

The New York Times

Sunday Styles

Can Tommy Lee Change His Spots?

By ALEX KUCZYNSKI

MALIBU, Calif.

TOMMY LEE walked into the kitchen of his hilltop house wearing a pair of bluejeans, his black (and orange) hair flopping around his face. His naked torso was tan, muscled and inked with tattoos.

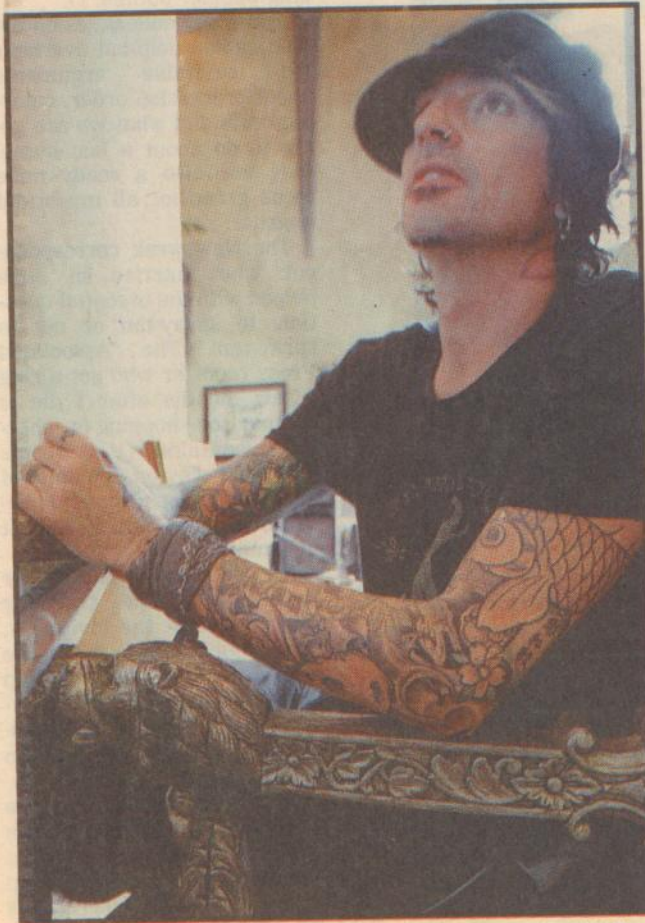
He muttered hello, bobbing his head and shoulders in the manner of a teenager and disappeared up the stairs to his bedroom with a young woman wearing a lacy tank top.

Whoa. Was the interview already over?

"Oh, that's the groomer," his publicist, Dvora, said.

Ah. Mr. Lee had gone to get pretty.

It is easy to imagine what he ought to look like in real life. Anyone who reads People magazine or has an Internet connection will have formed some lasting mental image of



Tammy Kennedy for The New York Times

A NEW SONG Tommy Lee, the Mötley Crüe drummer, sees a chance to reinvent himself in his book, "Tommyland."

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tell about his marriages to Heather Locklear and Pamela Anderson (and to an exotic dancer named Candace), the depravity of the Mötley Crüe band members, the accusations of spousal abuse by Ms. Anderson, the terror of his time in jail and his decision to get a life coach.

But in the world of aging rock stars, words like reinvention mean one thing: the career is in the toilet, and a manager somewhere has started making noises about headline-grabbing stunts like religious conversion or tell-all books or plastic surgery. In Mr. Lee's case, the final results of the transformation are unclear: after all, he is perhaps better known not as the drummer for a band that had hits like "Smokin' in the Boys Room" but as the kind of celebrity society requires to satisfy its own obsession.

Any lingering interest in Mötley Crüe has long since been trumped by his tabloid escapades and marriages to blond Hollywood babes, said Leo Braudy, a professor of literature at the University of Southern California and the author of "The Frenzy of Reckless: Fame and Its History" (Oxford University Press, 1986).

"He went from being known for doing something to being famous for — well, being famous," Mr. Braudy said. "You lose whatever identity you have and become an appendage of Pam Anderson, or an appendage of all the infinite references to your name. You become the empty center of all those references."

Mr. Lee said he was happy to be out of Ms. Anderson's wake.

"I am so happy and mellow that I do not have to deal with that anymore," he said.

Mr. Lee's marriage to Ms. Anderson (with whom he made the famous sex tape) was part of the reason for him to write — and for his publishers to sell — "Tommyland." He and Ms. Anderson, a "Baywatch" star and former Playboy model, met on New Year's Eve 1994 and married after a four-day ecstasy-fueled courtship in Mexico. Four years and two sons later, estranged from Ms. Anderson, Mr. Lee kicked her in the buttocks during an argument while she was holding their younger son. She punched him first, he writes, and besides, he was wearing Ugg slippers when he kicked her. But his son bumped his head during the encounter, and Ms. Anderson called the police.

Mr. Lee places the blame for his marital troubles in part on the tabloid press and its constant surveillance.

"I hated that," he said. "Every time we would go somewhere, it would be this huge drama — like, here come the hordes." He started to trill the theme that accompanies the flying monkey warriors in "The Wizard of Oz."

"Do-do-do-do-do-do, do-do-do-do-do-do. Like, truckloads of them. Everywhere you go." He continued, "I mean, how many pictures of her shopping at Ralphs do we really need?" (Ralphs is a California supermarket chain.)

A representative for Ms. Anderson said she was out of the country and unreachable for comment.

Mr. Lee was charged with one count of spousal abuse, one count of child abuse and one count of unlawful possession of a firearm. He pleaded no contest to the spousal abuse charge and served four months in the Los Angeles County Jail.

"That was gnarly," Mr. Lee said. "If you're a celebrity or something," he added (hooking his fingers distastefully around the word "celebrity"), "they put you in something called a K-10, a keep-away, so you're not with any of the other inmates. You're in solitary, basically, for months."

The experience of solitude prompted him to reflect. He had been moving nonstop since he dropped out of high school to form Mötley Crüe, and the years following were a blur of Jack Daniel's, heroin and group sex.

"I needed to stop and turn off the motor," he said. "Since the age of 17, I had been



Dave Weaver/Associated Press



Lucy Nicholson/Agence France-Press — Getty Images

THE MÖTLEY LIFE EXAMINED
Tommy Lee, at far right in his recording studio in Malibu, Calif., and with his former wife Pamela Anderson, above, is reinventing himself in a new book, right, and in a reality series in which he plays the drums in the school band at a University of Nebraska football game, top.



Naum Kaubdan/The New York Times

flooring it. So once I got there, I was, like, 'I'm going to take advantage of the silence in prison and just chill and check in with Tommy.' I would have preferred to post up in some cabin in Montana with no phone and no TV, but it was the same experience in a way."

He paused and twirled out his cigarette. "Don't get me wrong," he added. "I am not saying I deserved it."

After he served his sentence, Mr. Lee

Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, and now a new interest: classes in anger management.

tried to resume a relatively normal life. But in June 2001, at a children's birthday party at his house, a 4-year-old guest drowned. Again he was the center of attention not because of his music but because of a scandal, this time a fatal one. The parents filed a wrongful-death suit, accusing Mr. Lee of negligence; last year a jury rejected their claims.

It was the child's death that in part spurred him to clear the decks on another aspect of his life and put his house, which is also called Tommyland, on the market. Tommyland sits behind gates high up a twisting road in Malibu. Koi swim in a pond

out front. A six-foot-high statue of Ganesha, the Hindu elephant god, stands outside the front door. In the living room a gauzy painting of women in a Grecian bath hangs on the wall.

"This place has amazing memories for me," Mr. Lee said. "My boys were born upstairs. But it also has terrible, terrible memories for me — for one, the little boy dying. And it's time. It's been nine years. In a way the book is part of this big cleansing process. The book is out. The house, gone. I think I'm starting over, going to Square 1."

But where, exactly, is Square 1? For starters, Mr. Lee has embarked upon a predictable celebrity rite of passage: the reality show. (He is not the only member of Mötley Crüe to have done so: Vince Neil, the band's former lead singer, will be part of a VH1 series, "Remaking," in which he subjects himself to the ministrations of a trainer, a plastic surgeon and a lifestyle counselor.)

Mr. Lee's six-part show, to run on NBC sometime next year with him playing himself, follows him as he tries a quickie college education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Mr. Lee played some scenes from the show on a Macintosh computer in his office. In one, he pulls up in a red sports car next to two attractive college women clutching books to their chests and asks for directions to the dean's office. In another, he plays drums in the band at a football game in front of 77,000 fans.

He laughed. "Awesome," he said. "Right?"

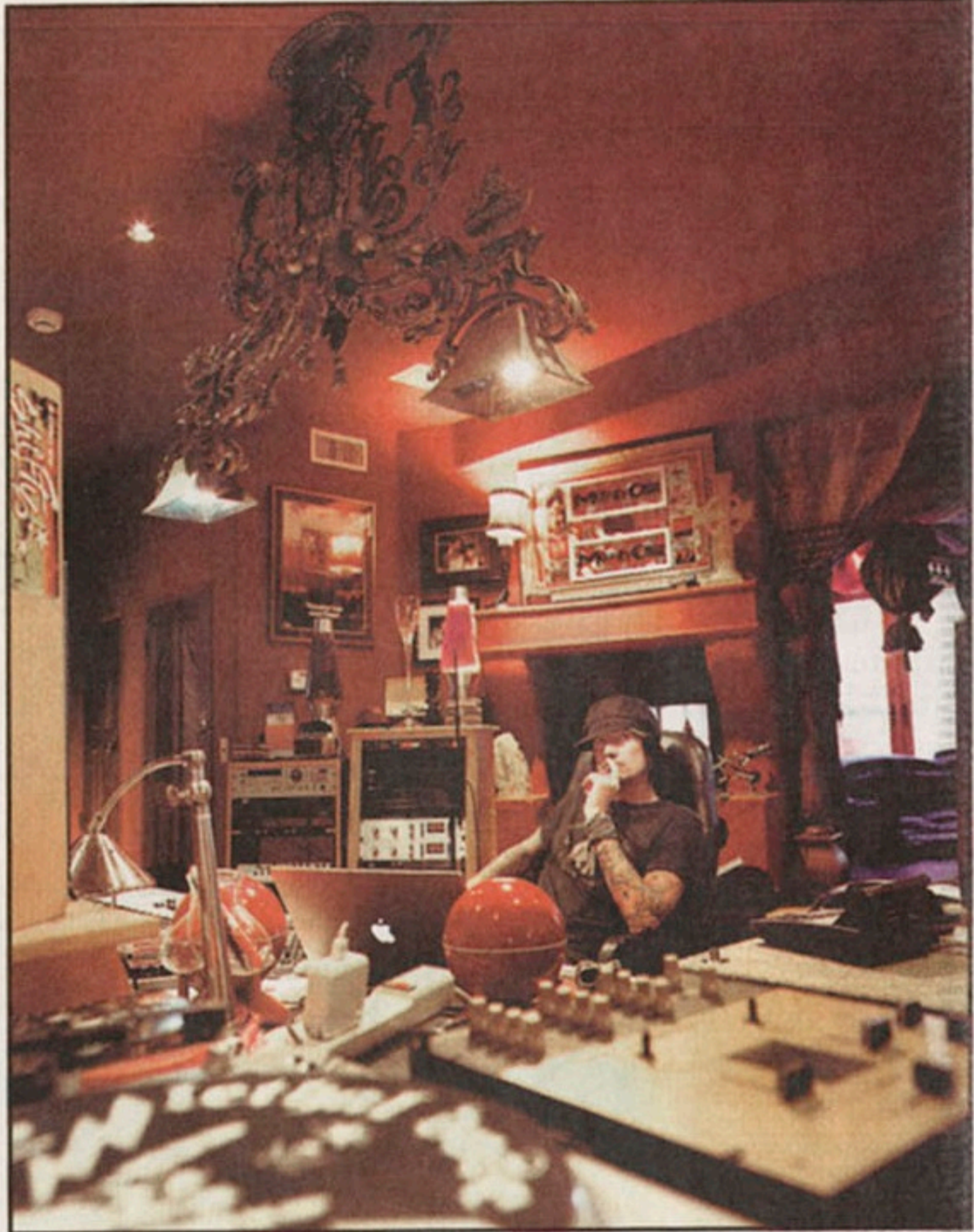
The subtext of the show, he said, is "classic 'fish out of water': you know, rock star goes to college in full-blown middle America." He said he was taking it "semi-seriously."

Mr. Lee, whose intelligence glints below a surface blunted by a foreshortened education and a California rock 'n' roll lifestyle, acknowledged that there was something poignant about his going to college for televised entertainment. "Look, I dig a challenge," he said. "But it's not as easy as I thought. Would I go back to school? I don't know. I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. No."

For now he is spending time with his sons and working on new music. Next to a dim seraglio piled with floor pillows in his studio, which is tucked at the back of the house, Mr. Lee fiddled with a bank of computers and played a song that he had recorded with Nick Carter, a former Backstreet Boy. "And I'm approaching Lenny Kravitz," he said. He also played a collaboration with a woman he dated who is a musician, but she won't let him release the song. (He discussed their work on the song only if she was not identified.)

"I'm like, 'Why, why, why?'" he said. "Come on." They are no longer dating, he added, although the term he used was a bit more brusque.

Mr. Lee feels confident about entering the next phase of his life, he said, in part be-



Tommy Kennedy for The New York Times

cause he has worked through some of his major problems. Under court order, he participated in more than 50 anger-management classes. "I think I know what to do now," he said. "If something is making me crazy, I bail. I will run, I will drive, I will do whatever I have to do to remove myself from the situation. I'll go outside and yell, throw something, smash something."

Which doesn't sound like management, really.

"Believe me, it is, considering the alternative," he said.

He now relies on a life coach, Gerald Wil Rafferty, at times of stress. "Sometimes I still spin out," he said. "He keeps me from totally bouncing off the walls. But I'm not starting a self-help book club or anything."

And drugs and alcohol are no longer a major problem. Although the Jägermeister on tap in his studio is certainly cause for suspicion.

"Oh, I still drink, but the days of bad craziness are done," Mr. Lee said. "I woke up one day and said, 'You know, I can't do this anymore.' It's either going to get worse, or I'm going to wind up dead." He paused, pulling thoughtfully at the square patch of beard on his chin. "And also, I was like, dude, I've done it all. There's really nothing else to do. I mean, unless they come out with something new I haven't tried. Which I doubt."