

Famous Americans, Hear My Ring

By Maks Westerman

Common wisdom among Europeans has it that Americans love to talk about themselves. It has to do with what an American writer once phrased "the cult of narcissism": The American dream is about "making it," and you only have it really made when others are aware of it. So a little self-promotion can't hurt.

When Americans talk, Europeans listen, sometimes begrudgingly, but always with interest. We have had our centuries of glory but these days it is your lead we follow in business, politics and, increasingly, culture. It was for that reason that the editor of Elseviers magazine (the Newsweek of Holland) recently assigned me to do "a bunch of interviews with famous Americans" for a special Christmas issue. "You'll have no trouble. Americans love to be interviewed," he said. Then why after two months did I feel compelled to beg: Please talk to me.

Now, perhaps I was setting my goals a bit too high, when I requested a brief interview—two, or three questions—with the first lady. And I wasn't very surprised when her spokeswoman gave me a brief "No," devoid of explanations. But did I detect a note of surprise in her voice that I, a reporter from a country that in the eyes of most Americans produces little more than tulips and wooden shoes, had the audacity to ask to see the most powerful woman in the world? The line went dead before I had a chance to remind her that the Dutch also happen to be the second-largest investors in this country and have given Nancy's husband his nickname.

On to Geraldine Ferraro. This time I promised myself to be more tenacious. When her personal secretary sent me about my business, I approached Random House, through which Geraldine is telling "My Own Story." Like everybody else, they asked me to spell out Elseviers three or four times. ("What does Elseviers mean?" Nothing, to my knowledge.) And they were awfully frank: Geraldine is interested only in the American press since it talks to people who may buy her book. "The bottom line is this," said a Random executive. "You can get an interview if you buy the book." And she didn't just mean one copy, but a contract with Elseviers (also a publishing house), to purchase the Dutch rights to the book.

So Geraldine was out. I began aiming for Gary Hart. The New York Times had just reported his complaint that journalists never mention his ideas. I was all set to do

just that—and got as far as the secretary to his press secretary. "Now, how do you spell the name of your publication again?" E-L-S-E . . . "He'll call you back," she said. I'm still waiting after two weeks.

Calvin Klein was next. He's of Dutch descent, I tempted his PR aide. She called me back twice to check the spelling of Elseviers. Then called me to say that, unfortunately, he is too busy putting together his wardrobe for Fashion Aid, yet another Ethiopia fund-raising extravaganza.

Neil Simon: His agent promised to forward my request to the studio where Neil is filming his "Brighton Beach Memoirs." But she didn't give me much hope: He's declining all interviews, at the moment. So is Mikhail Baryshnikov, who is busy doing . . . oh I forget what. They're all too busy doing something. Stevie Wonder is busy packing for a trip to Japan. Meryl Streep is busy, period.

True, the Dutch can't vote in U.S. elections or boost a book to the top of the New York Times best seller list. In the scheme of things, the Dutch don't matter a lot. And that is perhaps one of the reasons why the above are too busy when Elseviers calls, but have ample time when it's "Today."

But there is something else. I am convinced that Calvin Klein, too, at times comes home wondering whom to have dinner with. And even Neil Simon may spend time picking his nose between takes. That's time they could spend talking to me or another foreign journalist.

So why don't they? Because, in most cases, they don't even know we called. American celebrities are ringed by a prohibitive barrier of people whose rule of thumb seems to be: If you've got to ask a journalist how his publication is spelled, he ain't worth talking to the boss. My advice to the stars: Get rid of these dopes, buy an answering machine and spend five minutes a day screening your calls. It'll save you money and the time that is now spent on dealing with self-important underlings.

Most important, through a foreign journalist, you will be talking to an eager audience. One that has a passionate interest in almost anything American and doesn't suffer from the numbing effects of network overkill.

Any takers for an interview with E-L-S-E-V-I-E-R-S? I'm in the phone book. And if I'm not home, I have no secretary—just an answering machine.

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