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## Me minding my own business

Mike Rowe has drawn a crowd. Again. This time it's on a chilly December night in Florence, South Carolina, at a local joint called J. Michael's Grill and Raw Bar. In between autographing beer naps and posing for pictures, Rowe, the craggily handsome star of the Discovery Channel's hit series Dirty Jobs, is officiating an ill-advised drinking contest between one of the show's crew and a friendly waiter. The crew is enjoying a rare night off, and by the time Rowe joins them, the challenge-be the first to chug an Irish car bomb (a shot of Bailey's dropped into a pint of Guinness)-has already been negotiated.After watching two increasingly boisterous elimination rounds, Rowe decides to jump in as judge and jury. He sets the stage while his fans gather round. "I'll say, 'One, two ...'" He thumps the table. "Then you drink." He eyes the two gladiators. "When finished, glasses down. The one with the least remaining liquid wins.""What about spillage?" someone yells. "I'll be factoring that in," he deadpans. "And as always, the decision of the judge is final." The crowd roars. Rowe beams. The Dirty Jobs soundman puts on his game face and prepares to power down. Sadly for him, his fellow crew members have loudly bet on the local. Not a good sign. "One, two ..." Thump! Some six seconds later, Rowe studies the glasses intently. "Too close to call. There's one simple solution," He pauses. "Drink-off!" The place erupts. For years, Rowe was a master of the simple solution. Largely free of ambition, he got by as an itinerant actor, taking on an infomercial here, a pilot or two there. He spent three years as a pitchman on the night shift at QVC, a job he lost for appearing to do ungodly things to a nun doll on the air. His was a life of guiltless underachievement.But Rowe has stumbled in the past couple of years into international celebrity through a most unlikely route-by doing other people's dirty work. On Dirty Jobs, he performs the sorts of tasks most of us couldn't bear to do but are really happy someone else will. He has tried his hand at more than 165 of them. He has sloshed around in sewers, peeled roadkill, cleaned up epic septic explosions, castrated horses, and hunted plagues of vermin-all while being coached (and sometimes mocked) by the real people who do it every day. (Unlike most shows in the reality-TV mold, it's the star, not the civilians, who ends up the butt of the jokes.)Dirty Jobs, which first aired in November 2003, is an homage to George Plimpton, with a nod to Studs Terkel-an introduction, Rowe says, to the "men and women who do the kinds of jobs that make civilized life possible for the rest of us." Watching Rowe struggle with a forklift or wade through raw sewage is good, nasty fun. But for all the bathroom humor, his real curiosity about and respect for his subjects telegraphs a powerful message: There's dignity in hard work, expertise in unexpected places, and deep satisfaction in tackling and finishing a tough job.These themes-plus the chance to see Rowe vomit on camera, which he does occasionally-have struck a chord with viewers. They flock to online fan boards, unabashedly declaring their "man crushes" (though the ladies dig him too) and reliving their favorite dirty moments. He is swarmed by autograph seekers at airports, captured on camera phones at Starbucks, and regaled with stories from dirty jobbers everywhere. "My family owns a sewer business!" gushed a waitress recently in South Carolina, as Rowe signed menus for the staff. Walking down the street in New York, Rowe got a shout-out from a cop and the handcuffed perp in his cruiser: "Man, you're awesome!" they said in unison.But Dirty Jobs isn't just working-class fare. It has become a monster hit, at least by cable standards. Based on total audience, the program has remained a top-three series on the network for the past two years and sits in the top five of all ad-supported cable shows for its Tuesday-evening time slot. And while it's huge with older folks, Dirty Jobs has given Discovery a welcome boost among younger viewers, delivering a double-digit rise in the lucrative 18-to-34 and 2-to-17 demographics. It was on track to air 700 times in 2007 alone. For Rowe, that success has translated into opportunities he'd never thought possible. He negotiated a major relationship with Ford (starring in a slew of spots throughout 2007 and 2008) and is inking deals with Whirlpool and HP. He commands six figures as a speaker, talking about the show's themes with undirty places such as Yahoo and Motorola. He has four book deals on the table-including one with his mom.As his star power intensified over the past 12 months, however, Rowe found himself at risk of losing the very thing he now cares about most: his authenticity. "I can't imagine going back into the kind of acting jobs I was doing before," he says. "I did them specifically because they didn't matter. I didn't want anything from them except a check for two weeks of anonymous work." Now, having only recently discovered his professional soul, the reformed slacker is fighting off those who would suck it back out of him. Rowe eschews entourages, managers, and other types of "people," so armed with only his intrepid attorney, he's trying to avoid any step that might taint his brand. He passes on the vast majority of the requests he receives, like an invitation from FremantleMedia, the production company, to try out as the new host of the Price Is Right (Drew Carey was not so proud). He has politely said no to every major reality-television producer. And he barred the door against the Endeavor Agency, which came promising to package him as the next media supernova."If I'm going to be a package, I'd just as soon wrap it myself," Rowe says. "These things are incredible and flattering, but I've come to realize that I'm really doing something else here." He's trying not to sound holier than thou. And his ideals sometimes put him at odds with his corporate overlords at Discovery. But Rowe sees it as his mission. "We're prisoners of efficiency, addicted to the notion of innovation," he says, "but we need people with dirty jobs. They contribute to progress, too. I feel tested at this point, way more than ever before. And I feel as though there's an audience watching my test more closely than ever before."The Dos Equis YearstIt's four o'clock on the Friday before Labor Day, and Rowe is in the green room of The Tonight Show, waiting for Jay Leno to stop by. "Any minute now," says the attendant, after handing Rowe a glass of red wine. It's Rowe's first appearance on the show ("Get It? Dirty Jobs? Labor Day?" he cracks), yet he seems perfectly at home. Leno pops in with a grin. "Hey, Mike, how are ya?" Introductions all around. Then Leno asks, "Do you have any questions for me?" Rowe feigns confusion. "Wait. Is this The Tonight Show?" Leno cracks up. "Pretty much. That simplify things for you?"After Leno leaves, Rowe goes back to trading barbs with two colleagues he'd brought along: Dave Barsky, the Dirty Jobs field producer, whose frequent appearances on camera have made him a demi-celebrity in his own right, and Craig Piligian, a former Survivor producer who has made Dirty Jobs since day one. "You're the saddest entourage I've ever seen," Rowe tells them, in mock pity. Piligian, who has produced several shows for the Discovery Channel, including American Chopper, teases back: "This is only your first time on the show, Mike? That's weird. The Chopper guys have been on twice already."Rowe may slip easily into the role of jester, but he has done more than any on-air talent to bring the Discovery Channel back from a ratings trough earlier in the decade. Discovery was rebuilt mostly on the strength of a few gritty series, including Deadliest Catch and Mythbusters. But Jobs is the clear standout. "It's our number-one show," says David Zaslav, president and CEO of Discovery Communications, which oversees Discovery and more than 100 other channels. And Rowe is "perfect for Discovery. He's curious, smart, and fun. He teaches you about the world. And the subject matter is really accessible. I mean, he's not climbing Everest." Asked if Rowe could ever be replaced, Zaslav doesn't even blink. "The show wouldn't work without him." Period.That anyone would see him as a brand comes as a huge surprise to Rowe. In an acting career spanning two-plus decades, he has never appeared in a movie or soap opera. Not even a sitcom pilot. "This business is a great way for a lazy guy to work," he says, only half-joking. And Rowe has been, well, lazy. By looking for opportunities that were doomed to fail, he managed to get about six months of playing in every year. "You can have a great life in television if you don't want to get too successful. You just carve it off as you need it. It's why I worked in reality TV."As actors often do, Rowe started out terribly earnest. After a brief stint at community college, the Baltimore-area native attended Towson University, where he studied acting and voice. "I had a beard and was all righteous in the craft," he smiles. His first real job came as a standing player with the Baltimore Opera, in 1990-a production of Wagner's Ring Cycle, "a horrible crucible of misery, which lasted for 18 hours over four nights." One Sunday night, he and a castmate decided, as they frequently did, to head out for a beer during intermission. 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