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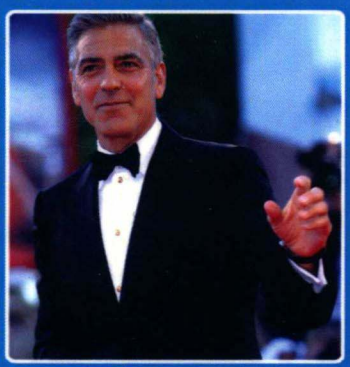

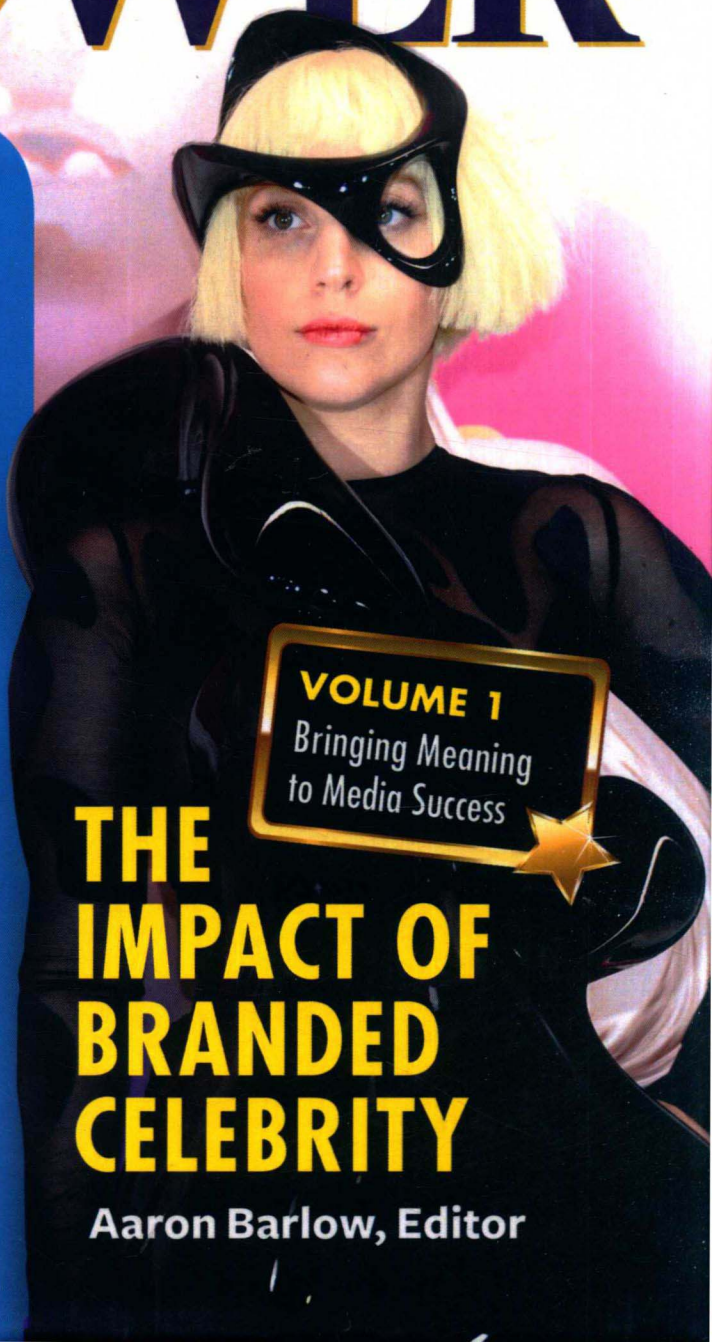

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Bringing Meaning to Media Success

THE IMPACT OF BRANDED CELEBRITY

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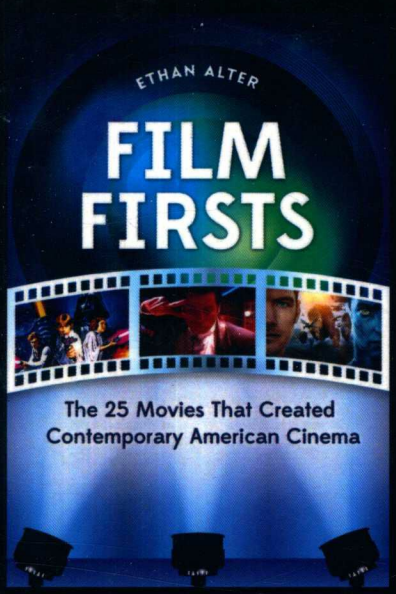

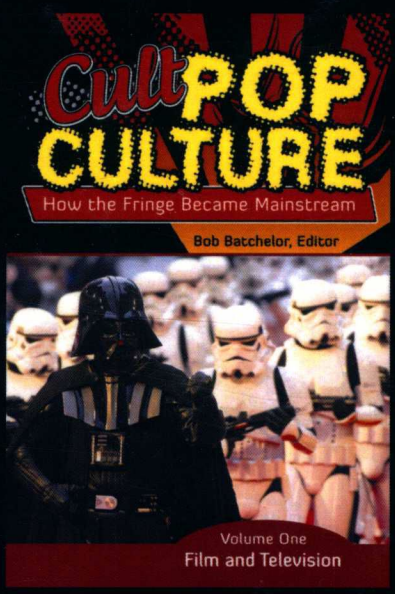

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VOLUME 1

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Volume 1: Bringing Meaning to Media Success

Aaron Barlow, Editor

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Star Power

For
Isabella, Fred, Stella, and Russell

Introduction: Bringing Meaning to Media Success

Aaron Barlow

Ronald Reagan—If there is any name that embodies the power that stardom can achieve, it is his. Though never quite reaching one of the top spots in the Hollywood firmament, Reagan seized the power that his reasonably bright stardom afforded him and turned it into a political force as strong as any seen in 20th-century America. Though his brilliance did not lie in his ideas or originality (and he would have agreed), he was absolutely unmatched in his skill in transforming one sort of power into another . . . in taking what he had learned in one arena and making it work in his new endeavor. All successful national politicians since have turned to Hollywood to teach them how to be a star, for stars they must be. And they can thank Reagan for that.

Reagan, of course, wasn't the first or only media star to become a presence on the national political stage. His contemporary George Murphy was California senator while Reagan was governor of that same state. There have been plenty of others, the most recent being comedian Al Franken, now a senator from Minnesota. Another, much earlier comedian Will Rogers could easily have run for office and won—his political humor had made him one of the most popular people of his time. Franken, though, has abandoned his humor, for the most part, in his developing political persona, trying for a *gravitas* that would never have worked back in his days on *Saturday Night Live*. Reagan, on the other hand, carried the signature earnestness he developed during his earliest days in film all the way to the White House.

After all, though there had been a real George Gipp, it is Reagan who is remembered today in the commonplace "Let's win one for the Gipper"

associated with the 1940 movie *Knute Rockne, All American,* in which Reagan, of course, played the earnest Gipp.

There have been media stars, of course, ever since there have been media. Even before. The griots and poets of orality cultures were certainly known throughout their own cities and villages—and even beyond—but, except in rare cases (Homer and Virgil first come to mind, of course), their power rested pretty much within their professions and not far beyond the sounds of their voices. The rulers and the warriors around them held what may have *seemed* to be the real power in their own communities, and the entertainers knew they could never gain the brute force necessary for displacing them directly. In fact, they knew, even back in the days of antiquity, that, if they were to have power at all, it had to come through their ability to make people happy, at least initially, to divert them and relax them, and not through threats or violence.

Oh, there was one more avenue to power open to media stars, one that probably led to the development of the "politician." They could develop power through their own machinations. One way or another, they knew it certainly wasn't going to come at the point of a sword.

Still entertainers in the old days were most always close to power, and that certainly lured some of them to try to find their own ways to grab it. Palace plots, intrigue—these weren't simply part of the art portrayed but were part of the lives of the artists. Being so often physically close to power, the taste for power, for the ability to make a difference—in one's own life, one's family, and one's community—has surely been in the artist's mouth since the earliest of times.

Recognition that not all power rests in the force of arms was critical to the success of media stars anyhow. Sometimes, certainly, the court jesters even managed to work their ways into becoming the powers behind the thrones. Some of them, in this sense, were among the first real politicians.

For a number of reasons, many of them technological in nature (and related to the Industrial Revolution) by the Romantic Revolution of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the power of the artist had begun to change—as had his or her position in society. No longer was he (or, far too rarely, she) quite so dependent on the largess of the physical ruler, but the entertainer could now eke out a living (or better) performing before broader audiences—Shakespeare and his contemporaries had shown the way a couple of centuries before, but patronage had made even that expansion possible. It was only at the time of Tom Paine and then Lord Byron, when dependence on a patron for largess and protection was no longer so absolutely necessary, that an artist could become—dare we say it?—a public revolutionary. Or, at least, a political gadfly.

Oh, and a walking profit center. It was at this point, also, if one wants to look at it most cynically, that the roles of entertainers and politicians began to diverge. It would be almost two centuries (if you discount incidents like John Wilkes Booth leaping from a stage to kill a president) before the two would once more begin to merge.

Even though the Romantic Revolution had put forth a new vision of the artist, the tainted image of the popular entertainer (not the one surviving on patronage, but the one serving poorer audiences) as an itinerant and probably immoral ne'er-do-well remained. Mark Twain's duke and dauphin in *Huckleberry Finn* are probably closer to the 19th-century image of the entertainer than anything Romantic poet William Wordsworth put forward. It was only with the advent of electronic media that the entertainer as a unique and honorable professional really began to come into his own. Or, perhaps, I might more accurately say, into *her* own. Electronic media had more to do with women's suffrage and liberation than is generally suspected, in part because the new media industries had not quite settled into patriarchy before women had begun to carve out roles for themselves.

There is an irony to this. At the same time that stardom and success of entertainers could not be denied, the new media of film (most notably) began to develop its own misogyny. Still, though Svengalis and executives tried to control them, it was womens' voices on the recordings, their faces on the screens, and those voices and faces carried a great deal of power. Though progress was often in fits and starts, and Hollywood soon slid back from its early promise of sexual equality, there were women directors and women producers almost from the beginning of the motion-picture industry. One of the great studios, United Artists, counted a woman, Mary Pickford, among its founders. These successes faded, unfortunately, as the entrenched sexism behind those who created the studio structure began to make itself felt, but they were not completely forgotten.

There was always room for women writers, both for the screen and about it in newspapers and magazines, and film editing was so long a woman's realm that it actually came to be degraded in the eyes of the misogynist Hollywood moguls who had come to control the industry and who had frozen women out of many industry roles, for the time being (though it has proven to be a long time being), at least.

But nothing could deny the woman on the screen, and it was only a matter of time before the pitched battles of the likes of Bette Davis against the Jack Warners of studio management exploded into a future when more and more women would take control of their own roles both on the screen and in the industry. This has happened, of course, though with neither the speed nor the finality that many had hoped for or expected. Too few

women, for example, find themselves at the helm of film projects today, the word *director* behind their names.

Perhaps the greatest success for the movement toward woman's equality in electronic entertainment was that force of media called Lucille Ball. Like Ronald Reagan, she was never at the top of the Hollywood film-industry hierarchy, but, also like Reagan, she was a great student of what was happening around her. She paid attention to what others were doing, to what worked and what did not. She *learned,* and she never forgot. It can almost seem, looking back, that her years before television were merely her way of getting ready for television—just as Reagan's years in the movies can easily be seen as his own preparation—for politics. She remains the archetypal television star and the fount of almost all sitcom humor.

A few years ago, I wrote an article about Yakima Canutt. Entitled "The Greatest Cowboy Star You've Never Heard Of," it dealt with the career of perhaps the most important early stuntman, someone who worked on around 200 movies from the 1920s through the 1960s, primarily westerns (he was known for handling animals without hurting them) but also as a renegade soldier who tries to attack Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and as the second-unit director and choreographer of the famous chariot race in the 1959 remake of *Ben-Hur.* Though he had started out as an extra and then a stuntman working for the likes of early cowboy star Tom Mix, he was soon featured in his own films, but gave that up at about the time sound films came in. He had a few speaking roles in early John Wayne movies for Republic Pictures, but he had already turned his attention to creating the stunts that made him legendary within the film industry.

A slight brush with stardom had proven enough for "Yak." He was not interested, apparently, in what it could bring him or with what he could do with the fame and power he might be able to gather. He saw no advantage in it to himself or to his own creative endeavors. In fact, he had greater freedom to follow his own interests when *not* a star than he would have found, had he continued on the quest for stardom.

Canutt made the opposite decision from that of many who have since become household names, some of whom deliberately set out to become stars simply for the power and career freedom they felt they could find. Notable among these in later years is Bruce Springsteen, who was a middling successful rocker for over the first decade of his career—before deciding to become a star and creating a carefully planned track for doing so.

In that article about Canutt, I also wrote of Springsteen, saying that he "deliberately set out to reach as high a level of fame (and of an income that supported his future endeavors) as he could with his *Born in the U.S.A.*

album. Since that success, he has looked less to fame than to satisfying his own artistic drives."[1] Fame, for Springsteen, was as freeing as it was confining to the mind of Canutt. As confining (as we will see in the second volume of this set) as it would be for novelist Mario Puzo, whose own quest for fame was every bit as plotted as Springsteen's.

Canutt, Puzo, Springsteen, Reagan, Ball: these entertainers knew what they were about, though they made decisions relating to their career paths that set them far apart from each of the others. Canutt wanted freedom (not power) behind the scenes; Puzo wanted to be able to live by his skills as a novelist; Springsteen wanted to be able to create without having to worry about audience reaction, about what the impact of his latest project might be on his career; Reagan wished to be in control; and Ball wanted to entertain. Each had her or his own vision of star power and of what it could—or could not—bring. Today's artists represent as broad a spectrum as this of ideas about star power and of desires that they wish to realize through it.

Today's entertainers, though, only have possibilities for moving beyond their current roles because of what entertainers in the past accomplished—or did not, for as many lessons have been learned through failure as through success.

For each of the stars whose power is discussed in the following chapters, there are at least a dozen others who would have done just as well. This—along with its accompanying volume—is not meant as a comprehensive study of star power but an introduction to the ways in which stars *use* their power. In this first volume, we dip into the history of star power, attempting to show the breadth and the problems and successes that stars of all sorts—from politicians to poets to performers—have faced over the years in trying to branch out from their base of success. Then we look at some of the various ways stars have tried to leverage their fame—just a few, but providing an introduction to the variety of roles stars today play—beyond their primary roles in the media.

The variety of approaches found in these chapters is extensive. Some are quite conversational and personal; others are scholarly, rigorous in their presentations. Each one, though, provides both insights and information that can be valuable to anyone from a casual reader to scholars who are themselves on research voyages. Useful information (like entertainment) comes in a variety of guises, and the writers here have chosen their approaches, in part, to match their subject matter, illuminating through style as much as through, say, footnotes.

Section 1, "Backgrounds on Electronic Media, Stardom, and Consequences," provides a look at some of the early attempts to bring meaning

Contents

SECTION 1

Backgrounds on Electronic Media, Stardom, and Consequences

The history of celebrities attempting to use the power of their names to gain more power, to enter new fields, to engage their political beliefs, to help others, to make money—the list is long and complex—is a history of attempt and, often, of failure. That's to be expected: celebrities have always gained their star power through risk. It's what they know, and they have succeeded through it.

Celebrities who make it to the top, certainly, of media stardom have little fear of falling on their faces or making fools of themselves. They do it all the time—that's what keeps the tabloids in business. Their senses of boundaries are vague, whether they are in show business or politics, yet their successes, paradoxically, sometimes give them the idea that they are always going to succeed and that they are the ones, as Bob Dylan says:

> That can do what's never been done
> That can win what's never been won