





WEIRD AL

WHERE ROCK 'N' ROLL MEETS 'FIDDLER ON THE ROOF'

BY JO ANN LLOYD

"WEIRD AL" YANKOVIC (ARCH '80) has been at it for more than a quarter century: making music, making fun of music, making fun of people making music.

The legend of how the Grammy Award-winning-parodist got his start is widely known. His first hit, "My Bologna," was recorded in the bathroom in the Cal Poly Graphic Arts Building, across the hall from KCPR radio, where Yankovic worked as a disc jockey.

Most people also know that he plays a mean polka on his accordion.

And another well-known fact is that he got his nickname during his freshman year in the dorms at Cal Poly. He took it on professionally when he started doing shifts at KCPR. "It seemed appropriate, because I definitely played a lot of weird music," he said.

That, and "Weird Al" has a much snappier ring to it than Alfred Matthew Yankovic.

A lesser known fact, perhaps, is that Yankovic was Lynwood's citywide spelling bee champ in both the fifth and sixth grades, was a straight-A student, and was valedictorian at his high school graduation.

Success in school came pretty easily to Yankovic. And while he enjoyed his days at Cal Poly, he said they would have been a whole lot more fun if he didn't have to go to class or do any homework.

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Success didn't come so easily after graduation. He spent a couple years trying to solicit a record deal. "In the meantime – to pay for my burritos – I worked in the mailroom at a radio syndication company in Culver City."

Turns out, though, success was worth the wait – for Yankovic and for his loyal band of followers, who now organize an

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occasional event – AlCon – dedicated solely to Yankovic.

Generally held in a hotel ballroom in the Chicago area, AlCon "happens whenever it happens," Yankovic said. So far, there have been three. In addition to the "Weird Al" look-alike contest, the event includes a trivia contest, talent show and "garage sale" at which they auction off his memorabilia for charity. "One year a baggie of my dryer lint fetched \$600," he boasted.

The "King of Parody" has diverse personal musical tastes. "But my favorites are songs about whales and anything with a bagpipe solo." What? Not an accordion?

Yankovic says he likes today's music, "but actually liked last Thursday's a little better."

His favorite musician? His drummer, Jon Schwartz. "He's pretty cool," Yankovic said.

His idol? "This week it's Ra the sun god."

On profanity in music, Yankovic deadpans: "There's not nearly enough. Mind you, I never use any profanity myself, but I think Celine Dion would benefit greatly from going a little gangsta."

His own music runs the gamut from hip hop and rock to polka and pop. He jokes that it wasn't until shortly after his

sixth album that he "really started to get serious about this whole show business thing."

Not that he approves of all show business. For instance, he disapproves of the hit TV show "American Idol."

"I think it's terrible that a TV show is dictating who becomes a pop star. Why can't they still create pop stars the old-fashioned way – with radio station payola?"

Yankovic gets the ideas for his songs "by listening to the voices in my head."

His songs don't carry political or social messages. "My main goal is just to be funny and to try to get people not to take themselves too seriously. I suppose it could be argued that a few of my songs make a statement of some sort, but primarily I'm just going for laughs," he said.

And as for the thrill of performing live? "There's no greater thrill than interacting with a live audience, and it's always a big surprise to see what's on the deli tray backstage," he said.

He describes his concerts as "a rock and comedy multimedia extravaganza" with an audience that "ranges from toddlers to geriatrics." Or as one Internet fan said, "Dude you rule. You're like rock 'n' roll meets 'Fiddler on the Roof.'"

Yankovic is on the road again, touring to promote his latest CD, "Straight Outta Lynwood." The tour began in early March in Auckland, New Zealand, then Australia. Now on the North American leg of his tour, he's performing five or six shows a week in about 100 cities to audiences as large as 20,000. The

tour includes a performance on Oct. 9 at the Performing Arts Center at Cal Poly.

Although the entertainer's degree from Cal Poly is in architecture, he actually does put it to good use. "I got my degree in architecture so that I would be able to write out all my lyrics in beautiful architectural lettering. Really, you should see the lyric sheets, they're beautiful."

His knowledge of architecture also came in handy, he explained, when he had his bathroom remodeled and he showed the contractor where to put the toilet.

Yankovic lives in Los Angeles with his wife of six years, Suzanne. They have a four-year-old daughter, Nina, a poodle named Bela, and a cockatiel named Bo.

His grand plans for the future include "a nap, and maybe a cheese Danish afterwards." □

(Editor's Note: Yankovic will take part in the university's Journalism Week and give a performance in the Performing Arts Center on Oct. 9.)