

A close-up portrait of Alyssa Milano with dark, shoulder-length hair, looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. She is wearing a light-colored, ribbed, off-the-shoulder top.

Alyssa Milano

FIG

Alyssa Milano was America's child-star sweetheart in the 1980s TV hit show *Who's the Boss?* She was even the inspiration behind the animated character Ariel in the classic Disney film *The Little Mermaid*.

By the time she was 19, *Boss?* was canceled. Now at 26 and married, Alyssa stars in the Aaron Spelling hit *Charmed* as one of three sister-sorceresses, and is flaunted on the covers of the hippest magazines, from macho *Maxim* to sassy *American Woman*.

In between these spotlight successes, however, Milano was desperate to keep her career afloat at the top—and some of what she did has come back to haunt her in ways she never expected.

Sex Sells

As is the case with so many child celebrities, Alyssa's star quickly faded once her hit show was canceled. It's not the child's fault. Industry people often view these young actors as taboo because they think they are too identified with their show character. (which is why you never saw the *Brady Bunch* kids again). Washed up before you're out of high school. Is it any wonder so many such Hollywood teens turn to drugs and booze to quench the pain of their suddenly-crumbled identity and fame?

Alyssa, however, was a fighter. She was more determined than ever to rejuvenate her career, willing to do whatever it might take to keep her in the game, get her back on top. She knew she had to change her cutie-pie image in people's eyes. She took parts in sexy thrillers like *Poison Ivy II*, *Deadly Sins*, and *Embrace of the Vampire*.

So what if Alyssa had to take her clothes

HITS

ONLINE IMAGE PIRATES

off in a couple of love scenes and kiss another woman? It was worth it if it got her noticed, got people talking. Alyssa figured she would do the roles, and move on.

Her strategy worked. Alyssa's nudity, combined with critical praise for her portrayal of Amy Fisher in *Casualties of Love* (a network-TV movie on the "Long Island Lolita" affair), created a buzz and propelled her career. She took fewer projects, but now they were larger and more respected, like Disney's *Gold Rush* and *Hugo Pool* directed by Robert Downey Jr. Aaron Spelling, the all-time king of television producers, took notice of Alyssa's reemergence and cast her as a regular in the smash hit *Melrose Place*. Alyssa's success on that show landed her a lead in her current hit, *Charmed*.

World Wide Pornography

As Alyssa's star began to shine anew in 1996, however, something sinister was brewing. Internet pornmasters.

Unbeknownst to Alyssa, her nude images were being pirated from the source material in *Embrace* and *Poison Ivy* and posted on thousands of Web pages. These revealing moments—originally intended only for the specific project with which they were associated—had been abducted. Worse, some images were "pasties," where Alyssa's childhood face was digitally grafted onto the bodies of naked children, often in pornographic scenes.

Alyssa says, "The real nude pictures of me were taken completely out of context, which was bad enough. But the disgusting pedophile ones were the most upsetting."

It wasn't just Alyssa—virtually every star was targeted, from Jodie Foster to Sandra Bullock and Alicia Silverstone—but Alyssa's film outtakes were a bit more steamy than most, and the pedophile "pasties" far more repugnant and shocking than the average nudes circulating (fake or real). Most websites were charging for access to view the naked star images, making \$10,000 - \$80,000 a month.

Alyssa's name was also being used to lure people to adult sites. Search for "Alyssa Milano" through Alta Vista in 1996, for example, and most of the tens of thousands of hits you'd get would lead you to hard-core porn having nothing to do with Alyssa. These sites employ "metatags," files loaded with keywords (e.g., "Alyssa Milano" or "Playboy") attached to Web pages that are readable by search engine "spiders"; the

spiders are fooled into thinking the page is packed with what the Web surfer is looking for, the porn sites come up at the top of the search list, and the websurfer is thereby lured to the porn pages.

Porn sites use celebrity names because their advertising dollars are directly linked to how many hits they get, regardless of whether or not a websurfer was conned into visiting the site. The pornmasters also hope that they will snare memberships out of people who tripped into the site, but may want to join anyway. Most of these sites charge between \$10 - \$30 a month, in addition to splitting the \$20 - \$30 fee for an age-verification service (such as Adult ✓).

Alyssa learned what was happening in 1996 when her then 12 year-old brother was playing on the Internet at boarding school. He innocently searched his sister's name—and was nearly traumatized at what came up on screen. His classmates prodded him, deepening the mortification. Alyssa was "devastated," and their mother Lin, furious.

The Lawless Land

Lin and Alyssa decided to fight it. They may not have known which, if any, laws were being violated, but they knew such activity was at least morally reprehensible and potentially career damaging. The problem was that the Internet in its initial boom, even as recent as 1997, was a lawless land—a wild, wild West of unrestrained speech and activity. No laws applied directly to this new frontier, so legally it was untested.

The Milanos' fight wasn't easy. Cyberland-law was no more than frontier-style justice, where you mostly just chased people off one spot, only to watch them set up their criminal sleaze-shop elsewhere. Or they simply told you to "go to hell." Most webmasters felt they had the God-given, First Amendment, All-American right to do and say whatever they wanted on the Internet. After all, wasn't that the entire point of the Internet—unrestrained speech and communication?

Cyber-Tracker is Born

"There's a big difference between free speech and illegally exploiting a celebrity's image in a pornographic context, and defaming them," says Lin. Imbued with such conviction, Lin formed Cyber-Tracker and has since launched a crusade against

Internet pirates who abduct Alyssa's nude images.

Lin's quest has garnered interest from other celebrities concerned with protecting their public image and celebrity-aura. She has been retained by about 25 other stars, such as model Kathy Ireland and Nancy Sinatra. Cyber-Tracker has become the celebrity's Internet watchdog.

"This is about celebrities taking back their image," Lin says. "There's a really big difference between celebrities doing nudity for a film and what's getting put up in these porn sites for the entire world to see, 24 hours a day. It's taken completely out of context, and is flashed on screen in a defamatory way in a purely sexual setting."

A celebrity's reputation and public image are their currency. Devalue a celebrity's image, and their commercial potential is damaged. Pamela Anderson's nudes have been so overexposed on the Internet, for example, she could never again command much money for doing nude scenes on film. Actors, before the Internet age, had an air of fantasy and sophistication, an

"Sexiest Woman of the Year" and Yahoo's "Queen of the Internet." All this, despite never having had a TV series or a major film role (now, of course, she's getting loads of work). If Cindy suddenly decided to start doing nude film scenes or a *Playboy* layout, however, public fascination with her might initially peak—but long term, her image and commercial viability would be tarnished.

It's not just the pornmasters. Fans with simple "shrines" or "worship pages" for their favorite stars contribute to the unauthorized proliferation of nudes. Lin says, "Even the non-commercial fan sites offend me, and we'll go after them, because they're taking [the nudes] out of context from what that work was supposed to be. So the continuity is lost, the artistry is lost, and it looks like just a bad, nudie photo shoot."

Preparing for World-Wide-War

Lin rises each day at 6:00 a.m. with a cup of coffee, sits down in front of her computer, and goes hunting. She hits the offenders with "cease and desist" letters, demanding removal of the images. If that doesn't scare the culprits, she will contact the ISP (Internet service provider) to request that the page be removed and that the user account be terminated. Each week, she sends about 300 cease and desist letters via e-mail.

Lin has also enlisted the help of the Chameleon Group for investigative purposes (to track down the offending parties, if it can't be easily done through the Internet's Internic registry), and Mitchell Kamarck, a top Beverly Hills litigator and partner at Rosenfeld, Meyer & Susman.

Most image-pirates promptly remove material upon a letter from Lin or attorney Kamarck, especially after being educated on the law. "Education is a big part of it," says Kamarck. "No one is fighting once they learn the law is against them." There is still no law specifically targeted against such activity, and the legalities are problematic. Lawyers must use an panoply of theories to combat the different types of offending activity.

Kamarck notes that those who post nude images without permission may be guilty of copyright infringement (since they don't own the rights to use the photos), trademark infringement (i.e., false endorsement), false light (for "pasties"), defamation (for harm to a celebrity's reputation), and for violating one's rights to privacy (if the images were previously unpublished) and publicity (for commercially exploiting the nudes).

Lin estimates she has had millions of "Alyssa Milano" hidden-keyword references removed from the Internet, and removed thousands of nude images.

Alyssa Battles Her Internet Abductors in Court

There are always a few standouts who refuse to quietly relinquish their captive nudes, however. Many of them are young, unsophisticated "porn-pimps."

To date, the Milanos have settled lawsuits against a dozen defendants, and have several suits and settlements pending. The first settlement was a five-figure sum against Paul Anand, a Canadian who was marketing CD-ROMs of celebrity nudes.



Alyssa Milano's official website (above) found by using Safesearching.com (below)

untouchability about them, and audiences would rush to theaters to see a famous person in a nude scene. Now with the Internet, every microscopic detail of a celebrity's life is readily available. Stars today are commonplace people. Thus, those who have refrained from nudity have retained their most prized commercial asset—mystery. The public is still intrigued because not all has been revealed.

Take Cindy Margolis, a Cyber-Tracker client. Cindy began as a Southern California swimsuit model who has strategically used her personal webpage to become wildly popular—without ever having removed her clothes. Cindy is now in *The Guinness Book of World Records* for being the most downloaded woman on the net, is listed in *Forbes'* "Top 100 Celebrities," and was *Detail's*

In the one case to go to trial—the first ever of its kind—the Milanos obtained a default judgment of \$238,000 against the pornmaster John Lindgren. Lindgren, a 21-year-old who didn't seem to take the whole lawsuit thing seriously, is the registered owner of nudecelebrities.com. Now the Milanos have placed a lien on all of his Internet income to satisfy the judgment, and the court has forever barred him from posting Alyssa's image on the Web. But he's still running his online porn shop from his home in Minnesota.

Cleaning up the Net—Safesearching.com

Alyssa took the court winnings and funded the war chest. She realized that one of the best ways to counter-attack the photo-pirates would be to set up websites that fans could visit while avoiding all the smut. In early 1999, she and her mother founded Safesearching.com, an "Online entertainment lounge and community" that allows fans to gain clean, official information on their favorite stars. By eliminating the need to sift through unwanted sexual sites, Safesearching.com is revolutionizing the way celebrity information is channeled on the Internet.

Alyssa states that "Safesearching.com was my idea. I thought we should make a free search engine that had no porn links, where fans could type in a celebrity's name and not have to worry that scary things would come up. And my mom made it happen."

"Safesearching is a safe haven for celebrities and users. It's an Internet community," says Lin. "It's a place where celebrities can have a positive influence on their own image and have input into clean content." Safesearching directs users to official celebrity websites that are part of the "safe" community, such as those for Catherine Zeta Jones and Cindy Crawford. It also offers the ability to shop for official Hollywood merchandise and has links to modeling agencies, celebrity gossip and news pages, and contains fun items like trivia, games, and the Joke of the Day.

The site is also tightly regulated with security features that offer protection against outside manipulation of the content, although Lin won't divulge the specifics.

Lin says the site receives about 4 - 5 million hits a month, and has already garnered interest from Wall Street investment banks. "I would love a Wall Street deal. I'd love to see the community grow and help clean up the Web." Cyber-Tracker, however, is not for sale. "Cyber-Tracker is far too personal to make public," she says.

Star Destiny on the Internet

Alyssa doesn't regret the choices she has made in her career, but says, "I don't think I'll ever do nudity again because of this, because there are no limits on how it is used."

While adult content will no doubt continue to flourish online, it remains to be seen whether or not the Internet can ever be cleaned of illegal celebrity nudes. Celebrities wishing to clean up their online image are in for a monumental, ongoing fight. A search for "Cindy Margolis nude"—someone who has never done nudity—can yield over 100,000 sites.

"I love that the Internet is so free, but it needs to be regulated better," says Alyssa. Clearly, specific criminal penalties against such unauthorized use and manipulation of another's nude images and name would help eradicate the problem. The biggest obstacle in new laws, however, would be tightly tailoring the legal language to accommodate free speech concerns while ensuring that the punishment fit the crime (i.e., an innocent fan with a single nude posted on his personal Web page should be treated differently than a million-dollar porn king who trades in digitally manipulated pedophilia).

Then there is the problem of advancing technologies, like Virtual Celebrity Productions' Digital Clone System, that allows for the realistic faking of one in motion pictures. One can recreate John Wayne for a Coors commercial, or resurrect Fred Astaire in a dance video. Imagine the more obscene possibilities. . .

Alyssa, meanwhile, is steadfast in her mission. "I don't want some fourteen year-old girl who watches *Charmed* to look me up on the Internet and see porn." Her goal is to see Safesearching.com continue to grow into a comprehensive entertainment site, a home for celebrity fans.

Lin states, "We are not here to take adult content off the Web. We're here to create an environment that our young people can visit and where a celebrity has control. No one should be able to get away with exploiting a celebrity's image without their permission."

Attorney Kamarck notes that things only change for the better when people fight for their rights and compel change. He sees a direct link between a celebrity's online image and the efforts of those who fight to control their Internet presence. "For [Alyssa], there's been a tremendous change. For other celebrities who don't police their image, it's getting much worse."

Alyssa Recolors the Online Landscape

Attorney Kamarck praises Alyssa's efforts. "You have to give Alyssa a lot of credit for being the first to step forward and say, 'These are my rights, and I'm not going to let others trample on them.' She's the first to file a lawsuit, the first to get a judgment. She really is trailblazing. She's getting so much respect from Hollywood, and she deserves it. It's tough to stand up there by yourself and tell others they're wrong. But because of her work, more and more people are defending their rights to control their image, and the Internet is a better place for it."

Perhaps two very distinct Internet landscapes will develop, similar to towns with their respectable neighborhoods and their red light districts. It's all up to Alyssa and others like her to continue using their celebrity clout to create a safesearching haven on the Net. □

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