

A late night with Jay Leno

by MICHAEL GILTZ

In 1986, when comedian Jay Leno was selling out Carnegie Hall, appearing on *Late Night with David Letterman* more than any other guest and generally hitting the big time, a producer for the CBS newsmagazine *West 57th Street* decided to trail Leno and get "the real scoop."

When the producer was unable to unearth anything (Leno doesn't drink or do drugs, and he is just as friendly offstage as he is on), *West 57th Street* aired a segment on the stand-up comic that would make Mr. Goodwrench look a little shift-y in comparison.

It appears Leno is just an ordinary, nice guy.

Ironically, that is what makes him so unique among today's crowded field of comedians. In a time when every jokester worth his salt has a "hook" or "catch phrase" — Sam Kinison screams, Steven Wright mumbles and Howie Mandel gurgles — Leno is simply . . . well, funny.

Leno will bring his uniquely normal brand of humor to Gator Growl this October. It is the largest student-run pep rally in the world, but the prospect of performing in front of more than 70,000 people does not seem to daunt him.

"I'll be there at the Gator Growl!" he barks like a carnival shyster.

When told this was presumably the largest audience he would ever face, Leno said, "Well, I've got that thing in Red Square."

Will he be doing anything differently from his regular shows?

"Obviously, you do BIG JOKES!" Leno said, laughing. "No, it'll be fun, a nice intimate thing. I'll get to do my disappearing dime trick. It'll be great."

If past experience is any indication, it *will* be great. Leno performed at the O'Connell Center about two years ago and his two-hour show was ecstatically received.

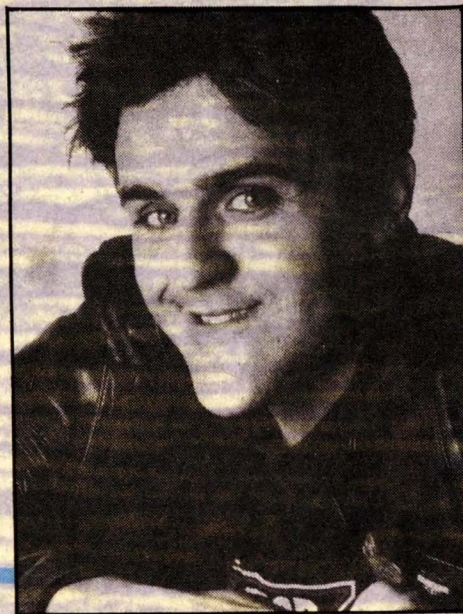
His wry, insightful style can best be described as the opposite of Don Rickles': Rather than insulting people and putting them down, he treats them as equals. Leno lets his audience in on the joke, and together they laugh at how silly the rest of the world can be.

One of his favorite topics is *TV Guide*, the most widely read publication in the country.

"Since when is *TV Guide* literature?" Leno (and his audience) groans. "Honey, when are you gonna stop reading and come to bed? Just a couple of more hours, dear. I want to see who's on *Cross Wits* for the rest of the week."

It's funny stuff, and it doesn't hurt that the man delivering it has a likeable mug that resembles nothing so much as Dudley Do-Right come to life. That mug soon will be appearing at a theater near you, for Leno was giving this telephone interview from the set of *Collision Course*, his third film and first starring role. He had two small parts in *The Silver Bears* and *American Hot Wax*.

"It's a movie with Pat Morita (of *Karate Kid* fame)," Leno explains. "*Collision Course* is a comedy/adventure...I guess in the vein of *Beverly Hills Cop*."



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— Jay Leno

"I play an American detective and Pat plays a Japanese detective. Hey, there's a switch," he continues jokingly. "I'm investigating one crime, Pat's investigating another crime and they're related, so we keep bumping into each other all the time."

But don't worry. Even though Leno wouldn't mind working on more films, he has no intention of being lured to the bright lights of Hollywood and abandoning his live shows.

"Yeah," he said, "if it's a good movie, I'd like to do more. But movies are a lot of work. They're not as much fun as doing your act. I prefer being a stand-up comedian, if only because comedy is so much fun when you're doing it."

"When you're making a movie, it's not really fun because you do it eight different ways. You do the

master shot, the reverse (shot) and all that kind of stuff and it takes hours and hours to do it. And you have to wait six months to a year to find out if the movie's funny, whereas in comedy you do the joke right away (and get a reaction)."

"When you do a joke while filming a movie, you go, 'Hmm, that's kind of funny,' and the crew kind of laughs but you never really know," he said.

"Movies are fun *after* you've done them. It's fun to sit in a restaurant and have people go, (squeals of delight) 'Oh, we just saw your movie,' and you go, (aloof and self-satisfied) 'Oh, really?'"

Leno's nice-guy persona and razor sharp comic delivery make him an ideal candidate for the movies. But there is every reason

to believe Leno when he says that success on the silver screen won't change him.

At a stage in his career when he could limit himself to select appearances in big auditoriums, Leno chooses to tour constantly. He usually does about 300 shows a year. True, Leno can command \$15,000 a shot at the larger venues, but you get the distinct impression he is just as happy performing at a Kiwanis Club luncheon as at Carnegie Hall.

Leno says when he plays at an out-of-the-way town, "People walk up to me and say, 'What the hell are *you* doing here?' But this is what I do. I enjoy doing shows. When people have a funny story to tell, they run around the office — or wherever it is — and they

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— Jay Leno on Gator Growl



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tell each person the story. If it gets a laugh, it's fun to tell again."

Leno sounds a little bemused. He's doing what he loves and, much to his surprise, being paid handsomely for it — about \$500,000 a year. He can't understand why the media makes such a point of his being a normal guy.

Normal guys usually don't make it in show business. Normal guys rarely have that spark of eccentricity that makes comedians (and actors) different. Normal guys are usually too smart even to attempt a career in a field where

90 percent of the players can't even scrape by.

And normal guys don't get chosen as permanent replacement host for Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show*. It is the comic equivalent of knighthood, and Leno received his title this June.

"It'll be great fun," he said. "I like the kind of job every comedian shoots for — filling in for a host and that kind of stuff."

When a distinction is made between *The Tonight Show*, a talk show with comedy, and *Late Night with David Letterman*, a

comedy show with some talk, Leno was asked whether he'd be more comfortable doing something like Letterman's show.

"Well, there already is a show like *Late Night*," he said. "And I enjoy talking to people. I do it anyway. If I'm in a Green Room or backstage, I like to talk to people and see what's going on."

When Carson takes a week off or goes on vacation, Leno will be the rotating guest host, along with comedian Gary Shandling. Shandling has substituted frequently on *The Tonight Show*, as well as starring in his own critically acclaimed sitcom, *It's The Gary Shandling Show!*, which airs on the pay cable channel Showtime.

Leno's own television show isn't far behind. NBC already has signed him to a long-term contract and is patiently waiting to find the right vehicle to suit his talents.

Leno's first late-night special, *Stand Up for Leno*, aired in the red-carpet slot usually occupied by *Late Night Live*. But the show, Leno readily admits, was a far from a fair shot in a cavernous hall that contained some funny

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bits (especially one concerning a tour of a fictional *TV Guide* museum), but never really gelled.

"It's funny," Leno said, "when you say you're not happy with (the special) and it comes out in the press, it makes you look as if you're somehow putting the network down. But they were great and let me do pretty much whatever I wanted to."

Leno is still working with NBC to find the right format, and fans can look for a prime-time special sometime this fall.

One thing Leno fans *shouldn't* look for is a comedy album. He is unique among stand-up comics in believing an album would hurt his show and be unfair to fans.

"With cable and records and all that kind of stuff," Leno explains, "people have access to anything they want to hear anytime they want it."

"You have to worry about over-exposure, you have to worry about picking the best time to do things. When you do a comedy album, deejays inevitably play it at 7 o'clock in the morning and they play it 80 times a day and people just get sick of you."

"If you're doing a show Saturday and the people are coming to the show, chances are that if



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people want to see you they'll listen to your album or watch your video or whatever on Friday or maybe right before the show. And nobody wants to hear material they just heard."

Clearly, Leno gave his decision much thought, and it probably wasn't easy — in 1986, he turned down an offer of \$300,000 to record an album for a major label.

This refusal brings to mind another performer — musician Bruce Springsteen, who turned down a \$12 million offer from Chrysler to use the song "Born In The U.S.A." in one of their commercials. Because of his lengthy concerts, Leno has been called

"the Bruce Springsteen of comedy" by numerous critics.

When reminded of it, he groaned a little and said, "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. Sometimes people write something and your press agent latches onto it, (in a booming voice) 'Oh, this is GREAT. We should capitalize on this.' It's nice of people to compliment you and it's certainly an honor, but... it's just comedy, it's just jokes. I'm not up there making some sort of vast social revolution."

But he is making whoopee.

"Comedy is like sex," Leno said. "If it's good, you want to do it again. If it's bad, you go 'Uuuuooohh!' " ■