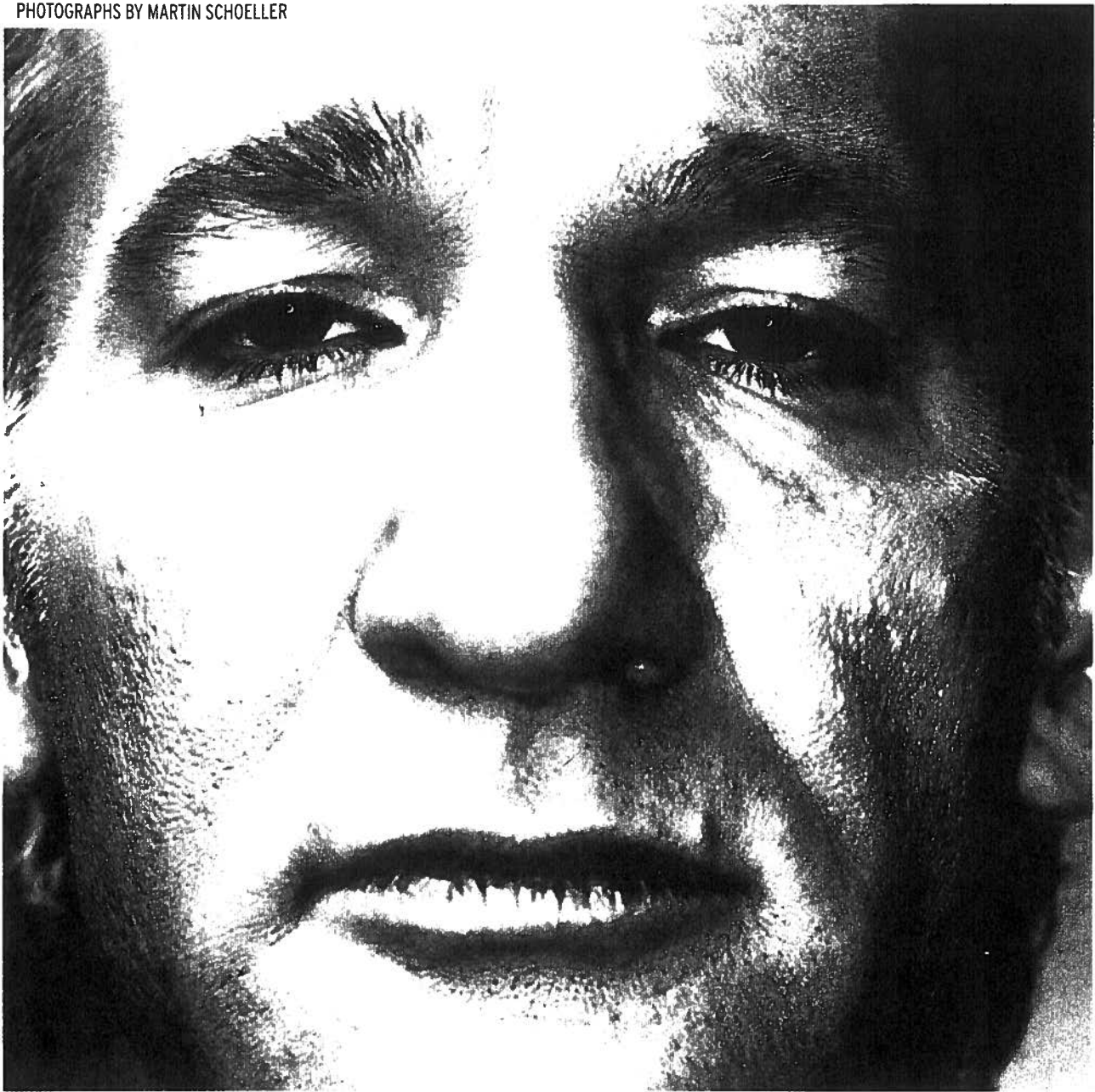




DO WE NEED ANOTHER

BY LARRY PLATT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN SCHOELLER



THIS GUY USED TO BE FUNNY. BUT EVER SINCE HE FOCUSED HIS "GOOD OLD-FASHIONED IRISH ANGER" ON KEN STARR, TALK SHOW HOST BILL MAHER HAS SEEMED MORE INTERESTED IN MAKING POINTS THAN IN GETTING LAUGHS.

PAIN IN THE ASS? →

BILL

Maher is sunk low in the plush backseat of a stretch limo. He has a bottle of Jack Daniel's in one hand, a striking young beauty on his arm, and he is passing me a pipeful of what I will soon learn is some very potent marijuana. Even so, Maher—one of the nation's most vocal advocates for legalizing drugs—has his lips pursed in anger. "It is so crossing a line," he spits out.

What has the 44-year-old comic upset is the previous night's appearance by Al Gore on *Late Night with David Letterman*. The highlight of the show was Gore's reading of a Top 10 list provided by Letterman's writers—the intent being to make Gore seem more self-deprecating and charming than he really is. "It's a Faustian deal with the devil these shows make," Maher spits out again, his face twisted in anger—just as it is at the most compelling moments on *Politically Incorrect*, his week-night gabfest on ABC. "These shows will joke about stereotypes—like Gore inventing the Internet—and then write him material to make him look like he's poking fun at a goofy thing he once said. Well, there's one tiny problem: The truth is that Gore *did* have a lot to do with bringing the Internet into people's homes, and he never said he 'invented' it, anyway. But they make this deal: 'Come on our show and we'll make you look good.' It's so wrong."

Four nights later, there is Maher on national TV, venting on the same issue, his rant an almost verbatim recitation of his buzzed limo ride. When one of Maher's guests, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, suggests that gigs like Gore's on *Letterman* "humanize the process," Maher explodes: "Falsely! Isn't the job of these shows to be detached critics of what's going on, to keep it a little bit real?"

Jackson tries again, softly: "To me, Bill Clinton doing *The Arsenio Hall Show* showed a connection—"

"But at least he actually played the sax!" Maher fairly screams, cutting off Jackson. "I think you of all people would be against this, because you actually have a personality. Bore and Gush are being given a personality by that show's writers."

It's one of the few times in political history that Jackson seems stunned into silence. Then, almost in a whisper, he says to Maher: "Don't be so hard on these guys. They're all we have." The audience laughs. The punch line is not the comic's but the reverend's—and that's just fine with Maher, because since Ken Starr descended upon Clinton's private life, Maher's been basking not so much in being funny but in being right. It is a dangerous transformation that has overtaken funnymen before, men like Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce. Their careers never recovered.

Back in the mid-'70s, a new generation of socially aware comics burst onto the scene. Influenced more by the crusading comedy of Sahl and

Bruce than the nontopical "take my wife, please" high jinks of Jack Benny and Bob Hope, the new generation included the likes of George Carlin, Richard Pryor, and Robert Klein. They were angry and anxious, and saw themselves as moral missionaries. Then, in the '90s, the dynamic shifted again. Irony became paramount, and Maher watched as guys like Jerry Seinfeld, with whom he'd come up through the New York comedy clubs, rode a wave of comic detachment to fame and fortune. "Nobody's angry anymore," says Maher, perhaps the last descendant of that comedy-with-a-purpose generation. "Chevy Chase, Letterman, Jerry, they all just stood back from the parade. Even if they did comment on the bigger picture of the world around them, it wasn't a comment that betrayed any belief one way or another, except to go for the joke."

Maher is seated on the sofa of his Hollywood office, beneath a pair of framed *Time* magazine covers of two of his earliest heroes, Hugh Hefner and Johnny Carson. In person, Maher seems shorter (he's five feet seven) and much more soft-spoken than on TV—his sudden and frequent paroxysms of political rage notwithstanding. On the air, he can come across as a swaggering alpha male and, indeed, he is known to be a fixture at Playboy Mansion bashes. Away from the camera, though, Maher is surprisingly shy. A former staffer recalls a Maher appearance on *Letterman* that was going well until the commercial break, when both men sat there awkwardly without once speaking to or looking at each other.

Maher was a regular stand-up performer on Carson's *Tonight Show*. After Carson's retirement in the early '90s, Maher made the circuit on the other late-night talk shows, but by then he'd had enough of their mainstream sensibilities. "They always discouraged you from being political," he says. "We'll get letters, they'd say. And they would. It was clear I had to open my own shop."

Seven years ago, Maher's brainchild, *Politically Incorrect*, debuted on the fledgling Comedy Central network. The idea was to create a kind of comic *McLaughlin Group*, to gather an eclectic mix of four guests to argue current events with a funny, opinionated host. It was 22 minutes of spontaneous television, a stark contrast to other late-night fare. There was Chris Rock calling right-wing pundit Laura Ingraham a "bitch" and Harvey Fierstein blasting Michael Reagan: "Fuck you and fuck your father!" (The cursing was bleeped.) Individually, the guests didn't always scintillate, but the incongruity of the panel's mix was often entertaining. It's not every day that you can see Bill Bradley make a highfalutin point on national TV while dim-witted comic actor Pauly Shore stares at him vacantly. In those early days, remembers a writer connected to the show, Maher would often instruct his staff, "I'm for whatever's funny."

But then came Ken Starr, and an irate Maher suddenly grew more pointed. In the early days of the scandal, Maher, who had moved the show to ABC in 1997, went on air and suggested a pithy way Clinton could explain the Monica Lewinsky imbroglio to the American public: "She blew me. Fuck you."

"What they did to Clinton incensed me," Maher says. "The way I see it, everyone was outraged because he was on the phone to a congressman while she was blowing him. Well, no—he's working through

the blow job! That's how much this guy is on the case! How can you not, like, salute a guy for that?"

In the past three years, Maher's outrage has seemed to liberate him. In September, he even ditched his opening monologue, further distancing himself from the likes of Letterman and Leno. Instead of settling for one-liners, he's become a plain-speaking, free-swinging pundit in his own right. On the night of the second presidential debate between Gore and George W. Bush in October, for example, Maher cut a stark contrast to the talking heads who filled the postdebate

he didn't hold back: "He is a liar... [But] his lying is rooted in pandering. He doesn't lie for as nefarious reasons as Bush; he lies because he wants you to like him, which is so sad." In the next breath, he shouted down liberal journalist Faria Chideya on the issue of Bush's opposition to hate-crimes legislation: "I'm with [the right-wingers] on this one," he said. "Hate crime is thought crime. A crime should be a crime. You kill somebody, that's it. You don't need to ask what's going on in their head."

Thanks to such equal-opportunity strafing, *PI* is now one of the few venues on national TV for alternative thought, and thanks to

Maher's recent contract extension with ABC, it will be around for at least two more years. "Our thinking," says ABC senior vice president Andrea Wong, "is that Bill brilliantly toes that fine line between being funny and being a commentator. He has a rare talent for managing the conversation while at the same time getting his point across, often in an outrageous way."

On occasion, he goes beyond outrageous. On a recent show, Maher entertained the notion that child molestation may not be as traumatic for children as we tend to think. The topic came up because one of Maher's guests that night, gossip columnist Liz Smith, had written in her recently published memoir of her experience being molested as a child. "I rather enjoyed it," Smith wrote. Armed with Smith's account and a scientific study of 37,000 victims of molestation that found no overall link between their childhood experiences and problems in adulthood, Maher wondered whether it was possible that, while "molestation is wrong," it may not be as harmful as we think.

Actor Paul Sorvino, also a guest that night, would have none of it: "This is a scurrilous thing, very outrageous," he said.

"But it's science," Maher responded, asserting that Sorvino's reaction "makes me think we live in a communist country where the facts come second."

Maher's passionate critiques of the drug war are similarly radical for TV—particularly on a network owned by Disney. His argument for the legalization of *all* drugs is typically libertarian, as he laid out in a strikingly serious address to Arianna Huffington's Shadow Convention during the Democratic Convention in Philadelphia. Government has no right to interfere with "what goes on inside people's heads," he's argued

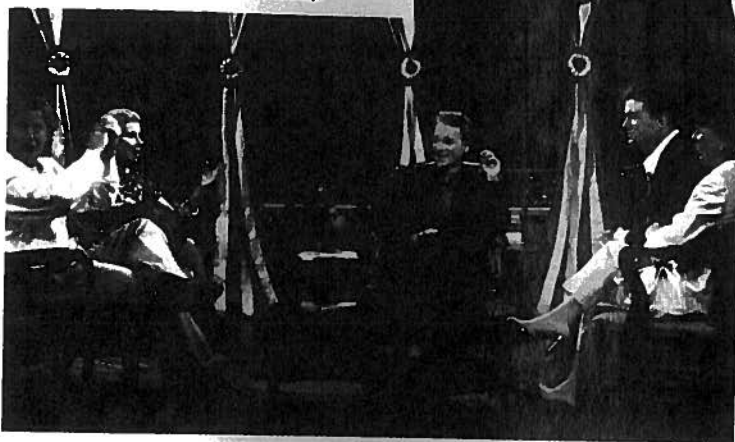
on the show, going so far as to charge that the Partnership for a Drug-Free America is really a lobbying arm for the prescription-drug and liquor industries, so they can maintain their strangleholds over America's legally protected addictions.

So far, Maher's stridency hasn't seemed to have hurt his ratings. He rejoices in the market research that finds only 14 percent of his audience agrees with his more incendiary opinions. And yet people keep tuning in, some 2.5 million viewers a night—which is roughly equivalent

Continued on page 98

THE ECLECTIC MIX:

HOST MAHER STIRS UP THE ACTION WITH (L-R) BILLY BUSH, JOAN RIVERS, ALEC BALDWIN, AND SENATOR BARBARA BOXER (D-CALIF.).



"DOLE WAS ASKED WHETHER TOBACCO CAUSES CANCER, AND HE SAID, 'HOW SHOULD I KNOW? I'M NOT A DOCTOR.' ISN'T THAT MORE OFFENSIVE THAN CLINTON LYING ABOUT PORKING A FAT GIRL?"

airwaves with careful, measured tones. Maher took the stage that night carrying notes. "Do you believe there's such a thing as global warming?" he asked guest Naomi Judd, after she heralded Bush as a man of integrity. "Bush tonight said that science has a lot of different opinions about global warming. Now, that's a lie bought by oil companies, who have given him his money. There's not a difference of opinion on global warming; almost all scientists agree it's already a problem. To me, that's not integrity."

When the subject turned to Gore, whom Maher says he also "hates,"

BILL MAHER

Continued from page 73

to *Letterman*'s numbers. They tune in, Maher believes, because they're starved for something authentic.

"Bill has become a satirist in the best sense of the word, in the Swift and Twain tradition," says Huffington, a close friend. "It's satire driven by a sense of social justice and passion." It was Huffington who, one night at her home, urged Maher to look in on her sleeping children in an ongoing effort to spur him to settle down and give up his womanizing. "It didn't work," she says.

As Huffington suggests, Maher is nothing if not a crusading moralist, railing against the phonies who "play" the political game. That's why he champions Clinton, who, in his view, at least lies about the right thing: sex. "It's not whether you lie; it's what you lie about," Maher says. "Like the time [Bob] Dole was asked if tobacco causes cancer and he said, 'How should I know? I'm not a doctor.' Isn't that more offensive than Clinton lying about porking a fat girl?"

"I think Bill Maher is one of the most interesting people in the political universe right now," says Clinton's recently departed press secretary Joe Lockhart, who has done the show and clicked with Maher. "He's a populist libertarian whose genre is totally different from the other late-night guys, who make jokes at the expense of people. Bill crawls into the system, shakes things up a bit, and makes people look at things differently."

He certainly had Lockhart looking at things differently on the night of our limo ride. After Lockhart did a guest stint on *PI*'s college tour (Maher does about 10 live shows a year on college campuses), we met up with him in a trendy restaurant. Lockhart, who had two weeks left on the White House clock, was commenting on his boss's visceral connection with African-American voters when the Maher snarl surfaced: "I'll tell ya why blacks love Clinton—because they know what it's like to be fucked with!" he said, leaning forward in his seat, the words shooting out like verbal artillery. "They know what it's like to live eight to a one-bedroom tenement apartment where there's no privacy and everyone knows who everybody else is fucking and then here's the president, and people aren't even letting him get away with the occasional blow job!"

Lockhart didn't miss a beat. "Yes, but I categorically deny that there are interns in those tenements," he said, causing Maher to burst out in laughter. "I probably shouldn't have said that with a writer present, but what the hell—he's from a monthly, and I'm done in two weeks."

Maher literally slapped his knee; Lockhart's crack, for that moment, had dulled the sharp edge of his anger and reminded him of the power of a punch line. It's a constant balancing act for Maher, trying to find the proper equilibrium between outrage and comedy. Still, he won't apologize for his passion. "I've got good old-fashioned Irish anger," he says, "and I'm proud of it."

As a student of comedy and politics, Maher is

aware of the ghosts of cut-ups past. He is the closest thing yet to the reincarnation of Mort Sahl, who, in the early '60s, earned a reputation as a truth-telling iconoclast during the reign of another youthful president who was popular with the ladies. It was Sahl who noted "liberals feel unworthy of their possessions, and conservatives feel they deserve everything they've stolen"; it was Sahl, nearly 30 years before the term "political correctness" entered the zeitgeist, who said, "I went to my dressing room between shows and an attorney for the NAACP was waiting for me. He wanted to know why I don't have any Negroes in my act."

Maher has long been a fan of Sahl, though he's also aware of how Sahl's career bottomed out in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination. Intent on proving conspiracy, Sahl took to reading to audiences from the pages of the Warren Commission Report. It was not unlike Lenny Bruce, who at one point in his "act" started reading the transcripts from his own obscenity trial. The moral? "Once you start reading from transcripts of anything, you're through," Maher says now—noting that not once has he read from the Starr Report. "I've learned that if you're really wanting to get a message across, it has to go down with a sweetening dollop of comedy. You've got to keep reminding yourself that your point has to be a pill in the dog's food."

Four years ago, Sahl appeared on *PI*. Maher says Sahl told the following joke: "They asked what kind of underwear Clinton wears, and he said, 'Boxers.' They asked Dole, and he said, 'Depends.'"

Maher's retort was, "Jeez, you've been hanging around [Borscht Belt comic] Jackie Leonard too long." That enraged Sahl, who told others later that Maher couldn't carry Jackie Leonard's bags. (Through a spokesman, Sahl declined to speak to me for this article.)

Maher may have vowed not to repeat the mistakes of Sahl and Bruce, but it is no easy task. Like Bruce, Maher seems to court battles with censors. He tries to work the phrase "blow job" into at least a couple of shows a week, and he fought with ABC's office of Standards and Practices when it wouldn't run a skit that satirized the success of the Harry Potter books. In Maher's sketch, the author was Harry Pothead, a burned-out '60s relic who had written an unwieldy, unintelligible book. The censors said they couldn't air anything that glorified marijuana use; Maher's failed—and perhaps a bit disingenuous—response was that the virtually brain-dead character illustrated the perils of pot.

Like both Sahl and Bruce, Maher also seems to have become something of an intimidating presence. Countless politicians now refuse to do *PI*, because they don't want to risk being subjected to his unscripted wrath. Self-assured pols like Jesse Ventura and Jesse Jackson are regulars, but pols with handlers tend to stay away. Much to Maher's dismay, even Senator John McCain has kept his distance. "He lied," says Maher. "I'd been speaking glowingly of him, because I thought he had the issue—let's face it, the two-party system comes down to choosing between two bought-and-sold parties—and I'm partial to war heroes. When it

was Bush versus him, I kept saying how I couldn't believe that this party of tough guys was favoring the empty suit over the hero. He said he'd come on the show the next time he was in California, and the next thing I know, he's doing Leno, right down the road. So I'm even too much of a loose cannon as an ally. That's okay, because he showed that he's really not Mr. Maverick, once he swallowed all pride and went to the Shadow Convention, which was supposed to be about alternatives, and spoke about nothing but voting for Bush. That was a huge turnoff."

But even Maher's buddy Lockhart isn't surprised McCain failed to show. "Sorry to say, but the advice I'd give most politicians is to stay away from Bill," says the former spokesman. "The risk-to-reward ratio isn't very good. The guys who are good on the show, like Jesse Ventura, don't care about the downside. When the mainstream media gives politicians a bonus for speaking their minds, guys will line up at that studio. But we're not there yet, not the way the media seizes on every little misstatement and exaggeration."

After a recent taping, Maher seemed pretty harmless, speaking softly while picking at a piece of luncheon flounder in his office, and I inquired about the origin of the outrage that has the most powerful people in the nation's capital cowering. "New Jersey," Maher said. "One of the cool things about being on TV every night is that my mom can see my dad, who died eight years ago, every time I blow up at somebody."

Maher was born in the small town of River Vale, New Jersey, where he was raised in an Irish-Catholic and Jewish home. His Irish-Catholic father, Bill, was an NBC news editor with a combustible passion for current events. In the early '60s, the dinner table would come alive with the senior Maher's ruminations about his heroes, President Kennedy and the reform-minded Pope John XXIII. By the end of 1963, however, both were dead, and Maher's father—as politically impetuous as his son would later prove to be—became so turned off by the stodgy finger-wagging of Pope Paul VI that he pulled his family from church. "I was, like, 'Great! I love Pope Paul,'" Maher recalls. "'Make this guy a saint right now.'"

Maher's father became disenchanting as the losses of 1963 gave way to the turmoil of the late '60s. The son watched as his father grew more cynical and angry, which helped turn the younger Maher into a sensitive teen. "He was a very thoughtful boy," says Maher's mother, Julie, now 81. "He was by no means the class clown."

Maher's parents met while both were serving in World War II. Julie was a nurse, and Bill fought under General Patton. Today, even Maher the cynic talks reverently of his parents' generation and what they did in World War II; Maher went so far as to vote for Dole in 1996 as a paean to his father. A couple of years ago, he took a woman he'd just started dating to see *Saving Private Ryan*. When the movie opened with a close-up on the aged face of the Matt Damon character visiting a graveyard, Maher suddenly saw his father on the screen and began sobbing uncontrollably.

"All those guys of that generation wear that same shitty polo shirt and have that same look, you know?" he says now, shaking his head as if to acknowledge just how out of character such displays of emotion are for him. "The whole ride home, I couldn't stop sobbing and gasping." He pauses. "I, uh, didn't get laid."

Now, every few weeks, Maher takes the red-eye back east and spends Saturday with his mother. "It's wonderful for me, because I have someone to eat breakfast with and watch videos with," says Julie. When she goes to bed at 11 P.M., Maher hooks up with his friend of over 20 years, Max Rabinowitz, and the two hit, in Maher's words, a "pony-tailed, douche-bag-doorman club" until dawn.

Max, who sometimes uses the stage name Max Raven, describes himself as a writer-actor and a Wall Street operative, but 30 years ago, he was one of the last men on death row in New York state. He spent 10 years there on a murder rap that was eventually overturned. When the real murderer was captured, Max got out, but he wasn't bitter. "Hey, I was a pretty bad guy," he says. "I did 10 years for one I didn't do, but there were plenty of things I should have been put away for."

"Yeah, he's killed some people, but, I mean, he's not a bad guy," says Maher, smiling sheepishly as he hears himself say the words.

They met when Maher was a fledgling comic at Catch a Rising Star in New York and Max was a constant presence at the club—seven nights a week, six hours a night. Max first became intrigued when Maher was reprimanded by fellow comic Richard Belzer for using the word "cunt" too often in his act. One day, Maher used the word "pusillanimous" onstage, prompting an audience member to ask what it meant. Maher, then an English grad fresh out of Cornell, proceeded to harangue the crowd on the sad state of the country's use of language, putting down his audience all the while. Max decided he had to meet the guy and ended up drinking with him till dawn. Since then, agents, publicists, and well-intentioned Hollywood friends have counseled Maher to cut his burly friend loose. "He tells them to go fuck themselves," says Max, proudly.

The Maher that Max and other close friends speak of is decidedly different from the ubiquitous image of Maher in Hollywood—that of an arrogant, unfeeling playboy. But not even Maher denies that he has a terrible reputation. Max chalks it up to his friend's being a "terrible boss" (he lasted about three months as Maher's bodyguard). Indeed, Maher let me sit in on a *PI* writers' meeting, and the tension in the room was palpable. Maher sat granite-faced while his court jesters tried to prod him into either laughing or scowling. "What else do you have?" was his constant grumble.

For Maher, the lack of warmth in that room is strategic. "I need those guys to be cranky, because that's when the show works," he says after the meeting. "We have to be pissed off to be good." Others say Maher's shyness is often interpreted as arrogance, and that Maher, ever the alpha male, is loath to appear sensitive. "He doesn't like me talking about it, but he's been wonderful working

with me on A Place Called Home, a home for at-risk children," says Arianna Huffington. "He's supported these at-risk students financially and also spent time there with them one-on-one."

Maher believes his reputation stems from one fact: that he's over 40, single, and loving it. "I don't know if you remember your American history, but my analogy is to the *Dred Scott* case, the pivotal Supreme Court case leading up to the Civil War in 1857," he says. "Dred Scott was a runaway slave who got to a free state, and if he was allowed to live free after running away, then every slave would do that. Well, that's how wives see me. I'm the slave who has found his freedom, an example of the 'emancipated man,' to borrow Gay Talese's description of Frank Sinatra. I love that phrase."

But not everyone's impressed. "I was reading this interview with those dickheads from *South Park*," he says. "The question was, 'Where do you see yourself at 40?' and the guy was like, 'I want to be married with kids. I certainly don't want to be Bill Maher.' See, people don't like an unmarried man in his 40s still chasing young girls—they think it's sleazy, and it's not. I love women—I haven't married, so that should prove it."

His face twists in outrage. "So, you know what, Mr. *South Park*? I think you might want to be Bill Maher when you're 44 and you have three snot-nosed kids crawling on you and you haven't had fun sex in eight years. You might very well want to be Bill Maher. I know I'm enjoying it."

It's late at a chic Beverly Hills club, and Maher and his date are seated next to me. They are making out on a sofa. "Hey, Bill! It's a pullout!" cries Maher's friend Kato Kaelin, another confidant Maher has kept despite warnings from associates. If anything, Maher has gotten bolder in recent years in championing his pal Kato's comedic talents, an appreciation that appears genuine. Kato's goofy quips keep Maher giggling all night.

Maher's date tonight is charming, young, and stunning. When not slobbering into her mouth, Maher is gentlemanly and solicitous. Suddenly, a troubled John Salley approaches. Recently retired from the Los Angeles Lakers, the seven-foot Salley is now hosting TV's *BET Live*; he'd appeared on *PI* earlier in the week, and Maher invited him to stop by tonight. But it appears the self-important, Armani-clad dude at the door didn't recognize Salley and tried to charge him a \$300 cover.

As Salley tells him this, Maher looks around the crowded club and notices there are no other black faces. "This sounds like celebrity racial profiling," I say, and Maher's eyes meet mine for an instant—like he's thinking, Should I or shouldn't I?—and then he's up and storming toward the door. He gets in the club promoter's face, and the body language is instantly recognizable—precisely what can be seen every weeknight on national TV. When he comes back, Maher looks at me. "You want to know why people who don't know me say I'm an asshole?" he says. "That guy will now tell 50 people what an asshole I am."

He pauses for a sip of his cocktail. "But fuck 'em," he says, smiling priggishly. "I was right." ■



Your eyes tell you
it's an SUV.

Your right foot
begs to differ.

Introducing the
200-hp Mazda Tribute.
The SUV with the soul
of a sports car.



MAZDA
Get in. Be moved.

1-800-639-1000
MazdaUSA.com