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Holy TV's heaven can rate

On-air evangelists: divine comedy for bored-again viewers

By Charles Lieurance
Senior Reporter

Somewhere between the Cable Value-Network and the Lake of Fire are the TV evangelists, those purveyors of hateful ignorance who have performed the miracle of turning Elmer Gantry's traveling chautauqua tent into a multi-billion-dollar industry and gold plating the old rugged cross. Their constituency is the old, the lonely and the uneducated, the narrow and the short-sighted, those who have suffered insurmountable crises and those whose free minds have been crushed by the effervescent, middle-class, Caucasian Jesus.

This is not to say that there isn't also a constituency of viewers who watch these caterwauling Christians simply for the entertainment value. A whole generation of young Americans have discovered that watching Jimmy Swaggart pound his great gavel of a fist on the old family Bible in condemnation of fags, freeloaders and free thinking, is far funnier than your average sit-com. There are no noisy laugh tracks, no obsessive cheerfulness and, best of all, it's real life. Watching the eyes of some fundamentalist preacher's congregation tearing up as they're told they're heading for hell in a hand basket, and then watching them scrape our their pockets into the collection plate in gratitude sure beats the hell out of "My Sister Sam."

In an effort to keep you up on which of the multitude of TV evangelists is the most entertaining, I've assembled a list of the loudest and most self-righteous, those most adept at the spiritual blackmail that is fundamentalist evangelism.

Tube Talk

1) Jimmy Swaggart:
Swaggart is a spiritual terrorist, a mutant hybrid of his kin Jerry Lee Lewis, Captain Ahab, Elmer Gantry and the Spanish Inquisition. He hates nearly everything about modern American life, except, of course, the currency.

He is a ranting screamer who makes sometimes completely nonsensical poetry out of condemnation. His white hair falls in his face; he sweats and barrels through his ratty Bible like, dare I say it, a man possessed. And he finds verses that support the forced exile or death of liberals, rock 'n' rollers, gays, politicians, insurance salesmen, feminists, drinkers, smokers, college professors, cultists, tolerant Christians and sexual perverts.

Hell hath no fury like Swaggart scorned. The only problem with watching Swaggart for entertainment value is that Swaggart is really a dangerous man.

2) Jim and Tammy Bakker:
Jim and Tammy are nowhere near as

hypnotic as Swaggart, but they are surely funnier. So much has been printed in this newspaper about the Bakkers that I'll just say this: Tammy is not human; she's made of Mary Kay cosmetics through which an electric charge passes to keep her upright. So that this ball of makeup won't crack, the outer shell is continually lubricated by the discharge of fluid from the eye holes.

Jim is a large toad.
3) Jerry Falwell:
Falwell used to be at the top of the list. He started the whole idea of the evangelist sent to devastate this Sodom and Gomorrah called America by taking God out of the church on Sunday morning and into the streets, onto the airwaves and into the White House.

Now, he's kind of boring and looks like he'd really rather be back in the church on Sunday morning.

4) Oral Roberts:
Oral Roberts never would have made this list at all were it not for his recent attempts to extort money from his followers by threatening them with his death unless they gave him every cent they had.

His approach to Christianity has been moderate and relatively innocuous, sticking with overexplaining the Scriptures and selling his followers trinkets and bricks with names on them between monotonous spiritual pep rallies.

He must have changed PR men somewhere along the line.

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Jessie Johnson's second LP

Prince disciple owes debt

By Stew Magnuson
Senior Reporter

Jessie Johnson, "Shockadelica" (A & M Records).

Jessie Johnson, former lead guitarist for The Time, and ex-member of Prince's Minneapolis "family," has been bad-mouthing his Royal Purple boss since leaving fold. His story of how Prince mistreated The Time don't really shock me. But then again, nothing about Prince shocks me anymore.

What Johnson doesn't tell everyone is just how much he owes Prince musically, although that almost goes without saying after listening to his second solo effort, "Shockadelica." After I planned Ready For the World's latest LP for blatant Prince rip-offs, I came upon quite a dilemma when I heard this LP. Because I like it a lot, but Johnson came from the Prince camp, RTW didn't. Where RTW is attempting some commercial Prince sound, taking the popular sounds from his big hits, Johnson keeps his grooves gritty and hard-edged like The Time and some of Prince's lesser known LPs.

Record Review

Prince-like or not, some of these songs are just too good to ignore because the sound isn't 100-percent original. Side one kicks off with two heavy grooves, "Change Your Mind" and "Crazy" featuring vocals by Sly Stone, who permanently changed soul music with one fell stroke 18 years ago with the Family Stone's album "Stand."

"Crazy" is simply the best funk song to come out in years. It beats anything by Prince since "1999." It's better than anything Fishbone,

George Clinton or Morris Day has come up with, and it nearly beats The Time's "Jungle Love," which Johnson co-wrote. This song is worth the price of the album.

The rest of the LP keeps up with "Crazy's" beat, but never tops it. He slows it down for "A Better Way," a nice, easy song with some good bluesy picking by Johnson.

None of the lyrics on this album are especially remarkable. The words won't send the critics searching for interpretations as they often do with Prince. But there is one notable exception. In the last song, "Black in America," Johnson sings a quick, almost spiritual hymn about the status of blacks. Things aren't changing for the better, according to Johnson.

Overall, this is a solid dance LP. It's music to make you work up a sweat on the dance floor, instead of just making you shuffle.