

# Following the Original Paparazzo

## "Smash His Camera" turns the lens on Ron Galella

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During the opening day press conference for the Sundance Film Festival, Robert Redford talked about his own experience with the subject of a film that is screening as part of the U.S. Documentary Competition.

"Smash His Camera" delves into the life and times of Ron Galella, who is widely recognized as the original American paparazzo. Before photographers were hovering outside every Hollywood hotspot, Galella was the guy who got the shot.

Redford, as it turns out, was one of Galella's most sought-after subjects.

"He's a character," Redford said of the sly photographer. "He was after me for 30 years."

Although Redford said he could recall plenty of tales involving car chases and disguises, he chose to share one story in particular because as he put it he won. "You didn't win with Ron Galella," he said.

Redford recounted the day that he tricked Galella while filming scenes for "Three Days of the Condor." Determined not to let Galella get a photo of him, Redford had his stand-in lead the paparazzo astray while he walked out of his trailer wearing an Afro wig, mustache and sunglasses, and returned to the set unscathed.

When Galella heard that Redford had told that story, he laughed and countered with one of his own.

He explained that when Redford lived in Manhattan, his driver typically took the Madison Avenue route to the star's apartment. Galella figured out that cutting through Central Park was a shortcut. "[Redford] said to me, 'How the hell do you beat me to my apartment?'" Galella recalls. "I did win out with him."

Galella's career as a paparazzo began when he enlisted in the Air Force and began taking photos for newspapers during the Korean War.

After the war, Galella enrolled at the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles and had the idea to crash movie premieres to take pictures of famous people.

"What drove me is curiosity of how these stars look are they as beautiful as we see them on screen? That was my motive, to capture them spontaneously, with surprised expressions on their faces," he says.

In 1958, he graduated with a degree in photojournalism and moved to New York. Since he didn't have enough money for a studio, he set up a makeshift lab in his father's basement in the Bronx. "I had no choice but to shoot on location, so that's what I did that's what started the paparazzi style," he says.

He continued to shoot movie premieres and Broadway openings, and that evolved into catching stars as they entered or exited their hotels and apartments. "What I do is capture them in an environment where they don't pay attention to the camera they're being themselves and relating to each other and therefore I get pictures that to me, are more meaningful and more realistic," he says. "That's how I became successful."

However, Galella's guerilla-style photography also got him into trouble a few times. In 1973, Marlon Brando famously punched Galella in the mouth because he didn't want to be photographed leaving a restaurant. "He knocked five teeth out of my jawbone," Galella says. "He did that really without a warning. I didn't even see the punch."

Galella sued Brando and won a \$40,000 out-of-court settlement. "The funny part of the story is the next day he almost died from his hand getting infected with my bacteria," Galella says. "He remembered me by the scars on his right hand and I remember him from my teeth."

Galella's other negative encounters include two highly publicized court battles with his favorite subject, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. She generally liked having her picture taken, Galella says, but she had him arrested for snapping photos of her kids. "It's a David and Goliath story," Galella says. "She's the giant, and I'm David with not a slingshot in my hand, but a camera."

Despite the setbacks, Galella never questioned his lifestyle. "I have great passion for this art of photography," he says. Stars who made it challenging gave Galella even more determination.

One of the craziest things he did, he says, was hiding out in a rat-infested warehouse for two days in order to get a shot of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton on a yacht with their children.

Galella is now 79 years old and rarely reverts to his old habits of staking out the stars. "Today I'm not missing anything," he says. "There's too many photographers and more restrictions with security and body guards it's terrible." Plus, he says, "Paparazzi takes a lot of patience and a lot of hours waiting. I don't have patience anymore. My time is very valuable, I'm 79!"

He also looks at today's celebrities as incomparable to the great actors of the past. "I call them featherweights all the Lindsay Lohans and Britney Spears I shot the heavyweights!" he says.

Galella has focused his energy on creating books out of the thousands of photos in his archives. "I have gold in my files. See, to me, the great stuff has been shot. I can't do this today, because the conditions are bad, the stars are not there, and so I'm better off just doing books and I love it," he says.

His ninth book, "Man in the Mirror: Michael Jackson" came out this month, and a compilation of stars pretending to punch him (emulating the Brando incident), "Boxing With the Stars," is slated to come out this spring. He's also planning a compilation of never-before-seen photos of Onassis, entitled "My Obsession: Jackie."

Galella's photos are also available in fine art galleries around the world. During the Sundance Film Festival, Gallery MAR on Main Street is displaying a collection of Galella's most iconic images to celebrate the premiere of "Smash His Camera,"

The film, Galella says, is culled from two years of footage compiled by director Leon Gast and producer Adam Schlesinger, whose father worked with Galella during his 1972 court battle with Onassis.

Galella says he enjoys having the camera turned on himself. He visited Park City over the weekend for the film premiere and chatted with guests at an artist reception at Gallery MAR.

Remaining screenings of "Smash His Camera" are Wednesday, Jan. 27, at 11:30 p.m. at the Library Center Theatre and Friday, Jan. 29, at 3:30 p.m. at Holiday Village Cinema II.

Galella's photos and books will be on display at Gallery MAR through today, Jan. 27, and will be available for purchase through the remainder of the festival. Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday and Tuesday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, and 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday.

*For more information about Galella, visit [www.rongalella.com](http://www.rongalella.com). For details about the film and ticket information, search for "Smash His Camera" at [http://festival.sundance.org/2010/film\\_events](http://festival.sundance.org/2010/film_events).*