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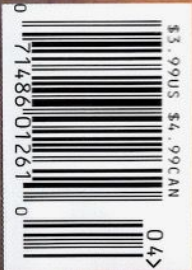
L.A. CONFIDENTIAL
109 BACKSTAGE
BROKERS

OSCAR ALERT:
LATIFAH LOVES IT
WHEN YOU CALL
HER BIG MAMA

PLUS:
LES NUBIANS
JOHN RIDLEY
BUSTA RHYMES

**MR
ROCK**
GOES TO
WASHINGTON

Chris campaigns for Head of State



APRIL 2003

RUNNING THINGS
Rock doesn't want to
rule the world—just
the box office.

SHOW ME THE FUNNY

BY JAY A. FERNANDEZ

President Rock

hits the silver screen this month, starring and making his directorial debut in *Head of State*. But please, all he really wants are your laughs—not your votes.

Chris Rock has something to say. And he's not afraid to repeat it, reword it or emphasize it so listen carefully: He is not, has never been, and will never in your sad-ass lifetime be, political. Ain't happening. At least in his public persona. The most he'll cop to is occasionally provoking an oh-no-he-*didn't* reaction from audiences lucky enough to have seen his incendiary stand-up performances. He even claims, without apparent irony, to be caught by surprise when something he says turns out to be controversial. Now, that's not to say the man doesn't have opinions. But his tortured body language—squirming in his chair and wincing when the talk turns to his political presence in pop culture—reveals his reluctance to yoke himself to the p-word. >>>

SHOW ME THE FUNNY

"People want me to tell jokes, that's my gig," Rock says, sitting in his Santa Monica, Calif. offices where he is editing and looping lines for his directorial debut, *Head of State*, which arrives in theaters this month. "Do you want to see a Pamela Anderson cookbook? No—you want her in a bikini running after something. That's what she's here for. This is what I'm here for."

It's hard to disagree with that rationale on both counts. Bringing the funny, the electroshock funny, is what Chris Rock is here for. Call what he does "social commentary," or "observational criticism," and leave it there. The fact is, whatever he wants you to call it, Rock—as an actor, writer, director and comedian—is almost unmatched by contemporary entertainers. With unerring accuracy, he simultaneously hits his listeners with a belly laugh and a shot to the cerebral cortex. Whether it was in his early standout *Saturday Night Live* sketches (remember the vicious conspiracy spoofing in "The Dark Side With Nat X"?), his Emmy-winning 1996 comedy special, *Chris Rock: Bring the Pain* or his groundbreaking HBO showcase, *The Chris Rock Show* (1997-2000), Rock has consistently displayed his seemingly supernatural ability to cut to the heart of an issue—racism, the drug war, capital punishment, failing schools, the rap world—and expose the stubborn absurdities in American society. So why is Rock dodging the "political" label like Neo ducking bullets in *The Matrix*?

48

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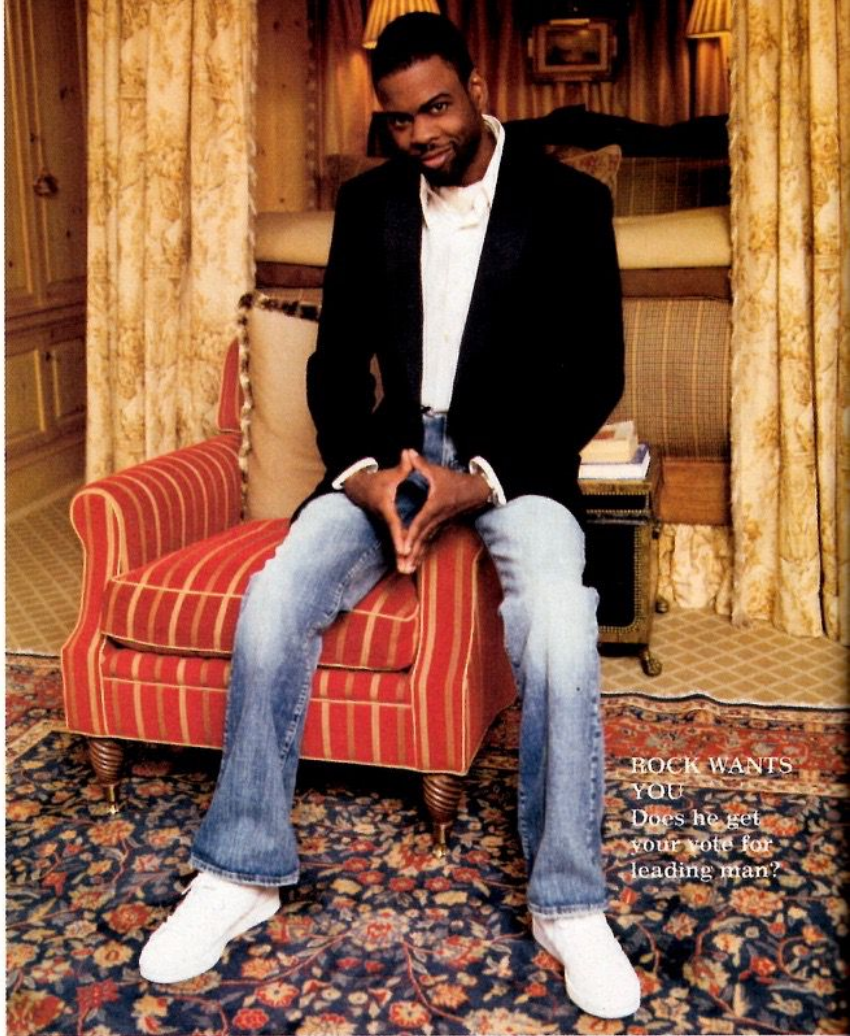
"Chris may claim that his comedy is not political, but certainly his comedy has political overtones and political implications," says Congressman Jesse L. Jackson Jr., D-Ill. Jackson laughingly admits turning down three invitations to the HBO show out of fear that Rock would make "a national ass" out of him with the same smart, embarrassing probing that Rock used on J.C. Watts when he found out that the former Oklahoma congressman didn't know who George Clinton was. Jackson did finally appear on *Chris Rock*, but not before throwing up. "His comedy shows an astute awareness of contemporary political issues and a depth and a profundity of those issues that one would not necessarily expect from a comedian," Jackson says.

It may be that Rock differs from, say, George Carlin or Dennis Miller merely in the baldness of his intentions. "I don't think he views what he does as, 'I'm gonna be political,'" says Nelson George, author and former consulting producer of *The Chris Rock Show*. "I think he views what he does as, 'I'm gonna state a point of view that I have about something that's going on,' and people perceive it as political."

The balancing act between comedy and political commentary will get even more precarious when the 37-year-old Rock makes his best case yet for the movie stardom that has eluded him thus far. In the DreamWorks release, *Head of State*, the comedian plays Mays

Gilliam, a Washington, D.C. alderman plucked from obscurity to run for the top job when the party's presidential and vice presidential candidates go down in a plane crash three months before the election. On the campaign trail with his bail bondsman older brother (Bernie Mac) and a slew of hangers-on (played by an ensemble cast consisting of Tamala Jones, Robin Givens, Lynn Whitfield and Tracy Morgan), Mays knows he's a lame-duck candidate cynically chosen by the party because he's likely to lose, so he gives the monochromatic political game a much-needed injection of hip-hop high style. To ensure that the flavor was right and to avoid the disappointments of his last few films, Rock, who co-wrote the script with longtime collaborator Ali LeRoi (*Down to Earth*, *The Chris Rock Show*), shrewdly decided to direct it himself.

"[My directing] happened just because I wasn't really satisfied with the movies I had starred in—those things don't feel like me," Rock says. Nursing a cold and threaded up in jeans, a blue sweater, Adidas kicks and a Yankees cap, Rock is polite, if a little wary, and projects his discomfort by pacing, fidgeting and staring out at the parking lot. He provides his own intermittent self-conscious commentary on this interview—"He blew his nose," "Rock was running in and out looking at edits of his movie"—and, like the director on a deadline that he is, jumps up suspiciously when he suddenly doesn't hear any noise outside the door. "I haven't done a movie as good as my show. It was like, 'Well, my show did all right while I was in



ROCK WANTS YOU
Does he get your vote for leading man?

charge, maybe the movie will be better when I'm in charge.' I think people will go, 'Wow! This [movie] is *waaay* better than anything else he's done.'"

Rock's fans may be muttering that that shouldn't be too hard. It's true that he has long entertained audiences on the big screen in memorable secondary or bit parts in movies such as *I'm Gonna Get You Sucka*, *New Jack City* and *Boomerang*. And the expectations-shattering *Chris Rock: Bring the Pain* brought him larger roles in a string of commercial and critical successes: *Dr. Dolittle* (1998), *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), *Dogma* (1999) and *Nurse Betty* (2000). But stepping into the leading-man limelight has been a frustrating experience, especially since the main reason he stopped doing his sorely missed HBO show was to focus on his film career. Rock's edgy appeal has largely been wasted or watered down in the brain-dead action flick, *Bad Company* (\$30 million) and in *Down to Earth*, the *Heaven Can Wait* rehash (\$64 million).

To date, Rock has miraculously conquered almost every other medium imaginable—albums (*Roll With the New*), specials (*Chris Rock: Big Ass Jokes*, *Chris Rock: Bigger and Blacker*), books (*Rock This!* Hyperion Press), political commentary (covering the 1996 Democratic National Convention for ABC's now cancelled *Politically Incorrect*), publishing (Howard University's *Illtop Journal*), producing (*The Hughleys*), hosting (MTV Video Music Awards), commercials (the voice of Lil' Penny Hardaway for Nike) and talk TV.

Theories abound as to why crossing over to film has been the lone holdout. "Chris has the 'good comedian curse,'" says LeRoi, who's known Rock since the late '80s. "If you look over the landscape of very influential stand-up comedians, they tend to have less success in film: Richard Pryor, Bill Cosby, George Carlin. There are other guys who weren't as revolutionary, in terms of content, in terms of presentation, but they tended to fare better in film: Eddie Murphy, Adam Sandler, Martin Lawrence. They're just funny guys. The tough part for a guy like Chris is that in his stand-up he's so grounded in reality that when you take him and put him in an artificial reality it's hard for him to keep that edge." Rock, for his part, just wants folks to give him a minute. "People have to realize that as a star in a movie, this is early," he says. "When I first got on *Saturday Night Live*, I was okay, but I wasn't as good as I was on *The Chris Rock Show*. I'm learning and growing in movies. I think this movie definitely [shows my] growth."

Rock filmed the \$30-million *Head of State* in Baltimore and at many of the prominent landmarks around Washington, D.C. over 50 days last summer. (One day after shooting, a chance encounter with a security guard that recognized him led to a private tour of the White House, including a stop in the Oval Office.) According to Rock and LeRoi, the film is a broad satire in the *Stripes-Putney Swope* vein in which the words "Democrat" and "Republican" are never uttered. "This is a straight-up comedy," Rock says.

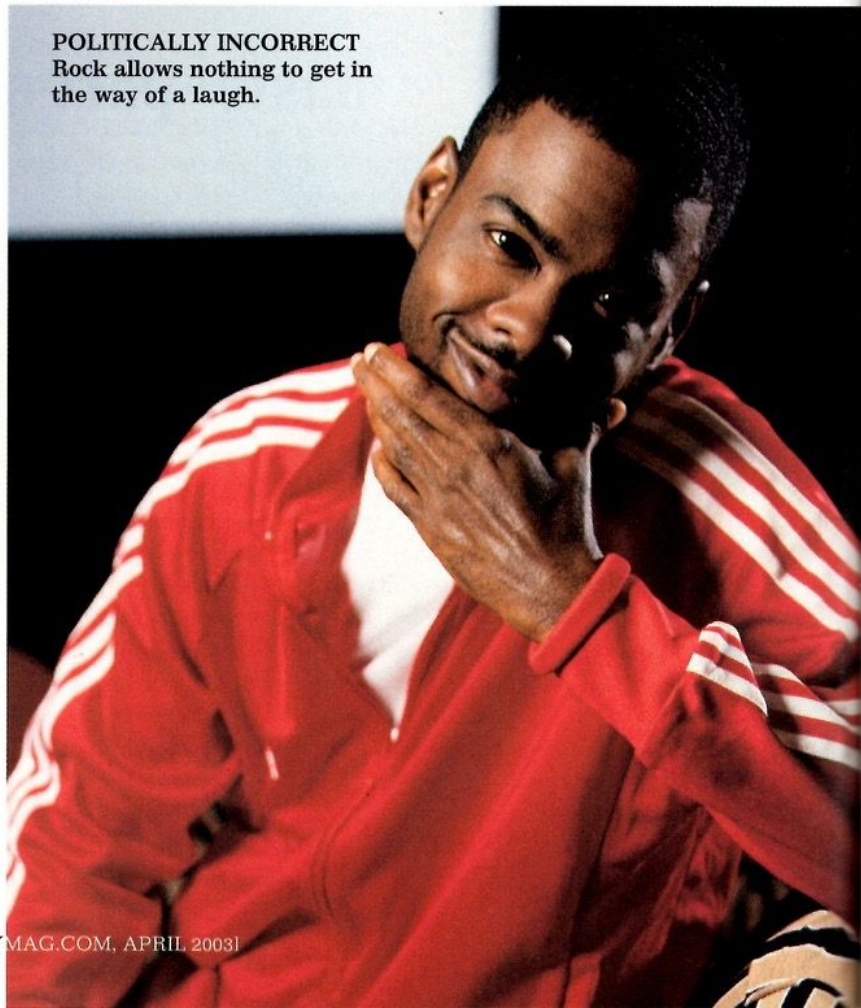
"No one wants to see no preachy movie. They want jokes. I didn't want to make a movie that only played to an audience that watched *Meet the Press* or *The O'Reilly Factor*."

Rock claims to have had a relatively easy time of it, and definitely plans to direct again. As for the delicate task of giving direction to the seasoned comedic crew of actors he assembled, Rock had a simple philosophy. "We got the best actors you can get and you let them act," he says. "Unless it's f-----g with the funny. As long as they ain't messing with the funny..."

"I think at the beginning he might have had uncertainty about himself, and that's natural," says co-star Bernie Mac (*Ocean's Eleven*, *Boozy Call*). "But the good thing was that he was doing a project that he nurtured. It was a project that he knew the vision [for] already." The original spark for *State* came to Rock 10 years ago, but he let the idea gestate for a while. Then when people thought Colin Powell might run in 1996 and Morgan Freeman popped up as the Leader of the Free (albeit asteroid-wrecked) World in 1998's *Deep Impact*, it started to look like an African American could actually get the job, and Rock became antsy to get his comedic take on it into theaters. "Morgan Freeman was so good, he played the President and nobody said s---," Rock says. "It wasn't even a big deal. It's like, 'Of course Morgan Freeman's President.'"

As for Powell, whom Rock met at a Janet Jackson concert, Rock has sympathy for his difficult position as the secretary of state in the current Bush administration. "I don't agree with all his politics but

POLITICALLY INCORRECT
Rock allows nothing to get in the way of a laugh.



WARM-UP BY ADIDAS; T-SHIRT BY CALVIN KLEIN

"HAIL TO THE CHIEFS"

It wasn't long ago that Secretary of State Colin Powell was considered a potential contender for President, and Reverend Al Sharpton has now declared his intention to run for the Democratic nomination for top dog. But until power shifts to the black-hand side in real life, black folks can take some pride in the actors who have served the country well on film and TV as Commander-in-Chief. Here are some of our favorites:



★ **James Earl Jones** painted the White House black in the 1972 film adaptation of Irving Wallace's book, *The Man* (Simon & Schuster). In the film, Jones gains the presidential seat through a hoax after all the other candidates "accidentally" pass away, leaving viewers with the apparent moral of the story: The only way a brother can really become "the Man" is to get rid of "the Man."

★ **Supersize Tom "Tiny" Lister Jr.**—best known as the menacing lout, Deebo, in 1995's comedy *Friday*—flexed his muscle as President Lindberg in the 1997 sci-fi thriller, *The Fifth Element*. Lindberg remains calm, cool and collected despite the mayhem brewing in the galaxy in the future.



★ **Morgan Freeman**, with his authority and dignity, was a natural to play President Tom Beck in 1998's *Deep Impact*. But why is it when a black man gets elected to the White House the world has to come to a tragic end? At least he got to redeem himself by saving 800,000 of the world's population.



★ **Dennis Haysbert's** debonair looks and intoxicating smile made him the quintessential smooth-talking ladies man in 1995's *Waiting to Exhale*. Ironically, it isn't a far stretch from his current role as President David Palmer on FOX's *24*, where his marital problems have become public, like a certain former "black" President we know. Hey, nobody's perfect.



—Nana E. Eyson

SHOW ME THE FUNNY

let's remember that he got his job from the President's father," he says, picking at a package of Pop Tarts. "And there's a certain loyalty that goes with somebody giving you a break. Lorne Michaels put me on *Saturday Night Live* and that's the biggest break of my career. You'll never hear me dissing his son." You may, however, hear him dissing some recent Republican snafus, like the latest Bush-whack on race-based initiatives. "None of it surprises me—it's America," says Rock. "Seventy-three percent of white Americans say that we don't need to have affirmative action. There's your proof right there. When it's 73 percent that say we *should* have affirmative action, then you don't need it anymore."

The political landscape may be slowly filling with African Americans that people might consider worthy of the crown: Powell; former Newark mayoral candidate Corey Booker; Reverend Al Sharpton—who's running for the Democratic nomination—and even National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. Rock has turned a hopeful eye on the 32-year-old mayor of Detroit, Kwame M. Kilpatrick. "Yeah, Kilpatrick, he just seems like a new [kind of] politician...he's from the hip-hop era." Rock, who was born in Georgetown, S. C. and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., has no interest in the top job himself. "I would never run for office, not in a million years," he says, letting loose one of his patented incredulous giggles. "I hate working for *one* person, I can't imagine working for 250 million people."

He's more sanguine about the current state of African Americans in Hollywood. "There's definitely some progress," he says. "I just look around: I'm working, Will's working, Martin's working, Cedric's working, Bernie's working, Anthony Anderson's working, Orlando Jones is working. It used to be a black guy had to be really famous to work. That's not the case anymore. Could be *more*...But black women! Definitely something needs to happen. It kind of stops at Halle, when you think about it."

Rock's own future is full of new opportunities, both domestic and professional. In June of last year, he and his wife, Malaak,

had their first child, Lola Simone, a week before Rock began shooting *Head of State*, and it has made him reassess his priorities. He recently turned down an invitation from Jack Nicholson to share courtside Lakers seats, opting instead to stay home and watch the game on TV with his daughter. Fatherhood has also pushed him to work harder and explore new options. In addition to directing, he is definitely open to doing another television show, and he'd like to concentrate on producing features for TV and film in the future. But more than anything he is dying to get back in the comedy clubs, tighten up his timing, try out new material and reconnect with the audience in ways he can't from the distance of the big screen. The only question is whether being a dad will affect his sharpness. "I don't think it's gonna change me that much as a performer. There's no law that says you gotta do cuddly comedy. Hey, Eminem's got a kid. It hasn't affected *his* edge," Rock says, laughing.

This sounds like a guy who's much more knowing about the heart of his jagged appeal than his odd protestation of innocence might suggest. Maybe Rock is underestimating himself by limiting his self-perception to that of simply a humorist, or maybe he's underestimating his audience by assuming they couldn't handle anything more from him. Then again, maybe he's right. Maybe after all the time and sweat spent trying to define himself, he finally knows exactly who and where he is.

"I'm in a decent spot," Rock says, nodding his head, his eyes widening. "The good thing is I can see so many people ahead of me, so I have a place to climb. You see a guy like Eddie—'Ooh, boy, I got a long way to go to get there...' Or Will—I got a long way to go to get there...' So there are things to strive for, and that's good. But at the same time, I'm not hungry while I'm striving." If he does get hungry, there's always that Pamela Anderson cookbook. ▼

Jay A. Fernandez wrote "Inside Magic's Kingdom" in SAVOY's February issue