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At BWI, Cleared for Takeoffs

*Performers Get Long Lines Of Travelers to Lighten Up
 [FINAL Edition]*

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They fanned out across Baltimore-Washington International Airport yesterday: Madonna, Austin Powers, Groucho Marx, Ur

On they strode, past rifle-toting soldiers, plunging into lines so long they seemed to cross several time zones. Groucho, bold rules of personal space in 21st-century America, went right up to the grimmest, most unapproachable-looking traveler, paw her coat and said:

"Ummmmm. Is that felt? It is now!"

With a honk of his horn (probably borrowed from Harpo), a waggle of his eyebrows and a flick of his cigar, he bid her adieu to the next poor traveling soul.

After a moment of stupefaction, she did a double take. And then smiled a huge, slow smile.

Groucho and the rest of the troupe of pop-culture icons were hired by the Maryland Aviation Administration to soothe the jar travelers scared about flying or cheesed-off by hours-long waits.

"We decided anything to make the environment more friendly and comfortable would help -- anything that would be distracting good," said John White, a BWI spokesman.

Travelers are being told to get to the airport two hours early. Clipboard-wielding airline officials walk the lines trying to move passengers whose flights are imminent. Still, some said they had been waiting as long as four hours because of delayed flights they didn't get pulled out of line. There was also some confusion, with people discovering that they had been waiting in the

To soothe passengers in this brave new world of airline travel, BWI has been hiring entertainers the past few weekends -- the place with a little comedic Saint-John's-wort. The schedule has been irregular, sometimes on Friday afternoons, sometimes Saturday or Sunday. The airport has spent a couple of thousand dollars for a day or two of distraction by professionals and recruited school groups and other volunteers who perform free.

One weekend had a sports theme with appearances by the Washington Redskins cheerleaders and local sports mascots. (A man slid dramatically across those long metal benches on his giant feathered stomach.)

Another weekend, it was the food of Maryland: a blue crab, a giant apple (actually Nancy Sanpere, an airport official who put on an entertainment program together), an outsize box of Old Bay seasoning.

Also making the scene on previous weekends were Cher, Mae West and Radar O'Reilly, whose spooky lack of affect was so unnerving. And no one wants to talk about the mimes, who have not been invited back.

This is high-stakes comedy, with the potential to make fragile passengers wonder if they've wandered into a giant Pieter Bruegel's "Saturday Night Live" skit gone terribly, terribly wrong.

"You get to know, you have an instinct for who's gonna play along and who's not," said Michael Levick (Groucho), a 48-year-old professional impersonator from Washington.

The impersonators not only calmed some people down, they also brought out their Inner Adolescent.

"Hmm. Let's see how you look in a cowboy hat," Madonna purred to a button-down Randy Davis, a Johns Hopkins orthopedic surgeon who was waiting in line to go to Las Vegas to give a talk. She plopped the glitzy hat on his head and he reddened.

"I've got to get her to sign my 'Like a Virgin' CD," Davis said, after veteran Madonna impersonator Chris America had moved on. Davis seemed interested in seeing and bonding with the ersatz Austin Powers: "I've got some Austin Powers teeth and one of those things."

But it was hard to catch up with that International Man of Mystery, he moved so fast, skipping around the ticket counter area. How else to explain how this mincing creature with lacy cuffs and yellow buck teeth could survive fondling the U.S. Naval Academy midshipman?

"It's a great idea to have these people here," said Sam Fletcher, a 20-year-old junior heading back to his home town of Baltimore. "I can get pretty disgruntled waiting in line."

The Southwest Airlines ticketing area yesterday simply belonged to Austin (actually, actor Jim Nieb, who, like the others, was from the Cast of Thousands talent agency).

He was insulting. ("What, did you go to public school? Focus, man, focus!") He was silly. ("Look, I'm carry-on!" he said, jumping on those boxes used to measure potential on-board luggage.) He was grandiose. (When a porter went by pushing an empty cart, he jumped on for the ride, throwing back his arms and shouting, "I'm king of the world!")

Most people seemed to love it.

"This is great. I've been stressed for the last hour and a half," Angela Boyer said after an Austin encounter.

"I thought I had a weirdo on my hands, for a minute," Mel Hilderbrand, a program manager for Bell Helicopter heading to Doha, said following a Moment With Groucho. "Then I realized, he does this for a living. It's good. God knows, we need it."

Larry French, meanwhile, wasn't buying it.

"Why don't they spend the money on shortening these lines?" the Baltimore resident said. "They think this is going to make

It makes me wonder what they're trying to cover up."

Moments later, he was sprinting through the terminal.

"I was in the wrong line the whole time."

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