



Wild Thing!



Paula Abdul lets us tag along for a day in her crazy life

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By Joe Rhodes

Paula Abdul wants the cameras to look away.

Not just the ones that have been following her all day for her new Bravo behind-the-scenes reality show "Hey, Paula" but the ones from "Access Hollywood" that have been following the "Hey Paula" cameras as they've been following her, a Paula-centric parade that includes her ever-present retinue of assistants, publicists, make-up artists and wardrobe stylists, a fluttering coterie of handlers, ready to swoop to her side whenever a crisis occurs. And, if you happen to be Paula Abdul, crisis is always in the air. Here comes one now:

"This is a moment guys, where the cameras have to be turned off," she is saying, wearing what appears to be a paper dental patient's bib, easing down onto a massage table in the upstairs tv/work-out room of her modest (by celebrity standards) canyon-side home in Sherman Oaks, the room with the Ab-Lounger and sheet-music light sconces and the leopard-print carpet, preparing for her afternoon acupuncture appointment, which she will undergo while simultaneously chatting with Access Hollywood's Billy Bush, who is, reluctantly, shirtless and sprawled out on the table next to her when one of Paula's four Chihuahuas, not

usually allowed in the room, decides to deposit a souvenir.

“Can we get some Kleenex?” Paula shouts out. “One of my dogs left a land mine.”

They come running, of course, to remove the evidence. Billy Bush, afraid of needles, is warily eyeing the acupuncturist. Paula is chattering on about how high a threshold she has for pain as the smallest Chihuahua, Bessie Moo, looking curiously relieved, falls asleep in the crook of her legs on the massage table. Her makeup is perfect. Her hair just right. The cameras never stop rolling.

“It’s easier to work on Shaquille O’Neal than it is on me,” she volunteers as needles are placed into the back of her neck and Bush tries very hard not to move. “Shaquille can’t take it.” She grimaces, says “ow” and encourages the acupuncturist, who she sees 3 times a week, to point out that the needles are going in much deeper on her than on Bush, who hasn’t flinched once.

“No,” Dr. Jun Song, the acupuncturist says, not catching the hint. “They are the same.”

“My dogs are funny,” Paula says, for no apparent reason. And then she closes her eyes.

The idea behind “Hey, Paula,” (also the title of a pop music hit from 1962, the year Abdul, a Southern California Valley Girl with Syrian Jewish ancestry, was born) was to show a side of her life that the public doesn’t see, a rebuttal to her loopy “American Idol” image, indisputable evidence that she is not the scatter-brained nut job the tabloids frequently make her out to be but is, instead, a hard-working entrepreneur who has managed to stay in the public eye for more than 20 years, first as an award-winning choreographer and then as a mid-90’s pop music star, triumphing in spite of well-publicized personal problems and not-so-well-documented physical maladies.

“I’ve endured life journeys that people never in a million years would ever think of experiencing,” she would say later, after the film crews had gone, sitting in the Ab-Lounger, all four Chihuahuas – Tinkerbelle, Tulip (the one she tripped over two nights before this year’s “American Finale”), Thumbelina and Bessie Moo – napping nearby. “I have come from the bowels of hell and risen above and come out tripping and singing and dancing. I’ve always been counted out, but I come back, like a stealth warrior.

“I feel like this is the beginning of my career,” she says, “and I’m like a kid all over again, counting my blessings. Because a lot of people don’t know that that I was in a plane crash (in 1995) which stopped my

career, which started all of this pain. And I was left to endure 14 cervical spinal surgeries. I have 4 plates in my neck and, for 5 and a half years, I disappeared, off the charts.

That was the period, after a car crash that aggravated her injuries, the end of her marriage to Emilio Estevez, the onset of eating disorders that dropped her weight to 83 pounds, when Abdul thought her professional life was over. “It was extremely lonely and maybe I made the biggest mistake by trying to keep it secret,” she says. “Maybe I should have opened my heart, my mouth, my mind to allow others to come in and maybe help me for a change.”

Was that, she is asked, why she decided to open up her life to reality show cameras, to make up for keeping secrets so long ago?

“Partially,” she said. “And partially the fact that I do know my life purpose. I know that sounds funny. But I do know my life purpose.”

Which is?

“It is having the uncanny ability to tap into the heartstrings of people and to make them feel like they’re going to be okay. And that if I can get through these hard times, so can you.”

This is a recurring theme with Paula, in the show and it seems, in every conversation, a sense that she’s never been given her due.

Even now, surrounded by paid admirers, in a house full of awards and expensive oil paintings and fancy clothes, she can’t stop talking about how she just hasn’t gotten enough credit for the things she does – the jewelry she designs, the shows she has in development, the deal she just signed to do a line of inspirational books for young girls in conjunction with “Chicken Soup for the Soul.”

“What I do feel proud about myself is I don’t give up,” she says. “Especially standing up for myself, you know? I’ve worked extremely hard to maintain the integrity and level of class and goodness that I have. I screw up just like everyone else. The difference with me is that I get to teach the rest of the world lessons, to learn how to bounce back a lot quicker.”

Her day begins at 6:45 a.m.. There is a quick run to Starbuck’s for a chai tea latte, an hour workout on an elliptical trainer and then, after a session with her hair and make-up squadron, she is driven to the Millennium Dance Studio in North Hollywood to audition dancers for an improv dance project to be called “Paula Abdul’s Shut Up and Dance Troupe.” She is there by 9:30 a.m., only half an hour late.

The camera crews, both from “Hey, Paula” and “Access Hollywood” are waiting inside, right by the sign that says “Please Be

Cautious of Mirrors.” There more than 30 dancers, all of them young and lean and outrageously dressed, in tiger-striped pants and blonde-Afro fright wigs. They have been told to come dressed as characters of their own choosing, but prepared for whatever suggestions Paula might throw out.

“What’s being created,” she tells them, her voice clearer than her explanation, “is a worldwide recognition of dance. But it’s also a variety/game show. “ The dancers seem confused, but game. Over the next three hours, Paula asks for their interpretations of various commands. She asks them to take off one piece of clothing, to pretend they are climbing out of a box, to act like a fish out of water. At one point she just starts barking out word associations.

“John Travolta,” she screams out. “Pee Wee Herman. Play in a sandbox. Smell your armpits. Pick your nose. “

“I may have your character dancing drunk,” she says, after being particularly impressed by the acrobatics of one hopeful. “ Remind me of that. And since I’m just boozing it up all the time, according to the tabloids, I’ll be joining you on that.”

She is gone by 12:30, entourage in tow, going home for lunch and then, after another round of touch-up, she does a 20-minute interview with Bush in her rose-

colored living room in which she once again, emphasizes how she’s never been drunk in her life and, when he gently pries into her dating life, responds cheerily, “I’m not talking about my effin private life, Billy (and yes, she actually says “effin”). I don’t like to talk about it, even though you do. You like to live vicariously through whatever you hear.”

As much she wants “Hey Paula” to be about her professional successes and work ethic (“Cameras are not going to get into my social life,” she says. “That’s off limits.”) the show inevitably focuses on Abdul’s foibles, misunderstandings with her staff, the infamous babbling round of satellite interviews she did earlier this year that she claims were a result of exhaustion “Sometimes, it’s really hard to watch,” she says. “It’s uncomfortable.”

Still, she seems surprised by the suggestion that, in the premiere episode, she comes off looking, well, spoiled. Critics have already honed in on a scene in which she dresses down her assistants for bringing her the wrong outfit for a cross-country red-eye flight, complaining that the shoes are wrong and the pants are too tight.

“That was no tantrum” she says of the scene. “A tantrum would be me yelling and screaming. If that’s how it’s been written up (and it has) that’s people that are trying to

make me look like a diva. I've worked for divas. I WISH I could work for someone like Paula Abdul. Honest to God, I am the kindest-of-kind human being. There's nothing in that scene that shows a diva at all. As a matter of fact, what the scene show is an unbelievable amount of patience.

At this point, the end of a very long day, Paula's publicist, still on duty, steps in suggest that maybe the interview has gone on long enough. Paula's eyes have narrowed a bit. The dogs are still sleeping. The leopard-skin carpet is dappled with sunset shadows.

"When I look at that scene, I feel bad for my assistants cause they're look like they're not on the ball. And that I'm forgiving enough and kind enough to not be inappropriate in front of the cameras.

"If that's what people find a diva," she finally says, "I wish everyone n this business was a diva like that. " She goes back into her bedroom to change her clothes, the cameras finally gone.

Joe Rhodes is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer.

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