

Oh, Gosh. First, I'd Like to Thank All the Actual People.

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Isaac Brekken for The New York Times

Maybe the Reel Awards aren't the Oscars, but when was the last time you saw John Wayne, Minnie Pearl and Howard Stern all together?

By STEVE FRIESS
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LAS VEGAS, May 28 — Johnny Depp and Tina Turner meandered slowly through the crowded casino, their progress hindered not by screaming fans or paparazzi but by a pair of Marilyn Monroes up ahead offering each other flamboyant hellos.

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Isaac Brekken for The New York Times
Liza Minnelli impersonator Suzanne Goulet.

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The presence of just a few obviously ersatz stars turned only a head or two at first. But soon the scene was like a Madame Tussauds sprung to life, with those performers joined by [Anna Nicole Smith](#), [Tupac Shakur](#), two Elizabeth Taylors and dozens of other celebrity look-alikes.

“What is this, dress-up night or something?” Patrice Desmond of Seattle asked her boyfriend as she watched a President Bush being warmly embraced by, of all people, a [Barbra Streisand](#).

The celebrity impersonators who gathered at the Imperial Palace hotel and casino here on Sunday — more than 100 in all — would surely take umbrage at Ms. Desmond’s description of the 16th annual Reel Awards, the Oscars of their industry.

“People think it’s a cheesy profession — they think it’s like you’re a singing telegram,” said Lisa Irion, 47, a blue-eyed

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Isaac Brekken for The New York Times
Donald Trump impersonator Robert Ensler.

blonde from Lafayette, La., who said it took her two hours to become Cher, complete with black fishnets and a blacker wig. "They don't understand the years of work that go into this. It's a specialized talent. You have to look, sound and perform like them and act like them. It's difficult."

Far different from the campy lip-synched acts done by drag queens in countless gay bars, most of the performers who met here for the presentations and an ensuing three-day convention impersonate in their own voices and are of the same sex as the stars they imitate.

Those who won awards are the cream of a fair-size crop. The event's organizer, Janna Joos, a talent agent based in Palm Springs, Calif., said she alone had more than 2,000 celebrity mimics across the nation ready to pop in for meet-and-greets, trade show appearances, business meetings and bar mitzvahs. (Their fees range from \$450 into the thousands.) Some in the industry expect it to get a further boost from the new ABC show "The Next Best Thing," an "American Idol"-like competition among impersonators.

Unlike Ms. Irion, who forces any resemblance to Cher, many were urged into the business by friends who noticed their physical similarities to a celebrity. Brent Mendenhall, 57, of Nevada, Mo., quit his job in the construction business and says he now earns a six-figure income as President Bush. Americans usually realize he is a fake because he is not flanked by security, Mr. Mendenhall said, but people do fall for it overseas.

"I did a TV commercial in Israel for a chocolate candy, and they had me tour the country," he said. "One 18-year-old came up to me and said, 'Mr. President, when are you going to legalize weed?'"

Sometimes the attention is not so lighthearted. Teresa Barnwell of Los Angeles, who has been playing [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) since 1993, said she was occasionally accosted by conservatives.

"I've had people say, 'You look so much like Hillary, you should be shot,'" said Ms. Barnwell, 52, who has impersonated Mrs. Clinton on television sitcoms like "Roseanne."

Real events can affect an impersonator's fortunes. After last fall's racist rant by Michael Richards, the demand for someone to impersonate him as the "Seinfeld" sidekick Kramer dwindled, Ms. Joos said.

And while death does not seem to have hurt the timeless Marilyn Monroes and Judy Garlands, two 20-year-old guests at the Imperial Palace did not have a clue as to the identities of two other objects of impersonation, Rodney Dangerfield and George Burns.

Impersonators win varying degrees of approval from those they ape. Lorri Sheldon of Los Angeles sought and received the blessing of the country comic Minnie Pearl's estate before donning a wide-brimmed hat with the dangling price tag. An [Ozzy Osbourne](#) impersonator, Don Rugg of Napa Valley, Calif., joins the mumbling singer on stage every summer at the Ozzfest. And Ms. Barnwell said Mrs. Clinton laughed when she approached the senator and said, "Has anyone ever told you you look like Teresa Barnwell?"

But Gregg Chelew said he had been snubbed repeatedly by [David Letterman](#). And Jeff Jones, whose natural resemblance to Richard Gere is so uncanny he is often

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propositioned by women, has been told the actor dislikes that Mr. Jones and others profit from their likeness of him.

The impersonators at the awards show said they tried never to allow people to think they were the real thing, in keeping with industry ethics.

There are exceptional circumstances, though. Dennis Keogh of Scottsdale, Ariz., said he was impersonating Sean Connery at an auction when a couple came up to him and said the wife, who was dying of cancer, had always hoped to meet her movie idol.

“What am I going to do, tell her I’m not the guy?” Mr. Keogh said. “I took the paper and wrote: ‘Pamela, God has his eye on ya. Love, Sean Connery.’ And she walked off in tears. I don’t think Sean would mind that.”

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