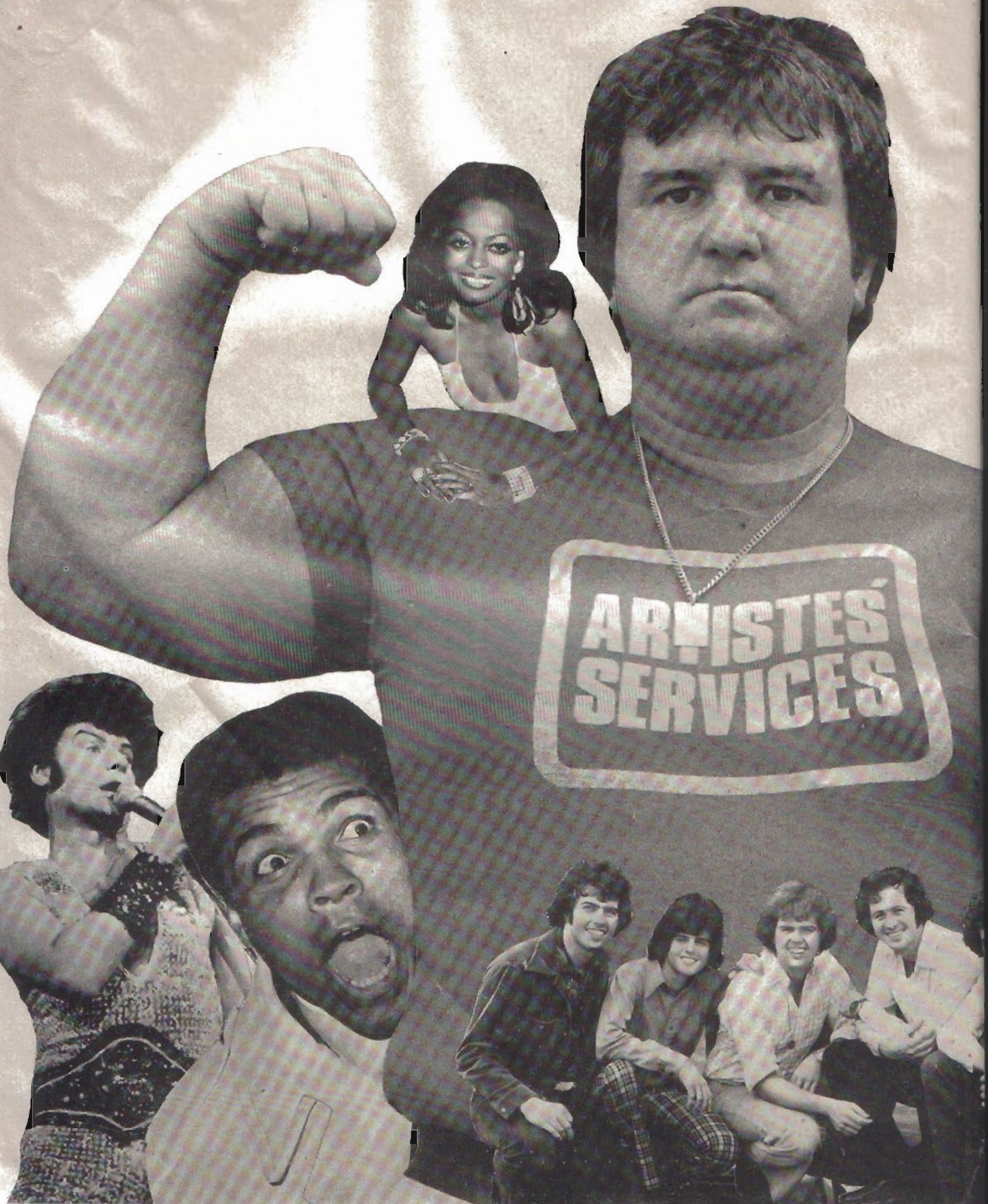


'I was knifed in the back'says Fat Fred...

BODYGUARD TO THE STARS



David Cassidy, Muhammad Ali, Diana Ross, the Rollers, Olga Korbut and Julie Andrews have one thing in common . . . 'Fat Fred' Bassett has guarded them against all-comers with his undoubted bulk. Bassett, 5ft 8in and 18 stone, is one of the best-known of Artistes Services' security guards. Here, he talks about the good and bad times in more than 10 years as friend and bodyguard to the stars. . . .



● I started working for Artistes Services in 1966, when Don [Merfit] and Gerry [Slater] formed the company to provide personal security for The Monkees' European tour. There were only a few of us then, and we had to learn the hard way. Now we can sign on 400 men to provide the security — personal, backstage and crowd control — for a concert, rock festival or showbiz stars.

Personal security is done by the regulars, people such as Paddy the Plank, Pete the Meat, Mighty Mick Upham, Gerry Horgan and me.

It's not really dangerous. Sure you get a lot of kids who try to walk through or over you to get at their idols, but I've only had three bad experiences in 10 years.

There was the night in Copenhagen, Denmark, after a Led Zeppelin concert. We'd got the group away, and were walking across the car park at the back of the stadium, when 11 guys moved in on us. We'd had some trouble that

night and reckoned these were the guys responsible.

Anyway, there was nowhere to run so we had to get stuck in. It was a hell of a punch-up. The trouble was some of them had iron bars and knives . . . they didn't seem to like us.

My mate was whacked over the head with an iron bar and one guy knifed me in the back. But we didn't go down, we just kept at them until they eventually gave up and ran off, dragging a couple of their mates with them.

The hospital put 13 stitches in my back and I was out of action for three days. Mind you, if the guy who knifed me had got in any closer he could have done a lot of damage. I know I need to slim, but not that way.

Probably the toughest bloke to look after is David Cassidy. His fans will go to any lengths to get near him. We caught 12 girls at the back of his hotel with a three-piece ladder. Another night, we found about four girls in the shower behind his dressingroom . . . they'd been there for six hours.

Then there was the night 1,000 fans surrounded his hotel. If we hadn't got out fast they would have demolished the van and taken David apart.

We also had some right fun and games getting David in and out of the stadium. We dressed him up as a St. John's Ambulance man and used several other disguises.

Once we even carried him in in a wooden box. . . .

But it wasn't all fun during that tour.

Towards the end of one concert, the audience started pressing forward. There must have been between 10,000 and 15,000 kids trying to get on the stage, and there were only 120 of us, plus 120 old guys employed by the White City Stadium.

While our blokes in front of the stage formed a human wall, I went on stage to get David out fast if things turned nasty. The more the kids pushed forward, the tougher it got for those in the front rows.

Eventually, the crush and the heat got to some of the kids and they went down like nine pins. That's when things got very rough; our blokes went into the crowd and lifted the bodies out over their heads to the St. John's Ambulance men at the side of the stage.

In all the years I've been doing this job, I've never seen anything like it — it was like a battlefield.

When it was all over, we counted the cost. Thirty of our blokes were injured, including one with a broken arm and another with a broken leg. About 100 fans were treated for shock, bruises, broken legs, arms and collar bones. One girl died. She was only 14, she went

down in the crush and never regained consciousness.

The crowd control regulations for concerts have been tightened up since then, but there are still promoters who try and skimp on security. We won't touch a job unless we're satisfied the promoter can afford to pay for the right amount of manpower.

This year, things are a bit more violent. We covered The Who concert at Charlton Athletic football ground, London, a few months ago and there were loads of punch-ups . . . there was a violent streak running through the atmosphere.

Our people can handle themselves okay, but we don't encourage violence, except in extreme cases. And when the case is a nut out to kill, or maim for life . . . well, would you risk it for between £10 and £20 a night?

I can take care of myself and used to reckon all I needed to do was stand up, look tough and tell the kids to 'turn it in'. Now our lads seem to be the focus of some of the aggro and that's going to make life difficult for everyone.

Mind you, the job has its compensations.

Ten years ago, I was an asphaltter earning quite good wages. I never dreamed that someone would pay me more money, send me round the world first class, book me into the finest hotels, offer me vintage champagne and the best food, and get me on first name terms with some of the biggest names in showbusiness.

I've looked after Muhammad Ali — he doesn't really like whites but we got on okay; Julie Andrews — she reckoned I saved her life when she was mobbed by autograph hunters in London; little Olga Korbut — very sweet; Diana Ross; Gary Glitter; the Bay City Rollers — I've been all over the world with them; David Bowie; Led Zeppelin; Alex Harvey . . . the list is almost endless.

When these people aren't in the public eye, they're just like you and me: friendly, chatty, and full of respect for the job I have to do.

Like the night David Cassidy wanted to walk out to the front of the stage, right where the kids could grab him. I told him: 'If you go out there, they'll tear you to pieces. The minute you walk across that line, I'm not responsible for your safety.'

He gave me a bit of a look, smiled and said okay.

The best part of the job?

When someone such as Robert Plant, the lead singer with Led Zeppelin, goes out of his way to say 'hello' and have a chat, like he did when I was doing V.I.P. bar security at the Bob Marley concert at Ninian Park, Cardiff, a couple of months ago. ●