

## SOCIAL COLUMN- The Montreal Gazette- Grand Prix Ball.

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Checkered flags beckoned. Small cars zoomed around. Major decibels of noise drowned out any hope of conversation.

Surely I was in the pits at the Circuit Gilles Villeneuve. But no, it was Le Bal du Grand Prix Air Canada 2000, a gargantuan social extravaganza held at Windsor Station.

More than 800 fast-track guests in long dresses and tuxedos arrived to a party that had the theme ? mystical circus?, and it was so wondrous I thought P.T. Barnum would show up any minute.

The place raced with beautiful babes and rich, globe-trotting guys. The ball was mainly about sex appeal, booze and rock ?n? roll, {de rigueur} elements of any race-car bash. Everyone was on the starting grid for an all-night bash that lasted ?way longer than the Grand Prix race itself, and was probably a great deal more entertaining.

Movie star Steven Baldwin showed up, the Boogie Wonder Band, decked out in their wild ?n? crazy costumes, energized the dance scene, and Vasco set up an outdoor cigar lounge complete with leather sofas and a Cuban expert hand-rolling stogies.

The gala started out on the sprawling open-air plaza between Windsor Station and the Molson Centre with enough alcohol to fuel [Michael Schumacher?s ] Formula I [Ferrari]. Foster?s Beer and Finlandia Vodka each had a kiosk and a crew of waiters served sparkling wine.

The carnival atmosphere came alive with clowns on stilts, jugglers, as well as amusement park diversions like a water-pistol gallery and a bumper-car ride set up by [Mattel].

A flurry of flags of 20 nations announced that this was pegged to a world-class event and banners flapped the logos of the ball?s many commercial sponsors.

It was a perfect summer night, hot as a turbo-charged engine, with the sun setting against a dark blue sky. Onlookers in sweaty sleeveless T-shirts hung over a fence, ogling the swells and hoping for a glimpse of high-powered drivers like Mika Hakkinen and Eddie Irvine.

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