

"WEIRD AL" YANKOVIC: POLKAS, PARODIES AND THE POWER OF SATIRE

By Chuck Miller

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Al Yankovic strapped on his accordion, ready to perform. All he had to do was impress some talent directors, and he would be on *The Gong Show*, on stage with Chuck Barris and the Unknown Comic and Jaye P. Morgan and Gene Gene the Dancing Machine.

"I was in college," said Yankovic, "and a friend and I drove down to LA for the day, and auditioned for *The Gong Show*. And we did a song called 'Mr. Frump in the Iron Lung.' And the audience seemed to enjoy it, but we never got called back. So we didn't make the cut for *The Gong Show*."

But while the Unknown Comic and Gene Gene the Dancing Machine are currently brain stumpers in 1970's trivia contests, the accordionist who failed the *Gong Show* taping became the biggest selling parodist and comedic recording artist of the past 30 years. His earliest parodies were recorded with an accordion in a men's room, but today, he and his band have replicated tracks so well one would think they borrowed the original master tape, wiped off the original vocalist, and superimposed Yankovic into the mix. And with MTV, MuchMusic, Dr. Demento and Radio Disney playing his songs right out of the box, Yankovic has reached a pinnacle of success and longevity most artists can only imagine.

Alfred Yankovic was born in Lynwood, California on October 23, 1959. Seven years later, his parents bought him an accordion for his birthday. He learned the standard accordion songs - "Lady of Spain," "Beer Barrel Polka," "Roll Out The Barrel" - but in his spare time, he practiced playing the top pop songs on the radio on his accordion. Before long, Yankovic could play Mason Williams' "Classical Gas" and the entire "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" album on his accordion.

At first glance, an accordionist playing rock and roll may seem incongruous, similar to the kid in 5th grade band who could play "Yellow Submarine" on his string bass. Never mind the fact that when Bill Haley and his Comets appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* to promote their new song, "Rock Around The Clock," there was an audible accordion player in the band. Or that artists like John Mellencamp, Paul Simon, Styx, the Who and Petula Clark have draped their songs with accordion music. "Accordion players are coming out of the closet a little bit," said Yankovic. "I think over the last 10-15 years, the accordion is slowly becoming more of a hip instrument. In the 50's, Dick Contino was considered both a sex symbol and an accordion player. If you look at some of his album covers, they look very campy now, but you'd have Dick Contino on the cover with his accordion bellows wide open and girls hanging off of his legs. You hear accordion people in the music of Talking Heads and Sheryl Crow and John Mellencamp and Paul Simon and a number of fairly hip acts. So I think it's starting to be considered once again what it



always was, a very sensual, versatile instrument."

And in Yankovic's hands... a very funny instrument. During his teen years, Yankovic discovered the Dr. Demento radio show, and listened every weekend as the host would play novelty songs and comedy music - parodists like Spike Jones, Allan Sherman, Stan Freberg and Tom Lehrer; bawdy singers like Ruth Wallis and Rusty Warren; conceptual artists like Dickie Goodman and Wild Man Fischer. Yankovic fell in love with the show, and listened to it as often as possible.

In 1973, Dr. Demento made a promotional appearance at Yankovic's high school. The Dr. Demento show had a contest for a new theme song for the program, and a shy 13-year old accordion player slipped the guest a cassette. Yankovic's song didn't win the contest, but it was his first contact with Dr. Demento - a contact that would develop into a 30-year friendship.

Two years later, Yankovic sent Dr. Demento a novelty song called "Belvedere Cruising," about driving his parent's 1964 Plymouth. Even though "Belvedere Cruising" was recorded on a simple drugstore cassette, it caught Dr. Demento's ear - and he wanted to hear more. "What I first noticed about the song," said Barry "Dr. Demento" Hansen, "was the accordion, you didn't normally hear an accordion in 1975 from somebody young who's not just playing polka music. So here was somebody that had written an original song, a style that made it clear that he at least knew a little bit of rock and roll. And what I noticed most, after I played it all the way through, was the song was really funny, and his voice had a lot of presence. I'm not saying that song was the best thing I ever heard, but it was good enough for me to give it a shot on the show."

Within days, Yankovic received a letter from Dr. Demento. "I think you have potential," the letter said, "but only 39-cent people use 39-cent cassettes."

"I did get a letter from Dr. Demento that said exactly that, it might have been 'Belvedere Cruising,' it might have been the kind of thing where he played it grudgingly, saying 'Well we'll play this, but you should really use a better quality recording medium.'"

"'School Cafeteria' was the second song he sent me," said Demento, "he'd rather talk about that one, it's a better song."

On September 5, 1976, "School Cafeteria," a song written about the lousy lunches in high school, became Yankovic's first composition to be played on the syndicated "Dr. Demento" show. Buoyed by this initial response, Yankovic was invited a few months later to appear on Dr. Demento's radio show Los Angeles station KMET. "I don't really remember that much about my first couple of times on the air. Dr. Demento remembers that for some reason I wore a suit to the radio station, which he found kind of odd at the time. I didn't know what the dress code would be. I was so impressed to be at the place where the Dr. Demento show was being done."

"High school kids didn't normally wear suits at the time," said Demento, "but I guess Al thought it was an important occasion, so he dressed up."

After high school, Yankovic attended college at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, majoring in architecture. Between studies of the differences between Doric and Corinthian columns, Yankovic virtually lived at KCPR, the college radio station, where his playlist of novelty and comedy music earned him the nickname "Weird Al" Yankovic. It also earned him his first recording contract.

In 1978, the Knack's "My Sharona" was the hottest song on radio. Drawing inspiration from the parody work of Allan Sherman and Stan Freberg, Yankovic re-wrote that song as "My Bologna." Remembering Dr. Demento's edict about using the best quality recording equipment possible, Yankovic ran a microphone from the radio station's reel-to-reel tape recorder to the

radio station's mens' room down the hall, and recorded "My Bologna" amidst the acoustically superior commodes and urinals.

"My Bologna" received some airplay on the Dr. Demento show, as well as on KCPR. Knack lead singer Doug Fieger loved the parody, and wanted to offer Yankovic a recording contract. So for \$500, "My Bologna" was released on a 45 [Capitol 4816], backed with Yankovic's earlier recording of "School Cafeteria." But the joy of having a single with a national record label faded when the song received zero promotion and limited distribution. But Yankovic continued his dream, never giving up.

In the 1970's and early 1980's, guests would appear on the Dr. Demento show for an interview segment at the beginning of his program, then joined him near the end of the show to introduce the Dr. Demento Funny Five countdown, and then spent the rest of the time in another room answering phones and talking to Dr. Demento's many listeners.

It was during this time period at the Dr. Demento studios that Yankovic met Jon "Bermuda" Schwartz, a man who would be his drummer, archivist and first member of his new band. Like Yankovic, Schwartz had recorded original material that received Demento airplay, including a remake of "The Woodsy Owl Song." On September 14, 1980, Dr. Demento invited Schwartz to the studios, where Yankovic was helping out on the show. "And he had just written a song, 'Another One Rides The Bus,' and was going to play it live on the air," said Schwartz. "The Dr. Demento show in LA at that time was live on KMET. So I was down there, and he was doing the show live, for real, on the air, and Al asked if I would beat on his accordion case during the parody of 'Another One Bites the Dust.' So I did that."

While Schwartz pounded on the accordion case and Yankovic did his best Freddy Mercury imitation, Dr. Demento activated his two-track tape recorder. Just as Sam Phillips once captured lightning by recording a live in-studio performance by a young Elvis Presley, Demento caught the frenetic performance of a young Weird Al Yankovic, with Jon "Bermuda" Schwartz on percussion, and many of the Demento regulars at the time offering sound effects ("Musical Mike" Kieffer making squeaky hand noises; Dan "Damaskas" Hollombe adding guttural groans). "The Doctor ran a two-track tape as we were playing the song," said Schwartz. "And that became the master, that became the single, that was what wound up on the first album. I thought that that was a pretty fun thing, and said to Al, 'you should get a band together, and if you do, I'd like to play drums for you.'"

"Another One Rides The Bus" became a popular request item on the Dr. Demento show - in fact, the program added at least a dozen new radio affiliates on the basis of that song alone. The two-track recording eventually made its way to TK Records [TK 1043], but the Florida disco label folded two weeks after releasing the song, leaving Yankovic's record in the dust. But that in-studio collaboration with Schwartz eventually became the nucleus of Yankovic's band.

Yankovic's songs were still popular on the Dr. Demento show, as a demo song of "Yoda," featuring the Star Wars character with a melody borrowed from the Kinks' "Lola," received enough requests to make the song a regular on Dr. Demento's "Funny Five" countdown. After graduation from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Yankovic got a job at the Westwood One mailroom, working for the company that distributed the Dr. Demento show nationwide. He also played some clubs, bringing his accordion to any coffee shops or improv stages that would have him.

One night, while working as the opening act for Dr. Demento at a Phoenix concert, Yankovic's performance caught the eye of Jay Levey, an artists' manager who booked the Demento show. "It was amazing," said Levey in Dr. Demento's *Permanent Record: Al In The Box*

liner notes. "Al was introduced, and he comes out with his accordion and pours all of his energy into a set of parodies and originals. The crowd went wild and rushed the stage. I'm blown away. After his set, he comes off stage and I ask him if he ever thought about putting a band together and having a real career. In this quiet, shy voice, he says, 'Well, sure.' The rest, I guess, is history."

Levey convinced Yankovic that he needed a full band, and within days the Los Angeles newspapers carried a new ad looking for a bass player. Stephen Jay, whose had previously worked with John Cage, Wayne Shorter and Hugh Masekela, saw one of the ads, and joined Yankovic's band in 1981. "Al ran an ad saying he needed a bass player, he was going to do a show at the Roxy, and I was answering all kinds of ads, so I answered that one," said Jay.

Jay recommended a guitarist who also played the LA club scene, Jim West. "Steve and I played in some bands together," said West, "and Steve met Al first. At the point Al was deciding to put a band together, so he was auditioning guitar players, so Steve recommended me, and Al went down and auditioned me. I think the place I was playing at, the DJ played 'Another One Rides the Bus' once and I said, 'What is that?', that's the weirdest record I've heard in a long time."

Meanwhile, Yankovic worked on another song parody, a re-interpretation of the Joan Jett hit "I Love Rock and Roll." Jake Hooker was one of the original song's co-writers, and Al thought a parody called "I Love Rocky Road" could be a big hit. "We were trying to put together the first album," said Yankovic, "and we knew that if we were going to release 'I Love Rocky Road,' that we'd have to get permission from the original songwriters. So we contacted these guys, and Jake Hooker sensed an opportunity, and said 'Not only can you do this parody, but I manage Rick Derringer, maybe he'd be interested in producing your album.'"

Rick Derringer, the former lead singer of the McCoys and later a successful solo artist and producer, was a fan of comedy and novelty music. "When I was a kid, my folks had a big Spike Jones collection," said Derringer. "In order to do a video, you have to get a synch license and you have to negotiate with the original writers. So Al came to Jake Hooker to give him the idea of this song, to see if he could get permission for the synch rights, to release it as a video and make a single. Jake, my manager, played it for me and asked me what I thought of it. I loved it. A guy like Weird Al doesn't come along very often, and I told my manager I would love to do something with Weird Al myself. So we proposed to Weird Al, rather than making a single, what you should do is let us make the whole album. You should have an album out there - you want to have hit singles and stuff, but you want to also be able to release albums."

"So we all got together over dinner," said Yankovic, "and talked things through. I was a bit starstruck, because I was a huge Rick Derringer fan when I was a kid, and we got along great, and I thought it would be a great opportunity to work with one of my heroes."

So the accordion player and his fledgling band, along with his new producer, began work on their first album. "We did the first album on spec," said Yankovic, "we had a deal with Cherokee Studios in Hollywood that if we didn't get a record deal, the studio time would either be free or really cheap. But if we did get a record deal, we'd pay them a premium rate plus they'd get a percentage of my next few albums. This was before we had a record deal, and the deal was not a great deal now that I think about it."

"We approached Cherokee Studios with the idea of allowing us to make a record on spec," said Derringer. "We did the first album in seven days, on spec, without an album deal, and then Jake shopped the album deal for Al and ended up with the Scotti Brothers as our record label, where we released the first album."

In that one-week recording session, Yankovic pulled everything he could into the studio - a re-recorded version of "My Bologna," the Dr. Demento two-track of "Another One Rides The Bus," the "I Love Rocky Road" song that started the album deal, etc. Scotti Brothers released the debut album, *"Weird Al" Yankovic* [Rock n' Roll/Scotti Bros. 38679] in 1983. For a debut release, the album had a respectable chart run, eventually peaking at #139 on the LP charts.

At the time, Yankovic's biggest musical supporter wasn't radio (outside of the Dr. Demento show) - it was the new music video television channel MTV. Yankovic and his band made videos of songs like "I Love Rocky Road" and "Ricky" (a parody of Toni Basil's "Mickey," with Yankovic and co-singer Tress MacNeille camping it up as Lucy and Ricky Ricardo). The all-video-music channel was short on new music videos, and was more than willing to play Yankovic's videos to an appreciative TV audience.

By 1984, Yankovic and his band were working on a new album, *Weird Al Yankovic in 3-D* [Scotti Bros./Rock n' Roll 39221]. The last song recorded for that album was a parody of Michael Jackson's rock hit "Beat It" as an ode to omnivorism, "Eat It." Getting permission from the King of Pop to make fun of one of his biggest hits wouldn't be easy, but Yankovic gave it a try. Jay Levey contacted Jackson's representatives, and told them what he wanted. A few days later, Levey received a call back - the representatives said Michael Jackson gave his permission, thinking Yankovic's idea was good for a laugh.

"Eat It" became Yankovic's first Top 40 hit, peaking at #12, and winning a Grammy for Best Comedy Recording. The song's accompanying music video featured Al making fun of Michael Jackson's own video, turning Jackson's original "West Side Story" music video rumble into an all-out food fight (and eventually won an American Music Award trophy for Best Male Performance). Rick Derringer even added his own wacky take on Eddie Van Halen's "guest-starring" guitar solo. "If we are parodying this whole thing," said Derringer, "then my contribution as a soloist at that point would certainly be a parody of Eddie's. And that's what I tried to do, and that's why we blew up the guitar at the end of the video. Our version culminated in the guitar player whipping himself in such a frenzy that he exploded. Jim West did the solo in the video, but that's my guitar solo on the soundtrack."

After "Eat It," Yankovic had some more radio hits and MTV smashes in the early 1980's, such as "Like A Surgeon" (a parody of Madonna's "Like A Virgin"), "King of Suede" (the Police's "King of Pain") and "Living With A Hernia" (James Brown's "Living In America"). By 1988, Yankovic adapted another King of Pop hit, rewriting Jackson's "Bad" into "Fat."

"I met Michael Jackson twice in person, and both times they were very brief. Once I went to a TV shoot that he was doing, and I got to talk to him briefly after that. He mentioned that he really enjoyed my movie *UHF*, and the fact that he would play it at his theater at the Neverland Ranch, and guests got a kick out of it. And another time I was backstage at a Michael Jackson concert, and I presented him with a gold album for *Even Worse* (the album containing "Fat") and had my picture taken with him - and whoever took the picture had their camera stolen, so I never got that photo. In retrospect, I'm not sure that's the kind of thing that Michael Jackson really appreciated, another gold album for the pile."

Derringer produced five albums for Yankovic in the 1980's, watching as Yankovic studied and learned how to produce his own work. "Al's meticulous," said Derringer. "I found a lot of people have a lesser opinion of novelty records for some reason. And what I tried to explain to people, the only 'novel' thing about Al was how hard he works, how attentive to detail Al is, in comparison to all the other artists with whom I had worked previously - including Steely Dan, on

whom I've recorded on most of their albums. If there's a musical section that needs to be written, Al has written those parts out for all the musicians involved, the band is extremely well-rehearsed when they come in, everything is totally done before they get in there, they're all work in the studio."

It's a hot sweltering August in Hampton Beach, New Hampshire, as thousands of sun-worshippers and bikini babes fill this beach community for suntan lines and good times, on the last summer season of the 20th century. That afternoon, Yankovic's long tour bus makes its way to a local hotel, so Al and his band can get a little rest and take showers.

That night, Yankovic and his band played a concert at the Hampton Beach Casino, a combination performance hall/carnival midway. Despite battling the facility's poor acoustics, the fivesome - Yankovic, Jim West on guitar, Stephen Jay on bass, Jon "Bermuda" Schwartz on drums and Ruben Valtierra on keyboards - brought the house down with their energetic and frenetic performances.

Weird Al Yankovic tours incessantly. Since 1980, he and his band have criss-crossed North America dozens of times, on the road so often they could name every interstate from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon. In the early years, the musicians themselves would drive the van or equipment truck, taking turns behind the wheel just to get to the next city.

"I remember one time Steve and I were driving the truck," said Jim West, "and we were playing in New York City. And we had to find a place to park the truck, and parking is hell in New York City, especially when you have a big truck. So we drove around the hotel for an hour trying to find a place to park. Finally found a place to park at some exorbitant rate, and it comes time for the show, go get the truck for the next day and load it up and - where is that truck? I walked around for two hours trying to find the truck, because I couldn't remember what street it was on. We finally found it."

But as the band grew more successful, they would travel in customized chauffeured buses, spending more time relaxing and preparing for their next show than trying to find the nearest off-ramp to Kennewick, Washington in the middle of the night.

In February 1995, Yankovic and his crew, along with Dr. Demento, played a series of concerts in Alaska as the first dates for Yankovic's "Al-Can" Canadian tour. "We were told before the show," said Dr. Demento, "that after the show we were all going to pile into cars and go out to a remote part of Alaska and go dog mushing. After the show, we had a caravan of cars and we went out to the country about 20 miles or so, and one by one, we each put on what looked like space suits - it was about 37 below that night, and we each had a little bit of time on the dog sleds, one at a time. Al and all the members of his band, the crew, and me. The Northern Lights were fantastic, it was a real experience. That was definitely the highlight of that tour."

"It was a great experience," said Yankovic. "I was bundled up like I was getting ready for a walk on the moon. We were in -40° weather, and we got to ride dogsleds in Fairbanks, Alaska. And the Northern Lights were out. I could barely see them because my glasses inside my goggles were frosted over. But it was definitely a once-in-a-lifetime experience riding a dogsled and seeing the Northern Lights."

Whether it was seeing the Northern Lights in Alaska or the biggest ball of twine in Minnesota, for Yankovic and his band, each performance was another night to entertain the fans. The core lineup of Yankovic's band - guitarist Jim West, drummer Jon "Bermuda" Schwartz, bassist Stephen Jay - have been with Yankovic since 1981; keyboardist Ruben Valtierra joined the

group ten years later. For many fans, that band is as much a part of Yankovic's musical success as his accordion. For more than 20 years, Yankovic and his band have become what the rock and roll dream is supposed to be - without having to succumb to the rock and roll excesses.

"They're amazing," said Yankovic. "They've had it drilled into them over the years that we're looking for perfection, we're looking to duplicate every single nuance. They're incredible musicians, they're obviously extremely versatile, they play every genre that I can throw at them skillfully. And I'm fortunate that I've been able to maintain a band like this over the past few decades."

"You think of groups like the Beatles," said Schwartz, "and you'd imagine that they all just lived together and worked together and slept together and played together. But we're separate people. We keep our lives separate, we're together on the road, but it is a job, a job we enjoy and love, but it is a job. Al was very lucky to get Jim, Steve and I together, a very compatible bunch of guys. Jim and Steve had worked together before, and the three of us work very well together. And that's part of the success of being able to pull off the stuff that we do."

In 1988, Yankovic was offered the opportunity to record in a new format - a classical music album. CBS Masterworks wanted Yankovic to record a new version of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. The original plans - Yankovic working with Michael Tilson-Thomas and a full symphony orchestra - fell through. But when somebody suggested Yankovic collaborate with the avant-garde synthesizer pioneer Wendy Carlos, the combination created a Grammy-nominated classical album [*Peter and the Wolf / Carnival of the Animals*, CBS Masterworks 44567].

"When CBS called to invite me to get involved with Al Yankovic and them in a gentle leg pulling satire of *Peter And The Wolf*," said Carlos, "I couldn't resist. For me the project was a chance for some musical fun and tomfoolery, working with a bright, witty collaborator, before getting back to more adventurous tuning and timbre projects."

"Wendy Carlos was an amazing talent, a real thrill to work with her," said Yankovic. "Her musical ideas were astonishing. When the original collaborators fell through, and then they suggested Wendy Carlos, and I thought - that's perfect, we should have done that in the first place. Wendy's got such incredible ideas, she's such an amazing artist and musician, and we'd be able to go in a whole different kind of direction. And creatively, it was great because we decided that for the flip side of *Peter and the Wolf*, we'd do the [Camille Saint-Saens/Ogden Nash] *Carnival of the Animals* with all new Ogden Nash-style poems, and she would come up with completely new compositions based on those animals."

In 1989, "Weird Al" Yankovic made his feature film debut in *UHF*, a film he and Jay Levey had shopped around Hollywood for years. In *UHF*, Yankovic starred as a slacker who inherits a low-power television station, and turns it into a ratings winner with the most off-beat programming ever. The film's co-stars included Victoria Jackson, Kevin McCarthy and a pre-*Seinfeld* Michael Richards, who stole most of the scenes in the movie.

The film also starred Trinidad Silva as host of "Raul's Wild Kingdom," a *UHF* sketch involving exotic pets in an apartment complex. Sadly, Silva was killed by a drunk driver before his scenes could be completed. "It was devastating," said Yankovic. "We were under an extreme amount of pressure, and to have this happen in the middle of everything really just devastated it. We carried on the best we could - he wasn't even really done shooting his part. Raul had a much bigger part in the movie, in the original script. We obviously wrote around that, and in fact we briefly thought about recasting, and none of us just had the heart to do that. At that point, we

didn't want to deal with that, we were just too depressed about the whole thing. And besides, we loved the performance that Trinidad had given, so we decided to just keep what we had in the can. A couple of years after that, I had been approached by a beer company and was offered quite a bit of money to be their commercial spokesman. And I declined, one of the reasons was because of Trinidad. And I had another friend, Bob Greenberg, who produced my 'Christmas at Ground Zero' video, who was also killed by a drunk driver. And that, plus the fact that I didn't think it was appropriate for me to be endorsing an alcohol product, because I know that a lot of my fans are young kids, and the whole thing just kind of seemed inherently evil to me."

Released in 1989, *UHF* was a box-office failure, unable to wrest moviegoers away from the first *Batman* and *Lethal Weapon* movies of the summer. An accompanying album and "UHF" single were only marginal successes. Over time, however, the film has become a cult classic, with out-of-print VHS copies selling for as much as \$75 over the Internet.

The *UHF* project also was the last collaboration between Yankovic and Rick Derringer, as both men amicably parted ways. "When the Scotti Brothers renewed their contract with Weird Al," said Derringer, "they said what they thought would be good for them was to build in another profit for them, to let Weird Al be the producer and cut out the previous producer, which was me - and the Scotti Brothers would make more money. So it was time for me actually to move on. And that's what I did. It was not a hostile parting at all. As a matter of fact, the only two Grammys I've ever been part of are the two I won with Weird Al."

Undaunted, Yankovic went back into the recording studio, working on parodies for his next album. He continued to listen to the radio, hoping there was a track or sound out there that could be turned into a killer parody.

That song eventually came from Seattle. The grunge music movement had taken over pop and rock radio, effectively forcing most dance and metal bands to the side. And the song receiving the most airplay in those initial years was Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Yankovic immediately started writing a parody of the song, but needed to make sure he could get lead singer-songwriter Kurt Cobain's permission before recording the project.

One night, Nirvana was scheduled to play NBC's *Saturday Night Live*. Yankovic contacted his former *UHF* co-star and good friend Victoria Jackson, who at that time was a regular on *SNL*. At Yankovic's request, Jackson handed the phone to Kurt Cobain, and asked the Nirvana frontman if he could receive permission to record a parody of "Smells Like Teen Spirit."

Kobain agreed - but before hanging up the phone, he asked Yankovic if the song was going to be about eating food or something. Yankovic replied that the song was actually about how nobody could understand Nirvana's lyrics.

With that, Kobain gave his blessing for the parody.

The parody, "Smells Like Nirvana," became Yankovic's first Top 40 hit since "Eat It." It reached #1 on the MTV airplay charts, sometimes played synchronously with Nirvana's original recording. The track was nominated for an MTV Video Music Award in the Best Male Performance category. *Rolling Stone* put "Smells Like Nirvana" on their Top 100 Videos of All Time list; *Spy* magazine voted the song as "Video of the Year" for 1993. The album containing "Smells Like Nirvana," *Off The Deep End* (Scotti Bros. 75256) received a NARM award for Best Selling Comedy Album of 1993, as well as a Grammy nomination for Best Comedy Recording.

Meanwhile, back in California, Dr. Demento took a vinyl copy of "Smells Like Nirvana" and added it to the 45 RPM jukebox in his home, a place of honor for Dr. Demento's favorite records of all time - both comedy and traditional music. It was a long journey from "Belvedere

Cruising" and 39-cent cassettes for Yankovic.

It's a clear November night in Camden, New Jersey, as Weird Al Yankovic performs a sold-out concert at the Sony Entertainment Center, rocking the amphitheater along the Delaware River waterfront. During his performance of "Like A Surgeon," which Yankovic re-orchestrated into a "Truth or Dare" version, complete with writhing and satin sheets, keyboardist Ruben Valtierra takes the stage - wearing only his jeans and a cone-shaped brassiere. The audience bursts out in laughter and cheers, as Yankovic continues to sing, trying to avert his gaze away from Valtierra's dead-pan performance for fear of muffing the lyrics and laughing his head off during the song.

"Al had Jim West wear the cone bra at first," said Valtierra, "and Jim got too humiliated after three times of doing it. And Al said, 'If you're not going to do it, somebody's got to do it, Ruben?' And I said okay fine, and I did it. And I made it my little thing. I've seen it on video, my niece and nephew just saw it, they're 5 and 7 years old, and they ran from the room. The thing is after a while you're up there and things are so silly - one night I ran out and did it with Speedos on."

After the Camden show, two men were spotted at the aftershow party wearing matching T-shirts - a collage of Yankovic's album covers, all arranged in the number 27. They had an extra copy of the 27 shirt in their hands, and gave it to Yankovic, who graciously accepted the shirt and thanked the men for their gift.

Author Douglas Adams may have postulated that the number 42 is the answer to life, the universe and everything - but for Weird Al fans, searching for references to the number 27 is a treat unto itself, not unlike searching for Ninas in a Hirshfield caricature. Why else would Yankovic wear a 27 on the cover of *Running With Scissors*? Or in the song "The Biggest Ball of Twine in Minnesota," which contains the lyric, "Oh the kids were so happy, they started singing *99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall* for the 27th time that day!" Or in the music video for "Like A Surgeon," where a wall-counter advances to 27 as Dr. Yankovic waits for his next patient.

The 27 phenomenon dates back to 1994, when subscribers to the Yankovic fanzine "Midnight Star" (named after one of his early recordings about tabloid newspapers) noticed that the number 27 appeared with more than coincidental frequency in Yankovic's lyrics, his videos, his album covers. By 1996, lists of 27-sightings appeared on the Internet. Some of the 27 sightings take their cues from Paul McCartney-is-dead coincidences (type the number 27 into a calculator, rotate the calculator so the buttons are on the top, and the you see "SJ" - Stephen Jay, Yankovic's guitarist), while other listings are eerily uncanny (on the periodic table of elements, the two-letter abbreviation for aluminum is "AL" - and its atomic weight is 27).

"I suppose I used the number 27 originally because I just thought it was a funny number or maybe it was the right number of syllables. Maybe there's a deeper meaning to it than that, but at the time I just thought that that number just seemed to work best for different situations. But some fans brought that up to me, and some fans started to think maybe there was some kind of deeper significance to the number, and there became this kind of whole cult based around the number 27, and people looking for the number 27 as it would occur in my work. And I was aware this was going on, so I would kind of feed the flames a little bit, and from that point on, started putting the number in more consciously."

Other artists for whom Weird Al Yankovic is an inspiration have weaved 27 references into their own compositions. On a Weird Al Yankovic fan-based tribute album, "Prosthetic Lips"

(a reference to a lyric in the song "Everything You Know Is Wrong"), Yankovic superfan Amanda Cohen recorded a song called "27 Questions With 'Weird Al' Yankovic." It's track number 27 on the CD. Another musical satirist, "The Great Luke Ski," re-interpreted the Offspring's "Pretty Fly for a White Guy" into a Yankovic tribute song, "Quite A Man For An Al Fan," and hid the song as track number 27 on his own CD.

"Anyone who is trying to make a name for themselves in the genre of dementia (funny music, for the uninitiated) in today's society owes everything to Al," said Luke Ski. "He is our Elvis, the king of parody music. If it were not for Al, I would not be trying to make funny music, and considering that I have not yet branched out into writing original non-parody pieces yet, his influence is very obviously there in my work."

Because of the delicate nature of parodying another artist's work, Yankovic always tries to get an artist's permission before rewriting their song - and most times, there isn't a problem. Michael Jackson, Nirvana, Madonna, MC Hammer and the Offspring have all given their permission to have their greatest hits parodied. Paul McCartney didn't want Yankovic to turn his song "Live and Let Die" into "Chicken Pot Pie," but only on the grounds that McCartney is a vegetarian (coincidentally, since 1992 Yankovic himself has become a vegetarian).

"When you're actually changing the lyrics around," said Yankovic, "it's a bit more than going to the Harry Fox Agency - that's if you're doing a straight cover version. It gets very gray legally as to whether or not I have to ask for permission, because of the decisions in the Supreme Court in the last few years, the *Acuff-Rose v. 2 Live Crew* decision the most famous one. I could most likely get away with what I wanted, parody-wise, and paying them their normal rate. But that's never been the way I've done business. I always get permission from the original songwriter, because number one, I've been in this business for a few decades now and I've got a lot of relationships with songwriters and artists and publishers and managers, and I wouldn't want to do anything to upset those relationships. And number two, I think it's just the right thing to do. Plus, I want to make sure that I have my proper writing credit and get my fair share of the royalties. I just want to do what's fair all around - and I want the artist to feel like they're in on the joke and to feel like I'm not making fun of them or being derogatory or stepping on their toes. It's supposed to be a tribute to their work."

The situation with Coolio, however, was another matter.

In 1995, Coolio had a #1 hit with "Gangsta's Paradise," a reinterpretation of Stevie Wonder's song "Pastime Paradise." Yankovic's record company informed him that Coolio had given his permission to adapt the song as "Amish Paradise," and Yankovic plowed ahead. He recorded the song, filmed a video, and even created an album cover, *Bad Hair Day* (Scotti Bros. / Rock n' Roll 75500), with Yankovic's flowing curly hair replaced by twisted snake-like dreadlocks.

"Amish Paradise" had a respectable run on the pop charts, hitting #53. The video received plenty of airplay on MTV, and the Dr. Demento phonelines were flooded with requests for the new Weird Al song.

Unfortunately, it turned out that Coolio claims he *never* personally gave his permission to re-record the song, and when a reporter at the Grammy Awards asked the rapper what he thought of Yankovic's interpretation, he said, "I ain't with that. No. I didn't give it any sanction. I think that my song's too serious. It ain't like it was 'Beat It.' Well, his record company asked for my permission. And I said no. But they did it anyway, I couldn't stop them. So more power to him, I hope he sells a lot of records. Just stay away from me."

"I was completely under the impression that he had given his blessing," said Yankovic, "and that he was okay with it, and my record company assured me that they'd spoken to him and that he was fine with it, and I should do the song and not to worry. And I wrote him a very sincere letter of apology, and I never heard anything back from him. And every now and then, I'll read interviews where my name was brought up and he's still pretty angry and bitter about it. So I don't know what else I can do or say. I don't think that the fact that I did 'Amish Paradise' detracts from the message or the intent of 'Gangster's Paradise.' They're two different songs."

Goldmine attempted to contact Coolio to get his response to Yankovic's apology. We were told through his record label that there would be no official comment regarding the "Amish Paradise" track.

Since that incident, however, Yankovic no longer relies on a third party saying permission was granted. Unless he receives permission directly from an artist or songwriter, the parody isn't written. For example, one of the hottest tracks on *Running With Scissors* sums up the entire plot of *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*, as sung to the melody of "American Pie." That song, "The Saga Begins," held down the #1 spot on the Dr. Demento "Funny Five" countdown for six straight weeks, breaking "Eat It"'s own longevity record.

"I had a very interesting phone conversation with Don McLean when I was back in Los Angeles working on a video. Don McLean was a very sweet man, he was telling me how his kids are fans of mine and they listen to *Running with Scissors* around the house, and he's been hearing my parody all day long, and it's been messing with the part of his brain that knows the lyrics to 'American Pie.' So now when he's in concert playing his own song, he's hearing my lyrics in his head, 'My, my, this here Annikin guy,' oh that's Al's song. I feel very flattered that he let me parody 'American Pie,' he's very protective of that song. In fact, he told me that the same week that he agreed to let me do my parody, he turned down Coolio to use an 'American Pie' sample. Just yet another reason for Coolio to hate me, I guess."

Also on *Running With Scissors* is a 73-second track called "The Weird Al Show Theme." At first listen, it sounds like the opening music for a Saturday morning children's show. Which in fact, it was - a 1997 live action children's series similar to *Captain Kangaroo* and *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*.

Unfortunately, any attempt Yankovic made to be hip and funny and cutting-edge with the series ended when CBS, the network airing the show, added a few "suggestions" to the program. "I had very little control over the way this show was sold or positioned in the marketplace," said Yankovic. "The most unfortunate thing was that they made me skew the show extremely young. I figured that since a lot of my humor appeals to pre-adolescents anyway, that I'd just be able to do the kind of humor that I always do, it would appeal to the Saturday morning crowd and it would appeal to the adults watching. But every time I'd try to work in a pop culture reference, they'd say 'Well, 8-year-olds aren't going to know who Yoko Ono is.' And I was saying, 'Well they can learn, they can ask their dad or something.'"

Al was able to get new and offbeat musical acts on his show, including performances by Barenaked Ladies and Hanson. Pioneering parodist Stan Freberg appeared on the show, as did Dr. Demento himself. He even got Fred and Wilma Flintstone to appear on his show (Yankovic was animated into a Flintstones episode as "Al Yankstone"). After the show's cancellation, many of *The Weird Al Show's* sketches - tongue-in-cheek satires of old Castle Films educational school movies, mini-parodies of songs like the Prodigy's "Firestarter" - were recycled as part of

Yankovic's current concert tour. "We do play several clips from *The Weird Al Show* in our live performances, because we were able to do a few things that I was very proud of. Of course, we had to do a lot of things that I wasn't so proud of, and as a result, it was a fairly uneven show. For what it's worth, our ratings were perhaps the highest of the entire CBS Saturday morning block, but the ratings overall sucked. Because CBS did not promote it outside of Saturday morning, which oddly enough people weren't watching, and their ratings overall were horrible, and their solution to that was let's cancel everything. And I can't tell you how well their programs are doing now on Saturday morning, but I'm guessing not any better."

After the cancellation of *The Weird Al Show*, Yankovic made some personal changes in his life. He shaved off his trademark moustache, and underwent optical laser surgery to correct his nearsightedness. "A friend of mine convinced me to have the operation done. It's not that the glasses ever bothered me that much. I was very aware that it was part of my trademark look, it was one of the ways that people recognized me. And I thought it would be kind of cool not to have to depend on wearing glasses. I thought it would be fun to see my feet in the shower and to live life like most non-bespectacled people. So I had the operation done, which was quick and painless and pretty remarkable. It was science-fiction-like. Up until I started doing publicity for this new album, I was completely anonymous without the glasses, it was like the Clark Kent effect. I took the glasses off and I was completely anonymous. It was mind-blowing, and quite a nice change of pace, actually. Now that I have been doing some TV and the *Behind the Music* special, now I'm getting people kind of recognizing me, thinking, 'did I go to high school with this guy?'"

He also began work on his new album, entitled *Running With Scissors* ("He said on my show was that he wanted to come out with something that he could not have done on *The Weird Al Show*, something that parents would be a little horrified at," said Dr. Demento). But while Yankovic began working on the parodies for his new album, his dedicated fans got together at "AL-CON," a weekend convention in Evanston, Illinois, dedicated to all things Yankovic.

Yankovic and the band have always enjoyed the support and camaraderie with their fans, and the millions of "Close Personal Friends of Al" have responded in kind. "It always blows my mind when I see Weird Al tattoos," said Yankovic. "The first one I remember was a guy named Carl Ditmar, who I signed his arm one year, and he came back the next year with my signature tattooed on, he had run right out to a tattoo shop and had the autograph tattooed on. I've seen a guy named Dave Rossi has my autograph and a picture of me on his one leg, and he now has an autograph and a picture of my drummer on his other leg, and he's planning to get the whole band tattooed on his body. There's a number of people out there like that, which blows my mind, I keep telling them, this is permanent, this doesn't come off, but they say 'oh no, my limb is a shrine to you.'"

"Some guy had me sign his leg the other night," said Steven Jay, "he was going to make it into a tattoo. It takes all kinds, and I mean that in a positive way, like a compass needs all its different directions. You and I may be 180 degrees, but we create each other by our existence. But to me, what I like about life is that we're always changing, we never know how we're going to feel the next day. Things like tattoos seem to deny that."

At the AL-CON convention, fans could leave messages in the "Record-A-Message-For-Al" booth; they could purchase art created by fellow Yankovic devotees; they could participate in look-a-like contests (including two gentlemen who dressed as 300-pound Yankovics from the "Fat" video). There was even a garage sale, where Yankovic had previously donated leftover

props from his various music videos and movie cameo appearances - a pair of gold boots from the "Gump" video; some latex exploded head pieces from the film "Spy Hard." "I had donated some shirts that were on album covers," said Yankovic, "old pairs of my glasses that I didn't need any more because of the laser operation, and things that I was going to throw away. Somebody paid \$500 for my wisdom tooth. The blow-up head from *Spy Hard*, I was going to throw it in the garbage, somebody paid \$250 for it. Glasses went for over \$400 each, the shirts went for over \$700, at that point I decided I was never going to throw anything away again."

But the best was yet to come. Schwartz was the featured guest at AL-CON, and had brought along a video presentation of Yankovic's work, much like an art history professor would bring a carousel of 35mm slides. Unbeknownst to the organizers or the fans, Bermuda had brought a special guest along with him to the convention - and he was waiting upstairs in a hotel room.

"I wasn't planning to attend it," said Yankovic, "because I thought it would be too weird to be at my own convention. I just wanted to hear the report and let me know how it went. And as we got closer and closer to the date, I thought - what if this is the only Al convention there ever is, and how said it would be for me not to go and see it first-hand. So I wanted it to be a complete surprise though. So the only person who knew I was going was my drummer, Jon Schwartz. And 6:00 the morning of the convention, I took a cab in from the airport, stayed in his hotel, and I stayed hidden the entire day until Jon had a 90-minute lecture based upon video clips that he was playing."

"Absolutely nobody knew he was going to be there," said Schwartz, "Nobody. Except Al and I. His manager did not know he was going to be there. The organizer of the convention, Amanda Cohen, did not know he was going to be there. And throughout the day and throughout the convention, I'm just bursting inside because I can't wait to spring this on everyone."

"And at the end of the show, Bermuda had a pre-taped segment at me in home in LA, saying 'Sorry I couldn't make it to the convention, I'm sure you guys are doing great, I'm really flattered, thanks for doing this, thanks for your support, blah blah blah, wish I could be with you, but I'm really busy, got a lot of irons in the fire, got a lot of stuff on my plate, I'm a really, really busy guy, I, uhh, just, really, really busy here... oh, who am I kidding, I'm not that busy.' And then I walk off screen and I walk on the stage."

"The next thing everybody knew," said Luke Ski, who attended the convention, "the man of the hour, 'Weird Al' Yankovic himself jumped out from behind the video projection screen, asking, 'Is it all right if I hang out for awhile?' You can imagine the reaction of the crowd. Amanda Cohen (the organizer of AL-CON) screamed her head off."

Al's appearance at the convention caught everybody by surprise - and since he had recently undergone his laser eye surgery and shaved off his moustache, the crowd first thought the person on stage was one of the look-a-likes from an earlier contest. But soon it dawned on them that it was the real, one-of-a-kind, clown prince of parody, "Weird Al" Yankovic - and the place erupted in cheers and applause. "When they realized it was me, the crowd went nuts. It was one of the most unbelievable experiences of my life. "

"It was a wonderful surprise," said Schwartz, "a surprise worth having. Nobody was really angry that I didn't tell them, but obviously I couldn't."

In addition to the continued support from Yankovic's usual conduits - Dr. Demento, MTV, VH1, MuchMusic and his loyal fans - the *Running With Scissors* album has received heavy

airplay on the 44 Radio Disney stations across the country. "I'm really grateful that Radio Disney exists in this universe. They played 'Yoda' like it was a Top 40 hit, and in fact it was a 15-year-old album track. I've had a lot of parents yell at me, saying, 'I have to listen to your songs every hour of the day, cause my kid listens to Radio Disney.' But it's really great, I get an incredible amount of exposure. I was really grateful that 'The Saga Begins' was such a hit on Radio Disney, it was the #1 song for a couple of months. When I first decided to do a parody of 'American Pie,' my first thought was, baby boomers will appreciate this, but am I writing off my whole kid's audience, when in fact kids just ate it up."

"It's a privilege to re-record these songs," said Stephen Jay, "because a lot of the songs we do are fantastic compositions and great recordings. The original artists had to do all the work to create the parts, and so I'm really passionate about getting in and noticing all the details. In a fretted instrument like the bass, there's a lot of different ways to play a given line. I always make sure I get it in the same exact fingering, same exact voicing on the strong and everything else so you have the same tone. You can tell when a bass player's using one finger or another by the slight slides before the next note, like in the Nirvana song, he goes up to the D string, and then he slides up - it's unintentional, but it's obvious."

"Some of the stuff is fairly simple," said West, "and some of the stuff is deceptively hard to duplicate because when people make records, they can through on dozens of parts, especially guitar parts. When we were doing the parody for 'One Week,' the Barenaked Ladies song, where Al's version is called 'Jerry Springer,' there were so many guitar parts on that record, and it was my part to do the guitar parts, so I had to sit down and listen. It took me 3-4 days to figure out those parts, and there are so many, and some of them are buried deep in the song."

"On 'It's All About the Pentiums,'" said Schwartz, "we did the rock remix version of 'It's All About The Benjamins' that MTV played. A lot of drummers would approach that song and not really know what happened. I can listen to a song and hear the drums in it. I can hear if there's a drum loop, I can hear if there's a live high-hat on top of the drum loop, and I can hear that there's a live drummer on top of the high-hat on top of the drum loop. And that's why it's a very thick track. And that's the way I did it. I've always been able to pick out the drums. If I weren't able to do that, it would obviously be a lot tougher."

"If you listen closely to 'The Saga Begins,'" said Valtierra, "it sounded like the musicians who recorded 'American Pie' ran through it once or twice, and during the recording session Don McLean and the pianist played off each other - Don followed the keyboardist, and the keyboardist would follow Don, so it's very back and forth. Al wanted me to have it so that my keyboard parts had to match the original's so that you could play them at the same time, so they're so close that they would be actually chorusing. I'm a good enough programmer and have enough good keyboards that I can go and I can find or else make up any sounds that he needs. I can play within the style that he needs me to play within, or else I can sample and do stuff that's just not physically possible - if we need an orchestra sound at that point and we're not synched to tape, I can play that."

Besides performing with Yankovic, the band members all have varied and diverse outside interests. Jay recently recorded a funk/world beat album called *Tangled Strings* [Ayarou 15128, (805) 499-7753], with guest appearances from Jim West and Ruben Valtierra. West has also released a solo album, *Coconut Hat* (Westernmost 30001), an excursion into the classic sounds of Hawaiian slack key guitar and the influences of such artists as Gabby Pahinui, the Sons of Hawai'i, and The Sunday Manoa. Valtierra has recently completed keyboard tracks for a new computer

program, "Rhyme," which allows computer users to swap selected rhythms, melodies and vocals in a virtual production studio.

"I love both Jim's and Steve's solo albums," said Yankovic. "I think it really shows a different side to their personality and their musical work, and I'm glad they have that outlet. Sometimes I feel a little sorry for the band that they don't get the respect they deserve, because they play in my band, and a lot of people seem to think that because the music is funny, that there's somehow perhaps less musicianship involved, when actually oftentimes just the opposite's true."

Schwartz' outside interests involve archiving Yankovic's complete history and discography, operating the Weird Al Yankovic website (<http://www.weirdal.com>), and being the conduit between Yankovic and his fans. "I'm the Internet point of contact, and I wrote and maintain *weirdal.com*, as well as a few others. And a lot of our fans are on the net, it's really rare these days that we meet someone who's never been to *weirdal.com*. I keep all the tour dates on there, and people know about dates even before the venue. I'll put a date up there for October and they'll call the venue before the venue knows what's happening. There's people that travel all over the place for a Weird Al show, more so than ever before."

"It is a privilege to play with this band," said Stephen Jay. "Jon, Jim, Ruben, Al, everybody - it's so great to get on a stage with such incredible musicians who are giving their all every night. There are no egos any more, we're a family, we've been together so long, egos don't exist, we can all say and do everything with each other, so there's no problems. That's really cool."

"I think we're all pretty decent people in the band," said Yankovic. "We're nice guys, there's no substance abuse problems. We're just friends, we get along. When we're on the road, we're together constantly. When we're not on the road, we go our own separate ways and have our own lives and our own side projects. So it's not like we ever get sick of each other because we're not in each other's face 365 days a year. So it's the kind of thing that it's nice when you get together, and when the tour's over you get a little vacation. Everybody in the band is pretty mellow in a way, we're not Type A type of personalities like on *The Real World*."

But for now, it's another day, another stop on a nationwide tour. Another night of high-energy performances, costume changes and satisfied audiences. Another night of posing for pictures with wide-eyed teenagers meeting their comic idol. Another night of saying hello to old friends who have seen Yankovic and his band in concert since the very first days.

"The other thing that I hear," added Yankovic, "which is actually quite flattering, although I'm not sure how to take it, is I've had several people credit me with saving their lives, or at least getting them out of a deep depression. I've had people tell me that they were seriously contemplating suicide, and then they heard one of my records or saw a video on TV and it snapped them out of their funk and they decided that if they can get that much enjoyment out of something, then maybe life was worth living after all. So they became huge fans and credited me with their current existence on this planet."

And as Yankovic signs another set of autographs at another town, the variety of Yankovic collectibles fans bring to the concert for his signature is staggering. A rare CD booklet from the *Peter and the Wolf* classical album. A mint condition VHS box cover of *UHF*. A Dr. Demento compilation album that has a track Yankovic recorded 20 years ago. Even today, Yankovic is both amazed and awestruck at how much his music has influenced fans around the world and of the thousands of "Weird Al" collectibles in the world.

"Thank you for being there. I'm probably the biggest AI collector there is. I collect my own memorabilia. It's just very flattering and it's very heartwarming to know that there are people that really care what I do. And it makes it all worthwhile to me."

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

The following article was written through interviews with "Weird AI" Yankovic, John "Bermuda" Schwartz, Stephen Jay, Jim West, Ruben Valtierra, Rick Derringer, Barry "Dr. Demento" Hansen, and the Great Luke Ski. Quotations from Wendy Carlos can be found at her Internet homepage, <http://www.wendycarlos.com>. The assistance of Sheryl Northrop at the Baker/Northrop Media Group, as well as Gayle Fine from Q-Prime, are greatly appreciated. For more information about "the 27's", visit this website: <http://faq.at/The 27.List>.