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WHAT does Alan Cumming smell like?

Hmm. A manly, tasty blend of black pepper and bergamot with just a hint of Scotch pine, whiskey and – could it be? – rubber. This is the bottled Alan Cumming, one of the latest and most improbable scents to hit the booming celebrity fragrance market, joining Britney Spears's Curious and Jennifer Lopez's Glow, Miami Glow, and, soon, Live.

Even fans of the actor Alan Cumming may purse their lips at the idea of wearing cologne by a man whose roles include an odious haberdasher ("Circle of Friends") and a leering Weimar ringmaster ("Cabaret"). And as a genial figure in New York, Mr. Cumming is not exactly material for the supermarket weeklies, whose relentless coverage of celebrities is as good as free publicity for the makers of celebrity fragrances.

"No, I'm not Britney," he said by phone this month from Los Angeles, where he was attending movie meetings. Though maybe because he isn't Britney he could afford to treat his scent as a form of camp. "It's almost like a pop cultural joke," he said, "But the bottom line is I really like it." So does Sephora, which stunned Mr. Cumming and his perfumer, Christopher Brosius, when it asked to carry the fragrance. Soon they will bring out a line of shower products, like scrubbers (Cumming Off Buff) and soaps (Cumming in a Bar).

Mr. Brosius, who works out of Brooklyn, said he expects sales of the cologne to reach about \$1 million this year.

"It's obviously crazy, and it's as much a surprise to us as it is to everybody who finds it," said Mr. Cumming, who has been making personal appearances at Sephora stores, including a new one at Union Square in Manhattan.

While Mr. Cumming's expected volume is just a dab behind the ears to Elizabeth Arden, whose Curious generated sales of \$36 million in just four months last year, his response seems exactly right. "Crazy" might well describe a world where fragrance marketing executives refer to Ms. Spears's "aspirational qualities" as dependably as magazines like Star produce evidence of her bad taste; where a reality television show has a scented spinoff (Donald Trump, the Fragrance); and where the short attention span of young consumers works to the benefit of cosmetic companies, which view celebrity as an endlessly renewable resource.

And nothing these days is too far-fetched to consider. A Donald Rumsfeld scent to go mano a mano with the Donald? How about something presidential – W, the Scent, or the more discreet Oval?

"I'm surprised that Martha Stewart doesn't have her own perfume," said Rochelle Bloom, the president of the Fragrance Foundation, a trade group.

Celebrities have been good for the perfume industry just as they have become a huge source of revenue for department stores that sell celebrity clothing lines. Pop stars like Ms. Lopez have drawn young women and buzz to fragrance counters at department stores like Macy's, where their scents are sold next to classics like Chanel No. 5. And they're not inexpensive, either. Prices are in the \$40 to \$55 range.

After several dismal years perfume sales in the United States rose 2 percent last year, to \$2.8 billion, said Maria Ianni, an account manager at NPD Beauty, a market information company. In 2000 celebrity brands represented 2 percent of the total fragrance market, she said. Today that share is 6 percent.

More significant, 31 percent of the top 100 perfumes, compared with 26 percent in 2003, are named for a celebrity or promoted by one, as Gwyneth Paltrow will do this fall for Estée Lauder's Pleasures.

"The trend has been accelerating over the past two years," said Patrick Bousquet-Chavanne, the group president of Estée Lauder, which last fall brought out Mr. Trump's cologne and snagged Beyoncé Knowles to endorse its Tommy Hilfiger's True Star scent. Mr. Bousquet-Chavanne was recently in Moscow, and he said all he heard was, "When are you bringing Trump to Moscow?" A Russian trip is now in the works.

Despite Estée Lauder's classy reputation and Mr. Bousquet-Chavanne's belief that very few celebrities can turn themselves into global brands, he suggests it would be imprudent of Estée Lauder, a public company, not to claim at least a modest share of the celebrity universe.

"We're taking a very balanced approach to it," he said. "At the same time we've got to listen to the psyche of different segments of the market, and today they are indeed responding to celebrity. We had to take part in that."

This fall Coty will bring out Lovely by Sarah Jessica Parker and a Kimora Lee Simmons perfume, as well as Live, its fourth Lopez fragrance in three years.

"We're in a good position to choose the right partners," said Bernd Beetz, the chief executive of Coty, who declined to comment on published reports that the company is in talks for a Madonna fragrance.

Ms. Lopez's fragrances, which have generated an estimated \$250 million in sales, reflect Coty's strategy of picking stars who have a multifaceted persona – in Ms. Lopez's case, a pop singer, actress, glamour puss, and budding fashion designer – and who are prepared to impart the secrets of their personality to fragrance and packaging designers.

"Because that's what the consumer wants to buy," Mr. Beetz said. He predicts Ms. Lopez will surpass in brand longevity the diva to end all divas, Elizabeth Taylor, whose White Diamonds has been an Elizabeth Arden top seller since it came out in 1991.

"We believe Jennifer can last even longer," he said.

Perhaps, but with most celebrity fragrances pitched toward consumers 16 to 28 years old, and with the window of fame now more like a portal than a bay, there is an inevitable moment when demand begins to cool. One way that companies like Coty have addressed this problem is to bring out spinoff products, like Miami Glow, a heavy coconut-and-orange-blossom scent that quickly followed Glow.

In the spring Elizabeth Arden offered Britney Spears fans a two-in-one product with a lipstick at one end and a roller-ball scent at the other. "We can't keep it in stock," said Tamara Steele, the company's vice president for global marketing, of the dual stick, which sells for \$25.

But makers of prestige fragrances say the many new products and upgrades rob the industry of its glamour. "The constant pounding of names – the Paris Hilton syndrome, I call it – just cheapens the image" of the industry, said Arie Kopelman, the vice chairman of Chanel, which uses actresses like Nicole Kidman in some of its advertisements. "I think it's harmful to future growth, which already isn't that great."

Last year some 300 new men's and women's fragrances came out, according to the Fragrance Foundation. That's more than double the number for 2000 and a good deal more than the 67 released in 1990. The blitz seems to have a diminishing effect on consumer expectations, as Mr. Brosius found out with Mr. Cumming's cologne.

"People are always shocked when they smell it," he said. "They're like, 'Oh, this is really good.' Well, that speaks a lot about perfume today. People are all too often prepared for something powerful and not immediately pleasant."

Fragrance companies like to take a long-term approach to a brand. "Once a fragrance becomes a classic, that's when the profitability comes in," Mr. Bousquet-Chavanne of Estée Lauder said. But this is becoming harder because of the time involved.

"When you build a fragrance from scratch, you have to create the whole persona and image from nowhere and over time build a following," said Kenneth Hirst, a designer of bottles and packaging, describing a practice that was standard 20 years ago. "With a celebrity, the image and fan base already exist. That reputation is built through the media with the bombardment of coverage. That's free advertising for the fragrance companies."

Mr. Hirst, who worked with Céline Dion on her scents for Coty, added, "I've stopped creating new fragrances and just focus on building celebrity ones."

That's precisely the problem in the industry, said Allan Mottus, a fragrance consultant. He said that since 1997 unit sales of fragrances in department stores have risen 18 percent, while dollar sales have remained constant. "By jacking up the number of new launches the fragrance companies are just replacing volume," he said. "They're not building anything."

Though Mr. Mottus admires the design and white-flower scent of Curious, saying that its atomizer bottle is a reason for its appeal among young women, he wonders why companies aren't producing products that jibe with the portable lifestyle of a generation that loves its BlackBerries and iPods. "Look, the kids are into scents," he said. "There's no doubt about that. But the packaging looks like older packaging."

Industry executives say that innovative designs and smells may be the next wave.

"Portability and good design are definitely part of our times, and it's not just young people who like these technical innovations," Mr. Bousquet-Chavanne said. Last year he showed his daughter new designs for Estée Lauder's Beyond Paradise scent, including a roller ball stick in rainbow colors. "She basically took the roller ball," he said, sounding pleased. Mr. Bousquet-Chavanne's daughter is 12.