

# THE BLONDE BOMBSHELL BILLBOARD QUEEN: Famous for Being Famous Before the Internet

Riley LoCurto

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*Who is Angelyne? Journalists, scholars, and residents of LA County have been asking this question for forty years—with the answer only revealed in 2017. Before that, she was known as a local celebrity, a onetime constant presence on billboards in Los Angeles, the owner of a pink corvette, a “proto-influencer,” a blonde bombshell, and most of all, an enigma. She put her first billboard up on the Sunset Strip in 1984, and quickly became an object of speculation. What was is that she did? Why did she have massive billboards with only her portrait, her name, and a phone number? In a world where more and more people can be “famous for being famous,” Angelyne could represent the first influencer, a bridge between two worlds of fame, or at least a certain side of Los Angeles. Whether you never heard of her or were a Los Angeles resident who was plagued by her image, she’s probably your favorite celebrity’s favorite celebrity.*

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In 1984, a woman named Angelyne purchased a billboard on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, California. For many years, Angelyne was almost entirely a mystery. Was she a struggling singer attempting to drum up interest? Did she have movie star aspirations? Over the years, Angelyne claimed many different origin stories; she was from Idaho, or maybe she was from Los Angeles. She wanted to be a singer, or maybe she simply believed that her personality was magic and needed to be shared with the world.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the eighties and nineties, Angelyne’s billboards were ubiquitous. They all shared a simple and provocative message: Angelyne. Call this number for more information because a star had arrived. Angelyne attracted fame and interest with little more than her face and name and became known thereafter as the “Billboard Queen.”<sup>2</sup> Since her first billboard appeared, Angelyne has acquired a local celebrity status in Los Angeles.

Angelyne’s true identity was a mystery until recently. In 2017, *The Hollywood Reporter* revealed that Angelyne was born in Poland as Ronia Tamar Goldberg in 1950. Later Renee Tami Goldberg, Angelyne was the daughter of Holocaust survivors.<sup>3</sup> The family moved to Israel and then to Los Angeles in 1959, where she went to high school in the San Fernando Valley and was briefly married until her divorce in 1969.<sup>4</sup> By 1984, she had renamed herself Angelyne, bought her first billboard on the Sunset Strip, and officially entered the public eye.<sup>5</sup>

Given the limited scope of her fame and her geographic specificity, there is

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<sup>1</sup> Ajay Sahgal, “Angel ... so L.A. & Me: WHAT’S THE STORY BEHIND THE BILLBOARD? SHARE THE PAIN OF ONE WHO TRIED TO FIND OUT,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 23, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Patti Hartigan, “LA’s Royal Highness, the Billboard Queen: [City Edition],” *Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), Aug. 01, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Baum, “The Mystery of L.A. Billboard Diva Angelyne’s Real Identity Is Finally Solved,” *Hollywood Reporter* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug. 2, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Baum, “The Mystery of L.A. Billboard Diva.”

<sup>5</sup> Sahgal, “Angel ... so L.A. & Me.”

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limited scholarship on Angelyne. Joshua Gamson briefly mentioned her in the introduction to his book *Claims to Fame*, primarily as a framing device for larger questions about the nature of celebrity.<sup>6</sup> What does it mean to be a celebrity and how it is executed? In *Celebrity and Power*, P. David Marshall tracked the term celebrity to have a current meaning that is aligned with a certain inauthenticity.<sup>7</sup> Christine Geraghty, in “Re-Examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance,” emphasized the difference between a celebrity and a professional or performer; a celebrity is someone whose fame “rests overwhelmingly on what happens outside the sphere of their work and who is famous for having a lifestyle.”<sup>8</sup>

It is generally agreed that stars and celebrities are commodities, and that they represent and can be perceived as the ultimate individuals. Richard Dyer stated these ideas and argued that stars were an active part of their transformation into commodities.<sup>9</sup> Viewing the star or celebrity as a commodity also leads to an emphasis on celebrity as an investment, which was explored by Gamson in his analysis of the inner workings of the star-making process.<sup>10</sup> The larger critique of the entertainment industry in this vein springs from Adorno and Horkheimer, who criticized the “culture industry” for its “stunting” of the imagination.<sup>11</sup> To this end, the topic of celebrities that are “famous for being famous” has become increasingly relevant in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Angelyne acts as a prototype for this type of fame as she created notoriety from nothing in a way few other individuals have. She is also a celebrity intimately linked with the city of Los Angeles, attaining a level of local celebrity rather than national or international fame. In his landmark book *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis tracks the development of the Los Angeles. The city’s intellectuals traditionally view Los Angeles as bereft, with Hollywood and the “Culture Industry” attracting artists but



Figure 1: McCurry, Steve. *ANGELYNE aspiring personality on Sunset Strip*. 1992, Photography, Los Angeles, CA. Angelyne posing in front of her own billboard in 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 2-4.

<sup>7</sup> P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Geraghty, “Re-Examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance,” in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, ed. by Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 99.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Syer, “Heavenly Bodies,” in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, ed. by Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 86-87.

<sup>10</sup> Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, ed. by Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 34.

<sup>12</sup> Susan J. Douglas and Andrea McDonnell, *Celebrity: A History of Fame* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 240.

wasting their talents in the grind of “pure capitalism.”<sup>13</sup> Los Angeles, then, becomes “a city of seduction and defeat.”<sup>14</sup> Much of the coverage of Angelyne ties her specifically to these common myths about Los Angeles and its culture.

In Figure One, eight years after her first billboard, Angelyne poses in front of another in 1992.<sup>15</sup> We can see Angelyne posing for the camera in a similarly exaggerated manner, wearing what appears to be the same glasses. This billboard is among her tamer images, but all the hallmarks of Angelyne’s image are here: perfectly coiffed blonde-bombshell hair, a provocative pose that emphasizes her sexuality, and a simple message: “Angelyne.” The features of this billboard are her face and her name, and that proved to be enough to gain fame.

Angelyne transcends the normal limits of celebrity and embodies a unique version of celebrity. Through newspaper articles, interviews, and Angelyne’s own website, this essay will investigate the development of her fame and how her celebrity has been built and interpreted by the media, as well as her own view of her celebrity. Angelyne became “famous for being famous” by independently creating publicity through billboards and press coverage, performing this type of celebrity before it was as commonplace as it is today. She provides a view of local celebrity, tied to not only a geographical location but to its culture and mythology. Angelyne created her own specific celebrity through self-made publicity and a persona rooted in a specific place, becoming a prototype for the increasingly important “famous for being famous” model of celebrity.

### **Angelyne as Related to Los Angeles**

Angelyne is strongly associated with Los Angeles and is represented as not just a figure driving around in a Corvette, but as a metaphor for life in Los Angeles and a symbol for the myth of the city.<sup>16</sup> It is surely not a coincidence that Angelyne shares her name with the city that she is so tied to. In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis describes the “L.A. School” of thinkers in the 1980s, and characterize the city as “a place where anything is possible, nothing is safe and durable enough to believe in ... and the automatic ingenuity of capital ceaselessly throws up new forms and spectacles.”<sup>17</sup> The idea of L.A. being a destination for hopeful dreamers to “make it” is commonplace, but what Davis describes here is the underlying darkness that often comes with it, the way this propensity to be remade leads to a feeling of inauthenticity. In a city where the old is constantly making way for the new, nothing can be relied upon. This translates to the need for new faces and new celebrities who will almost inevitably either fail to reach their goals or be cast off once the novelty is gone. It is reflected in the coverage of Angelyne by characterizing her as a symbol of the city’s worst and least savory instincts. While this is just one school of thought, it was prevalent at the time of Angelyne’s rise to notoriety. These myths about the nature of Los Angeles color the way she was spoken about in the press and her status as a figure tied to the specific culture of Los Angeles.

The myth of “making it” in Los Angeles is a long shot, and Angelyne can be read as a darker symbol, one that shows the failure and desperation that such dreams often entail. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Al Martinez describes her as a typical example of the type of person attracted to Los Angeles. She is a cipher for all the hopefuls who come to Los Angeles in a misguided way: “Angelyne, therefore, is a perfect metaphor

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Davis, *City of Quartz*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> John Barr. *Angelyne’s New Billboard*, July 1987, Photography, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>16</sup> Sahgal, “Angel ... so L.A. & Me.”

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *City of Quartz*, 85.

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for those who strive with limited talent and staggering ingenuity to be seen.”<sup>18</sup> She is described as “sad, desperate,” and a “caricature, rather than a real person.”<sup>19</sup> This writer characterizes her not as a full person but as an inauthentic character, and the article has a distinctly melancholy tone. She is at once representative of the culture of Los Angeles and an empty vessel; the author notes that she will not give her real name but finding out the truth about Angelyne lacks importance. She is a character, and that character is an example of the cycle of life in Los Angeles.

Writers from outside the city also viewed Angelyne as a representative of Los Angeles. In the *New York Times*, Angelyne was described as “the city’s eccentricities” turned flesh, “The fame-hungry, appearance-obsessed, publicity-driven spirit of Los Angeles is embodied in Angelyne, the billboard queen.”<sup>20</sup> Written from an outside perspective, this article sought quotes from Angelenos for their perspective on Angelyne. Robinson Devor, who created a short film about Angelyne, mentioned that she reminds Angelenos of what they are all trying to achieve, “We’re all out there to hustle ... and get people curious about us, and that can be a very unsavory task. And that it was this town is all about.”<sup>21</sup> He conveys that she accomplished the same goal as many in Los Angeles, but in a way that is perhaps more direct and therefore more uncomfortable to acknowledge. She is described by the Angeleno novelist Bruce Wagner as a “phantom pursuer” of fame, the “currency of the city.”<sup>22</sup> In each of these quotes, there is an acknowledgement that Angelyne represents something. Whether or not she is liked, she is always a figure who fits into the Los Angeles landscape. Her presence is logical and understandable. In any other city, she might be an outlier. While she is still an oddity, in Los Angeles she is an oddity that is only an exaggerated form of the stereotypical Los Angeles mythology.

Angelyne was quickly understood to be a part of the fabric of the city. Her billboards were featured in many films, and she was well known in Los Angeles.<sup>23</sup> She also appeared in a few films, almost always in some cameo form of herself.<sup>24</sup> One film in which she played herself was *Earth Girls Are Easy*. When asked why he wanted Angelyne in the film, director Julien Temple said, “This is very much a film about L.A. ... and I think she is one of the strange marvels of L.A. ... I think she’s a kind of like the patron saint of a certain side of L.A. ... I don’t think someone like Angelyne could exist anywhere but here.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, she is so much a part of the city that a film taking place in Los Angeles in the nineteen-eighties could include her as a marker of time and place, giving a sense of authenticity in all her inauthenticity. She is incredibly specific and recognizable to Los Angeles, not just in her celebrity, but as a symbol of the city. A *Boston Globe* article, to explain Angelyne to a non-Angeleno audience, said, “Angelyne has created a myth in a city that constantly reinvents itself ... Everything is for sale. Nothing is permanent.”<sup>26</sup> She is directly tied to the history of Los Angeles, and therefore the nature of the city itself. Her propensity to create her own mythology is just an extension of a city that does the same thing.

Angelyne had become a fixture in Los Angeles, not just of the newspapers but in daily life. Because of this, her position of celebrity was limited to the city and her fellow Angelenos. Anecdotes about Angelyne sightings abounded. There were

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<sup>18</sup> Al Martinez, “A Fantasy Named Angelyne Wants Attention,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 8, 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Martinez, “A Fantasy Named Angelyne.”

<sup>20</sup> Carey Goldberg, “Roadside Icon Promotes Herself and City’s Image,” *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Goldberg, “Roadside Icon Promotes Herself and City’s Image.”

<sup>22</sup> Goldberg, “Roadside Icon Promotes Herself and City’s Image.”

<sup>23</sup> Goldberg, “Roadside Icon Promotes Herself and City’s Image.”

<sup>24</sup> Martinez, “A Fantasy Named Angelyne.”

<sup>25</sup> Schwartz, “Temple of Hope.”

<sup>26</sup> Hartigan, “LA’s Royal Highness.”

midnight run-ins in the produce section of a local L.A. grocery store, with Angelyne as “the star I most looked forward to, er, bumping into.”<sup>27</sup> Even in this small and sweet anecdote, there is the common through line of objectification contained in much of the journalism about Angelyne. Perhaps the true mark of universal fame was attracting the ire of Los Angeles parents, who claimed her billboards were “corrupting children” and attempted to remove one of her billboards across from a school.<sup>28</sup> In 1995 the *Los Angeles Times* included the fifteenth anniversary of her first billboard in an article titled “Anniversaries of America,” claiming that “they are as much a part of the L.A. skyline as mountains and smog.”<sup>29</sup> She became a part of the landscape of Los Angeles in the everyday experiences of locals.

In his 1995 profile of Angelyne, Ajay Sahgal began his inquiry with this: “I have lived in Los Angeles all my life, I have seen Angelyne billboards almost every day for ten years and I have no idea who this woman is.”<sup>30</sup> In response to this profile, numerous readers sent in their own Angelyne anecdotes. This is interesting for a few reasons, not least of all the anecdotes themselves. The response shows, in a limited capacity, the place that Angelyne held in the minds of Angelenos. These demonstrate the type of knowledge that Angelenos had about her, and the feelings that they had towards her, in a very direct way. One reader responded that the author found out “what most sensible, thinking L.A.-area residents suspected all along: that Angelyne is simply [a] self-made, typically L.A. character seeking desperately to be a celebrity.”<sup>31</sup> Another reader spotted her “driving through Modesto in a white T-Bird—followed by Richard Dreyfuss.”<sup>32</sup> A five-year old saw her picture and declared she needed a bigger bra; one reader bemoaned, “How dare Sahgal insult a living Hollywood landmark!”; another noted that she must be older than she claims.<sup>33</sup> The most succinct explanation is that “Angelyne is just Angelyne.”<sup>34</sup> Each of these anecdotes demonstrates the fact that for Angelenos, Angelyne was just a part of the life of the city; not necessarily for good or for ill. Whether or not she was truly representative of Los Angeles is unimportant to these stories. What matters is that she was well known to the residents of Los Angeles and that she was written about in a very specific way. These writers mostly treat Angelyne with a bit of ridicule along with a degree of affection. While not absent of criticism, these responses generally show an acceptance of Angelyne on the part of the city’s residents. She had risen to fame in Los Angeles, and she now belonged to them. Her unique position of local celebrity was complicated by the city she lived in and its unique character. She and Los Angeles were able to feed into each other and their respective mythologies.

### Angelyne’s Portrayal in the Media

Accepted to be a woman who is “famous for being famous,” Angelyne marketed herself into her own celebrity. This was reflected throughout the news coverage that she gained in the eighties and nineties, which contained a trend of newspaper articles explaining who she was to an unfamiliar audience. She was described as “famous for

<sup>27</sup> Rip Sense, “A Place Where Everyone Knew Your Name,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 2, 1995.

<sup>28</sup> “Parents Say Billboard for Angelyne Bedevils Students,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 10, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> Irene Lacher, “Anniversaries of Americana: What do Harley-Davidsons, Frederick’s of Hollywood, Angelyne and Supermarkets have in Common? It’s Not What You Might Think. They’re All Celebrating Birthdays in ‘96,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 29, 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Sahgal, “Angel ... so L.A. & Me.”

<sup>31</sup> Dakota Sands, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 11, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Scott Hemmelgarn, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 11, 1995.

<sup>33</sup> Dianne Kramer, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 11, 1995; Damon Devine, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 11, 1995; Gabe Mooradian, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 11, 1995.

<sup>34</sup> Sandra G. Medof, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 11, 1995.

being famous” in 1989 for the readers of the *Baltimore Sun*, where she was also characterized as a “torpedo-busted cotton-candy blonde with no obvious skills.”<sup>35</sup> Much of the coverage she received had a dismissive edge that bordered on derogatory, while other coverage was cruel in its characterization of her. One journalist remarked that she should be placed in the “pantheon of L.A. circus freaks,” another called her “a clown still performing long after the circus has closed.”<sup>36</sup> The commonality of almost all press coverage of Angelyne was that she was almost never taken seriously, even when she was not the butt of the joke.

Journalists and reporters often portrayed Angelyne as a character, both playing into the things she said about herself but also spinning their own tales. She was portrayed as a character rather than a real person, usually reliant on her sex symbol image.<sup>37</sup> Journalists’ refusal to take Angelyne seriously led to nonsensical analysis such as this: “Her vapid psychobabble is too sincere to be anything more than a carefully contrived joke.”<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, Angelyne is sincere, on the other, she is the mastermind of a long-con persona. Some journalists could not decide between these conflicting ideas. Her promiscuous billboards seem to have opened the door for her to be reduced to that aspect of her persona. Thus, she is described as a “Hollywood sex kitten with a Betty Boop cant” and an “X-rated Barbie Doll.”<sup>39</sup> Angelyne consciously played into these stereotypes and adopted “Love Goddess of the Future” into part of her persona, perhaps as a way to gain control over this facet of her image.<sup>40</sup> While Angelyne did put that image of herself out in her billboards, in these quotes the journalists use the way she presents herself as an invitation to objectify and deride her. In the examples of letters written about Angelyne, there is ridicule that goes along with affection.<sup>41</sup> In the press coverage of Angelyne in the eighties and nineties, the same affection is not present.

### Angelyne, by Angelyne

Over time, Angelyne developed calling cards, such as the blond hair and the pink corvette. These characteristics, and the oft-repeated rumors that surrounded them, were cultivated by Angelyne, and reported on breathlessly. At one point, Angelyne was reported to own five pink convertibles for cruising around Hollywood or to paid engagements.<sup>42</sup> The mythology of Angelyne was often exaggerated, sometimes by Angelyne herself or those who work with her. Such rumors include communicating with Marilyn Monroe through a medium, having a number of different screenplays in development, and claiming she has always wished to be a genetic scientist.<sup>43</sup> In Figure Two, Angelyne is on the Sunset Strip, wearing an outfit typical for her, both in life and on her billboards.<sup>44</sup> This demonstrates that the image Angelyne created for herself through her clothing, hair, car, and makeup was not limited to the billboards; it was how she presented herself to the world on any given day.

<sup>35</sup> “PEOPLE, ETC.,” *Sun* (Baltimore), Jul. 16, 1989.

<sup>36</sup> Sahgal, “Angel ... so L.A. & Me”; Martinez, “A Fantasy Named Angelyne.”

<sup>37</sup> Martinez, “A Fantasy Named Angelyne.”

<sup>38</sup> Peter Hilmore, “Sweet Nothings from Stuck-Up Angelyne,” *Observer* (London), Dec. 8, 1996.

<sup>39</sup> Martinez, “A Fantasy Named Angelyne”; Karina Mackenzie, “Hot Pink Fame: L.A.’s Angelyne is Famous for being Famous. [Final Edition],” *Edmonton Journal* (Alberta), Jan. 25, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Lacher, “Anniversaries of Americana.”

<sup>41</sup> “Letter to the Editor 1—no Title.”; “LETTERS.”

<sup>42</sup> The Social Climes Staff, “For \$8,000, the Least She could do is be Friendly,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 16, 1995.

<sup>43</sup> Lacher, “Anniversaries of Americana”; Schwartz, “Temple of Hope”; Martinez, “A Fantasy Named Angelyne.”

<sup>44</sup> Steve McCurry, *ANGELYNE aspiring personality on Sunset Strip*, 1992, Photography, Los Angeles, CA.

Angelyne was notoriously mysterious when it comes to interviews, and what she does reveal was often very similar across the board. She developed her own mythology that has changed in content over time, as reflected in the interviews she conducted. In 1984, the year her first billboard on the Sunset Strip appeared, she claimed it was to get attention for her music career or to gain movie parts.<sup>45</sup> It is noted that billboards on Sunset Strip are often an accomplishment for artists, and Angelyne claimed at this time to want the attention of the industry. She remarked that it is working well, and that “I’m more famous now than I was two months ago.”<sup>46</sup> While



Figure 2: McCurry, Steve. *ANGELYNE aspiring personality on Sunset Strip*. 1992, Photography, Los Angeles, CA. Angelyne posing on top of her pink corvette on Sunset Boulevard.

she does focus on her own fame, there is an element of the billboards being part of a larger goal of gaining recognition in the music and film industries. In 1987, Angelyne still promoted her music in interviews, though these were primarily focused on the billboards and a painting she commissioned on a building near Hollywood and Vine.<sup>47</sup> While she spoke about her billboards and the mural, she still plugged her music career, although she did repeat that she “can feel

[herself] getting more and more famous every day!”<sup>48</sup> Angelyne represented herself differently through the years. In the beginning of her rise to fame, she kept at least some of the focus on her music career and her desire to be noticed in that regard, but over time, the quotes that she gave to journalists changed towards promoting only herself as a personality.

Eventually, Angelyne fully embraced her notoriety as the “Billboard Queen” rather than focus on her career aspirations, although she had always defined what she is famous for in her own terms. In 1996, she answered the question of what exactly she does with, “It’s over ten years of being famous and I still haven’t come up with an answer, I’m telling you. How about this one? ‘I don’t do; I am.’”<sup>49</sup> Although she was still releasing music, she had stopped referring to herself as primarily a singer.<sup>50</sup> She began to characterize herself as being “famous for the magic that I possess.”<sup>51</sup> This shift marks an embrace of the “famous for being famous” tag, demonstrating her adaptation to the nature of her own fame. The changing explanation for her fame also feeds into the more disingenuous aspects of Angelyne’s mythmaking. She presents her fame as a result of always only wanting fame—“I just didn’t feel normal until I

<sup>45</sup> Rogers Worthington, “Nation/world: Hot Billboard on Sunset Strip is a Ticket to Fame and Fortune Assignment: Hollywood.” *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 17, 1984.

<sup>46</sup> Worthington, “Nation/world: Hot Billboard.”

<sup>47</sup> Cathleen Decker, “Uh, that’s Hollywood: This Would-Be Star Pictures Herself with a Larger-than-Life Image,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1987.

<sup>48</sup> Decker, “Uh, that’s Hollywood.”

<sup>49</sup> Goldberg, “Roadside Icon Promotes Herself and City’s Image.”

<sup>50</sup> Goldberg, “Roadside Icon Promotes Herself and City’s Image.”

<sup>51</sup> Sahgal, “Angel ... so L.A. & Me.”; “PEOPLE, ETC”; Lacher, “Anniversaries of Americana.”



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became famous”—rather than a byproduct of higher career aspirations.<sup>52</sup> Between 1984 and the 1990s, Angelyne had seemingly abandoned the idea of gaining recognition for doing anything else. Although she was still releasing music, her focus had shifted, and she had embraced her unique form of celebrity.

Throughout her time as the “Billboard Queen,” Angelyne maintained distance between herself and the press with the help of her supposed staff. The task of putting off reporters and providing quotes illustrating her influence was almost always performed by Scott Hennig, alternatively called her manager or the president of her fan club. Angelyne and Hennig have made various claims about the size of Angelyne’s staff, sometimes twelve people, other times twenty-three. In almost every article where such claims occur, the writer notes that Hennig was typically the only person to answer the phone.<sup>53</sup> She avoided giving face to face interviews, as Hennig claimed that she was too busy and instead furnished quotes and clippings about the grand and global nature of her fame.<sup>54</sup> Hennig acted as her mouthpiece and as a gatekeeper to reporters attempting to write articles about her, giving the same information to everyone and emphasizing how in demand of a celebrity she was. Giving reporters this run-around enhanced Angelyne’s mystery and ultimately became part of her persona as an oddity.

Still, Angelyne and her various mouthpieces always present her as a genuine person rather than a persona or character that she could slip in and out of. Hennig claimed that Angelyne is “conscious about this whole business of being a celebrity, and she takes it seriously,” and made a distinction between her and figures such as Elvira and Pee Wee Herman. For Angelyne, “She’s Angelyne 24 hours a day. It’s not like some costume she puts on.”<sup>55</sup> Her investor, Hugo Maisnik, quoted her as saying “I’ve lived to be Angelyne this long, I act like Angelyne.”<sup>56</sup> Whether it was true or not, Angelyne and her representation sought to present her not as a character or an act, but as an authentic and full person. This is reflected in her relationship with her fans, who Hennig maintained understood Angelyne’s authenticity.<sup>57</sup> In fact, in the *Hollywood Reporter* story revealing her true identity, Angelyne did not confirm the details and remained cagey; she did not issue a full denial but remained elusive about her real identity.<sup>58</sup> Though Angelyne was often referred to as a character, persona, or caricature, she has never presented herself this way. She has claimed Angelyne as her true identity and has used Hennig and the scant quotes that she did give to emphasize this. According to Angelyne, there is no hidden identity, and she had no interest in acting as anything but herself.

While Angelyne did not give in-person interviews and intentionally made it difficult to speak with her, there are indications that she read her own coverage and responded to it, mostly in other quotes about her fame. In one specific instance, Hennig directly responded to a profile of Angelyne that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1995. A major theme of that profile was the author’s attempts to speak with Angelyne in person, but they were put off by Hennig. In a group of letters to the *Los Angeles Times* published in response to that article, Hennig claimed that the author was “on a mission” to date Angelyne and was unable to accept that she wasn’t interested; then claimed that the problem with Hollywood “is not its entertainers but

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<sup>52</sup> Hartigan, “L.A.’s Royal Highness.”

<sup>53</sup> Hartigan, “L.A.’s Royal Highness.”; Sahgal, “Angel ... so L.A. & Me.”; Hilmore, “Sweet Nothings from Stuck-Up Angelyne.”

<sup>54</sup> Sahgal, “Angel ... so L.A. & Me.”

<sup>55</sup> Hartigan, “L.A.’s Royal Highness.”

<sup>56</sup> *Angelyne*, (1995, World Artists Home Video).

<sup>57</sup> *Angelyne*, (1995, World Artists Home Video).

<sup>58</sup> Baum, “The Mystery of L.A. Billboard Diva.”



the promoters and publicity people they have to deal with on a daily basis.”<sup>59</sup> This quote has a pronounced adversarial tone in comparison to other quotes from Angelyne and Hennig, and is emblematic of much of the Angelyne myth making process. She felt misrepresented by the press and did not want to give them ease of access. Additionally, she maintained that claims about her are exaggerated and that the statements she has made were purposefully outrageous. Perhaps Hennig and Angelyne meant this earnestly, but, either way, it established the heightened sensitivities of Angelyne.

With Hennig as her primary mouthpiece to the press, and by allowing others to speak on her behalf, Angelyne created a sense of mystery. By letting reporters acquire most of their information from Hennig, she was able to pass along information like clippings of stories, statistics about her billboards in the U.S. and abroad, her fan club, and the opportunities she may or may not have.<sup>60</sup> This method was used to great effect in the 1995 documentary about Angelyne that features interviews with Hennig, Maisnik, Angelyne, and other figures in her sphere.<sup>61</sup> The documentary, in black and white, primarily featured interviews about Angelyne interspersed with clips of her or short interview segments with Angelyne herself. Her own interviews in the film are more cerebral and focused on showcasing her personality, while those with Hennig and Maisnik focus on her persona and the business aspects of Angelyne as a brand.<sup>62</sup> Maisnik presented Angelyne as a forward-thinking trailblazer and as a human completely different to the norm, while Hennig espoused the breadth of her fanbase and the ability of her celebrity to “enlighten the world through the persona of sex-goddess.”<sup>63</sup> These quotes and ideas are bold statements, and they come off as more authentic because they come from the mouth of Angelyne’s acolytes rather than from her own lips. In the documentary, Angelyne is pictured at the pool, dancing around, and sitting in bed making quips.<sup>64</sup> The film contrasts the literal Angelyne, presented as simply being herself, with the adoring statements of her supporters in a way that adds to her mystique. She became someone who has earned the respect and praise of others who are able to articulate *why* they are under her spell; all Angelyne must do is simply appear and confirm that she is deserving of the mystery and star treatment that she receives.

In 1997, Angelyne created her own website as an even more direct way to communicate her identity. In this medium, she could remain unfiltered from the opinions of reporters.<sup>65</sup> The website, which was completely designed in bright pink, features links to her “Driving Tours,” her biography, and a FAQ.<sup>66</sup> Some sections are written in the first person, while others are in the third person. The sections written in the first person include the specific mannerisms of her speech, such as “Ta Ta!”, “OOOOH!”, innuendos, and copious amounts of exclamation points.<sup>67</sup> Her biography states that Angelyne “symbolizes, and keeps alive the glorious essence that is Hollywood,” while emphasizing the amount of advertisements she has appeared on internationally.<sup>68</sup> In regards to her image, she is “seductive and sensual without being

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<sup>59</sup> Scott A. Hennig, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 11, 1995.

<sup>60</sup> Sahgal, “Angel . . . so L.A. & Me”; Hartigan, “L.A.’s Royal Highness.”

<sup>61</sup> *Angelyne*, directed by Robinson Devor and Michael Guccione (1995, World Artists Home Video); Steve Harvey, “Only in L.A.: Angelyne Moves! Angelyne Speaks!” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 18, 1995.

<sup>62</sup> *Angelyne*, (1995, World Artists Home Video).

<sup>63</sup> *Angelyne*, (1995, World Artists Home Video).

<sup>64</sup> *Angelyne*, (1995, World Artists Home Video).

<sup>65</sup> Angelyne, Angelyne.com, April 9 1997.

<sup>66</sup> “Angelyne’s Treasure Chest.” Angelyne.com. Apr. 9, 1997.

<sup>67</sup> “Angelyne’s Treasure Chest.”

<sup>68</sup> “Angelyne’s Treasure Chest.”

campy or burlesque.”<sup>69</sup> She characterizes her advertisements as being her “agent,” presenting herself as an independent figure who is extremely sought after. The FAQ is fashioned as an interview, stating that “THEY ALWAYS SEEM TO ASK THE SAME QUESTIONS ... MAYBE NOW ALL THOSE REPORTERS, JOURNALISTS AND INTERVIEWERS CAN COME UP WITH SOME NEW QUESTIONS.”<sup>70</sup> The answers to these questions are similar to those that she has given to reporters, but the framing indicates her frustration with the press in a direct way. Despite this, the website does have a tongue-in-cheek tone. This tone has allowed her to offer her own view on herself and her fame, and to beat back against the way the press has written about her. Angelyne clearly does not agree with the characterization many of the articles about her have produced, and this website has allowed her to present her own narrative.

In addition to biographical information, FAQ, and contact information, Angelyne’s website offers a tour of Hollywood hosted by Angelyne herself. Along with the videos, there are pages written in the style of her diary about the different stops on the tour.<sup>71</sup> In each of these diary descriptions, the focus is clearly on Angelyne rather than the stop along the tour.<sup>72</sup> The Hollywood Sign becomes “one of the most recognizable signs in the world, next to mine, of course!”<sup>73</sup> By creating a website that is written almost entirely in her own voice, Angelyne decided to communicate directly with her fans in a way she never was able to before. Up until this point, Angelyne was only accessible by chance, by booking an appearance, or by the view of her billboards.<sup>74</sup> This was a new endeavor for her, and it shows that she was trying to adapt her fame to be somewhat accessible. The tour guides were free and offered an experience to “ride along with Angelyne in Hollywood” whether participants were able to see her in person or not. The fact that she offered tours in Hollywood illustrates Angelyne’s allegiance to her home, and the way that she views herself as specifically associated with Hollywood to the point that she has become an expert on it. Because she is so enmeshed with the Hollywood landscape, she has been able to present the experience of driving through Hollywood with her as one worth having.

### Angelyne in Context

The media has categorized Angelyne in many ways since the beginning of her stardom, but one of the most persistent comparisons is to Jayne Mansfield. The director Julien Temple described Angelyne as an “heir” to Jayne Mansfield.<sup>75</sup> At the premiere for *Earth Girls Are Easy*, Angelyne’s look for the evening was described as “a Martian imitation of Jayne Mansfield.”<sup>76</sup> One journalist characterized her as cultivating “a vision of glamour that died with Jayne Mansfield.”<sup>77</sup> Another article described her as “living out her Jayne Mansfield caricature 24 hours a day.”<sup>78</sup> Why was this the figure who seemed to be the obvious comparison, while Angelyne compared herself to Marilyn Monroe or to Barbie?<sup>79</sup> Mansfield, a glamour girl and blonde bombshell of the fifties and sixties, was a star known for her pursuit of

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<sup>69</sup> “Angelyne’s Treasure Chest.”

<sup>70</sup> “Angelyne’s Treasure Chest.”

<sup>71</sup> “Dear Diary,” *Angelyne.com*. Apr. 9, 1997.

<sup>72</sup> “Dear Diary.”

<sup>73</sup> “Dear Diary.”

<sup>74</sup> The Social Climes Staff, “For \$8,000.”

<sup>75</sup> Schwartz, “Temple of Hope.”

<sup>76</sup> Kevin Allman, “INTO THE NIGHT,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1989.

<sup>77</sup> Hartigan, “LA’s Royal Highness.”

<sup>78</sup> Goldberg, “Roadside Icon Promotes Herself and City’s Image.”

<sup>79</sup> Hartigan, “L.A.’s Royal Highness.”

publicity and lesser-remembered movie career.<sup>80</sup> She was not coy about her goals of stardom and fame, and shared other similarities with Angelyne: a love of pink, a pink sports car of her own, and an association with Angelyne's prime territory, Sunset Boulevard, which Mansfield once walked a tiger on a ribbon down.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps the biggest similarity between them is the fact that their publicity blitzes predated career success, strategically launched preemptively to studio or record label support.<sup>82</sup>

Angelyne's path to fame is less atypical than it first appears. In the 1980s, getting a billboard on the Sunset Strip was not an unorthodox way to promote oneself as a performer, particularly as a recording artist.<sup>83</sup> Billboards on Sunset Boulevard were used to promote individuals regularly, most often for book, films, and music. Recording artists often required their labels to put up a promotional billboard in their contracts.<sup>84</sup> Ann-Margret, another star who emerged with the help of press agents, had a billboard on the Sunset Strip before any of her movie roles or music had been released.<sup>85</sup> Her management saw an opportunity to market her as the "female Elvis Presley," and soon she was a bona fide star; they continued to market her aggressively, separately from her film roles and as a star unto herself.<sup>86</sup> The idea of independently purchasing a billboard and chasing publicity in a larger pursuit of fame and opportunity was thus not entirely unorthodox. In an article from 1984, the year of Angelyne's first billboard, the quotes she gave and the tone of the coverage in the *Chicago Tribune* were similar to those of Jayne Mansfield in 1957, when Mansfield's first starring role had not yet been released. They were both strategic in how they described their fame; Mansfield stated that she needed to get all the men and women "stirred up," and Angelyne asserted that she was fielding offers and waiting for the right part.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps the reason why Angelyne's pursuit of fame in such a bold manner has been the subject of slightly shocked remarks in the press was simply because she was not as successful at it as the others; she did not go on to have the career of an Ann-Margret or even of Jayne Mansfield. These two had the backing of professional press agents, while Angelyne had a less experienced investor.<sup>88</sup>

Angelyne was also not the first person to be called "famous for being famous." One of the early examples in the press of that kind of celebrity is Zsa Zsa Gabor; an actress more famous for her own persona and many marriages than her film career.<sup>89</sup> This was not a label given to her later on, but one that she had already been given by 1989, by which time Angelyne was given this moniker as well.<sup>90</sup> In light of other figures, what exactly sets Angelyne apart as a prototype of the "famous for being famous" celebrity? Mansfield and Gabor were both characterized by their publicity, persona, and fame, as they were perceived as disproportionate to the success of their acting careers.<sup>91</sup> Angelyne, Gabor, and Mansfield thus all fall into the category of celebrity whose fame is dependent on their public persona rather than any of their work.<sup>92</sup> The difference is that Mansfield and Gabor did ostensibly have acting and

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<sup>80</sup> "Jayne Mansfield Dies in New Orleans Car Crash," *New York Times*, Jun. 30, 1967.

<sup>81</sup> Richard Donovan, "She Will Do Anything for Publicity," *Saturday Evening Post*, Jun. 1, 1957, 99.

<sup>82</sup> Donovan, "She Will Do Anything for Publicity."

<sup>83</sup> Worthington, "Nation/world: Hot Billboard."

<sup>84</sup> Worthington, "Nation/world: Hot Billboard."

<sup>85</sup> Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, 46.

<sup>86</sup> David H. Kelsey, "Meet Ann-Margret: Hard Work, Ambition Propel a Young Actress to the Top in Hollywood," *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 07, 1964.

<sup>87</sup> Donovan, "She Will Do Anything for Publicity.," Worthington, "Nation/world: Hot Billboard."

<sup>88</sup> Kelsey, "Meet Ann-Margret"; Donovan, "She Will Do Anything for Publicity."

<sup>89</sup> Alessandra Stanley, "Polisher of Her Own Star," *New York Times*, Dec. 20, 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Nikki Finke, "Famous for being Famous," *Los Angeles Times*, Sep. 12, 1989; "PEOPLE, ETC."

<sup>91</sup> "Jayne Mansfield Dies in New Orleans,," Stanley, "Polisher of Her Own Star."

<sup>92</sup> Geraghty, "Re-Examining Stardom."

movie stardom as their careers; despite how successful or unsuccessful they were, one could point to the fact they were in movies as a contributing factor to their fame.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, Angelyne only appeared in movies as herself and accepted the “famous for being famous” label very early on.<sup>94</sup>

Today, “famous for being famous” has reached new heights. Throughout the early 2000s, Paris Hilton was renowned for this type of fame.<sup>95</sup> The Kardashians, perhaps the most dominant celebrities of the past decade, are also often described this way.<sup>96</sup> Angelyne predated them all, and her model of celebrity is a prototype for the type of fame these other celebrities have acquired. There is still a distinction between them, however. Hilton and the Kardashians have spun their fame into entrepreneurship, while Angelyne has remained content where she is.<sup>97</sup> Hilton now maintains that the image of her as a blond ditz was a character, while Kim Kardashian West is pursuing a law degree.<sup>98</sup> Angelyne states that she has refused her own reality shows, rejecting the idea of all-access celebrity as “boring and gauche.”<sup>99</sup> This too, sets Angelyne apart from other celebrities who are famous for nothing. She has not converted her fame into anything other than continued celebrity, and apparently has no interest in doing so.<sup>100</sup> Because of this, Angelyne is perhaps one of the purest expressions of the type of fame she occupies. She is not coasting off prior fame and she will not turn notoriety into business success or another career path; she is simply continuing to be Angelyne. She has never promoted anything except herself and has always been honest about that fact.<sup>101</sup> Her embrace of the “famous for being famous” moniker set the stage for the acceptance of this type of fame. She was never embarrassed of that title, although it has often come with negative connotations.

### Angelyne: The End

Angelyne is still alive and up to her old tricks. She can still be spotted in Hollywood in her pink Corvette, and is still selling only herself.<sup>102</sup> Today she is heralded as a “first generation influencer,” and counts Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian West as fans.<sup>103</sup> There are countless celebrities today that are famous for being famous who are more well known for their personalities than for their work, and the invention of the Instagram influencer has created scores of individuals whose celebrity relies solely on self-image. The comparison to Angelyne is natural but not completely accurate. Angelyne thrives on mystery, while influencers and reality stars aim to provide relatability and constant access. Angelyne tightly controls her own image in a more obvious way than modern influencers, who create the illusion of complete openness.

She is still interpreted as a symbol of Los Angeles, perhaps disproving the theory that in Los Angeles nothing is certain; it seems there will always be Angelyne.<sup>104</sup> Angelyne’s original route to fame demonstrates an understanding of

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<sup>93</sup> “Jayne Mansfield Dies in New Orleans,” Stanley, “Polisher of Her Own Star.”

<sup>94</sup> “PEOPLE, ETC.”

<sup>95</sup> Ilana Kaplan, “Who is Paris Hilton, really?” *New York Times*, Sep. 11, 2020, Late Edition (East Coast).

<sup>96</sup> Amy Chozick, “The Keys to The Kardashian Kingdom,” *New York Times*, Mar. 31, 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Kaplan, “Who is Paris Hilton, really?”; Chozick, “The Kardashian Kingdom”; Gary Baum, “L.A. Billboard Diva Angelyne Bemoans Kardashian, Hilton and ‘Boring, Gauche’ Celeb Culture,” *Hollywood Reporter* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug. 6, 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Lisa Respers France, “Paris Hilton Reckons with Her Legacy—and so should we,” *CNN Commentary*, Sep. 10, 2020; Elizabeth A. Harris, “Prisoners Freed. Beauty Sold,” *New York Times*, Apr. 5, 2020.

<sup>99</sup> Baum, “L.A. Billboard Diva.”

<sup>100</sup> Baum, “L.A. Billboard Diva.”

<sup>101</sup> David L. Ulin, “Angelyne and Los Angeles—a Self-made Duo,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 20, 2019.

<sup>102</sup> Ulin, “Angelyne and Los Angeles.”

<sup>103</sup> Ulin, “Angelyne and Los Angeles.”; Baum, “L.A. Billboard Diva.”

<sup>104</sup> Ulin, “Angelyne and Los Angeles.”

personal branding and marketing of the self, but it was not unheard of. She created a recognizable image and has maintained it, demonstrating acumen in the art of image creation. Celebrity culture is dependent on personal branding and creating an image of the star, enabling celebrities to be recognizable and giving them a public narrative. Her embrace of the “famous for being famous” label was ahead of her time, placing her as the forebearer not only to the individual celebrities that came after her but as an entire genre of celebrity that has exploded in the forty-six years since her first billboard appeared. She believed, even in the nineties, that “everyone will be a star in the future” and that her role was to guide people in that direction.<sup>105</sup>

Whether extremely prescient or just lucky in her guess, at least one thing that Angelyne predicted came to pass. Angelyne as a case study fits into the field of celebrity as one example of fame evolving in real time. Our understanding of celebrity is under constant expansion, whether through types of celebrity or debate over when the celebrity sphere begins.<sup>106</sup> Fame changes with the times, as people have new avenues towards notoriety. Angelyne’s fame has existed in a very specific window of time and demonstrates the changing attitudes towards her specific type of fame. She was too early to become a modern-day influencer and embraced the “famous for nothing” notoriety, while maintaining mystery and an old school philosophy of celebrity.<sup>107</sup> Her persona and her bald-faced pursuit of publicity for herself created a mythology wrapped up in the city of Los Angeles and the larger trends of celebrity going into the twentieth century, creating a blueprint for those that came after her.

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<sup>105</sup> Angelyne, (1995, World Artists Home Video).

<sup>106</sup> Nicola Vinovrški, “Casanova: A Case Study of Celebrity in 18th Century Europe.” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung. Supplement*, no. 32 (2019): 99-120, doi: 10.2307/26836213; Nicola Vinovrški & Robert van Krieken, “New Directions in the History of Celebrity: Case Studies and Critical Perspectives,” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung. Supplement*, no. 32 (2019): 7-16.

<sup>107</sup> Martinez, “A Fantasy Named Angelyne.’

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