ROS CUTHBERT

Carnival of the Dolls, 2017
Collage, acrylic, and watercolor,
20 x 28 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

ROBERT KERWIN

Feeding the Tabs

Adventures in writing for the tabloids

Practically since I'd started profiling celebrities, the tabloid representatives had been pursuing me, asking which celebrities I had on my agenda and telling me of their interest in seeing transcripts, notes, or anything at all.

It didn't take long to be able to predict the sort of quotes the tabloids wanted, and over time I became rather expert. It was easy: work up some tired lines a star had uttered to me years before, send them in, and from that nucleus the tabloid copywriters (veritable geniuses at this) fleshed out a full-length article.

"We'll never use your real name," one tab rep said in confidence. "We don't want to blow you out of the water."

Regularly I saw my contributions appear in the *National Enquirer* and *Star* under bylines such as "Cecil MacGowan," "Rupert Williams," "Alastair McLaughlin," and a dozen other names, each (to me anyway) more creative and fanciful than the last.

Most of the celebrity media—freelancers and affiliated alike—fed the tabs as much as I did, or more so. It was like espionage trade: when you did it, you sneaked it, and each time you promised yourself that you'd get out of this very soon and never have anything to do with it again. Constantly, over all, hung the realization that if your cover was ever blown, career-wise you were finished.

The tabloids had larger circulations than most legitimate outlets, and paid higher rates. Their primary, obsessive, interest was in TV. The more a celebrity subject was connected to a television show—particularly a show in the top ten or twenty ratings—the greater was your chance of getting a tabloid cover or a first inside page, where tease rates were highest of all.

Regularly, the tabloids sent out updated tease cards that listed categories they liked best:

My Big Break
My Career Turning Point
My Romance
The First Time That I _____
My Cute Meets
My Success
My Diet
My Exercise Program: How I Stay Slim

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Yes, you could do better with tabloids in less time and with less effort than you could with legitimate outlets, but feeding tabs was extremely stressful activity. There was always the possibility—which was constantly on my mind—that I could be named in a damaging lawsuit. Or that a challenge to an item's credibility could result in publicized backlash, and my involvement with the story would come to light, exposing me, and—well, there goes the career.

As any publicist (self-respecting or otherwise) will tell you: "Hollywood is a very small town." One evening at a hotel bar, a publicist, drunk, spelled it out, "We don't mind you bozos feeding a tabloid occasionally to make a couple of bucks—as long as our clients don't get hurt. But it's when a writer's reputation becomes *all* tabloids, that's when we won't work with them anymore.

"Look," he continued, "phony bylines or no phony bylines, we know exactly who's doing the supplying. Especially the damaging stuff, which concerns us most. Hey, personally, I like the tabloids, they circulate to a hell of a lot of our potential audience, those morons who watch TV all the time. But don't let's overdo it. And keep it a secret, okay?"

One rep from a prominent tabloid made frequent missionary calls to me talking rates and explaining how simple it would be for me to make some real money for a change. All I had to do, he said, was sit down with a celebrity and lead the conversation into specific areas that had been predetermined by the tab's editors (who supplied payoff questions in advance). "It's not necessary for you to edit or transcribe. Just ship us a raw interview tape; we'll do the rest." Furthermore, when results exceeded expectations, the rep added, there'd be a hefty bonus.

"Let's meet and talk. Some of us will be in L.A. this week, why don't you be our guest? What stars do you have coming up? Anybody from the top twenty?"

I mentioned some movie star names.

"Movie stars. Depends on what they say. TV stars are better for us; with TV stars, it doesn't matter *what* they say."

I met the tabloid boys at a Holiday Inn over by USC, an off-the-beaten-track locale that suited me fine, because nobody would ever see me there with them (I hoped).

One of the boys, named Ewen, was from Scotland. There was another Ewen; he was from Scotland, too. And there was a Tom from Scotland, and a Monty and a Nigel from England. All of them had come up through the British press, and all were still half-drunk from the night before.

"So you're seeing Mackenzie are you?" one Ewen said to me. He beckoned the others to gather 'round. "All right, lads, the man is interviewing Mackenzie Phillips. Take out pencils, give us ten questions each."

Mackenzie Phillips, who, besides starring in the *One Day at a Time* TV series and being the daughter of John Phillips of the Mamas and the Papas, recently had made media headlines when she was discovered overdosed in a gutter on Sunset Strip.

As the others scribbled questions, Ewen asked me, "Where will you meet her?"

"Beverly Hills."

"Ah, we'd love to go with you. Could you take one of us along? I'll sling a camera on my shoulder, you can say I'm your photog."

"It's better if I go alone."

"Where will you interview her?"

"At her agent's house."

Ewen looked at his wristwatch, went into an exaggerated countdown, then announced, "Gentlemen, time's up!" He collected the note scraps and handed them to me.

Spontaneously they had created two dozen questions, the results of which—if Mackenzie Phillips answered with any coherency—would not only make their cover but also leave plenty of leftover material to fill their other lucrative special categories. Mackenzie's relationship with her numerous fathers and mothers, Mackenzie's dope connection, being found overdosed in the gutter. "In your own words, how does it feel to be thrown into the tank?" "Can you talk about your relationships with rock stars?" (The names of four current rock headliners were listed.) Whoever extracted even a third of this information out of Mackenzie Phillips could feed the *National Enquirer*, *Star*, *Globe*, and other tabloids for weeks to come.

When lunch ended, Ewen said, "We'll give you a ride there, eh?"

I shook my head: no thanks.

"Well then, can you join us for dinner tonight?"

I said I wasn't sure, that I might have to go to a meeting with some studio publicist or other.

"Well, anyway, we'll be at Rangoon Racquet Club."

On a sofa, next to her agent, sat Mackenzie Phillips, a pale-faced creature looking like something out of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. With stars who are known to talk too freely and honestly with press, you'll always get an agent hanging close by, screening the Q and A. On some interviews (especially if a star has been burned), there'll be two or three agents standing around, like defense lawyers, and you can't get away with a thing.

To break the ice and build trust with Mackenzie Phillips, I started with soft questions about the *One Day at a Time* series, her costars, and her budding music career.

Fifteen minutes into the interview, the agent left to make coffee, and as soon as Mackenzie and I were alone, she said, "I'm surprised you haven't asked about my overdosing and all of what's been filling up the papers recently."

I put on my most humble expression. "I don't get into those subjects much," I told her.

This approach works like magic: display a lack of interest in any aspect of a celebrity's life, and that's what the celebrity wants to delve into most.

Mackenzie talked at length about her addiction, and how she'd recently pulled out of her dependence, partly because of trust in a new rock-star boyfriend, whom she named and told me all about.

When I mentioned the Mamas and the Papas, Mackenzie carried on freely about life at home, the various stepfathers and stepmothers coming and going all through the years. "I don't know what a 'normal' upbringing means," she said. "*That* upbringing was 'normal,' for me."

After an hour with Mackenzie Phillips, I had on tape an overabundance of the sort of material the tabloid boys would kill for.

Rangoon Racquet Club was a Brit meeting place that had been instituted by English expatriates who lived in the movie colony during the palm days. Once inside the club, in off the street, you were no longer in the U.S.: you walked through a door on Little Santa Monica and stepped out of Hollywood into a defined foreign atmosphere and locale, and backward in time.

The boys were at the bar. As soon as I walked up, they surrounded me, excited. "How was Mackenzie? What did she say?"

"She's a nice kid. Open and honest."

"Did she say anything? What sort of things did she say?"

"She talked about growing up, about being in the business, things like that . . ."

"Did she say anything about drugs?"

"Only a little, in passing."

"What did she say? Man, we don't give a fiddler's fuck what sort of human being she is. What did she *tell* you? Did you get anything? Were you able to use our questions?"

A waiter came and told us that our table was ready. As we were being seated, one of the boys said, "Did you get her on tape?"

"Yes."

"When can we have the tape?"

"I want to hear it first," I said. "I'll transcribe it when I get home."

"Give it to us now, we'll transcribe it for you," the one named Nigel said to me; then he called across the table: "Ewen! Can we get Bronwyn to open the office tonight and transcribe?"

"Absolutely. She won't like it, but we'll pay her double."

The one called Monty said to me, "Give the tape over to us and we'll have it done before morning, and we can move this along, eh?"

"I want to go over it first," I said. "I don't know what I'll do with it."

"You don't have to do a thing. *We'll* do it."

Across the table Tom and Ewen nudged each other as they watched a waiter move from booth to booth on the far side of the room, taking orders.

"Is he wired?" Ewen said to Tom.

Tom made an exaggerated Shhhhh! sign and crouched like a schoolboy.

I asked Monty, who was seated next to me, what was going on.

"We were wondering if that particular waiter is in our employ. We know the blokes who work here, they pick up bits of conversation for us."

The boys dropped the subject of Mackenzie Phillips and settled into trading celebrity anecdotes, all of them making an obvious point of showing utter disdain for stars, trying desperately to give the impression that they looked upon celebrities purely as exploitable commodities. To me, the singular thing, the truly fascinating thing, about these tabloid boys was that you could mention any star's name—stars from America or stars from anywhere in the world, past stars, present stars, or about-to-be-launched stars—and they were able to spew twenty minutes of the nastiest, coarsest anecdotal diatribe I had ever heard.

What I liked most about them was their attitude, how they were (or seemed to be) so freewheeling and self-effacing about their work, entertaining no delusions about so-called journalistic dignity or integrity. To hear them tell it, media wasn't a profession, far from it. It was *craft*; and every celebrity anecdote they related there at Rangoon Racquet Club was practically a candid admission to being the kind of whores that they were, in a whore business.

All evening, around the table, the boys told cloak-and-dagger international tabloid spy stories that incorporated false accents, phony credentials, counterfeit introduction letters, and numerous disguises. Men dressed as women, women dressed as men. Renting of crutches and wheelchairs. Posing as busboys and as baggage porters. Faking of virtually anything they needed to fake, across many continents, in many guises, in order to garner morsels of information on one celebrity or another, in the name of yellow press.

These boys had been at this activity daily for all of their adult lives and, in my view, any ethical self-compromises that Hollywood freelancers, including myself, ever had made, appeared to be elementary in comparison.

"Who will you see tomorrow?" Ewen asked me.

I told him Henry Winkler and other *Happy Days* principals.

"We wouldn't mind going with and wandering around."

The next morning the boys picked me up at my hotel. When we were a block from Paramount's gate, Ewen stopped the car and handed me the keys. "You drive. We'll go in back now."

They wormed their way into the trunk, all heads, legs, arms and coats squashed in, then a meaty hand pulling shut the lid on themselves. "Okay," came a muffled voice, "carry on." There was some stifled laughter, then silence.

At Paramount's gate I rolled down the window and told the guard whom I was there to see. He checked me out on a clipboard, then gave the *Happy Days* stage number and waved me through.

Instead of driving to the parking lot by the commissary, where I usually parked when visiting Paramount, I headed for remote parking, backed into a slot between two sedans, with our rear to the bushes, then went around and opened the trunk.

You've never seen anybody scramble like those tabloid boys. They sprang out of the trunk like monkeys and flew off screeching in three directions.

Throughout the day, as I traveled around the studio with a publicist—from interviewing Henry Winkler at the production office to interviewing Ron Howard at the commissary to interviewing Marion Ross on the *Happy Days* set—I kept running into one or another of the boys. Systematically, we passed each other with no greeting or acknowledgment on either side. Every time I looked down a hallway there was the one of the boys trying a doorknob or standing a bit too casually, about to slip onto another HOT SET stage. Or there would be one of them skulking in an alley between stage buildings; I'd see him poke his head out of a doorway, like a bird, and dart glances both ways before waddling off.

Let the tabloids know which stars you had coming up on your schedule, and they were back to you in a half hour with a supply of key questions and specific hooks. In the event of a possible lawsuit, tabloid editors required that all interviews be taped, and informed me that soon after the beginning of each interview I was to work in the star's name publicly, loud and clear, so that anyone who listened to the tape would be assured that the interviewee was really the personality I said it was, and that the interview hadn't been faked. After a while, I got pretty good at it: "So, BURT REYNOLDS, how did you react when they presented you with the award?" (Then Burt answering, etc.)

Another strict tabloid requirement was that the interviewer's voice really had to be the interviewer's voice and that the interviewer had to be clearly identified by name, also up front in the interview. In addition, during the taping you were to refer to a current news item and make sure you identified the specific location where the interview was taking place. "I like the feel of this Ivy's patio don't you, Dudley Moore? Especially at lunchtime on an autumn day. Hey, how about them Chicago Bears beating the Packers yesterday!"

Once a week, at the supermarket, I approached the tabloid racks warily, scanning for items that I might have had something to do with, that might have had some input of mine. Invariably I came across quotes that I'd procured, larded in with quotes that (ostensibly) had been procured by other stringers and tossed together, like a mixed salad, into a staff-written narrative, "By Arthur Beamish" or "By J.F. Smithwick."

Many readers assume that tabloid stories are made up, whole cloth, but it was my experience that the tabs were overly rigid about accuracy—not only about the authenticity of quotes, but also about almost every other aspect of the story. Like hard-nosed cross-examiners, tabloid editors trusted no contributor. They wanted full verification of everything submitted, right down to what articles of clothing the celebrity was wearing, who else was present at the meeting, and whether it was lunch or a cocktail get-together, dinner at a celebrity's private quarters, or just sitting at a makeup table on a studio soundstage.

Whenever I took on a full-blown assignment for the tabs (and I was doing a lot of this after a time), quotes had to be verbatim. This authenticity requirement was much stricter for the tabs than for any legitimate outlets that I fed copy to. With legits you could make up a quote or could arrange or alter a quote in any order and sequence to gain the effect you were after, and the legitimates would print it. When you presented something to the tabloids, however, even the *order* of the quoted words had to be precisely in the order that the star had spoken them, and all of it verifiable on the tape, which was required to accompany your manuscript. With tabloids you were never, ever, to reposition a phrase so as to make better sense of it or to give it stronger wallop.

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In the matter of attaining quick results, the tabloids put the legitimates to shame. When you completed a tab assignment, the progression was so rapid from your taped interview to print to payment that it made your head spin. Dazzled after a few of these speedy experiences, I began to project: why not do four or five interviews a week for *Globe*, *Star,* or the *Enquirer* and finally realize some decent income?

Eventually—yes, it came to this—whenever I did a celebrity interview I approached it primarily in tabloid terms. In my wallet I carried a handy reference list of the tabs' category needs and framed my questions not only with the tabloids' general pegs in mind (My Big Break, My Childhood Trauma, My Personal Occult Experience, etc.) but also with specific current angles on a star that the tab editors had supplied to me in advance.

And, naturally, the tabloid that paid the highest fees and dangled the largest bonuses was the tabloid whose angles I went after most assiduously.

I dreaded going to our local supermarket because I never knew from week to week what awaited me there. On tabloid delivery day, when the papers were sitting fresh in the rack by checkout, I borrowed copies of the various tabloids, hurried to the rear, back by the frozen foods, and turned pages.

As I scanned the various show-business-related items, my feelings kept changing abruptly: if a piece jumped out that I had a connection to, I felt a sweet rush, because it meant that a sizable payment would be coming soon in the mail. Then, almost simultaneously with the uplifting feeling, I was overcome with a sinking rush as I considered the possible consequences: that with one nasty twist in the way a story went, or was perceived, my career in show business could be ended. Also as I turned pages I remained in a state of fear and shame, suspecting that what the tabs had done (or could do) with a piece that I'd had some dealings with would personally wound a star, or a star's family, in the worst way.

On many tabloid delivery days, after I had reviewed the current week's offerings and found that no contributions of mine had been twisted too far out of shape, I experienced a sense of relief that bordered on joy (until next week), thankful that nobody had been hurt or damaged on my account and that (for now) there'd probably be no legal or career repercussions. Also, week after week, when the tabs came out I prayed that my hard-earned publicist contacts either wouldn't catch a certain item that I'd had to do with, or if they had indeed caught one, they wouldn't put my face to it or would look the other way.

On many of those days I couldn't bring myself up to the examination. At the market I skirted past the news rack deliberately; I simply did not want to know. But subsequently, as I walked home with the groceries, I lightened up and justified the whole process and operation.

"What difference does it make what one writes or supplies about celebrities, or how celebrities are quoted? The celebrities and the publicists are using me, and the tabloids and I are using them back. When you get right down to it, we're all pimps, we're all whores."

Robert Kerwin's celebrity profiles, essays, short stories, and travel and op-ed pieces have appeared in *Playboy*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Ellipsis*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, and *Los Angeles Times Calendar*. Born in Chicago, he now lives in northern California and most recently has been working on a memoir, *The House That Saved My Life*.

ROS CUTHBERT

Change Partners, 2017
Collage and watercolor, 16 x 11 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST