

**ENQUIRING MIND**  
Barry Levine on the  
waterfront, Brooklyn,  
New York.

**ENQUIRER**  
THE BEST SELLING WEEKLY IN AMERICA

# **SEX, TRASH &**





**B**ARRY LEVINE, THE NEW YORK BUREAU chief of the *National Enquirer*, stood by the Hudson River surrounded by garbage. He wore a navy blue Hugo Boss suit and in his hands cradled a pair of cell phones that rang incessantly, sometimes both at once. The bright lights of Manhattan, hiding thousands of salacious stories, flickered in the distance, while Levine worked the phones, juggling them from ear to ear like a couple of auditory six shooters. It was early August, midway through an excruciating heat wave, and as he paced back and forth under a torrent of sweat, Levine began to look more and more like his usual disheveled self—like a well-dressed man who'd just wandered out from behind some movie star's hedges. That afternoon he'd gotten a tip that the singer Bobby Brown had been rushed to a New Jersey hospital after succumbing to a possible drug overdose (Brown's representatives say it was heat exhaustion). Levine had four reporters working different angles, and they were all calling in with updates on Brown and on his pop diva wife Whitney Houston. The story, sure to make the front page of the *Enquirer*, was only one of a half dozen leads he was monitoring that night in the oppressive heat under the Manhattan Bridge. As the calls came in with a piece of good news or a new lead—a break in a story about Ted Kennedy's latest health crisis or a scoop on a brewing book advance feud between Bill and Hillary—Levine's face would light up and his mouth would explode into an enormous tabloid headline grin that tugged at his nose and at the puffy bags under his eyes.

"The phone was ringing until 1 a.m.," he said later. "It was complete chaos, but that's how I like it."

Levine, a man with a reputation in tabloid circles that's as outrageous as his paper's notorious blaring headlines, has

# & VIDEOTAPES

**The *National Enquirer's* Barry Levine made his name riffling through celebrity garbage and dodging bullets at Melanie Griffith's wedding. Now the guy who discovered Jesse's Love Child is digging for dirt in the capital—and finding his scoops recycled on the front page of the *New York Times*.**

**BY JAY CHESHES**

**PHOTO BY MICHAEL EDWARDS**

been keeping the famous on their toes for nearly 15 years. As Los Angeles bureau chief of the *Star* in the late '80s he terrorized Tinseltown from the tabloid's cramped quarters in Beverly Hills. "In Hollywood there's the heroes and the villains," he says. "It's a morality play. I'd rather be a villain. It's a better gig." Later, as managing editor of the TV series *A Current Affair*, he helped turn Amy Fisher and Joey Buttafuoco into household names. Two years ago he returned to print, lured to the *National Enquirer* by an offer to open the tabloid's first full-fledged editorial operation in New York City. "I won't rest until every limo driver in New York is wired," he says, "until every personal assistant to every celebrity is working for us."

And yet at the *Enquirer* Levine has been breaking stories that have been getting recognition in unusual places. Earlier this year Levine directed the team of reporters who tracked down Jesse Jackson's mistress and illegitimate child, as well as the first hints of financial impropriety at Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition. The story put the *Enquirer* on the front page of the *New York Times* and got the 42-year-old Levine an invitation to appear on the *Today* show. The paper's coverage of politicians has earned the *Enquirer* so many plaudits from the mainstream media that flattering snippets have become an important part of the paper's new marketing campaign. Last February the *Washington Post's* media critic Howard Kurtz

## THE ATTACK ON LEVINE INSPIRED A BIZARRE LEGAL FIRST: A TABLOID SUING A CELEBRITY.

dubbed the *Enquirer* "the hottest publication in America."

"In many ways politicians have become as big as movie stars," says Levine. "After the Jackson story I got so many calls about political stories. Unfortunately we can't do all of them; we have to think about our audience, what they want to read. They're still just as interested in Kim Basinger and Alec Baldwin as they are in Jesse Jackson."

Still, Levine is particularly enamored of the last president, a man he says will "continue to be an *Enquirer* cover boy hopefully for years to come."

"I would like nothing more than to spend an off-the-record night on the town in New York at the *Enquirer's* expense with Bill Clinton," he says. "What a figure he's been, what a tabloid celebrity!"

Tabloid culture and the mainstream press are merging, argues the *Post's* Kurtz. "With the *Enquirer* making its mark," he says, "journalists are now giving the *Enquirer* grudging respect, because whatever the trash level in other areas, its work on the Jackson and Hugh Rodham stories was worthy of being chased by the mainstream press."

If Levine has helped blur the distinction between tabloid and mainstream news coverage, it has partly been by mandate. Shortly before he came on board, the *Enquirer*, along with its competitors the *Weekly World News* and the *Star*, was acquired by an aspiring media tycoon named David Pecker, who some years earlier helped John F. Kennedy Jr. launch *George* magazine. *George* failed partly because no one wanted to read glossy profiles of politicians. Levine and the *Enquirer* had a more lucrative formula, covering politicians exactly the way they cover Hollywood stars—by getting the dirt on them. Even so, adding political stories to its menu has made the *Enquirer* a little more palatable, and gone are the stories on psychics, swamp creatures, and UFOs—all favorite subjects of Generoso Pope, the eccentric former CIA man who bought the paper almost 50 years ago.

"We don't cover any of the alien activity anymore. That ended in the last seven or eight years," says *Enquirer* editorial director Steve Coz. "It created a credibility problem, so we eased it out of the paper."

"They used to call us sleazebags," says Steve Dunleavy, a friend and former tabloid colleague who's now a *New York Post* columnist. "These nitwits who sneered at us, they want to open their veins now that the *New York Times's* front page actually has to recognize the *National Enquirer*. Now they

want to know, who is Barry Levine? I'll tell you who he is: He's the best news man I've ever come across."

BARRY HAS ALWAYS BEEN A theatrical guy," says Richard Leiby, a *Washington Post* reporter who years ago worked with Levine at their college paper, the *Temple University News*, a raucous daily that had its own drug columnist. "I'm fairly certain he was smoking large cigars and going

about with that sort of Jimmy Breslinesque tabloid presence." To cultivate his own outlandish newsroom persona, Levine, who eventually became the paper's editor-in-chief, embraced the kind of stunts that would only have been encouraged professionally at a place like the *National Enquirer*. In 1976, to commemorate the release of *King Kong*, Levine donned a gorilla suit, trekked down to Philadelphia City Hall, and began scaling the building. His photo made the front page of the *Philadelphia Daily News*. After college Levine spent a few years as a sports writer at the *Baltimore News American* but never managed to find his niche as he continued to long for the kind of mythic fedora-crowded newsroom. "I wanted more of the drama," he says. "What I liked about papers was the





old *Chicago Front Page* type of bigger-than-life writing, and that was in the tabloids.”

Levine moved with his first wife, Joanne Brooks, to Los Angeles in 1987 to begin life on the margins of journalism at Rupert Murdoch’s *Star*. “There were 10 million people in America buying tabloids in that day. That was pretty heady.”

There, he quickly settled into the groove. One of his earliest assignments took him to Moscow with a very surly Mike Tyson, who was on a honeymoon of sorts with his new wife, Robin Givens. Levine and the heavyweight didn’t get along all that well. “He threatened to throw me over the stairwell when I asked him about his marriage,” recalls Levine. “We were up on the 20th floor, and he said ‘Nobody will find you’ and ‘You’re an American, so they won’t care about you anyway.’ I managed to talk him out of it.”

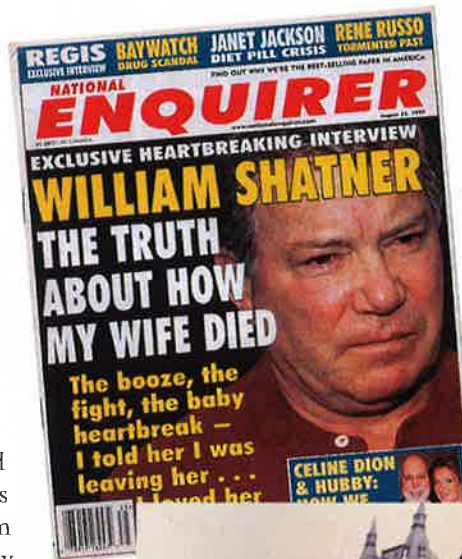
Later Levine devised an elaborate plan to infiltrate the Elizabeth Taylor–Larry Fortensky wedding, a heavily fortified affair caught in a tabloid feeding frenzy. “Barry sent us a 60-page battle plan he’d drawn up about how he was going to get people into this wedding,” recalls Steve LeGrice, Levine’s former boss at the *Star*. “Hot air balloons, walkie-talkies—it was like a full-blown military operation.” That particular operation fizzled when the hot air balloon got snagged on a tree and came whistling to earth with a thud.

“For a while there we were very big into stealing celebrity garbage,” says John South, a veteran *Enquirer* reporter who used to compete against Levine and now works for him. “I remember one of the *Star* reporters complaining to me that Barry was so into it that the whole *Star* office smelled like a garbage dump.”

When Levine traveled for stories, he stayed in the same fine hotels and ate at the same restau-

rants as the celebrities he was tracking. He usually carried plenty of cash, and on the big stories he was authorized to offer sources exorbitant sums to ensure exclusivity.

One afternoon, before crashing Roseanne Barr and Tom Arnold’s wedding, Levine stopped at the lot of 20th Century Fox, a Murdoch property. “I went to the office of this executive with a big handlebar mustache,” he recalls. “I was given \$100,000 literally on a silver platter. And so off I went to Roseanne Barr’s wedding with \$100,000 in various pockets to buy up neighbors with.”



#### SECRETS OF MY SUCCESS

From top: Levine’s favorite *Enquirer* cover; Levine (writing) with Mike Tyson in Moscow; a 1988 *Star*; Elizabeth Taylor, hospital-bound in sunglasses, 1990; Levine in a scuffle at Robert Wagner’s wedding, 1990.



Levine, like all good tabloid reporters, knew that the most important thing was getting there first. When Don Johnson wed Melanie Griffith for the second time outside Aspen, Levine was the only reporter who managed to find a way to cover the story. He chartered a helicopter and buzzed the wedding, equipped with a camera with a telephoto lens. The reception from below was a little more hostile than even Levine had anticipated. From the

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## PACE

who had paid \$900 for the painting in 1959, agreed to sell. The acquisition made the front page of the *New York Times*, and along with the sale of *Blue Poles* changed the market for American art.

**1981** Claude Picasso and I had been casual friends for many years. After the death of his father and the subsequent success of the lawsuit he brought against the French government, we met again at a party in East Hampton and, our relationship renewed, began spending time together in Paris. Claude showed me transparencies from his extraordinary archive of the works in the Picasso estate. I was most intrigued by the sketchbooks. It was agreed that I would act as agent for Claude, Picasso's daughter Paloma, and grandson Bernard in presenting a major exhibition from the estate.

What fascinates me about representing the estate of historically significant artists is the challenge of revealing unknown or little-considered aspects of the work, allowing for a new or more complex evaluation and sometimes a reappraisal of their careers. I proposed an exhibition of Picasso's sketchbooks, to be accompanied by a publication that would catalog most of the other notebooks in the possession of most of Picasso's heirs. The book would be a valuable document.

I began research for the project in 1980

and soon realized that it was such an immense undertaking that I would be unable to present the exhibition for five or six years. Another body of work cursorily represented in the MoMA retrospective was the very late work, shown by Picasso in 1973 at the Palais des Papes, in Avignon. The exhibition, mounted in a kind of 19th-century Salon style, was Picasso's last great gift. He covered the walls, double and triple hung with all of the unedited and unframed canvases painted between 1969 and 1972. Critically catastrophic, the exhibition was received as the senile ramblings of a once great painter—as messy and imprecise as the tragedy of old age.

I knew that the Avignon paintings had in the '70s inspired a generation of artists as diverse as Julian Schnabel and Georg Baselitz, so against the advice of my scholar friends and with the full support of my artist friends and Claude, Paloma, and Bernard, we mounted an exhibition of late paintings, which I designated the "Avignon Paintings." It sold out before the exhibition opened to the accolades of critics.

**1999** Loss hovers over Saul Steinberg's life, and its fog infiltrates the work. In the Gogol drawings and objects a man is in search of his lost nose. In the documents he is in search of his foggy identity, and in the maps whole cities and countries are lost in the myopic

perception of a New Yorker's view of America. When we discuss this, Steinberg says, "Today you get from here, where you board the plane, to there, where you get off. There's nothing in between, not like it used to be. The discovery of Bozeman, Montana, is lost."

Being with Steinberg was seeing a layered world whose reality was heightened by the gift of his perception. We were friends for 25 years and had several exhibitions together. Annually we would plan shows, and Steinberg would postpone them, annually. Each exhibition that actually took place was a minor miracle, as he worried about the critical reception of his work. He feared the classification of "cartoonist." For him the idiom was a springboard, a kind of shorthand whose style was captivating, a seduction that instantly brought the viewer into his arena of ideas, both intellectual and pictorial.

Steinberg once showed me a drawing of a group of women parading down a street in Los Angeles in which each one is dressed in the costume of a different era. Each one is safeguarding the period within which she blossomed and to which she forever belongs. Unlike Steinberg, each one is dated, but together they are a timeline woven into the fabric of contemporary memory, reaching back and looking forward and, like Saul Steinberg, trying to make sense of the carnival we call the 20th century. ■

## LEVINE

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ground an unidentified security guard opened fire on the chopper, peppering the cockpit with buckshot. "The pilot I hired was a Vietnam vet," recalls Levine. "When he was being shot at he had flashbacks and wanted to bomb the people that were shooting at us." The attack made the evening news that night and inspired a bizarre legal first: a tabloid suing a celebrity.

One afternoon Levine got a tip that Elizabeth Taylor, who had fallen ill with pneumonia, was being transferred from one Los Angeles hospital to another. The former screen goddess was being wheeled out of an ambulance when she noticed Levine's photographer on the roof across the street. "She had an IV in her arm, was on a stretcher, orderlies around her," Levine recalls. "She took out a pair of sunglasses. I don't know where they came from, because she was wrapped in a robe and a sheet, but somehow she took out a pair of sunglasses and put them on as if to say, Even though I may be coming out of an ambulance I'm still Liz Taylor and I'm still glam-

orous. It was a classic Hollywood moment."

Does he ever feel bad about the effect his reporting has on people's private lives? Evidently not. The way he figures it, if he didn't report these stories somebody else would. Still, there are plenty of celebrities who would be thrilled to see Barry Levine tarred and feathered. When he went with a friend to watch the taping of Roseanne Barr's TV program, Tom Arnold, her husband at the time, spotted Levine in the audience and instructed the crowd to boo him out of the studio. He stayed.

After Murdoch sold the *Star* to its arch-enemy, the *Enquirer*, in 1990, Levine moved to New York, where he landed a job at *A Current Affair*, Murdoch's salacious evening TV program. It was the golden age of tabloid television—an era, says Levine, of total madness working against rivals at *Inside Edition* "in an office that had ant farms and dogs running around, and a potbellied pig—complete and utter chaos in the filthiest newsroom in New York City." In those days guys like Levine weren't getting many kudos from the likes of the *Washington Post*, which once described his former TV em-

ployer as "both the lowest form of journalism and the lowest form of television."

Levine spent most of his time at the show negotiating for exclusives and spent a fortune buying up stories: the Waco siege, the William Kennedy Smith rape trial, the O.J. Simpson murder case, the Susan Smith child killings, the death of Princess Diana. He'd nail down a new angle and then dispatch Steve Dunleavy, the show's larger-than-life on-air bloodhound, to appear on camera and conduct the interviews. Dunleavy, known for his boundless appetite for vodka tonics, would sometimes file his report and then head to the bar. *A Current Affair's* satellite operations director Sharri Berg, a broadcaster who is now a vice president at Fox News Channel, would staple money and plane tickets into the breast pocket of Dunleavy's jacket to ensure that he'd make it home in one piece. Levine and Berg spent long hours together in the office, and late at night, when the work day had finally ended, they often retreated for drinks to the bar across the street. They were married at the Copacabana in 1997, a year after the show was canceled.

## LEVINE

After the demise of *A Current Affair*, Levine moved to *Extra*, one of the few remaining tabloid shows. The genre had been destroyed by media magnets like O.J. Simpson, whose tabloid scandals blurred the line between broadcast news and tabloid TV to such an extent that the latter all but vanished. "*Dateline NBC*," says Levine, "is *A Current Affair* with the same bells and whistles, except the stories are longer."

In the spring of 1999, toward the end of his brief tenure at *Extra*, Levine worked out a deal to purchase videotape of the parachuting antics of Thor Kappfjell, a Norwegian daredevil known as the Human Fly, who had let him know in advance that he planned to skydive off the World

Trade Center, in lower Manhattan. Although the stunt went off without a hitch, when the New York City police phoned Levine he gave them the name of the hotel where Kappfjell was staying and then arranged to have a film crew on hand to capture his arrest. Nonetheless, Kappfjell expected to get paid—he'd been promised \$7,500. When he tried to collect, Levine reportedly told him that the deal was off. "I don't pay criminals," he said. Kappfjell filed a \$2.2 million lawsuit against the show, and Levine was forced to resign. "It was probably the worst thing to happen to Barry, but the best thing to happen to me," says Steve Coz, Levine's boss at the *National Enquirer*, who offered him a job almost immediately after he'd left the show.

At the *Enquirer*, Levine's continued to cultivate the hard-boiled image he first embraced as a student journalist. But he's toned it down somewhat. On most evenings after work he can be spotted trading celebrity gossip with colleagues at Langan's, an Irish bar in midtown Manhattan. These days, that's about as wild as it gets for Levine, who collects Hemingway memorabilia, retreats on weekends to a secluded house in East Hampton, and spends most of his time chained to a phone behind a desk in his 14th-floor office.

"I basically live the job 24 hours a day," he says. "But I wouldn't want it any other way, because I thrive on it. I love getting phone calls in the middle of the night. Every call, you don't know what it will bring." ■

## KAYSEN

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would collapse, and then my vagina would overheat and I'd wake up.

A few nights later I was looking forward to sleeping without my tent. I got into bed, curled up on my side, and thought about how tired I was.

You asleep? asked my boyfriend.

Mmm, I said. I knew what was going to happen next.

Honey? he said. I felt the weight of his penis on the back of my thigh. Honey?

I can't, I said. It hurts too much.

Does it hurt right now?

It's bearable now. If we fuck, it will hurt.

But you said you'd try!

I tried, I told him.

Once. You tried once.

I didn't say anything. I lay on my side and hated him.

Can't we try again? He'd slid himself between my legs already.

I realized I wanted to hate him. It helped me, because then I could pretend it was all his fault. So I didn't object again. And I stayed up late with my tent, hating him.

It went on like this for another week. Then I called the alternative nurse.

**O**ATMEAL, I SAID. I'M BACK TO APPLYING breakfast to my vagina.

The alternative nurse laughed. It helps that you keep your sense of humor, she said.

It doesn't really, I said. Well, maybe it does. Who knows. I sighed.

We were sitting in her office. For a minute or two we sat in silence.

Maybe the psychological issues... she began.

But then I feel responsible! I started to

cry. I feel it's hysterical. I feel that anyhow.

I know, she said. She came over to my chair and put her arm around my shoulder. Just cry, she said. It's all worth crying about.

I followed her advice. I cried for a couple of minutes.

Thanks, I said after I'd cried enough. I think I needed to cry with someone.

You could bring him in here, you know. Sometimes these guys need to have it explained to them.

I've explained it a million times.

But he might listen to me. I'm a professional, after all. She laughed.

I don't think he's going to listen to either of us, I said. He doesn't want to understand it.

He's got to, she said. He's got to learn to let you move at your own pace.

He can't, I said. Of course, this is why I fell in love with him—he's so emotional and sexual. Now look.

Yes, she said. Isn't it funny? Bring him in here, she said.

I don't want to, I said.

Why don't you want to?

That's a good question, I said. I'll have to think about it.

When I thought about it I realized I had to break up with my boyfriend. I didn't want to; I still loved him. But it was the only way my vagina would have a chance to get better.

Just do what you feel you can do, she said. Call me whenever you want. Think about bringing him in here.

**A**S LONG AS I'D BEEN LIVING WITH MY boyfriend, I could hope things would improve when I was living alone. Now I was living alone, but there was no improvement,

and I had more time to think about how my vagina hurt. The fights and reconciliations and the pestering and the need to explain everything over and over had distracted me from the pain, even though all those things had made the pain worse.

Low-grade pain is debilitating in a subtle way. I could get interested enough in a movie or a conversation to forget about the pain for an hour or so, but it lurked just beyond consciousness. And, of course, it always returned.

The fact of the pain was the burden. This fact was like an unwieldy piece of luggage that I had to drag around. When I went out to dinner or took a walk or got into bed, I had to slog the luggage along with me. The pain itself was not that bad. What was bad was the idea that I was stuck with it. There was no checking it or storing it in the overhead bin, no unpacking it and putting it in the closet, and that was what sapped my energy.

**T**HIS WENT ON FOR MONTHS AND months, though some days the pain was much less intense. Then, in the early spring, there came a week in which my vagina did not hurt. It had somehow regained the capacity to be normal—that is, to feel nothing. It still got agitated and zinged and stung, but it had remembered how to calm down to zero.

I wondered if it had remembered how to feel good, too.

I poked around at it. It was like poking at my foot—actually, it was like poking at somebody else's foot. There was no sensation at all. My vagina had curled up into itself like a hedgehog, cool, dry, and unresponsive.

I didn't know what to do. Rent X-rated