

FAME US

## INTRODUCTION

Brian Howell

A while ago, I started taking pictures of celebrity impersonators after a string of chance encounters with look-alikes. When I began researching the subject, I had no idea that so many people made a living at it. I became intrigued, and as a result, this project was born. I attended a number of conventions for the celebrity impersonator industry; there are two major gatherings a year: Las Vegas in the spring and Orlando, Florida in the fall. The impersonators are there to showcase their talent and to network with others in the industry; the conventions are like any other, except that on any given day, you might see George W. Bush hamming it up with Ozzy Osbourne, or bump into Marilyn Monroe wearing her dress from *The Seven Year Itch*, except there is no subway air vent to blow it up to her waist.

Impersonation is a full-time career for many of the people who appear in this book. Some of them make a great living at it, including a few who look more like the celebrity they impersonate than the actual celebrity himself. While getting to know them better, I've learned that the biggest misconception about impersonators is that they are somehow obsessed fans desperate to physically become the celebrity they impersonate. But I never met anyone like that. On the contrary, many impersonators got into the business because of others—those passersby on the street who stop and stare, and ask, “Has anyone ever told you you look like...?” Simply put, and not in a derogatory way, impersonators are opportunistic, taking advantage of a culture with an insatiable, uncontrollable thirst for celebrity and all that it entails.

“I absolutely love bringing the legendary Marilyn Monroe back into the present for my audiences. Because I am a big fan of hers, I think it helps to create an illusion of what it might have been like for the audience to experience being around Marilyn, and what it might have been like to see her onstage in a show. I always try to insert a heaping spoonful of Marilyn’s fabulous wit and humor into the show, as well as capturing her essence by talking, acting, and looking like her as much as I can. I interact with my audiences, giving each show a personal feel and making every show unique.”



“Madonna is a character with limitless possibilities. For over half of my life, I have held the unique occupation of portraying her, one of the world’s most influential, glamorous, and controversial stars. Even after achieving icon status and inspiring millions worldwide, Madonna is still a work-in-progress. Her persona continues to captivate me, keeping my career as a look-alike challenging and evolving, right along with hers. This is what has held my interest in the work I do for so long.

“Paying tribute to her can be exhausting. Madonna is like a superhero—lacking any physical flaws and functioning with superhuman discipline. Sometimes I don’t want perfection; sometimes I just want to kick back and live a mortal life. I’d like to gain a few pounds, eat what I want, color my hair and cut it ... but in this work you cannot have it both ways and be successful. It is a mixed blessing because, while I enjoy what I do, I try to balance it with my personal life and still be me. I do not want to look back on my life and feel like I have always lived through someone else’s image, vicariously. You need a good sense of self to be able to take on another person’s character, especially when you resemble them naturally. You have to be able to separate where that person ends and you begin in your daily life, and I think a lot of people find that challenging in this business.

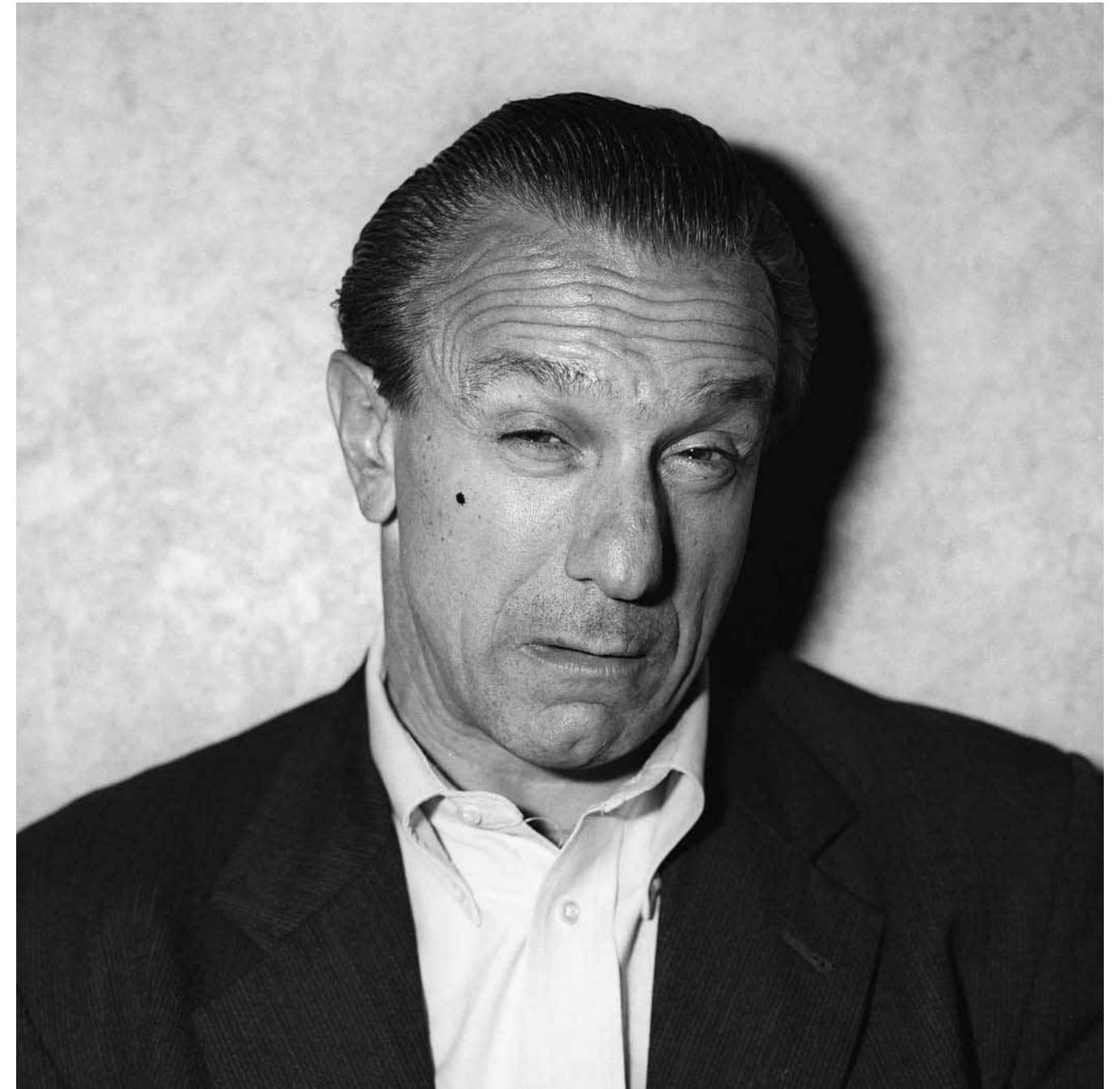
“While working as a Madonna look-alike, I’ve come to realize that her career is a study in American pop culture, and that she herself often emulates many successful entertainers and artists from the past. At the same time, she has redefined these attributes into a style that she can legitimately call her own. It shows me how we all influence one another, and that it all comes full circle.”

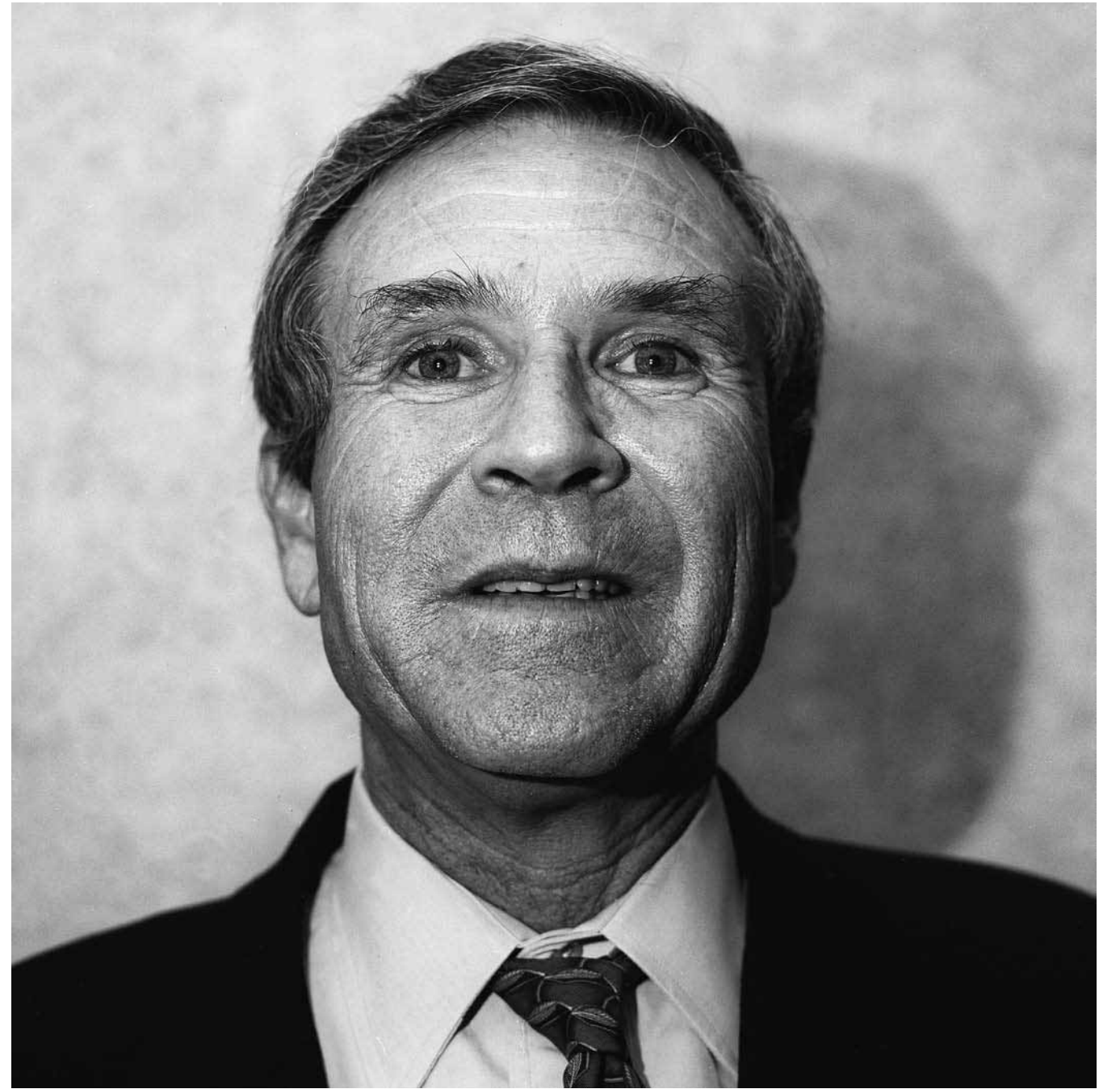


“I was in Northern Brooklyn and Robert De Niro grew up in the Little Italy area of Manhattan. Along with the bone structure, skin tone, and the general ancestry, we have the same walk and talk and all that stuff. It’s not like I grew up on a farm in Iowa or something; we probably went to the same movie theaters and rode over the same roadways and subways.

“The first time that someone spotted me [as a De Niro look-alike] was when I had just gotten out of the army. I had been in Vietnam and wore my green army jacket a lot. With my short haircut and a gold Camaro, I would stop at red lights in New York City and people would do double takes and stare at me. De Niro wore a green army jacket and drove a yellow cab as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*.

“For the first ten years I didn’t really think I looked like the guy. Then I saw *Midnight Run* and I had an epiphany. De Niro was wearing the same black leather jacket that I wore as a teenager ... that was the first time I saw Joe Manuella as Robert De Niro.”



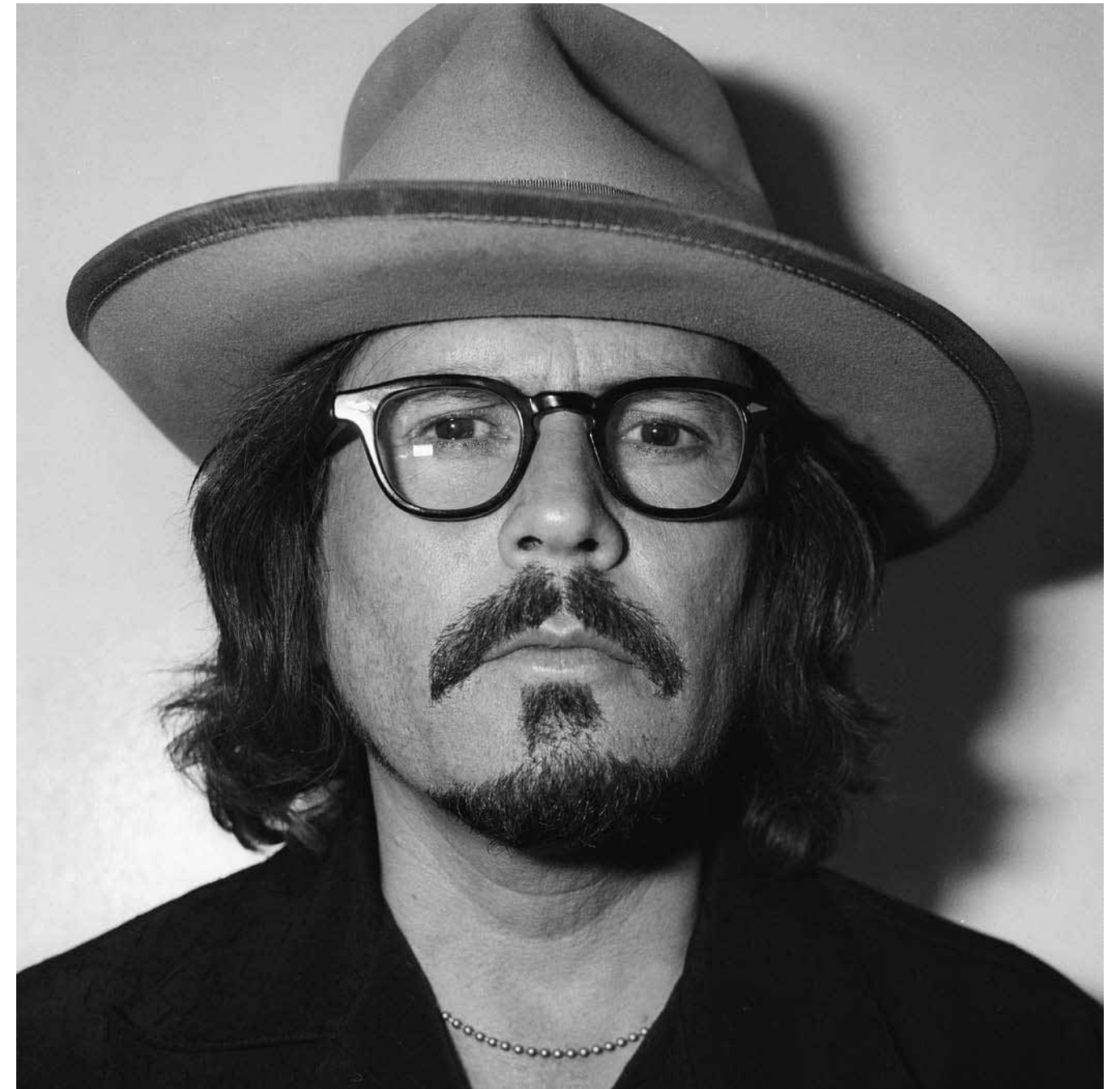


“There are worse things in the world than looking like Johnny Depp.”

Danny Lopez has more in common with Johnny Depp than looks. Not only was he born on the same day as Depp—June 9, 1963—but they both have two sisters and a brother; further, Danny’s brother’s name is Johnny and Depp’s is Danny.

Lopez’s resemblance to Depp has given him a taste of what the actor experiences when in public: “I know what it’s like to be hit up at the airport for pictures and to be stared at while eating. Celebrities can’t always go out. Johnny doesn’t go out; he’s a recluse.

“We [impersonators] actually experience fame on a lot more levels than they do. Sometimes I want to be left alone. But you don’t want to represent your star as a jerk, so there is some responsibility in a weird kind of way.”





“I met Paris Hilton in person, when I worked on her reality TV show *The Simple Life*. She’s really sweet. It was cool to meet her, but I wasn’t as surprised or excited to meet her as she was me. I already knew about her and act like her all the time, so to me, it was just normal. She said, ‘Oh my god, you look like me—that’s hot,’ as she was running out the door of a nightclub. That was cool.

“Celebrities should be flattered by us because we’re promoting them. It’s the hugest form of flattery. I’m promoting Paris, meeting her fans and stuff, so I’m doing things that she wouldn’t have time to do.

“I don’t know how long I want to do it. I came to New York to become a model, but the agents said I looked too much like Paris Hilton and wouldn’t take me on. Now I want to get into acting.

“When *Playboy* approached me I thought, ‘Wow, *Playboy* is very Hollywood and a lot of actresses have posed for the magazine.’ The world is becoming more open about nudity. So I figured it’s not such a bad thing. I never, ever could have seen myself doing all of this.”

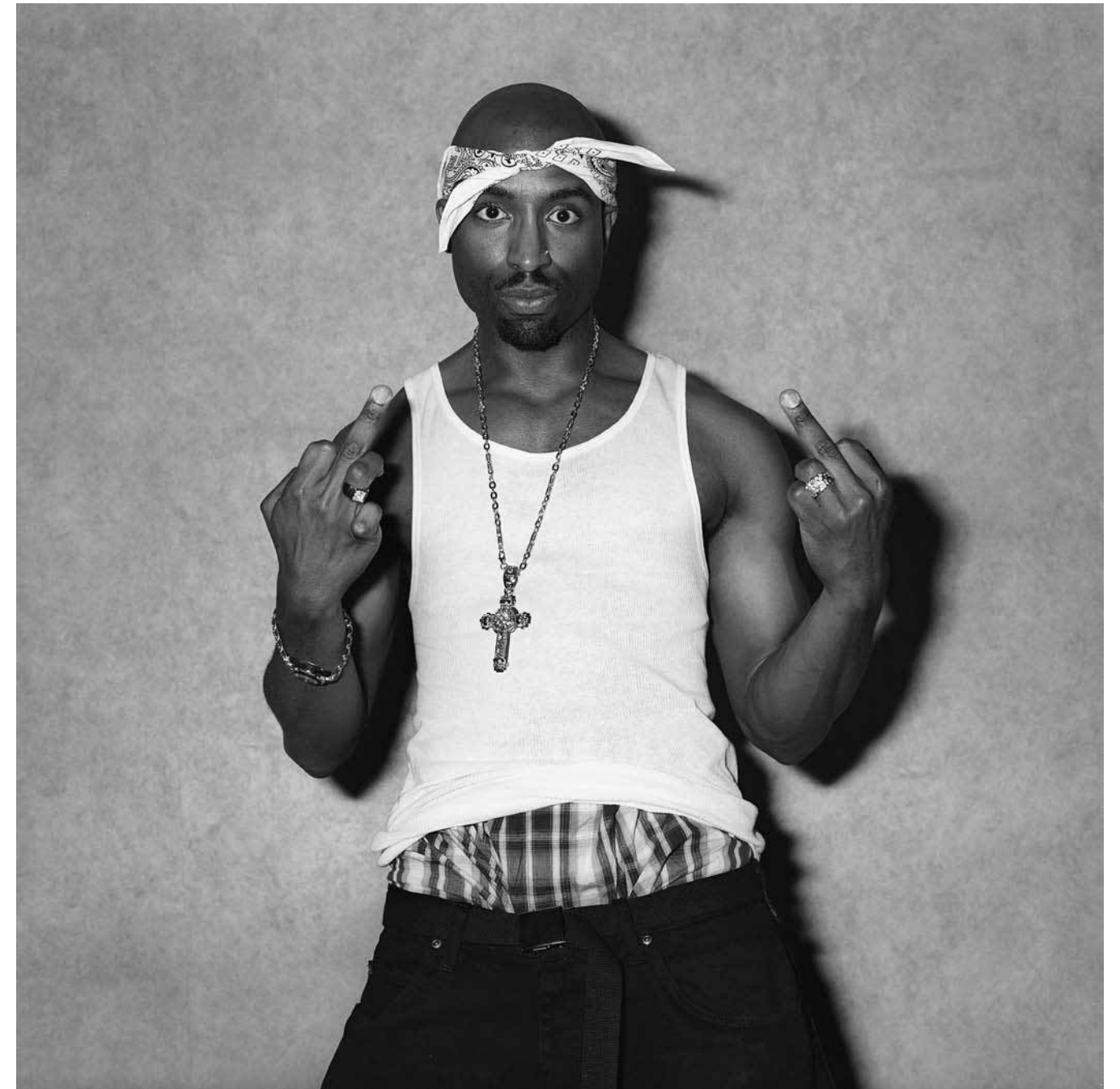




“Five years ago, people started telling me that I look like Tupac Shakur. Strippers, bouncers, girls at clubs, girls at strip clubs, bouncers at strip clubs, everybody. I was directing music videos around the same time, so I put two and two together and dressed up like Pac and shot a video lip-synching one of his songs. I even got the same tattoos as Tupac’s done on my skin in temporary ink. I hit the gym a little harder for the physique, shaved my head, and grew some facial hair.

“While I was in full costume, I walked into a grocery store to buy some yogurt. All the bag boys stopped their work and surrounded me, saying, ‘You look exactly like Tupac! What are you doing? Are you making a movie? What’s the name of your company? Can we have a business card?’ It was at this point that I realized I might have a little more on my hands than just a passing resemblance. I had originally started the project to gain attention for my directing career, but before long I was getting hired to attend private Hollywood parties and perform at women’s clubs. Since I studied theater for many years and have a lot of experience performing at hip hop shows, I quickly learned Tupac’s most popular songs and performed them live with the instrumental beats playing in the background. And that’s how I became the world’s first Tupac impersonator.

“It’s funny ’cause I’m similar to Tupac in certain ways, but completely different from him in others. For instance, Tupac attended a school for the performing arts, and I did too. On the other hand, Tupac smoked a lot of weed, but me, I’m completely sober. Tupac wrote a screenplay while he was in a small jail cell; I wrote my first screenplay while living in a small Hollywood studio apartment. On the other hand, Tupac’s script was all about the street life while my script was all about my penis. Go figure.”



After Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe is the most popular character for look-alikes to portray. When tribute artist shows first started, the performers were paying homage to stars who were dead; they impersonated musicians for the most part, and the shows were concerts which featured look-alikes such as Presley, Janis Joplin, Buddy Holly, and others.

In today's culture, the media bombards us with an endless stream of celebrity images and stories. We know more about the lives of some stars than we do our own family members or neighbors. This thirst for celebrity has enabled the impersonator industry to thrive.



Lyndall Grant (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Dianna Paige (Shania Twain) met at the 2003 Celebrity Impersonators Convention in Las Vegas. They got married during the following year's convention, in the wedding chapel at The Imperial Palace. Jack Nicholson was the best man, Tina Turner was the maid of honor. And the wedding guests included George and Laura Bush.

