

## NEWS

## COMING UP ROSES

BY NEWSWEEK STAFF ON 7/14/96 AT 8:00 PM EDT

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SOMETHING ABOUT ROSIE O'DONNELL MAKES PEOPLE want to give her things. Like Entenmann's pastries, Ring-Dings, a basket of corn -- all offerings from the audience of her new daytime talkfest, ""The Rosie O'Donnell Show." Guests come bearing gifts, too. Richard Simmons brought Rosie's baby a tiny tank top, shorts and rhinestone sneakers. Ed McMahon proffered a stuffed ""Babe" pig. ""It's terrible!" O'Donnell said in her office after a taping last week. ""George Clooney brought flowers and now everybody thinks they gotta gimme something." In the two weeks since ""Rosie" went on the air, the pudgy comedienne from New Yawk has gotten other cool stuff, too. Great reviews. Big ratings. And credit for singlehandedly saving daytime TV from itself. She's taken the trash out of talk by making nice, not nasty. And for that she should be given a Nobel Prize, or at least more Twinkies.

""It's a lovefest!" O'Donnell cooed to Teri Garr during a typically logrolling interview. Not since Merv Griffin oozed his way through the '70s has there been this level of raw celebrity sycophancy on TV. Who'd have thought we'd be praising a talk-show host for being ""the new Merv"? But it's such a relief from the freak-of-the-week sideshows on ""Jenny Jones," ""Ricki Lake," ""Sally Jessy Raphael" and their ilk. Warner Bros. Television put ""Rosie" into syndication to replace ""Carnie," one of the many shameless ""Ricki" clones that died this year. Bombarded with sleaze, viewers refused to watch ""Carnie" or ""Danny" or any of their partners in slime.

""It wasn't so bad a decade ago," says Geraldo Rivera, whose notorious on-air fistfight with some unruly skinheads took talk to a new low. ""Things started to get ugly over the last several seasons." Rivera has vowed to clean up his daytime show by September (page 48). The overall daytime talk audience has dropped by almost 4 million households since last year. But they have embraced ""Rosie." Her show averaged a 3.2 rating in its first week, the best debut since ""Oprah," and held steady in week 2. Reviewers liked her brassy wit and campy guest choices (the Captain and Tennille!). But what's really clicked is her unabashed niceness. She hugs. She mugs. She plugs her guests' movies and CDs. Before the taping last week, the show's warm-up comedian asks a woman in the audience, ""Do you know Rosie?" No, the woman answers, ""but I feel like she's a friend." How many of us would want to say the same about Maury Povich?

Happy hunchback: Nice is back, on TV and off. Leno is up, Letterman down. Helen Hunt, star of ""Mad About You" and ""Twister," is described on the cover of *Mirabella* as ""the nicest person alive." A *New York Times* review of ""Phenomenon" was headlined JOHN TRAVOLTA, PLAYING NICE, GETS SMART. (No more busting kneecaps: in his next movie, Travolta will play an angel.) With ""The Hunchback of Notre Dame," Disney has turned Victor Hugo's deformed, bitter bellringer, Quasimodo, into ""Quasi," cute enough for a Happy!Meal figurine. On ""Regis and Kathie Lee" last week, Bob Dole was nice. Bob Dole! OK, so it didn't last. The next morning he was biting Katie Couric's head off on the ""Today" show. In New York City, cabdrivers have been given a list of 50 nice things to say to passengers, pleasantries such as ""Thank you for hailing me, sir (madam)" and ""I'd be happy to take you to Brooklyn." So far, no one has actually heard a cabby utter one of these phrases, but it's a start.

""You catch more flies with honey," says Jeffrey Katzenberg, the formerly ruthless Disney exec who says he has embraced a more soulful approach to dealmaking at his new company, DreamWorks SKG. Katzenberg is cell-phoning in his thoughts on niceness from the Kimball Junction, Utah, Wal-Mart, where he's picking up Fourth of July supplies with his kids. This is the new Jeffrey. ""I don't know if nice guys finish first, but they finish just fine -- and it's a lot more pleasant way to lead your life. I'm in business with the two greatest guys in the world," he says of his two partners, Steven Spielberg and David Geffen. ""We only want to work with people we like. It's too tiring to be fighting all the time, trying to take advantage and pull the other person's pants down." Cynics have speculated that what Katzenberg really wants to do is pull down the pants of his ex-employer, Disney. He denies it. ""I'm not engaged in a competition with them." That wouldn't be nice.

and

Niceness in Hollywood is hard enough to swallow. In the naughty-by-nature world of rap music, it's a still stranger development. But Bill Stephney, CEO of the New York-based black music labe StepSun Music, thinks ""there's a desire for normalcy, for niceness" and a reaction against ""the commodification of nigga culture," like hard-core gangsta rap. ""The s- was pretty ill," Stephney says. ""It's like we all need to chill for a second." Dr. Dre, one of rap's original gangstas, pronounces the genre ""totally f-ing dead" in an interview in *The Source* magazine this month. And Stephney points to the success of Hootie and the Blowfish: ""You don't get a nicer black man than [Hootie lead singer] Darius Rucker. We've gone from Snoop Doggy Dogg to Darius as the biggest-selling black artist." Angelo Ellerbee runs a ""black charm school" for hip-hop performers. At \$250 an hour, his clients are schooled in appropriate language, dress and manners. R&B singer Mary J. Blige is a student. Ellerbee calls her progress ""gradual" since a magazine interview during which she opened a beer bottle with her teeth and tried to pick a fistfight with the reporter. ""But at the Grammys she was so polite, signing autographs like it was no problem."

These shocking outbreaks of civility (page 50) may have an entirely uncivil motive: greed. For now, nice is selling better than nasty. ""The Nutty Professor" is an Eddie Murphy movie you can actually take your kids to. If this keeps up, he'll be starring in ""Mr. Holland's Opus 2." The ratings for ""Rosie" prove that there's money in nice. CBS is counting on that. In its upcoming fall schedule, Bill Cosby returns as a grumpy geezer with a heart of gold. ""Touched by an Angel," the network's sleeper hit about a couple of God's messengers doing good deeds on earth, will be paired with a spinoff hour of uplift called ""Promised Land." Gerald McRaney stars as a samaritan who tours the country in an RV helping people. Both shows are being filmed in Utah. ""Nice people in Utah," says Martha Williamson, the executive producer of both shows, echoing Katzenberg. ""I made a commitment that I wasn't going to work with anybody who wasn't nice. I said, "I'm not going to look for the best writers first, I'm going to find nice writers'." Trust us: there aren't any.

Anti-sleaze: Game shows, the ultimate in nonobjectionable programming, are also making a comeback. The Disney-produced ""Debt" has been such a hit on the Lifetime cable channel that it'll soon spread into syndication. Instead of prizes, the show pays off its winners' credit-card bills. Game shows are the opposite of trash talk: instead of public humiliation, contestants get cash lovely parting gifts. Says ""Debt" host and veteran gamester Wink Martindale, ""I never do anything to belittle or embarrass anybody." Wink is the anti-Maury.

You may remember that O'Donnell, 34, hasn't always been the Queen of Nice. Her stand-up routine was salted with R-rated attacks on O.J. and Woody Allen. She sported leather dominatrix gear in the movie ""Exit to Eden." And her friend Madonna isn't known for hanging with people because they say ""Please" and ""Thank you." But under the gruff exterior, fans sense a softy, someone just like the best friend she played in ""Sleepless in Seattle." And they love that she's now the doting single mom of an adopted 1-year-old son. Decompressing in her comfy office in Rockefeller Center, she still enthuses about celebs like the star-struck kid she was growing up on New York's Long Island. She worshiped Barbra Streisand, Bette Midler. Merv and Mike Douglas were her heroes because their talk shows ""made everyone feel at home. They had a reverence for celebrity in a good way." That's putting it, uh, nicely.

A couple of years ago, O'Donnell went to Disney executives and told them she wanted to be their next Dean Jones and remake all those juvenile '60s movies like ""The Love Bug." They turned her down, but the kid-friendly cable network Nickelodeon cast her as a wise and lovable nanny in its first feature film, ""Harriet the Spy," opening this week. She rejected offers to do a late-night show because she didn't think she had the edgy ""college humor" of a Dave or a Conan. And trash talk was clearly out: ""All these shows give these people is a ticket to New York, and their shame is sold for that fee." By contrast, Rosie gives her audience members Drake's cakes and cartons of milk. Too many Drake's, though, and you want to throw up. Same with excessive niceness. Sooner or later, it backfires. Witness Hootie, Barney and John Tesh. If Rosie's not careful, she could become the next Kathie Lee.

There are some bad people out there just waiting for that to happen. Not everyone is with the niceness program. Judith Martin, the etiquette expert whose new book is titled ""Miss Manners Rescues Civilization," says she gets hundreds of letters a week complaining about bad behavior. But is it getting any better? As yet, she says, ""I haven't noticed that the streets are full of people making way for one another."