

BY JOE RHODES

PHOTO BY JEFF MORTON

Conan O'Brien remembers every detail of the first time he met Johnny Carson. Nine months after retiring from his 30-year run as the definitive host of *The Tonight Show* in 1992, Carson agreed to do a guest voiceover on *The Simpsons*, where O'Brien was a staff writer.

"He showed up in a white Corvette. He got a brand-new white Corvette every year," O'Brien says, the awe still evident in his voice. "I'll never forget, he had a Filofax and two fresh cartons of cigarettes, and he told us stories all afternoon. It was *great*."

Six months later, when O'Brien—who'd never hosted a talk show and had barely been in front of a camera—was named as David Letterman's *Late Night* replacement, he encountered Carson again, at a party thrown in Connecticut by NBC chairman Bob Wright. He was expected to shake hands with the corporate big shots, tell a few jokes to the crowd and then introduce Johnny.

"All I was thinking was, '48 hours ago I didn't even own a suit coat. This can't be happening.'" he recalls. He joked around and pretended, not entirely lying, that he didn't even know who Bob Wright was. Afterwards, Carson came up to congratulate him and to give him the one piece of advice O'Brien has tried to follow ever since: "Just be yourself. That's the only way it can work."

"For the first year of the *Late Night* show," O'Brien says, "I kept expecting to get a call from him saying, 'Is there anyone else you can be?'"

No one—least of all O'Brien—could've expected that, 16 years later, he would be telling this story just weeks before his June 1 debut as the new host of *The Tonight Show*. Seemingly relaxed as he prepares to take over from Jay Leno as steward of the most storied franchise in late-night TV, O'Brien puts his feet up on his office desk (his good-luck Eisenhower ceramic mug on the credenza behind him) in a brand new high-tech digital studio and production facility built just for him on the Universal Studios lot.

THE TONIGHT SHOW WITH CONAN O'BRIEN, weeknights, 11:35/10:35c, NBC (also online at [hulu.com](http://hulu.com), iTunes (\$) and [nbc.com](http://nbc.com))

THE NEW TONIGHT SHOW HOST IS READY FOR THE BIG

# CONAN GOES HOLLYWOOD







# LYWOOD!

TIME—BUT IS AMERICA READY FOR HIM?

“When you’re on the 101 [freeway], that’s where the culture shock really hits,” says O’Brien of his move to L.A. “And anything involving sunlight. Cause I’m a vampire.”



"Fourteen months ago this building didn't exist—there was nothing here but a parking lot," he says, clearly impressed and still trying to get his bearings in the five-story maze of offices adjacent to the completely gutted and remodeled Studio 1. The soundstage where Jack Benny once filmed his TV show has been expanded to 4,000 square feet, including 388 audience seats (compared to the 190 in the old *Late Night* studios in New York) and a massive stage, with a blue-tinged twilight backdrop and more than enough room for Conan's *Tonight Show*-traditional desk and sofa and drummer Max Weinberg's elevated bandstand. Yes, all the other band members, including frequent foil Richie "LaBamba" Rosenberg, have moved west for the show. Weinberg, for the first time ever, is missing part of the current Bruce Springsteen tour, just to be on hand for the initial month of broadcasts.

In fact, almost all of the New York *Late Night* production staff have accom-

panied O'Brien to Los Angeles, including long-time producer Jeff Ross, head writer Mike Sweeney and the entire writing staff, many of whom will continue to make regular appearances in sketches. He even brought his *Late Night* wardrobe and make-up people with him. Only announcer Joel Godard is not making the move to L.A. He's being replaced by O'Brien's original *Late Night* sidekick for

the first seven years of his run, Andy Richter (see sidebar). What this means, early on anyway, is that the new Conan-hosted *Tonight Show* won't feel dramatically different than the last few years of the Conan-hosted *Late Night*. The sets will be fancier, the monologue jokes may be a bit more headline-oriented and there will be lots of routines built around O'Brien—a pasty-faced, Harvard-educated New Englander who couldn't seem more out of place in Hollywood if he rode into town on a snow plow—adjusting to life in California.

"We're in a new sandbox now," he says. "The only way to survive in television is to force yourself out of your comfort zone and here we are. I'm genetically out of my

nize my thinking. They let me know when something's good and when it's not. Since the *Late Night* show ended [on February 20] we've been working hard to get ready, but whenever I go down to our studio and stand on that monologue spot, I just think, please, let's just get some people in these seats."

He does know some of the specifics: His first-night guests will be Will Ferrell and Pearl Jam. He also knows some of the sure-fire bits from *Late Night*, like In The Year 2000 and Telemundo Moments, will show up at some point. As for those who wonder if he'll just be too weird for a mainstream 11:30 audience—this is, after all, the man who brought us the Masturbating Bear and the Horny

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GUTTER CREDIT TK



"It evokes Art Deco," says Richter of the new set. "Also, red hair looks nice against blue, so there's a lot of blue"

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comfort zone. We've ripped this show out of its roots and plopped it down in the desert. I wish I could tell you what's gonna happen, but I'm glad I can't."

He's told everyone who asks, including his writers, that he won't have a feel for how the show will change until it's been on the air for a while. "This part, waiting to get started, is the hardest part for me," he says. "Audiences help orga-

Manatee—O'Brien thinks people may not be giving him enough credit for evolving over the years.

"I think sometimes people think it's the 1993 Conan who's taking over *The Tonight Show*," he says. "I'm not 30—I'm 46. I'm still shockingly capable of behaving like I'm 15, but things change. I got married and had kids. Life acts on you and you just change and, I hope, you grow."

Richter guested on O'Brien's final episode of *Late Night* in February

He envisioned *Late Night* in the beginning as a comedy lab, a place where writers were encouraged to try weird things for weirdness' sake. "When I started *Late Night* in '93, I thought of myself like a comedy bad-ass gunslinger. I wanted people's eyes to melt," he says. "Now, I'm less interested in starting a philosophical discussion. I just want to make people smile."

So expect less outright absurdism than on *Late Night*. "I think I have an innate sense of what will work at 11:30 and what won't. Common sense is one of my better traits. If you walk into a party and men are wearing three-piece suits and the ladies are all very well-dressed and people are quietly talking, you adjust the way you behave. If you walk into a party and the first thing you see is a raccoon being thrown in the air while people throw back shots of tequila, you might adjust the other way. I'm pretty good at taking the temperature of a room."

Still, he's not morphing into Charlie Rose. "I'm not saying I won't still be doing silly things just because it's 11:30. If I think it'd be funny for me to pratfall all the way down the staircase in our studio and land in a key lime pie at the bottom, I might do it. I don't want to euthanize that part of myself. If something makes me laugh on a gut level I'm gonna want to do it. But will you be seeing the Masturbating Bear on the first show in the opening segment? No."

He's acutely aware of the pressure and the scrutiny that awaits his debut, intensified by the recent announcement that, starting in September, Leno will be moving to the 10 p.m. NBC time slot every weeknight. Some question whether that will drain some of *The Tonight Show* viewership, or whether Conan will be able to maintain Leno's ratings dominance over David Letterman. Rick Ludwin, NBC's executive vice president, says plainly, "I think *The Tonight Show* is going to continue to be No. 1, as the show has been for decades."

But, relaxing in his office, O'Brien seems not terribly concerned about any of this. "On a simple level, I like Jay—he's always been nice to me and I wanted this to resolve itself in a way where he was happy and I could be happy. And that seemed to have happened," he says. "I don't know what's gonna happen with



## Conan & Andy: TOGETHER AGAIN!

**W**hen Conan O'Brien started thinking about who'd be his announcer on *The Tonight Show*, he says he realized "it's going to be hard to find someone who's as good as Andy." So he was thrilled to discover his *Late Night* sidekick Andy Richter was ready and willing to reclaim his old spot. We asked Richter about the big reunion.

**So what's the difference between being a sidekick and an announcer?** I don't know. Just being in the studio is all I care about. Where

I sit or what I do, it doesn't matter to me. I think I'm doing the same thing I used to do, which is just be there for Conan to talk to, go out and do remotes and be a writer. I might do the whole show from behind a podium, though, cause I like to have something to hide behind. **You've had a couple of sitcoms since you left *Late Night*. Are you not going to pursue that for a while?** I had been developing a sketch show for Comedy Central, but that feels through. And I was looking at a couple of pilots, but I

didn't like what I was seeing. So I was ready for something to come along that would get me out of that rat race, and I could not have come up with anything better than this.

**How does this feel different from when you were starting *Late Night* in 1993?**

Then I was just scared. I didn't know what I was doing and my choices were mostly based on fear. Now I have an innate sense of when to say something, what to say and when to shut up. The when-to-shut-up part is the most important.

that. But, it's funny, if I can't control something, I relax. I really do. And I just have no control over that."

Besides, in his mind, nothing will ever come close to the terror he felt 16 years ago when he took over *Late Night*. "It's all relative," he says. "To come out of nowhere trying to replace a legend like David Letterman and fall flat on your face, that could just end your career in comedy. This is a big challenge, but the start of *Late Night* was like strapping a gerbil to a rocket and sending it over Snake River Canyon to see what happens. And I was the gerbil."

These days, the mood is different. "Now there's two competing emotions," says producer Ross. "One is, sh--, we have to figure this out. The other is, wait a minute, we've been doing this for 16 years. There'll be some figuring out to

do, but what wins out is, we know how to do this."

For his part, Conan is confident. "Because I'm this smiling, carrot-topped, affable, silly person, I think sometimes what gets glossed over is that I have a very strong will to make my creative stuff work," he says. "You have to earn it every night."

A few months before Carson died in 2005, he called O'Brien one last time, to congratulate him on getting *The Tonight Show*. "He was terrific. He talked to me like someone who'd gotten the Dodge Dart he used to own," O'Brien remembers. "I told him, 'I'm going to do my best to take care of the franchise.' And I told him—and I was always glad I said this—I'm mad at you. Because the only reason I ever wanted to do this was because you made it look so easy. And it's not easy."