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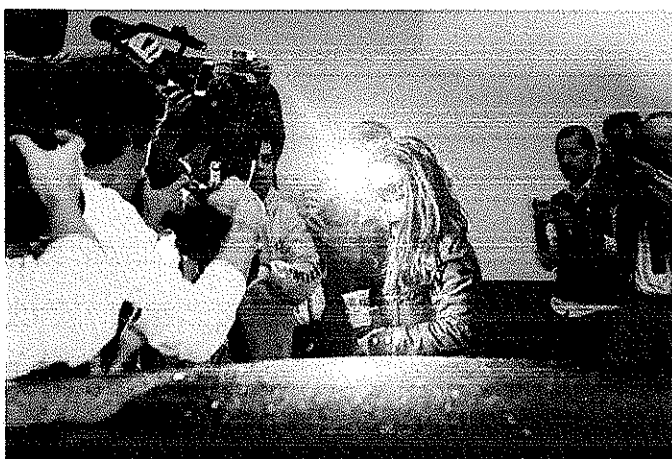
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How a French journalist recruited a posse of Brazilian parking attendants and pizza-delivery guys and helped create Hollywood's most addictive entertainment product

BY DAVID SAMUELS

Shooting Britney



X17ONLINE.COM

"Britney Spears beat up my truck, bald-headed and everything," Dano tells me as we lurk on the Valley side of Mulholland Drive in his silver Ford Explorer, which became famous when the out-of-control pop star attacked it with an umbrella. The night is darker than usual, owing to smoke from over a dozen wildfires that are burning as close as Malibu and around Lake Arrowhead. The air is so bad that several paparazzi have gone home sick. We are waiting for a white two-seater Mercedes SL65, Britney's turbo-powered sports car, or the black Audi driven by her friend Sam Lufti.

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SLIDESHOW: THE CELEBRITY HUNTERS
David Samuels interviews Brandy and François-Regis Navarre of X17, Hollywood's biggest paparazzi agency, about a selection of recent celebrity photographs taken by X17's photographers on the streets of Los Angeles.

Between 30 and 45 paparazzi work Britney on any given night. The expensive cars they drive reflect the fact that Britney Spears—her marriages, custody battles, fights with her mom, new boyfriends, Starbucks runs, trips to the hospital—is a bigger and more lucrative story than Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton or John Lennon and Yoko Ono. History's best-publicized celebrity meltdown has helped fuel dozens of television shows, magazines, and Internet sites, the combined value of whose Britney-related product easily exceeds \$100 million a year, and helped make *Britney Spears* the most popular search term on Yahoo once again in 2007, as it has been for six of the past seven years.

Dano, a sweet-faced but cynical Angeleno of Mexican extraction, has been part of the Britney show for three years. His employer, X17, is the biggest agency in the Hollywood paparazzi business. Nearly every famous picture of the world's most famous imploding pop star—Britney driving with her son on her lap, Britney in rehab, Britney without underwear, Britney shaving her head—was taken by X17's "shooters," or "paps," who work in teams under the direction of X17's owner, François Navarre, a graduate of the

Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, who moved to Los Angeles in 1992 and covered the L.A. riots for *Le Monde* before embracing his destiny as a freelance celebrity photographer. Navarre operates under his middle name, Regis. He is roundly despised by more traditional Hollywood paparazzi, who accuse him of having destroyed their highly individualistic business by hiring gangs

of immigrant kids with digital cameras purchased on credit from Best Buy to do the work of the heroic lone photographers who once lay in wait with telephoto lenses, stalking Jackie O.

Most of X17's paps, who number between 60 and 70, depending on the day and who quits or gets fired, are paid a stipend of \$800 to \$3,000 a week plus the occasional four- or low-five-figure bonus in exchange for global rights to their images, which Regis owns lock, stock, and barrel. X17 also pays weekly stipends to a dozen dedicated tipsters and occasional fees to 500 or 600 parking-lot attendants, club kids, and shop girls in and around L.A. X17 licenses its pictures to celebrity skin magazines like *Us Weekly*, *People*, *Life & Style*, and *In Touch* and their associated Web sites; to celebrity-oriented television programs like *Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood*, *Inside Edition*, and *Extra*; as well as to newspapers and magazines in England, Australia, Germany, Japan, Hong Kong, mainland China, Israel, Dubai, and dozens of other countries; to major television news networks like CNN, ABC, NBC, and CBS, and nearly everyone else in the media business who needs pictures and video clips of Paris Hilton's arrest or Brad and Angelina's kids or Britney's latest courtroom drama, which is to say nearly every major news outlet on the planet.

"We would normally spot her coming down towards Beverly Hills, past where Jessica Simpson lives," Dano explains, rubbing his palms on his navy Adidas tracksuit. "This is really old-school."

The main X17 team working on Britney these days is MBF, a secretive group of eight Brazilians plus floaters like Dano. Tonight the team leader, Felix Filho, has decided to try to lure the pop star outside by pulling his photographers from their usual curbside spots above and below the Summit, the gated community at the top of Mulholland Drive where she lives. The practice of sitting right outside the entrance to a star's house is known as "door-stepping," and it takes its toll on paparazzi and their subjects alike. The potential upside of waiting 12 or 14 hours a day, six or seven days a week, is the chance that one day Britney will roll her car into a ditch, or be taken away again strapped to a gurney. "You're telling a little story in a 15- or 20-second clip," Dano explains, resting his right hand on his Panasonic DVX 100B three-chip broadcast-quality video camera. "You need an establishing shot. You need an action. And then you need it to resolve."

The evolution of Hollywood paparazzi from a marginal nuisance to one of the most powerful and lucrative forces driving the American news-gathering industry is a phenomenon that dates back to March 2002, when a women's magazine editor named Bonnie Fuller took over a Wenner Media property called *Us Weekly*, which had drifted along since its founding in 1977 as a rival to the fantastically successful *People* magazine franchise. What Fuller brought to *Us* was a keen understanding of her audience. "Every day, we'd look at tons of pictures that came in and lay them all out on a conference table," Fuller remembers. "And what was interesting to me was to look at celebrities going to the dry cleaners and pumping gas. I loved looking at these pictures of celebrities who were just like us."

Fuller's trademark front-of-the-book photo-feature, "Stars—They're Just Like US," created a lucrative new market for Hollywood paparazzi, whose output had formerly been limited to tabloids like the *National Enquirer* and the *Star*. It was not unusual in the Fuller years for a set of high-quality snapshots to rake in \$100,000 or more in secretive bidding wars that began on Thursday night and ended Monday evening, when *Us* and *People* were put to bed. Insiders could keep score by looking at the small-print photo credits in *Us*, *People*, *In Touch*, *InStyle*, and half a dozen or so newly minted competitors to see which of the paps hit the jackpot that week. It could be Bauer-Griffin, the union of the British rock-and-roll photographer Frank Griffin with the ex-New Yorker Randy Bauer; the daredevils at INF or the British expats at *Splash* and *Fame*; Eric Charbonneau and Kevin Mazur at WireImage; Alex Berliner, who for years had a lock on *Vanity Fair*'s Oscar party at Morton's; the infamous Louie De Filippis of LDP Images; Phil Ramey, the legendary old-school hack who ruled Page Six and caught Johnny Carson stepping out on his wife with Sally Field; or three unknowns who got lucky that week and snapped a celebrity hottie with her new boyfriend or someone else's spouse.

The genius of Bonnie Fuller's new approach was that almost any picture of a celebrity doing something ordinary would do, with a little help from an inventive caption writer who could come up with a snappy one-liner like "Who Wore It Best?" (three happy stars wearing the same outfit) or "Can-Do Couples" (three couples smiling) for a quickie photo-feature to accompany newsier fare like "Angelina's Web of Lies." It was easy to imagine legions of Internet-era Andrew Marvell's staying up late in fluorescent-lit cubicles appending metaphysical exclamation points to celebrity photo captions that would rocket readers ever closer to the celestial objects of their desire:

They Buy Bottled Water!

They Pick Up Presents! They Love to Buy Handbags!

They Fix Flat Tires!

They Can't Get Their Straws in Cans!

The front-of-the-book snapshots in *People* and *Us* cost \$50,000 to \$75,000 per issue, to say nothing of the attention-grabbing exclusive photo-features on Brad and Jen's divorce or the latest *Friends* wedding, which averaged in the low-to-mid six figures. When the spending became impossible to sustain, the magazines slashed their photo budgets and stopped buying exclusives. The larger photo agencies like X17 and Bauer-Griffin then found that they could make even more money by selling a single set of pictures 15 or 20 times over, to eight or 10 magazines, five or six television programs, and Web sites. And so the industrial phase of paparazzi production was born. (X17 estimates its take from the sale of Britney-related images last year at \$3 million, or 25 percent of the company's gross revenues from the sale of celebrity photos and videos.)

The result of this happy convergence, the 24/7 Britney-ParisNicoleLindsayLohan MaybeDidCokeBradand AngelinaSavethe-WorldOneChildaTimeBradand JenBenandJenPoorKatie HolmesMarried Tom CruiseWhoIsanAlien Celebrity Reality Show, was a distinctive new kind of participatory media experience resulting from the cold fusion of the old-school paparazzi business with the new wave of celebrity magazines and Internet sites. The proximate models for this new celebrity infotainment were the artfully staged "reality shows," like *The Real World* or *The Bachelor* or *I Love New York*, that have taken over the channel-clicking space once occupied by music videos and sitcoms. Where reality television was most often a highly edited and stylized version of an artificial ecosystem inhabited by good-looking pharmaceutical sales reps and tattooed baristas, the new reality shows did not require the active and willing participation of their central characters. The online communities that formed around news-driven celebrity dramas fed the buzz that drove the sales of the magazines and the ratings of the television programs that paid the paparazzi.

Where old media imposed a polite and deadening spectatorial distance between the reader and the medium to buttress the authority of the message handed down from on high, the online convergence of instant images and dramatic story lines encouraged the idea that the news was filter-free and that readers were part of the story. Online communities became gladiatorial forums where pseudonymous participants sallied forth to trade insults and shred the toilet-paper-thin reputations built by studio publicists and New York magazine editors with a vulgar and highly sexualized avidity that recalls the frenzied mob scene at the end of Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*.

The brightest star on the world's newest stage won her first professional role acting in the off-Broadway comedy *Ruthless!* at the age of 9, after her mother moved her from Kentwood, Louisiana, to Manhattan. Britney was enrolled at the Professional Performing Arts School, where Lynne Spears struck the fledgling school's administrators as the very model of an obsessive stage mom. Her daughter impressed everyone she met early on with her fabulous work ethic, which landed her a spot on *The All New Mickey Mouse Club* at age 11 with future pop stars Christina Aguilera and Justin Timberlake, and future actor Ryan Gosling. "You had to sing and you had to dance ... and it was every night," she later recalled of her career as a teenage pop star. "I kinda got tired."

At 17, she was shot for the cover of *Rolling Stone* by David LaChapelle with her bra and panties showing to promote "... Baby One More Time," the breakout single that made her a star. Five years later, on January 3, 2004, after releasing the platinum-selling albums *Oops! ... I Did It Again*, *Britney*, and *In the Zone*, and signing a multimillion-dollar endorsement deal with Pepsi, she married a childhood friend, Jason Alexander, at the Little White Wedding Chapel in Las Vegas. Her handlers portrayed the marriage as a prank, and it was annulled. On October 6, 2004, she married Kevin Federline, a fecund chorus boy, and a year later she gave birth to their first child, Sean Preston Federline. A year after that, on September 12, 2006, she gave birth to a second son, Jayden James. Less than two months later, she filed for divorce. As her public behavior became more erratic, it was reported that Spears's father was an alcoholic and that her grandmother committed suicide by shooting herself in the chest with a 12-gauge shotgun on her infant son's grave.

For a host of reasons (Britney's days as a Mouseketeer, her failures as a parent) feverishly speculated upon by message-board experts, *Us Weekly*, and *E!*, the star's outlandish attention-seeking behavior helped drive the celebrity skin trade like no other story, and produced dozens of often unappetizing and iconic pictures. Together, these images constitute a very public and oddly intimate deconstruction of the persona that the singer and her surrounding machinery had created.

Of all the highly intrusive pictures that have made Britney Spears the reigning goddess of poor life choices and bad parenting, it is impossible to ignore the surpassing weirdness of the image of the world's biggest pop star seated in front of a mirror in a Ventura Boulevard hair salon on February 16, 2007, electric razor in hand, looking blindly at the camera while shaving off all her hair. Her look was at once vulnerable and wildly alienated, the expression one might expect to see on the face of a young cult member who had just set fire to her birth certificate on the sidewalk. Subsequent shots in the series showed the star smiling and making faces in the mirror as she tried and failed to convince herself of the virtues of her radical new haircut.

It is hard to overstate the impact of these photos on the Britney story. With their worldwide publication, Britney Spears departed the planet of normal bubblegum celebrity story lines and entered the heavenly realm of pop myth. America's sweetheart had dramatically and publicly un-edited herself, removing the customary trappings and protections of celebrity to reveal the damaged psyche of a fractured person who was no longer able or willing to regulate her public behavior. "It was completely arresting," remembered Bonnie Fuller, who left *Us* in 2003 to become the editorial director of American Media, which publishes the *Star*. "You don't expect to see a celebrity, especially a celebrity known for their beauty, poise, and glamour, shaving their head in public and clearly in need of some kind of help." After that day, it became nearly impossible to find exclusive shots of Britney Spears, because there were so many shooters. When exclusives did come along, no one could afford them.

The Nextel walkie-talkie on the dashboard crackles.

"Where are you?" asks Felix. "We could put somebody by Beverly Glen," Dano answers, "but you never know with Britney." The heavy pall of smoke from the wildfires is everywhere, making the evening stakeout particularly unpleasant. Dano leans back in the darkened interior of his plush SUV, keeping an eye on the road in the hope of spotting the star's white Mercedes. "You became famous because of the people who buy your albums or pay to go to your movies," he says. "Now those people want to know about you. Who's your girlfriend? What's your favorite kind of shoes?"

Some stars hate the paparazzi. Others use them to reinvent themselves or increase their fame. Working with the paparazzi to create memorable shots is called "giving it up," a sexualized metaphor that neatly captures the masculine-feminine romantic dynamic of need and reluctance that characterizes the relationship between celebrity photographers and their subjects. Paris Hilton is the Queen of Giving It Up, Dano says. "She creates the beautiful shots that we need. She is the one who wants it." Another favorite is Lindsay Lohan. "Lindsay's OK, but she's kind of strange, because she can be high, or in a weird mood," he says. His least favorite subjects are surly male stars like Leonardo di Caprio, Ben Affleck, Justin Timberlake, and Tom Cruise. "Jessica Simpson, she's really sweet, she'll give it up. Gwen Stefani is nice. She'll give it up." But no one in the business compares to Britney.

When I ask Dano if he is bored with talking about the umbrella attack, he says that he has never spoken about it to the press before. The X17 guys had followed Britney to Kevin's house, but he wouldn't buzz her in. "She wanted to see her kids," Dano says. "We came out and took pictures." Then Spears and her long-time friend Alli drove around the corner to a Jiffy Lube, where Alli opened her door and asked the photographers to please leave them alone. Britney stuck her head out of the car, too. "She took her hat off, and she was bald," Dano says, of the moment that made him the most celebrated photographer in America that week. "She was breathing like a bull. It was like smoke was coming out of her nostrils. Then she leaps out of the door, screaming 'Motherfuckers!'"

Paparazzi prefer to work in a triangle, with the celebrity at the center and a shooter on three sides. That way, when they turn away from one camera, they are facing another, and when they turn away again, they are facing the third shooter. As Dano retreated from the enraged star, two flanking X17 photographers took stills while Dano shot video. When the umbrella-attack video went viral, Dano put his Ford Explorer on eBay. Bidding went over \$30,000 before he took the car off the market. Stills and videos of the incident sold for nearly \$400,000.

X17 has an office in Beverly Hills, but Regis prefers to work at home in an old T-shirt and shorts, just as he did as a lone

paparazzo. Now he owns a \$5 million house in Pacific Palisades, where his neighbor is the actor Adam Sandler. On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, at 7:45 a.m., he has already been up for an hour and a half reading the news and reviewing last night's pictures. The best shots of the evening are of the very pregnant singer Christina Aguilera by a team called VWR, a designation made up from the initials of the team's key members. "She's holding her stomach. It's quite heavy," he says approvingly.

Next up are exclusives of Jessica Simpson at a bar in Los Feliz. "The story of the girl is that she's single, so here she is in a bar," he explains, seated in front of a computer screen with a cup of coffee. With his tousled hair and brown doe eyes, Regis, who recently turned 45, looks like the *beau idéal* of the modern French husband. The images will sell, but not for more than a few thousand dollars, he says. "She's not dressed, and she is with her hairdresser, who is gay." As he finishes his selection, he posts high-quality versions of the best sets on X17's agency Web site, where they can be accessed by photo buyers and agents around the world but not by the general public. Low-quality versions of the most striking images are also posted on X17online.com, where they drive traffic and attract the attention of television producers and editors. Even if 50 photographers shoot the same star on the same night from different angles, Regis says, the photo buyers will mysteriously gravitate to the same shot.

Regis's wife, Brandy, is a blonde in her mid-30s who looks like the actress Michelle Pfeiffer. Brandy has a master's degree in broadcast journalism from USC and used to work for Reuters. Now she runs X17online. She is typing an e-mail:

Dear agents, PLEASE DO NOT post on your websites our recent exclusive shots of Britney Spears driving the toy car with her sons. DO NOT include them in your e-mail alerts. While we want to sell them, we do not want them intercepted by fan sites who will post them online.

The e-mail is signed "Kelly," a pseudonym left over from the days when François and Brandy imagined that they might wind up doing something more conventional.

Regis is talking on the phone to the team that will be staking out Brad Pitt. "When he goes to the studio, you have to watch all the exits," he explains. Brad Pitt is a master at playing games. One of his favorite tricks is to drive onto the Warner Bros. lot and leave the photographers guessing which of the studio's many exits he will choose for his departure. Adrien Davis, 5, and Remy Alaska, 3, imitate their father's French-accented English, then skitter off to the living room. Adrien pokes his head up over the back of the couch, peering first at Regis and then at Brandy through the telescopic sight on his plastic rifle.

As Regis instructs his team on the finer points of stalking the wily Pitt, he looks over a set of Paris Hilton photos taken at LAX. When he gets off the phone, he curls his upper lip in distaste.

"For me, she is slipping," he says. "She has an expression on her mouth that she didn't have before. She lost a little bit of something. I don't know if it will come back." Regis dates the decline to her recent arrest; since then, the Queen of Giving It Up has appeared chastened. In the shots, she is wearing a Japanese cartoon-print hoodie and talking on her cell phone, with a silver purse over her arm. "That's not enough, OK?," Regis says, drawing my eye to shots of Paris at a newsstand. "Before, she would have picked up a magazine or a big candy bar or some funny thing. She is just standing in the newsstand at the airport like anybody else."

Regis started X17 in 1997. He had intended to call the company Photo-something, but nearly every combination with the word *photo* had been taken, and 30 people were in line behind him at the registrar's office. So he asked what letter in the alphabet was the least popular, and was told "X." The name "X17" reminded him of a secret agent from the Second World War, he says.

When the Britney shaved-head pictures arrived, Regis was about to go to bed. The intimacy of the photos was more disturbing to Brandy than to him. Still, he thought they were striking. "You feel as if she's looking at you, trying to tell you something," he says. "When the public saw our photos, they thought Britney Spears had gone mad." *Entertainment Tonight* bought the right to air the photos for one night for a sum rumored to be \$80,000.

Before Brandy and Regis left on vacation a week ago, her main source inside Britney's camp, the Svengali-like Lufti, was obsessively text-messaging her. Now he returns her texts two or three days late. "I don't know if that vacation weaned him off of me," Brandy says. When Regis comes back downstairs after getting dressed, Brandy inspects him critically. "You are missing a belt loop in back," she says. Regis adjusts his belt, and they head out together to the office.

Regis pilots his Porsche Cayenne down the hill, a sweater looped over his shoulders, his cell phone held daintily up to his ear between forefinger and thumb. "So tonight they have family therapy of the entire family," he says, passing on his latest Lindsay Lohan tip to his team in New York. "He will be telling us where and when. We need video and stills. Shoot low light, but get something. You need a good camera, like the new Sony." The source of Regis's latest exclusive is the actress's father, Michael Lohan, a failed actor who is hoping to get a celebrity gossip show on the air.

The intimate and terrifying world of celebrity gossip sites like [PerezHilton.com](#), [TMZ.com](#), and [X17online](#) attracts much of its traffic during the corporate lunch hour, from women between the ages of 16 and 34. The granddaddy of the Web gossip sites, PerezHilton, was founded only three years ago by a young Miamian named Mario Lavendeira, who rocketed to Internet fame by retailing celebrity gossip with bitchy comments scrawled in digital Magic Marker on photos he appropriated from X17 and other agencies by a variety of means, which informed sources say included gaining the passwords to newswires, photo-agency accounts, and the photo departments of major magazines.

What was most striking about Lavendeira's site was not the quality of the gossip but the way a few lines casually written on a celebrity snapshot and then expounded upon by a few hundred anonymous or pseudonymous commenters could tear down reputations that took millions of dollars to build up. In addition to costing the photo agencies a fortune in lost fees, Lavendeira exposed the traditional cozy alliance of star publicists and studio heads and their lapdogs in the magazine industry. Where Bonnie Fuller's "Stars—They're Just Like US" made celebrities seem normal (while suggesting that even their least significant daily activities were worthy of full-color glossy photo spreads), PerezHilton depicted movie stars as freaks and delighted in being nasty.

The success of PerezHilton led to the rise of the gossip site TMZ, which gained major media traction in 2006 when it published a police report with the details of Mel Gibson's DUI arrest. (TMZ stands for "30-mile zone," meaning the Greater Los Angeles area as defined by the film and television production guilds.) The site is owned by the giant media conglomerate Time Warner and edited by a pixieish attorney and former TV producer named Harvey Levin. "It's old-fashioned journalism," Levin says of the way that celebrity Web sites gather news. He suggests that the kind of aggressive Web-based coverage that TMZ and other prominent sites have pioneered has obvious applications beyond the world of celebrity, in areas like politics and sports. "I see lots of opportunities," he says. TMZ originally paid X17 for most of the pictures and video footage featured on its site, a relationship that cooled considerably after X17 launched its own gossip site, X17online, a little over a year ago to compete directly with TMZ and PerezHilton.

Offering paparazzi photos accompanied by gossip items updated as many as 20 times a day, all three sites encourage visitors to become part of the story by defending their celebrity favorites, spewing bile, and attacking each other in obscene and frequently scatological terms whose proper interpretation often requires an anatomy textbook and a dictionary. In the dark sewer of misanthropic, gynophobic, and Rabelaisian epithets running through the comments section of celebrity blogs, one can also find gems of authentic emotional connection to celebrity foibles from readers who have suffered tragedies of their own, or been drunk, high, or on pills and up way past their normal bedtimes. A good number of readers seem to write in the openly delusional (yet not entirely impossible) belief that if their post is sincere or hateful enough, the walls separating their own lives from the lives of celebrities will dissolve, transporting them from the backlit world of their LCD screens to the super-pollinated atmosphere of the media daisy chain.

The staff bloggers at the heart of X17online are USC film-school graduates who prefer to conceal their real names in order to preserve their future viability in the rapidly disintegrating Hollywood system. The house style is a kind of effervescent sugary sweetness that allows for wholesale insincerity without compromising the relationship between a given celebrity and X17's photographers. "We'll put up a picture that's so obviously negative," Brandy admits, "and we just write something so completely ignorant of the focus of the picture and let the commenters online take care of it." It is impossible for anyone who has spent even a modicum of time in the comments section of a celebrity blog to look at paparazzi pictures the same way:

I love these two pics of Britney

The first one really shows off how disgusting her skin is. And her new lips just make her look dirty or like she has a moustache. Too bad you can't also see the nasty individual greasy extensions to show

what an unkempt slob she really is.

And in the second pic, she seems irritated with the paps. If she wasn't such a trainwreck, they wouldn't be following her around like they do.

An attention-grabbing picture can receive as many as 400 comments a day.

Regis and Brandy first met in Frank Sinatra's driveway, when they were both covering his funeral. "I rode around with him a lot to try to understand what he was doing," Brandy says of their early dates in the summer of 1998. At the time, she was living on the beach in Venice above Figtree's Cafe in a one-bedroom apartment on \$450 a week. When her roommate left, she moved in with Regis. "He'd be walking around the pool and he'd be making a sale, and it was \$800 or \$1,500 or sometimes \$2,000," she remembers. "And I was like, 'Oh my God, this is a dream life!' Although from the very beginning, I always hated the fact that he was on the phone and I could never finish a sentence without being interrupted by that ring. And he would never turn it off, and he would never really apologize for it."

Regis and Brandy seem to have an ideal marriage. They spend a lot of time together at home and both feel liberated by their work, though it does have its drawbacks. "You know," Brandy sighs, "I want to get my kids into the good private schools around here, and I don't want them to know what we do. But we probably won't get in, so it probably doesn't matter."

Regis drops Brandy off for a meeting at E! and we take a drive to Malibu. On the dashboard of the car is the monthly accounting of X17's sales to Germany, which amount to 40,000 euros. The largest sale is for 360 euros, confirming that this is a volume business. The biggest market for paparazzi photographs is the U.S., followed by the U.K. and Australia. Regis checks his phone again. In the last hour, he has received 36 voicemail messages from people asking for pictures. Acting as the guiding spirit and brain for 60-odd photographers means that Regis comes as close as he can to the paparazzo's dream of never missing a shot.

"Ubiquity, being everywhere, always, that's a dream," he says. "It's true that from the beginning, I have struggled with the fact that in this business, you are always at the mercy of the factor of chance. Eventually, I realized there was a way to solve this problem, if I let go of my ego." As photographs, most paparazzi pictures impress him as hopelessly banal, but he is not without a sense of purpose.

"I don't want to say anything, but in a way, X17 put three stars into rehab, if not in jail, this year," he says as we pull into the parking lot of the Malibu Country Mart. As we are talking, Shirley MacLaine materializes out of the fog, like a ghostly, withered apparition of celebrity past. It takes Regis a moment to remember her name. "She is the actress from the '60s whose brother is a famous actor," he says. "She is the one who is seen when there is nothing to shoot in Malibu."

It's late in the afternoon and all the paps from Mulholland are hanging out by the entrance to the underground garage at the Four Seasons, waiting for Britney, a scene that has taken place at every hotel in Beverly Hills. "At first it was the Bel-Air, then it was the Peninsula, now it's the Four Seasons," says Felix Filho, the team leader of X17's top Britney-stalkers. Known in the business as "the Brazilians," the eight ranking members of MBF have logged over 40,000 man-hours watching Britney while taking perhaps \$6 million worth of often exclusive pictures. When Britney Spears fulfills her apparent fate and dies in a fiery car crash or overdoses on prescription medication, it will be surpassingly strange if MBF misses the shot.

Suddenly, a pair of headlights appears at the bottom of the ramp. The photographers start shooting, and then they run for their cars. Felix drives a new BMW truck. I jump inside, and as the pack swings up Coldwater Canyon at a scarily high speed, the other MBF drivers box out the competition so Felix can pull up alongside Britney and shoot video. The star is blasting a song from her new album, *Blackout*, through her open passenger-side window and singing along. She looks lost in her own world, a rich girl singing to herself in a white Mercedes. "Britney is unpredictable," Felix shouts, as he films her driving. "She might stop and take her clothes off, I don't know."

The Mercedes disappears inside the Summit and the photographers park their cars farther up Mulholland Drive, near Mischa Barton's mansion. "To be a pap, you have to be ready to do anything, legal or illegal," Felix says. He agrees to tell me the story of how the Brazilians came to dominate the trade in pictures of Britney Spears. Before he became a photographer, he says, he worked in valet parking and then as a delivery boy for Domino's, the pizza chain. One evening, he delivered a pizza to Denis

Castro, a Brazilian photographer who worked for X17, who had a very serious case of the munchies. Denis was thrilled to find out that Felix was from his hometown of Porto Alegre. Because his license had been suspended, he had already hired another Brazilian from Porto Alegre named Luiz Betat to drive him around to his assignments. He gave Felix a camera, and Luiz taught him to shoot. Eventually, Denis started sending Felix, Luiz, and another Brazilian named Ismael Marchi out on assignments and selling the pictures to Regis while he stayed at home and smoked dope. The original three members of MBF (the first letters of their last names) stayed with Denis for three months before they went out on their own.

The only way to learn to be a celebrity photographer is to spend time out in the field. "You look at what they shoot and how they shoot it," Felix says as the lights twinkle through the haze in the valley below. "You find out how to be sneaky."

A dark-haired photographer in a silver Mercedes zooms by, parks by the side of the road, and idles for a while. He has been on Britney, on and off, for four years. His name is Adnan Ghalib. "He's the most cool guy in this job," Felix says. A few weeks earlier, Britney had picked Adnan, a handsome Afghan, out of the pack at a Quiznos and invited him to join her in the bathroom. It will soon be rumored, then confirmed, that they are having an affair. It's easy to see why Britney would choose Ghalib. He's good-looking and stylish, he knows everything about her already, and they have the same taste in cars.

The two-way radio crackles.

"Felix," the voice says. It's Luiz.

"Tell me," Felix says. The radio crackles again.

"A cop went into the Summit. I saw him go in. I saw him go in for sure. Maybe Britney overdosed."

The cops pull up, and the paps take off. When the cops are feeling mean, they will roust the paparazzi three or four times a night. We drive around in circles for 20 minutes, and Felix is glum. "My money is going down. I feel frustrated," he says.

In a *Los Angeles Times* article, Felix was identified as the shooter of the most famous Britney Spears photo of them all, the image of her shaving her head. "I was like, 'It's not real,'" he told the *Times*. "I freaked out, my legs were shaking." When he tells me the story, his details of the night are vague and rambling. The more time I spend with Felix, the more I believe that he took credit for someone else's picture. A great shot is almost never an accident. You need luck, skill, timing, good information, a sense of how to frame a shot, and the ability to make the right decisions under pressure. The margin for error is so small that the best paparazzi generally get the best shots. Felix's walkie-talkie beeps again.

"Yayo, what's going on? What's going on?" he says. When he gets off the phone, he shrugs. "I'm getting crazy, working this," he says. "I don't give a fuck, man."

The previous day, MBF got some shots of Britney in her car arriving at the Beverly Hills Hotel with a box of the prescription stimulant Provigil poking out of her handbag. It was Regis who noticed the box. "I didn't think that was a big deal, you know?" Felix says. With 35 photographers camped outside her house, and the voices of her lawyers and self-styled pimp-daddy ex-husband and monster stage mother all arguing for space in her head, it is easy to see how the pop star might look for outside support.

It is not uncommon for Britney to stay up late reading the X17 message boards, or so Sam Lufti told Brandy. The source of the pop star's fascination is not hard to locate:

She needs to secure her ass in the car with the seatbelt. Look how the belt is behind her. Fool.

Posted by: QueenOfTrashin

My tribute in the form of a haiku to the lovely and talented Miss Spears:

Radiant beauty

Voice pure and sweet like honey

Enchanting goddess

Posted by: Lorenzo Vega

There is no way the courts are going to give Britney her babies back. She is very dangerous to them and could end up harming them very badly with all the really selfish and crazy stunts she pulls. It is also very obvious that she has no real interest in being a mother. It is more important to her to flash her crotch over and over so she can embarrass her babies when they are older.

Posted by: Anonymous

X17.COM READ MORE!

Brit Gets a Shiny New Toy!

Britney's Blackout is Here!!

Brit Gets Lip Injections for a Prettier Pout!

Brit Gets Her Kids Back!

Britney Gets Booked!

X17's photographers say that Britney Spears frequently comments on the pictures they post on their Web site. They also suggest that the pop star sometimes goes out a day or two later and restages unflattering shots. "Forever, she has been in on the joke," says Harvey Levin of TMZ. "She has also been severely mentally ill for a while."

Adnan Ghalib's agency, Finalpixx, has marketed sets of the two of them together in choreographed outings. In January, Finalpixx offered seminude pictures of Spears, taken by Ghalib, for a reported asking price of \$5 million. The pictures sold to an Australian magazine for \$57,000. The relationship faltered soon thereafter.

Security has been enhanced today. Another metal detector has been added to the eighth floor where the hearing is being held," reports a big, handsome celebrity gossip reporter in a suit outside the Superior Court building at 110 North Grand Avenue in downtown Los Angeles. Perched on stone lintels above his head are three weird figures representing Mosaic Law, the Magna Carta, and the Declaration of Independence.

The reporters for *Access Hollywood* and *Entertainment Tonight*, and for E!, Fox News, CNN, and other networks take turns doing stand-ups and interviewing their local experts on chapter 22 or 23 of the Dickensian courtroom drama in which the pop star gives birth, loses custody of her children to her ex-husband, and now makes a complete hash of her attempt to get the kids back. "Your laundry is out in front of everyone," the *Access Hollywood* woman explains to her viewers. "It's very embarrassing." Diagonally across the street, the core of the decayed downtown is wrapped around Frank Gehry's undulating, steel-clad concert hall, which looks like a giant steel-capped molar in a mouthful of rotting teeth.

Passing office workers, many of whom are black, stop and shake their heads. Downtown is part of *their* city, which, despite all the talk about drugs and gangs, still goes to church on Sunday and most emphatically does not endorse the loosey-goosey morality of the Hollywood set. "We are all sinners," one woman shouts. "Leave that poor, poor girl alone." Bystanders who use shouts and curses, and sometimes bottles and fists, to keep the paparazzi from their prey are referred to as "heroes." Two years ago, everyone wanted to be a hero, but now it is rare to get more than two or three a night. Here, where celebrity sightings are less common than in Beverly Hills, the local population of heroes is still relatively untapped.

A cluster of some 50 photographers has gathered around the corner at the loading-dock entrance to the courthouse on West 1st Street. Francing in the center of the driveway is Larry Mays, 59, a wiry black man in a white shirt and tan pants, and a baseball hat that says "Man of Faith." He brandishes a bedsheet banner that reads "Ask Jesus to Save You Now." The paparazzi talk among themselves. "I'm gonna fall in front of her car, and she's gonna run over my foot," one pap jokes, foreshadowing what will in fact happen to a different photographer a few hours later.

Eventually, the combination of Mays's religious enthusiasm and the 97-degree heat and their heavy gear begins to wear, and they start bickering and shoving for position. Felix is on the phone across the street directing six X17 photographers, who already know that Britney is driving herself and are betting that she will make a right-hand turn into the driveway.

"All right, she's coming," someone yells.

"Right there!" another shouts, pointing to the Mercedes convertible, which stops at the median, speeds up, and turns the corner, heading toward the courthouse's front entrance. The paparazzi break ranks and start running, carrying Mays and his banner with them. Britney pulls up to the entrance, rolls down her window, and starts talking with a female police officer. There's a little orange plastic Halloween pumpkin hanging from her rearview mirror, and five or six more pumpkins are scattered on the dashboard. The pop star is wearing wraparound Gucci sunglasses and eating junk food from a bag.

The police scream at the paparazzi to stay back. "Keep your fucking hands off my camera," one of the photographers yells. Britney rolls up her window and loops back around the block. The paparazzi run into the street to get the shot, but she keeps her window shut. As she turns into the loading dock on 1st Street, one of the paps loses his balance and falls heavily against the side of her car. She opens the door and steps out as the police hold the pack at bay.

"That's the shot right there," someone says. Across the street, Felix is uploading some video clips to the X17 Web site, squatting by the curb and linking his Sony HDV cam to his laptop.

Leaning against the fence is Luiz Betat, one of the founding members of MBF, a balding crew-cut man in his mid-30s with big gray eyes and a large nose. He wears a black T-shirt and blue jeans and a power pack on his hip. Whereas Felix is talkative, Luiz has been avoiding me during my nightly pilgrimages to the top of Coldwater Canyon Drive. Luiz is famous for getting pictures of Britney playing outside her house with her kids and other intimate shots that would appear to indicate an old-school talent for climbing fences, evading security guards, and sitting in ambush for days with a telephoto lens. Now that I am here, and he is here, in broad daylight, he offers me a crooked smile and motions me over.

"I never talk to anyone, so it's nothing personal," he says. He is a former motocross champion from Porto Alegre. In Brazil, he owned two used-car dealerships and carried a gun. He moved to America to work in a valet-parking business. When Denis Castro came to America, Luiz took him in. "My first day, I got Britney exclusive," he remembers of his first outing with Castro. "It was at a restaurant on PCH, near Cross Creek in Malibu. We got \$20,000 for that shot. After 10 days, I was working by myself."

It's easily over 100 degrees in the sun, and the photographers are begging for water. Tamm, X17's field general, stands on the marble deck in an X17 hat and T-shirt, directing the photographers to stand closer or farther in order to get the widest range of angles. Inside the courthouse, a distraught Britney Spears has yelled "Eat it! Lick it! Snort it! Fuck it!" at a reporter who asked her how the custody hearing was going. "Eat it! Lick it! Snort it! Fuck it!" will be the new vulgarian mantra for the Britney-obsessed for a week at least.

After two and a half hours of waiting, a bell rings. The doors to the loading dock crack open, and the photographers all move their arms and shoulders to get another few inches of shooting space. Britney runs over a photographer's foot, can't seem to decide whether she is turning right or left, and blunders into the median strip. She rolls down her window for a quick second and looks around, confused, then lurches forward, nearly colliding with another car. The photographers run for cover.

"Is Britney gone?" someone asks. The CNN cameraman is talking on the phone. "She almost killed about a hundred photographers," he says breathlessly. The hearing ended without the pop star's getting her children back, an event that in the greater scheme of things seems increasingly unlikely. Two months later, the star will be removed from the Summit strapped to a gurney by police officers at the end of a three-hour siege during which she locked herself and her son Jayden James in her bathroom. According to police sources, the pop star yelled at the police officers who put a sweater over her shoulders, "Don't cover me up. I'm fucking hot!"

On Thanksgiving Day, I eat a slice of pumpkin pie for breakfast and take a taxi up to the top of Mulholland. The late-morning air is crisp and clear. By the side of the road is a neat little offering of orange juice, ginseng tea, and coffee. None of the Brazilians particularly like turkey. All eight members of the MBF team—Fabricio, Max, Sandro, Luiz, Felix, Eduardo, Ismael, and Carlos—are on duty. Sandro, a short, middle-aged guy with brown puppy-dog eyes, brings over one of those

super-size chocolate bars you buy in airports and offers everyone a piece. In Brazil, he worked for the federal police. The part of the new job he still can't get used to is running red lights and trespassing. "I feel bad," he admits. "Eight years ago, I put guys in jail for this. But I have to take care of my family." Parked behind Sandro is Maxi Rinaldelli from Buenos Aires, a member of X17's West Coast Pix team. Behind him are a French pap from *Splash* and a Salvadoran from *Fame*.

Carlos, a curly-headed Brazilian charmer from Porto Alegre, is killing time in his tricked-out Land Rover LR3, which he pays for on the installment plan. Fabricio joins him. "Come out, Britney, come out come out," Carlos says.

"She's sending text messages on her phone to Kevin. 'Keep the babies. I don't want the babies.'"

"I want weed. I want coke."

At 4:44, the radio crackles. "She's out! She's out! She's out!" I jump into Fabricio's car and we drive fast down Coldwater Canyon. "Don't tell me she's going to Four Seasons again, or I will kill myself," Fabricio moans. Maxi, the Argentinian, is driving like a maniac in the wrong lane and trying to cut back into the queue. "He's new, so he's totally desperate," Fabricio says. "He's an amateur." He radios ahead for directions. Britney is at a record store. As everyone jumps from his car and rushes to the store window, I follow two of the paparazzi into a parking garage. A door opens, and I find myself standing next to her.

"Hi, Britney," I say. She looks at me and smiles brightly. "Hi," she says. "Happy Thanksgiving." One of the photographers asks her how her Thanksgiving is going so far. "Good," she says. Her eyes roll back in her head as she smiles. A Brazilian pap lowers his camera and opens her car door, as if he is still working at valet parking. The pop star gets into her car and starts driving straight toward a concrete wall.

"No, no, no!" one of the photographers shouts. He bangs on the trunk of the car to get her attention. Britney stops and rolls down the window. "This is the exit, right here," he says, pointing. The paparazzi stop shooting and form a human chain to guide her toward the exit. Britney laughs a carefree, crazy-person laugh. When the photographers finally succeed in getting her into the right lane, approaching the tollgate, the moment of human connection ends. She rolls up her window. The photographers pick up their cameras and start shooting.

On my last night on Mulholland Drive, Luiz finally agrees to let me ride with him. The inside of his two-seater Mercedes is a stripped-down steel cage that looks ready for Le Mans or Dakar. He has mounted a Sony video camera on his dashboard. As we drive down Coldwater Canyon in hot pursuit, he shows me some footage from the camera. "This is the day that she bought her new car," he says. When I ask him what pictures the pack is waiting for next, he shrugs. "Now I think she can have a little car accident," he says simply. "Lindsay had an accident in that same car."

We arrive at the Four Seasons Hotel and wait outside the parking garage for two hours. When Britney's car appears at the bottom of the ramp, the paps all shoot and then run like hell to their cars. I jump in Luiz's car, and as I try to swing the heavy door shut it catches on the grass and the lining comes loose. I have to hold the door shut for three blocks until we hit a red light, but Luiz barely registers the damage. He is focused on his job. The faces of the drivers in the cars behind us show cupidity, avarice, dopey interest, fierce intensity. Some are high as kites. "What makes me feel very good is if something I do will be remembered forever," Luiz tells me as he drives.

The dividing line between the Britney Spears story as it exists today, with a pack of photographers trailing behind her, and Britney Spears as a normal star in the Hollywood galaxy, was the night that she shaved her head. After we park at the top of the canyon, Luiz decides to give me his account of the most famous shot from the most lucrative story in the history of the paparazzi. "OK, I'll show you," he says, flipping open his laptop and propping it up on his knees.

A team from Bauer-Griffin was on Britney at her home in Malibu, and X17 jumped their story. The pop star came out, drove around, and then drove back inside her gate. When she left her house again, after 6 p.m., there were maybe 20 photographers in the chase.

Luiz shows me the pictures from his camera, with time and date stamps offering the exact model of the camera and the settings that he used for each shot. In the first images, the pop star is wearing a dark-gray sweatshirt with the hood up. As she entered the salon, Luiz tried to get a good angle by the door. "I saw I'm not gonna have a great shot," he said. "I realize maybe the place have

other windows, other doors." He drove around to the back, where he found a sliding glass door that was blocked by a plastic curtain, through which he saw a sliver of light. "You can see on my pictures, there is black in the side," he says, pointing to the dark margins. "I got all these pictures through a one-inch space."

Beyond the glass door, the pop star was sitting no more than four feet away. The 70-200 mm lens on the camera he held in his hands was too long to get the shot. "Fortunately, I was carrying two cameras," Luiz says. He switched to his second camera, a Canon Mark IIN with a short 24-70 mm lens. He turned off the flash and started shooting. At first, he thought she was putting in extensions. "But a second after, I saw the machine in her hands, and I realized she was shaving," he says. "For sure I get excited, but I don't have a shaking legs or bullshit like this. I just realize I had a second to do my job. You can see from the first frame that she never saw I was there."

In the first photograph, the star looks happy, anticipating her actions. After a while, her mood sags. The key shot comes in the middle of the sequence: the pop star is alone with her own reflection in the mirror. "She was surprised, like me," Luiz says.

"I feel glad," Luiz says, when I ask him how he feels about never getting credit for the most famous paparazzi picture of the past decade, which a more enterprising photographer might have sold to X17's competitors for several hundred thousand dollars. "I'm glad that I gave a bunch of pictures to a guy like Regis. He did the work before me. He dreams about the perfect shot. He keeps living and thinking about the shots, like me. I can't tell my son, 'One time I was working for a guy who gave me a great opportunity when I was working in valet parking, he taught me a great business and a fun business, and you know what I did? When I got a great picture, I turned my back and I sold to a guy I never sold to before!' If I told this thing to my son, he won't want to tell to nobody that I'm his dad."

The marriage of Britney Spears and the paparazzi is a marriage made in heaven, which is to say that it is as tawdry and upsetting as any other marriage. It is possible, even likely, that soon Britney Spears or some other big star with 15 or 35 photographers in hot pursuit will roll their car down the side of a mountain while on pills or drunk, and then there will be a righteous outcry against the paparazzi and the people who publish their pictures. In the rush to accuse and make sense of the moment, we will forget a simple truth. The paparazzi exist for the same reason that the stars exist: we want to see their pictures. Happier, wealthier, wildly more beautiful, partying harder, driving better cars, they live the lives that the rest of us can only dream about, until the party ends and we are confirmed in our belief that it is better, after all, not to be them.

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