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**LIFESTYLES**

# Tailing Lassie

DERRIK J. LANG spends the evening with the world's most famous dog.



Acceptance speeches are so much shorter when you deliver them in barks. (AP Photo/Hiroko Masuike)

Thursday, 4 May, 2006, 15:32 EDT, US

## NEW YORK

She's not a show dog. She's a show business legend.

Since Lassie's big screen debut with Elizabeth Taylor in 1943, the mucho famous pooch has appeared in numerous films, radio and television shows.

Now, the collie -- the ninth in the Lassie bloodline -- is launching her own dog food brand, receiving a lifetime



You couldn't afford to sleep where this dog does. (AP Photo/Hiroko Masuike)



Riding with your head out the window is so declassé. (AP Photo/Hiroko Masuike)



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Lassie poses with adoring humans Jenna Berloni, 8, of Conn., and her family friend Carey VanDriest. (AP Photo/Hiroko Masuike)



"Oh no, I forgot my shades." (AP Photo/Hiroko Masuike)



Dr. Jeff Werber, Lassie's personal vet and spokesman, on the collie's cultural impact.



Carol Riggins, Lassie's trainer, discusses why dogs are always relevant.



How much does Lassie eat? Riggins explains.

achievement award and kicking off a 25-city promotional tour.

But when it comes to all things Lassie, there are actually two entities involved: Lassie the dog, a sweet and well-behaved collie from California, and "Lassie" the brand, a nearly 70-year-old empire owned and operated by Classic Media (who also operate the rights to Underdog and Ruldoph the Red-Nose Reindeer).

asap spent Wednesday evening with the dog and the brand.

**5:23 p.m.**

After a long day of media interviews, Lassie is lounging on the couch in her suite at the posh Jumeirah Essex House Hotel overlooking Central Park. She's bigger and much more docile than you might expect.

Like most celebrities, Lassie likes to be stroked. Just not her ego. She prefers you to wave your fingers through her luxurious coat that's brushed three times a day. And if you pet her for long enough, her head will eventually fall into your lap.

Also, like most celebs, Lassie's got an ever-present entourage, which includes a trainer, personal veterinarian/spokesman, marketing executive and two publicists (one represents the entire brand, the other manages her new dog food, Lassie Natural Way).

**6:12 p.m.**

Time to go to the park.

Lassie and some of her people pile into an Escalade. Carol Riggins, Lassie's trainer and self-proclaimed mommy, says the pooch is accustomed to riding in style. When traveling, Lassie always flies first class. (She's also a frequent flyer member.) The two live -- along with several other dogs and cats -- at a ranch in Canyon Country, Calif.

But what makes Lassie, well, Lassie? Other than being a descendent of Pal, the original pup that played Lassie alongside Roddy McDowell and

Far, the original pup that played Lassie alongside Roddy McDowall and Elizabeth Taylor in "Lassie Come Home," the distinguishing characteristics are a white stripe down the middle of her head, fluffy white collar and four white paws.

"It's interesting because collies are an introverted breed," Riggins says. "But 'Lassie' is known for being extroverted."

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**6:26 p.m.**

The driver stops at 76th Street at Central Park. This is Lassie's favorite spot, Riggins says before hopping out of the SUV with the dog. asap is barred from joining the pair on the potty break.

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**6:49 p.m.**

Lassie and company pull up to the swanky Pierre Hotel, where animal rescue organization Bide-A-Wee is hosting the Kibbe Awards Gala. Think: Oscars for pets. Lassie is immediately ushered up to the grand ballroom where black tie-clad attendees have barked up \$5,000 to \$25,000 for a table.

Before the ceremony begins, Lassie is perched on a club chair in the corner, posing for photographs with women in gowns and men in tuxedos. Lassie has done this a million times before. She makes it look so easy. She's an 8-year-old pro. Well, a 45-year-old pro in dog years.

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**7:02 p.m.**

Carson Kressley from "Queer Eye" and comedian and liberal commentator Al Franken are here. So is Morris the Cat, who's receiving the feline version of the award Lassie will be pawing later. During cocktail hour, Morris is in another room entirely. The cat's publicist says he doesn't like dogs.

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**7:24 p.m.**

Guests are called into the dining room. At first, there's some confusion over whether Lassie is going to just wait backstage until she receives her award or actually sit at a table, which is adorned with a gaudy milkbone-filled lamp centerpiece.

Lassie's entourage decides she'll just wait at her own table in a corner backstage.

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**7:52 p.m.**

Peter Scolari, that guy who wasn't Tom Hanks in "Bosom Buddies," is serving as the Kibbe Awards' master of ceremonies. Lassie is the first to receive an award. Dr. Jeff Werber, Lassie's personal veterinarian and spokesman, gives a speech. So does Lassie. She barks. And the crowd goes wild. After all these years, she's still got it.

As soon as the award is placed around her neck, Lassie hops back in the Escalade to go back to her suite to sleep (at the foot of Riggins' bed). Lassie has to get up early in the morning for more media interviews. It's a dog's life.

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asap reporter Derrik J. Lang will soon be the proud parent of a Welsh corgi named Root Beer.

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