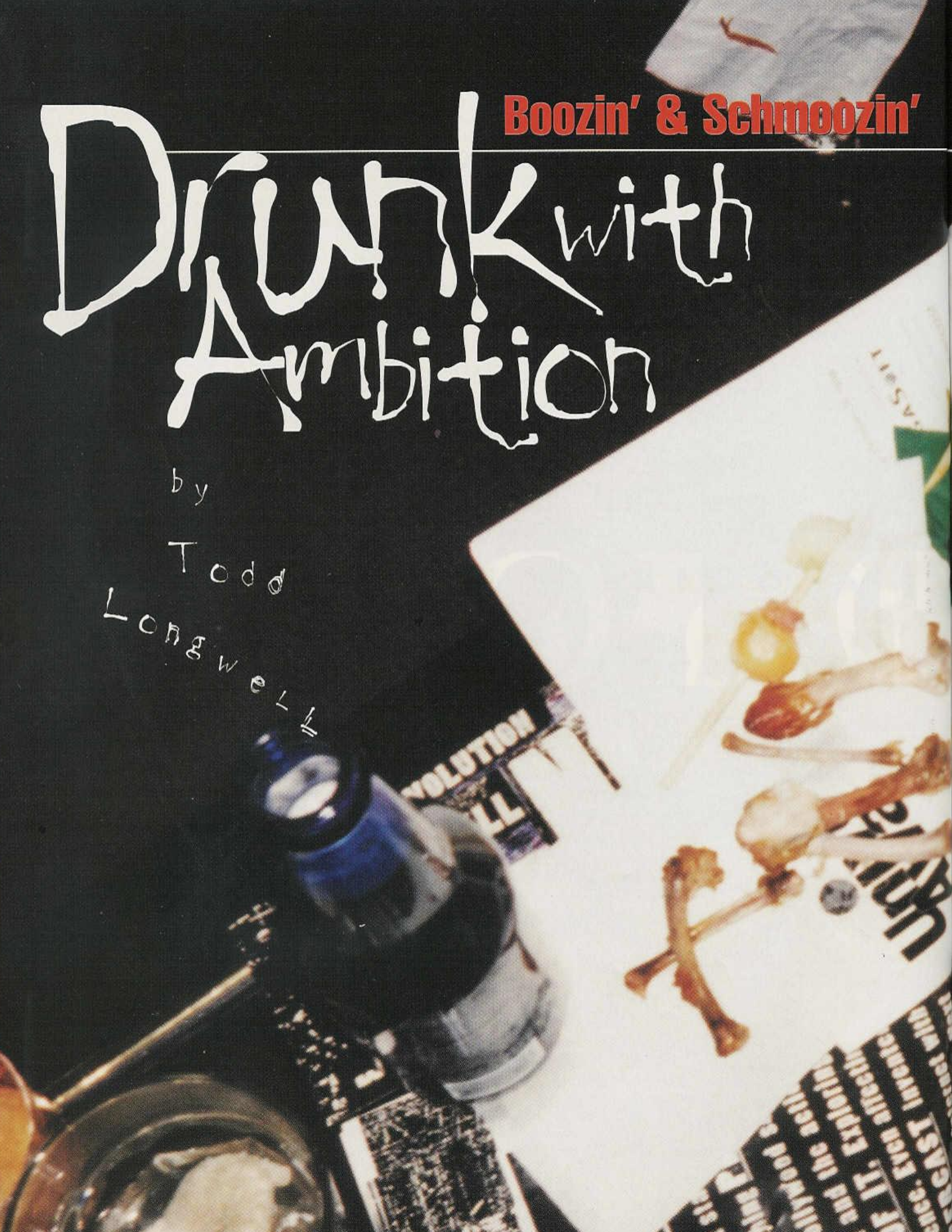
Boozin' & Schmoozin'

Drunk with Ambition

by Todd Longwell



with Hollywood's Young & Hungry Hotshots.

You want to make it in Hollywood. You've got an MBA, infallible artistic instincts and an encyclopedic knowledge of film and television history. All of those combined are worth nothing compared to your ability to make entertaining yet strategic cocktail chit-chat.

It's true. The big word in the corporate world today is synergy—making the different arms of a company work together so that the overall thrust of action is greater than the sum of its individual efforts. In Hollywood, that applies to the individual, as well.

Take a look at the life of any true show biz player. Every move they make is a career move—whether it be at work, at home, on the phone, or in the car; eating, drinking, or screwing. Take a look at yourself. When you go out for a night on the town, what are your goals? To get drunk? Get laid? Maybe just blow off a little steam? Is that your small-town, Midwestern, beer commercial, factory worker *vision* of what socializing is all about? In this town that'll never cut it. If you truly want to make it up there with the Ovitzes, the Geffens and the Gubers, you must think of your life as a corporation, with a business plan for the personal as well as the professional.

But where to go? Any schmo who watches *Entertainment Tonight* knows where the big fish swim—Morton's, The Grill, Spago, Drai's, Le Dome, The Ivy, etc.—but what about the baby sharks? The harried assistants? The D-Girls & The D-Boys? The starving actors? The struggling writers? Where do they meet to sip cheap gin and tonics, munch greasy snack foods, swap horror stories about abusive bosses, and, perhaps, advance their careers in the process?

Strangely, the action seems to be centered on and around La Brea Avenue in Hollywood. A wide street long home to furniture outlets and car dealerships, it's become gentrified in recent years with the addition of numerous trendy, upscale restaurants and bars. Of course, trendy, upscale nightspots are to L.A. what potatoes are to Idaho. So why is this *the* place? Location, location, location. Not only is it near several studios (Paramount, Raleigh, Warner Hollywood), but, more importantly, it's where people from the talent agencies of Beverly Hills and Sony and 20th Century Fox studios in West L.A. can meet halfway with people from the studios of the San Fernando Valley (Universal, Disney, Warner Bros., etc.).

Better to maintain eye contact (but not too much eye contact) than to alienate your pals with incessant room-scanning. Watch how you throw around those business cards! Don't be over-eager!

"As soon as you get a job

Bright Lights, Big Schmooze

But, really, there are places all over town. You want to get buddy-buddy with the agents' assistants and mail roomers at William Morris? Try the El Torito Grill in Beverly Hills. Looking to hang with models? Scam your way into the Gem on Melrose. Want to test the new pompadour and sharkskin suit? Mingle with "Cocktail Nation"-types at Three of Clubs, Lava Lounge and The Derby.

Right now, the hottest industry hang for the young and hungry seems to be The Pearl on La Brea, just south of Melrose. "Love The Pearl," says Brooke ("It's 'kill' on the end, you know.") Driskill, a creative executive with Shoreline Prods. Why? "It's low-key. Not too pretentious." Dark lighting, dark green walls, tasteful decor... expensive appetizers. Sure, a sign outside would make it easier to find, but then patrons wouldn't think they were in on some hip little secret.

While The Pearl is perfect for networkers trying to make the jump from small-scale clique-ishness to full-blown elitism, El Coyote, a Mexican restaurant on Beverly just west of La Brea, is a good place for the beginner. Its low prices and egalitarian attitude attract stingy senior citizens and other "regular" folks, as well as hungry young industry types, and it actually has a designated happy hour. But while the prices are low and the atmosphere friendly, the food is not to everyone's taste. "It gives me a rash," says a story editor who wished to remain anonymous. Still, it's a good place to hone name-dropping skills.

No matter where you go, it's just good to be seen "out," because it gives the impression that you are not just a work-obsessed automaton—you have a "life." If you indulge in a cocktail or two, better yet. "I always like them more if they drink," says "Laura," (not her real name) a development executive. "It makes them seem like more of a real person."

But what to drink? It may sound stupid, but with every move you make, every meeting you take, you are building and shaping an image, and your choice of beverage is an integral part of that. Perhaps it's not as important as the car you drive (Jag... Beemer... sports utility vehicle?) or the clothes you wear (designer suit... sports coat & jeans?), but a misstep in this area can be painful and embarrassing. Just ask Laura, who once made the crucial error of failing to recognize the prevailing trends in drinking water. "They were making fun of me because I ordered a Pellegrino," she says.

One way to make yourself stand out is to devise a unique drink order, *à la* James Bond ("martini... shaken, not stirred"). One development girl I talked too has taken to ordering McCallan Single Malt Scotch with... *drum roll, please...* one ice cube (a mere eight bucks at The Derby). Sounds stupid and pretentious, but... "I've gotten points for this," she says. "People think it's cool. They're clearly influenced by such shallow things."

Why can't you just be your real self, you ask. Because your "real self" will never do, that's why. Take that self-help tape, Deepak Chopra b.s. and throw it out with your hand-me-down luggage with the Greyhound tags and your map to the stars' homes. "Image is everything" is more than just an obnoxious *Details* magazine slogan, it's an irrefutable fact of life in Hollywood. Embrace it.

The art of nightlife networking is a lot like the art of war. Under every cocktail napkin lies a potential land mine, and veterans are full of sage advice on how to avoid them. *Stay away from drinks with decorative umbrellas, and under no circumstances order a domestic light beer! Waving at people is good. Dropping too many names is bad. Beware of using people's first names to give the false impression of familiarity. Networking is a dirty word.*

In the '80s, naked ambition was accepted and encouraged. Today, it must be clothed in casual wear. Current fashion dictates that you should regularly proclaim that work isn't your whole life, you have interests outside of show business—a significant other, hobbies... perhaps even a dog. This doesn't mean you must actually *have* a private life. It's enough just to talk about it.

Another hazard of the Hollywood nightlife networking scene is the club (like Jones or The Gem) with the restrictive door policy. In other words, if you don't want to spend a half hour in the line sucking down car exhaust while the valet parks someone else's Jag, it's best to be either a famous actor, rock star or supermodel, or on *Premiere*'s list of the "100 Most Powerful People in Hollywood." If this fails, try to be either a beautiful woman or someone accompanied by several beautiful women.

The scene is cutthroat for club owners, as well. Trendsters are notoriously fickle, and by the time a nightspot becomes known as *the-place-to-be*, the truly hip have usually moved on. Take Bar Marmont. Located in the shadow of the Chateau Marmont Hotel on Sunset Blvd., it quickly became the place to be when it opened in 1995. On a recent visit, the bartenders still maintained their chilly superiority, but no longer was there a doorman stationed out front to pick the beautiful and/or important from the homely and/or powerless. Still, it seemed to have become an unconscious parody of nightlife trendiness. Walking through the door, I felt like I'd stepped into a Vanity Fair society piece packed with overripe metaphors...

With fake butterflies on the ceiling, a stuffed peacock on the wall and the English sitting room cum Indian hash den atmosphere of the lounge area, you

get the impression that, while it might make for a tawdry and exciting one-night stand, the place is hardly the love of a lifetime. The presence of Julia (You'll Never Eat Lunch In This Town Again) Phillips, seated at a prominent table near the door, reinforced the notion that perhaps it has become a "Love Boat" for show biz has-beens.

Maybe Bar Marmont lost its "hot" status because—like a new mail room employee fresh out of college—it's just trying too damn hard. The argument is borne out by the host/maitre d': a husky-voiced transvestite dressed all in black with gloves, stockings, high heels, long false eyelashes, stiff posture and a shaved head. To employ a drag queen would be mere camp, they thought to themselves. We must hire an alien storm trooper from planet Sex!

Indeed, the place seems less like a hangout than a Warholian Hollywood theme park. Out-of-towners and nightlife amateurs might get a kick out of knowing they're boozing it up just yards away from where a struggling young Billy Wilder occupied a basement room and John Belushi checked out with a lethal injection of cocaine and heroin, but locals quickly tire of paying eight dollars a pop for stingy mixed drinks with silly names like "The Infusion."

At the Formosa, next door to Warner Hollywood on Santa Monica Blvd. (just west of La Brea), the historical atmosphere comes with a more reasonable pricetag. It's also less formal; more lived-in—the grimy bar doesn't look like it's had a good cleaning since Bogart and Flynn drank there. Laura finds it a good place for "pseudo-meetings" with people she "might actually want to be friends."

But with everyone always posturing and jockeying for position, does she ever really get the chance to make any *true* friends? At first, she tries to say it's like any other business, any other town, before breaking down and admitting, "No. I've never formed a friendship from one of these things, honestly."

Laura says she goes out three nights a week, sometimes even five ("And I'm married," she laments). Brooke, who is single, averages about four. On nights and weekends, there are bags of scripts to read (Brooke says she tackles six or seven).

No matter how many martinis and single malt scotches you down, the grind gets to you. "It definitely wears me out," admits Laura. "The whole week goes by and you didn't really live it. You just did it. That's another thing. Staying busy seems to be competitive. People seem to think it's a bad thing to relax. Even though this 'sense of priority' thing is supposed to be so great, they tend to try to take credit for every little thing."

Breakfast meetings, lunch meetings, dinner meetings... late nights... work weekends... cell phone meetings and books on tape in the car (*The Seven Habits of Highly-Effective People*, perhaps)... maybe even a phone in the bathroom at home. With all this frantic activity, is there ever a moment for reflection, or are people's eyes too focused on the brass ring for them ever to take an honest, critical look at themselves? What is all this hard work and sacrifice for, anyway? Screen credit? Millions of dollars? A mansion in the hills? The love of the entire world? How do you define success, and even after you've achieved "it," will there ever be a moment's rest?

Probably not. "As soon as you get a job you're thinking about what your next job should be," says Laura of the prevailing industry attitude. Laura herself is just grateful to have the job she has now, with friendly, supportive bosses and the chance to snag a producer's credit. She wouldn't have said that a few years ago, when she was working for a substance-abusing screamer. "I thought, I'm just stupid for being here. I have a facial tic.... I have neck spasms... I have nightmares all the time. It was ugly. And I think a lot of people put up with that. And they make you think that you have to be able to withstand all sorts of torture, and if you can't stomach it, you won't make it."

Damn, I need a drink. FT

you're thinking about what your next job should be..."

Waving at people is good. Dropping too many names is bad. Working the room can be a chore.