

Life in a goldfish bowl

New opium for the masses

by Tim Patterson

As the Guardian goes to press, model Cheryl Tiegs has clearly emerged as the cultural-superstar-of-the-moment in the U.S. (But by the time you read this, chances are it'll be somebody else.)

In the past two months, Tiegs' career has taken her from a see-through swimsuit pictorial in Sports Illustrated to the cover of Time magazine, and from the top ranks of fashion and commercial modeling to the dubious front ranks of "celebrities." Her case is merely the most blatant illustration of the current obsession with the glorification of stardom and "personalities," an emphasis that cuts across the media and even reaches into the dignified realms of the "fine arts."

The basic cultural message being marketed here—the promotions of individualism—is, of course, nothing new. Individualism expressed in cultural and ideological forms has always been a staple of capitalist society, reflecting and in turn legitimizing the anarchic individualism in property relations that is at the heart of the system. Stars of one kind or another—from entertainers to politicians—have always been with us. But the updated packaging has its own revealing features.

Part of the power of the capitalist system is its ability to make a point and make a buck at the same time. The buildup of stars in the media has both the economic function of selling the product to cultural consumers and the ideological function of selling those consumers a set of ideas.

COVER—STAR WARS

Cheryl Tiegs' appearance on the cover of Time is the kind of publicity coup that even presidential candidates dream of. Among her future possibilities are now a book on beauty tips for Simon Schuster, a weekly spot on the "Today" show and

examples of such demands being made by big-name celebrities, including a detailed look at the unsuccessful attempt by Bob Dylan's manager to orchestrate a flurry of visibility for Dylan's new movie. One of the most interesting cases was a People magazine cover deal for Glen Campbell; Campbell was promised approval of the story copy, didn't end up getting it, and is suing People for \$1 million for breach of contract.

"PLATINUM CONSCIOUSNESS"

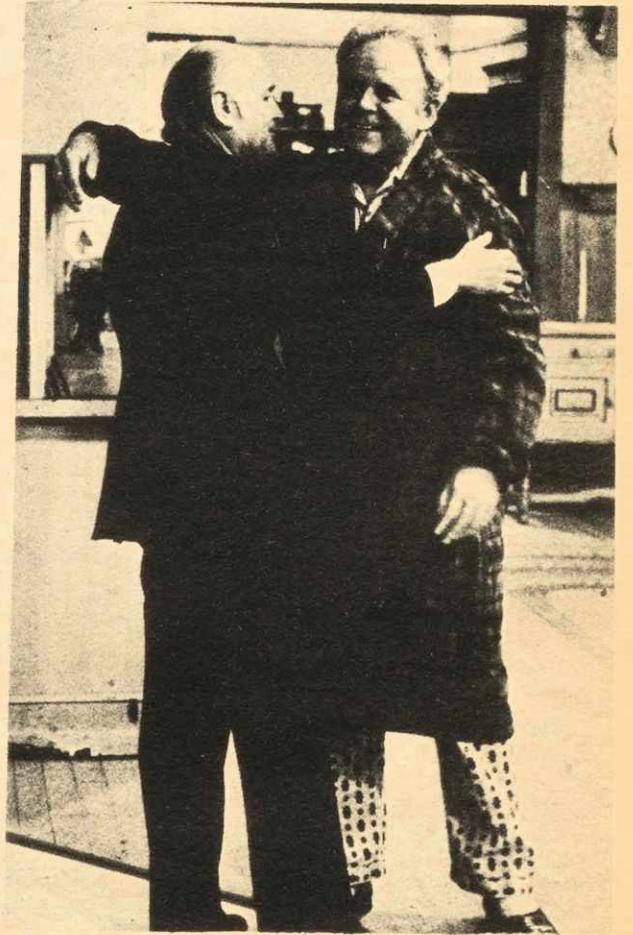
"It's simple dollars and cents," according to a Los Angeles public relations man quoted in New Times. "In the music business we're in the era of platinum consciousness and disposable journalism. Major magazines have allowed themselves to become talk shows for the semiliterate. And the publications are as guilty as the publicists. We're both involved in an aggressive competition to sell an image first."

Image-making has become a profitable concern even for the more refined promotion efforts in the area of classical music, opera and ballet. High-culture superstars—Rudolf Nureyev, Leonard Bernstein, Beverly Sills—now command the level of pay once reserved for rock stars; Chicago Symphony director/conductor Sir Georg Solti's various musical activities bring in close to \$1 million annually. In the past few years, the works of contemporary painters and sculptors have brought in auction prices that rival the old masters, inflated by the celebrity status of figures like Andy Warhol.

While high-culture idols are unlikely to push Burt Reynolds or any one of Charlie's Angels off the front page most of the time, the quantity of publicity and the personal-image emphasis in the approach has been firmly established. The calculation, apparently a correct one, is that hyping stars in the fine arts attracts audiences and spurs ticket sales for concerts and recitals. Since there are no "new" Beethoven symphonies, the logical marketing strategy is to emphasize the mystique of a conductor or soloist who can become a hot property at the box office.

One reason why classical star promotion remains a limited enterprise is the difficulty in projecting a sexy enough image—who's going to buy a Georg Solti pinup? The current personality fixation blends the selling of sex with the selling of celebrity to the point where they are almost indistinguishable. Focusing on and manufacturing the "sex appeal" of stars is the perfect complement to the general rise in soft-core pornography in all the major media. While glamorous, undraped women provide the main aspect of this double barrage, the sexual packaging of men has produced a growing crop of hairy-chest, open-collar pictorials as well.

Alleged "inside stories" about the sexual adventures and other scandalous behavior of the stars is, of course, the basic stuff of tabloids like the National Enquirer and the Star. Downplaying the sensationalized reports of ax murders and other crime fare of the past, and bolstered by



extensive television advertising, the tabloid weeklies have enlarged their readership. In the world of star hype, bad news is clearly better than no news. Spicy gossip about infidelity, dope busts, barroom brawls and the "real story" behind Hollywood divorces can only help the careers of the accused.

"PERSONALITY" MAGAZINES

But the low comedy of the scandal sheets has been upstaged in the past few years by the slicker showmanship of two glossy "personality" magazines—People and US. Essentially high-class versions of the Enquirer, they nonetheless represent a real breakthrough in making star hype palatable to a wider, more educated, more affluent audience. Perhaps the classiest of all is Quest '78 (launched last year as Quest '77), a monthly which details the contributions of scientists, researchers, inventors, explorers and other notable professionals, giving them the status of "ministars" on the basis of their worthy individual efforts.

Fame is certainly fleeting. Jimmy Carter may not be a big-selling cover figure, but he's bound to reappear anyway, while Cheryl Tiegs has probably now had both her first and last national newsmagazine shot. The essence of the media star system, however, is the system and not the star. The publicity machinery itself chews up the stars it creates, forcing the production of new symbols to become even more rapid and even more extravagant.

At the same time, the process sinks its teeth into the audience, the spectators and consumers of star promotion. The merchandising of entertainment celebrities is clearly not the source of rampant individualism in U.S. culture; it merely reflects and reinforces the individualism built into the entire structure of social relations in the economy, the political and legal systems, and nearly all areas of "personal life."

Star hype plays only a supporting role, but an important one that is indicative of a growing cultural desperation in the U.S. The stress on individualism carries with it a wide range of illusions, fantasies and distortions of reality—the promise of instant social mobility, the pleasures of escape, the obscuring of class conflict, the thrill of self-indulgent hedonism, to name a few.

The accelerated production of stardom as a cultural theme in the current period testifies to the durability of individualism as a mainstay of bourgeois ideology. But the successful appeal of star hype (which is selling better than ever) also shows that the ability of bourgeois culture to deliver anything more substantial is slipping daily.



A heady time for Pia

various TV and film offers. The race is also on to see whether her just-released pinup poster outsells last year's Farrah Fawcett-Majors hit (7 million copies), which surpassed the previous mark set by the World War II Betty Grable "classic" (3 million).

But the competition for cover space also has important economic significance for magazine publishers, since the selection of cover personalities has a dramatic impact on sales. The results of 1977 sales have been tabulated, and the big winner was Elvis (top-selling cover for Rolling Stone, Photoplay, True Story and the National Enquirer), while the sure loser was Jimmy Carter and his staff (bringing up the rear for Newsweek, Time, Rolling Stone, McCall's and Ebony).

Since show business celebrities have proven to be an increasingly good bet, general interest magazines like Newsweek have joined with the pulpy screen publications in featuring more entertainment figure covers. The profit-oriented push for celebrity covers has given salesworthy performers the upper hand, with magazines outbidding each other frantically and even relinquishing editorial control of the copy that goes with the covers.

A recent article in New Times lists numerous



A liberated Paloma

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