

THE TALK



My Magic Carpet Ride

MARIA BELL PUTS HER SOCIALITE PAST BEHIND HER
AND NOT A MOMENT TOO SOON.

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or about 15 seconds, I was an L.A. socialite.

My photo appeared four times in one month in Los Angeles Confidential. Old pals would call to alert me to a new picture of myself smiling vacantly at another party. I made it into Town & Country, Women's Wear Daily and this venerable newspaper. I was even offered a reality show (don't ask). The end came as I sprinted down a red carpet in an orange ball gown, photographers calling my name as I twisted this way and that and sucked in my cheeks and stomach. Smile! My husband had wisely abandoned me while I bathed in the spotlight alone. Hey, this wasn't about him. It was about me. Fabulous me! Wait, who am I? That's when I became the first member of Socialites Anonymous. We have no meetings, but we do take 12 steps away from the camera at every opportunity.

Finding Maria In her whirlwind life as a temporary L.A. socialite, Maria Bell drank, ate and smiled her way through Paparazzi Land.

The dawn of the L.A. socialite is now. New York socialites have been dominant for decades. From Babe and Slim at the Colony with Truman to Lee and Jackie on Ari's yacht, New York and socialites go together like peas and carrots. The 90's were quiet in Los Angeles, and all we could do was read about the adventures of those sisters Miller and Lauder. In a new century, the rich and sort of famous wanted in. But L.A. is not New York. And L.A. socialites are like Miller Lite: a third less filling than your average New York variety. Yes, there are old L.A. families and new L.A. money, and it all mingles at fundraisers and parties. But let's face it: in L.A., we live in cars that we drive ourselves, filled with old juice boxes and smudges of jam. We still occasionally (when no one is looking) wear UGG boots.

I never had a desire to become a socialite. It started happening when I

THE TALK

wasn't paying attention. Like cellulite. I was persuaded to appear on the cover of a new local magazine to represent P.S. Arts, an organization I love and of which I am the chairwoman. The night before the shoot, I began to panic. I pictured my face on the cover, and I felt nauseous. The unfortunate title of the magazine is *Privilege*, as in, "I'm privileged, and you are not." Or, "It is such a privilege to be me." "Hi, I'm here to help the underprivileged." Yikes. I chickened out, leaving the public-relations people rather annoyed.

Of course, there's more than just *Privilege* for L.A.'s privileged to peruse. Overnight, like a field of toxic mushrooms, society magazines began sprouting up with an insatiable appetite for party pictures. When you consider that Teri Hatcher gets up early and has to work late, there aren't enough good celebrities to go around.

Enter the socialite makers.

Nowadays the personal press agent in Los Angeles is as ubiquitous as Juicy Couture. Press agents work both sides of the fence. They might represent you, or they might work with the fashion houses and the charities that control the guest lists. A new face in town can make the scene fast by retaining one of them. Someone with lots of worthy causes to promote can use them to get the word out. But whatever the motivation, the results are the same: place a few pictures in a local magazine, add vodka and shake. *Voilà*: instant socialite.

There is one professional, however, who practically invented the term. He's the go-to guy for fame and fabulousness. Hanging with this well-connected fellow means enticing invitations and fawning attention from his friends in the press. Until I leapt onto his radar screen, I saw myself as just a regular mother and writer who happened to like clothes. Despite the fact that my husband makes soap operas for a living, my life isn't one. Yes, I support the arts, but I would never call myself a philanthropist — my Svengali did that *for me*. Seen through the prism of his spin, my lifestyle suddenly appeared ever so chic and glamorous.

For a brief time I was his favorite protégée, and I was always ready for my close-up. No money changed hands, but he did get a couple of free plane rides to Aspen. Invitations poured in, and all I really had to do was look chic. He showered me with flattery and flowers — and advice: avoid knits ("They make you look bulky") and don't forget to spritz. When I wondered what to wear to a party, he would say things like, "Darling, don't you have some Chanel couture lying around?" It was the perfect courtship of a gay man and a married mom. Here was a guy who seemed to really appreciate me. But, like Restylane, it didn't last. When he found a fresher face to promote, my Henry Higgins dumped me. Like all his protégées, I had come with an expiration date.

It was just as well. As my friend asked, "When did going to parties become all about having your picture taken?" I have attended many events where the photographers outnumber the guests. These very same guests would spend the morning after a major event checking out their photos on WireImage.com. Keeping count of your own photos and Googling your girlfriends is fun — or painful. Why wasn't I invited to Barneys for that new perfume launch? I became accustomed to blushing at my kids' school, as another well-meaning parent blurted out, "Hey, just saw a photo of you in *Angeleno*, or was it *L.A. Confidential* or *Los Angeles Magazine* — or all three?"

Truth be told, I'm one of the lucky ones. I went to the brink of socialite hell and returned unscathed. I want to keep it that way. My existential panic reached its zenith in the flash of a bulb as my mind went blank, and I wondered, Who am I and what am I doing here? My dreams of fame had always involved achievement, not just access. I never built up the antibodies for overexposure. Now, looking back, I'm left with nagging philosophical questions. If you know you are ridiculous but still behave in ridiculous fashion, are you still ridiculous? If I fall on the red carpet and no one takes my picture, do I still exist?

Pass me the Cristal with the little straw, and I'll think about it. ■

New Bold Faces

THESE ARRIVALS ON THE SOCIAL CIRCUIT HAVE YET TO BE OVEREXPOSED. BUT THE SEASON IS YOUNG.



Jessica Joffe (left, with Jamie Johnson).
Day job: reporter at The New York Observer.
Habitat: West Village.
Designers: Proenza Schouler, Adrian, Costello Tagliapietra.
Currently reading: "The nutritional information on my box of Lucky Charms."



Annelise Peterson
Day job: publicist for Calvin Klein.
Habitat: West Village.
Designers: Calvin (duh), Narciso, Stella.
Style icon: Slim Keith.
Cause: Henry Street Settlement.
Reading: Immanuel Kant.



Lily Atherton
Day job: jewelry advisor at Jasper.
Habitat: Upper East Side.
Canteen: Il Buco.
Favorite store: E. Vogel Custom Boots (she rides), Moss in SoHo.
Holiday spots: Lamu, Kenya; Sun Valley, Idaho.



Julia Restoin Roitfeld (left, with Carine Roitfeld).
Day job: design-management student.
Habitat: SoHo.
Designers: anything from the closet of her mom, the Paris Vogue editor Carine.
Canteen: Russian Samovar.
Currently reading: Gogol. "I love his sense of humor."



Forebee Bishop
Day job: celebrity services coordinator at Calvin Klein.
Habitat: West Village.
Designers: Calvin (second duh) with a touch of Chloé, Zac Posen and Missoni.
Cause: New Yorkers for Children.
Holiday spots: Sweden, Dominican Republic.



Vanessa Haydon (left, with Brittny Gastineau).
Day job: model-actress.
Cause: Operation Smile.
Designers: Gucci, Sass & Bide.
Dog or cat? the Havanese puppy that her fiancé, Donald Trump Jr., bought her at a charity event.