



By Joel Schechter

DESPITE THE ONGOING CONTRAGATE INVESTIGATION, there is at least one more big revelation to come: Ronald Reagan never fully abandoned his previous career as a professional entertainer. Over the past six and a half years he has been seen performing for nightclub audiences in San Francisco and Washington, D.C. His act opened this summer at the Ballroom, a club in Manhattan.

The White House staff will deny it and claim that some comedian named Jim Morris is impersonating the president. But Morris has told the press that Reagan is doing the comedian's job for him. Reagan has never stopped delivering anecdotes and one-liners; even in the hospital, wounded by an assassin's bullet, he told the nation: "I forgot to duck." As an impersonator of Reagan, Jim Morris frequently finds himself stealing lines from the president. "Can you believe I [Reagan] actually said that?" he asks in the middle of his nightclub act.

Some of his worst one-liners come directly from Reagan, and Morris has to suffer the consequences. "I haven't heard so many groans since I was in the intensive care unit of the Bethesda Naval Hospital," he said the night I saw his act in New York. Despite his excessive fondness for puns (hence the groans), Morris has won considerable praise this summer for "An Evening with the Pres-

ident." And, barring impeachment, he will probably be revising and performing the same show for the next 18 months.

Morris follows a succession of presidential mimics, most of whom have faded from public attention after their inspirations have left the White House. Every suspicion that the president is a liar, an impostor or a master of the "politics of image" has been confirmed on nightclub stages, by comedians who recreate themselves in the president's image: Vaughn Meader as Kennedy, Stacy Keach as Lyndon Johnson in *Macbird*, David Frye as Nixon. Before moving his new show to New York, Jim Morris was in Boston for several months, imitating Reagan in Garry Trudeau's cabaret revue, *Rap Master Ronnie* (the title song of which features the president as a rap singer).

Meet the Prez: Morris also formerly operated "Rent a Reagan," a service that allowed individuals and companies to lease the president's double for public appearances. Little did he know he was competing with the White House again: a contra fund raiser was offering donors a personal meeting with the commander in chief. Morris' current act gives citizens a chance not only to meet the president, but also to ask everything they want to know. His show thrives on the intense curiosity of those who want to know what Reagan knew, and when he forgot it, in the contragate scandal. The inquisitive need pay only a \$15 cover charge, or buy a

few drinks, to hear a man whose smooth, deep voice, highly mobile eyebrows and boyish pompadour are very much like the president's.

Morris' nightly press conferences democratize the presidency, in a sense, by making the man answerable to anyone who visits the nightclub. And in this instance, questioning is not restricted to a carefully screened press corps; many of these questions will never be heard from the press. There's a great interest in the chief executive's sex life, and his future as an actor. Morris' answer about Iran—"I ran in '80 and '84 and won, and that's all you have to know"—dismisses the topic quickly with a pun. Like his model in the White House, the comedian has rehearsed most of his answers in advance. In fact, he is generally better prepared than the other president—and funnier. The White House may want to hire this man as a stand-in—if it has not already secretly done so sometime in the past.

Morris' most satiric statements treat White House scandal as if it is part of a logical, official program. He says that as president he had to approve of contra drug smuggling because: "How can we have a successful 'Just Say No' campaign if we don't have any drugs imported?"

Throughout the evening, when not hesitating and stumbling through statements (or misstatements) as confidently as Ronald Reagan, Morris captures the president's

antic side: the leader who would be comedian. Who else but the president would ask how many White House advisers it takes to change a lightbulb, and then answer: "None, I prefer to remain in the dark."

His face is often bemused, as he is reminded of *another* anecdote, which he only half-completes because it reminds him of another anecdote. He warns his listeners that they better laugh, or America will fall behind the Soviets in its build-up of jokes. "You know what happens if you don't laugh...I'll bomb." Too often, however, these puns trivialize the evening's promise as political humor. No president could be so desperate for votes or laughter that he would announce, "I just flew in from Geneva and, boy, are my arms limited."

Morris excels in his vocal imitation of the president. He can say almost anything and sound authoritative (as can Reagan, most of the time) with carefully measured and sonorous intonation. At the conclusion of his presidential press conference, Jim Morris leaves the stage and returns to offer some other vocal impressions. Brief speeches feature the voices of George Bush, Ollie North, Dan Rather, Julia Child. And assuming one of them is elected president in 1988, Morris may outlast Ronald Reagan as a popular entertainer. ■

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