

## Celebrity Justice (We Laugh)

By Tylla Bradley

One of the basic tenets of Western civilization is that no one is above the law. Kings and queens, rich and poor, men and women have repeatedly found this to be true, but in the twenty-first century, one lone group has managed to supersede the rules – celebrities. The bizarre insulation and isolating effective of the Hollywood Hills seems to create the impression that the rules that apply in “flyover” country are suspended for the elite that the little people are meant to adore. So, anarchy reigns amongst the group fiercely protected by their lawyers and publicists.

In reality, justice doesn't exist in Hollywood, or anywhere else for that matter. The discrepancies of the justice system and human nature are simply more pronounced and flagrant when a court case is examined under the bright biased lights of the media. Justice, as a concept, is a great principle that no one is able to fully enforce because of the many vagaries of the human condition and perception of what is just. The semblance of justice remains as the inept of the Hollywood and celebrity criminal element parades through court receiving ceremonial slaps on the wrist and the occasional “hard” sentence to show that they really aren't above the law.

In 2008, 214,811 people were arrested for driving under the influence in California.<sup>1</sup> Almost 80% of these arrests resulted in DUI convictions.<sup>2</sup> According to California law, first time offenders convicted of DUI automatically have their driving licenses suspended for four months, face three days to six months in jail, and are fined up to \$1,000 before being placed in a DUI education class. If a second offense is committed in the next ten years, the penalties are the similar, except the fines go up and the license is suspended for a year. Three or more convictions require a minimum of 120 days in jail, DUI education classes, and fines.<sup>3</sup>

As a deterrent, the system could be harsher. For instance, in Arizona, first time offenders not only face the jail and fines, but they are also required to have an ignition interlock device on their car. Illinois has a system in place that automatically suspends the license of an Illinois driver who DUIs anywhere in the country. California's laws seem to be reasonably in line with the rest of the country, depending on the high cost of fines, classes, and the inconvenience of a suspended license to discourage a repeat performance. Does it work? Occasionally. And when it doesn't, as celebrity cases like Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan prove, the system proves incredibly futile and laughably lenient.

Why do celebrities get off so easily? The reasons are both simple and complex at the same time.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.adp.ca.gov/factsheets/drivingundertheinfluencestatistics.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ots.ca.gov/pdf/Publications/DUI\\_2010\\_MIS\\_AR.pdf](http://www.ots.ca.gov/pdf/Publications/DUI_2010_MIS_AR.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.lawyers.com/our-blog/archives/895-Rodney-King-and-Californias-DUI-Process,-Penalties.html>

Easy reason: most celebrities are able to either 1) hire expensive attorneys who are capable of adequately defending them or 2) good attorneys volunteer to represent celebrities for the publicity. Either way, quality legal defense is always a good thing. Money says a lot. Prominent L.A. attorney Blair Berk noted, "Los Angeles is a company town [and the company is the entertainment industry]. If it was Washington, I would have defended congressmen. If it was Detroit, it would have been car executives."<sup>4</sup>

Instead, she defends celebrities like Lindsay Lohan, Ryan Seacrest, and Mel Gibson. As the legal counsel that managed to compact Lindsay Lohan's two 2007 DUI arrests into a plea deal that included a cursory prison visit, community service, and another ineffective stint in rehab. This was punishment for driving, on two separate occasions, motorized vehicles when either intoxicated, high on cocaine, or both. In one case, she was in the act of chasing another car in which the person would later comment that she was afraid for her life. Still, the deputy district attorney stated that "'Lohan received the same sentence that anyone else with a second DUI conviction would get. She got no special treatment."<sup>5</sup>

The complex reason is that weird psychological relationship the public has with celebrities. James Houran, clinical psychologist and joint creator of the Celebrity Worship Scale, commented "[Celebrity worship is] a form of social bonding, stress reduction, escapism and entertainment."<sup>6</sup> Several celebrity trials have hinged on the fact that the defendant is simply too well-known to find an unbiased jury. One obvious, controversial example would be either of the O.J. Simpson criminal trials. After being acquitted of double homicide, the former football star and actor managed to find his way back to criminal court where it seems that public opinion ruled the day and he found himself sentenced to 33 years in jail for an incredibly stupid stunt that would have gotten most other celebrities a slap on the wrist. Combined with the public sense of knowledge and familiarity, it's difficult to believe that the person that seems like a close friend would be capable of wrongdoing. And, even if they did it, well, take it easy on them, just because.

Not that this approach is good for society or the celebrity. During the trial that eventually sent him to prison, notorious drug addict Robert Downey, Jr. told the judge, "It's like I have a loaded gun in my mouth, and I like the taste of metal." In situations like these, public attention changes drastically from harmlessly friendly escapism to a disturbing level of twisted voyeurism. Are people crying for justice because they truly believe that it is deserved, or because they want to see what Lindsay Lohan will do behind bars?

This change prompts the questions that some are afraid to ask and many are afraid to answer. Are these crimes simply a desperate pantomime for the never satisfied audience waiting for a fading actress to turn in her last performance? If so, America literally has a front row seat to watching a troubled young woman milk her suicide for all the media attention it can get.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-09-28/justice/celebrity.lawyer.berk\\_1\\_shawn-chapman-holley-hollywood-lawyer-blair-berk/2?s=PM:CRIME](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-09-28/justice/celebrity.lawyer.berk_1_shawn-chapman-holley-hollywood-lawyer-blair-berk/2?s=PM:CRIME)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20052815,00.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cosmosmagazine.com/features/print/414/divine-trash-psychology-celebrity-obsession?page=0%2C0>

While many celebrities' criminal scrapes are either quietly resolved or handled with kid gloves by the justice system, there are several who are sent to jail.

- Lil'Wayne was sentenced to a year in Riker's Island on firearms charges,
- Michael Vick went to prison for perjury related to a dog fighting ring on his property, and
- Wesley Snipes was sentenced to 36 months for not filing his taxes.

Well, that's the price you pay for being a black male in a world of predominately white celebrities. You stand out and you rarely get a pass for your wrongdoings. And, even when you do, here's looking at you O.J., Kobe, and M.J., you're still ostracized until public opinion turns or you actually become some version of what people think you are.

And, while football player Plaxico Burress was recently released from jail for accidentally shooting himself, the king of the uncaught celebrities, Charlie Sheen, who himself is no stranger to gunshot wounds, domestic abuse, and prostitution, continues his diminishing blaze of self-destruction. With a laundry list of incidents that would have sent a lesser man, even a lesser actor, to jail Charlie uses his rampant criminal misbehavior to propel his dubious career of playing characters named Charlie forward until he reached the pinnacle of his career as the highest paid TV actor thus far (2011). Unfortunately, he also tumbled off that pinnacle in an overly public, psychotic debacle that is sure to make it on a lot of top ten of 2011 lists in December. As some have said, his fall makes Lindsay Lohan look like she has it together.

Prison is a punishment for crimes against society and your fellow citizens and residents of the United States. The word *penitentiary* has its root in *penitent*, the idea that you have considered your wrong doing, are sorry and ashamed of your actions, and wish to rejoin society as a productive member.

While prisons have evolved over time, the basic idea remains, it's punishment for a crime. If you did the crime you most certainly should serve the time. Something vapid socialites Nicole Richie and Paris Hilton need to be clued in on. Both had their brushes with the criminal justice system with the Hollywood crime *du jour*, the DUI. After driving her luxury SUV the wrong way on the L.A. freeway, Richie served 82 minutes of her four day sentence. She later said in her interview that that was "my way of paying my dues and taking responsibility and being an adult."<sup>7</sup> To her credit those 82 minutes seemed to have scared her straight; however the same cannot be said of her friend Paris Hilton. Hilton, who seems almost incapable of not being caught, spent three days of a three week sentence in jail before being released to house arrest. In 2010, she was arrested for possession of cocaine again after inadvertently showing it to a police officer while looking for lip gloss in a purse that she first denied was hers.

At least Martha Stewart actually spent some time in prison, not behind bars, but prison. And you have to know that life without access to decorating equipment must have been murder for the multi-millionaire (former) stockbroker. Likewise, 24 star Kiefer Sutherland

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20049996,00.html>

conveniently served his 48 days in jail for a DUI charge during the summer to accommodate his day job. His lawyer, Blair Berk, praised him saying, "Kiefer felt a responsibility to his show, and the hundreds of people that were employed, to resolve his case quickly and in a way that protected their jobs."

When in doubt, spin the story to come out as the hero. While in prison, Martha Stewart didn't sit and contemplate the hurt she caused and the reason she was in jail. Instead, she worked as a liaison between the prison management and her fellow prisoners because they're all in the same boat. Kiefer didn't go to jail because he broke the law and was being punished for his recklessness and irresponsibility. Instead, serving jail time was the "selfless" responsible choice for the actor.<sup>8</sup>

In Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the pig's first rule eventually evolved from "All animals are equal," to "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others." In America, everyone is equal under the law, but some people get a little more leeway for special circumstances. As more and more of the pantheon of celebrities march through the halls of justice to receive their perfunctory slap on the wrist, the divide spreads a little more. Just because justice is blind doesn't mean she can't hear the media circus and, right or wrong, it affects her judgment.

From powerful lawyers to the sympathies of the American audience, some celebrities are free to enjoy their criminal activities without fear of serious legal intervention. Others feel the full weight of the gavel and live to regret their legacy of a ruined career, criminal record, and personal failings. And, when a stint in prison is served, it can always be spun into the further heroic adventures of a noble leading man. In a land where society is obsessed with their every move and they can do no wrong, there is and cannot be justice for the celebrity, to the detriment of the defendant and society.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-09-28/justice/celebrity.lawyer.berk\\_1\\_shawn-chapman-holley-hollywood-lawyer-blair-berk/2?\\_s=PM:CRIME](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-09-28/justice/celebrity.lawyer.berk_1_shawn-chapman-holley-hollywood-lawyer-blair-berk/2?_s=PM:CRIME)