PHOTOGRAPHED AT STEINWAY HALL, NEW YORK, BY OTTO STORCH

Artur Rubinstein is almost always described in superlatives: the most famous concert pianist in the world; the greatest living interpreter of Chopin and possibly of Mozart; the busiest, most exuberant, youngest eighty-two-year-old anywhere. And anywhere is just where you'll find him. Currently, he is here in the United States to record (more than five million of his records have been sold); to concertize from coast to coast and from Texas to Toronto, accompanied, as usual, by his wife and a bag of good-luck charms from their children. Proceeds of many of his concert performances go to Israel.

INTERVIEWER: During all my years as musicologist and critic, I have heard you in concert and on records hundreds of times, but many details of your life—particularly your early years—are still something of a mystery. Please tell how you got started at the piano.

RUBINSTEIN: Well, I was the seventh child in

Interviewed in his Park Avenue apartment and his small, elegant house on the Square de l'Avenue Foch, Paris, the world-renowned pianist

the family. The oldest children were already sixteen, eighteen, and nineteen when I was born. They had all had piano lessons, for the purposes of playing for dancing or accompanying for singing. You know they had no gramophones in those times and no radios—nothing of that kind. All the womenfolk were taught a little piano. Auntie played for dancing for the young people. Otherwise you had to hire an orchestra. So I watched my sisters' lessons. They couldn't take me out of that room. When they had their lessons, I was constantly there—shrieking, yelling if they tried to get me out / *turn to page 150*

A TALK WITH ARTUR RUBINSTEIN

talked with McCall's about life, love, music, miracles • by Louis Biancolli and Selma Robinson

A talk with Artur Rubinstein

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of that room. And, of course, right away I tried to imitate them. I put my fingers on the piano, and instead of slapping the keys, you know, banging on them, as little children usually do, I tried to find the notes, and found them! And more and more of them. Then I started to play their pieces, four hands, with them when I was three, and my only pride was that I knew when to stop playing when there was a page to be turned, even though I couldn't read the music.

INTERVIEWER: All by ear.

RUBINSTEIN: All by memory or knowing, yes. I could play anything by the time I was four.

INTERVIEWER: I'm surprised that your fingers could have reached the chords.

RUBINSTEIN: It made me quite famous all over the city. People talked about it.

INTERVIEWER: Weren't your parents bewildered? Puzzled about what to do with such a talent?

RUBINSTEIN: My parents were completely unmusical, and people around the house didn't know much about what talent meant and how it showed, but my uncle dared to write a long letter to the violinist Joachim, a very, very great personality in music. Very famous! He was the most revered musician in the world at that time. He was a best friend of Brahms and Schumann.

My uncle explained my case; told him exactly how I played, and so on. Being a very noble personality, Joachim wrote back and gave very good advice to my parents.

He said that one shouldn't teach me things, because it wouldn't be good for me to behave like a little monkey, you know, imitating people and so on. But to make me listen to good singing, if possible, to good kinds of music. He finished his letter, fortunately for me, by saying that if it were possible for my parents to take me to Berlin and bring me to him, he would be very glad to see for himself.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still have that first letter from Joachim?

RUBINSTEIN: No, my uncle died in a concentration camp in the war, and the letter and all his possessions were destroyed. All the rest of my family died with him. I have only three nieces and nephews alive by miracle. One is in Israel.

INTERVIEWER: It must have been difficult for your parents to follow Joachim's advice, since there were no recordings, no radios, in those days.

RUBINSTEIN: And in my little town, Lodz, very few concerts. We had a garden where an orchestra played sometimes, though. I remember they took me to see *Aida*, but I was so terrified by the trombones that they had to take me out, crying. I was terrified of trombones for quite a long time. Every time I saw a trombone, I cried.

INTERVIEWER: And Berlin—did you get to visit Joachim?

RUBINSTEIN: Yes, not long after. I was a baby of four. My oldest sister was going to be married, so my mother took her to Berlin for buying the trousseau, and they took me along. My father still had some money then. We weren't rich, but not poor. We had a house, and so on.

INTERVIEWER: What did you play for the great Joachim, do you remember?

RUBINSTEIN: I played a little Mendelssohn piece and a Mozart rondo. Joachim made my mother and my sister leave the room, because he was afraid that they had taught me some tricks. Then he sang to me—with his bass voice—a melody from Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, and said to me, "Could you play that on the piano?"

INTERVIEWER: Had you ever heard that before?

RUBINSTEIN: No, never. So I played the melody with one finger. Just the melody. He said, "That's right, yes, yes, but now could you play that with an accompaniment?" I don't remember exactly what I then played, but it appeared that I played it with the right accompaniment, as Schubert had written it. That, of course, absolutely made Joachim believe in me forever. He said to my mother, "Oh, he will never be anything but a musician!" And then he said he hoped that I might also be a violinist. "Why don't you teach him the violin?" he asked my mother. "I'd love it!"

Well, my father bought a little violin for me. And I hated that instrument so terribly that I broke it.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you hate the violin?

RUBINSTEIN: Because I was a polyphonist, you see. I wanted *all* the music: I wanted chords, harmony. I wanted modulation: I wanted to hear it all. And then, you know, a fiddle *is* terrible if it's not played divinely. Have you ever heard a beginner on the fiddle?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, indeed I have.

RUBINSTEIN: Well, you must admit that it is better to hear a beginner on the piano. In any case, I started my piano lessons at five, with an old lady, who declared, after about four months, that she couldn't teach me anything more. So then my parents sent me all alone to friends in Warsaw, and there they left me in the hands of a very old professor of the conservatory. He was so old that the minute I started to play my lessons, he went to sleep. He only woke up when I finished and would say, "Play again." It was absolutely no good.

And I was very hurt by his son, who became later a famous composer in Poland. He's dead now, but his music is still being played. At that time, he was about thirteen years old, and I was six. Every now and then, the lady whose apartment I stayed in gave me an envelope to give to the professor. It was money. But I didn't know this until later on. One day I went to my lesson, climbed up the three staircases there, and the boy opened the door. Boys in Poland were very polite. They called each other "cavalier" and talked in the third person. We insulted each other, but always in the third person. "Will the cavalier receive a slap if he doesn't give me back—" you know. The boy opened the door a little bit and asked, "The cavalier has the money?" I didn't know what he was talking about. Had he said, "Have you an envelope," or something—but no. Then he slammed the door. I cried right there on the staircase I was so offended. I never forgave him. I never played a note of his music. I told him so later on. So that was that.

But there was a very good professor back in Lodz, who taught me quite well, I must say, for about a year or so. Then my father lost all his money. That was a very bad period for the whole family. We were dispersed, you know. We lived in different places and so on—with an aunt and then my sisters. It was not good at all. Finally, my mother took me to Berlin for studying and finding people to support me. It was sadder and more difficult.

INTERVIEWER: What were you then, about seven or eight?

RUBINSTEIN: No, then I was already ten. I was a long time without any lessons at all. Mother took me to different professors. They heard me play with great interest, they said that I was a great talent, but they wanted big money for lessons. And that my mother couldn't afford. So finally, in despair, she took me back to Joachim. She was ashamed to, because I had become a pianist, not a violinist. She thought he'd say, "Well, I'm not interested in a pianist. I'm a violin teacher." But she took me to him. He was a little disappointed at finding out that I was a pianist, but never lost his first interest. When Mother mentioned that my father was not able to support me in Berlin, he said right away he could find somebody to help me. He found three Jewish bankers in Berlin, one of them Mendelssohn's nephew. And for seven years those three rich men, and Joachim himself, paid for my livelihood and my education. That was very extraordinary.

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INTERVIEWER: Your mother was certainly a brave, persistent woman.
RUBINSTEIN: Mother was very kindly, very fine, and dedicated as a mother, in the old matriarchal style. She lived entirely for her family, even those only remotely related to us. She was always helping when there was illness.
INTERVIEWER: Was she one of the most influential women in your life?
RUBINSTEIN: No. She was not musical at all. The artistic contact was missing completely. Mother's was simply the primitive family language, the love and devotion of the family, the concern for protecting the family. Maybe she gave me that. But she did not influence me in any other way.

INTERVIEWER: So many children hate to take music lessons. Can you understand this?
RUBINSTEIN: Oh, yes, I was one of them. You see, music lessons mean always this horrible dictatorial attitude of the professors. They slap your fingers and *aarh;* they shout at you: "Can't you learn that? You must practice scales!" I mean, it is the same kind of thing children dislike from parents. They are all the time pushed around: "You must do this. Sit straight. You must go now. Brush your teeth again, and now again brush your teeth." I hated to be pushed and ordered to my piano. I'll tell you my story about how I studied with closed doors, with cherries and chocolates.
INTERVIEWER: Please do.
RUBINSTEIN: Well, it was when I was living with a private family in Berlin. They were not musical. I had my orders to do two hours' practicing. I closed my doors with a key —not to be disturbed. I would put a novel of Zola, or some other writer I was not allowed to read, on the music stand in front of me. Then I had some chocolates to my right and cherries to my left, and I played with my left hand, doodle, doodle, doodle; then I did diddle, diddle, diddle, and chocolates, yum, yum. And I was reading my book. Then they would say, "Today you really studied with one hand all the time." Oh, yes. *(With mock gravity.)*
INTERVIEWER: So you managed to get quite a lot of reading done while practicing.
RUBINSTEIN: I adore books. When people ask me, "Aren't you mainly in love with music?," I say, "No," because music is so much in me that I am identified with it. It's exactly as if somebody asked me, "Do you like to look at things with your eyes?"
INTERVIEWER: Yes, I suppose music is like your breath and your blood.
RUBINSTEIN: Yes, of course I look, of course I hear, of course I touch. But books—that's already a distance. I could say, "No, I am not particularly interested in books." But I have a terrific passion for reading, and they are my best friends, books—really. I lost two of my best friends. Since then I have only *good* friends. Dear friends, but not best friends. My friends were always, always writers. Musicians, when we get together, always talk shop! "Who is the best manager?" "What hotel do you stay in when you go to Brussels?" "Do you know those people who have concerts there?," and so on. I am not interested in that. I'm *doing* it.
INTERVIEWER: You have such vitality, such zest for living. How do you account for it?
RUBINSTEIN: I don't think that there is any possibility of accounting for it. It's very funny. I was at a luncheon in Washington given by the National Press Club. Three hundred newspapermen there in all. And they made me speak. I told them a little bit about my career, about the meaning of being a virtuoso, a performer, and so on. And they asked me if I would consider running for office, as Paderewski did. He was the Prime Minister of Poland for a little while. So I had a lovely story to answer them. I said Paderewski came to Versailles for the Peace Conference as Polish Premier. He was introduced to Clemenceau, the French Premier, and Clemenceau said, "Aren't you the famous Paderewski?" "Yes." "The musician, the pianist?" "Yes." "And you are now the Premier of Poland?" "Yes." "What a downfall!"
INTERVIEWER: That's charming.
RUBINSTEIN: Then they asked me what you just asked me now. They asked me, "What is your formula for your vitality?" I said, "If I had it, I would sell it!"
INTERVIEWER: You don't take any exercise?
RUBINSTEIN: No.
INTERVIEWER: Or vitamin pills?
RUBINSTEIN: No. Well, vitamin pills, yes, sometimes. I don't believe in them at all, but the doctor says, "Why don't you take number three." It's ridiculous. I'll tell you about vitamin pills. I gave three years ago —or four years, I don't remember now —those ten concerts in New York for charities. Do you remember that?
INTERVIEWER: Yes, I do remember.
RUBINSTEIN: And, of course, that was a terrific undertaking. Ten different programs. So a doctor—a friend

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of mine, really—not curing me, just talking to me, said, "Oh, I'll give you a little pill, marvelous, to take before the concert. You'll get a feeling of resistance. Very good for you," and so on. And I was determined to take it, you see. So before the first concert, there it was. And I never played with such a feverish vitality, and I was simply jumping out of myself, and I thought: Well, this is marvelous. This pill is doing it. I will always take that pill. And there was a big party, and I was very happy until four in the morning. I wouldn't go home to sleep. I couldn't have slept. But finally we went home. And what did I see? The pill was lying on the table with a glass of water. I had forgotten to take it.

INTERVIEWER: This is what they call the influence of the pill!

RUBINSTEIN: Of course! Imagination

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is a great, great thing. I was all the time being absolutely sure that the pill was wonderful.

INTERVIEWER: Which of your four children do you think takes after you most?

RUBINSTEIN: My younger son is very much like me. He gets at once the knack of things. He's interested in everything. Shows talent. It's unaccountable. One has it or not.

INTERVIEWER: And what about your daughters?

RUBINSTEIN: I always dreamed of having a daughter—even when I was a boy of eighteen. It was because I loved women so much. I suffered from the realization that even in the most passionate affair, no matter how much you loved a woman, she was still a stranger. If she falls in love with someone else, she can forget you and your face in no time. On the other hand, a daughter might even hate you, but she still is and will be your flesh and blood and your daughter. She cannot help but belong to you.

The thought of a son frightened me always. I was afraid he would be apt to criticize his father and assert his own personality. This is especially dangerous in the relationship of an artist with his son. The artist, you see, tends to remain rather young, not to say childish, sometimes even up to the son's own old age. This artistic trait seems often ridiculous to a serious-minded son, but never to a daughter. And when a son is not artistic-minded himself, he finds his father slightly preposterous. Daughters usually like that in a father. The son is more enchanted by a father who is an executive in a bank, or a great college professor, or a politician of importance. Daughters are a little frightened of all that. Artists generally find that their daughters are their

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best friends. Maybe it's their intuition that makes them more understanding.

INTERVIEWER: Were you strict with your children?

RUBINSTEIN: I have always had a deep respect for human life. Since we bring the children into the world without having them sign any contracts, we must admit that their lives belong to themselves entirely. All we can do is help them, but never live their lives for them. When I married my wife, I exacted two things of her that I strongly believe in. One was that if we had children, we should never present a divided front. Even if we wanted to murder each other, we must seem completely united before them. The child's chance of a happy childhood and youth must come first. As for the second, I told her, "Look here, you never take me for granted, and I will never take you for granted." This business of "Darling, some friends have arrived from out of town. Would you mind if I joined them at dinner?" just does not exist with us. There has been one exception. For three months six years ago, my wife was in bed with hepatitis. Once or twice she had to force me to go to see a movie by myself.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that all women are necessarily good mothers?

RUBINSTEIN: From a completely physical, animal way, I presume they are—at least, most of them are. The maternal instinct, inherited from animals and fantastically developed, is a great asset and protection for humanity. But there are also mothers who, like pigs, eat up their small ones.

INTERVIEWER: Have you known any truly destructive women? Destructive to children? To men?

RUBINSTEIN: This is a very difficult question to answer, because it implies that there is a weakness of character in men which allows them to be vulnerable to "destructive women." I can modestly say that I can think of no woman in my life who could create any situation where I might feel that she could hurt or destroy me or be a danger of any kind to me. I just am not made that way. I have known some malicious and evil women, but for me it was only one of many experiences in my life, which interested me very much at the time but had absolutely no influence. I remember when it came to a breakup with one of them, all I desired was to go to the finest restaurant in town and have the greatest meal of my life.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you come so late to marriage?

RUBINSTEIN: I suppose because I believed in the meaning of marriage, the way my Jewish ancestors believed. It meant the ability to offer one's wife absolute protection, a decent life. It meant making her proud of her husband's work and achievement. I

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wasn't satisfied with my work as a pianist for many years, frankly. I had been very lazy as a young man. Although music was a sacred thing to me, a religion, which filled my life completely, playing the piano did not seem so important. I hadn't much esteem for pianists as such. In those days, they played lots of wrong notes, often presenting an unfinished business to the public. Their example encouraged me to neglect the strictly technical work. I got away with it in Slavic countries and in Latin countries, like Italy. They adored it. They said my wrong notes were better than the right notes of others. But in America and England and Germany and Scandinavia, they were critical of my playing. They knew what was missing, and they said so.

INTERVIEWER: But, to get back to the original question, about your late marriage—

RUBINSTEIN: I'm coming to that. You see, for me as a pianist everything changed when I discovered my wife. She was the daughter of a great musician, Emil Mlynarski. Incidently, it was he who conducted the orchestra at my first appearance in Warsaw when I was a boy of thirteen. That was ten years before my wife was born! Years later, when she agreed to marry me, I suddenly realized I owed it to her to do something better with my talent—to start playing the piano the way it should be played. It was only then that I learned how to go about practicing.

INTERVIEWER: Really? You're not exaggerating?

RUBINSTEIN: No, no, not at all. I couldn't honestly say about any particular piece of music up to my marriage that I knew it absolutely well. Not one single piece. Well, my wife made me do it, and without forcing me. I just felt it deep inside me. And she didn't know she was doing it. I simply wouldn't have her being shamed by somebody who might tell her, "Oh, if only your husband had worked at the piano more seriously, he might be one of the greatest."

INTERVIEWER: And so you began practicing the piano with the vigor of a young student.

RUBINSTEIN: I had a little upright piano in an old stable that was turned into a garage. And that was where I started to practice in earnest, sometimes for four or five hours, always at night, with the light of a single candle. I began my fight to change the minds of the music critics. Finally, after quite a few years, I was lucky enough to make them forget the frivolous performances they had rightly scolded me for. I had become a pianist.

INTERVIEWER: It has often been said that great musicians are equally great lovers. Do you agree?

RUBINSTEIN: A dangerous generalization! Whatever a man says or writes about himself as a lover must be taken with great skepticism. A man is always apt to lie about his amatory achievements. His arithmetic is at least seventy-five percent wishful thinking. This is a fact.

Now, what can I, Artur Rubinstein, a pianist, say about the art of love that has not been said? At the heart of all the arts, there is the factor of love, sex, beauty, all bound in one. When you interpret music, it is with you all the time. The libido is never idle in music. Mathematicians—politicians—their work doesn't inspire thoughts of romance. Music does. And the responsive musician is always aware of that powerful impulse of lovemaking, and I actually find myself in that emotional state. So long as he makes music, a musician never stops making love or thinking about it. As to the physical and nervous involvement in the act of love itself, I think this is so entirely individual a matter that it is not even worth discussing. It is purely physiological. Except where this is a major impediment, I see no reason it should ever stop.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about all this new sexual freedom?

RUBINSTEIN: There is more naturalness and less strain today, but I'm not sure that it is better. Certain essentials have changed a great deal. For instance, the freedom of dressing nowadays. I well remember how the movement of a lady's long skirt revealing a tiny bit of her ankle put us young men into trances of excitement. Today, when women walk around night and day in minidresses, my eye never lingers. I am so accustomed to know exactly how every woman is built and how she looks in the nude that I don't need to exert myself to imagine it with great care. In my youth, the body of a woman was her most carefully guarded secret. No man today has to await the final undressing to discover how a woman is built. All he has to do is to go to the nearest beach and find it all laid out for him.

Lovemaking has become less of a moral strain and more of a normal function, like eating, sleeping, and the other necessities. Girls today are frightfully practical. I suppose the pill has removed some of the strain, too. Much has been gained by the whole new attitude, but it has taken a lot of the romance out of lovemaking.

INTERVIEWER: Are you a religious person?

RUBINSTEIN: My family on both sides were Jewish. My wife is a Catholic. My daughter Eva is married to the Presbyterian chaplain of Yale University, the Reverend William Coffin, and my older son, Paul, is married to the daughter of a rabbi from Jackson, Mississippi. Like my other three children, Paul is half and half, but he showed a tendency to hold on to the Jewish background, more so than the others. We all go our way; no one is forced in any direction.

What is my own belief? I believe that everything is a miracle or nothing. I would never give the title of miracle to unforeseen things. If the angel Gabriel appeared at lunchtime to a family, do you know what would happen? The older people would fall on the floor with amazement because of the miracle, while the little children would take him for a baby-sitter and start playing with him. Children don't see any difference between the ordinary and the miraculous. We take for miracles only those things we are not accustomed to. I am not surprised at anything. Sky and rain and a flower and man and woman. All these are miracles. Why are they there? If any of these things, which we take so much for granted, were not there and they were suddenly to appear for the first time, they would then be miracles in the eyes of most people.

INTERVIEWER: When you think of the soul, what thoughts come to you?

RUBINSTEIN: The soul is the motor which runs everything. We each a parcel of that motor. Maybe we turn it on like electricity. We have been toying with things like thought transmission, spiritism, hypnotism, et cetera. We have laughed at it. We have played at it like a game, the way the ancient Greeks played with signs of electricity. They imputed it all to their gods. We know now that the Greeks were on the right track. Who knows what the next generation will think of us for ridiculing a thing like the silent and distant transference of thought from one person to another? We may be toying with things which really emanate from something still beyond our reach. That something we might call soul. I believe there are people who dominate others by some sort of emanation, which we still cannot trace. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Have you any hope that the next generation will find better ways to communicate—ways of breaking down the barriers to peace among men?

RUBINSTEIN: The only hope to bring some harmony among the nations is through art. Art never wakens suspicions and afterthoughts, thus leading to treachery, to violations of the spoken and printed word. Diplomacy has failed us. Art, particularly music, is the universal language of kinship and shared emotion; it creates love and respect between all creeds, colors, systems. In its image, all men are brothers—and equal. THE END

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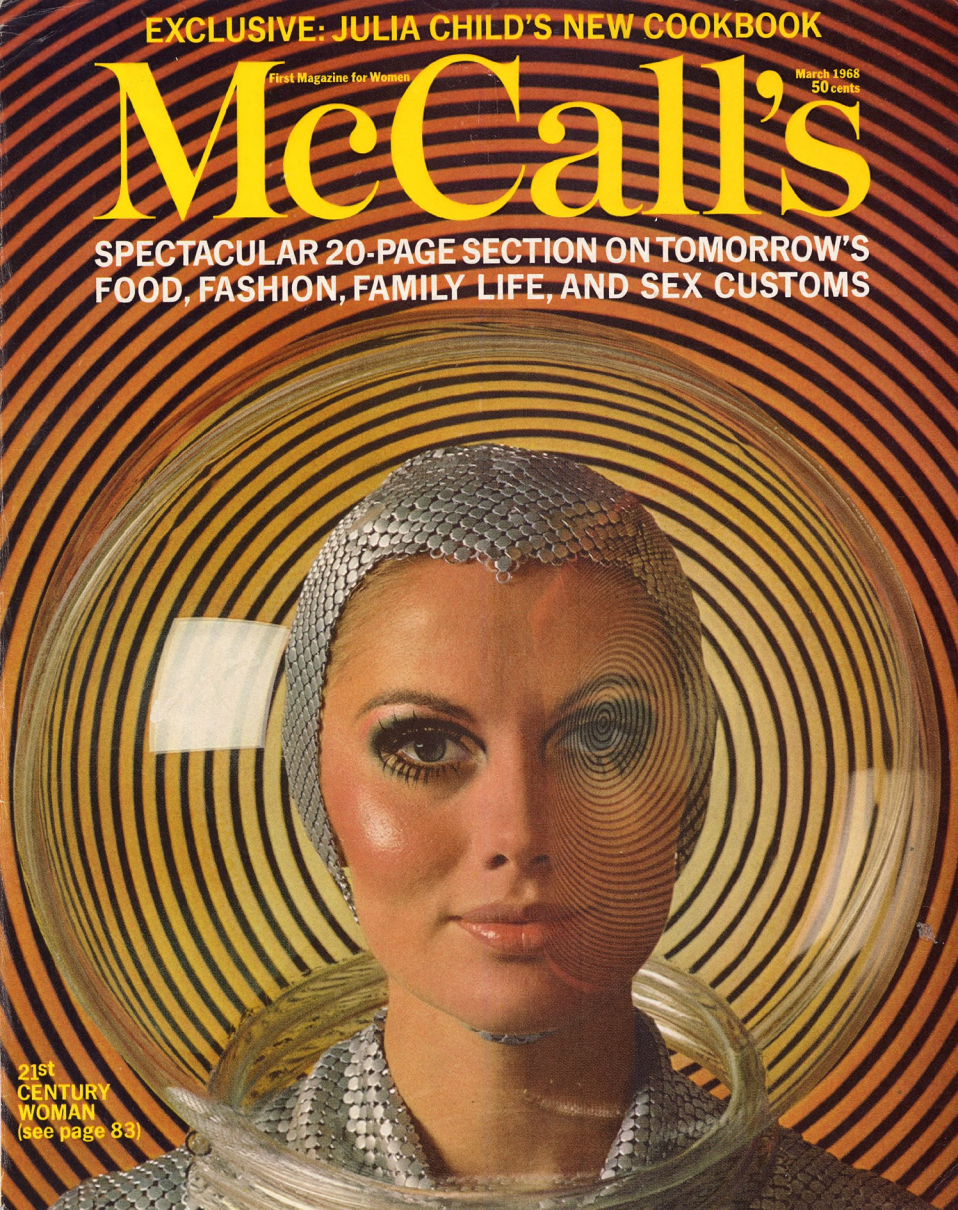

21st CENTURY WOMAN (see page 83)