

Odd Celebrity Encounters

My wife is often after me to write an entire book about celebrities I have met. Some of the people she has in mind I interviewed, either for TV Guide, my column in the L.A. Times or one of my three collections; some I met through my work in TV; some I just happened to run across.

The idea of actually sitting down and writing an entire book about these various encounters puts my teeth on edge. Maybe it's because a full-blown memoir strikes me as a rehash. I mean, isn't it enough to live through it all without then having to sit down and write about it?



Orson Bean

And, yet, some of the events were somewhat interesting and if I don't share the experiences, who will? Certainly not Oscar Levant, Groucho Marx or Stan Laurel. They're all dead, and I'm not getting any younger.

The first celebrities I ever saw anywhere except on TV or the movie screen were Orson Bean and Jack Palance. That was because I took over the corner of Wilshire and Canon in Beverly Hills nearly 60 years ago when a friend was on vacation with his family and someone had to fill in for him, selling the Sunday edition of the L.A. Times.

I was probably the only newspaper boy in town who would have recognized Orson Bean because his TV appearances at the time were limited to shows like the Blue Angel, where he would deliver offbeat comedy monologues while constructing a Christmas tree out of a newspaper. For all I know, maybe the reason he bought a paper from me was so he could go back to his hotel room and rehearse his act.

Because there was very little foot traffic, I would sit on my pile of papers and read a book. So it was only when I noticed a pair of shoes in front of me that I realized I had a customer. Looking up from a sitting position at that clock-stopping visage of Jack Palance could take several years off a person's life. Fortunately, he paid for his paper, but I certainly wouldn't have pressed the issue. I had already seen him gun down little Elisha Cooke, Jr., in *Shane* for no good reason.

The next two notables I met came about while I was writing for the UCLA Daily Bruin. I went out to MGM to interview Tony Randall, who was shooting *Boy's Night Out*. It was a frustrating experience because he told a series of amusing anecdotes, but each one ended with a string of obscenities. Without the payoffs, the anecdotes made no sense. With the payoffs, I couldn't have gotten the article published.

Equally frustrating was my session with Stan Laurel.  Because he had just recently been interviewed by John McCabe for *Mr. Laurel & Mr. Hardy*, a book that hadn't yet been published, he felt it was unethical to tell me anything he had already shared with the author. Although I tried to convince him that a few hundred words in a college paper would do nothing to curtail future book sales, he stuck to his guns. To make up for it, he insisted on playing a comedy LP by the fellow he insisted was the funniest man in the world. It turned out to be some English music hall comic I had never heard of who specialized in delivering blue material in a Cockney accent, and who, it turned out, was only the third funniest person in the room.

I first met Groucho Marx at Nate 'n' Al's, a famous deli in Beverly Hills. We hit it off pretty well, although I could have done without all the incessant puns. As the interview was just ending, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted an elderly couple who had just spotted Groucho. Like a hunting dog on point, the woman stopped in her tracks and then scurried over.

As soon as she began gushing, I could see Groucho turn a gimlet eye on her. No sooner had she assured him that she was his biggest fan in the entire world, then he began to insult her. He insulted her looks, her intelligence and, if I recall correctly, even her husband, who hadn't said a word. If Groucho had given her a pile of cash and a diamond necklace, she couldn't have been happier. She was absolutely giddy as she led her husband away. If an elderly Jewish woman could be said to be floating on air, she was definitely floating.

As they moved off, a disgruntled Groucho turned to me and said, "I've discovered that's the second worst thing about getting old. When you insult people, they think you're kidding."

Although I am not given to practical jokes, I was party to one when my friend, William Peter Blatty, struck gold with his novel, *The Exorcist*. When the book tour brought him back to L.A., the publicist contacted me about my interviewing him. I naturally agreed and we set up a lunch for a few days later.

That evening, Blatty phoned me. He thought it was absurd that we were going to do a standard interview. Instead, he suggested, I should come over to his house and we'd get the formalities out of the way. Then, because I was Jewish and he was of Lebanese heritage, when we got together at the Tail o' the Cock, we could get into a mock argument and I would stomp angrily out of the place.

Two days later, right on schedule, he said something insulting about Israel, I said something insulting about Lebanon, I slammed my notebook shut, capped my fountain pen, got out of the booth and started for the exit. I had taken no more than four steps when I heard giggling behind me. It was Blatty. He couldn't contain himself. It was probably just as well because when I went back to the table and took a look at the publicist, he appeared to have aged 20 years and was gasping for air. If I had actually gone out the door, he probably

would have plotzed on the spot.

In retrospect, what most surprised me is that it was Blatty and not I who giggled. You see, years earlier, Blatty had worked as a publicist at USC. In order to break the monotony, he and a friend concocted a plot to pass Blatty off as an Arab prince. With his friend acting as his translator, they began hitting all the hot spots in L.A. In short order, word got around that the Prince had killed someone in Saudi Arabia, and his father had sent him to L.A. until things cooled down.

Every time they hit a nightclub on the Sunset Strip, the friend would ask the maître d' for his birth date. He would then jot the information down in a little notebook. He had half the people in town thinking they were going to get a Rolls Royce on the big day.

As a result, they never paid for food or drink. But because Blatty had dreams of giving up flacking and becoming a writer, he finally blew his cover and wrote up the comic tale for the Saturday Evening Post.

When the story broke, there were a lot of red faces in town. The reddest probably were those belonging to Dick Powell and June Allyson. They had actually invited the Prince to dinner in their home. And being the perfect host and hostess, when he began eating the salad with his hands, they did, too.

One day, shortly after the story ran, Blatty's phone at USC rang. It was Dick Powell. It seems he wasn't angry. In fact, he was calling to invite Blatty to a party that weekend. There was only one stipulation. He had to come as the Prince.

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