

words **paul giles**

# MY MODEL *life*

Paul Giles is a former Calvin Klein model, living in Adelaide, who has seen up close and personal the world of fashion and the celebrity it creates – along with its heady highs and miserable lows

IT'S A profession many aspire to but only a few get to experience, and I was one of the lucky ones. For more than 20 years I lived the modelling dream and yet, during my time in front of the camera, I never felt comfortable telling people what I did for a living or talking about it.

But now, after being out of the business for over a decade, I'm happy to give an insight into the life and times of an international male model – the good, the bad and the ugly sides of this industry.

It started for me in 1987, and within the space of two weeks, I went from mowing lawns for the local council to a modelling contract in Tokyo. I was 19, in a country obsessed with western culture and people. I was in the right place at the right time.

With my portfolio of four pictures, I would head to my agent to get the rundown of the day's castings. A casting is in essence, a job interview. You walk into a room and behind the table is the client, advertising representative, photographer, stylist, make up artist and a few others. They look you up and down, whilst checking out your portfolio, and talking a foreign language.

Sometimes they don't even look at you. You know then you're not what they're looking for. On average, I would go to 8-12 castings a day, starting at 10am and finishing at 9pm. Subway, taxi and leg power were the means of getting about, which I loved, as it was all so foreign to me.

Beautiful women also surrounded me 10 hours a day, which sure beat looking at grass clippings.

Once you did get a job, things got interesting – fun, arduous, amazing, tedious, exciting, lavish, punishing, unbelievable, dramatic, fulfilling, boring, painful, profitable, fortunate ... all depending on who you were working for, with and where.

The finished photo or TV commercial with me lying on the beach, surrounded by white sand, palm trees, a drink in hand and girl by my side, looks like the life of Riley. At times it was, especially as my alternative was the company of a Victa lawn mower.

But not always. Like when it's a 2am call to drive for three hours on unsafe tracks, then be caked in make-up as you sit chilled to the bone (you shoot summer in winter and winter in summer) while listening to a male diva make-up artist who finds any excuse to apply body bronzer to you; and to then be romantic with a girl who whinges about being tired and the pimple you cannot see, while missing her boyfriend terribly, who has breath like the local dog kennel.

Or standing at the bottom of Mt Fuji, doing swimwear in the snow, where I became so cold, I turned blue. To rectify this they spray-painted me with brown paint. Spending the following three days in

bed with hypothermia on chocolate brown sheets is soon forgotten when the billboard is in every subway station and the dollars are transferred to your account.

Or the time I did 173 different outfit changes for a corporate wear catalogue that had me on set from 6 am-11pm, with a 15 minute break and the third degree burn I got from the stylist who decided to iron my polyester jacket while I was still wearing it.

The other side to the equation was being on some shoots where I felt guilty about being paid. Traveling first class, staying in luxurious hotels at exotic locations was when reality was way better than perception.

Working with wonderful, interesting, creative people, also beat the council supervisor who checked on my manicured parks. To work with the likes of Mickey Rourke, Carl Lewis, Mark Wahlberg and Elton John, or to hang out in nightclubs with Michael Jackson, Motley Crue, and Jack Nicholson, or to date Cameron Diaz and Belinda Carlisle, was at the time, the reality of the world I lived in.

My upbringing of not making a fuss or talking "shop" and treating everyone equal, held me in good stead when working on set or meeting people of fame.

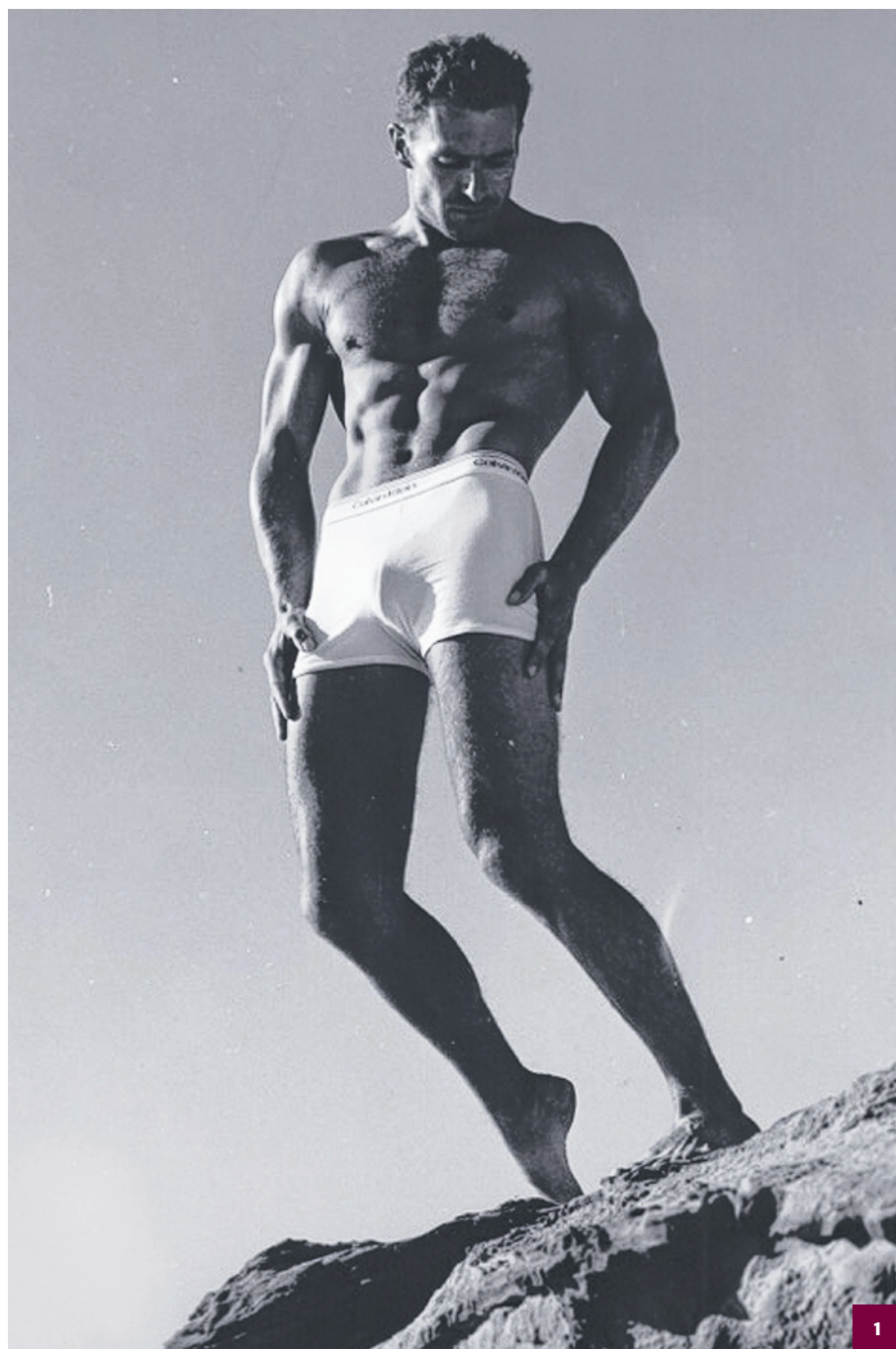
I was 19 and Mickey Rourke was at the peak of his powers when I won the gig to sit next to him at a bar for a Suntory whiskey shoot. As expected, he was late, which allowed all lighting, props, ambience and the look to be perfect so he didn't have to wait around. The moment he laid eyes on me I could feel he didn't want to be there, sitting next to a male model.

Not much was said in the first hour but as time went on, the silence became uncomfortable. I didn't let him know I was a fan and even pretended I hadn't seen his films, and by lunchtime he was following me around like a bad smell – asking questions about Australia, talking sport, fashion, food and all things normal.

This is how I played it with all celebrities. They love to be treated as normal. Crouching on the starting blocks in a suit at Tokyo Dome next to the great athlete Carl Lewis was a memorable moment.

**F**UN fact: Nightclubs were free entry and so was the alcohol. It was nothing to walk in and order 20 drinks for a laugh because you could. We were so indulgent. It was the models and actors that made the clubs popular so we were given anything and everything to attend and have fun.

In the end it became so monotonous that we spiced things up to have fun. I used to work with some real characters, who loved fun, taking the mickey out of themselves and others, so wigs and dress up outfits became the norm at some of the biggest and best clubs in the world.





Once in Tokyo, we decided that the last outfit we wore on shoot had to be worn at the club for the night. When doing Japanese workwear catalogues, cheap department store flyers or traditional Japanese bridle wear adverts, your outfits for the night turned some heads. After a few weeks of this game, due to our influence this attire became fashionable among the clubbers, along with the 80s permed wigs we wore with pride.

When I saw Michael Jackson at the club Lexington Queen once, I made a bee-line for him and did the moon dance, before asking him how I went. Jackson wasn't as impressed as the crowd, who went wild.

Another time in a club, Jack Nicholson wanted to hang with us for some reason, so my mate play wrestled with him for 30 minutes on the couch in the VIP area while I refereed. Pinning Jack down for the three count is still talked about today.

I once drank with Nikki Six from Motley Crue, who after finishing his bottle of Jack Daniels threw it against the wall of the club. Continuing the party back at his hotel room was like something out of a *Hangover* movie. Framed gold records and guitars everywhere, clothes and cash amongst the room service, left over food – it was a penthouse suite with a difference.

One night I was introduced to Belinda Carlisle from the 80s girl band The Go-Go's. After a few dances we left and rode in her limousine around Tokyo talking architecture and gardening for hours (I had no idea about either subject), eventually watching the sun come up.

**W**ORKING and hanging out with beautiful women came with the territory and after a while, I did not think too much of it. However, Linda Evangelista and Claudia Schiffer took my breath away. I don't think photos did these girls justice. In the flesh they were surreal, too perfect.

I remember when Claudia walked past (and did not even notice me). Not only did she look like a goddess, but smelt amazing. I was rarely lost for words but I was at that moment, totally. Another time, I was introduced to a girl by a friend and after dinner, remembered thinking how infectious she was, a great storyteller who was the first to laugh and joke around, with

a tomboy manner, who ate and drank everything in sight. A rare commodity in this game. We played table soccer with two glasses and a 10-yen coin. She was the life of the party with the energy of a Duracell battery. She was not the classic beauty but was cute, and after a few times going out together she went back home as most models did. It came as no surprise that a few years later I saw this girl on the big screen. I'm talking about Cameron Diaz.

**A**S WITH any profession, along with the great people, there were also the difficult, bizarre, emotional and insecure. I witnessed men six foot three and built like Greek gods in tears because they missed out on campaigns. I saw stunningly beautiful girls come to blows through jealousy. I saw famous girls drink men under the table ... a client and model came to blows about disagreement on a payment. I saw models stuffing their shoes with \$50,000 cash when leaving to go back to their homeland. I saw people thinking they would make millions and go home with nothing, their egos shattered. I saw girls not eat for two days because they had swimwear to shoot. I saw the healthiest looking individuals live on canned tuna and rum and coke for 60 days straight.

I saw small community farm people become rich and famous. I saw people play with sexuality. I saw washed up people, older than my parents, trying to succeed in a young person's industry. I experienced being rich and poor, flavour of the month and yesterday's paper, being in love and lonely, happiness, sadness and every emotion in between.

But what a ride. What an experience. What a luxury to do something I did not have to study for, or ever dream of doing.

For that reason, plus being an Aussie, I didn't think I was better than anyone else. For me, it was a remarkable way to earn, learn and see the world. As my older brothers continuously reminded me, keep your eyes open, your mouth shut and your teeth clean, or else come back home as the grass always needs mowing.

I loved working with photographers. They were hard working, creative, fun and had the power to influence the client and promote your brand. Whilst on set, it is a team effort, which makes a great end



## “I EXPERIENCED BEING RICH AND POOR, FLAVOUR OF THE MONTH AND YESTERDAY'S PAPER, BEING IN LOVE AND LONELY

product. I always loved fashion so to work with some of the biggest designers in the world like Ralph Lauren, Giorgio Armani, Versace and Calvin Klein was unreal.

What goes on behind the scenes to produce a collection is amazing. The vision, creativity and hard work is not obvious when garments are displayed on the runway. Yes there is stuff that is so way out that it could be mistaken for a fancy dress costume, but I still admire the individuality and process involved.

I'VE been asked many thousands of times if I got to keep the clothes. It depended on the client. With my love of threads I would buy items at cost, especially from the top end designers. A lot of clothing I still own and wear today, some 25 years later.

I'm also asked, often sarcastically, what I achieved from being a professional smiler. This is my response: I learnt things that are best taught by experience rather than textbooks – independence, confidence, positivity, resilience, people and social skills, acceptance, humour, tolerance, and the value of keeping an open-mind.

I'm so grateful to have experienced two decades in the business, seeing and experiencing things I could never have imagined while always having a laugh along the way and not taking the whole thing too seriously. How could you when you were wearing fur coats, hats, gloves and scarves in 35-degree weather, or wearing budgie smugglers in -2 degrees?

Or changing clothes over 100 times in a day while make up was applied with a trowel to cover the sweat pouring off your forehead as the lights were so strong.

Or when the girl next to you was so tall you had to stand on telephone books to gain a few needed centimetres. Or walking the catwalk with tissues stuffed in the end of your shoes, three sizes too big.

Or when they dyed your hair blond and it turned green. Or when you go on a three-day shoot and the chain-smoking client sets his alarm every hour in the middle of the night to light a cigarette and you're sharing the same room.

Or when a lion cub that was supposed to be friendly and tame decides to see what you taste like. Or when the location driver falls asleep while driving on a 5-lane Tokyo highway and you're sitting in the front. Or when the pin pulling in your pants jabs you so hard it breaks and you need tweezers to pull it out.

But I never complained. After all, wearing an Italian suit while driving a German sports car, with a beautiful girl in the passenger seat, and the camera and lights flashing, were never part of the job description for my local council's parks and gardens. ●

Paul Giles is an SA Weekend columnist and author of *The Gentleman's Guide to Cool; Grooming, Clothing, Etiquette*

1 Working for Calvin Klein 2 Cameron Diaz  
3 Claudia Schiffer 4 Making warm look cool 5 ... and cold look hot

