



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

SPY GUYS KURT ANDERSON, GRAYDON CARTER  
AND GEORGE KALOGERAKIS

# SPY MASTERS

BY MICHAEL GROSS

LOOK AT ALMOST ANY MAGAZINE TODAY, AND YOU'LL SEE THE MARK OF THE BEAST UPON IT, A CRITTER CALLED *SPY*. LAUNCHED IN 1986, *SPY* DIED YOUNG—AT ELEVEN YEARS AND THREE MONTHS, IT WASN'T EVEN A TEENAGER—BUT LEFT A GOOD-LOOKING CORPSE. IT WAS THE PRETEEN MOTHER OF TODAY'S CULTURE OF SNARK, AS WELL AS AN OBJECT LESSON IN HOW THE BEST OF THE PRESS COMFORTS THE AFFLICTED BY AFFLICTING THE COMFORTABLE. IF YOU WERE COMFORTABLE IN THE LATE 1980S AND 1990S, *SPY* WAS THE WHOOPEE CUSHION AT YOUR PARTY. TODAY, ITS TWO EDITORS, KURT ANDERSEN AND GRAYDON CARTER, ARE ARGUABLY THE KIND OF PEOPLE THEY USED TO WRITE ABOUT: AS AN ESTEEMED NOVELIST AND *STUDIO 360* RADIO HOST AND THE EDITOR OF *VANITY FAIR*, RESPECTIVELY, THEY ARE KINGS OF MEDIA. BUT ONCE, THEY WERE COURT JESTERS, AND THEIR JUST-RELEASED BOOK, *SPY: THE FUNNY YEARS*, IS A TRENCHANT REMINDER OF JUST HOW FUNNY AND SMART AT LEAST ONE MAGAZINE USED TO BE. THE TWO EDITORS AND A FORMER EMPLOYEE, GEORGE KALOGERAKIS (WHO ACTUALLY WROTE THE BOOK AND IS NOW THE DEPUTY EDITOR OF THE OP-ED PAGE OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES*), RECENTLY JOINED BG FOR LUNCH AT BG RESTAURANT ON BERGDORF GOODMAN'S SEVENTH FLOOR, TO DISCUSS THEIR BOOK AND LOOK BACK WITH HUMOR ON THEIR DAYS OF WINE AND RAUCOUS RANCOR.

**BERGDORF GOODMAN:** First of all, George, the book is great.

**GRAYDON CARTER:** George made the history so much fun, that even if you were there, like Kurt and I were, you enjoy it. Maybe enjoy it more. We had responsible jobs and children and wives and stuff. It would have been more fun to be twenty-three and an intern. For that to be your first job out of school! I felt envious of them.

**KURT ANDERSEN:** I saw David Remnick last night. He said that very thing about the book. Here's the Pulitzer Prize-winning editor of the *New Yorker*, and he wishes he'd had that kind of crucible.

**BG:** The biggest surprise in the book is how financially tenuous *Spy* was.

**GEORGE KALOGERAKIS:** The staff didn't realize it either. *[laughs]*

**GC:** Part of that is not even in the book. There was a point when Kurt and I—do you remember that meeting? Well, we can't go there. But we came so close. What actually hurt us is that we started selling more copies than we anticipated we would. There was a lag time between when you pay the printer and when you get the money from the advertising.

**KA:** We were doing too well. And we had to print too many copies to keep up. The joy of it,

of course, was that we were just doing it to have a good time, but that was the scary lack of backing that we had. If it had been a big company, they would have said, "Oh, this is going great; we'll just write you a check." But we didn't have that.

**BG:** The level of your naivete was also surprising—both financially and editorially.

**GC:** We knew nothing. It's absolutely true. And still true, in my case.

**KA:** We were naive, but that helped us. And we had a business partner, Tom Phillips, who was relatively less naive than we were in some ways. But I think editorially, we *were* naive, and that was a good thing. For instance, I had no idea what we were getting into when we started covering CAA in Hollywood. I had *no* idea that we were taking on Goliath. We took risks that, if we were five or ten years wiser, we might have been a little more loathe to take. We were just the right age, and we had just the right amount of experience.

**GC:** We both had our nose in the door, but not too much that we'd be terrified of actually doing it.

**KA:** We actually convinced all these younger people to potentially ruin their careers.

**BG:** But you didn't look like revolutionaries.

**GC:** No, I made a point, when someone came to photograph us, of wearing a suit. I thought you were a better revolutionary if you could walk into a club, rather than wearing long hair and blue jeans.

**GK:** There was a lot of counterintuitive stuff going on. I remember you guys also saying, "When you're being photographed, never smile." Because it's a funny magazine, you can't smile.

**GC:** And photographers always wanted us to...

**KA:** ...yes. Jump up and down!

**GC:** Or they'd give us a little spyglass or trench coats. "We're not that kind of a magazine!" We had a Japanese film crew that came one time and we did calisthenics, and they didn't know what the hell we were doing. But it was a very nice, collegial office. I remember when we were having a rough period, talking to the staff and saying, "Take a look around. You'll look back and think, these were the good old days." They did have more fun than we did, because they were single, they could go around and [expletive deleted] each other and all the rest of it. They didn't have the financial responsibilities and didn't know how dire it was at the end of the day.

**KA:** There were periods where it wasn't dire.

**GC:** Yeah, there were. Yes. At the beginning, I expected to spend my whole working life there.

**KA:** But the stress of doing this magazine that purported to sort of critique the whole world and the powerful people in it was not so much scary exactly as much as it required toughness of spirit. But I'm not sure either one of us was born with it.

**BG:** Was there a learning curve?

**KA:** A kind of skin-thickening, soul-toughening. I often felt as though I was attached to some great turbine.

**BG:** Did you ever have confrontations with angry subjects?

**KA:** I had a couple. The writer Cynthia Heimel once poured ice down my shirt at a party. But nothing horrible, frankly, given what we undoubtedly deserved.

**BG:** There were definitely some detractors at the *New York Times*. *Spy's* column about the newspaper got under their skin.

**GC:** After a while, it really pissed us off, because we thought our copyright was being stolen by the Xerox machines at the *Times*. Someone would buy one copy and make a thousand Xeroxes. So we tried a million different techniques of printing the page so it could not be copied. I don't think we ever fully accomplished that.

**BG:** Who suggested doing a *Times* column?

**GC:** Jann Wenner. People forget now that there was a time when nobody ever said anything nasty about CAA or the *Times*. We were not involved in Hollywood, so what we ran about CAA didn't really matter.

**KA:** But we didn't realize the hornet's nest that we were stirring up.

**GC:** I remember people thanking Michael Ovitz three times at the Oscars in 1987, and asking, "Who is this guy?" That's when we started it. But the *Times* was much more dangerous territory. Now, what we did looks like child's play.

**KA:** A thousand bloggers now have their fun carving up the *New York Times*. There was a sense of going out on a long limb with that. We were trying to get it right and not violate journalistic standards. But it was dangerous, you know? Kind of terrifyingly balls out.

**GC:** Also, both of us were such [expletive deleted] reporters [general laughter] that I'm sure we were used by various people. We were really bad reporters. Kurt's better than I am. I'm a horrible reporter.

**GK:** There were a lot of sources, writers and editors.

**BG:** The identity of *Spy's* most famous pseudonymous writer, "Celia Brady," who wrote the Hollywood column, remains a closely held secret.

**GK:** She did give an interview for the book.

**KA:** But the fact that she's still living and working in Hollywood pleases me.

**BG:** It boggles the mind. George, did you have to swear an oath of secrecy, or did you already know who she was?

**GK:** There is nothing signed. But we know...

**GC:** I'll tell you, there were no nondisclosure forms. And tons of people know who Celia Brady is. But we know who all those people are.

**GK:** Right. *Omertà*.

**GC:** There are a half-dozen or more people who I'm sure do know who she is.

**KA:** Don't say that. It'll scare her.

**BG:** Talk about the investors for a minute.

**KA:** Tom's dad, my parents.

**GC:** Our lawyers. A number of lawyers. Paul Weiss pulled the deal together, and three Paul

Weiss partners invested in the magazine.

**KA:** A few of them were people I'd gone to college with. Some of them were people Tom had gone to college with. One of the many strokes of luck we had was that 1985 and 1986, when we were raising money, was the first great boomer moment in Wall Street. So there were plenty of people about our age who'd made a ton of money in the last few years who thought throwing fifty grand into this hopeless venture was a fine idea.

**BG:** Then, at the end, as George writes in great detail, you had a silent investor who refused to be silent, a playboy named Jean "Johnny" Pigozzi, who famously sent you faxes criticizing the magazine.

**KA:** Did we send him a copy?

**GC:** I'm sending him a copy. Pigozzi only had two ways of treating people. You were either a manservant or you were Mick Jagger. And there was a long way between those two. I was closer to manservant. I did the shoes. Kurt did the jackets. He was a fun person. But he was not properly equipped to handle quote-unquote talented people.

**BG:** So much of what is going on in magazines now started in *Spy*.

**GK:** That was one of the trickiest things in doing the book. We wanted to say it, but we couldn't really say it.

**BG:** Are you flattered when you see it?

**KA:** I am totally flattered. There are moments when I feel a little bit like the architect Robert Venturi, who talks about the '80s and '90s, when he saw what was happening in postmodernism in architecture, this thing he'd invented. He was like, "I don't want credit for *that*." You feel like you don't want credit for everything that's called American humor today. But yeah, we had some influence, and if nothing else, we were very early on a great big wave.

**BG:** There are only two magazines that seem to be templates any more, and you two ran, or run, them. Something is always either the new *Spy* or the new *Vanity Fair*.

**GC:** We have a list in the office of quotes, I swear. "The *Vanity Fair* of podiatry." We must have forty of these things. Every time a magazine launches. I sometimes wonder if we had done this exact same thing twenty years later, would we be sitting on a Google empire? Maybe we'd be on a yacht somewhere.

**BG:** Well, you guys did invent the Internet, didn't you?

**GC:** [pointing at Andersen] He did.

**KA:** That's possible. But it's effectively impossible to do today what we did then because of the Internet. Because media is so diffuse, and everybody can do funny. It would be impossible to create a place that got as much attention.

**GC:** *Spy* could be a little bit [excretory expletive deleted], the Internet can be a little [ditto]. Can you say [ditto] in *Bergdorf Goodman Magazine*?

**BG:** We'll see.

**GC:** But we made a benefit of having no money. We couldn't afford photo shoots. At *Vanity Fair*, we spend more on the food at a photo shoot than we spent on the entire editorial process at *Spy*. But having no money, I think, was probably the best thing that ever happened.

**BG:** You were even able to commission the kind of in-depth saturation reporting that a lot of editors say they can't afford anymore. How did you do it?

**GC:** Tons of eager young kids. It was basically four editors and 200 interns and assistants.

**KA:** There were also some real experienced reporters. But because, in our odd, neither-Left-nor-Right way, we were kind of on a mission, people were willing to spend the hundreds of hours necessary to do the reporting, because it wasn't just a job for a magazine. There was something grander about what they were setting out to do.

**GK:** And there was sort of a friendly competition that came through when I was interviewing a lot of old colleagues. I wasn't as aware of it at the time, but the younger staff members would try to come up with an idea that no one else would do because it was too labor-intensive, because it was a way into the magazine.

**GC:** *The New Yorker* masthead we ran in 1988 or so took one person one year. [The illustrious magazine had never run a listing of its staff.] Remember, Roz Chast said she could never

talk to us again, she was so offended by it? And I think a lot of people at the *New Yorker* were sort of amazed at where they came in the food chain. Also, we published it in [legendary *New Yorker* editor William] Shawn's last month.

**GK:** A week or two later, he was out.

**GC:** It took another year to do the CAA client list.

**KA:** Which were both examples of pulling the curtain away from the wizard and revealing a guy back there operating the controls.

**BG:** Another thing you pulled off was having a consistent tone of voice in the magazine, yet you also let individual writers shine. So many magazines are no longer writer-driven. They're all tone, they're all...

**GC:** ...concept-driven.

**KA:** That's interesting. That may have been partly because we'd both just worked at *Time* magazine for five years or so, and at that moment, *Time* was transitioning from an entirely institutional voice to individual writers, like Bob Hughes, so we may just have absorbed that by hanging around our betters.

**GC:** I always say the difference between *Spy* and *Vanity Fair* is that *Spy* was like running Menudo, which was just millions of young kids, and *Vanity Fair* is like running the Metropolitan Opera.

**BG:** Several dozen divas?

**GC:** Yeah, right.

**BG:** Has either of you run into Donald Trump, your great detractor at *Spy*? Do you have a relationship?

**KA:** I think you're the godfather of his daughter, right?

**GC:** Little Donnie! The Donald is like somebody that never leaves. He hated Tina Brown more than he hated me. Therefore, he liked me. I mean, I'm not a fan of his buildings or anything like that. But he can be good company.

**BG:** Graydon, you took so much grief when you took over *Vanity Fair*: "How dare he not be the angry young man any more?"

**GC:** I think I was criticized because it was so different from *Spy* and because my first two or three years there were very rocky. I wasn't doing a great job. But that's because it was 1992, the tail end of the '80s, and something new hadn't been born, something that you could reshape the magazine around. It was saved by the information-technological-entertainment revolution that created a whole new cast of characters.

**KA:** Look at any world. When someone like Eric Bogosian stops being just a downtown performance artist and becomes an actor...anybody who moves from an indie/alt world to some larger world is going to get grief. That's the way it goes.

**GC:** And we *never* made any money. We were paid like—don't listen to this, George—\$150,000 each at the highest point.

**BG:** I remember, Graydon, when you took over *Vanity Fair*, being at a Calvin Klein fashion show and seeing you sitting in the front row with Diane von Furstenberg, Barry Diller and David Geffen and wondering what was going through your mind. The same thing, Kurt, when you took over *New York* magazine...It was like the guards had joined the patients in the asylum.

**GC:** Let me tell you, you're a different person in your thirties. Then you get older. As we say in the book, if you're still angry in your fifties, you don't need a magazine, you need help.

**KA:** It's interesting. *Spy* obviously was driven by a certain amount of rage, but I think—and you'll find this if you look at the book—there was a lightness of touch, and certainly in the experience, internally, I have never worked in a neater, less back-bitey office.

**GC:** There was no politics. Everyone was real nice all the time. It's really funny. It was very easygoing.

**BG:** That comes through in the book too. I thought of it as, "Georgie has two daddies."

**GC:** George is still working that out! [*laughs*]

**KA:** We were lucky. I mean, we had no idea. We were friends, good friends, close friends, but who knew? It was a crazy idea to try to do something with two equal bosses. But as it turned out, we were, you know, 95% of the time, incredibly positive.

**GC:** I'd say 99% of the time.

**GK:** Also, whenever I write something, I hear these two, and I still often have them in mind: Would they like this? Because they're the ideal audience. One of the first things I did in my new office [at the *New York Times*] is I took out one of those "greetings from *Spy*" postcards that we printed before the magazine started, put it on my desk, and I just thought, "Ahh..."

**BG:** How did you decide to do the book?

**KA:** It seems like ten years ago. Graydon and I started talking about doing an anthology of the greatest hits. We weren't going to do a history at all. At the moment we were about to go out and do that, George called and said, "Is it okay with you guys if I write a history of *Spy*?" And we said, "Let's join forces and make George do all the work."

**GC:** George wrote a proposal, and I remember saying, "This is a \$35,000 proposal. We want a million dollar proposal." So we worked George to death for six months, and it was one of the great proposals ever. It was all George.

**GK:** It was also very nicely packaged. But in fact, hardly anyone got to see it, because...

**KA:** ...Miramax just took it. Harvey Weinstein's take on it was, the way he justified overpaying us for the book, was that it would be inspiring and attractive to anybody, anywhere, who was interested in trying to start a business.

**GC:** Well, a magazine. This is not exactly starting a business!

**KA:** What not to do! Anyway, then it was just meeting after meeting after meeting. It's very tricky, obviously, to do this. I mean, to be candid about the stress of intentions and issues and all that, but also be a celebration, is a tricky thing to pull off. As *Spy*, the magazine was, it was a highly wrought, fussed-over thing.

**GK:** It was very similar to actually writing for *Spy*. The stuff kept getting passed around and got better and better. I was writing for two editors.

**BG:** Two editors who ended up sticking their own two cents in. The footnotes by Kurt and Graydon are hysterical.

**GK:** That was a way to solve the problem of how do you write about yourself. They ended up doing a light edit and instead doing little notes that sometimes take issue with something someone said, or something that I wrote, and is also in their voices, which was essential.

**KA:** The editing on our parts was almost entirely fact-checking or just notional nudges like "Let's have less about this, the swizzle sticks used at a certain party."

**GK:** The project almost fell apart over that.

**GC:** That's the next book: *Spy: The Swizzle Sticks*.

**BG:** You also print the names of all the *Spy* alumni in the back of the book, and it's quite a list. Is there anybody in New York media besides David Remnick who didn't work there?

**GC:** But it's funny, because they're all management rather than writers now.

**KA:** There are writers. Phil Weiss. Tad Friend. Paul Rudnick. I think they're all sleeper cells, and at the right moment, 2012, everybody's rising up again.

**BG:** Do you have a message for potential book buyers?

**GC:** Yes. There's a huge party at Kurt's place.

**KA:** Actually, they just missed the party.

**GC:** I don't know how many copies are going to be sold. But I would think that if I were twenty years old, I'd die to read it. It shows you that you can start something with no information and no real intelligence about what you're doing.

**KA:** Just passion and focus and luck.

**GC:** Yes, a lot of luck. BG