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'Cheese!' The photobooth lives on

Nothing can replace that four-shot strip

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This is for all of you who've ever crossed your eyes, puckered your lips and let cigarettes dangle from your nostrils in a photobooth.

Yes. Those things are still around. Their stools still wind. Their flashes still blind. Their four-pose strips defy all forecasts of fade-out.

"I don't know anyone who can resist them," says Rick Hock, director of exhibitions at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, N.Y.

Today, photoboos don't just dot the malls, museums and amusement parks. They also provide entertainment at wedding parties, play supporting roles in movies (think "Amelie") and inspire both Web sites and books. Two new titles out: the nostalgic "Photobooth" (Princeton Architectural Press, \$19.95) and the hyper "MTV's Photobooth" (Universal Publishing, \$28.50).

In the MTV book, some 200 celebs ham it up inside the network's backstage color booth. There's Spike Lee, deadpan in three frames and giving a tiny smirk in the fourth. There's Hugh Grant, looking right, left and disappearing. And Kirsten Dunst picking her nose. In all: 44 stuck-out tongues (including Heather Graham's), 14 blown kisses (including Hilary Swank), one shoe close-up (Ethan Hawke's) and a bare butt (belonging to R&B star Usher).

It's anyone's guess how many photoboos are in the United States, but two companies - Photo Me and Fantasy Entertainment - account for about 5,500 machines. Most are digital, and some offer extras that let you:

- Try on hairdos - from blue spikes to yellow braids.
- Choose backdrops - tropical beaches, clusters of "hot babes."
- Have your portrait sketched "in the style of Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo or Rembrandt."

But it's the no-frills, black-and-white booths that seem to inspire the most loyalty. As 12-year-old Angela Yragui of Ballard, Wash., explains, "They just seem more original."

'Getting more creative'

In the Seattle area, only about a half-dozen black-and-white machines remain. One sits in Archie McPhee in Ballard. You can find it by walking past the Pee-wee Herman dolls and the nuclear-protection suits to the back wall. It's easy to spot, although the staff sometimes tries to disguise it as a spaceship or, as at last Halloween, a haunted wedding chapel, covered in fake-o spider webs.

"It's cool because it's like a flashback," says Megan Giese, 18. "It's very retro, very funky."

Wearing green eye shadow and low-slung pants, Giese has just emerged from the booth to wait her 3½ minutes. When her photos arrive, she will mail them off to her beau at college in Bellingham, Wash., with whom she trades strips about once a month.

"At first we just made silly faces," she says. "Now we're getting more creative."

At Archie McPhee, "creative" may mean anything from donning a Shriner's cap to embracing a skeleton.

These days, nothing fazes store manager Shana Iverson. She's seen folks bring in their dogs. She's seen them haul in signs - "I LOVE YOU." She's watched as they cram in six at a time. And, yes, she's encountered her share of mooners.

"People will flash and then take their photos to the counter to show us," she says jovially before clearing her throat and growing serious. "We don't really like that, because this is a family store."

What is it about photobooths that turns upright citizens into goofballs? Part of it is the lack of a photographer. No witnesses means no inhibitions.

"When I was in high school, the girls would circulate photos of their bare breasts, and we'd try to identify who was who," says Hock with a laugh. "No one could ever figure it out."

Part of it is also the price - \$2 for four shots. If you smile nicely in one, that gives you three more in which to smirk, scream, squint or blink. And if you don't like any of the four shots, you can trash the evidence and try again.

(Just be sure to read the signs before investing your capital. "I'm always finding carefully folded bills in the coin slot," gripes Bill Hertel, who maintains two-dozen Seattle-area machines, taking 150,000 photos a year.)

A late '20s fad

The automatic, multipose photo machine was patented in 1928 by Anatol Josepho, a photographer from Siberia. When he opened his first photobooth in New York City's theater district, offering eight poses for a quarter, *The New York Times* called it "a smart fad." One year later, Josepho sold his company interest to a group of businessmen for \$1 million.

"How can it be? It's amazing," wrote one early poser on the back of a photo shown in the book "Photobooth." But if the first photobooth users were awed, giddy, excited or thrilled, they gave no hint. Mostly they resembled a bunch of stuffed birds. Their faces didn't begin to relax until the 1930s, about the time the booths' attendants disappeared.

"A lot of people would enter the booth, start out looking serious and then realize, 'Hey, I can do whatever I want because no one is watching,'" says Tammra Engum of Newcastle, Wash., a photo dealer who supplied many of the shots for "Photobooth." "You can see them getting freer as you move down the strip."

During World War II, soldiers posed in amusement-park booths with their gal pals and Army buds before shipping out. In the 1950s, moms said "cheese" with their baby-boom tots at booths in Woolworth's. In the 1960s, artist Andy Warhol elevated photo strips to an art, turning them into self-portraits, silk screens and even a *Time* magazine cover on "Today's Teenagers." But with the advent of Polaroids and one-hour photo shops, the booths lost some of their allure.

"It wasn't until the 1990s that their popularity started rising again," says Matthew Carter, chief financial officer for Photo-Me USA, which is headquartered in Grand Prairie, Texas. "Why did it rise? In a word: nostalgia.

"People immediately get a smile when they see a photobooth," he explains. "It's a reminder of a happy time, a time when they went to a theme park with their friends, found a booth and crowded in."

Collectibles

Today, fans not only pose for pictures, they also collect them. Especially vintage photos in black and white.

On eBay, a typical one-shot will go for \$6 to \$8. But it can go higher if it's somehow unique. Engum, who makes her living selling snapshots under the name Photogurl, once sold a double-exposed photobooth pic for \$65.

"If you had told me three years ago that I would be doing this, I would've said, 'Who would buy someone else's photos?'" Engum admits.

But every week she puts vintage photobooth pix up for bid, and every week they're snapped up. Among the shots in high demand: kids, dogs and quirky images - a woman standing before a palm-tree backdrop, a man showing off his black eye.

"The popularity of snapshots in general is amazing, and it's just going to grow," Engum says. "In 30 or 40 years, everything will be digital. We're not going to have anything we can hold in our hand."

Will the booths of tomorrow be paperless?

Giese, at Archie McPhee, for one, says she hopes not. "It would destroy the spirit a little," she says, reaching for a strip that's just slid down the chute, smelling a bit like rotten eggs.

Although the 3½-minute photobooth processing wait can sometimes seem interminable, it also creates a kind of thrill, she says:

"Half the fun is the anticipation, the waiting to see what you get."

And the other half? Posing, of course. In sunglasses. With mussed hair. Tongue out. Looking zany in a four-strip that can be fixed to the fridge or sent to a beau in Bellingham, the backside bearing a lipstick kiss.