

FAME WITHOUT ACCLAIM

What did tabloid icons such as Anna Nicole Smith, Paris Hilton, and Nicole Richie do to deserve celeb status?

Originally published in *The Blade* on Wednesday, February 21, 2007

BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Let's review: Paris Hilton became famous ... why? And Nicole Richie? And Anna Nicole Smith?

Get past all the headlines, the pictures in every supermarket tabloid, the media obsession, and try to remember. Start with Smith. Was it because she:

- Married an 89-year-old billionaire when she was 26?
- Posed in *Playboy*?

Are those really enough to make her a cultural sensation for years to come?

The short answer, according to some pop-culture experts, is yes.

"Fame has been redefined," explained Dave Levine, executive producer of *Showbiz Tonight* on *Headline News*. "Fame used to be something that you earned through your accomplishments. Now fame is predicated on how you look, how you act, and whether you're an interesting story, regardless of accomplishment."

You might call it famous for being famous.

Take a hotel heiress like Hilton, mix in a sex tape, and - voila! - instant celebrity.

Give her an on-again, off-again friendship with a sidekick who is '70s soul singer Lionel Richie's daughter and you've got a reality TV show and enough gossip-column fodder for years.

"For whatever reason, someone like [Hilton] has a kind of look and demeanor that some people are entertained by, that they're amused by," said William Husson, visiting assistant professor of communication at the State University of New York at Albany.

This is not to say that the existence of people who achieve great fame without particular achievement is new, he continued.

People have always been interested in those who are different from them - the rich, glamorous, and beautiful. You don't have to fly across the Atlantic Ocean like Charles Lindbergh or orbit the earth like John Glenn to become an icon.

Zsa Zsa Gabor knew that. So did Farrah Fawcett.

Even 19th-century author and naturalist Henry David Thoreau knew it. In *Walden*, he touched on America's appetite for celebrity gossip:

We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the New; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has



Anna Nicole Smith shown in 2004, engaged and manipulated the media. (ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS)

the whooping cough.

There's something a little different about this kind of celebrity now.

"There is this mechanism, this machine that is out there, this celebrity machine," said Matt McAllister, associate professor of media studies at Penn State University. "If you can get plugged into that, you start this famous-for-being-famous life."

Years ago in the early days of television, there were fewer outlets that could make this happen. One was the TV game show.



Paris Hilton, left, and Nicole Richie are examples of celebrities who are famous for being famous.

"Who really is Charley Weaver?" Mr. McAllister asked, referring to the persona played by actor and comedian (and Toledo-born) Cliff Arquette. "I'm sure most people didn't know who Charley Weaver was, but they knew he was from Hollywood Squares."

Now there has been an explosion of opportunities like this, with a myriad of television programs and tabloid magazines dedicated to keeping the American public abreast of celebrity news. Each has a stake in promoting fame for fame's sake.

The night Smith died was a bonanza for entertainment news shows, according to published reports. Inside Edition had season-high numbers and Showbiz Tonight had its highest

ratings ever. Entertainment Tonight and The Insider saw increases in ratings of more than 30 percent over the previous year.

All this for the subject of a reality television show.

"It's in their best interest to have celebrities, and if this means they are responsible for manufacturing these celebrities, then that's what they'll do," Mr. McAllister said.

On the other side, this breed of celebrity is more than happy to engage and manipulate the media.

"These are the people who embrace the paparazzi and are using it," said Esther Clinton, visiting professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University.

The more we see about these people, the easier it is to establish personal feelings for them. So Smith becomes more than a centerfold. We see her reality TV show, hear about her family troubles, follow her legal battles and her struggle with her weight, and we empathize.

And when she dies, we not only watch, but many of us truly care.

"Because of her television show, people felt like they knew her. It's like a lot of Americans have lost a friend," Ms. Clinton said.

Perhaps the best example, though, comes back to Hilton.

"To me, the Paris Hiltons of the world are like NASCAR," said Mr. Levine, of Showbiz Tonight. "You keep watching and you know eventually there's gonna be a wreck."

As for the future - one that includes YouTube and more outlets to the world and potential fame than ever before - who knows if the line from Casablanca, "We'll always have Paris," will hold true. Mr. Levine suspects we'll continue to watch people like her - until someone better and more interesting comes along.

"If you actually think about it, they've only been around a [few] years," he said. "It seems like forever."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)

