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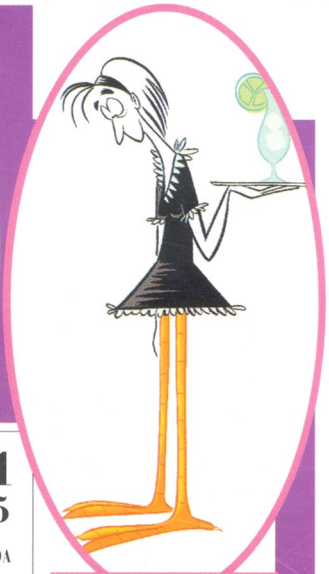

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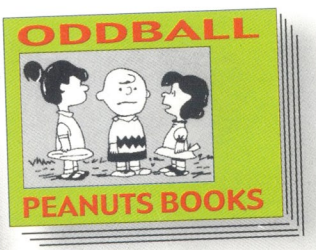
Nothing Ambiguous About This!

animator

J.J. Sedelmaier

on BEAVIS, SNL and Crime Fighters

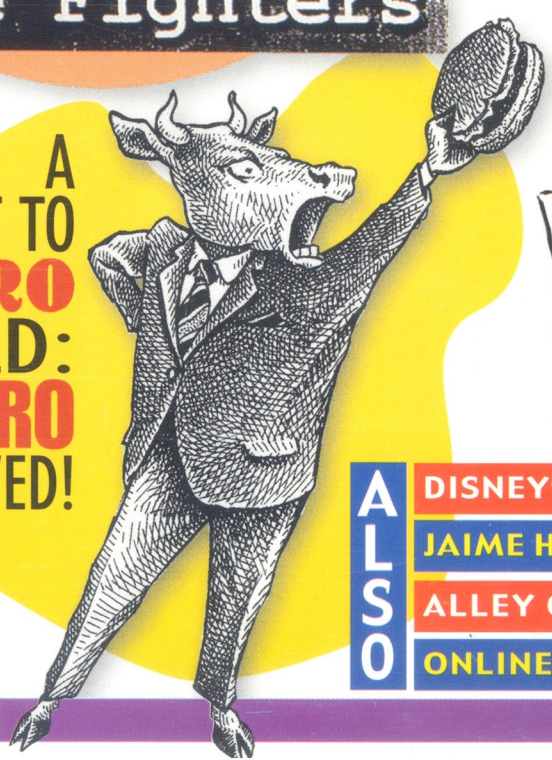


A CARTOONIST CONFESSES: 'I WAS A TEENAGE COCKTAIL WAITRESS!'

The SPIRIT

DAILY STRIP

A VISIT TO BIZARRO WORLD: DAN PIRARO INTERVIEWED!



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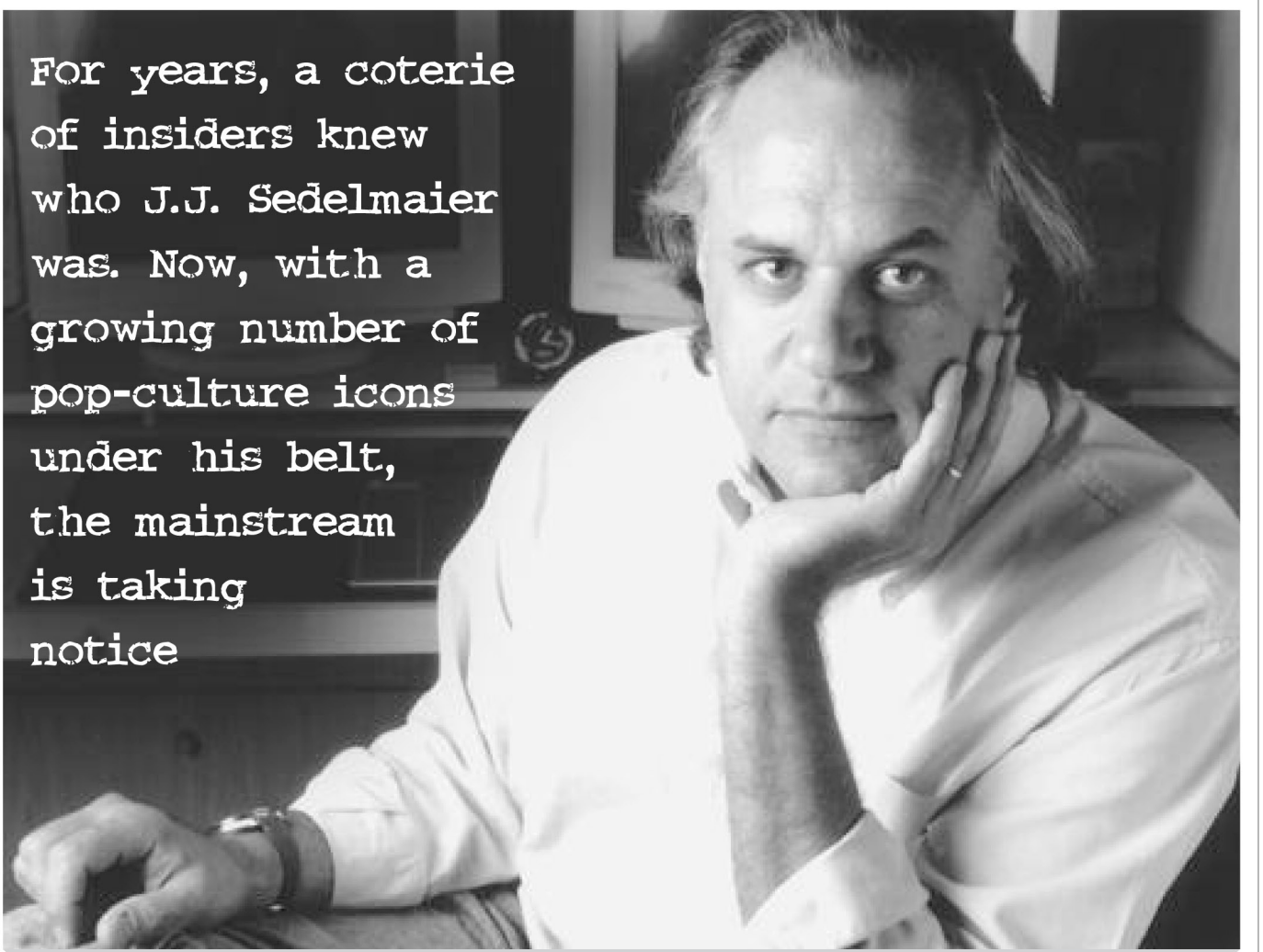
Fortunate Son

An interview with J.J. Sedelmaier



For years, a coterie of insiders knew who J.J. Sedelmaier was. Now, with a growing number of pop-culture icons under his belt, the mainstream is taking notice

It's hardly an object lesson to the children of America, but goofing off in geometry class sometimes pays off. While his fellow students were busy calculating the area of a parallelogram, J.J. Sedelmaier was busy doodling comics characters in the margins of his notebook. In adulthood, it's likely that few of those people are applying the Pythagorean theorem, but Sedelmaier is still busy doodling characters. Only now he does it as the head of one of advertising's most respected animation studios.

John Josef Sedelmaier comes by his envelope-pushing tendencies honestly. His father, Joe, spent his career in advertising and as a director was responsible for some memorably groundbreaking campaigns, including Wendy's "Where's the Beef?" campaign and FedEx's motormouthed pitchman. Joe's son learned early that as long as you learned the rules, you could break them. So he learned the craft of animation in the early 1980s while working at the Perpetual Motion studio as an inbetweener on *Strawberry Shortcake* and *The Berenstain Bears*, properties that hardly hinted at the edge he would later hone. In 1984, he joined R.O. Blechman's animation studio, The Ink Tank, where he worked prolifically (including more than 100 Fido Dido bumpers for CBS's Saturday morning children's programming). With no small amount of misgiving, he accepted the title of pro-

Interview conducted by Tom Heintjes

ducer (fearing that the administrative work would reduce his time spent drawing), since he had been doing the work of one.

After founding J.J. Sedelmaier Productions Inc. with his wife, Patrice, in January 1991, he became a hot commodity among advertising agencies who sought out his innovative approach. Sedelmaier's eclecticism allowed his studio to produce work ranging from gentle and homespun (his Northern Tissue ads) to edgy and bursting with attitude (the Converse "Psychotrainer" campaign) to convincing retrospection (his 1950s-style ad for Home Savings Bank). He updated Speed Racer for a modern audience in a series of commercials for Volkswagen, and he adapted *Doonesbury*'s Mr. Butts for an animated antismoking campaign for the Massachusetts Department of Health.

The pliably arch sensibility associated with Sedelmaier's White Plains, N.Y. studio didn't attract only advertisers; it also appealed to writers who recognized that Sedelmaier's studio was not only capable of producing innovative work, but that it insisted on it. Television comedy writer Robert Smigel collaborated with Sedelmaier to produce the "Cluckin' Chicken" parody commercial for *Saturday Night Live* that appeared on Nov. 21, 1992. The short film combined animation with live action—Clucky's animated, decapitated head gave viewers a gleeful behind-the-scenes tour of how he is killed and prepared for eventual consumption—and received enthusastic praise. (Sample dialogue: "Bein' dead never tasted so god-nobbity good!") Soon after came "TV Funhouse," a showcase that made its debut on the short-lived *Dana Carvey Show*, later moving to *Saturday Night Live*. "Saturday TV Funhouse" featured various Sedelmaier-Smigel collaborations that placed J.J. Sedelmaier Productions prominently on the cultural landscape. Recurring vignettes included "Fun With Real Audio," "The X-Presidents" and "The Ambiguously Gay Duo." The latter series of wildly popular shorts delights in the befuddlement that Ace and Gary's imprecise sexual orientation causes for those around them, all the while cloaking the action in the guise of a low-budget 1960s Saturday morning cartoon. Sedelmaier's simultaneous affection for and savage tweaking of yesteryear's bare-bones superhero animation were obvious in the series of shorts, which remains a fixture in S*aturday Night Live* reruns.

Sedelmaier, 47, also breathed celluloid life into another pair of cultural icons, albeit Beavis and Butt-Head are very different from Ace and Gary. In late 1992, when MTV was casting about for an animator for its proposed showcase of rampaging id and juvenile delinquency (not to mention music-video criticism), they hired Sedelmaier to bring *Beavis and Butt-Head* into the world, so the culture at large can credit him for the first season.

The creative restiveness that has been the hallmark of Sedelmaier's career continues. While his studio remains busy with commercial work (his clients have included Nike, Georgia-Pacific, Converse and Old Navy), it also keeps a foot in the short-series camp. Sedelmaier directed the pilot for Cartoon Network's "Harvey Birdman" series, which is a part of the network's edgier Adult Swim programming block. Sedelmaier, with writers Michael Ouweleen and Erik Richter, transformed one of Hanna-Barbera's most banal characters—the puerile Birdman—into one of its most compelling. Adding another wrinkle to superhero satire, Sedelmaier also co-created (with writer Stuart Hill) Captain Linger, the socially inept hero who can rescue people but can't hold a conversation with them. The Captain is also part of Cartoon Network's Adult Swim block.

Sedelmaier—an inveterate comic-book fan whose early aspiration was to draw comic books—has fielded an increasing number of print jobs. *Playboy* hired him and Smigel to produce an Ambiguously Gay Duo comic-book insert in the 1999–2000 millennial issue, and last year he wrote and drew a parody of the classic Charles Atlas ad to accompany the magazine's March 2002 interview with Seattle Mariner second baseman Bret Boone. Last August, *Playboy* published "Crime Scene Enron," a two-page strip in which Sedelmaier and writer Daniel Radosh fused elements of CBS's hit forensics program *CSI* with Enron's corporate malfeasance. (Sedelmaier and Radosh also collaborated on a "Daughters of Hazzard" comic strip for *Playboy*. The strip took a satirical look at President Bush's fun-loving daughters, but it was pulled from the publication in the wake of the terror attacks on America.) Readers of the June 2002 issue of *Esquire* saw Sedelmaier's two-page strip that accompanied the interview with *Spider-Man* actress Kirsten Dunst, in which Dunst and her interviewer gradually morph into retro-style characters who would be at home in a 1960s issue of *Spider-Man*.

Madison Avenue's secret is out. After years spent making viewers aware of brand names, J.J. Sedelmaier Productions Inc. is now itself a brand that fans seek out for its smart, subversive approach to telling stories. And there's nothing ambiguous about that.

—Tom Heintjes

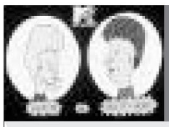
The Interview

Tom Heintjes: *I've seen your studio, and it's filled with vintage telephones, old toys and generally lots of artifacts from yesteryear. For a guy who is on the cutting edge of commercial animation—*

J.J. Sedelmaier: —why is all this old shit here? [*laughter*] In totally general terms, I think history is really important. I think if you don't have a grasp of what's happened before, you're not as well equipped for the future as you should be. I'm not saying you have to have an in-depth background in any subject to approach it or give your opinion on it, but if you have an idea of heritage and a grasp of history, it makes everything richer. This is separate from doing parodies of something, because you could research that. But if you know something inside out, you're able to get subtleties and nuances that you wouldn't get otherwise.

Heintjes: *I wondered if you felt the designs and level of craft of past decades were inherently superior to what's being done today.*

Sedelmaier: No. The level of dreck has always been very high. We're all guilty of injecting nostalgia. It's one of the most potent drugs. It's like love. It totally masks any sense of judgment when



it comes to design, when it comes to film, when it comes to anything you've grown up with. You wouldn't have Nick At Nite, you wouldn't have TV Land. But you have people saying, "Oh, the '50s were wonderful, look at the design." The '50s were *dreadful*! Talk to anyone who had to live through them. The '50s were probably the only decade where people, certainly in America, had no sense of humor. The only thing that allows us to reflect positively on the '50s is nostalgia. It seemed like a simpler time because we were younger, and every generation goes through that. We're starting now to get into the dream of the '80s. It's very funny. But at any time, there were dreadful things going on with literature, design, everything.

If you're talking about craftsmanship, there are blanket statements you can make about things like this. If you buy a better house, it's going to be better made. But there are plenty of houses that weren't so great, too. I will say that today people have a low interest in taking the time to do a good job. We live in a fast-paced society that is obsessed with making money, and there is a level of quality that is sacrificed as a result. The way that decisions are made and corporations are structured doesn't set a tone for being able to do good work or to have one person who is executing a vision, and this goes into filmmaking, advertising and so forth. Decisions are often made by committee, there's a lot of testing, and this slowly but surely whittles away at any sort of strong, single vision.

The Robert Smigel-scripted "Cluckin' Chicken" parody commercial that Sedelmaier produced for *Saturday Night Live* began the long relationship between the studio and the program. Adam Sandler provided the voice of Clucky.

HEINTJES: *Advertising is an area of commerce that is often open to compromise. You have focus groups, everyone thinks he's an art director, etc. How do you prevent this atmosphere from watering down your vision?*

SEDELMAIER: I try to make people as comfortable as possible with the process. If people feel their project is in good hands, they tend to leave you alone. As the studio's been around longer, it's gotten easier, because there's an attitude of, "This studio knows what it's doing, let's leave them alone."

HEINTJES: *That's why they hire you.*

SEDELMAIER: Ideally, yes. But you're never completely insulated. Sometimes there's even a fear: "We can't tell this guy what to do!" Actually, you kind of hope for that. That even makes it easier to be nice. I genuinely enjoy what I do. As crummy as a day can be, I always look forward to coming in the studio in the morning. I'm able to look at myself in the mirror in the morning due to the fact that my wife Patrice and I run our own business. Patrice runs the business end of it. We've been doing it close to 12 years now, and it's the best decision we ever made. The ultimate foundation of everything we do is the control we have. If we're doing a job, we chose to take that job. If a job sucks, well, we're the ones who decided to do it.

I know what it's like to work for other people. Even though it was always *with* other people, it was ultimately *for* other people. And there came a certain point where if I wasn't ultimately responsible for it, I wasn't pleased with it. As much as some people take comfort in not being responsible for something, I would much rather kick *myself* in the ass. I'm spoiled rotten now.

HEINTJES: *You're in that enviable position now, but you weren't always. When you first came to New York, you tried to break into comic books in the '80s.*

SEDELMAIER: Boy, was *that* a mistake! [*laughter*]

HEINTJES: *But you ended up getting work in animation, your other passion.*

SEDELMAIER: I didn't even know it was a passion! I grew up an animation fan. I can remember seeing animated commercials, animated theatrical shorts and feature-length animated films. But what had a big influence on me was *The International Animation Film Festival*. It was hosted by Jean Marsh and was broadcast on PBS in the '70s. It was on television while I was in school. Even though I had seen various short animated films, this show each week reinforced the fact that there was a lot of this going on, regardless of the fact that most of it was being done in Eastern Europe. I was very receptive to this because I was in school and I was trying to get myself ready to go out into the world, but my idea of animation was still Disney. It was Disney that even Disney wasn't like anymore. It was the Disney of *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*, the Golden Age. I knew it wasn't being done like that any more, but I also knew that at some point it was done like that.

During a hectic five months, Sedelmaier's studio produced the first season of MTV's hit *Beavis & Butt-Head*.

HEINTJES: *Your first work in animation was on* Strawberry Shortcake *and* The Berenstain Bears. *What did you learn from those experiences?*

SEDELMAIER: It didn't matter what I was working on. I was just so excited to be working in a professional realm. I knew the stuff was dreck. It didn't make any difference. It taught me not only the craft, but I met people who'd been working in the industry 40 years! In some cases,

many of them were burned out or retiring. The one guy I hooked up with, Jan Svochak, was the guy who for years was responsible for Punchy in the Hawaiian Punch animated commercials. The first thing he said to me was essentially, "Get out of the business. You're young and you have your whole life ahead of you. This industry is dying. There's nothing I can do, but you should run." That was my first day on the job.

HEINTJES: *What would your advice be to an aspiring animator today?*

SEDELMAIER: I speak to artists and animators all the time. I speak in schools, and the schools refer their students to us and they come by the studio. If they are sincerely interested in animation, depending on what they showed me in terms of work or what I felt upon meeting them, I would tell them to do everything they can to get as much exposure to as many different techniques and as many different people as you can. You may not use it right away, but you will at some point. You don't have kids, you don't have a house, you don't have a wife, and now is the time to f---up and cut your teeth. I've had to do all of that, and I still do. If you're really interested in it, you'll do it, because you essentially have no other choice.

HEINTJES: *How would you compare the robustness of the animation industry now with the one you broke into?*

SEDELMAIER: There are more opportunities now, and there's more understanding of the effectiveness of the craft. But when I was starting out, I wasn't involved with advertising. I was working in long-form animation. And my father's name is influential and recognizable in the advertising world but not so much in the animation world, so I didn't have that hanging over me. I could basically just hang out and learn from people and go about my business without the pressures that might have been there had the industry been thriving. I was this young guy showing a lot of enthusiasm at a time when there wasn't a lot of enthusiasm.

HEINTJES: *It must have been gratifying for the veterans to see a young guy who wanted to learn from them and was genuinely interested in their experiences, rather than wanting to kick them aside and take their place.*

SEDELMAIER: There were some who felt that way, and there were some who were on their way out and just didn't care. As much as some people might consider it brown-nosing, I fought very hard and was the only one who attained a relationship with an animator as his exclusive assistant. That was Jan. I had to go to the director of the project. I had to go to the owner of the company. I had to be a pain in the ass, but I said, "I know I'm good enough to be his assistant. I know you don't like people to be singled out, but I want to be Jan's assistant." I didn't want to just pick up a folder of somebody's work and assist it and in-between it and then pick up a folder of somebody else's work and assist it and in-between it. They relented, and that was another thing that really helped me. I wanted the consistency that even people who were doing the work didn't see the value of.

HEINTJES: *It sounds like an actual apprenticeship.*

SEDELMAIER: Yeah. I'd go get his coffee, whatever. But he didn't take advantage of it. I enjoyed his company. It was really, really wonderful.

HEINTJES: *Do you see the popularity of animation programs like Flash having an effect on the way people perceive commercial animation?*

SEDELMAIER: We're still in a sorting-out phase with programs like Flash. People are trying to figure out how to do things cheaply—*duh*, big surprise—but it's the marriage of technique, concept and design that makes things work. If you try to do *Ben-Hur* or *Fantasia* with Flash, you're dead in the water. If you're trying to do something that has a graphic style but doesn't need a lot of movement, it's terrific.

HEINTJES: *For a long time, all animation was done in the shadow of Disney. How do you think Disney's long domination of feature animation affects the field?*

SEDELMAIER: It was a big shadow that is still there. As a result, I think the industry will always suffer some from that, because feature animation has this baggage that comes with it. The craft is judged. If you go to a movie and it sucks, you don't say, "Boy, I don't know about this whole motion-picture thing." But if the average person goes to an animated feature-length film and it sucks, they judge the craft of animation.

HEINTJES: *I think that's true of all cartooning disciplines. If people read a comics page that bores them, they'll say, "Boy, comic strips suck." Comic books are pigeonholed by their worst adolescent power fantasies.*

SEDELMAIER: I think animation is judged even more harshly than strip work or illustration. Everything gets pigeonholed to an extent.

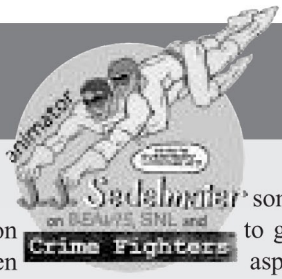
HEINTJES: *What are some of your favorite feature-length animated films?*

SEDELMAIER: Apart from *Pinocchio*, my two favorites are *Yellow Submarine* and *The Iron Giant*. *Yellow Submarine* explores the whole animation experience like it had never been done before, and the way it should be done: mixed media, trying to get into someone's vision of what a certain song is without polluting your vision of it. As far as *The Iron Giant*, the reason I like it so much is that it sneaks up on you. It looks conventional, but it's not. I called [*Iron Giant* director] Brad Bird about it to let him know that not only I but the whole studio was juiced about the movie. It sounds like it got done under the radar.

HEINTJES: *The way the studio ignored it was criminal.*

SEDELMAIER: In terms of promotion . . . there was none. It didn't get reinforced the way other films do. But unfortunately, I am glad to sacrifice the fact that it didn't do well as long as it got done the way it did. It didn't subscribe to the devices that most feature-length animated films use. There was no comedy relief and there were no songs. Brad is so talented, though, and I'm sure he learned a lot from the experience!

HEINTJES: *Let's talk about work that is deliberately less than technically flawless. You're producing* Harvey Birdman *for*



Cartoon Network's Adult Swim block of programming.

SEDELMAIER: We only did the pilot, the one with Benton Quest and Race Bannon. [Writers] Michael Ouweleen and Erik Richter are creatively so great. The main reason we did *Harvey Birdman* was to work together. Even though each of the *Harvey Birdman*s will be different, the juicy part of the whole process is formulating the initial structure of the thing, and that's what we helped to do. That's why J.J. Sedelmaier Productions will get credit on each of the *Harvey Birdman* episodes—we helped put together the foundation that the show will use. It was Erik and Michael's idea to dredge up this bankrupt Hanna-Barbera character, which they're doing more and more now. They've gone through the Space Ghost levels, and now they're beneath that [*laughter*].

Sedelmaier produced the pilot episode of "Harvey Birdman" for Cartoon Network's Adult Swim programming block. The episode involved a custody battle between Benton Quest and Race Bannon for guardianship of Jonny Quest and Hadji.

HEINTJES: *Although the original source animation for those Hanna-Barbera cartoons was exciting when I was a child, I look at it now and see all the limitations and the corners that the studio was cutting. When you are mimicking the source material by drawing down to its level, are you invoking the audience's nostalgia for it? Or are you making an ironic commentary on that style of animation?*

SEDELMAIER: It's interesting. You have to be so conscious of it, because you can start to obsess on it and lose sight of what the whole thing's about. When we were doing the first Ambiguously Gay Duo—and we didn't know there were going to be nine of them altogether—it was kind of a packaged concept. The idea that it was kind of a '60s superhero cartoon seemed to be important in capturing the clunkiness of the animation and the low film quality and the bad leveling. Even though he had a light blue arm on his body suit, when the arm would move, it would be a lighter color, just like in those '60s cartoons. With some of those things, it's the kind of animation where you need to get a life, but if you have time to do it, it's kind of fun. You can allude to it and it gets good press and all this other stuff. But as it starts to evolve, certain things don't become as important.

In commercials, it's a whole different story. We did a commercial for Home Savings Bank, and it was done in '94, before any of the—quote "retro" unquote—stuff was being done. Even though it has a look out of the '50s, it wasn't influenced by parodies that had been done. When we did the Home Savings Bank commercial, I even pulled in some people who had been doing stuff around then, just to give it a better feel. There's a case where all of the aspects of what commercials used to be were in the concept. The tag line was, "Banking the way it used to be," and then there's a line under it that says, "except for the computers and stuff." And the spot was done in black and white, and there were scratches and burns and cigarette ashes put on it as it's running. It was just totally screwed up. At that time, there were still a few people around who remembered that when a commercial started to come toward the end of the reel, it would get dirtier because they would run it through the gate. The end of the film, where people handled it, would just look that way. It had the rhythm of an old piece.

But time moves on and stuff like that doesn't necessarily mean the same thing. It isn't that important an influence on the viewing experience. It's good to be conscious of that.

HEINTJES: *Your client, Home Savings Bank, was paying for a new commercial. Did they ever have a reaction like, "We wanted a new commercial, not something that looks like it's been stored away for 45 years!"*

SEDELMAIER: The only thing they said that addressed that aspect was that they didn't know if they would use the dirty, scratched-up version. The agency was Chiat-Day, and they were known for being a very creative agency. They came in tow with the concept almost like you just put it: "*Hey, look over here! This has been up on a shelf! Look at this one!*" If there was a chuckle to be had during the commercial, it would be during the tag line at the end: "except for the computers and stuff."

HEINTJES: *I understand you were not crazy with the way that tag line was presented in the commercial.*

For Home Savings Bank, Sedelmaier created a black-and-white, UPA-inspired commercial, complete with scratched film and burn marks.

SEDELMAIER: I wasn't crazy with the way they wanted the type designed. They wanted a new-looking tag line, and I said, "Oh God, you're going to toss the whole thing away! Why not keep the whole thing looking old?"

HEINTJES: *How conscious were you of that sort of period authenticity when you produced the Speed Racer commercials for Volkswagen?*

SEDELMAIER: That's another case where you know it's a commercial, and you've got to flood that 30-second experience with enough information so that the audience is not only understanding they they're supposed to be interested in buying this car, but they're supposed to be feeling

everything about this Speed Racer thing that makes it a Speed Racer thing.

HEINTJES: *As an animator, was it different for you to work in the Japanese anime tradition rather than in the American approach?*

SEDELMAIER: It wasn't really any different than working on any problem that you're trying to solve in any project. We weren't trying to get an overall feeling of anime. We were trying to kind of eat up the Speed Racer thing and spit it back out in such a way where, at the end of it, you would say, "I didn't know they did a Volkswagen commercial using Speed Racer back then." So we weren't looking at an overall film technique as much as the Speed Racer animal itself.

HEINTJES: *How did the use of Speed Racer come about? Did Volkswagen do the work of securing the rights and bring it to its ad agency?*

SEDELMAIER: Yes. I've since become friends with Jim Rocknowski, who holds the rights in the United States. Arnold, the agency, called and said, "We're thinking of doing a commercial in an old, Japanese TV animation style. Would you be interested, and do you know what we're talking about?" So I went into the videotape library . . . we have a very extensive videotape library.

The dyssemic superhero Captain Linger comes out of Sedelmaier's studio as part of Cartoon Network's Adult Swim programming block. Writer Stuart Hill co-created the character and wrote the segments.

HEINTJES: *I'm not surprised to hear that.*

SEDELMAIER: I pulled out *Gigantor*, *Speed Racer*, *Astro Boy* and all these things, and I sent them to the agency and said, "If you're not going to tell me specifically what you're looking for, here's the realm that sounds like you're talking about." When they got this flood of reference material, then they were convinced that we at least understood the whole thing. Actually, by the time we were halfway through it, they realized that we knew it better than they did. That was inevitable, because we get our fingers much dirtier than they do. They're glancing over it and we're totally into it. It's only when we got into it and were trying to put together a consistent model sheet that we realized we could barely find two pieces of art that looked the same—it was dreadful!

HEINTJES: *When you see a commercial at home, do you find yourself thinking, "Man, I have a great idea for how I would treat that"?*

SEDELMAIER: Yeah, and there are times when I see a commercial and go, "Oh boy, I can hear the meetings that went on behind that one." Part of it is being in the industry, but I'm not being effectively entertained if I'm doing that, either.

HEINTJES: *But you won't look at a commercial and think, "Well, if J.J. Sedelmaier Productions were doing this, it would be done in such-and-such a way"?*

SEDELMAIER: Oh, sure. You can't help but do that. I look at it and go, "Oh, why didn't they do it that way? They weren't confident in the decisions they made, and now they're overcompensating." But at the same time, I look at commercials and say, "Oh my God, I would love to have done that job." And I'm usually really protective of animated stuff because of how people judge it.

HEINTJES: *So you'll see Red Bull commercials and think they did an OK job on it.*

SEDELMAIER: Well, I like the Red Bull stuff in particular. I know how they're done because we were asked to look at the stuff and see if we could do it. I told them yes, of course we could *do* it. But if you want it to look just like this, what are we contributing to it? They were just looking for other studios who could do it without changing the way it looked, but I think most of that work is done overseas because they had a presence overseas before they came to the United States. I think it's still done overseas. But they're fine. One benefit that Red Bull has is that they have the same presence on TV that they have on radio, so it makes sense in terms of a marketing campaign. If they wanted to print, they could, and it would still work.

HEINTJES: *When your studio signed on to produce the first season of* Beavis and Butt-Head*, you were committing to producing 120 minutes of animation in five months. I guess the question is, what were you thinking?*

SEDELMAIER: We weren't thinking, because we didn't know any better. No one knew any better. I got calls from people in the industry who had been approached about the project or who knew about it, and they asked me basically the same thing you asked me. Only then it was, "What are you thinking? Are you nuts?" My response was, "I don't know." I knew that for the first time, here was a situation where there was a very convenient combination of elements that were all coming together. Andy Arkin, who represents me, and I both knew Abby Terkuhle. Abby was the guy who was originally in charge of on-air promotion at MTV, and I had worked with him on a couple of the 10-second IDs for MTV. Later on, he became in charge of MTV animation. Abby had contacted Andy, and Andy suggested bringing me in.

For a 1997 Volkswagen campaign, Sedelmaier updated Speed Racer, mixing classic animation from the series with new footage.

HEINTJES: *What was it like seeing Mike Judge's drawings of Beavis and Butt-Head?*

SEDELMAIER: When I saw them for the first time, I found myself laughing, almost against my better judgment. I had never seen such naive

animation, let alone animation that was being contemplated for use on an ongoing basis. That was exciting and intriguing. The structure of the show consisted of a good deal of them on the couch, and anything they did outside consisted of formulas and cycles. A raucous and unique vision held it all together, and everyone could relate to that vision. Everyone has known a "Beavis" and a "Butt-Head," if they haven't been one themselves. Simultaneously, Andy and I had been forming a relationship with guys named John Whitney and David Lippmann, who ran a company named USAnimation, which later became VirtualMagic. They had this idea of compiling a library of images that you could call up on a computer. Normally, I wouldn't be interested in that sort of approach to animation, but here, everything was just making sense.

HEINTJES: *So 120 minutes was not really 120 minutes.*

SEDELMAIER: It wasn't tangible. I don't know that it would have been tangible under any circumstance. Our studio had only been open about a year and a half, and at that point, the industry was different. There were a lot more people available on a very hungry basis. The industry really needed something like Beavis and Butt-Head to make people say, "You know, this animation thing can really be used for things other than ducks and bunnies."

HEINTJES: *What it was like to collaborate with Mike Judge on the first season of* Beavis and Butt-Head*?*

SEDELMAIER: Since Beavis and Butt-Head were created by Mike, I had to concentrate more on corralling the talent together that was going to be able to grasp a project that didn't follow normal animation rules. I also had to be the "in-studio" eyes that could keep consistency on track. Everything was subject to Mike's approval, but we had to have stuff pretty pulled together before we showed it or it'd be a waste of time. I'd say the hardest part of the process was reminding the people to look/see what they were working on. *Beavis and Butt-Head* was unlike anything done in animation before. Its naive look was a bear to maintain in a series structure, because people just naturally fall into formulaic devices in longform production. If we had done that with *Beavis*, it would've ceased to be effective. We also had to design new characters that could appear to be created by the same hand, in this case Mike's. Anyway, Mike and I went through *all* the art at the studio in White Plains—MTV actually moved him from Texas to Port Chester, N.Y., to be in proximity to our studio. He was a whirlwind of energy and dedication. He'd go from looking at art in the studio and then make the 20-mile jaunt into the city to supervise writers and record a majority of voices himself. In short, I held down the northern portion of the production while MTV handled the city. The films he did on his own—"Frog Baseball," "Peace, Love and Understanding"—basically wrote the vocabulary we needed to translate Beavis and Butt-Head into a series. I *do* think it must've been a bit overwhelming initially for Mike to have the responsibility of supervising a huge production based on stuff he'd done on his own.


Far from the bustle of the Capitol, of Texas are just like you and me (except they don't know where to park). by Evan Smith

THE EX-Governors

LIKE A MILDLY SUCCESSFUL GAME SHOW CONtestant, George W. Bush will leave the White House a few Januaries from now with some lovely taxpayer-funded parting gifts: an annual stipend of $157,000, Secret Service protection, secretarial help, even free postage for life—all courtesy of the 1958 Former Presidents Act. By contrast, when he left the statehouse eight years ago, he received . . . next to nothing. Other than health insurance and a modest pension based on the salary of a state district judge, he got not so much as a gold watch from his constituents. Without the equivalent of a Former Governors Act on our books, he was left to fend for himself (or would have, had it not been for his new gig). No bodyguards. No stereo pool. No stamps!

You might think that life as a former governor of Texas would be pampered and glamorous. But except for "43," the previous occupants of 1010 Colorado Street have found the joy of ex to be elusive, at least at first. For one thing, there's the mental transition from ruler to ruled. "It's a shock to have everything that comes with the office and then immediately go back to being an ordinary citizen," says Dolph Briscoe (1973–1979). For another, there are the physical realities, such as getting around on your own. "More and more I miss the fact that I had someone to do the parking for me," says Mark White (1983–1987). Still, the five surviving exes who aren't the leader of the free world have managed to make lives for themselves that are as interesting, if perkless, as their personalities.

Take Preston Smith (1969–1973). After his second term was up—until 1974, governors served for two years rather than four—the feisty veteran pol returned to Lubbock with his wife, Ima, and got into the money business: He signed on as a fundraiser at his alma mater, Texas Tech, and joined the boards of two banks. The former went better than the latter. Smith was able to help Tech raise $600,000 right off the bat to complete construction of the university's Ranching Heritage Center, but the banks got walloped by the economy of the late seventies. "Interest rates got so dadgum high that people couldn't pay off their loans," he recalls. In the years that followed, Smith dabbled in public relations and real estate and tried unsuccessfully to recapture the governor's office, but Tech remained his great passion. Nearly three decades later, he maintains a busy schedule as the administrative assistant to the chancellor—at age 89. (Ima Smith died in 1999.) "I'm in better shape than I've been in years," he says. His secret? Plenty of sleep, clean living, and rigorous exercise three to five times a week. What he misses most about being governor is "the [CONTINUED ON PAGE 51]

ILLUSTRATION BY J.J. SEDELMAIER PRODUCTIONS

EX-CALIBER. FROM LEFT, WHITE, RICHARDS, CLEMENTS, BUSH, SMITH, AND BRISCOE.

GOVERNORS

Sedelmaier drew the "X-Governors" (six former Texas governors) for a *Texas Monthly* article, a nod to his "X-Presidents" segments on *Saturday Night Live*.

HEINTJES: *When your name appeared on the TV Funhouse title card on* Saturday Night Live*, everyone suddenly knew who you were. You must have felt like one of those guys who works for years to become an overnight success.*

SEDELMAIER: Well, I already had a reputation as a creative person. I wouldn't have been able to open a studio if I didn't have a reputation. But that was a totally different experience. It was great, but it was different.

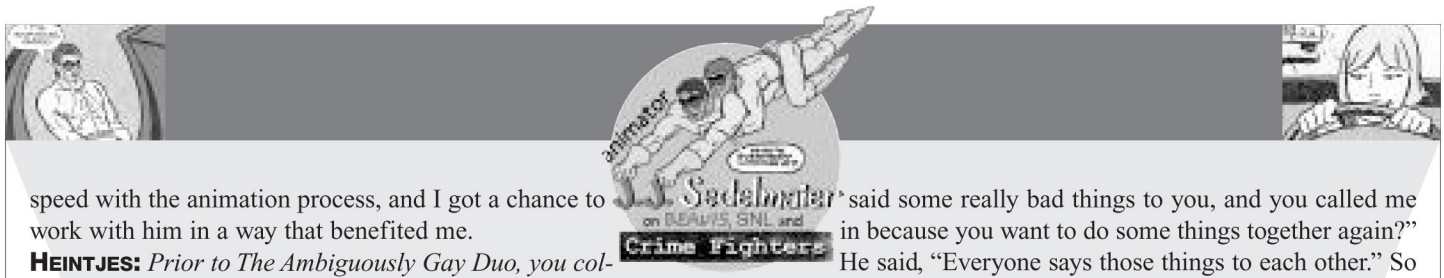
HEINTJES: *You went from working in relative anonymity to having a hand in creating what became pop-culture icons in The Ambiguously Gay Duo. How did your studio deal with that change?*

SEDELMAIER: It was a slow change. It all felt natural. It was interesting how the cartoons were garnering their own following—justifiably so—separate from Robert Smigel or me or anyone associated with them. The *Post*, the *Daily News*, the *Tribune* in Chicago and all these other media outlets were glomming onto the cartoons and were saying that this was the best thing to happen to *Saturday Night Live* in years. The Ambiguously Gay Duo garnered their own fan following! That was the most exciting things to watch.

We'd seen it happen with *Beavis*. We were in the credit roll on *Beavis*, but we didn't have a title card. The title card was the most intensive crash course in branding, regardless of how I'd been involved with it in commercials and how I could effectively speak about it and lead clients through the branding process. It's funny—we haven't done one in more than two years, and we still get people calling us and e-mailing us like we still do them.

HEINTJES: *What was your initial reaction to the concept of superheroes with uncertain sexual orientation?*

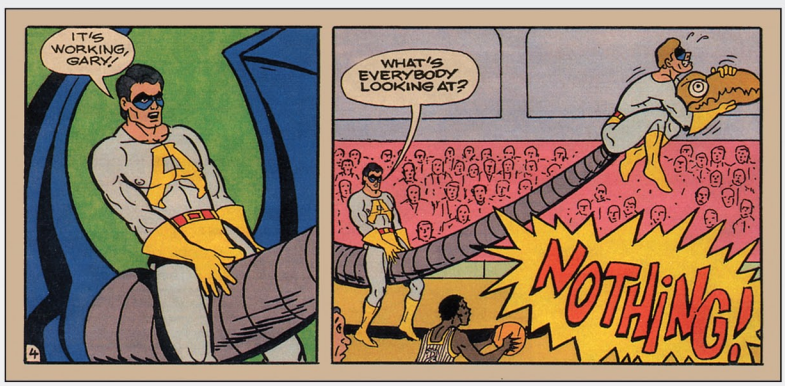
SEDELMAIER: When I got the first script from Robert Smigel, it was the first time I laughed out loud at a script. I've read lots of stuff that I knew was funny, and I could envision how it would be funny, but this truly was hilarious. With my association with comic books, everything fell into place. We were lucky to have started the cartoons together—Robert got the chance to get up to



speed with the animation process, and I got a chance to work with him in a way that benefited me.

HEINTJES: *Prior to The Ambiguously Gay Duo, you collaborated with Robert Smigel on another* Saturday Night Live *parody commercial, "Cluckin' Chicken," in which a freshly decapitated chicken's head gives the audience a tour of how the restaurant's fast-food chicken is produced. What kind of response did you get to that?*

SEDELMAIER: It was tremendous. That was the first time I'd been involved with something that stirred and entertained people to a level that I had not done before. After we did that for *Saturday Night Live*, I immediately put it on our sample reel. It was just a dream to have something that combined animation with the advertising angle.



Sedelmaier and writer/co-creator Robert Smigel adapted their animated Ambiguously Gay Duo episode "Trouble Came 3 Times!" to print for *Playboy*.

HEINTJES: *"Cluckin' Chicken" was your first collaboration with Robert Smigel.*

SEDELMAIER: That's how we met. It was right before we started working on *Beavis*. We met through Jim Signorelli. Jim is the guy who runs the film unit and does all the commercial parodies. Jim and I are friends, and we had been talking about doing a commercial parody. I had been thinking about a serial thing with animation and live action. Robert was still a staff writer at that time. Working on "Cluckin' Chicken" was the worst production experience I'd ever had. I said things to Robert Smigel that I had *never* before said to anyone in a professional situation.

HEINTJES: *What made it so difficult?*

SEDELMAIER: Oh, he was changing everything right and left. We didn't have the schedule, we didn't have the budget. It was my first time working with *Saturday Night Live* and it was just a terrible experience. Tom, I made it very clear to him that I was not happy.

It was very strange, then, when I got a call from NBC. They were going to do a new show with this guy named Conan O'Brien, and they wanted me to come for a meeting. At the meeting, the producer's there, Conan's there, Andy [Arkin] is there, and in walks Robert! I thought, Oh my God, it's a setup! I'm totally self-centered, like NBC is going to set up J.J. Sedelmaier, but it was the only explanation! I said these things to this guy, and here comes the payback! So, I said "hi," and he said, "Hey, how's it going?" I asked him why he was at the meeting, and he said, "I'm the executive producer and the head writer, and we want to do an animated title sequence."

I said, "Hold it, just stop. I said some really bad things to you, and you called me in because you want to do some things together again?" He said, "Everyone says those things to each other." So that sort of established the ground rules [*laughter*]. While we were doing the *Saturday Night Live* stuff, there were times when we would clash, but it always went away. We still stay in touch and there's still stuff we want to do together.

HEINTJES: *Regarding the Ambiguously Gay Duo, it's interesting that much of the humor comes from the speculation of whether they're gay—it doesn't matter if they are or not.*

SEDELMAIER: Bighead and Brainio have an ongoing debate about whether Ace and Gary are gay. Bighead is obsessed with them being gay. Brainio says, "Chill out—even if that's the case, what's the difference?"

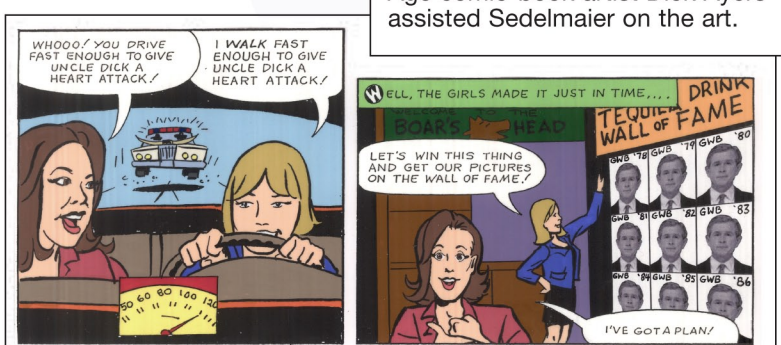
HEINTJES: *You also produced the "Fun With Real Audio" shorts for* Saturday Night Live. *How did those come about?*

SEDELMAIER: We had originally done The Ambiguously Gay Duo for *The Dana Carvey Show*, which was short-lived. Then, the summer before the following season of *Saturday Night Live*, Robert called me and said, "What if we did some cartoons for *Saturday Night Live*?" I asked him what he meant, and he said, "We would just do some cartoons!" I told him I would love to do them, but I didn't know what he wanted or anything. We started talking about how they had to be topical. He had this idea of using the real audio of a Ross Perot and Larry King interview. Before I knew it, we were doing this cartoon that had to be done in three weeks.

HEINTJES: *That "Fun With Real Audio" adapted Barry Blitt's style to the animation. How did that decision come about?*

SEDELMAIER: I was applying the approach I was using for commercials, which is to understand the concept and use the visual style that will push the concept even further. The Ross Perot-Larry King piece had political undertones, and it involved caricatures. I had a relationship with Barry, and it was a chance for us to work together. After doing it—and it's one of my favorites—the idea of using an outside artist was really prohibitive in terms of scheduling and budgeting. It was really going to cause

Sedelmaier drew and Daniel Radosh wrote "The Daughters of Hazzard" for *Playboy*, which has not yet scheduled the story for publication. Silver Age comic-book artist Dick Ayers assisted Sedelmaier on the art.



a strain on my relationships with the individual artists. I wanted to concentrate on the production to get a good cartoon, and I could tell I was going to spend more time keeping people happy.

HEINTJES: *With all the cross-hatching in Barry Blitt's work, I would have thought his style would be really difficult to animate.*

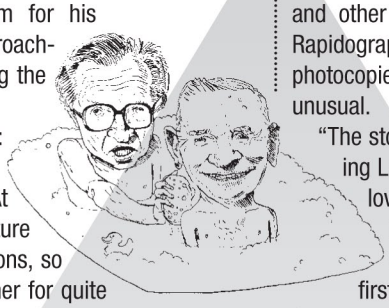
SEDELMAIER: If you look at it closely, you realize that it's two, maybe three, drawings that are repeated, and the mouths changed. Barry did layouts that basically captured each scene. Then we added animated touches to it. Over the course of three years of doing them, the cartoons evolved and "Real Audio" began to take on its own look, which was this kind of watered-down caricature. It wasn't great design, and it wasn't great animation, but the idea was so terrific. I came to understand that if the look had a fuller design, it would have only gotten in the way of how gutsy and raucous the idea was. It was really a lot more effective because of its crudeness. There aren't too many instances where you can say that without rationalizing it, but this was one of them. The crudeness was itself a design device, which now has been understood and picked up by advertising. We did a series of FootJoy commercials, "The Golf Gods." That was clearly inspired by the *Saturday Night Live* stuff, and people have begun to understand that it's the whole package, working together, that makes it successful.

HEINTJES: *How were you perceived in the industry prior to the attention you received as a result of TV Funhouse?*

SEDELMAIER: My reputation was probably as a very creative producer, even though I had directed stuff. My reputation was as a producer who seemed to be directing simultaneously. I steered that into a reputation as a director who was ultimately going to

GREAT ADAPTATIONS

One of the perks of J.J. Sedelmaier's job is working with some of today's top print cartoonists as he animates their work. We asked him for his thoughts on the various approaches he has used in animating the work of a group of very distinct artists.

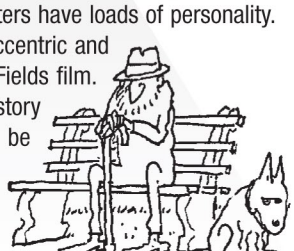


BARRY BLITT (for Fun With Real Audio): "Barry and I worked together on the very first 'TV Funhouse' piece done for *SNL*. At that point, I had no idea what sort of structure was going to be required to do the cartoons, so since we had both wanted to work together for quite some time, I took the opportunity to bring him in. He did both character drawings of Larry King and Ross Perot in pen and ink and watercolor background treatments. We used his character designs as guides and kept the animation very limited so it really never strayed from his designs. Because of this limited approach, the animation was almost 'cosmetic' to his drawings. But he captured so much in one sketch that the piece actually seems fuller than it actually is. Ultimately, I had to scrap the idea of using outside, 'name' talent for design, though. The schedules and budgets are so limited that it's more economical to keep it within the studio walls . . . but the piece we did together remains a favorite of other artists."

DAVID LEVINE (for Brown & Co.): "This campaign—we ended up doing nine spots, I think—was a dream to produce, but it started out under circumstances that were less than ideal. In the beginning the people we did it for requested that we don't contact David during the production because he's a premium designer and the budget doesn't cover his doing additional work. This was hard for me, only because I look at every project as an opportunity to collaborate with artists, and in this case, *David Levine*! The agency gave us a print ad that David had done for them and that was *it* for reference. I ended up shooting videotape at the voice record of the person that David had caricatured to use for reference during production. His style is extremely labor-intensive due to all the delicate cross-hatching he uses in his work. We normally photocopy drawings before filming them to avoid showing Wite-Out and other techniques used to touch up the art. In this case, the Rapidographed line was so delicate that it looked deteriorated if we photocopied it. We ended up shooting the original artwork—very unusual.

"The story's not over. Since there was no stipulation about contacting Levine at the end of the project, I called him and said that I'd love his opinion of our translation of his style to animation. As I recall, he couldn't imagine why anyone would want to try to animate his designs. Anyway, I sent him a cassette of the first spot we did and held my breath. He loved it, and I could finally consider the project finished."

GEORGE BOOTH (for Pacific Bell): "George is about as sweet a partner as there is to have in a production. He makes himself totally available and very receptive to ideas and direction. I've worked on two campaigns with him and he also "cartooned" one of our X-mas cards. The Yellow Pages spots we did together is a perfect example of how an artist can influence the narrative. The original idea was to have characters animated that showed how using the wrong telephone directory could screw up your life. In the two commercials, the agency wanted to focus on a female lawyer and a young man about to get married. They specified that they thought it was important to choose an illustrator with a simple line style because the animation would be over a flat yellow background. I suggested George because his stuff has a clean line and his characters have loads of personality. His characters also tend to be elderly, eccentric and totally American—almost out of a W.C. Fields film. This opened up all sorts of doors to story modification. Why does the guy *have* to be young? Maybe he's old and clueless—that's why he's just now getting hitched! I never would've considered this change without George's presence in the job. He



take responsibility for the production end by being his own producer.

HEINTJES: *Occupying those dual roles must have relieved your clients.*

SEDELMAIER: It was a relief to them after they knew how it was going to work with me. It's unusual for a director to produce his own stuff, mainly because most directors want to be insulated from the process that producers have to deal with. When the people from the agency are talking about money and schedules, it sometimes takes me down a notch in their eyes. "Why should we be dealing with him? He's the director." I think they eventually understand. If they don't understand, there's nothing I can do about it. It means I can't take on as much work, but the work I can take on, I'm intimately involved with. I bring it in, and then I decide how it gets handed out within the studio.

HEINTJES: *You could have continued producing TV Funhouse as long as you wanted, but you chose to walk away from it. What prompted that decision?*

SEDELMAIER: First of all, we were very busy with commercials. Regardless of how much visibility [the *Saturday Night Live* cartoons] were giving us, we had done it. It had become a machine, and for the most part, the people who work in the studio—myself included—we thrive on stuff that has problems that need to be solved. In one sense, we're gluttons for punishment. I think everyone in the studio was relieved when we ended it. The commercials were more interesting than the *Saturday Night Live* stuff had become. I wanted to see how we could apply some of this *Saturday Night Live* stuff we had learned to other realms. We all felt like it was visible and it was great to have that visibility, but it was "been there, done that."

faxed drawings to us, and I chose animators who naturally grasped the subtleties of George's style. He's a real dream."

GARRY TRUDEAU (for the Massachusetts Dept. of Public Health): "Garry's the first person I've worked with who's had—as one individual—final approval over all aspects of a project. In fact, I think he's the *only* person. Fortunately, he's bright and and actually has something to say! I've always been a fan of the writing in *Doonesbury* but considered the drawing secondary to the content—kinda like our *SNL* work—so I was a bit worried that he might not be receptive to what we would have to do to his models to make them effective as animated characters. His vision was to make the main character in the anti-smoking spot—Mr. Butts, the cartoon cigarette—a possessed hawking salesman, like Jim Carrey in *The Mask*. We chose Billy West to do the voice with Garry at the voice record with all of us. Garry faxed us drawings based on our storyboard and we took it from there. I shuttled around the studio between the background artist, animators and assistants. Garry and the rest of us got together in the studio to see the pencil test. He fully intended, he told us afterwards, to tear things to shreds, but he actually approved it as is . . . *nice*! I tried to stick as closely as possible to his print work, but I added some simple shading and coloring that would feel like what he would do if he worked in color. After seeing the final, I still felt something was missing. We had ashes falling as Mr. Butts talked and a hypnotic level of smoke that followed the end of his head wherever he moved, but I did a second version of animation that made the burning coal on his head glow. It really caps off the 'demonic' feel and made the cartoon complete."

BONNIE TIMMONS (for Northern Quilted bathroom tissue): "Bonnie and I have been doing the 'Quilters' spots for more than five years now. Prior to that, we had done work together for AT&T, Kotex and Dial soap. Bonnie recommended me to the advertising agency when they had asked her to become involved as the designer on the Quilters stuff. The only challenge to the production was how we were going to convert her quirky illustrations and color approach to animation artwork. She was able to break her technique down into color fields, which we converted to separate color levels, which were then combined either on celluloid or computer. Once we decided on the production procedure, it all fell into place very nicely. The hard part was the character design. Not that Bonnie didn't always provide brilliant designs—the problem was we had to contend with test results that were indicating what good character designs were supposed to be! Ultimately, we sorted it all out, but it was a process that took weeks to go through; this is nothing new in commercial production.

"Bonnie e-mails us files that we use for reference during production. I usually prefer to have her actually do package designs, which we use in the production. That's an advantage of the current computer technology: You can actually use an artist's static artwork intact within the film. You just have to make sure it's high resolution. I also work closely with Bonnie's agent, Joanne Palulian, when it comes to communications with the agency. This keeps things clean and consistent."

AL HIRSCHFELD (for NBC): "In 1992, NBC asked me if I had any ideas for 10-second network IDs that could use their peacock logo. I did two storyboards—my favorite was one that traced the graphic history of the NBC logo—which were produced. NBC had arranged for Hirschfeld to design a peacock and then asked me to animate it. He did two drawings that they sent to me. I was curious what he'd do with peacock feet as it walked, so I called him and asked if he could knock off a couple drawings of peacock feet. Then I went over to his place to pick up the designs. He's got a great brownstone in the city with his studio on the top floor. He was sitting in his chair—he draws in a barber's chair—at his drawing table, which is textured with years of also being used as his cutting board, and he handed me the drawings and I left. It was like having an audience with the Pope of illustration. What a treat. The guy's work is timeless! We didn't have a lot of collaboration, and it was only a 10-second spot, but it is still a highlight in my career." HA

Also, we started getting calls from advertising agencies saying, "We really love the *Saturday Night Live* stuff—would you ever consider doing commercials?" [*laughter*]

HEINTJES: *You also declined to produce the second season of* Beavis and Butt-Head.

SEDELMAIER: That was because we would have been destined to become a wing of MTV.

HEINTJES: *You probably had to devote your studio entirely to MTV for five months while you produced the animation.*

SEDELMAIER: And after we finished it, we essentially handed our studio over to MTV. There was no way I was going to keep 50 people on staff, and I never want to get that big again.

HEINTJES: *What is your normal staffing level?*

SEDELMAIER: A nice combination is about 12 people. I think I've got eight now. They weren't all on premises, but if they weren't on premises, they were coming in with the work.

HEINTJES: *It must have been strange not knowing everyone's name.*

SEDELMAIER: Oh, it was. There was a lot of, "And you are . . . ?" Before we finished *Beavis*, we had talked about doing more of them, and we decided no. Three-quarters of the people in my studio went over to MTV, and that's how they started MTV Animation.

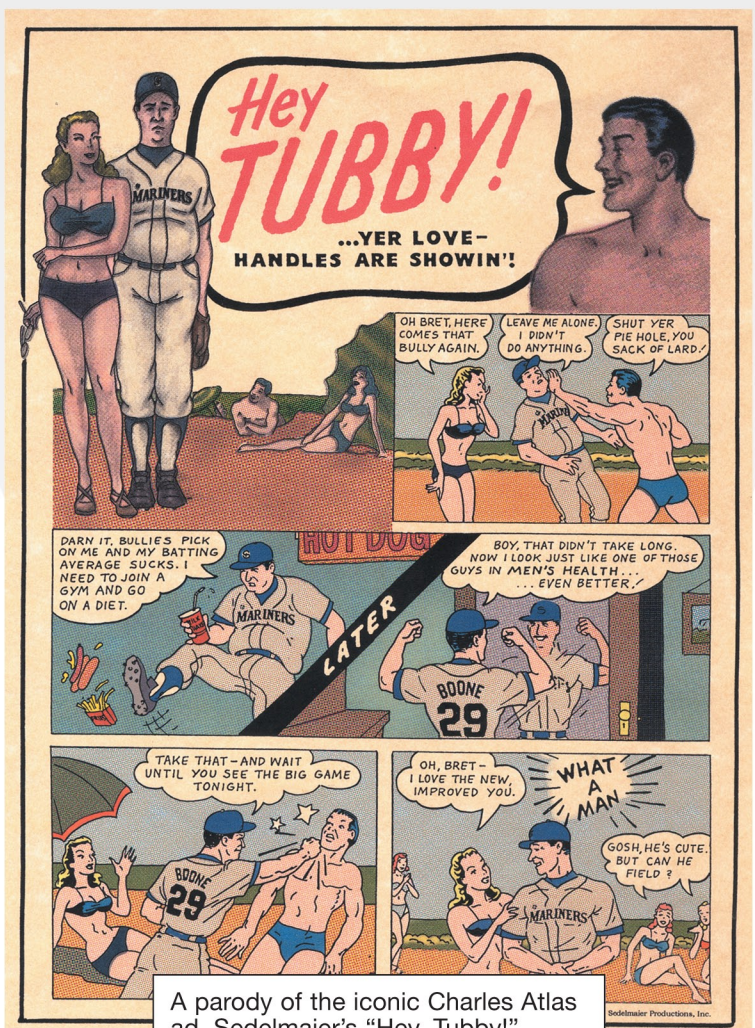
HEINTJES: *After* Beavis and Butt-Head*, you began producing "Schoolhouse Rock" for ABC.*

SEDELMAIER: That could not have been more of a polar opposite from *Beavis and Butt-Head*! I always thought the old ones were very well done. That was a wonderful thing to be a part of, because it hadn't been done for a few years. They had reinstituted the law that required networks to do a certain amount of educational programming.

HEINTJES: *In 1998, you produced an animated commercial for the Episcopal church in Maryland. That commercial could have been considered quite irreverent—it featured a cardigan-clad father trying to persuade his son, Timmy, to attend church by saying, "Not only will you get to learn about the wages of sin and eternal damnation, but you can learn to play fun games like Bible sword drill and sing inspiration songs like 'Kumbaya' and 'I've Got Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Down in My Heart.'" Timmy then walks into the street to face oncoming traffic rather than go to church—pretty pointed stuff. How did that spot come about?*

SEDELMAIER: I knew Jeff Hopfer from the Richards Group in Texas. He was an art director I'd worked with even before we opened the studio. He and his copywriting partner, Ron Henderson, told me that they had a pro bono client, the Episcopal church. They had already done a print campaign, but they had an idea for a 30-second spot. They sent me a four-line treatment of the idea and the print ads they had done. The print ads were so brilliant—they were a poke in the eye with a hot poker. One was a Renaissance painting of Christ on the cross, and it looked like it had been painted on wood. You could see the texture of the paint. Scratched in white letters over the painting were the words, "Of course, we accept people with body piercings." There was another with an out-of-focus cross with the words, "For Christ's sake, get in here!" They were amazing. I spoke to the church's pastor ahead of time and asked him how they would get away with a campaign like this, and he said, "The archbishop said to get a new flock."

I foresaw this commercial getting mentioned in the *New York Times*'s advertising section. This project would clearly get publicity, and that's exactly what happened. I sent it to the *New York Times*, and they not only talked about it, but they mentioned my name as the director and the owner of the production company, which they almost never do because they only talk about clients. My association with *Saturday Night Live* helped, because here is the guy who was doing animation for *Saturday Night Live* now doing animation for a church. MSNBC picked up on it, so it got national airtime that it wouldn't have otherwise gotten. Bob Garfield of *Ad Age* picked up on it and gave it no stars. He thought it was the worst, most blasphemous piece of animation that would possibly be done. He didn't get it; he said it was directed toward young parents, and it had nothing to do with young parents. Because he was the adver-



A parody of the iconic Charles Atlas ad, Sedelmaier's "Hey, Tubby!" appeared in *Playboy* when the magazine interviewed Seattle Mariners second baseman Bret Boone.

tising critic for *Good Morning America*, he came on and proceeded to introduce it as the worst spot of the year and then proceeded to talk about it for 15 minutes, and I think they showed it three times [*laughter*].

HEINTJES: *That's the kind of criticism you'll gladly accept.*

SEDELMAIER: Oh, it was like the stamp of approval! It was great.

HEINTJES: *How did you begin producing the "Captain Linger" spots for Cartoon Network?*

SEDELMAIER: Captain Linger came from Stuart Hill at Cartoon Network. It was his idea. He's been great to work with, and we're trying to keep Captain Linger going because not only do we love it, but everyone who has seen it loves it. Stuart's initial vision was having it look like a "Rocky and Bullwinkle"-type piece. I told him, "If we do it like Rocky and Bullwinkle, you automatically know something stupid or silly is going to happen." I suggested that we not only play it straight, but have the drawings look like a Curt Swan-type comic book—a straight-ahead comic book with no sense of humor.

Sedelmaier's "Golf Gods" series, produced for a FootJoy campaign, takes a group of actual top golfers and places them in superheroic situations, complete with superpowers and supervillains.

HEINTJES: *You wanted an archetypal look.*

SEDELMAIER: Exactly. Then, you establish a tone and people think they know what's going on, and then you hit them with something else. "Hold on—what's going on here?" I think that approach made it a lot more effective.

HEINTJES: *Your studio can go from something that really pushes the envelope, like a lot of what we've been talking about, to something that is sweet and gentle, like the "Quilters" ad campaign that adapted Bonnie Timmons's illustration. That sort of flexibility must be very beneficial in your industry.*

SEDELMAIER: People who hear me explain my feelings about animation know that I say animation is a craft that has no identity. Animation is a form of film that uses created graphics in sequence.

HEINTJES: *But no one would look at a spot you've done and say, "There's the Sedelmaier Productions house style at work."*

SEDELMAIER: They could identify our sensibility. But that's the fun part of what we do. Using the right tool for the right job is the fun part of the craft. I'm the first one to say—much to people's chagrin, sometimes—"Is this really something you want to use animation for?" And there have been plenty of times when I've gotten my hands on live-action boards and have been able to convince people that it should be animated. When I opened the studio, there were some people who said, "You've got to have a style to hang your hat on." They were essentially saying that you've got to have something to allow people to pigeonhole you. I understood why they were saying it, but thank God I didn't listen too closely. Now, you get people wondering how one studio can be behind all this.

HEINTJES: *Are there products that you would be morally opposed to producing commercials for?*

SEDELMAIER: Well, I wouldn't do a tobacco ad.

HEINTJES: *So you bring your own set of values to what you do.*

SEDELMAIER: There were times that a script for *Saturday Night Live* would go too far, and we'd have to say "no."

HEINTJES: *What kind of material would it be—drugs? Sexual innuendo?*

SEDELMAIER: Sexual innuendo. If it were drug-related, it wouldn't be positive, and then I wouldn't have a problem with it. But with the sexual thing, it can go the toilet-humor route and it can make people uncomfortable. When it's uncomfortable working on it or being associated with it, we'll draw the line. If I'm sending a reel to a friend of mine, I'll tell them they should screen it first, so they can decide for themselves. The reel could contain anything from the *Saturday Night Live* stuff to the ad for the Episcopal church. You might think you have your friends figured out, but you want to give your friends the opportunity to say, "You know, I like J.J., but this time he's gone a little bit too far."

Sedelmaier and writer Daniel Radosh fused the Enron scandal with the television drama *CSI* to create "Crime Scene Enron" for the August 2002 issue of *Playboy*.

HEINTJES: *Recently, you've begun doing print cartooning for markets including* Playboy *and* Esquire. *What has that experience been like for someone who is primarily used to working in animation?*

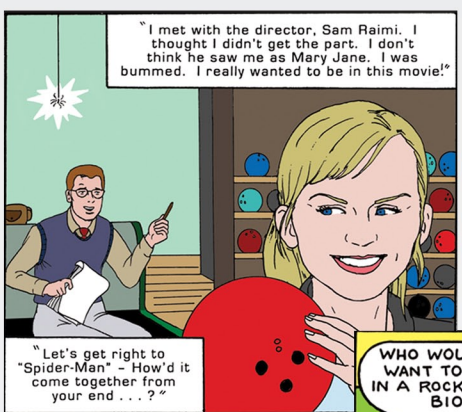
animator J.J. Sedelmaier on BEAVIS, SNL and Crime Fighters

SEDELMAIER: Oh, it's been great—thrilling!

HEINTJES: *It's ironic that you couldn't get your foot in the door at Marvel or DC, and now you're doing work in the comic-book format for much more prestigious markets.*

SEDELMAIER: Well, I didn't really give DC and Marvel a good shot. It wasn't like animation, where I could sort of slide in and get my fingers dirty. When I found out the reality of it . . . the comic-book thing was a dream that modified itself because it wasn't what I thought it was. Thank God!

HEINTJES: *As a storyteller, what are the differences between animation and print cartooning? Obviously, in animation you control how long the viewer sees something and when the action moves on, which is not the case in print. Are there any storytelling or structural challenges in print that you encounter?*



Sedelmaier's studio produced this feature, "An Interview With the Amazing Kirsten Dunst," for *Esquire*. Over the course of the story, the interviewer (writer Ross Johnson) morphs from a Peter Parker-like journalist (above) to the wall-crawler himself, all the while conducting an interview with *Spider-Man* costar Dunst. The narrative technique of a normal conversation against the backdrop of incongruous action is one that Sedelmaier has used in his "Fun With Real Audio" shorts.

SEDELMAIER: They're two completely different worlds! I'd say that in both realms I try not to be broad or overplay the shot. Especially in print, I'd rather present a visual with subtleties than shtick. I try to use shtick only as a device in, for example, a parody or satire, not as a regular element of expression. I find that print is a much more intimate process. You just don't need to involve as many hands. I still find it quite refreshing to be able to "dwell" on a panel so long before I feel it's completed. Sometimes I act as an art director, sometimes I do the actual art. Sometimes I stick my fingers in other's work, sometimes I step back. This goes for both realms. But in many ways, print is a simpler, calmer process for me.

HEINTJES: *Have you enjoyed the process of exploring in print properties that you've animated?*

SEDELMAIER: The process has been great, because they're coming to me to do a variation of something I've done, but I get to explore a different realm. I've gotten to think about things more in terms of print. It's been great, and I'm just scratching the surface.

HEINTJES: *When you're talking about Spider-Man, a person is usually a Steve Ditko fan or a John Romita fan. Who was your favorite Spider-Man artist?*

SEDELMAIER: I was a Romita man, but I think Ditko is absolutely brilliant. To me, Romita was the Curt Swan of Marvel. John Buscema was like the Alex Raymond of Marvel. There were other artists I liked . . .

HEINTJES: *Jack Kirby?*

SEDELMAIER: Jack Kirby was in a class by himself. There was nobody like him.

HEINTJES: *Artistically, he was a force of nature.*

SEDELMAIER: He was *amazing*. But I actually met Ditko. One day I was walking down the street in Manhattan, and I happened to glance inside the lobby of a building. My eye went to the register, and there was "S. Ditko." I went to the guard at the desk and asked him if that was Steve Ditko. He said he didn't know, and I asked him if I could go up to the apartment. He said, "Sure," so I went up.

HEINTJES: *That's good security, by the way.*

SEDELMAIER: Well, this was years ago [*laughter*]. The building looked modern from the outside, but inside it looked like something from *The Maltese Falcon*. I found the room number, and there's a sheet-metal door. I knocked on the door, and it opens about four inches. This guy peers out, and I saw the drawing desk in the back. I asked, "Are you Steve Ditko?" and he said, "Uh . . . yeah." I said, "I just saw your name downstairs, and I wanted to come up and tell you how much I've always enjoyed your work." He said "OK" and closed the door. That was it! [*laughter*] And from what I understand, that was a pretty involved conversation!

HEINTJES: *You've worked with newspaper cartoonists and magazine cartoonists in your animation work. Have you worked with comic-book artists?*

SEDELMAIER: I recently had the chance to work with Neal Adams. An agency had called me in to direct an animatic. That's unusual, because animatics are test films, but they wanted it to test in a form that was close to the way it would ultimately be done for final. Neal has an animatic company called Continuity Associates. When I moved to New York, he was one of the people I wanted to meet, and now I'm working in tandem with him! I'm essentially designing characters that he and people in Continuity are working with. Talk about ironic! I would love to work with him in the reverse sense, where I get to fully animate his stuff. I've gotten to know Alex Ross.

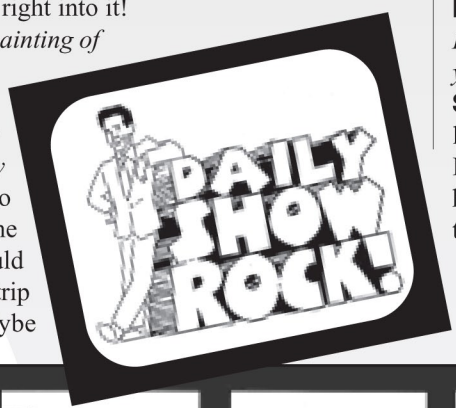
HEINTJES: *I saw a painting he did of The Ambiguously Gay Duo! It was on his website. It looks fantastic.*

SEDELMAIER: His work is fantastic! And his stuff has no business working! [*laughter*] It does everything that live-action people

would like their characters to do, which is to be able to exist in a realistic realm and not look like total idiots. I keep thinking of that long shot in the first Batman film, where Batman and Kim Basinger are running down the street to the Batmobile. It shows no sensitivity to why comic books work in their form and why film works in its form. Here Tim Burton's got this whole dark mood going, and they do this long shot, and all I can say to myself is, "Hey—there's a guy dressed like Batman running down the street!" But Alex Ross has control of the framing and control of the dynamics of it, and the fabric in the costumes has wrinkles . . . short of it feeling like socialist propaganda, it's terrific! I buy right into it!

HEINTJES: *How did his painting of The Ambiguously Gay Duo come about?*

SEDELMAIER: After doing the *Playboy* Ambiguously Gay Duo comic, it occurred to me that at some point I would love to package the strip with a cover and maybe someday do a whole J.J. Sedelmaier Productions comic book. I remember reading my father's Captain Marvel comic books from the 1940s, where C.C. Beck would do a realistically rendered cover for an issue, even though the strip itself was relatively cartoony. That's when Alex popped into mind. I tracked him down, asked if he'd be into it—he was, obviously—and with just a few faxes back and forth, we came to a graphic conclusion as to what it would look like. I wanted it to take full advantage of what *he* is about as an illustrator while addressing what Ace and Gary are about. It's a wonderful example of a satire of a parody. Not only were Alex and I was able to poke fun at The Ambiguously Gay Duo, but he got a chance to poke fun at himself, too!



The October 29, 2002, broadcast of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* included "Daily Show Rock," a send-up of "Schoolhouse Rock." Written by Eric Drysdale and D.J. Javerbaum, the segment took a wry look at midterm elections from the jaundiced perspective of Grampa, who attempted to explain the electoral process to Jimmy. Below are some of Sedelmaier's storyboards from the three-and-a-half-minute segment, depicting the first step of translating the idea into celluloid. Capturing the look of "Schoolhouse Rock" came naturally to Sedelmaier, whose studio revived the series for ABC in the early '90s.

Getting to work with these people—Doug Fraser, Garry Trudeau, George Booth, Al Hirschfeld—I love that part of what I do. I talk to my father about it, because he loves comic books and cartooning, too. He totally understands why I feel so lucky. And it's not like I'm just meeting them at a convention or something; we're working in tandem, doing what we both do best.

HEINTJES: *Your father must be proud of his son.*

SEDELMAIER: Yes he is, and I'm lucky to have had an upbringing from both parents that encouraged me to do whatever I wanted to do and be creative.

HEINTJES: *Your father has had his own groundbreaking career. Has he ever looked at any of your stuff and said, "I can't believe you did that!"?*

SEDELMAIER: I love the Home Savings Bank ad as a parody. He looks at it and says, "You know, I hated it then, and I still hate it." He hated that style in the '50s when he had to deal with it while he was working at ad agencies. When he looks at it now, he still thinks it's ugly, but he understands that that's the point of it. He knows I'm not working in that style because I have no other choice. The last thing I have to worry about it whether he "gets" it. He gets the proverbial "it." He's had to deal with it on higher levels because of the status of live action in the film-production world.

HEINTJES: *Do you think you can get away with a lot more nowadays than he could in his day?*

SEDELMAIER: Yeah, except he got away with a lot more than anyone did. He was breaking ground in areas where people didn't even realize ground needed to be broken. If there's anyone responsible for changing people's perception of advertising, certainly it's him. He did it by dispelling the myth that things had to be superficial and plastic if you're trying to sell something. That's something that's very exciting to see in any artist's work, let alone your own parent. To be a part of that heritage is just great. HA