

Exclusive Interview With

# Maurice Benard (aka Sonny Corinthos)

An animal enthusiast since he was young, Maurice Benard has a particular soft spot for his 7-year-old African grey, Tito.

# This “General Hospital” star might have more in common with you than you think.

**S**exy and calculating but sensitive and generous, Sonny Corinthos, the character Maurice Benard has played on ABC’s “General Hospital” for more than a decade, shares many traits with Benard’s favorite pet, his African grey, Tito. It’s easy to see why they’re a perfect match.

Although he plays a bad boy gangster with numerous love interests and illegal dealings to his credit, Benard doesn’t seem that tough when surrounded by his pets. “They make fun of me at work. They call me Dr. Doolittle.” That’s because his household includes an Eclectus, a rose-breasted cockatoo, a military macaw, a Senegal, an outdoor aviary with canaries, quails and rosellas, three dogs, two cats, four rabbits and four chinchillas plus several baby chinchillas. Part of this — maybe a lot of this — is Paula’s doing, his wife of 16 years.

“She always loved animals, and I always loved animals, so you put those two together and you’re just gonna have a lot of animals,” said Benard. “If it were up to her, she’d have seven dogs, 27 birds, 500 chinchillas and four monkeys.” Their first pet together was a poodle, and Benard’s arm bears a tattoo of the bulldog he had for eight years, which he describes as the “cutest, ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Prior to the interview, Paula showed me around their Hollywood Hills home that’s still being finished. Trailed by a German Shepherd and a Pomeranian, she carried the couple’s 1½-year-old son, Joshua, on her hip while the couple’s daughters, Cailey (12) and Cassidy (7), and Paula’s little sister, Heather (13), helped with the tour. Each bird enjoys a

spacious cage in its own corner, although Cisco, the military macaw, has the game room to himself, and Blossom, the Senegal, rooms with the girls upstairs.

“Wanna see the rabbits?” the girls asked. In the back yard, a spacious hutch houses rabbits and chinchillas separately, and the girls were excited at the new litter of chinchillas that had just arrived.

## A Life Of Birds

The cockatoo in the 1970s’ series “Baretta” first piqued Benard’s interest in birds. He had a budgie as a child, but it wasn’t until Tito entered his life six years ago that he really got bitten by the bird bug.

Despite a shooting schedule that keeps him away from home during much of the week — he was shooting four “General Hospital” episodes the day that BIRD TALK visited — Benard finds time to spend with Tito and all of his animals. “It’s so beautiful to see your dogs be able to play with your kids and your kids hold the birds or the chinchilla,” Benard said. “That to me is therapeutic to see that in the house, everybody coexisting.”

But in all of this, Tito the grey, named after Puerto Rican boxer Felix ‘Tito’ Trinidad, rules the roost in this animal-friendly home. Tito, of course, is an amazing mimic. “He does the phone ring like you wouldn’t believe ... People run to answer the phone.” He also mimics the dogs and can call out in just about every member of the household’s voice. “It’s amazing how perfect his pitch is,” Benard adds.

Interview by Rose Gordon

Photography by Christopher Ameruoso

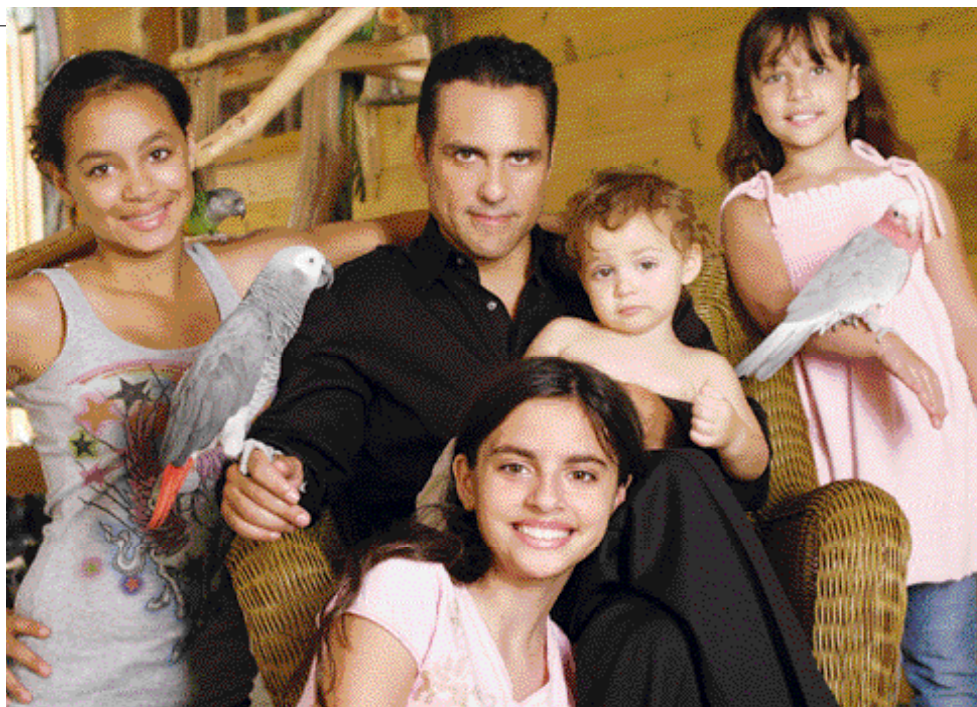
Kids, birds — and other animals — fill the Benard home each day, and that's the way Maurice and his wife Paula like it. After a day on the set of ABC's "General Hospital,"

Benard said he likes returning home to dinner with his kids and some time with Tito, his African grey.

Even young Joshua knows who the boss is and has taken to calling all birds — and even some people — Tito. "He loves Tito," said Benard. In fact, if Joshua is crying, a quick trip to Tito's cage calms him down.

Benard and his wife said they're careful to supervise the kids with the birds and other animals, but that in general, it's a mutually-beneficial relationship. "I've had all different sorts of animals. I think it's good to grow up with animals," Benard said. He believes it will teach his kids to feel comfortable around all types of animals. "My kids are gonna love animals," he added. He also teaches his kids how to properly approach birds: calmly and confidently.

Although the man of the house is an Emmy Award-winning actor, the calls of Cisco from his playgym and the enthusiastic chatter of two pre-adolescent girls makes it seem like a typical American household. Although, I wonder, does he



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balance all of this — a successful marriage and career, children and pets? "Well, this is my balance," Benard replies. "I am busy ... I have to study so many lines, but I can come home and ...

after I finish studying, I get to at least watch TV with my kids or go out to dinner and all that. So I need that to balance it out, because if I just had a job, I'd be a mess." ■

