

My Dinner With John

BY SAM MADDUX

John Callahan's brain is nourished (or is the word added?) by stress, irony and dread. He feeds on emotional chaos and cultural rigidity. He embraces the insanity of modern times, the "horror," as he describes it, and twists things around until they amuse him. If this makes him laugh, John figures it may make his legion of fans laugh, too. If it also makes some people uptight, fine. Deflating pomposity is a sport unto itself.

Humor is the one substance you can abuse without penalty. C'mon, John, how about one more snappy witticism for the road? BQ, before quadriplegia, John used a good stiff cocktail to quiet the barking dogs in his head. Now he uses a glass of milk and a good stiff joke. The horror? It's still there. But brain damage is minimal—at least now John can remember what happened the night before.

We caught up with the world's most famous quad cartoonist recently in his Portland, Ore., apartment. He's up at about 8, when his housekeeper arrives to start the coffee, spike his hair and get him going. After some stretches and exercise, John hits the phone and fax to take care of his burgeoning cartoon empire. He's just been in touch with the *London Observer*, a major chronicle of British dread. They need a daily dose of Callahan to soothe the burden of a troubled monarchy. No problem, he says. Talk to my syndication gal.

Times are pretty good for John Callahan. His cartoons are getting around more and more. His songwriting career is budding. He isn't fighting with the Oregon welfare people so much anymore. He's healthy. He's well-

known enough now to have an unlisted phone number. See him soon on "60 Minutes," a fame-certifying event, to be sure. The long-awaited Callahan film bio is still awaited; William Hurt has lost interest. That's OK; Robin Williams has found interest.

We join John and his fly for a few humor bites and some spicy repartee.

You don't work all day do you?

Nah. Afternoons I take off. I go to the coast, go to a park, go to a sleazy bowling alley.

For research?

I never think of it as research. That's where people are. Anyway, once a week or so my girlfriend comes down from Seattle. We drive around in her van.

Where'd you meet her?

I've known her for four years. She's a TV writer. I met her after she wrote me a letter saying she liked one of my cartoons. It's an old one—an executive pushes a button and says, "Miss Wilson, will you please live my life for me?"

You do lots of gags with anal, type A executives. But where do you get all your morbidity jokes?

I do seem to have lots of jokes about death. I don't know the psychology for that. I guess it's because I didn't get breast feeding when I was a kid.

Speaking of lactation, why all the Madonna jokes: the pope digs Madonna, Madonna's cat, Madonna working on the highway, etc.

Madonna. She's funny. I love to see someone with such a gimmick take hold and become rich and famous. Hey, god bless her. It's a trick to accomplish that without any talent. Without anything to say. It's not that I have anything to say, either, but her lyrics, they're bimbo stuff, bubblegum.

Do you watch TV?

Sure. I keep it clicking. Drives my friends crazy. I watch lots of bible shows, poor white trash stuff. I get about 50 stations on cable. I love to see the bimbos selling cheap jewelry on the shopping channel.

What is it with those preachers?



Peter Chapman

I like the phoniness of empty spirituality. I was depressed when Jim Bakker went to jail. But I was hoping to home in on Tammy. She looked like she might be a nice little roll in the hay.

You said in your biography there were lots of gangs in Portland. I think of lumberjacks, maybe, but Portland hardly invokes images of boys in the hood.

There are gangs like crazy here. There are more Crips and Bloods here than in LA. A fourth of the town is gang territory. Me, I'm glad to see them killing each other. I don't care if they die. Who needs them? What good are they? They molest people, sell drugs and kill.

Well, all right. Forget about schools handing out condoms. Let 'em issue handguns. Let's talk about your musical ambitions. Your phone message is a blues song about feeling like po' white trash if people don't talk, set to harmonica accompaniment. That's you, yes?

Yeah. I'm getting better on the harmonica. I've written some songs. Esquire printed one last November—they totally screwed it up, changed almost every verse. It's a little three-cord thing called "Pollution is the Solution." ["I could spend hours in acid-rain showers/And nuclear power is fun/Hooray for pollutants 'cause they make us mutants/And two heads are better than one."] I've got one called "The Girl with the Low Self-esteem." Some broad in New York sings it. A Hollywood band does one of mine called "You Can't Knock the Wind Out of Me," a sort of parody of Texas songs.

Do people ask you how you got hurt, or what happened to you?

Yeah. It's awful nervy for people to ask. But it does happen all the time. Sometimes I put one hand on my chin, the other on top of my head and demonstrate how I twisted as

hard as I could. [Insert snapping sound here]. They say, why? I say, oh, I had nothing else to do. Totally deadpan. Sometimes I tell people it was a hanging accident. Or that it was a cunnilingus accident—I was with a heavy-set girl. It got out of control.

Are you famous in Portland? Schoolkids wave from the bus?

More so in Florida and in Los Angeles than here. My cartoons are carried in the Miami, LA and Seattle daily newspapers. People know my work in those places. Some love it, others hate it.

You get hate mail?

From feminists, mostly.

How come—are you some kind of closet misogynist?

It's probably because of my cartoon about the feminist bookstore—the guy comes in the store and the sales clerk says to him, "This is a *feminist* bookstore, there is no humor section."

You're surprised that banged the gong of political correctness?

Feminism is OK. Equal rights is good. But women need to get over their anger at

men. I don't feel any guilt being a man. They should shave their armpits and lose their anger. Put high heels on ...

You still a republican?

Actually, I voted for Clinton. I'm for ecology and the environment. I'm for human rights. I'm for a hot babe for a first lady.

Do you laugh at your own gags?

Sure. I like the feminist bookstore one. And the one with Jesus on the cross, TGIF. Don't be a fool Billy, I like that one. [Billy,

who has no arms, goes up against a well-armed cowboy in a western gunfight]. I don't know how the humor works, where it comes from. I know when it does work.

Anything to say, after 20 years of quadness, to the new kids in gimpland?

I have nothing to say. Hang in there. Don't eat cheese, pray to Jesus. Find a good masseuse.

What's wrong with cheese?

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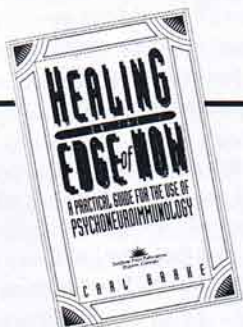
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