

Breaking into the big time

'Luxury' takes the rich for a ride

By MICHAEL GILTZ

ARE champagne wishes and caviar dreams back in vogue? Robin Leach — the original Peeping Tom — is back on the air and back to peeking into the lavish lives of celebrities with the debut special on ABC called "Life of Luxury" (Monday, December 29, 8 p.m.).

His signature show, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," of course led to MTV's "Cribs" and a million other reality shows.

"VH1 next year is doing a five-part miniseries on the history of reality shows," says Leach, "and it starts with 'Lifestyles,' because it did give birth to this whole genre. Whereas ours was a nice show that reveled in glitz and glitterati, I think we're now a step away from someone losing their life."

"Lifestyles" started in 1983, 20 years ago. This was before Gerardo opened the safe. We were lambasted; I can't tell you. We were crucified and nailed to the wall for being rude and impertinent, going into peoples houses and extolling the virtues of spending lots of money. You look at that show now, and you say with hindsight that it was the most genteel thing you could ever have imagined."

On "Luxury," the one-time Fleet Street journalist revisits old friends like Donald Trump, who amusingly talks about his days of being "poor," and recounts his moment of insight

when Trump realized he probably didn't need more than two apartments in Manhattan.

With a far faster paced show, Leach flashes quickly to an absurdly expensive automobile and barks, "If you haven't heard of it, you can't afford it!" He also hits the new purveyors of conspicuous consumption: rappers.

"That's why I wanted Russell Simmons and [wife] Kimora [Lee] there," says the now single Leach, who has three children from his former wife.

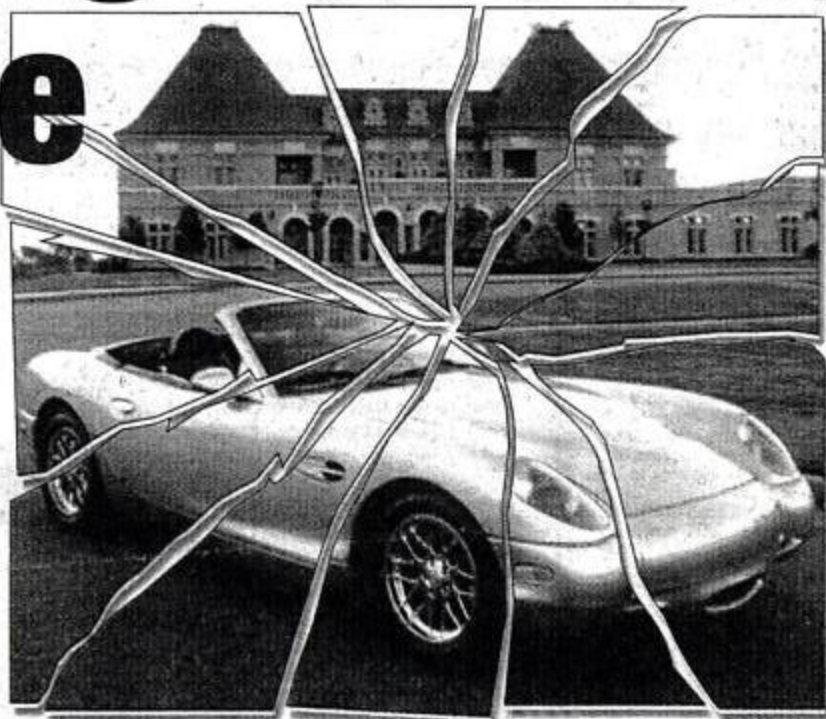
"They've put the stamp on it's okay to be rich again. There's no need to hang your head in

'To put diamonds on your teeth and gold teeth? This is the height of bling-bling.'

shame — fill it with gold-studded teeth! I was at the Billboard Awards in Vegas, and I can't tell you how many million dollar mouths I saw. To put diamonds on your teeth and gold teeth? This is the height of bling-bling."

But is Leach? Will viewers turn with a nostalgic glow to the man with a carnival barkers voice and the temerity to peer into bedrooms with a charm that now seems downright civil? Marc Berman, a TV ratings analyst for MediaWeek, isn't so sure.

"Although I wouldn't say Robin Leach is passé, he's not exactly a hot ticket," says Ber-



"Life of Luxury," a special on ABC next week, revives the envy gene in viewers for rich kids' toys like sports cars and big mansions.

man, who jokingly points out that Leach was the first contestant booted off the less-than-stellar reality show "I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here!" "Although Leach certainly began this craze, unless he is coming out with something different, I'm not necessarily sure viewers will gravitate to it."

But when a celebrity has been overexposed, Leach just moves in closer. Witness Sharon Osbourne: her home is displayed on MTV every week, so Leach

asked for a tour of her body, where Osbourne has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars nipping and tucking and getting herself a new belly button, among other treats.

Leach certainly isn't afraid of his latest close-up, even if the camera finds more hair on his chin than on the top of his head.

"The fact that we're doing this show on a network at my age with my girth and lack of hair is testament to the fact that television is not always owned by Jessica and Paris," he says.



Kimora Lee Simmons shows off her jewels to Leach.