

Stalking the stars: 'This is my high'

They'll jump fences, dodge security and risk arrest just for a few seconds in their 'world of fantasy'

NADJA SAYEJ

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Most nights, 23-year-old Michael Joseph manages a family restaurant - tending two dozen tables, answering phone calls and making sure the waitresses get their breaks.

His days off are as much of a workout.

Mr. Joseph has chased Marilyn Manson's chauffeured golf cart through an airport, harassed hotel managers for singer Chris Cornell's flight number and hounded security for a photo with Giorgio Armani. More often than not, Mr. Joseph will spend the equivalent of a night shift chasing down a celebrity - all for a snapshot of himself with them.

"You have to be sneaky," said Mr. Joseph, of Sydney, Australia. "Most of the time you gain access illegally - you shouldn't be in that place at that time - but you do."



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Mark Medley has lost count of how many celebrities he's posed with over the past 25 years. They include Hillary Clinton.

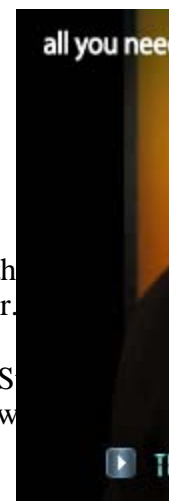
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For some fans, front row seats just aren't enough. Calling themselves celeb hunters, or "th stalkerazzi," they would rather share the spotlight with the stars - and the more, the better.

A photo with Will Smith is as good as one with Robert Plant. While waiting for Martha S book tour to hit town, a photo with Hillary Clinton, Douglas Coupland or Damien Hirst w And they'll jump fences, dodge security and risk arrest to make it happen.



"Fans are getting more original than they ever were before," said Benjamin Tabesh, the 28-year-old chief executive officer of Condor Security Inc. in Toronto. "The stories I can tell you, I can write a book on it - fake badges, fake ID, that they're family members of the stars. It's almost like an addiction. It's nuts."

To the fans, it's anything but. It's a way to mark their brush with fame.

Mark Medley, a restaurant owner in Springfield, Ill., has posed with so many celebrities over the past 25 years, he has lost count. He uses his dining rooms as makeshift galleries for his successful hunts: A look in one room reveals photos of Mr. Medley posing proudly beside Barack Obama, Kevin Spacey and Paul Stanley of Kiss.

He has called airports pretending to be a star ("I lost my flight number and can't get a hold of my secretary"), waited in hotels for hours, and joined up with fans from other states to find out the colour of Bon Jovi's tour van. "I hate to use the word 'stalker' but there's no better word for it," said Mr. Medley, 37. "It's the thrill of the hunt."

Jerry Seinfeld finally caved for a photo with him outside the Fox Theatre in St. Louis, Mo., after Mr. Medley asked him on 19 other occasions. He scored a photo with Richard Dreyfuss at a private charity function, fell to his knees and begged before Paul McCartney, and caught Billy Bob Thornton - "probably one of the nicest celebs out there" - landing at the Lambert-St. Louis International Airport last spring.

"I'm not above waiting in an ice storm for 10 hours. You've got to do what you got to do," Mr. Medley said.

"It's not a want, it's a need. I don't smoke or drink, so this is my high."

It has its lows as well. A few years ago, Mark Greeno, a 38-year-old analyst from Toronto, waited hours at a restaurant for Madonna. She refused a photo.

"But I'm sure she heard me tell her I loved her," he said. "I later ate at the same restaurant, at the same table and ate the same meal."

A former music store manager, Mr. Greeno has a photo collection in the hundreds - including snapshots with Ryan Seacrest, Charlotte Church, Justin Timberlake and Jessica Simpson. He posts them on Facebook; one album is entitled Celebrities + Mark = Happiness.

"For the few seconds I am interacting with the celebrity, I'm taken into their world of fantasy," Mr. Greeno said. "All my troubles and worries are erased."

It's also short satisfaction for Jaime Killion, a 21-year-old student from Mankato, Minn. The public relations student has been chasing stars since her early teens.

Chris Tucker told her behind a TV studio, "I don't have time for little people like you." When she asked William Shatner for an autograph on the street in New York, she says, the actor asked her for \$50. She also says she was snubbed outright by Rebecca Romijn.

But she has posed with more than 100 celebrities, including Matt Damon, Bob Saget and Julianne

Moore, drenching them in flattery, flowers and boxes of chocolates. It's worth it, she says. "For 30 seconds, Bob Saget knew who I was."

Bragging about meeting stars is a way of becoming a star in the stalkerazzi's circle, says Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the University of Buffalo in New York who specializes in media and popular culture.

"The word 'fan' comes from 'fanatic' and I definitely think there's something crazy about these people," she said. "Famous people have that kind of personality that makes you feel like you're friends, not strangers. These fanatics get off on getting as close as they're ever going to get with their photos. It's their only chance."

But the stalkerazzi don't take such criticism seriously. "Crazy?" Mr. Joseph asks. "I'm just a really big fan. Yes, it is crazy, but it's also very fun."

From the perspective of their prey, it's not necessarily a big deal, either.

"I totally understand," said Nigella Lawson between posing for fan photos at a recent book signing in Toronto. "I collect cookery books. Once you start, you want more and more."

Stalkerazzi tips

BY NADJA SAYEJ

Do:

Be patient and expect to wait for hours.

Plead for an autograph first, then ask for a photo while the celebrity is signing.

Chat up the person behind

you in line so you can take each other's photos.

Look for transport buses,

especially ones with band logos.

Be informed: Specific flattery on a star's work is more effective than saying, "I love you."

Don't:

Scream.

Obsessively ask questions;

security will just ignore you.

Be too aggressive. If the crowd is unruly, the stars won't bother to stop at all.

Expect eye contact or a chat from stars at in-store signings; there are often too many people to even stop the line.

Nadja Sayej

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