

MG: *Fair Game*

by Ross Scott Rubin

It Is To Laugh

One of the early CD-ROMs for the Mac was Time Warner Interactive Group's Funny. Little more than a showcase for Apple's exciting new QuickTime technology, Funny was a CD-ROM adaptation of a Brian Ferris film that essentially featured a bunch of jokes told by the famous and not-so-famous. You could watch the sequences as a unified movie or view the yuks according to a variety of criteria. For its time, it was a pretty entertaining title.

Times have changed, though, and it's not so easy to impress CD-ROM owners anymore. That fact, however, hasn't stopped multimedia mavens from trying to lure hard-won greenbacks from those seeking a little comic relief. Five products now vie for the skeleton key to your funny bone.

It's All Relative, by Time Warner Interactive Group (TWIG) starts by advertising its affiliation with Comedy Central's Short Attention Span Theater show. In this era of the monthly merger, it shouldn't surprise you why TWIG wound up with this title. Media giant Time/Warner owns HBO, which owns Comedy Central. The CD, though, bears a closer resemblance to Comedy Central's Stand Up Stand Up, in which a given topic is touched upon by 30 or so comedians. (In fact, current Stand Up Stand Up host Laura Kightlinger makes a couple of appearances.) After a loud introduction, It's All Relative settles into its busy main menu, with rows of meaningless buttons so thin they'd make Kate Moss jealous. Moving the cursor over one pops up its name along with a small clip from one of the comedians (sort of like balloon help for the thick). To TWIG's credit, the interface is cleaned up slightly in It's All Relative's follow-up offering, Dating and Mating.

Picking a category brings up a new screen. Names of comedians commenting on the topic appear on the right. Again, moving the cursor over them produces a large, pixel-doubled picture of the comedian on the right. Clicking starts a QuickTime clip in the classic 160 X 120 frame. Not that the surprises are over. Audio levels vary so widely you may find yourself interfacing with the Sound control panel as often as the main menu. Even when audible, the audio quality is atrocious; most of the comedians lisp their "s"es as heavy audio compression takes its toll. Anyone whose seen much of Comedy Central (and you don't have to watch it long to qualify) will recognize at least some of the clips, and much of it

sounds as if the producers recorded off some low-quality videotapes. Often, it was hard to pick up the title of the clip started, and parts of the action where the video freezes were long enough to be distracting.

That said, there's a wide enough variety of material here for you to find something amusing, and some routines are worth having archived. Content is ultimately king in the consumer software game, and Comedy Central's stable of comedians — despite their relative obscurity — strut some of their best stuff on this and the other TWIG disk. It was hard to keep a straight face as a fretful fiancée's describes hors d'oeuvres serving at a wedding where the groom wants to hire a blues band — "Weenie? Prozac? Prozac? Weenie?" It's a little frustrating when the same routine shows up in multiple categories, but you can easily interrupt the joke.

In contrast to the comic cornucopia of the TWIG duo, Sanctuary Woods' two comic CD-ROMs star Dennis Miller, who is considerably more famous than most of the yuksters on the Comedy Central CDs. Miller may go down in history as Weekend Update's second most famous anchor behind Chevy Chase (sorry Brad Hall fans), and certainly ranks as one of the most smug. Unfortunately, as Chevy only went so far riding the comic anchor bit on his ill-fated late night show, Miller runs into problems giving a month by month blow of 1993 in four categories — World News, Sports, Show Biz and Politics.

Old news, it turns out, is bad news. Miller's one-liners draw heavily on other topics of the day that hardly anyone remembers. Miller muses that you may not want to say "Ho Ho Ho!" to the first female Santa that Clinton has picked and that Robin Williams, fresh from his success in Mrs. Doubtfire, is going to star in the remake of Steel Magnolias. As you can guess, it was hard to actually eject the disc while rolling on the floor from bits like this. It's bad enough that we're stuck with Miller for the duration, but the CD features none of the occasionally different camera angles of the Comedy Central CDs.

So maybe Miller needs someone with whom he can have an on-screen rapport. Sanctuary Woods takes a stab at this in "That's Geek To Me," one of the strangest infotainment CDs you may ever be forced to watch. Here, Miller appears to ad-lib wacky definitions to over 140 computer terms. On the right is an animated geek that looks like he stepped out of Beavis and Butt-Head. Following the faux definition from Miller, the geek presents the proper definition, often throwing a jab at Miller in the process. Frankly, some of the animations that surround the geek as he presents concepts are a lot more entertaining than Miller's daffy definitions. It would be great for the Electric Company crowd if Miller's references weren't so topical.

The Sanctuary Woods duo is not without merit, though. Dennis pauses long enough between derisions to allow the audio to catch up and the QuickTime is generally larger and less boxed in. The interfaces are also more tasteful, although getting around the news CD seemed burdensome. And you know you can't be having too fun a time when clicking a few buttons seems like a chore.

Finally, there's A Million Laughs from InterActive, a deceptive title if ever one existed. There's considerably less than a million jokes here, and the laugh-per-joke ratio is far below 1:1. Like the Miller discs, the Mac and Windows versions ship on the same CD-ROM, but the InterActive CD-ROM is a hybrid in other ways, featuring a joke database and "comedy club" where you can hear some of the prize punchlines for yourself. The animated comic in the comedy club really looks like Beavis (with a haircut) and sounds like your typical New York stand-up. What a shame that the jokes he tells would get him kicked out of the Borscht Belt, much less Catch a Rising Star. At least you get to cheer or jeer him; sadly, that's as interactive as any of these five CDs gets.

If the comic is disappointing, he's riotous compared to the jokes in the database. For example, let's say you're looking for a joke on, say, abortion, a topic that always has them cackling at cocktail parties. You get two quotes from Ronald Reagan saying the same thing in two different ways and an equally serious quote from Bella Abzug (obviously taking a break from her recent stand-up tour). Another joke is repeated three times. And for all those times you've needed a joke about Abraham Lincoln, rest assured that it's in there. It's a wonder why anyone would want many of these clunkers written down, much less categorized.

What have we learned? Unlike the InterActive title, one must keep material fresh. Unlike the Comedy Central CDs, one must keep it audible. Finally, unlike the powerful personalities behind CD-ROMs featuring Peter Gabriel and Prince, celebrity is not enough to carry a comedy CD-ROM. At least, not in the case of Dennis Miller. Barring a title featuring comic entities with a cult following like The Kids in the Hall, Monty Python's Flying Circus, or Mystery Science Theater 3000, variety is the best hope for creating a CD that can evoke chuckles from a wider audience than the digitized purveyors.

Humor, after all, is a funny thing.