

star drivers

by lois siegel

... out to prevent star wars, these tireless Trojans risk their lives in the call of duty, sacrifice their Hollywood ambitions to the cause of service, and ignore the call of nature to get their charges to the shoot on time.

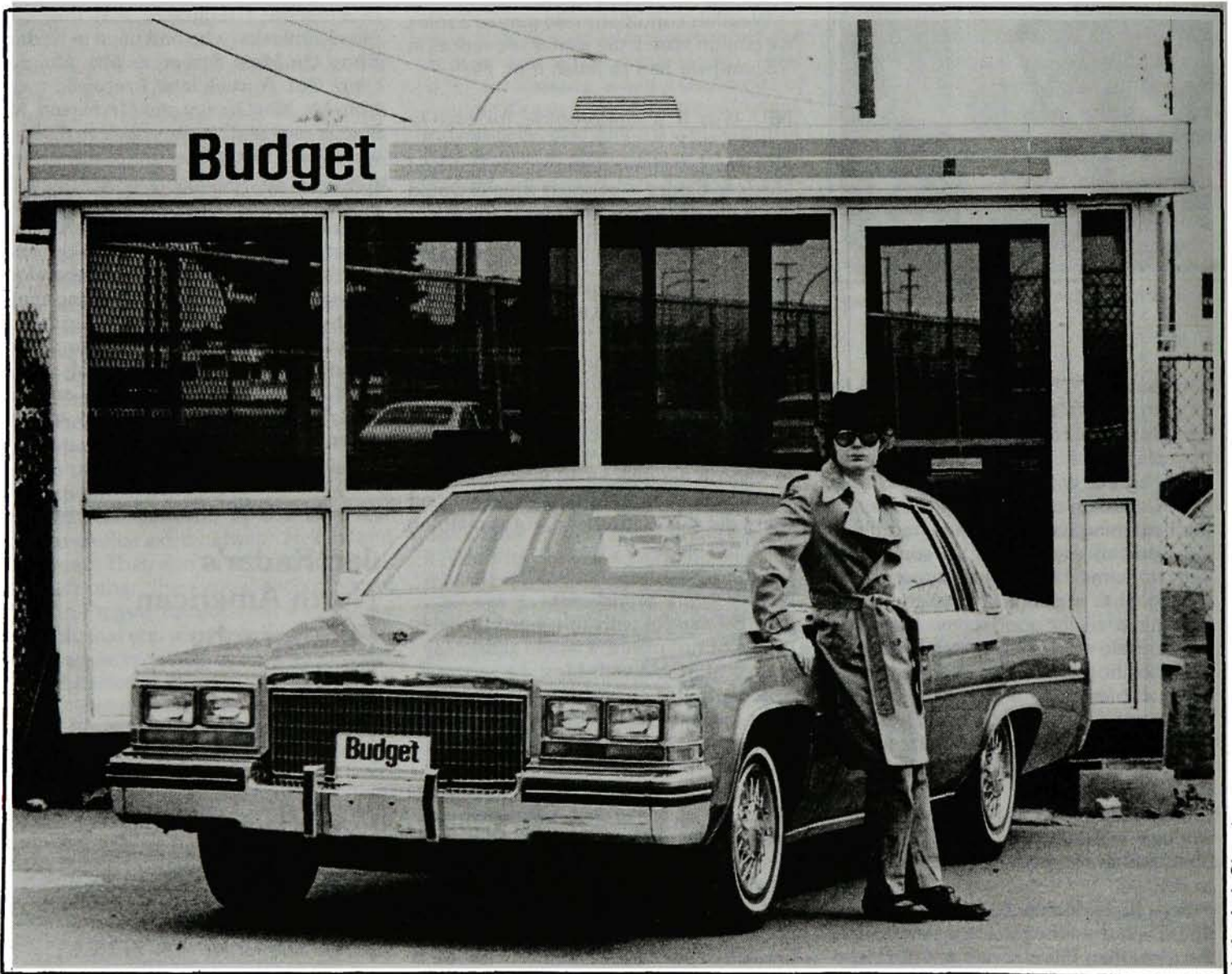


photo: Lois Siegel

Faster than a speeding bullet, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound... star driver Robert Gibson

When movie stars come from Hollywood to Montreal, the setting may change, but they still want to be treated like they are in the States — where Walt Disney created fantasyland. So, someone has to pamper them, care for them, practically bodyguard them, and see that their every wish is fulfilled.

It could be said that God worked for six days, and then created the “star driver” — that unique species employed by a crew to drive the movie star from point A to point B, with a few detours in between. On call 25 hours a day, the star driver’s first priority is to *get along with* the star — no matter what!

“Initially, you learn to keep your mouth shut. You don’t talk about other stars, or say, ‘So-and-so is a lousy actor,’ because you don’t know who they know, and you don’t want to offend their friends,” cautions one driver. “And you also can’t be star struck.”

During the production of *Agency*, Valerie Perrine’s driver was told to always call first, then pick up his star one half-hour in advance; but he admits, “I never did that because I would get there and she’d still be in bed, and she’d be hung over or something. So I’d call the set and say, ‘Give us about an hour.’ Sometimes I’d wait in the lobby and try to catch up on some sleep myself. It’s pretty hard to find somewhere close to the hotel to have a coffee at 5:30 in the morning.”

“On the other hand, Lee Majors was always super-punctual,” his driver Vincent Di Clemente contends. “He always used to say, ‘I’m very professional.’”

Robert Mitchum was a storyteller, the drivers report. He wasn’t happy unless he was telling a story. He’d tell stories anywhere — even in the bathroom.

For insurance purposes, drivers must be over 25 years old, although occasionally, arrangements for younger drivers can be made with the car rental companies. Not only must you be able to drive... you sometimes have to design floral arrangements for the stars when the flower shop is barely open on Sunday morning, or sign autographs!

“When the autograph hunters came by, I’d always tell them that the star was indisposed,” one driver admits. “And then the star’s manager told me just to sign for him; so I’d go away with the paper, sign it “Lee Majors” and come back. No one ever knew the difference, and they’d walk away happy.”

Though some stars say they want to be treated “just like a normal person,” the experienced driver knows better. What they really want is to frequent the best restaurants, the ‘in-crowd’ discos, and the bars like *Night Magic* in Old Montreal until 4 a.m., then sleep at the hotel from 6:30 to 7 a.m. — then sleep on the set. Lee Majors liked to go out with the drivers and drink beer. He was also big on Dilalo Burgers.

At the night spots the driver is expected to stay in the background. One driver who drove cab for seven years prior to driving stars said that it helped him to know the pros and cons of restaurants. He suggests *Roma Antiqua*

Lois Siegel is presently completing two films — her first feature, A 20th Century Chocolate Cake; and Extreme Close-Up, a documentary about multi-handicapped blind people.

for those who like Italian food and *Ruby Foos* for the Chinese buffets. Then there’s *Les Halles* on Crescent street for French cuisine and *Le St. Amable* in Old Montreal. But not all stars prefer the high-class restaurants. Paul Newman liked the *Sun-Sun*, and Vince Van Patton preferred the Hungarian *Coffee Mill* on Mountain Street.

Besides working all night, a driver is kept constantly busy during the day. He goes shopping for the star, takes care of his banking, arranges various reservations, and picks up visitors at the airport. Frequently, the driver also finds time to watch the action on the set.

“It’s a must to be on the set if the star wants coffee or anything else,” one driver insists. “A driver is like a personal aide — sometimes he even watches continuity, because wardrobe can make a mistake. The driver should read the script to know the actor’s involvement. If you’re ignorant about what an actor’s doing, then you may say something to upset him. You’re driving him to the set for an important scene, so he doesn’t want to hear about the fish sandwich you ate last night.”

Sometimes a star even wants to rehearse a scene, and the driver suddenly finds himself practicing lines with the actor!

Location: La Cité Health Club

Vince Van Patton: “Mom, how come you never remarried?”

Driver Rick Disensi: “Well, it’s just that I haven’t found somebody.”

Vince Van Patton: “I really love you, Mom.”

Driver Rick Disensi: “Well, I love you too.”

The driver played Mom.



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A driver is given a floater, ranging anywhere from \$150 to \$500, to cover any unexpected expenses. Rick Disensi had \$1000 for Paul Newman who didn't carry his own money. "He needed receipts for taxis, but he didn't want to have to ask for them, so I'd handle all the money." Then there are the special requests. For Robert Altman's birthday, Paul Newman asked Disensi to find him a live goat, so that Altman could have his own vineyard. (Newman always used to tease Altman that the wine he drank was no better than goat's piss...) "Newman made his request in the morning, and by noon he had his live goat! I went out to make a few phone calls, bought a goat for \$55 in St. Canut, and the goat was presented to Altman that night at rushes. A star driver needs access to everything in the city."

Newman also requested a race. Disensi consequently arranged entrance for him into various races along with a

Mini-Cooper racing car offered by another "friend." Then, Newman, a popcorn lover, had special poppers sent up from Los Angeles so that his driver — to whom he personally gave special popping lessons — could make his popcorn. "To Newman, money was no object," says Disensi, "no matter what we did."

Newman is known for being a speed freak. At dawn on Sunday mornings when there was little traffic, Disensi and Newman would start at The Howard Johnson Hotel on Sherbrooke and race towards the Expo site where the crew was shooting. "Every Sunday we tried to beat our record. We'd head down Sherbrooke, across Jacques-Cartier Bridge to Ste-Hélène's Island. Our record was 6 minutes and 27 seconds. (In normal traffic the drive would take a good 20 minutes to one half-hour).

Newman and Disensi were once driving casually in a mobile home, along the track of an ice race competition,



Nothing like getting his goat... Paul Newman's that is!

when another mobile home driven by another crew member passed them. Newman told Disensi, "Catch him."

"I was a little worried," Disensi admits. "I didn't want to overturn the mobile home and possibly break Newman's neck, so I said, 'I don't want to roll this thing,' and he said, 'Let's change.' So in mid-motion we changed drivers. Newman got in the driver's seat while we were doing about 30 m.p.h. Then he passed the other guy, the other guy passed him, and we decided to go around the track again! — a crazy race with these two mobile homes!"

A driver can make up to \$600 a week plus expenses, or as little as \$250 a week. The hours are long, but the benefits include constant entertainment and your own transportation. Also, stars often give their drivers presents when they depart — sometimes as much as \$1000 worth of cash and gifts: clothes, vintage bottles of wine, Melitta coffee makers... "Paul Newman gave me a hat — the one he wore in the movie *Hombre*. I'm a hat collector and he sent to California for it," Disensi adds.

Disensi also accompanied Newman on a jet jaunt. "A friend of Paul's, Peter Pocklington, who owns The Edmonton Oilers Hockey Team, came into town. The next day we took his private jet to Connecticut to look at a racing car he wanted to buy — on Paul's approval. Then we flew from Connecticut to Quebec City to see his hockey team that night. Then we flew back to Montreal and had to work early the next morning."

"If a star doesn't like you, you can be released right away," Disensi explains. "But a star who does like you might offer you a permanent job as his aide."

Disensi fell into the job as Newman's driver by accident. "I was an elevator mechanic for Otis. Construction was slow, so I began driving a cab. I met an old friend Allan Nichols, who had moved to Los Angeles, and he offered me a job on Altman's film *Quintet*. Now I don't want to work anywhere else."

Stars also arrive with loads of baggage, because sometimes they're on a set for as long as three months and they require large wardrobes — perhaps 10 or 11 cases. Vince Di Clemente used a five-ton truck borrowed from the art department to load Lee Majors' possessions. Majors also brought his own valet, Jim Cale, who is also a make-up man. Valerie Perrine brought her own costume designer. "He couldn't talk about anything but costumes. It just wasn't in his vocabulary," driver Robert Gibson reports. "He used to tell her she was beautiful at least 20 times a day."

Drivers (mostly male) claim that males are more suitable for the job. If a male star wants to be "fixed-up" for the night, how is he going to ask a female driver? The males contend that they are also more capable of making certain illicit connections... Not to mention handling luggage which is often too heavy for females. "Girls might be more concerned with their love life at home or become emotionally involved with a male star," one driver argues.

"Most actors are very serious artists," David Smith adds. "They live in an international world and are extremely intelligent people." Smith, who has driven Vittorio Gassman, Paul Newman and Donald Sutherland, ran into trouble once on Altman's *Quintet*. He was assigned to pick up the vice-president of 20th Century-Fox and his wife at the airport. They were in town one day to see the set



Vincent Di Clemente (B.F.A. graduate in Cinema), behind the camera, before he got behind the steering wheel

and look at the rushes. Explains Smith, "I was silent at first, then we started talking. I told them about Montreal and the artistic community. Later, when I drove him to the hotel, we began talking again in a more relaxed manner. He could see I was interested in films. Then we talked about scripts. I said, 'How do you people decide on scripts?' He said that they were pretty open. I didn't press anything. He asked if I had written a script. I said I had. He said he would like to see it and to bring it to the film office the next morning. When I got to the office I left the script for him. Then I went to the set and the Head of Transport said to me, 'Did you tell Mr. X you had a script?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'You're fired!' I asked why. He said he couldn't say anything about it, it came from the higher-ups. I was then driven off the set, given my pay and I was out. I think the PR man had overheard something and had assumed that I had pressed the situation. Nobody questioned me. Nobody asked me what had happened."

This unpleasant experience aside, Smith relates one of the more interesting moments of his driving career: Donald Sutherland, who had just finished *Casanova* with Fellini, told him a good story about working with the famed Italian director. The film was a year-long shoot. During one scene, where Casanova had to lift a glass and drink from it, Fellini merely instructed Sutherland to "Lift the glass to your lips. O.K., fine. Cut!" Sutherland was justifiably nonplussed, unaware of the director's motivation for such an abbreviated motion — until three months later, when Fellini said to him, "Remember that scene where you lifted the glass? Now I want you to drink from it."

Drivers not only have to be charming, perceptive, witty and intelligent, they also must have a sixth sense in order to understand the location maps: "You need a simple map with a big 'X' marking the location. It's hard enough to remember where you parked the car the night before. One day no one could find the location and just drove around until they saw the generator truck. As a driver you have to answer to everyone. Sometimes the A.D.'s yelling at you, the director's yelling at you, the unit manager wants to kill you, and the entire crew is waiting for the star who suddenly feels like seeing a movie or doing some shopping." So what can the driver do? "Ah," says the voice of experience, "you get used to making up good stories!"