bill Bonds.'"

### Nurturing coworkers

Bonds thinks caring for his younger brother and sisters has shaped the way he conducts himself at work. "I'm very protective of the young women in our office."

But is he protective, or simply a man who loves women? Probably a little of both. As he moves through the newsroom, Tammy Sortor, producer of the 11 p.m. newscast, begs a minute of his time; they touch, they move closer. It is an intimacy Bonds seems to have with most of the women on his



# STRAIGHT TALK FROM BILL BONDS

Bill Bonds has opinions on almost anything. Here are a few:

■ **On his broadcasting style:** "You have to exaggerate yourself. But you can't exaggerate yourself to the extent that you destroy who you really are."

■ **On Oprah Winfrey**, whom he has interviewed in his occasional show, "Bonds on . . .": "Something very special happened the first time we met — something spiritual and mystical. I find her very sexy, very attractive, very feminine."

■ **On Mayor Coleman Young:** "I think he's probably heartbroken over what has happened (to De-

troit). He loves this city. He's one of the brightest guys I've ever met in my life. Coleman could have been — should have been — one of the great statesmen in history. He was the guy who had the ability to reach out and bring Macomb, Washtenaw, Oakland and Wayne County together — because he's so damn smart."

■ **On President-elect Bill Clinton:** "One of the problems, when you're that smart, I think you're inclined to think there's nothing you can't solve. But what happens when your evaluation doesn't work out?"

*By Patty LaNoue Stearns*