

The Realist

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- Remembering Bill Hicks
- Who Killed Princess Diana?
- Janet Bode's Divorce Theme Park

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Editor: Paul Krassner

Case History of a Cyberhoax

Not by Kurt Vonnegut

I confess. Although I didn't handle the technological end of the Kurt Vonnegut hoax—I've never driven a car, I don't know how to program a VCR, and I use my computer only for word-processing—the idea was mine. A friend I'll call Hacker took care of the cyberspace aspects.

I've always loved pranks. In my high school yearbook, under Hobbies, I put "Eating new recipes and playing practical jokes"—not realizing that I had unintentionally described the best way for somebody to play a nasty trick on me.

When I started publishing *The Realist* in 1958, I printed a rumor that IBM, whose employees sometimes seemed as standardized as the machines they sold, required all personnel to have their teeth capped by a company dentist. IBM's Medical Director wrote in response: "We do not maintain dental services nor do we provide remedial dental care." Of all the hoaxes since then, my most infamous one was "The Parts Left Out of the Kennedy Book" in 1967.

Of course, I have had pranks pulled on me in return, from an announcement of my demise in the short-lived *Cheetah* magazine—they rationalized that I had published a fake obituary of Lenny Bruce two years before his death (in order to call attention to his plight while he was alive)—to an interview that I had supposedly done with Bob Dylan, which was actually made up by Marvin Garson and published in the *San Francisco Express-Times*. It was circulated throughout the underground press and critiqued in *Rolling Stone*.

When I stopped publishing in 1974, many readers thought that was a hoax. Others didn't realize publication had been suspended until it was resumed in 1985. The *Los Angeles Times* published a series on plagiarism by their media critic, David Shaw, and I reprinted an excerpt from it, using Pete Hamill's byline. *The Realist* was back in business.

Then along came the World Wide Web. A prank could now be communicated with greater speed and reach more people than ever before. For example, the following "Virus Alert" has been spread with altruistic intent and Malthusian multiplicity:

"Warning—If anyone receives mail entitled Pen Pal Greetings, please delete it without reading it. This is a warning for all Internet users. There is a dangerous virus propagating across the Internet through an e-mail message entitled Pen Pal Greetings. Do not download any message entitled Pen Pal Greetings.

"This message appears to be a friendly letter asking if you are interested in a pen pal, but by the time you read this letter, it is too late. The Trojan horse virus will have already infected the boot sector of

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The Morning After "Mother Night"

by Robert B. Weide

I'm not nearly as well read as I'd like to be, but I blame Kurt Vonnegut. I read *Breakfast of Champions* in high school, a little more than 20 years ago, and that was it. I had found my author, and I didn't want to know about any others. I gobbled up everything Vonnegut wrote and every word written about him. After I worked my way through his entire library in record time, I started all over again, this time reading all the novels and short stories chronologically. Often, a well-meaning acquaintance would suggest that if I dug Vonnegut so much, I should try Douglas Adams or Tom Robbins or John Irving. I would make occasional sojourns into such foreign territory, but I always returned home to my guy.

In the summer of 1996, I was sitting in the back of a limousine with Vonnegut and Nick Nolte, parked in front of the Place Des Arts in Montreal. We had just been ushered through a throng of enthusiastic filmgoers at the world premiere of the movie *Mother Night*, starring

Nolte and based on the 1961 novel by Vonnegut. Fans were cupping their hands around their eyes, trying to look in through the tinted limo windows. Vonnegut's door was slightly ajar, enough for one woman to peer in and enthuse to the famous novelist, "Thank you for all the books."

"You're welcome," the septuagenarian author replied, casually puffing on one of his ever-present Pall Malls (filterless).

What's wrong with this picture? What was I doing inside the car? Why wasn't I out there with my people? Well, it helped that I had written and pro-



Laurel and Hardy wearing Kurt Vonnegut and Robert Weide masks

duced *Mother Night*.

I produced my first film in 1982, a PBS documentary on the Marx Brothers. After its initial broadcast, I wrote a letter to Vonnegut proposing that I set to work on a documentary about him. He wrote back saying that he had seen my Marx piece and enjoyed it and that he'd be happy to talk with me. I met up with him in New York soon after, and we managed to hit it off. It was another five years before I actually managed to start filming my documentary—a project that continues to this day.

However, back in 1989, I asked him out of the blue about the availability of film rights to *Mother Night*. Within weeks, the rights belonged to me, all based on a handshake and no exchange of money. "You're family," was Vonnegut's reasoning.

It took me three months to write the spec script, after which my friend Keith Gordon and I spent the next five years hunting down the necessary financing. The stock speech we heard from everyone in town was, "I've been in this business for 30 years, and this is one of the best scripts I've ever read. I was riveted. I laughed, I cried and I

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COURT JESTER

The Lotus Position

This issue is dedicated to Lotus Weinstock, who died of a brain tumor at 54. I first met her in 1972. She was a stand-up comedian using the name Maurey Haydn. She had been engaged to Lenny Bruce in 1966. When he told her, "I feel I'm gonna die this year," she said, "Well, if I get you some raisin cookies, will you wait a year?"

Lotus always knew how to use humor under pressure.

A Small Circle of Friends

Speaking of dedications, my second comedy album for Mercury Records, *Brain Damage Control*, is dedicated to Phil Ochs, the late folk singer. A three-CD set of all his work, *Farewells and Fantasies*, has just been released by Rhino Records. None of the songs became a hit, but *A Small Circle of Friends* was on its way, reaching the Top 5 in Seattle. It was about to spread nationally when the FCC banned it from air play because of one line, "Smoking marijuana is more fun than drinking beer." This was the lyrical context of that line:

Smoking marijuana is more fun than drinking beer / But a friend of ours was captured and they gave him 30 years / Maybe we should raise our voices, ask somebody why / But demonstrations are a drag, besides we're much too high / And I'm sure it wouldn't interest anybody, outside a small circle of friends. . . .

There was never a justification for banning Phil's song for any reason. It broke his heart. Moreover, the line which offended the FCC was not an endorsement of marijuana. Rather, it poked fun at those who didn't get involved because they were too stoned.

Banning that song was an irony that Alanis Morissette never dreamed of.

Perceptions of the People's Princess

Everybody perceived the death of Diana Spencer through their own subjective filters. For example, those folks in Minneapolis who, since 1968, have been holding a weekly vigil at the Honeywell plant—protesting the manufacture of land mines and cluster bombs, handing out leaflets to workers, several of whom have quit as a matter of conscience—those demonstrators were extremely grateful that Princess Diana had helped increase global attention to the continuing tragedy of land mines.

On the other hand, Weight Watchers International had to halt a new ad campaign, in which the Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson, sits cross-legged, smiling at the camera and talking about the difficulty of losing weight. "It's harder than outrunning the paparazzi," she says. Tens of thousands of brochures were already mailed to homes, and issues of *Glamour* and *Self* with the ad had already gone to press. The TV commercial was pulled from the networks, even though it didn't contain the *paparazzi* line.

But were the *paparazzi* really responsible? On the night of that fatal car crash, Brian Williams, news anchor at MSNBC (Microsoft and NBC's cable channel), spoke on the air with a caller pretending to be *Newsweek's* correspondent in Paris who said that Diana had told the driver to hurry because she had to get to a video store before it closed so she could rent Howard Stern's movie *Private Parts*. To this anonymous fan of Howard Stern, Diana's death provided an opportunity to perpetrate a hoax. Symbiotically, to Brian Williams, who didn't question the impossibility of anyone knowing such misinformation, her death provided an opportunity to perpetuate that hoax in order to acquire ten full minutes of False Scoop Syndrome.

Paparazzi or *Private Parts*, it doesn't make any difference, the fact is that Diana's final act on this planet was permitting a drunk man to drive at such incredible speed that the lives of others were endangered. Of course, there are theories of a more conspiratorial nature traveling along the Internet, all about staged accidents, courtesy of the Hanover/Windsor power structure, the Pope, the Du Ponts, the IRA, the CIA, the Jew-royalty alliance, Islamic terrorists, the

Freemasons. Moammar Kadafi went on Libyan TV, claiming that British and French officials had conspired to kill Diana and Dodi "because they were annoyed that an Arab man might marry a British princess." Bulimia would be replaced by Ramadan.

Christopher Hitchens wrote a column which the *Los Angeles Times* headlined "Diana: Was She Mother Teresa or Marge Simpson?"—an ironic choice of icons since Hitchens had written a book, *The Missionary Position*, severely critical of Mother Teresa. As I write this, the news of her death has come on the radio, a contrived plot point in God's eternal screenplay. It makes you wonder. Did Mother Teresa, like the queen, resent all the attention that Diana was getting? Did she scream her jealousy to the sky: "Hey, what's going on here? I'm the one who's supposed to be a saint! But nooooo. I'm just a humble junkie. Quick, I need a fix. Find me a victim!" It's the day before Diana's funeral, and the airwaves are bursting with comparisons and contrasts of Mother Teresa and Princess Diana. No matter what else Mother Teresa may have done in her life, one thing remains inarguable. She always had a good sense of timing.

I find myself meditating on a statement Diana made about her in-laws during a phone call which was taped by a friend and quoted in the *Times*: "I've done enough for that _____ family." I assume she said "that fucking family," but it could've been "that goddamned family" or maybe even "that shitty family." But exactly what was it—fundamentally—that she did for them? She received the semen of



Mike Tyson Meets Vincent van Gogh

Prince Charles. It was indeed a royal screw, for he would later go on TV and say with inconceivable insensitivity that he had never really loved her. Charlie always looked like Alfred E. Neuman, but who knew that he had also adopted the philosophy of *Mad* magazine's mascot: "What—me worry?"

The legacy of Princess Diana is that her death inadvertently revealed the utter absurdity of successional monarchy. She was a cultural mutation, carrying the fetus of a future king in her belly, but going on to nurture the child with genuine warmth and a humane value system. If England *must* have a king, it might as well be a compassionate one. And he has his mother's smile, too. But, when Diana attempted to commit suicide, her responsibility to her children was overshadowed by her need to end the pain caused by her husband. It could've been anybody's family.

So there's a moral to this docudrama, after all, and the moral is: You don't have to be a prince to be a majestic asshole.

Positive Role Models

You just never know who will wind up serving as a positive role model these days. When Mike Tyson bit Evander Holyfield's ear twice during that heavyweight championship boxing match, he explained that he did it because he had to raise his children. At last, somebody speaking out for family values.

Also, recent documents reveal that the CIA offered the Mafia \$150,000 to assassinate Fidel Castro, but they said they'd be glad to do it free (except for \$11,000 expenses). This was an inspiring example of the volunteerism that President Clinton has been espousing.

After the Mafia failed in several attempts to kill off Castro, it was an act of pragmatic management style that the same team would be used to assassinate would-be Castro-executioner John F. Kennedy. This was also a gratis hit for the CIA. And, as Malcolm X said, a case of "the chickens coming home to roost."

The Divorce Theme Park

Janet Bode is working on a book, *The Accordion Family: A Guide to Surviving Divorce for Preteens and Their Families*.

Her contract contains a standard clause giving the publisher 50% of "Theme park rights," defined as "the exclusive right to use all or any portion of the Work in and in connection with amusement/tour/theme parks. Such rights shall include, without limitation, the right to (i) create, present, stage and/or perform any attraction, presentation, show and/or ride based upon and/or derived from the Work; (ii) use 'walk-around' performances by actors recreating characters in the Work; (iii) use the Work in and/or in connection with any such attraction, presentation, show and/or ride, and (iv) use any of the foregoing to advertise, exploit and/or promote any such amusement/tour/theme park."

Bode, however, insisted on maintaining 100% of Theme park rights. "Eureka!" she declared. "Divorce as entertainment. A natural. Why didn't I think of that, and now that I have (and have the rights). . . ." She has graciously granted *The Realist* permission to publish her plans for a divorce theme park as the centerfold of this issue. Additional ideas were contributed by artist Kalynn Campbell, Lynn Phillips and Stella Resnick, author of *The Pleasure Zone*.

The Realist Countdown

There are now nine more issues to come—three per year for the next three years—before *The Realist* ceases publication. A subscription to those final issues is \$18. If you wish to subscribe for a friend, send \$20 and we'll start with this issue. As for books, a collection of Paul Krassner's satire, *The Winner of the Slow Bicycle Race*, with a (real) foreword by Kurt Vonnegut, is published in paperback by Seven Stories Press. His autobiography, *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture*, published by Simon & Schuster, is out of print, but we have a limited supply (\$25). Also available: *The (Almost) Unpublished Lenny Bruce*, the controversial performer's articles, columns, stories, bits and pieces (\$10).

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CYBERHOAX

(Continued from Cover)

your hard drive, destroying all of the data present. It is a self-replicating virus, and once the message is read, it will automatically forward itself to anyone whose e-mail address is present in your mailbox.

"This virus will destroy your hard drive, and holds the potential to destroy the hard drive of anyone whose mail is in your In box, and whose mail is in their In box and so on. If this virus keeps getting passed, it has the potential to do a great deal of damage to computer networks worldwide. . . ."

However, the Virus Alert was itself a hoax. As Hacker explains, "E-mail can't contain a virus. E-mail is pure data. A virus has to be an executable code. No e-mail can contain a virus except for e-mail with executable attachments. This includes Microsoft Word, which has a macro language that can execute immediately when you open a document. So it's possible to do great harm by opening an attachment to your e-mail, but not by reading it."

In June, a subscriber sent me several clippings, including this column by Mary Schmich in the *Chicago Tribune*:

Inside every adult lurks a graduation speaker dying to get out, some world-weary pundit eager to pontificate on life to young people who'd rather be rollerblading. Most of us, alas, will never be invited to sow our words of wisdom among an audience of caps and gowns, but there's no reason we can't entertain ourselves by composing a Guide to Life for Graduates. I encourage anyone over 26 to try this and thank you for indulging my attempt.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Class of '97:

Wear sunscreen.

If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be it. The long-term benefits of sunscreen have been proved by scientists, whereas the rest of my advice has no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience. I will dispense this advice now.

Enjoy the power and beauty of your youth. Oh, never mind. You will not understand the power and beauty of your youth until they've faded. But trust me, in 20 years, you'll look back at photos of yourself and recall in a way you can't grasp now how much possibility lay before you and how fabulous you really looked. You are not as fat as you imagine.

Don't worry about the future. Or worry, but know that worrying is as effective as trying to solve an algebra equation by chewing bubble gum. The real troubles in your life are apt to be things that never crossed your worried mind, the kind that blindsides you at 4 p.m. on some idle Tuesday.

Do one thing every day that scares you.

Sing.

Don't be reckless with other people's hearts. Don't put up with people who are reckless with yours.

Floss.

Don't waste time on jealousy. Sometimes you're ahead, sometimes you're behind. The race is long and, in the end, it's only with yourself.

Remember compliments you receive. Forget the insults. If you succeed in doing this, tell me how.

Keep your old love letters. Throw away your old bank statements. Stretch.

Don't feel guilty if you don't know what you want to do with your life. The most interesting people I know didn't know at 22 what they wanted to do with their lives. Some of the most interesting 40-year-olds I know still don't.

Get plenty of calcium. Be kind to your knees. You'll miss them when they're gone.

Maybe you'll marry, maybe you won't. Maybe you'll have children, maybe you won't. Maybe you'll divorce at 40, maybe you'll dance the funky chicken on your 75th wedding anniversary. Whatever you do, don't congratulate yourself too much, or berate yourself either. Your choices are half chance. So are everybody else's.

Enjoy your body. Use it every way you can. Don't be afraid of it or of what other people think of it. It's the greatest instrument you'll ever own.

No Littering, Please

by Frank Miles

HOUSTON, 1986—I'm enjoying a warm summer night, hanging casually by the fingers of one hand from the railing outside a 20th floor apartment. It's freaking out some of the people inside, which gives me a kick.

The glass door slides open. Bill Hicks strolls barefooted onto his balcony, dressed in a black T-shirt and faded black Levi's. He walks over and leans cross-armed against the railing.

"You know, Frank," he says, "we have kind of a tenuous deal here with the building management." He takes a puff off his Salem Light. "And if you fall, technically, it would be littering. We could lose our lease."

Shit, you can't argue with that logic. I came in and joined the party.

The Bill Hicks I knew and admired back then was a kick-ass stand-up comic and a genuine rebel. Genuine. Not the kind that has to wear the same hair and sunglasses all the other rebels are wearing this season. Not the kind that sees rebellion as a handy hook on the way to a lucrative career making bubble gum movies. Most of what Bill did on stage went unrecorded, except in the memories of those of us who had no way of knowing how precious those moments would become. Here are a few of those memories that I keep in dusty corners of my mind and still take out once in a while to laugh at again. . . .

"If the anti-Christ is among us today, who

do you think he is?"

Someone calls out Ronald Reagan.

"Wrong!" Bill shouts. "Too obvious. A much better choice—Dick Clark! Why do you think the fucker never ages?"

The audience laughs weakly, and seems to miss the real beauty of the selection. Who better represents the commercialization and dilution of rock and roll—the very religion of rebellion? Clark is a money changer in the Temple.

"Picture the heated sexual union," Bill continues, "between the Prince of Darkness and the King of Bandstand. The scaly dick of Evil penetrates the puckered rosebud of Dick Clark's hungry anus. He retreats into the steaming sewers to gestate Satan's brood, and nine months later emerges to spew forth the Hell-spawned mediocrities."

Bill struts the stage in front of a stunned and slightly horrified audience. He becomes Dick Clark giving birth from his asshole. He squats, makes wet shitting sounds, then examines the results and names them.

"Fffffffftg." Bill looks back at the imaginary pile of excrement. "Vanilla Ice," he proclaims. He takes two steps, squats. "Fffffffftg." Looks back again, then says, "Madonna." Another step. Squat. "Fffffffftg. Allan Thicke!"

If anyone walked out on that particular performance (a pretty common event at a Bill Hicks set), they must have stepped over a dozen comics lying on the floor, helpless with laughter.

Sam Kinison had just left for Hollywood, fame, and fortune when I arrived at that strange nexus of energy called the Comedy Workshop. That pissant little comedy club, about the size of a handicap bathroom stall, would in a few short years produce not only Sam, but Bill Hicks, Brett Butler, Jeannine Garofalo, Ron Shock, Fred Greenlee, and half a dozen other brilliant performers.

Bill was the undisputed King of the Workshop during my stay. Everyone knew he was the best thing in town. What we didn't know then was that he was about the best in any town. That was a blessing, really. I and the other young comics there didn't know how high we were aiming when we tried to hit his mark.

Bill had achieved a dark honesty about himself equaled—in my mind—only by Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and George Carlin.

After a rough break-up that haunted him for years, Bill produced a sweet little routine.

"So, ever since my girlfriend tore my heart out, left me all alone, I've had this fantasy. Let me share it with you.

"Years from now she's married to an interstate trucker, and her two little water-headed trucker babies—born of his weak, caffeine-riddled sperm—are playing there in the mud, in the gutter outside their trailer home.

"Her fat, illiterate husband comes back from the road, jumps right on top of her—300 pounds of fish-belly white cellulite crushing down so hard she can barely breathe. He

Dance, even if you have nowhere to do it but your living room.

Read the directions, even if you don't follow them.

Do not read beauty magazines. They will only make you feel ugly.

Get to know your parents. You never know when they'll be gone for good. Be nice to your siblings. They're your best link to your past and the people most likely to stick with you in the future.

Understand that friends come and go, but with a precious few you should hold on. Work hard to bridge the gaps in geography and lifestyle, because the older you get, the more you need the people who knew you when you were young.

Live in New York City once, but leave before it makes you hard. Live in Northern California once, but leave before it makes you soft.

Travel.

Accept certain inalienable truths: Prices will rise. Politicians will philander. You, too, will get old. And when you do, you'll fantasize that when you were young, prices were reasonable, politicians were noble, and children respected their elders.

Respect your elders.

Don't expect anyone else to support you. Maybe you have a trust fund. Maybe you'll have a wealthy spouse. But you never know when either one might run out.

Don't mess too much with your hair or by the time you're 40 it will look 85. Be careful whose advice you buy, but be patient with those who supply it. Advice is a form of nostalgia. Dispensing it is a way of fishing the past from the disposal, wiping it off, painting over the ugly parts and recycling it for more than it's worth.

But trust me on the sunscreen.

At a recent memorial for Allen Ginsberg in Los Angeles, Bob Weide read a statement from Kurt Vonnegut which began, "Please, stop dying." Somehow, "Wear sunscreen" reminded me of that. When I chatted with Vonnegut in New York a few years ago, I got the

impression that he was saddened that young people might not be familiar with his work. The perverse motivation of my prank was to help remedy that situation.

Replacing Mary Schmich's byline and opening paragraph with "This speech was given by Kurt Vonnegut at MIT's commencement this year," Hacker proceeded to transmit the text of her column over the Internet in such a way that it could not be traced to him.

The non-commencement speech traveled fast and furiously. It was even posted to the Vonnegut Newsgroup. Many of his fans thought it was valid, including Vonnegut's wife, photographer Jill Krementz, who e-mailed it to several friends (her husband was out of town at the time). *Mademoiselle* magazine asked Vonnegut for permission to reprint his speech. Peter Lasally, who used to be a producer for Johnny Carson, tried to book Vonnegut on the Tom Snyder show.

Actually, the commencement speaker at MIT—five days after Mary Schmich's column had been published—was Kofi Annan, secretary general of the UN, who didn't mention sunscreen or flossing. Schmich, who had written the piece "while high on coffee and M&Ms," called Vonnegut to let him know that *she* wasn't behind the hoax. He said that it revealed the gullibility of people on the Internet.

Schmich traced one e-mail backward from its last recipient, a professor at Malcolm X College in Chicago. He had received it from a relative in New York, who received it from a film producer in New York, who received it from a TV producer in Denver, who received it from his sister, who received it from. . . . At this point, Schmich gave up her quest for the culprit.

I apologize to Vonnegut and Schmich, but I'm happy to say that the revelation that the commencement speech was a hoax reached more people than the hoax did, not only on the Internet, but also in print and electronic media. The truth had triumphed in a truly free marketplace of ideas.

can't get it up because of all the speed he takes to stay awake on long hauls, so he grabs a handy broomstick and starts romancing her with it. That gets him so excited, his bacon-encrusted heart literally explodes.

"She finds herself trapped beneath his dying bulk as black blood and bile spill from his foul maw and down her throat, choking off any hope she might have of gasping one last sweet breath of air.

"And as she lies there dying, slipping into unconsciousness, she turns her head towards her 10-inch black and white TV . . . and I'm there coming on the *Tonight* show.

"But I'm not bitter."

Cities are known to produce schools of music, but they also produce schools of comedy. The school of Houston comedy was protest. Kinison protested the hypocrisy of pious, self-righteous do-gooders at the top of his blown amp lungs. Brett Butler, with her no-bullshit attitude and polysyllabic vocabulary, protested the stereotype of the weak and ignorant Southern woman. Garofalo takes her shots at Lookism and the shallowness of '90s pop culture. Of them all, Hicks was the most acid, railing in rhythmic prose poems against moral insanity, anti-intellectualism and narrow little minds that were frightened by the infinite possibilities that he saw in life.

Bill was sure that fear fueled the rabid anti-drug fervor that erupted in the '80s.

"Why do you only hear bad news about LSD? It's always the same story about some idiot, thought he could fly so he jumped out a 50-story window.

"That guy was fucked up long before he ever did drugs. Even if he did think he could fly, why didn't he try taking off from the ground? Hey, asshole, you don't see ducks riding elevators. We're better off without him.

"Why don't we ever hear this news story? Today a young man took LSD and realized that ego is an illusion and that we are all part of the universe experiencing itself subjectively; that death is just another journey, and love is the only reality. And now here's sports."

I used to love reading the papers, and the feeling of gleeful anticipation I'd get wondering what fantastic routine Bill would build around the latest government bullshit storm, or the fall of another twisted televangelist. And now he's long gone, and I still miss the man, miss the opportunity to sing back-up laughter to his angry songs. I'm tired of the pop tunes of talk-show comics. And I get little joy from the "what happened to me today" ballads of the alternative scene. Hicks seemed to understand that actuality often contains less truth than a brilliant lie. The world of comedy is poorer today for the loss of his incredible imagination and technical virtuosity.

As a person, Bill Hicks seemed to me a tortured soul—tortured first by himself, then by a world that for the most part rejected him and embraced the kind of middling, unthreatening pseudo-artists he despised. As a poet of outrage, though, Bill Hicks showed what enormous issues his art was capable of attack-

ing, and he inspired many after him to climb to dangerous heights.

Even though his lease is up now, I'm still trying not to fall and litter the stage with myself.

Bill Hicks died in 1994 of pancreatic cancer. He was 32. His four CDs—*Dangerous, Relentless, Arizona Bay* and *Rant in E Minor*—were recently released by Rykodisc.

Lie of the Newt

by Lou Minotti

The idea of a digitally-enhanced politician is a popular theme in the cyberpunk genre of future-fiction, sprouted from Orwellian visions of Big Brother. Today's politicians should be happy to know that image-enhancing tweak techniques are currently available to alter their perceived vision in the public eye. I witnessed an example of such electronic enhancement of an elected official when Newt Gingrich appeared in the Third Wave theater of America Online.

The pretense of responsible journalism was a thin veneer over a P.R. framework in this virtual event. The online "auditorium" session was hosted by an avatar entitled *NewtWoman*—who may have been more aptly called *NewtWoman* as her purpose was to filter out any difficult questions and comments from the audience. Questions that didn't reek of sweetness n' light—sycophancy and overt ass-kissing failed to be submitted to Newt.

I repeatedly submitted the question, "How do your plans to alter the Constitution jibe with your professed agenda of smaller government?" The question was ignored in favor of continued praise and pap. I persisted, phrasing the question variously: "How do you plan to create smaller government with greater bureaucracy?" "Why do we need a so-called Religious Freedom Amendment when the Constitution is already designed to uphold freedom of religion?" "Why alter the Constitution when there is no pressing need to do so?"

My repetitive strategy caught the Speaker's attention. He typed, in praise of his deft political strategy, "My strategy is to repeat, repeat, repeat the message until it finally sinks in." He had noticed my question, and he acknowledged my strategy and claimed it as his own.

Perhaps he would address my question? Well, not officially. As *NewtWoman* began to sign off and close the interview, Gingrich proceeded to ramble on in overtime. He explained that in order to create smaller government, Congress first needed to "make more laws that made making laws that made it easier to make fewer laws easier."

You'd still be able to find that bit of pretzel logic on America Online at keyword AOL-LIVE in Newt's own muddled rhetoric—but it's been edited out of the final, electronically-published transcript.



Great Moments in Counter-Cultural History

This photo was taken in 1962. Lenny Bruce had just signed a contract with *Playboy* to serialize his autobiography, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, and then publish it as a book. Clockwise behind Bruce are guitarist Eric Miller, editor Paul Krassner and agent Jack Sobel.

A Bill Hicks Sampler

• "My honest-to-God belief about drugs? God let certain drugs grow naturally on this planet to help speed up our evolution. Do you think psilocybin mushrooms growing on top of cowshit was an accident? Where do you think the phrase 'that's good shit' comes from?"

• "I have this fear that I'll go to the video store for some porno videos, and when I get up to the counter, this banner will drop and horns and sirens will go off—*Congratulations! You've just rented your one millionth porno video!* I love pornography. That is one of my big fears in life, that I'm gonna die and my parents are gonna have to clean out my apartment and find that porno wing I've been adding onto for years. There'll be two funerals that day."

• "To me, pornography is spending all your money and not educating the people of America and spending it instead on weapons. That's pornography to me. That's totally filthy. The government's definition of pornography is: no artistic merit, causes sexual thoughts. Well, that sounds like every commercial on TV to me. You know, when I see those two twins on that Doublemint commercial—I'm almost embarrassed to tell y'all this—I'm not thinking of gum. 'Hey, honey, where's the Wrigleys? I feel like chewing on something.'"

• "What's cool is that every pack of cigarettes has a different Surgeon General's warning, isn't that great? Mine says 'Warning: Smoking May Cause Foetal Injury or Premature Birth.' Found my brand. Just don't get the ones that say 'Lung Cancer.' Shop around. 'Gimme a carton of Low Birth Weights.'"

• "A Waffle House waitress asked me why I was reading. I guess I read for a lot of reasons, and the main one is so I don't end up being a waffle waitress. It's not like I walked into a Klan rally in a Boy George outfit. It's a book."

• "During the Rodney King trial, I was waiting for one of those anchormen to just come on and say those cops were just racist pigs. They'd have the cops on saying that the video is all in the way you look at it. Sure. If you ran it backwards, it'd look like they were just helping him back into his car."

• "You can actually go to the sixth floor of the Schoolbook Depository in Dallas. It's a museum called the Assassination Museum. They have the window set up to look like it did on that day. And it's really accurate, you know? Because Oswald's not in it."

• "Last week was Kennedy week and Dan Rather was doing this special, once again supporting the lone gunman theory. He was questioning why nine out of ten Americans think there was a conspiracy. Well, since the Kennedy assassination, all we've seen is corruption in government. From Vietnam to Iran/contra to Watergate to the phony oil crisis, they have no credibility—they are obviously liars. Why are we supposed to believe them?"

• "If the FBI's motivating factor for busting down the Koresh compound was child abuse, how come we never see Bradley tanks smashing into Catholic churches?"

• "Instead of bombing the Iraqis, we should have embarrassed them. We should have assassinated George Bush. There never was a Persian Gulf war, okay? A war is when two armies are fighting. Couldn't we use Patriot missile technology to shoot food at hungry people? Fly over Ethiopia. There's a guy who needs a banana. Zap him one."

• "In England, where handguns are outlawed, there were 14 deaths from that weapon last year, while there were 27,000 such killings in the U.S. But you'd be a fool and a Communist to see a connection between owning a gun and using it. Of course, there were 27,000 deaths per soccer game in England. No system is flawless."

• "Jimi Hendrix died in a pool of his own vomit. Do you know how much you have to puke to fill a pool? Why is it that people like John Lennon have to die, and groups like Wham continue to make records? Do you know that if you play New Kids On the Block backward—they sound better?"

• "Ever noticed how creationists look really unevolved? Their eyes real close together. Eyebrow ridges. Big, furry hands and feet. 'I believe God created me in one day.' Looks like he rushed it."

• At a taping of his 12th appearance on the David Letterman show in October 1993: "You know who's really bugging me these days? Those pro-lifers. You ever look at their faces? 'I'm pro-life!' [*Making a pinched face of hatred and fear, lips heavily pursed*] 'I'm pro-life!' Boy, they look it, don't they? They just exude *joie de vivre*. You just want to hang with them and play Trivial Pursuit all night long. You know what bugs me about them? If you're so pro-life, do me a favor—don't lock arms and block medical clinics. If you're so pro-life, lock arms and block cemeteries. I want to see pro-lifers at funerals opening caskets—'Get out!' Then I'd really be impressed by their mission. I've been traveling a lot lately. I was over in Australia during Easter. It was interesting to note they celebrate Easter the same way we do—commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus by telling our children a giant bunny rabbit—left chocolate eggs in the night. Gee, I wonder why we're so messed up as a race. You know, I've read the Bible. Can't find the words *bunny* or *chocolate* in the whole book. I think it's interesting how people act on their beliefs. A lot of Christians, for instance, wear crosses around their necks. Nice sentiment, but do you think when Jesus comes back, he's really going to want to look at a cross? [*Making a face of pain and horror*] Ow! *Maybe that's why he hasn't shown up yet. [As though he is Jesus looking down from Heaven]* I'm not going, Dad. No, they're still wearing crosses—they totally missed the point. When they start wearing fishes, I might go back again. No, I'm not going. Okay, I'll tell you what—I'll go back as a bunny."

[When the program went on the air that night, Hicks couldn't help but notice that his entire performance had been excised.]

• To Bob Morton, producer of the Letterman show, who told him, "You killed out there," but that the CBS office of Standards and Practices felt that some of his material was unsuitable for broadcast, adding, "Bill, it's not our decision" and "You've got to understand our audience": "Your audience! Your audience is comprised of people, right? Well, I understand people, being one myself. People are who I play to every night, Bob. We get along just fine. We taped the show at 5:30 in the afternoon, and your audience had no problem with the material then. Does your audience become overly sensitive between the hours of 11:30 p.m. and 12:30 a.m.? And by the way, Bob, when I'm not performing on your show, I'm a member of the audience of your show. Are you saying my material is not suitable for me? This doesn't make any sense. Why do you underestimate the intelligence of your audience?"

[CBS Standards and Practice wrote to a complaining viewer: "What is inaccurate is that the deletion of Hicks' routine was required by CBS. In fact, although a CBS Program Practices editor works on that show, the decision was solely that of the producers of the program who decided to substitute his performance with that of another comedian. Therefore, your criticism that CBS censored the program is totally without foundation. Creative judgments must be made in the course of producing and airing any program and, while we regret that you disagreed with this one, the producers felt it necessary and that is not a decision we would override."]

• In a January 1994 interview with *Campus Activities Today*: "I am eternally hopeful. The America that I know is one where people are generally reasonable. I meet a lot of people, and everyone is genuinely perplexed by the state of affairs, but they just can't believe that TV will produce so many lies on the news. They just want you to feel hopeless so that you will buy their crappy products. If it weren't true, why would I be censored from Letterman? We live in the USA, United States of Advertising, and there is freedom of speech to the highest bidder. The next week there was a pro-life commercial during the Letterman show."

• In a letter to *New Yorker* theater critic John Lahr [*quoting Noam Chomsky*]: "The responsibility of the intellectual is to tell the truth and expose lies." While I do not consider myself an intellectual by any stretch of the imagination, his quote, coincidentally, is the same way my parents taught me to live. So in honor of them, I'll continue what I'm doing, the best way I can. Then I'll see you all in Heaven, where we can really share a great laugh together."

Fetal Aggression

by Lynn Phillips

A source of mine, whose identity I have pledged to conceal, found the following in a government office wastebasket. It was marked "Code Black: Top Secret."

ATTN: Supervisor, Fetal Nation, Galaxy 9
FROM: Agent Doe, Earth Station "Love Boat"

IN RE: Colonization of Earth—Progress Report

DATE: 7,988th Trimester E.C.T.

STATUS: URGENT

The takeover of the Planet Earth, scheduled for the 8,000th Trimester, Earth Calendar Time, proceeds on schedule. As you will recall, our historic mission, to invade and inhabit the human race, began with your double-pronged strategy: "First, exaggerate the physical resemblance between members of Fetal Nation (Gal. 9) and the pre-human Earthling or fetus. Once the resemblance is established in their culture, encourage them to grant supremacy to both organisms. Thus will we acclimatize them to the concept of Alien Fetal rule."

I am happy to say that we are close to complete success. Our large, opaque eyes, lack of nasal protuberances, our large skull-to-body ratio and our hairless, pale skin make citizens of Fetal Nation close doubles of the human's gestating young. By tucking our hooks and suckers into our Achillean slits, our agents pass for "beings of higher intelligence," worshipped like gods. A temple in Roswell, NM now glorifies our species; our images win admirers on the Internet; our operatives star in hit movies; and we have even inspired a cult in California to commit suicide in hopes of joining us.

Simultaneously, we have raised the status of the human fetus measurably. Although in theory women here retain the right to dispose of their first trimester fetuses as if they were hangnails, we have erected elaborate obstacles to prevent them from doing so freely. If we continue to block the availability of trained doctors, abortion drugs and sex education, we will soon win back the fetus's de facto "right to life" and subsequently its right to vote,

inherit property and run up gigantic credit card bills it can't pay off.

By burdening their economy with millions of unwanted offspring, we'll bring their civilization to its knees without firing a shot. Wall Street will eventually panic; the job market will fold, and it will then be easy to lure American females from the harsh futility of the bread-line into the padded comfort of our gestation modules where they will welcome us into their wombs as saviors. Bereft of jobs and mates, the majority of men will compulsively slay each other, saving us the trouble.

Even without an economic collapse, global economic conditions on Earth favor our ascendancy. Multinational corporate domination, which erodes human community and



connection, has filled humans with desperate yearning for the pleasures of intimacy—yearnings that the employed are too busy working and shopping to satisfy. Our original plan for 1998 was to present ourselves as the solution to spiritual famine by broadly circulating the communique designed by our late leader Gar. To refresh your memory, it is included here:

To the Human Race

Increasingly it is dawning on even the slowest-witted of you that Fetal life is the only life worth living, or, as encoded in the name of our First Uberlord, LABINWAF:

Life After Birth Is Not Worth A Fucking Thing.

To float around in an amniotic sac, twitching freely, to know without asking, to love without object or end, free of striving, envy or fear; to eat without chopsticks, never to feel the urgent need to defecate when the only facility for miles around is a filthy gas-station restroom, to experience the miracle of creation undisturbed and undistracted, this is the Life that you, the human Born, waste so much of your useless time and energy seeking. Now, through us, this Higher Purpose can be yours.

Serve us and know freedom from sin and responsibility! To err is human, but we are not human. We never err or insult minorities by accident, thinking they'll know we're only kidding. Submit, you who are human and ashamed. Submit to us who are inhuman (enfemme) and proud of it. Unlike your parents, lovers and leaders, a fetus will never lie to you. We don't whine about your inability to commit or how long it takes you to pick a restaurant.

We don't fight wars, charge exorbitant fees for a root canal or waste time debating about which stupid drape goes best with the ugly, shoddily-made couch that will take you three years to pay off and the cat one night to destroy. Why work for some idiot who doesn't appreciate your ideas or pay you enough to buy an Alfa Romeo when you can know complete fulfillment through us? Experience bliss and transcendence without chanting. Eat all you want while you watch TV, knowing that someone inside you loves and respects you just as you are. Submit today!

* * *

Given the right conditions and this powerful promotional message, Earth will soon be ours, but, alas, our sub-agents here grow impatient and urge me to take the world by force. As such an effort will only unite humanity and excite their most bellicose resistance, I remain committed to our original plan of peaceful division and seduction. To forestall mutiny, I am eagerly awaiting your instructions.

In Utero Uber Alles!

Fetus Doe

MOTHER NIGHT

(Continued from Cover)

couldn't stop thinking about it for days. It's extremely powerful." (Long, thoughtful pause, then): "It's a shame we could never make it here."

Mother Night chronicles the life of (fictional) ex-patriate Howard W. Campbell (played by Nolte), an American-born apolitical playwright who is living in Germany in the years preceding World War II. One day, he is pressed into service by an American operative who convinces him to do some spying for the Allies. His job is to cozy up to the Nazis and join the Propaganda Ministry, making pro-fascist, Jew-baiting, anti-American speeches over the radio. What the Nazis will never know is that Campbell will be broadcasting code throughout his speeches, relaying invaluable information to the Allies. The catch is that Campbell's role will never be made public, so if he sur-

vives the war, he will certainly be branded by his native countrymen as the worst kind of traitor.

After the war, Campbell slips back into the U.S. and lives an anonymous life in New York City until 1961, when word starts to leak out that the notorious Nazi turncoat Howard Campbell is still alive and well. There is no one to bail him out and the only people to offer sanctuary are a motley group of imbecilic neo-Nazis who consider him their guiding light.

The book (and hopefully the movie) captures Vonnegut's unique perspective, walking that fine line between the tragic and the absurdly comic. (One of the wacky neo-Nazis is an African-American—part Malcolm X, part Stepin Fetchit—known as the Black Fuehrer of Harlem.)

Vonnegut says *Mother Night* is the only book of his whose moral he knows, which is: "Be careful what you pretend to be, because in

the end, you are what you pretend to be." Eventually, Campbell turns himself in to Israeli authorities and the day before the commencement of his war crimes trial, he hangs himself in his prison cell, creating a makeshift noose from the typewriter ribbons with which he had been writing his memoirs.

Go figure why no one wanted to finance this movie.

Finally, the executives at Fine Line Features put their money where their mouths were and agreed to fund us. The two caveats were that we had to deliver a "bankable" star and we had to hold to our proposed budget of \$5.5 million (the catering bill on the average studio movie). We agreed. Once Nick Nolte signed on for 7% of his normal fee, we were in business. The cast was rounded out by John Goodman, Alan Arkin, Sheryl Lee and Kirsten Dunst. My pal and co-producer Keith Gordon directed. The script was pre-approved and Fine Line, to their credit, left us alone to make our movie in Montreal, with minimal creative interference. Ruth Vitale, the president of Fine Line, focused her concerns exclusively on the actress' hairstyles, and seemed unfettered by anything else. She even sent up one of the young female studio vice presidents, who bemoaned the fact that she had to fly to Montreal to go on "Hair Patrol."

After reading my final shooting script, Vonnegut sent me a fax, admitting that he wished he could take credit for some of the jokes I had added. He also told me that one critic responded to the novel by saying that anyone who found anything funny about the Holocaust was very sick. Although it would be a major stretch to classify *Mother Night* as a "Holocaust comedy," the film, like the book, does contain some dark humor. Vonnegut's message was clear: I should anticipate some of the same criticism for the film that he received for the book. (At one point in the film, Campbell, thought to be a genuine Nazi by the Americans and Israelis, is forced into hiding in the dingy basement of a neo-Nazi hangout. When Sheryl Lee's character grouses about those who would force them into such miserable living conditions, Campbell responds, "I don't know. In spite of everything, I still believe that people are basically good at heart." I figured maybe six people would ever get this twisted reference to Anne Frank's heart-breaking epitaph.)

Vonnegut remained extremely supportive throughout production. He even played a cameo in the film and after meeting Nolte declared, "Now I can't imagine any other actor playing Campbell." Regarding box-office prospects, Vonnegut was realistic, as were Keith and I. "Generally, if you produce a show that's about something," he said "no one will come."

But people *did* come, at first. *Mother Night* premiered in the same town in which it was filmed, at the Montreal World Film Festival. A capacity audience of more than 2,000 people packed the Place Des Arts. The opening scene of the film shows Nolte being escorted to his Israeli prison cell, accompanied by Bing Crosby's rendition of *White Christmas*. When I heard Vonnegut chuckle at the juxtaposition, I relaxed. It was a positive review from the only critic I really cared about.

The next morning, there was a glowing review in the *Montreal Gazette*. That same day, Keith and I were escorted to a screening at a local public theater, when we came upon a huge line of people literally winding around three blocks. I asked our escort what the crowd was gathered for. "This is the line for your film," she explained. I shot some photos of the crowd, knowing that lines around the block would be unlikely back in the U.S. for a film this dark and quirky.

Prior to the U.S. opening, we had a number of advance screenings at colleges, universities and film festivals. Keith and I would always hold Q&A sessions afterwards. I usually made it a point to tell our audiences of the importance of word-of-mouth in promoting an independent film. "But be careful," I warned them. "The next few months will see the release of *Twelfth Night*, *Big Night*, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, *Mother Night*, *Mother* and *Some Mother's Son*. So if you want to spread the word, please make certain you're recommending the right film."

Preview audiences were consistently supportive and enthusiastic. We started to think that our "controversial" film maybe wasn't so

controversial after all. Although we were prepared to defend our movie against those who wished to question its "message," few seemed inclined to do so. Being Jewish, I was curious to see how "my people" would respond to a film that presents an ostensibly sympathetic character who acted as a cheerleader for the Nazi genocide machine. Generally, audience members who identified themselves as Jewish seemed hip to the point of the film (which is essentially a very Jewish notion): You are what you do.

So where were the people Vonnegut warned me about who would miss the point of the film and accuse us of making a Fascist-friendly movie? As it turned out, many of them were members of PEN, the international writer's group. Fine Line had set up a special screening for PEN in New York City, only hours before the official U.S. premiere. This time, Vonnegut joined Keith and me for the usual post-screening Q&A.

The first audience member to speak up was an outraged veteran who went on about his own wartime experiences as a radio operator in Korea, before finally claiming that only two Jews died in service to the U.S. during the second World War, and why was *he* the only one who was aware of this fact? A murmur arose from a stunned audience. I responded as honestly as I could, saying, "Sir, you are full of crap." The guy stood up and suggested I try to beat it out of him. Others in the audience shouted him down. The evening was off to a roaring start. (Someone later suggested that the veteran's statement was meant to be facetious, implying that this was the obvious point of view of the film.)

One man stood up, said he was a Catholic and wanted to know why Campbell had to commit suicide. "What about the notion of forgiveness?" he asked. A black woman wanted to know why our film didn't address the contribution of Africans to the second World War and why the film didn't mention that Joseph Goebbels was born in Africa. (He wasn't, but why would she want that advertised if it were true?) She also told us she resented the use of the expression "black humor" (which had been banded about during the evening), declaring it a racist phrase. I responded, saying, "I'm not particularly offended by the phrase 'white lie,' but to each their own."

Another guy had memorized a page of Campbell's first-person narrative from the book, recited it out loud, and asked why it wasn't duplicated in the film. I told him that I wrote the script for people who hadn't memorized the book. The guy obviously thought he was defending Vonnegut's work. Kurt thought the guy was whacked.

Somebody asked Vonnegut what his credentials were for writing about such a subject. He explained that he was a veteran of the second World War, had been taken prisoner by the Germans, had directly witnessed the aftermath of the Holocaust, has many friends today who are survivors and felt he was quite qualified to write about this time in history. One old woman stood up, announced herself as a survivor of Auschwitz and asked how this film was supposed to help her. Another man suggested that the virulent anti-Semitic rhetoric spouted by Campbell in the film would likely serve to recruit neo-Nazis.

I was struck by the irony that PEN's charter is based on the preservation of artists' rights—protecting the written word, even when it expresses an unpopular viewpoint. The subtext of many of the comments that night were that we had no right to make this film. (What's the old joke about a liberal being someone who will lynch you from a lower branch?) In any event, we finally found the "controversy" that Vonnegut had warned of. In fact, the ugliness of the evening upset Kurt enough that he went home afterward, foregoing the official premiere later that night.

A few weeks later, we held a special screening at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. As the predominantly Jewish audience filed into the theater, Keith and I meandered through the current exhibits. When we came upon the Anne Frank display I turned to Keith and announced solemnly, "We're dead." This time, I introduced the movie, hoping to give some context to the film's ambiguous nature by quoting Elie Weisel: "I write not so that you'll understand, but so you'll know that you can never understand." Thankfully, they

seemed to get the movie. I even heard laughter at the Anne Frank joke. Afterwards, one Holocaust survivor told me, "You've made a very important film. It should remind people that evil doesn't always come from the obvious monsters. It lives in everyone."

The plan was to open *Mother Night* on an exclusive "art house" basis—only eight theaters in L.A. and New York. The most theaters we ever played at any one time would be 40. (A major Hollywood studio film may open in 2,300 theaters; 1,000 theaters would be a moderate release.) Opening day was November 1, 1996. That morning, reviews started to arrive via fax from the studio. I had learned early on in my career not to get emotionally involved with reviews. (I once heard a "critic" defined as someone who walks onto a battlefield after a war has been waged, then shoots the wounded.) However, a small "arty" film such as *Mother Night* would be dependent on positive reviews for its very survival. As they continued to roll out over the next few weeks, I found the rough breakdown to be as follows: 60% positive (about half of those, full-fledged "raves"), 25% mixed, 15% negative (about half of those, "rants").

The most consistent theme I noticed among the critical response was their lack of consistency. For every review that said the script was too slavishly devoted to the novel, another would cite that the screenplay strayed too far from the source material. A few critics loved the rather straightforward dramatic pacing maintained throughout the first half of the film, but felt that it lost its way once it took a comedic turn. Others felt the first half dragged, but the film really picked up once the comedy kicked in. One of my favorite criticisms accused us of perpetuating a racist stereotype with the portrayal of the black Nazi. (I had honestly felt that our film put a different spin on the typical Hollywood portrayals of black Nazis.)

I was surprised at the number of people who would ask me how Siskel and Ebert responded. I've always thought it sad that people rely so much on critics to help them form their own opinions. I now realized that we had regressed to the next step. Limited attention spans won't make it through an entire review anymore; so inquiring minds want to know, "Where are the thumbs? Show me the thumbs!" In the case of Siskel and Ebert, they were pointed south. Their TV review especially burned up Nolte when Siskel opined that the film was guilty of "romanticizing hate." Nolte actually got on the phone and called Siskel in Chicago, challenging him on this point. Siskel admitted to being wary of a current trend in films that make heroes out of morally ambiguous characters. When Nolte asked for examples, Siskel offered up *Ransom*, currently in release (and coincidentally featuring Nick's 10-year-old son, Brawley). The following week, Siskel and Ebert gave *Ransom* two thumbs up.

"Can those guys be bought?" Nolte asked me. I reminded him that Siskel and Ebert's show appeared on ABC, which is owned by Cap Cities, which is owned by Disney. *Ransom* was released by Touchstone, a distribution arm of Disney. "I don't know if they can be bought," I said. "But I'll bet they've been optioned."

The Jewish press was consistently kind to us, but the winner of the missing-the-point award went to Philip Berk of the *L.A. Jewish Times*, also a leading figure in the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, sponsor of the Golden Globe awards. Berk accused the film of being anti-Semitic, citing as one example our ironic use of the song *White Christmas* written by Irving Berlin, a Jew. It didn't occur to Berk that we had to license the song from the Berlin estate, which granted us the rights on a cut-rate basis after reading the script and voicing their support of the film's message.

The *L.A. Jewish Times* would eventually print my written rebuttal to Berk's attack, the low point being his questioning of Vonnegut's agenda by referring to him as "the son of a German-born American." I informed Berk that Vonnegut's family had emigrated to the U.S. before the Civil War (not that it should matter). Vonnegut would be less diplomatic in a personal letter to Berk, asking him, "What kind of twisted monster are you?"

The film actually performed quite respectably during its opening week. However, Fine Line apparently expected bigger things for this dark film about an ambiguous but sympathetic character with Nazi

tendencies who eventually kills himself. Literally, after the first night in theaters, a studio will calculate what the product will gross in its theatrical lifetime. After determining that *Mother Night* was not going to be the next *Pulp Fiction*, Fine Line shrunk our newspaper ads down to postage-stamp size for the second weekend. I told Vonnegut that filmgoers would now have to hire a private detective to find where our movie was playing.

That weekend saw a fairly precipitous drop at the box office, which then made Fine Line's prophecies self-fulfilling. The next week, Vonnegut, Nolte, Keith and I all made phone calls to the studio's top brass asking them to please replace the rug which they had surreptitiously pulled out from under us. The next weekend saw a slight increase in the ad size as well as the box office receipts. Clearly though, without genuine support from the studio, *Mother Night* would have an uphill battle at best. It proved to be a battle that the film would not survive. Fine Line had already placed all their eggs in a basket called *Shine*, an Australian acquisition and Oscar-endearing crowd-pleaser which, to their credit, they mined beautifully.

After the question about Siskel and Ebert, the next-most-asked question is, "What are your chances for an Oscar?" The answer is, of course, two-fold: "Who knows and who cares?" With all the talk of how well independent films are doing at the Oscars, most lay people don't realize the amount of advertising dollars pumped into trade ads that promote Academy nominations for the studio's favorite contenders. No ads = no nominations. Fine Line was betting on *Shine* and took out countless double-truck color ads asking the industry for their Oscar consideration. *Mother Night* received exactly zero ads. Keith and I were still thrilled that the film ever got made, and felt the rest was just so much gravy. Vonnegut said that he felt bad for Nick, who was totally overlooked at Oscar time for what many critics cited as a career best performance. So it goes.

Well-intentioned friends were insisting that the film would surely do well overseas as *Mother Night* would obviously appeal to European sensibilities. In England, we had the dubious fortune to open on the same day as *The English Patient*, a similarly-themed, big budget, heavily-promoted movie that won a slew of Oscars, including Best Picture. The British distributors opened us in all of two theaters, reneged on flying Keith out to London for publicity, then spent nothing on advertising. I was getting e-mail from British Vonnegut fans asking when the film would open in London.

"It's playing there now," I told them. "Stop looking for ads. There aren't any."

Mother Night was invited to play at the prestigious Berlin Film Festival. We were anxious to see what reactions the Germans would have to our little treatise on guilt and responsibility set in World War II. We'd never get the chance to find out. The German distributors declined the invitation to play the Berlin Festival. They would either go straight to home video or dump the film altogether. When I relayed this news to Vonnegut, his response was pragmatic: "These are still very sensitive issues. No one wants to risk rocking the boat. When are you going to make a commercial film?" he deadpanned. I answered, "When John Grisham gives me a free option on one of his books."

Two weeks later, I would call Vonnegut with more good news: Like their German counterparts, the Israeli distributors had decided to dump the film and eat their investment, rather than put it on public screens. "Do you realize what this means?" I asked Kurt. "Together we've created something that Israel and a reunified Germany can see eye-to-eye on. Talk about a New World Order!"

"Well, Bob, let's face it," Vonnegut cracked. "You must have made a crummy movie."

I wasn't going to let him get in the last zing. "Hey," I said, "Garbage in—garbage out."

Bob Weide is finishing his latest documentary, *Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth* for HBO. He has started to work on a screen adaptation of Vonnegut's *Sirens of Titan*. He hopes to finish his ongoing Vonnegut documentary by the new millennium.

MEDIA FREAK

Paparazzi Fallout

Correspondent Nancy Cain reports:
"In Los Angeles today the tabloids are no longer sold at Ralphs supermarket. Why? Hughes supermarket took them out citywide, so Ralphs did it too. Is it forever? They're taking it moment by moment, the check-out person says. They have *People* and *Life* in the *Star* and *Enquirer* racks. This week Time Warner gets the money instead of Rupert Murdoch, if that matters in the scheme of things."

New York Rent Control Blues

Correspondent Bette Fried reports:
"The *New York Times* was quick to publish a little human interest piece I sent to the Metropolitan Diary. Here's a piece they didn't publish:

"There used to be a bakery on my corner that made the best honey buns I've ever tasted. It was worth splurging the extra quarter they charged. The bakery is gone now, replaced by a bath and kitchen emporium. Recently, a hand-scrawled sign appeared in the window: *60% Off Display Items!* The display items included a soap dish for \$173, a cotton-ball caddy for \$214, and a tissue box for \$310. You can understand why there's a move to eliminate rent regulations in my neighborhood. If tenants were forced to camp out in Central Park, we could use our rent money to splurge on toilet accessories."

She adds: "By the way, the *Times* has taken a position against rent regulations, likening tenants to New Yorkers who kill for a parking space. The 'fair market' rent for my apartment would exceed my monthly income. New York will soon resemble South Africa under apartheid, when workers had to travel three hours each way between work and home."

Timothy McVeigh: American Hero

The following is reprinted verbatim from an anonymous leaflet:

It's true! Timothy McVeigh is a Great American and a Hero to many pro-American patriots.

Wes Cross, in the newsletter of South Carolina's "United Militias," has described McVeigh and his army buddies as "Great Americans" and "Heroes to all patriotic Americans" for their role in the bombing-murders of innocent men, women, and children.

Former President George Bush has also spoken up on national television to congratulate Timothy McVeigh and his accomplices, describing the bombing as "just and necessary."

McVeigh and his peers were also characterized as "America's finest" by retired General Colin Powell.

Even the Liberal Media has fallen into line with these sentiments. News anchorman Dan Rather offered "congratulations on a job well

done" to the bombers, while his competition Ted Koppel praised the "efficiency" of the killings.

Koppel even stated on his news program that "the good news (of the bombing) led to a rather unique feeling of euphoria throughout the nation."

Some public opinion polls corroborated this, claiming as many as 80% of Americans professed "support" for Timothy McVeigh and "the troops" in their bombing attack against even civilian government buildings, not unlike the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Destroyed in the bombing, besides the Baghdad City Hall, Iraqi Supreme Court, and the central post office, were electrical power plants, water pumping stations, dams, municipal water and sewage facilities, oil tankers, oil refineries, oil pipelines, cement plants, textile



Blind Item

Stephanie Miller, reacting to the

news that organizations for the blind are protesting the reappearance of the nearsighted *Mr. Magoo* animated cartoon character: "Maybe he should be a deaf, gay, Southern Baptist with an irritable bowel problem."

factories, car plants, a rubber factory, TV stations, radio stations, phone exchanges, offices, cafes, hotels, markets, and night clubs.

Two fully operating nuclear reactors were also bombed, adding nuclear terrorism to the list of war crimes committed by McVeigh and company.

Also among the bombed: busy highway traffic, civilian hospitals, including a mental hospital and a maternity hospital, schools, mosques, civilian homes, grain silos, wheat fields, farm buildings, a vegetable oil factory, a sugar factory, frozen meat storage, food warehouses, a tractor assembly plant, pesticide storage, a baby milk powder factory, and a major fertilizer plant.

A Pepsi-Cola plant and several Christian churches were also hit in the bombing perpetrated by the well-armed right-wing "self-defense" group calling itself "the Allied Forces."

An estimated 25,000 civilians were killed in the bombing (see Ramsey Clark's *The Fire This Time* at the Eugene [Oregon] Public Library). Another 25,000 civilians were killed indirectly by the bombing. At least 100,000 more civilians have died since the end of the bombing due to lack of food, medicine, and clean water.

McVeigh has also been implicated in other, smaller acts of terrorism.

Subliminal Target Practice

From an article in the *Wall Street Journal*

about the Dutch firm that has been hired to manage the International Arrivals Building at JFK Airport:

"The tile under the urinals in the Arrivals Building has that familiar lemony tinge; rubber soles stick to it. Over in Amsterdam, the tile under Schiphol's urinals would pass inspection in an operating room. But nobody notices. What everybody does notice is that each urinal has a fly in it. Look harder, and the fly turns into the black outline of a fly, etched into the porcelain. 'It improves the aim,' says Aad Kieboom. 'If a man sees a fly, he aims at it.' Mr. Kieboom, an economist, directs Schiphol's own building expansion. His staff conducted fly-in-urinal trials and found that etchings reduce spillage by 80%. The Dutch will transfer the technology to New York. 'We will put flies in the urinals, yes,' Jan Jansen says in a back office at the Arrivals Building. He is the new Dutch general manager, the boss as of noon today. 'It gives a guy something to think about. That's the perfect example of process control.'"

Filler Items

• On the Rosie O'Donnell show, the entire audience sang *Happy Birthday* to Jodie Foster's dog, Lucy, who wasn't there.

• Wisdom in a *TV Guide* listing: "*Dateline NBC*—Scheduled: A report on survival methods in the event of a dangerous situation. Segments include 'what you need to know if you were in a plane crash,' says producer Bruce Hager, who notes 'the key is getting out of the plane as quickly as possible.'"

• Andy Kindler's example of what a pundit on PBS called "the wonderful sense of humor" of the late Chinese dictator, Deng Xioping: "Why did the dissident cross the road? To get away from the death squads."

• Whither the alternative press? *The Village Voice* will not accept cash for a subscription, even in person. And the *L.A. Weekly* refuses to publish book reviews of paperback reprints.

• With the money he was awarded for being beaten by the police, Rodney King has started a record company. At a big outdoor party celebrating his enterprise, the security was provided by off-duty cops.

• The clue in a crossword puzzle in the *Los Angeles Times* was "Activist Hoffman." The correct answer was "Abbie."

• In 1968, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the Yippies announced that they were nominating an actual pig as their candidate for president. "That's a pretty good idea," observed the late William Burroughs, "but it would be more interesting if you ran a tape recorder." In 1996, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Burroughs' advice was finally followed. A tape recorder was nominated for president, and he was re-elected.

• Of those polled in Britain, 50% don't know that America was once their colony.

• A priest, a rabbi and a Mexican walk into a bar. The bartender looks up and says, "What is this, a joke?"