

9.7.08

QUESTIONS FOR HARRY SHEARER

One Man, Many Media

The comedian talks about his new album with the controversial cover art, his new video installation and what the nominating conventions will be like in 2012.

Q Your new album, "Songs of the Bushmen," is a collection of jazzy compositions that skewer members of the Bush administration and whose cover depicts the president with a bone Photoshopped through his nose. What kind of bone is that? It looks like it could be a tibia. I would say it is a leg bone, but I am not a doctor.

Do you find the image offensive? No, I find it jocular. That is why I did it. He looks like the bone is very comfortably fitted in there.

Clear Channel, which owns many conservative radio stations, apparently disagrees and has banned an ad for your CD. Why did you bother approaching them in the first place?

They own the digital billboards in Chicago, so you have to do business with them. They own more radio stations than God. They even own a progressive radio station in L.A.

As a musician, comedic actor, radio host and left-leaning blogger, how exactly do you describe your line of work? The only time it really counts is when I am filling out the landing card when I am coming back to the United States. I describe myself as an entertainer, which I think is fair.

Doesn't that raise the expectations of the customs officials? What if they ask you to do Mr. Burns, one of your voices on "The Simpsons"? Sometimes they do, and sometimes I oblige. I have a need to return home.

This Friday, you have a show opening at the Susan Inglett Gallery in New York. Are you a visual artist of some kind? I collect video footage of political and media types who are always yakking at us on television — the footage I collect is of them not talking. The project is called "Non-Talking Heads."

Is it supposed to be deep? Some people find it vaguely ominous.

What initially led you into comedy? The main influence was funny people I heard, starting with radio — Jack Benny, Bob and Ray, Stan Freberg. My parents and I would listen to radio at the dinner table, and then I would put myself to sleep listening to radio.

What did your father do for a living? My dad died when I was pretty young, I was 12. My mother inherited his business, which was a Texaco gas station in Redondo Beach, Calif. It was highly improbable. She operated it. She sat in the office every day. I pumped gas all summer. I kept threatening to get her on "What's My Line?"

With a story like that, you should run for political office. You have a great American narrative, as they say. It's a real American story, as they say.

And not every American has one. Apparently not. Your story has to pass muster at the Real American story desk. I think it has to involve a certain degree of legal immigration, a certain degree of familial struggle and a magical amount of celebrity at the end.

So then Katrina victims don't qualify as having a real American story. Judging by their invisibility at the conventions, apparently not.

Is it too soon to start planning the 2012 conventions? It's never too soon. In four years, I don't think there will be a big stage. Each convention will be a reality show. I think there will be a camera following the candidates around so we can watch them eat and argue with their limo drivers.

Are you concerned you will have no one to satirize once Bush leaves the White House? My kind of fallback position is to rely on the wisdom of the framers of our system, who had this unique insight that power turns everybody to dreck.

I take it you are not a surrogate for Obama. I am nobody's surrogate.

What do you make of the word "surrogate"? Until this election, it was used mainly to describe surrogate moms. It suggests you are carrying your candidate's baby.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED, CONDENSED AND EDITED BY DEBORAH SOLOMON

