



TALKING SHOP

The Bodyguard

Your safety is his concern. Words by **James Pham**.

Photo by **Quinn Ryan Mattingly**

Society has become obsessed with celebrities. With the pervasiveness of the internet, gossip magazines and entertainment-related TV shows, anyone can gain immediate access to information about their favourite stars — who’s romancing who, how much plastic surgery is on that face, what latest diet craze they’re on and everything else under the glittering sun.

But seeing a celebrity in real life takes it to another level. While an odd encounter with a single fan looking for a photo to tweet or autograph to cherish is part of celebrity life for stars from the world of screen, song or sports, multiply that by a few thousand delirious, screaming ones intent on getting everything from a handshake or a more space-invading hug, kiss or moment, and personal security becomes a real issue. Enter Rod Stubbs, aka ‘The Bodyguard’.

The interview with Rod is set at a small table in the crowded lounge at Strata, the establishment on the 50th floor of the Bitexco Tower. In walks a tall, stocky man dressed all in black and sporting dark sunglasses (which remained on during the entire interview).

“Let’s go over here,” he says, as he heads towards a deserted area of the restaurant, bypassing smiling waitresses and chatting up managers, casually throwing in the line, “I helped build this floor”.

International Man of Mystery

Indeed, Rod Stubbs is a man of mystery. Or at least he likes to portray himself that way. He’s also a master in kung fu. “In this business, being able to choke someone out and have them wake up wondering, ‘Where am I?’ is pretty handy,” he says.

Having done internal investigations and protection work for the Australian government and having been a member of the Australian Special Forces for eight years, bodyguarding came naturally to Rod, having

scored his first security job at 18-years-old at a radio station where he had to deal with a deranged “nutso” wielding a knife demanding to meet Cyndi Lauper.

Since arriving in Vietnam almost 11 years ago and setting up his own security company with more than 1,000 employees, he’s guarded everyone from the Prime Minister to The Backstreet Boys.

“When I first arrived, the protection industry was still pretty raw with only basic guard services,” he says. “There’s still a long way to go. It’s difficult here to provide a high level of training because if you train someone too well, they might disappear [to another

known to do everything from install GPS trackers in their idol’s car, or in the case of girls too young to drive, shell out hundreds of dollars a day to hire a car and driver to follow stars around, to poisoning rivals or sending fan messages written in menstrual blood.

Kiss & Sniff

Fortunately Vietnamese fans haven’t quite reached that level of *sasaeng*, although Korean superstar Bi Rain’s Hanoi visit earlier this year caused a national stir when a television insider reported that a seat (A12, to be exact) that Rain sat in during rehearsals was swarmed by fans later that evening wanting to take pictures with it and more shockingly, a group of teenage girls even kissing and sniffing the seat.

Earlier this year during April’s Soundfest, Rod was responsible for the security for Big Bang, presently the most successful Korean boy band on the world stage. Despite it being past 11pm, “the scene was incredible,” he recalls. “There were about 3,000 fans who swarmed the airport. The crowd soon got too big. They were jumping on top of cars trying to get to the group. It didn’t help that the airport personnel were trying to get pictures and autographs of their own. But professional security is all about understanding the threat and controlling it. Knowing where safe houses are, being able to change routes from points A to B are all part of the job. The security for Big Bang was like no other. We always kept control.”

Security guards in Vietnam aren’t allowed to carry guns, relying on less lethal weapons such as batons and tasers. “We have an international bodyguard training programme, covering rules of engagement and tools of the trade. But it always comes down to common sense, knowing what you’re doing”.

When asked about the most danger he’s ever encountered in Vietnam, Rod answers with a wry smile, “Driving on the road”. ☞

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job] the next month. There’s a big hole in security in Vietnam at the moment. But we’re hoping things change. Right now, the minimum wage for a general security guard is only VND2.3 million a month.”

Despite the occasional kidnapping or high profile robbery, Rod says Vietnam is not considered “high threat”. That all goes out the window when it comes to celebrities, though, Korean pop stars in particular. Korea has even coined a term to describe overly obsessive groupies who take fandom a step beyond stalking — ‘*sasaeng fans*’ (*sasaeng* is Korean for ‘private life’). *Sasaeng* fans have been