

The contestants aren't "pretty," ratings are down, and even feminists don't care anymore.

The year was 1968. The place: the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, N.J. As Judith Anne Ford embarked on her victory walk, tears streaming, her teeth bared in the trademark shocked-and-grateful smile, a banner unfurled from the far balcony. A fan's token of good will? The TV cameras panned the audience, and millions of home viewers read the banner along with the new beauty queen. It said: WOMEN'S LIBERATION.

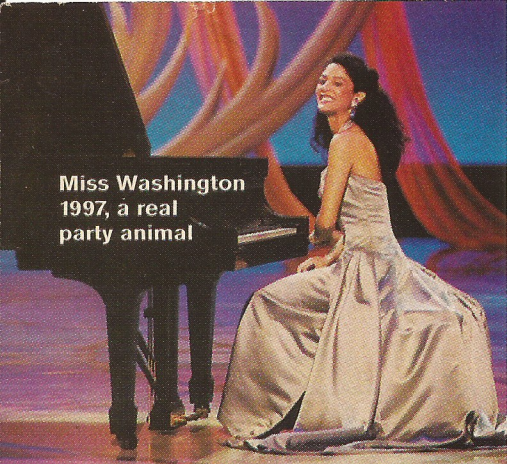
Outside the pageant's doors, a sheep was also stunned to find itself crowned Miss America. As the ewe teetered down the boardwalk, scores of jubilant feminists tossed bras, girdles, false eyelashes, aprons, high heels, and magazines like *Hustler* and *Ladies' Home Journal* into a "freedom trash can."



the Not-So-Beautiful

Jennifer Baumgardner goes backstage to see if the contenders have noticed.

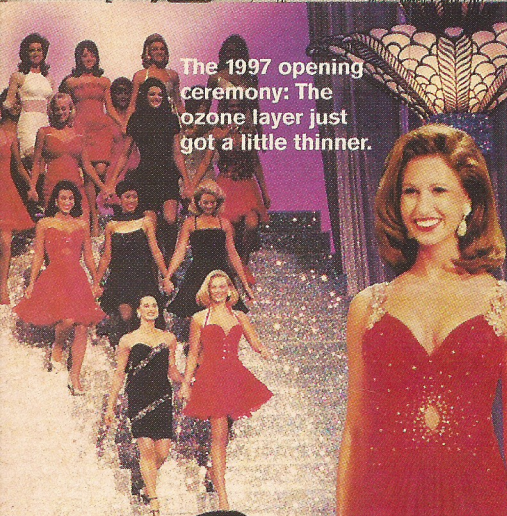
It's 1997. We're at the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City. Beer-gutted men in fluorescent Zubaz stroll the boardwalk, causing an aesthetic disturbance, but nary an outraged protester interrupts the vista of casinos and Planet Hollywood restaurants. Most people are here to gamble and probably don't even know the pageant is imminent. Audience attendance for the usual preliminary pageants has dropped a little more each year; indeed, there are a lot of empty seats in the house. The number of contestants is down on the local level; for example, only 15 women tried out to be Miss Vermont. And 1996's TV ratings were the lowest they'd been in years. Which could be why officials decided to allow two-piece swimsuits in the "fitness" portion of the 1997 competition. ▶



Miss Washington 1997, a real party animal



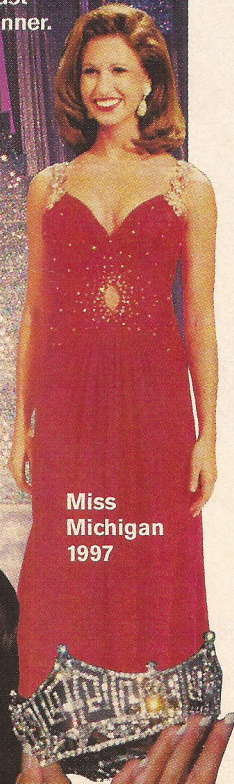
Oh, Lord, it's Miss Ohio 1997.



The 1997 opening ceremony: The ozone layer just got a little thinner.



Miss America 1996, give up that crown.



Miss Michigan 1997

It is 29 years after feminism threw paint at this institution, and in that time the pageant has morphed from a bathing-beauty contest to the largest scholarship organization for women in the world—dispensing \$32 million in grants last year. A “platform” component, an area of community service to which the contestant will dedicate her year, was added in 1989; interview and talent now are worth more points than swimsuit or evening wear.

Despite these reforms, or because of them, Miss America has less cultural impact with each passing year. She’s no longer simperingly beautiful enough for feminists to deride, nor clearly glamorous enough for the average adolescent girl to glom on to as her dream. Miss America is in major decline.

Which is why I have traveled to Atlantic City—to see a Miss America Pageant while I still can, to see how the contestants can hold their heads up, in the face of this increasing apathy. Pageant HQ—a room the size of a school gymnasium, partitioned from the conference center where the pageant takes place—swirls with activity. It’s filled with tables and white plastic chairs, outdoor porch furniture and flags for the home states. It has the feeling of a high school reception. An old-timer plinks out Broadway’s greatest ballads, like *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera*, on the piano. Mom-type women, called hostesses, hustle about chaperoning the contestants, attending

“I mean, I could be Miss America,” And it’s true; anyone with a good

to the scads of press people and cooking for the hundreds of volunteers in the Miss America Organization. The contestants are decked out in curiously dowdy sportswear: stonewashed jeans, white puffy sneakers and the kind of sweatshirt you might buy in an airport. Some of the girls rendezvous with their hairdressers for predawn transmogrification, and all are sporting elaborate coiffures and full stage makeup.

Darting among the hopefuls is 15-year-old Chyler Leigh, star of *Hall Pass*—a televised teen magazine in Boca Raton, Fla., that helps girls stay focused

on “beauty, fashion, modeling, talent and life,” in that order, I presume. Chyler—a Kate Moss look-alike with longer, thicker, blonder hair—is taping a segment wherein she finds out if she has what it takes to be the crowned one.

Chyler has more than what it takes. Miss America is a beauty pageant, but the contestants aren’t that stereotypically beautiful. Some have acne or gum-revealing smiles; many are short and have thick legs or long bodies. Most have big, bad hair, but that’s on purpose. Once they apply their mask of makeup and slip into the high heels, they do look uniformly glamorous, like showgirls or anchorwomen—but still, well, not that gorgeous. “I mean, I could be Miss America,” I overhear one reporter say to her friend. And it’s true; anyone with a good aerobics regimen could reign.

So if Miss America is average-to-middling as a beauty contest, what is her raison d’être?

“She’s a role-model,” Miss Michigan, a toothy dancer, says vaguely. I ask if there is a comparable role-model pageant for men. “Not that I can think of. But my boyfriend wishes there was.” I nod, trying to picture a non-gay man who’d be into competing in talent, swimsuit and formal wear in order to go to college.

“I think the Miss America organization is looking for businesswomen of the ’90s: clean, tailored and pressed,” offers Miss South Dakota, who plays the sax in an Elvis-style pantsuit for

the talent portion of the pageant. “The contestants have to work with the family issues that women face, like the need for flexible hours and parental leave”—all mandates from the ’70s, except now they’re in the glossy mouth of feminism’s old nemesis.

“In general, I think that most of the girls are going into the performance arena, and it’s simply a chance for them to share their [talents],” says tall-yet-kit-tinish Miss Washington when I ask for her honest take on the pageant. “Ironically, though, the only Miss America who made the jump is Vanessa

BARRETT/GLOBE (GOLD BATHING SUIT); WIDE WORLD PHOTOS; JOHN BARRETT/GLOBE (RED); STEPHEN TRUPP/GLOBE (1); JOHN BARRETT/GLOBE (2); JOHN FRANK/CP NEWS; JOHN BARRETT/CP NEWS; JOHN BARRETT/GLOBE (2); WHITE DRESSES); WIDE WORLD PHOTOS (2);

PHOTOGRAPHY; PAGE 98, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOHN FRANK; JOHN BARRETT/GLOBE (2); PAGE 99, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOHN BARRETT/CP NEWS; GLOBE (FLAG OUTFIT).

Williams." I love Miss Washington, because everything she says elicits a look of panic from her chaperon.

"It's the one time each year that we get to let our Apollonian side come out and be totally wild. It's like our Mardi Gras," Miss Washington continues. I point out that the pageant is pretty controlled; the girls aren't allowed to drink or smoke, or have boyfriends, and a chaperon travels with them. She's unmoved. "Look, I love to party," she says, looking as carnal as one can in a sweatshirt cardigan. "Human beings love beauty. We have a lot of animal instincts."

On the other, more spiritual, hand, Miss Washington says: "I would say probably 80 percent are Christian. It attracts that type of middle-American crowd. You know the girls you see in the mall? I'm not offending you, am I?" If the big wooden map that takes up an entire wall in the pressroom is any indication, her estimate is correct. Most girls have inscribed their favorite Bible verse alongside their fire-up messages to themselves; or in conjunction with them, like this thought from Miss Ohio: "The joy of the Lord is my strength!! ☺"

The pageant audience itself resembles that of a pep rally, albeit one full of tiny children so dressed up that they look like RuPaul. Nestled among the similarly glitzed-up parents and community contingencies are five men and women wearing fake tiaras atop their heads and banners that read,

mocking the women, they were just getting into the spirit of celebration by wearing tiaras and sashes—like Packers fans who paint their faces green and yellow, and wear hats made of foam cheese to the game.

The truth: Beauty standards exist. The more stereotypically attractive you are, the more likely you are to get a job, free drinks at a bar or your book published. But the pageant isn't any more guilty of judging women according to looks than your average person.

And I wonder what a world without Miss America would be like. Is she the Berlin Wall of female oppression, since, despite her decline, she is still a symbol of annoying beauty standards? Or would we miss this cheesy institution like we miss Woolworth's?

I think we would. The reason Miss America endures is probably because deep down, we do relate to her—in all her problematic hair and delusions of glamour. With 51 coeds, there might be one who reminds you of yourself. Of the contestants I talk to, most claim to have loved high school (were popular, on homecoming court, etc.), and many had pageant histories. No soul sisters there. But Miss North Dakota, from my home state, has verve; and Miss Washington—with her eclectic, catty insights about pageantry—reminds me of the Alexis Carrington side of my high school self.

On the day before the pageant, I

I overhear one reporter say. aerobics regimen could reign.

MISS ELLANEOUS and MISS Demeanor. Could it be that the spirit of '68 is here and pageant-protest lives? Not a chance. These people are here for the kitsch value. I run over to "Miss Steak," Pamela Goodman.

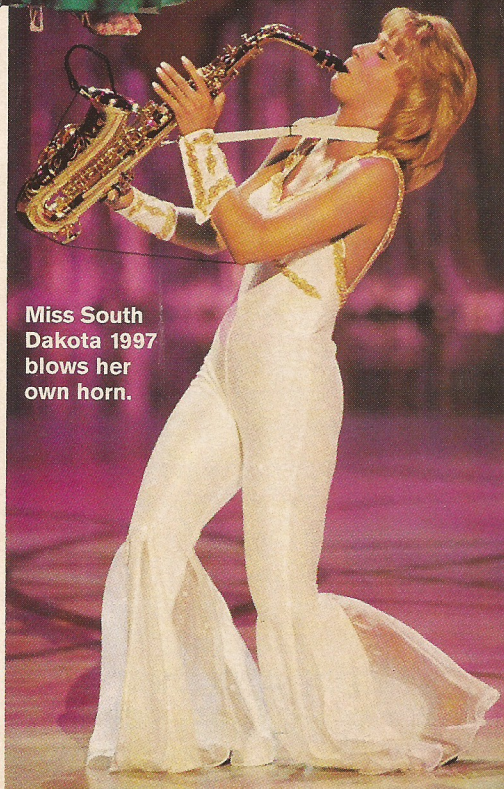
"I love the pageant!" she gushes. "You grow up watching it. It's like going to the Olympics or the Super Bowl." The men in the group didn't have such a nostalgic association. "It's so cheesy that it's fun," says Brian "Miss T-Eyed" Stollar. Like *The Brady Bunch*? I ask. "Yes, exactly," he replies. They took pains to make it clear that they weren't

spot sweet-faced Miss Vermont being interviewed by a local newscaster. The newswoman keeps redoing the intro: "Hi! I'm _____ and I'm here with a contestant who's really going to put some punch into the pageant—she's a boxer!" Miss Vermont stands up and bares her washboard stomach while five cameras zoom in on her navel ring. Afterward, I walk over and launch into my hard-hitting questions about popularity, pageants, high school.

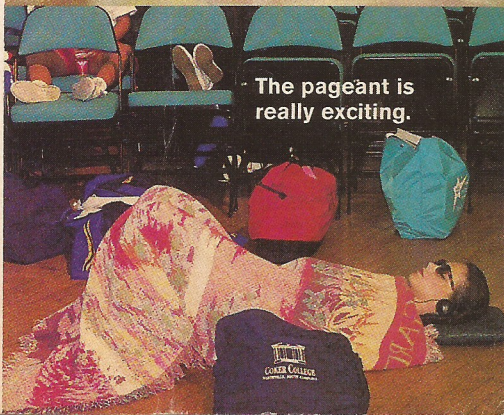
"I hated high school," she says from under her hopelessly limp tresses, and I feel a surge of love. ■



Miss Vermont (left) and her belly-button ring



Miss South Dakota 1997 blows her own horn.



The pageant is really exciting.