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Meet Alki David: The Billionaire Hollywood Bad Boy Being Sued by Every TV Network

The man behind online TV-streaming service FilmOn -- and pal to Charlie Sheen and Andy Dick -- has the industry seeing red.

BY **ERIQ GARDNER** OCTOBER 4, 2012 10:30AM





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At his Beverly Hills mansion, **Alki David**, one of Hollywood's biggest troublemakers, is showing his guests the 16,200-square-foot palace that, according to records, cost him \$16.5 million in 2010. It's one of many places that Alki — as everyone calls him — likes to relax. The others include a mansion in Greece, a ski lodge in Switzerland and several properties in the U.K. His stateside residence allows him to consider the Hollywood of years past — his home used to serve as **Mary Pickford's** hunting grounds, and his neighbors' mansions once belonged to **Sammy Davis Jr.** and **Charlie Chaplin** — as well as to be navel-to-navel with celebrity neighbors, like newcomers to the hood **David** and **Victoria Beckham**.

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On this night, the 44-year-old Greek immigrant with a net worth of \$1.7 billion is hosting a soiree — if you can call it that. In truth, producers are filming a “party” for a forthcoming TLC reality show tentatively titled *Trophy Wives*, which will feature his third wife, model and fashion designer **Jennifer Stano** (he’s got two sons, **Andrew**, 17, and **Alexander**, 15, from his first marriage). As a DJ plays what sounds like electro-porn-funk at barely audible levels so as not to interfere with the show’s production, the cast moves around the “party” with cameramen tracking them throughout. Alki, after changing \$1,500 silk shirts twice so he’ll look good on camera, regales a crowd of admirers with the tale of how a few days earlier he phoned his wife’s modeling agency pretending to be a john requesting a hooker.

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The whole scene has an eerie, fun house-like quality. But here stands the guy trying to shake up the \$22 billion-a-year TV business by operating what might be the world’s biggest TV-streaming service, FilmOn, an 85-employee company that operates out of a suspiciously nondescript building in Beverly Hills. At least, it’s nondescript for a guy with



Triumph Bonneville motorcycle that once belonged to **Steve Jones** of the Sex Pistols.

In the past few years, TV networks have been resisting the passionate pleas from viewers who want them to stream live television — and not just select events like the Olympics. To do that, executives from the networks and studios believe, would threaten the very underpinning of the modern television industry: TV still is an ad-based business, but ad buyers base what they will pay for commercials on Nielsen ratings — which only measure conventional set viewership. Then, there's the endangered billions of dollars sent by cable and satellite companies to networks for the pleasure of airing such shows as *NCIS* and *The Voice*. Networks use some of this money to purchase shows from studios, which in turn want to prevent any piracy or cannibalization that might threaten revenue from DVD sales and such digital platforms as Hulu and Netflix. Streaming, in short, has become a very dirty word.

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FilmOn, to put it simply, uses millions of small antennas to retransmit live TV, along with movies and original content, to computers and mobile devices throughout the world. The company makes \$24 million a year thanks to subscribers who pay between \$11.95 and \$17.90 a month as well as licensing FilmOn to companies like Lenovo (all of its new computers will have FilmOn preloaded). As a result, Alki has been sued in federal court by CBS, NBC, ABC and Fox for the copyright infringement that came with co-opting their network feeds to service his tens of thousands of customers.



transmitting unique signals for each of its individual subscribers — Alki started a new website, calling it BarryDriller.com to get around the standing lawsuits, and just kept on streaming. Of course, it led to a new round of litigation, most recently from Diller in late August, claiming that Alki had created BarryDriller.com to “mislead the public into believing that Defendants’ service has been judicially sanctioned.” In late September, a judge granted Diller’s request for a preliminary injunction, but Alki remains undeterred. (Today, if you head to BarryDriller.com, you’ll be redirected to CBSYouSuck.com.)

The same guy who lives in the heart of Beverly Hills, prancing around before the glare of reality TV cameras, has been served legal papers that, among other allegations, accuse him of threatening “every revenue model supporting the United States television industry.”

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In the race to, as Diller would put it, pry over-the-air broadcast television out of a closed system dominated by just a few media behemoths, there are the problem solvers like Diller, who, along with Aereo’s CEO **Chet Kanojia**, wants to work with the system by exploring technological work-arounds. Then there are the punks who draw up plans for bloody revolution.

Alki, a self-professed eccentric, definitely is a punk. He doesn’t have the renowned status of Diller. He says things like, “Bucking the trend is inspiring; it makes me realize I exist.” But he also has a 10-figure war chest (\$17 million of which he’s poured into FilmOn) and a new coterie of bad-boy partners — including **Charlie Sheen**, **Ice-T** and **Andy Dick** —



STORY: TV Broadcasters Settle Digital Lawsuit, but Aereo-Like Service won't Die (Exclusive)

Alki's backers don't mind that he is the type of renegade businessman who will offer \$1 million to anybody who would streak in front of **President Obama** (as he did in August 2010), try to engineer a \$10 million purse for a boxing match between **Chris Brown** and **Drake** and fool news outlets into believing he had provided the first live webcast of an assisted suicide. And if Sheen and Ice-T care that Alki's TV-streaming service is subject to lawsuits, it certainly hasn't been enough to compel the actors to resign from FilmOn's board of directors.

"There's a lot happening on the Internet," says Ice-T. "It's always a race. He works out of the box, and it's one of those things where if you got to pick a team, I'll pick the team with a commander who is crazy — because we might win."

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Adds Dick: "I've tried to figure him out. I can't. The only thing I can think of is that he got billions from his inheritance. That has got to skew your brain."

Alkiviades "Alki" David was born in 1968 in Nigeria into a respectable Greek Cypriot family who made its fortune owning Coca-Cola bottling factories in 28 countries. Growing up, he moved around a lot. Alki spent much of his childhood in various countries in Europe, with long stretches in Switzerland and England. Half-jokingly, he refers to himself as a "gypsy," which is somewhat accurate: He always has been a bit of an outsider who prefers to cultivate a community on the fringe rather than assimilate.



natural passion for Alki. When he was young, he would perform in Christmas plays with his cousins, with boys dressing as girls and the girls dressing as boys. His late father, the conservative tycoon who made his money shipping those Coca-Cola bottles, tolerated his behavior until his son went off to Bennington College in Vermont and then the Royal College of Art in London, grew his hair long and became a heavy drug abuser.

During the mid-1990s, Alki says he sobered up; though, really, he merely channeled his intense desire for stimulation in other ways: actor, producer, entrepreneur and world-class prankster. “I’ve tried to live straight,” he says. “It’s utterly boring. We’re born to create and inspire and contribute what we can. I believe I have the ability to infect people with color and laughter.”

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With the help of friend **Duncan Heath**, with whom he started a modeling agency and who now runs one of Europe’s top talent agencies, Alki landed small parts in various movies and TV shows. With his British accent, dark tan skin, thick eyebrows and prominent chin, Alki found himself cast as a “heavy” in the TNT miniseries *The Grid* and a few episodes of the British spy drama *MI-5* as well as alongside **Jason Statham** in 2008’s *The Bank Job*.

Alki also has used some of his wealth to dip into the world of independent film, writing, directing, producing and starring in 2004’s *Freediver* and 2007’s *Fishtales*. “I remember filming the ending scene,” says **Matthew Rhodes**, one of the producers on *Freediver* and now president of Mandalay Vision. “Alki yells ‘Action!’, dives a couple hundred feet off a yacht, jumps on a jet ski, rides it, grabs a girl diving in the water, all while helicopters are



In the process of producing those films, Alki felt he was being ripped off by distributors. Coming from a family of shippers, Alki is sensitive about “pirates,” whom he believes are all over Hollywood. So he developed a digital-delivery system in order to deliver trailers and full-length reels directly to the buyers.

Alki says he realized that going through brokers didn’t make as much sense as going straight to consumers, so his system eventually evolved into FilmOn. Today, despite the legal woes, he streams about 160 live TV channels throughout the world, including his new over-the-air station, L.A.-based KILM, which launched in September and is available on cable TV in upward of 5 million homes in the Los Angeles area.

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If there’s one statistic that Alki likes to throw around, it’s that the average age of the network TV audience is over 40; yet the majority of Internet users who traffic video sites are between 18 and 30. “If networks took the leap [into live streaming], those statistics would change,” he insists, believing that networks could attract younger audiences. (Of course, if they use his platform, he’ll be in a position to reap millions in subscription fees — which he claims he’d planned to share with the networks until they sued him.)

FilmOn was his attempt to push live network TV online, absent any approval needed to do so or any careful plan to avoid courtroom traps. He initially tried to take advantage of an old telecommunications law that allows cable systems to carry local stations by paying small compulsory license fees. The networks offered several reasons why the law never was intended to function this way, and thanks to a lack of focus on his part, Alki didn’t mount much of a challenge when broadcasters obtained a preliminary injunction



VIDEO: FilmOn's Alki David Challenges CBS 'Hypocrisy' on Piracy

But then Aereo came along. The company attracted \$24 million in backing from the likes of Diller, who showed up at a news conference in February to announce this new company would “break the chain” of a controlling TV industry. The TV networks didn’t take too kindly to such a bold proclamation, so they sued Aereo, which led to a decision in July in which a judge turned down the networks’ request for a preliminary injunction. As the broadcasters appealed, Alki looked on, unimpressed by his competitor. “Our system is much better than Aereo’s,” says Alki. “More channels and in more markets.”

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Despite the fact that Alki agreed to pay the networks \$1.6 million to resolve the 2012 lawsuit, he’s moving forward — and a quick look at FilmOn’s website shows that he has resumed streaming network TV. He points to Aereo’s system of having individual antennas assigned to individual customers and says that if a judge has blessed that approach, there should be no reason why his own version of that system shouldn’t pass legal muster. “We have deployed over 2.5 million antennas,” he says, “in major cities all around the country.”

As most of the area children are getting ready for the start of a new school year, Alki enters the Beverly Hills studio of his new over-the-air TV station, practicing his own form of education. KILM (available on all major cable and satellite platforms in Los Angeles, including Time Warner, Dish Network and DirecTV) has been around only a short while, and he already has fired **Janice Dickinson**, a veteran supermodel and



“strategic move” that will teach her a lesson in civility. “She’ll be back,” he says.

But there’s no time for that now. Dick is about to go on air as host of his own show on KILM, which features offbeat programming including a Kato Kaelin talk show, a celebrity fight night, video game competitions and a show called *Alki David’s Road to Hell* (sample episode: Alki offers a guy \$8,000 to tattoo the name of one of his companies on his head). As Dick takes his seat, dozens rush into position. That includes a guy who looks like Chef Boyardee sitting on a couch in front of a poster of **John Lennon** alongside the NRA symbol. It also includes *American Pie* co-star **Thomas Ian Nicholas**, who also now fronts a band and plays **Abbie Hoffman** in the film *The Chicago 8*. He’s Dick’s special guest today, though everyone around gets some screen time, including — at Alki’s passionate urging — the *THR* writer who is trailing him.

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Alki David sits back, admiring what he has unleashed. He enjoys surrounding himself with so many colorful people. That includes Dick, who starts his new show by thanking his boss for giving him a job when nobody else would. Alki met Sheen through **Nick Cassavetes**, who appeared with Alki in the 1997 comedy *Farticus* (which Alki also wrote and directed). Alki and Sheen also are mutual friends of **Lenny Dykstra**, a former Major League All-Star now serving prison time for grand theft auto. And Alki became acquainted with Ice-T through **Malik Spellman**, star of A&E’s *The Peacemaker*, who also hosts a show on FilmOn.tv.

“Alki is an edgy guy who doesn’t mind pushing it,” says Ice-T, who will advise Alki on new



knowing that there's no idea I will bring him that he will shoot down.”

As for what Alki gets, Kaelin, a longtime friend who hosts a show for him, explains that Alki doesn't mind embracing misfits. “He doesn't care if you're number one at the box office or if you have a lot of problems. He's full of compassion.”

STORY: Barry Diller on Aereo: ‘Broadcasters Ought to Cheer Us’

But is compassion, and passion, enough? Is it better to be a cool-headed executive who can work well with others, or is it more effective to be a hot-blooded executive who refuses to take “no” for an answer? Can Alki find the path that will lead to FilmOn's success?

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Sure, he doesn't have much of a formal business plan. FilmOn makes money, but Alki readily will admit it's not profitable. And he's not the type to heed the advice of lawyers or carefully study surveys of what consumers will pay for his service. What he does have is a belief that the Internet will set television free, an astonishing amount of money and, most especially, an ethos.

“Once you get past this image of an eccentric billionaire doing these acts of ridiculous Impressionism,” says Alki of his business philosophy, “I am more of a Dali than a Picasso.”

It is worth noting that neither of them was a realist.

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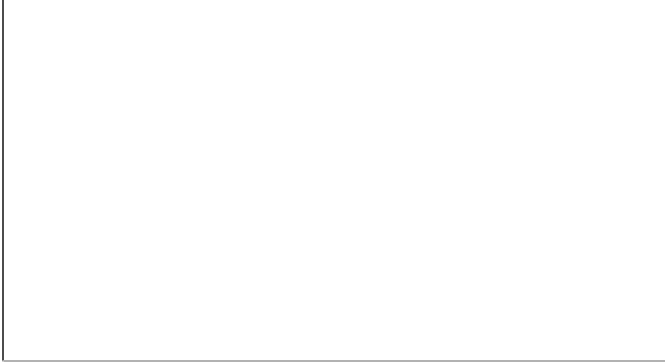
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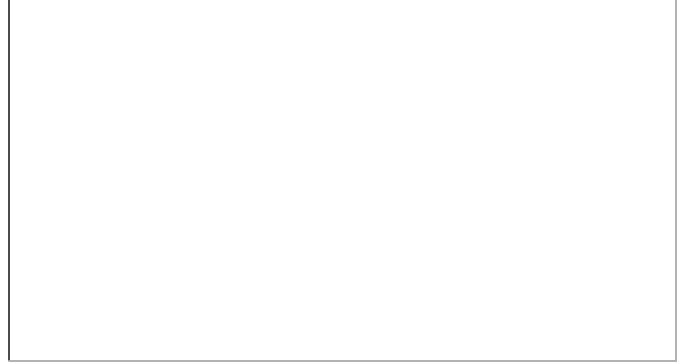


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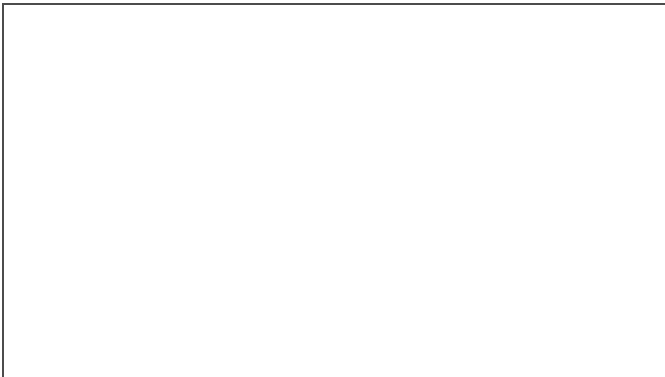
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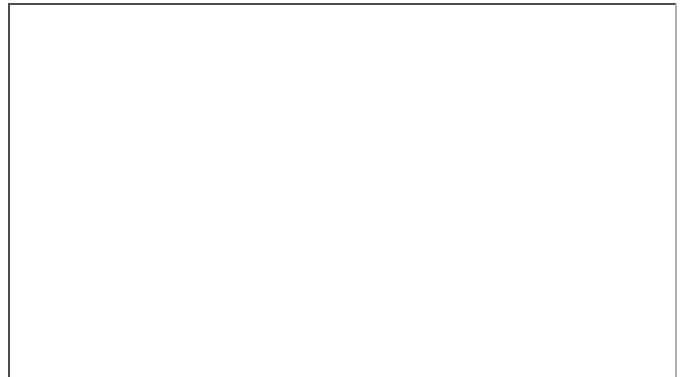
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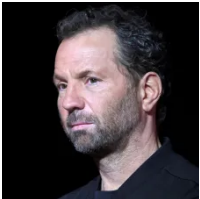
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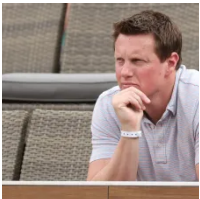
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