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New book brings celebrity interviewer back to life

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The telephone kept ringing and it was after 1 a.m. Finally, I picked up, only to hear a familiar voice. "I've just secured an exclusive interview with Benay Venuta." Then a pause. "I expect you're the only one who knows who Benay Venuta is besides me."

Yes, it was Brian Linehan, then at the peak of his fame as a celebrity interviewer on City Lights in the early '80s, asking me about the obscure but talented Broadway performer. Linehan died in 2004 but now his old pal George Anthony has miraculously brought him back to his sparkling peak in a new biography appropriately titled *Starring Brian Linehan* (McClelland & Stewart) that's chock-full of revelations.

"Brian said I had to be the one to write it," Anthony says, "and he was right. I knew him since we were both doing movie interviews in Hollywood virtually every weekend in the 1970s. Even then, he had his own style – of speaking, of dressing."

Anthony mentored the bright, young Citytv TV interviewer who had graduated from buying films for the station to being its most recognized on-air star. "He did it by dint of prodigious research. Nobody else could match him and this was way before the Internet. Brian could get stars to cry on cue. Before long, everybody wanted to be on his show. He took big interviews away from the networks."

That was the public Brian who had risen from the meanest streets of Hamilton, leaving the city at 19 to become a junior press agent for Odeon Films where he could satisfy his appetite for old movies.

But there was the private Linehan and, here, Anthony has done a superb job of digging for the truth – his Dickensian upbringing in Hamilton's North Side, a 35-year liaison with a wealthy dentist Linehan felt he had to keep secret from all but his best friends. Homophobia still ran rampant in the 1970s and Linehan had a delicate balancing act to keep his life compartmentalized.

"He was really friends with so many big stars," Anthony says. "Shirley MacLaine idolized him. Joan Rivers said he was the best interviewer she'd ever met. He often stayed with Bea Arthur. Gloria Swanson, George Cukor, John Gielgud – they told Brian everything." The little Hamilton boy who'd bought his first *Variety* magazine at age 8 felt vindicated.

With his own TV background, Anthony is very good at showing what went wrong in the late 1980s – TV was becoming ever more competitive as cable stations appeared and the demands for a leisurely hour with Shirley MacLaine dried up. TV entertainment reporting became vapid and Linehan left Citytv under a cloud in 1989 and never got another permanent gig. He was still the best interviewer around but no one could use him.

"And he refused to change. He wanted to be the centre of attention, he loved going first class, " Anthony says. "I'd give him jobs at CBC but he wouldn't budge about format."

Anthony's portrait is complete because he had the cooperation of Linehan's Hamilton siblings. But he also digs deeply about other controversial episodes and gets the plain truth from the likes of Citytv's Moses Znaimer and Jane Hawtin.

And the book becomes compulsively readable with Anthony's long and deeply moving description of Linehan's brave but failed attempt to beat non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma (he died June 4, 2004). Anthony says he's been at the book "ever since," gathering anecdotes many of which are new to me.

The book is a kind of compendium of Toronto showbiz in the 1970s and 1980s and comes out just in time for the Toronto International Film Festival, Brian Linehan's favourite event of any year.