TV Close-Up: Jimmy Kimmel

by Eirik Knutzen

Jimmy Kimmel is set for life. He stars and produces his own ABC late night talk show, "Jimmy Kimmel Live," hosts the upcoming ABC game show, "Set for Life" and has co-created and produced "The Andy Milonakis Show" and "Crank Yankers" on MTV2.

And, when time permits, ABC tosses special projects his way - such as hosting the "American Music Awards" telecast for the third time.

JIMMY KIMMEL - Jimmy Kimmel stars and produces his own ABC late night talk show, 'Jimmy Kimmel Live.' CNS Photo courtesy of Karen Neal."I'm qualified for such work because I was a radio morning disc jockey for 12 years who stays attuned through his 15-year-old daughter and 13-year-old son," explained the 39-year-old Kimmel.

"I also have a photographic memory regarding music; I can give you the title of 99.8 percent of the songs from the '80s within five seconds of hearing them play - it's a great, worthless talent to have," he continued. "On the other hand, I can go upstairs three times a day and each time forget why I'm there."

And working for the ABC network's parent company, Disney, there is a rumor that he works weekends at Disneyland wearing a Pluto suit.

"Not true. I'm dressing as Snow White and hanging around the castle ... a little creepy, but it's fun."

Before becoming a Disney employee, Kimmel was fired from approximately 300 radio jobs and earned an Emmy Award for his work as co-host of the droll game show "Win Ben Stein's Money" (1997-20001). He wasn't particularly bashful either as the co-creator and head writer of "The Man Show" (1999-2003) - highly regarded as an utterly sexist vehicle.

But "Jimmy Kimmel Live," which is taped at 7:30 p.m. at the Disney-owned El Capitan Theater on Hollywood Boulevard, has been the focus of his activities since 2003. Although painfully short on trained seals and plate spinners, large celebrity guests - ranging from George Clooney and Britney Spears to Clay Aiken and Kelly Ripa - the late-night gabfest increased its fan base (now at 1.8 million) from 2005 to 2006 by 22 percent, according to company propaganda.

Although not a threat to Jay Leno and David Letterman (his childhood idol) at the moment, Kimmel is

slowly but surely gaining on them.

"Either the show is getting better, or maybe people have given up and now realize that this is the best they're going to get," he mused. "It's like when you're in prison and at first that grayish Jell-O doesn't look so good, but after a while you look forward to it."

But the workaholic, something he picked up from his father, an executive vice president for IBM, and his stay-at-home mother, looks forward to work every day as he is surrounded by genuine members of his German-Italian family.

Restoring faith in nepotism, "Jimmy Kimmel Live" employs his Uncle Frank, "a New York cop for 20 years, now a security guard," Cousin Sal, "he quit being a lawyer in New York and moved to L.A.; he eventually replaced me on 'Win Ben Stein's Money,'" Aunt Chippie, "a stereotypical, loudmouthed Italian from Brooklyn, N.Y.," and Cousin Mickie, "in the talent department, she's like my sister-in-law." He also has something like a distant cousin by marriage working in the art department and his best friend since childhood, Cleto Escobedo, heads up the "Jimmy Kimmel Live" band. Escobedo immediately hired his dad, Cleto Escobedo Sr., to play saxophone.

Hiring friends and relatives was not driven by keeping production costs down; it was strictly because Kimmel finds them funny.

Growing up in Las Vegas was a rather interesting experience, according to the Brooklyn-born television performer-writer-producer.

"It was a small town in those days with lots of fun things to do as a teenager - most of them things you weren't supposed to be doing," he recalled. "We made the most of it with $2 steak dinners at 3 a.m. at the casinos. And when you're 17, there is nothing better than 25-cent Heinekens."

On his way to becoming an artist, Kimmel was waylaid in high school while working part-time in a clothing store.

"Another guy working there also worked at a college radio station in Vegas, KUNV," he said. "He thought I was very funny and should find some work around his station - I did, and loved it. I interned at another radio station when I went to Arizona State University, then wound up in Seattle with a morning show at the age of 20."

Fired more often than a Saturday night special due to a false security complex and lacking all diplomatic skills, Kimmel bounced all over the country until taken in by "the best radio station in the country, L.A.'s KROQ," for five years.

"Win Ben Stein's Money" provided his transition into TV. Now, it looks like he will stick around for a while.

His marriage was terminated several years ago, and he is currently dating the star of "The Sarah Silverman" series, Sarah Silverman. Joint custody of his teenagers, Kate and Kevin, takes care of his alternate weekends.

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