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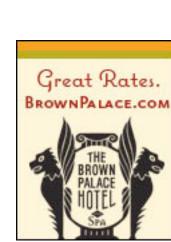
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The truth-teller

American humorist Bill Maher says, "Drugs are good, and religion is bad." by Dale Bridges

Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand. -Mark Twain

I do think the patriotic thing to do is to

make a country better but by pointing out its flaws? -Bill Maher

critique my country. How else do you





I he great thing about doing an interview with Bill Maher is that I can pretty much write whatever I want in this introduction and people will read it. There are limits, of course. For instance, if I start to pontificate on the biological properties of earwax or the mating habits of the majestic manatee, readers might decide to skip the

intro altogether and jump straight to the Q&A section. But as long as I keep the discussion more or less on topic, I can talk about whatever I want. That's one of the advantages of writing about popular culture — it's popular. Maher is an intelligent iconoclast who inspires controversy and attracts a diverse audience; everyone from Thoreauvian political activists to Pabst-guzzling frat boys find something interesting about this guy. He has been a professional humorist for almost 30 years, and in that time he has built a reputation for challenging our most sacred political, cultural and theological didactics. He walks a shaky tightrope between social criticism and

wanted to interview Maher in the first place. Every week, my colleagues at this paper write important, complicated stories about the socio-political state of the world, and yet, I predict this interview with a stand-up comedian will be read by more people than any article we've published all year (except perhaps the recent 4/20 cover story — thank you, stoners). On the one hand, that's kind of depressing, but on the other hand, it's a great opportunity to reach a large audience. Unless, of course, I screw it up. Which I probably will.

I suppose I could use this introduction to talk about Maher's opinions on global warming or health care or clubbing baby seals in Canada, but I'm not going to, even though these issues are important. That would be disingenuous, like promising ice cream and then serving Brussels sprouts. You picked up this article to read something new about a fascinating celebrity, and that's what I'm going to give you, albeit in a strange and unorthodox way. Instead of talking about "important issues," I would like to talk to you about humor in American culture: Where does it come from, and why should we fight to protect it?

Many would argue that the art form of stand-up comedy originated with the spinning-bow tie vaudevillian performers of the late 1800s and early 1900s, and while this assessment wouldn't be completely false, it's also not completely true. Telling jokes is one thing, but engaging in subversive satirical art is something entirely different. It is my contention that modern humorists such as Bill Maher owe their careers to a man named James W. Paige,

Now, don't feel bad if you've never heard of this Paige fellow, because most people haven't. He lived a fairly innocuous existence in the 1800s, went completely bankrupt toward the end of that century, and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave after he died.

young men who could not turn their "Eureka!" moments into viable business models. Paige was one of those men. An unrealistic perfectionist and an obsessive tinkerer, Paige fiddled with the details of his infernal typesetting machine for two decades before he discovered that it had no practical use in the newspaper industry, for which it was originally intended. However, Paige was blessed with unrestrained optimism and a silver tongue, and while he was working on his Compositor, he was able to convince various wealthy individuals to invest enormous sums

of money in his hopeless contraption, always promising profits in the future. One of those investors was a man

Most people knew Clemens by his penname, Mark Twain, under which he wrote some of the greatest works of fiction in the English language, including The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, The Prince and the Pauper, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Pudd'nhead Wilson. He was one of the most successful and beloved writers of his time. However, in the 1880s, Clemens was no longer a precocious, young artist. He was an elderly husband and a

publishing company forced Clemens to declare bankruptcy in 1895. He was in trouble. However, Clemens was a proud man and announced publicly that he was going to pay back his debts before he died. That was a tall order considering he was flat broke and owed more than \$200,000 to various entities around the country. In an effort to recover his good name, he embarked on an ambitious lecture tour that consisted of nearly 150 appearances on five continents. This would have been a grueling campaign for anyone, but for a man who was penniless and about to turn 60, it was particularly harrowing. As a young man, Clemens had gone on lecture tours to support his writing, and he had not enjoyed the experience. He stated that he would never put

himself through that kind of torture again. But these were desperate times. He had no choice.

Clemens' lectures were a combination of well-timed jokes, small-town anecdotes, readings from his popular novels and biting social satire. They were more successful than he could have ever hoped. Audiences around the world crowded into theaters to see this mumbling, wild-haired American with the droopy mustache and spidery eyebrows. Somehow he managed to keep them on the edges of their seats with nothing more than a raspy drawl and a trusty cigar. The lectures were always amusing, of course, but it wasn't just about getting laughs. Clemens used humor as a cultural weapon. He poked fun at the political tyrants of the day and openly advocated shocking social change, such as women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery. He criticized Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. No one was safe from his rapier wit. He combined literary storytelling and social commentary with live performance in a way that no one else had ever seen before. By the time Clemens returned from the lecture circuit, he had paid off every cent of his debt and emerged as one of pop culture's first international icons.

It would be misleading to say that Bill Maher is the modern embodiment of Samuel Clemens. If any living comedian deserves that honor, it's Bill Cosby. However, Maher does carry on a tradition that has become crucial to the notions of liberty and individualism that we often take for granted in America. Stand-up comedy is a truthtelling ritual, and in tumultuous times, one can gauge the level of personal freedom in a society by how far its

humorists are allowed to push the envelope. Maher is one of the few comedians who refuses to placate his audience and constantly pushes the intellectual and ethical boundaries of our culture. Like Clemens, Maher insists on attacking the most powerful people and ideas in this country, and it's important that he be allowed to continue to do so. If the Twains and Mahers of the world are ever restricted from expressing themselves, we'll know America is in real trouble. We don't always have to agree with him — in fact, I'm fairly certain Maher would be the first to suggest that we aggressively challenge his opinions — but it's good to know he's out there, fighting for the right to offend us.

If we can still laugh at ourselves, there is hope. When the laughter stops, that's when the real trouble begins.

over the years. How would you describe your current political and social ideology? **Bill Maher:** Wow, it sounds like I'm trying to get into college. Well, primarily I'd describe it as "funny," because if I

one goal, to be extremely funny, so when I get off the stage, people say, "Wow, I spent money on him in the recession, and it was worth it." But it is a pleasure to have a whole new act. I mean, six

stop being funny, then I'm out of a job, and in this economy nobody wants to be out of a job. That's my number



people's opinions if you think they're being complacent about their beliefs.

been fun. I just got back from Tulsa and St. Louis and Kansas City, and people are just hungry to hear about this new world — and to make fun of it. People need to laugh. BW: You're often accused of coming down hard on conservatives, but you're also critical of liberals, which I think is important.

on, I got booed by your crowd" — you know, because he's more conservative now. And I said, "Dennis, they boo me every week, and it's my show." I think unless you're getting booed you're wimping out. You're just preaching to the converted. You have to once in a while unsettle

You know, Obama is not some infallible chocolate Jesus... that's Kanye West. We like him, and I think he's doing great and he's sprayed the country with a big can of Bush-Be-Gone, which I think is terrific, but there's a whole

BM: Certitude is the hallmark of those who are not very bright. If you think you know for sure, you don't. It bugs me to no end when people talk about the theory of evolution as if it's just another religion. There's a very fundamental difference between science and religion. Science is always looking to disprove. Evolution is simply the best evidence we have right now. And by the way, for the first 50 years after the theory of evolution was

Christians say — or Jews or Muslims. They don't say, "Show me better evidence." They are absolutely 100percent certain. One of the criticisms I got for *Religulous* was, "Oh, Bill, you're such a big meanie. What does religion hurt? It gives people comfort. Why are you bursting their bubble?" And I really feel like perhaps my purpose in life is to make that connection of how religion is actually hurting people. You can start with the idea that 61 percent of Americans say they think religion solves all or most of their problems. Which is great — except that it doesn't. So if you think you can pray away global warming, you can't. And 25 percent of Americans think Jesus is going to come back in their lifetime. You know, before they cancel Ugly Betty, Jesus will be here and save the day. So if

you ask me: Do you think there's a connection between why this country hasn't moved more on an issue like climate change and religion? Yes, I do. I think there's an absolute connection. And then the other problem:

People who think their comic-book hero is going to come back and save the day are much less likely to try to fix

BM: Well, it depends on how you define faith. Yes, I think it's bad if it's defined the way religion defines it, which is

something that has earned my faith?... Do I have faith that when I have breakfast at Denny's, the eggs will be to

the willing and purposeful suspension of critical thinking. Yes, that is bad. If you mean: Do I have faith in

my liking? Yes, I do, because I've done that before so my faith has been rewarded. Do I have faith that the new Bruce Springsteen album will be good? Yes, because I liked the other ones. But faith as a replacement for

BW: Do you think faith is always bad?

BM: Yup. BW: In Religulous, you pounded on the Muslims, Christians and Jews quite a bit, but you didn't mention much about the fashionable religions, like Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. I was wondering if there was a reason you didn't get into that.

BW: Why do you think *Religulous* was passed over at the Oscars? **BM:** Well, I think because of the subject matter. The Oscars are not known (chuckling) for wanting to break new

BW: Aside from religion, what do you think is the most dangerous problem we're facing as modern humans? **BM:** Environment. That stuff is getting so scary and so dire that it might be too late already. This year, we've had so many discouraging reports from all these scientists concerning the glaciers melting and oceans warming. No one knows for sure what will happen when the glaciers melt, because they have always been essential to our survival. They reflect the sun's heat back into the atmosphere like a giant mirror. So I guess we're going to have to build a giant mirror.

can talk to other countries without the dreaded preconditions. We're even thinking about talking to Cuba. We can't change everything overnight, but we can at least try to get the smell of stupid out of the furniture. It's so great to have an adult... Man, when you see Obama attacked by the Right with these stupid things... I mean, they've got nothing, but they constantly come up with some new thing to attack him for. "He's buying a new

helicopter... grrrrrrrr." "Michelle is showing too much arm... oh, no." "Hugo Chavez handed him a book!" And he

BM: Well, right now, we're undoing a lot of things that made me feel ashamed of my country. We're closing Guantanamo Bay, and we're stopping torturing people, and we can have stem cell research again, and we're rejoining the world in trying to deal with climate change, and we're not raiding marijuana clubs anymore, and we

when Jesus appears in the cotton candy. BW: Do you know who Ward Churchill is here in Boulder?

BM: Yes, I had him on my show a few years ago. Now what? He won his case? BW: Yes, he won, but they only awarded him one dollar.

administration couldn't touch free speech. What I'm more worried about is free thought — people on their own accord just not thinking outside the box. So I applaud anybody who is outside the box, and he certainly is. We need more people who say things that make everybody else go, "Oh, my God, I can't believe you said that!"

monogamous?

For More Info:

with everything he says, but I'm glad there are people like that speaking out. BW: A lot of your commentary deals with criticism of people following various leaders like sheep. As you become more popular as a media figure, does that ever worry you — people blindly listening to what you say without challenging your opinions?

BM: I think it is always a problem when you have people who like you. But I think of all the people who might have that problem, I've got to be close to the bottom of the list, because my audience is primarily composed of free thinkers. Especially the people who come for the live stand-up shows. They really understand where I'm coming from, I think, and they understand what free thinking means. I notice this year that I get booed a lot in the

studio by my own audience. And that's OK. That tells me that we haven't sold out, and we're unsettling people's opinions, which is something you should do. You shouldn't just tell them what they want to hear. BW: You also talk about gender issues a lot in your comedy. Do you think humans are naturally

BM: Some. There are some people who are naturally monogamous... they're called *women*.

found that person who makes them laugh and makes them happy, and they are infinitely more happy having that person in their life every day. That's terrific. I'm not against marriage. What I'm against is the judgment that so many in our society make against people who choose the other path, who don't choose to pair up with someone eternally. Because the viewpoint that is so often expressed, passively or not, is that this is somehow a failing. People have often used the world "commitmentphobic" about me. As if not wanting to commit to someone forever is a disease. And that's what I object to. It's not a phobia; it's just a choice. It's like, I don't like sushi either, but I'm not sushiphobic. I'm not afraid of sushi; I just don't like it. So that's all I'm trying to say. BW: Why won't you consider running for political office?

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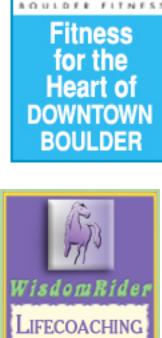


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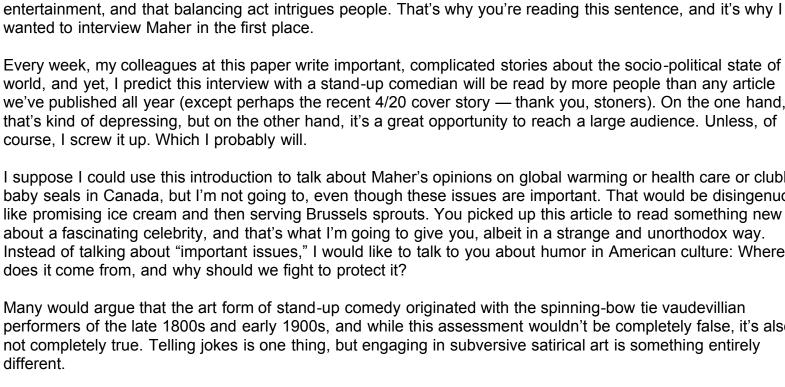


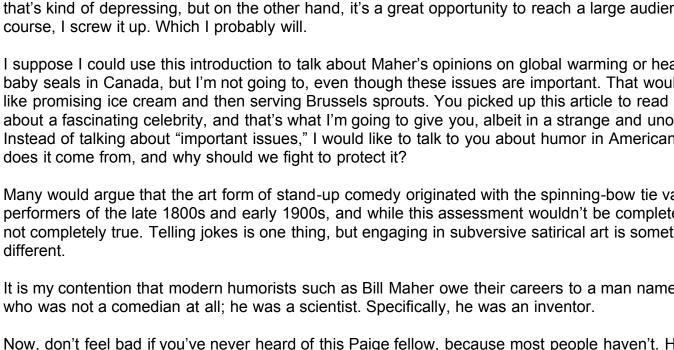


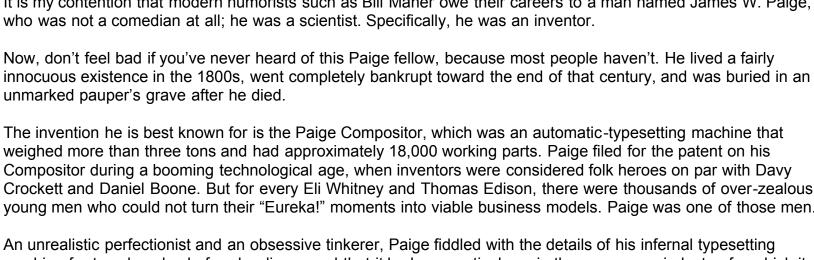












father of three. Tired of struggling to pay his bills as a writer, he set his sights on becoming, of all things, a businessman. You'd think a skilled storyteller like Clemens would be able to recognize a smooth-talking dreamer like Paige a mile away, but Clemens was blinded by greed and his own overactive imagination. As a writer, he was clearly a genius, but he did not have a practical mind. Clemens ended up investing more than \$300,000 (this would be almost \$7 million today) in the Paige Compositor, and he lost it all. This combined with the demise of his

named Samuel Langhorne Clemens.

that you had to leave 'em laughing.

This was the birth of the American humorist as a populist advocate for social conscience, and it paved the way for an art form that eventually became known as stand-up comedy. One man, one spotlight, and the only rule was

Boulder Weekly: It seems like your comedy and your personal views have gone through an evolution

months ago it was all about Bush and war, and now it's Obama and the economy and lots of other subjects. It's really

> **BM:** Yes, yes. It's funny; I was trying to get my friend Dennis Miller to come back on the show, and he said, "Last time I was

world to talk about. BW: In your documentary Religulous, you say you're preaching a message of doubt. Why do you think doubt is important to America?

printed by Darwin, scientists didn't come onboard. Over time, there was a tipping point where they came to understand the theory and test it out, but it was always a theory they were trying to disprove. That's not what

thinking... that's the George Bush-style faith. That is not good. BW: If you could snap your fingers and rid the world of religion, would you do it?

religions. It would have been a three-hour movie.

things, and we desperately need to fix things right now.

BM: Yes: time. Originally, we had talked about getting into Hinduism. We even thought about going to India, which would have been a focal point for Hinduism, Buddhism and Shinto. But the truth is there was just no time. So we made the decision to do the religions that are familiar to the Western world. The big three: Christian,

Muslim and Jew. Of course, we included Scientology and Mormons because they're sort of in the American camp. But it would have been too much explaining. I don't think Americans know very much to begin with about those

Documentary] category more and more irrelevant. I mean, [Religulous] is the sixth-highest grossing documentary of all time. By any yardstick you want to use for why a doc should have gotten nominated — putting aside the fact that people actually saw this one as opposed to the other ones — it should have been recognized. But it was

something that challenged people. It was a topic that hadn't been done before. There's no reason they had for snubbing it, except that religious people are everywhere. Religious people sit on those boards. And they were just not going to have it. They were just going to do what they could to get back at it, and that's one lever of power they had: just try to ignore it. But they can't, and it will be around forever.

ground, so I guess we should have seen that coming. But I think it does serve to help make [the Best

BW: You've been criticized for being anti-American, but you actually have a lot of positive things to say about the United States. What types of things make you feel patriotic?

just brushes it all off and gives you an adult response. We got so used to government being run by a clown posse; it's astounding how good it feels when a man just handles the job like an adult and talks to us like we're adults. You know, he quoted Voltaire. An American president quoting Voltaire! I felt like a hockey mom at the state fair

Well, I think this is a very conformist country. I think that's one of our problems. People have said to me many times, because of my tribulations, "Do you think we have free speech?" Absolutely, we have free speech. I'm not worried about free speech. Like many other things, you have to fight for it sometimes, but even the Bush

BM: (chuckling) One dollar? Always the backhanded compliment of the one dollar.

God, you can't say that" kind of country, and if someone says one thing that makes you a little bit uncomfortable, they have to go away for all time. Well, that's not really what this country was founded as. So, yes, I don't agree

Yeah, well, just think about it then. At least the idea is out there. We can reject it. We can say he's wrong about certain things. But at least he's saying The Things That You're Not Supposed To Say. This is such an "Oh, my

I'm kidding. You know, people think I'm anti-marriage; I'm definitely not anti-marriage. I know many people (pause)... OK, well, I don't know many people, but I know some people who are very happily married. They've

BM: (snort) Well, you try to start a campaign with the slogan, "Drugs are good, and religion is bad." Please, I don't get up before noon. There are press conferences, and you have to change your life, and I'm not married, and I go out with girls... there are a million reasons I could never get near elected office. I don't think that's my destiny. I was drawn to be a truth-teller and politics is anything but telling the truth.

Bill Maher performs at 8 p.m. on Saturday, May 2, at the Macky Auditorium, CU campus, Boulder, 303-492-8423.