

TIME IN

A selective guide to what's on

Rockefeller-palooza

Today groupies swarm midtown every morning

By Meakin Armstrong

At about a quarter to six in the morning, they start gathering behind the barricades at the corner of 49th Street and Rockefeller Plaza. By seven, countless *Today* show fanatics, some waving signs that say things like TANNER FROM TEXAS—HI Y'ALL! and HI DAD FROM COLONI!, have swarmed the windows that separate them from the hosts inside NBC's street-level studio. Grandmothers shout "Maaatt! Maaatt!" through the glass to heartthrob Matt Lauer, but they yell just as loudly for Katie Couric. Fathers hoist their kids into the air to see the action. Squeals of delight ring out whenever the studio monitors show the crowd on TV.

To the New Yorkers scurrying by on their way to work, this scene might look like the ninth circle of hell. But the crowd doesn't care. They're just happy to be this close to celebrity.

Every Friday morning this summer, 30 Rock will get even crazier. As it has done for the past two years, the *Today* show is putting on a free weekly concert by acts such as John Fogerty (July 3), Hootie and the Blowfish (July 17) and Culture Club (July 31). But there doesn't need to be live music for the *Today* frenzy to spread.

On one such broadcast, news anchor Ann Curry is telling us that Pakistan has just tested a nuclear bomb. The mood on camera would be quite grim, were it not for the guy waving through the glass behind Curry. Meanwhile, weatherman Al Roker is working the crowd outside, getting the people pumped up for his on-camera

moments. One prepubescent girl in denim shorts, acting like she's just been kissed by a Hanson, gushes, "I love it when Al says, 'Now here's what's going on in your neck of the woods!' " She runs back into the crowd and screams, "Al! Al!"

At a live show, nutjobs like the aforementioned can be expected to do almost anything; you'd think that the on-air personalities would be afraid for their lives. Curry, though, seems to love mixing it up with the crowd. She's often the last person to leave the daily party because she's been posing for photographs or hugging little children with more energy than Clinton. "Meeting the people who come here is the best part of working on *Today*," she says. "These are the people I work for."

Lauer, meanwhile, is content to sign autographs. "You're more gorgeous in person than you are on TV!" his fans tell him time and again. Straining to keep his dignity, he says "thank you" and moves on. His friendly coanchor Couric laughs with the crowds and brings her daughter Ellie to the concerts, but she's the first to head inside.

On May 29, the Artist kicked off *Today's* weekly concert series with a show of mind-bending magnitude—he went on playing long after the cameras were turned off. Midtown office workers looked down from open windows. People on scaffolds two blocks up grooved to the beat. Traffic came to a standstill. The crowd screamed. Lauer danced but looked sort of like someone's dad. It was like



Fan-tastic voyage: Katie Couric and Matt Lauer surf through a sea of people daily.

that scene in *Fame* where a guy starts singing and dancing in the street and everyone else starts doing the same. Confused Midwestern families expecting a much smaller crowd were left way out of camera range; they forlornly displayed their signs.

Like mosquitoes drawn to a bug lamp, these families join the *Today* fray every morning. But who they are and what they're about can be a mystery. One family—a nice mom with a ready smile and two well-behaved kids—jumps for the camera (their sign said WE LOVE ROSIE...ROSIE O'DONNELL IS THE BEST). They're well positioned, almost face to face with Roker. The only thing blocking them is a woman dressed like a cow. Just then, one of the kids shouts, "I think I see Rosie! Rosie's here!" The family

goes wild. Mom bounces ecstatically. The kids jump up and down. The cow lady says nothing.

With everyone else around them jostling to get their faces on *Today*, the family scoots into the street, disappearing into greater New York. The irony? Rosie O'Donnell wasn't even there.

The Friday concert series continues through September at 49th St and Rockefeller Plaza. Crowds fill to capacity by 6am, when the performers warm up off camera. Upcoming shows are Marc Cohn (Friday 19), Lionel Richie (June 26), John Fogerty (July 3), Chicago (July 10), Hootie and the Blowfish (July 17), Gloria Estefan (July 24) and Culture Club (July 31).

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