

# Pitfalls of the glam race

['Real,' from E1] piled with cash.

She always had reason to brag, or so it seemed: She was married to Tom Girardi, a renowned trial lawyer who made millions by suing corporate behemoths on behalf of regular people. If she used some of his vast fortune to fund her music career and finagle a starring role on Broadway, so what?

But during a recent episode of "Beverly Hills," Erika Girardi may have finally given up the game, telling a castmate: "My whole life is smoke and mirrors."

The comments were recorded last fall, days before Girardi, 49, abruptly filed for divorce from her much older husband after two decades of marriage. Bravo fans were shocked, but as The Times reported, Tom Girardi's storied career was in ruins amid allegations that he'd embezzled millions of dollars from bereaved clients and used it to maintain an extravagant lifestyle.

Erika Girardi now faces scrutiny over her possible involvement in the scandal and the impression that money intended for "orphans and widows" was frittered away on her celebrity ambitions. So far, the singer seems undaunted by the criticism, posting defiant memes and glamorous red carpet shots on her Instagram account.

The saga, the heavily hyped focal point of the current season of "Beverly Hills," makes Girardi the latest of the "Real Housewives" to contend with legal and financial difficulties connected to the fabulous persona they convey on TV. In March, "Salt Lake City" housewife Jen Shah was arrested on suspicion of running a vast telemarketing scheme targeting the elderly. "New Jersey's" Teresa Giudice spent nearly a year in prison after pleading guilty to fraud charges.

And although only a few "Housewives" have been implicated in such brazen white-collar crimes, the list of bankruptcies, foreclosures, tax liens and lawsuits involving cast members runs longer than Girardi's hair extensions.

Since the inception of "Real Housewives," the sort of "smoke and mirrors" Girardi described have been central to the show — and, arguably, one of the keys to its success.

## SPENDING ORGY

The franchise's first property, "The Real Housewives of Orange County," premiered in 2006, at the height of the real estate bubble — then exploded into a pop culture phenomenon during the Great Recession, morphing along the way into an orgy of competitive consumption. Women on the show are implicitly encouraged to overextend themselves by producers who reward ostentatious and frequently irresponsible behavior with screen time and juicy story arcs.

Sometimes the investment pays off. "New York's" Bethenny Frankel parlayed reality TV stardom into a \$100-million cocktail brand. "Atlanta's" NeNe Leakes charmed her way into an acting career. Those who live the largest and spend the most lavishly — whether on a new house, a new purse or a new nose — often amass a following, which in the world of reality TV is a form of power: greater leverage when nego-



**TOM AND ERIKA** Girardi, on "Real Housewives," are divorcing amid allegations of embezzlement.

tiating contracts between seasons and free publicity for whatever low-calorie cocktail or handbag line they are, inevitably, hawking on the side.

"Real Housewives" prime location in the attention economy cuts both ways, though: At some point, viewers — and law enforcement — may begin to wonder, "Just where is all this money coming from?"

"These women are thinking of themselves as cast members with a storyline," says Racquel Gates, associate professor of media and cinema studies at the CUNY College of Staten Island and an avid "Housewives" viewer from Day 1. "If your life is not interesting enough in all the ways the show defines interesting, you lose your paycheck. You get fired. That's a very real pressure."

Gates cites "Beverly Hills" housewife Taylor Armstrong, who threw a widely mocked \$60,000 birthday party for her 4-year-old daughter in the show's first season. Yes, it was ridiculous, but, Gates says, "Taylor isn't just throwing a birthday party, Taylor is throwing a birthday party that is going to be a filmed event."

From the beginning, "Real Housewives" has called attention to these lavish expenditures with sly editing and on-screen graphics listing the cost of various purchases — all part of the "Bravo wink," the house style designed to stir both envy and disdain in the audience.

In the early years, though, "Orange County" was about more than just our Bush-era fascination with the region's Hummer-driving nouveau riche. Set in the affluent planned community of Coto de Caza, the series followed a group of loosely acquainted women — some haves, some have-nots — as they balanced work, family and the pressure to conform to the O.C.'s blond, surgically enhanced beauty standard. One, Lauri Waring, was a single mom who moved out of a Coto McMansion and into a cramped town house after a bitter divorce.

But the pressure to deliver a compelling storyline ultimately contributed to financial ruin: Lynne Curtin joined "Orange County" in its fourth season with a mostly forgettable arc about her embellished cuff business. Then she and one of her teen daughters decided to get plastic surgery. "I don't put a price tag on my wife and children's happiness," said her husband, Frank.

A few episodes later, Curtin's daughters were at home alone when the family was served with an eviction notice. (One of the girls called her parents to break the news, shielding her face with an extended middle fin-

ger pointed at the Bravo cameras.)

When the global economic crisis arrived, though, the "Real Housewives" bubble only inflated: Between March 2008 and May 2009 — a period when the unemployment rate nearly doubled — the franchise expanded to three new locations (New York, Atlanta and New Jersey). A short-lived D.C. version debuted in mid-2010 but was canceled after two financially troubled cast members crashed a White House dinner, their social ambitions triggering a national security freakout. A Beverly Hills edition, featuring the most eye-popping real estate to date, followed later that year.

As millions of Americans were mired in economic despair, investigating the "Housewives" perilous finances became a cherished cultural pastime, the subject of countless blog posts with headlines like, "4 out of 5 Real Housewives of Atlanta are Actually Broke."

Viewers enjoy watching these women get into trouble, says Nicole B. Cox, an associate professor of mass media at Valdosta State University in Georgia who has conducted scholarly research on "The Real Housewives." "We're disgusted by them, and we feel superior, because it's like, 'I might not be able to buy those Chanel earrings, but at least I'm not going to jail.'"

## TRAGEDY HAPPENS

The schadenfreude that marks the "Real Housewives" fandom occasionally comes up against real tragedy. When Armstrong's estranged husband, Russell, died by suicide in 2011, reports emerged that he was deeply in debt. "He was living month to month to support his lifestyle for Taylor," claimed his lawyer. Bravo ignored calls to cancel the series, and Armstrong remained in the cast for two additional seasons.

More frequently, as in the case of "New Jersey's" Teresa Giudice, the conspicuous consumption crucial to the franchise's formula casts a very public spotlight on the family finances.

Few "Housewives" have aroused suspicion as immediately or intensely as Giudice: Minutes into the very first episode of "New Jersey," she spent \$120,000 on furniture. "I hear the economy's crashing, so that's why I pay cash," she said of the purchase, meant for the 10,000-square-foot faux French Chateau outfitted in marble, granite and onyx that she and her husband, Joe, spent three years building. The source of all this cash was murky: Joe, supposedly a successful entrepreneur, ran a construction company out of a modest storefront.

The show was an instant sensation when it premiered that year, thanks largely to Teresa's attention-grabbing shopping sprees and now-legendary table-flipping tantrums. But the ruse came to an end in 2013, when the Giudices were indicted on 39 counts of fraud. According to the U.S. attorney, the couple had lied to lenders about their income to obtain mortgage loans: In 2009, the year of that furniture-buying binge, they'd filed for bankruptcy, intentionally concealing income earned from the TV show and other deals capitalizing on their sudden celebrity.

After striking a plea deal, Joe went to jail for 41 months and was deported to Italy, the country of his birth. Now divorced, Teresa leveraged her prison stint into multiple memoirs and a spinoff, and continues to downplay her role in the fraud. If anything, her brush with the law has cemented her status in the Bravo firmament: She is the only original cast member remaining on "New Jersey" and will soon star in a "Real Housewives All-Stars" series for Peacock, NBCUniversal's streaming service.

Girardi's arrival on "Beverly Hills" in the show's sixth season marked the beginning of what could only be described as a "glam" arms race. The women of "Beverly Hills" — never exactly low-maintenance — scrambled to keep up with Girardi, who turned up to film in increasingly theatrical couture looks and boasted of dropping \$40,000 a month on hair, makeup and clothing. The pressure to keep pace with Girardi has inspired such relentless one-upmanship that beaded, floor-length gowns are now considered reasonable barbecue attire.

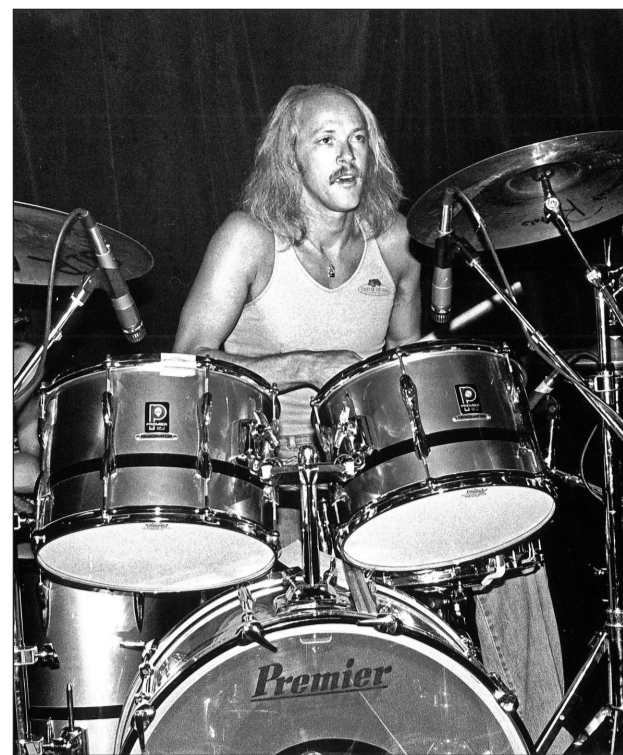
In similar fashion, "The Real Housewives of Atlanta" was consumed by the cold war between Kenya Moore and Sherree Whitfield as they built rival McMansions. "Salt Lake City's" Shah emerged as the breakout star of the series, which premiered in November, after ordering her team of eight assistants around during preparations for an extravagant party at the (probably rented) home in Park City, Utah, she dubbed the "Shah Ski Chalet." Sure, no one understood what she actually did for a living, but that merely added to the headscratching spectacle.

That authorities are paying close attention to what the rest of us might wave off as a guilty pleasure is evident from the U.S. attorney's statement detailing charges against Shah — "who portrays herself as a wealthy and successful businessperson on 'reality' television" — and her TV assistant, Stuart Smith. "Shah and Smith flaunted their lavish lifestyle to the public as a symbol of their 'success,'" it read. "In reality, they allegedly built their opulent lifestyle at the expense of vulnerable, often elderly, working-class people." (The role Girardi's TV stardom may have played in her husband's downfall is unclear, but at least one lender has accused the Girardis of inappropriately using money "to maintain their glamorous public image.")

Shah's legal trouble has done little to harm her standing at Bravo. Cameras were reportedly rolling when she was arrested in March because, as one source told US Weekly, "production sees this as a great story line."

Of course, our ideas about wealth — who has it, who deserves it, whose displays of it are tasteful and whose are gauche — are inextricable from gender and race. The "nefarious pleasure" we take in participants' rise and fall isn't neutral, Gates says: Women like Shah, a Muslim convert of Tongan and Hawaiian descent married to a Black man; Giudice, a brash Italian American; and Girardi, a former exotic dancer, receive more scrutiny because they defy the WASP-y ideal of a wealthy person.

In the end, Gates doesn't blame Bravo for our obsession with the lifestyles of the (supposedly) rich and famous, or reality stars deluded into thinking they can fake it 'til they make it. She blames U.S. capitalism. "That's why we read 'The Great Gatsby' in high school. That's why Elon Musk just hosted 'Saturday Night Live.' And that's why we had the president we just had," she says. "America has an obsession with wealth and not often enough of an obsession with how one gets that wealth."



**RUSS KUNKEL** on the drums in 1979. The musician says Joni Mitchell "thinks a lot like a drummer."

# Drummer plays part in music history

L.A. session musician Russ Kunkel reflects on contributing to Joni Mitchell's 'Blue.'

By RANDALL ROBERTS

Los Angeles session drummer Russ Kunkel has played on hundreds of recordings over the years, but he is best known for driving the rhythm on a series of 1970s folk-rock and FM radio classics by artists including James Taylor, Carole King, Jackson Browne, Linda Ronstadt, Bob Dylan, Stevie Nicks, Crosby, Stills and Nash and Joni Mitchell.

Now 72, Kunkel was in his early 20s when Mitchell, fresh from a trip overseas, asked whether he'd help on a sparse new album called "Blue" she was working on. Kunkel, who refers to his friend as "Joan," also worked on her 1972 album, "For the Roses." He recalled during a recent conversation how he ended up contributing the percussion parts on "Blue," which turned 50 this week.

**How did you come to play on "Blue"?**

I met Joan at Sunset Sound, when David Crosby produced her first record [in late 1967]. I was working on another project; I'm not sure what it was. I became very busy around 1970 and '71. Not only was I playing on Joni Mitchell's "Blue," but also James Taylor's "Sweet Baby James" and "Tapestry" with Carole [King]. The musical muses were very busy in California. At the time, my wife, Leah, and I were living in a studio apartment that I had built above [Leah's sister] Cass Elliot's garage in Laurel Canyon off of Woodrow Wilson.

**What did you know about the "Blue" sessions before going in?**

It was recorded after "Sweet Baby James," and I think at the time, Joan was seeing James Taylor. I was part of James' band, and Joan wanted me to play on her record, to come down and play some percussion. She came up to Cass' house one day to play me some of the songs — not all of them — just to get an idea before we went to the studio. I had figured that I would probably be playing percussion on them more than I would be full drums, but I'd have the drums there anyway.

**At what point in the re-**



**JAMES TAYLOR** and Joni Mitchell in 1971 during the recording of the Carole King album "Tapestry."

**ording process of "Blue" did you come in?**

Most of "Blue" was already recorded — just her and [engineer] Henry Lewy. Joan is such a fantastic musician. She played the dulcimer. She played guitar. She played piano. But a lot of people overlook what a great rhythm player she is.

She thinks a lot like a drummer. If you just listen to her strum the guitar, she plays with an acute understanding of the rhythm and the pocket of the song. So it was so easy for me to come up with simple little parts that helped support the rhythm she was already playing — like the conga part of "Carey." I think there are a couple of songs that I only played shaker and a little conga or something.

**I hear some high-hat in there too.**

On "California," I'm actually playing a full drum part, but it's with brushes. A lot of the backbeats are on the high-hat or really lightly on the snare drum. I remember playing that with James Taylor; we overdubbed together, or one right after the other. But there wasn't a process or a whole band being in there. She put down a lot of her parts first, because I don't ever remember being in the studio playing while she was playing and singing.

**You were at A&M Studios. What do you remember about the environment?**

We cut Carole's "Tapestry" in [Studio] B, and Joni cut "Blue" in C. Very, very small. God, it's such a tiny room. There was a set of congas, and one was a tumba that happened to be sitting in the corner. Its head was cracked; it had a rip in it so it couldn't be tuned up but it had this really low tone to it. I ended up using that on "Carey." I think Stephen [Stills] and I overdubbed together. He played bass, and I played my part, and then I think I overdubbed the shaker.

**Is "Blue" something you return to as a listener?**

Oh, absolutely. It's just one of those iconic albums. Being a part of those three records — "Sweet Baby James," "Tapestry" and "Blue" — solidified my place in musical history, however small. Three of the most influential records ever made, and I got to play on them within two years. If that's all that I ever did, I would be happy.

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