

Our Town

[snip] **All that glitters isn't green.** Fred Pearce writes in *New Scientist*, "The drive for 'green energy' in the developed world is having the perverse effect of encouraging the destruction of tropical rainforests. From the orangutan reserves of Borneo to the Brazilian Amazon, virgin

forest is being razed to grow palm oil and soybeans to fuel cars and power stations in Europe and North America." Surging prices and some governments' biofuel requirements are likely to accelerate the destruction. —Harold Henderson | hhenderson@chicagoreader.com

Up and Comers

Queen of All Media

Richard Bluestein may be Chicago's first podcasting star.

By Mike Seely

Bill Streeter wiped a stream of golden-brown grease from his chin as he pulled his maroon minivan out of a KFC parking lot in Bloomington and turned toward Chicago. He popped a cassette adapter attached to an iPod into his tape deck, and for the rest of his trip alternated between stored tunes and podcasts—downloadable radio programs he subscribes to via Real Simple Syndication (RSS), media aggregation software often referred to as "TiVo for the Web." Ninety miles south of town, he tuned in to one of his favorite shows: *Yeast Radio*, an hour-long daily podcast hosted by a gay Chicago-based performance artist named Richard Bluestein.

Streeter, creator of the rock 'n' roll culture Web site Lo-Fi Saint Louis, was headed for the Apple Store on Michigan Avenue to conduct a Saturday-night seminar on video blogging entitled "Meet the Vloggers." There, in the small theater at the back of the store, he finally met the 38-year-old Bluestein in person—though when he did he barely recognized him. That's because on his show—which also runs with different content as a video blog—Bluestein isn't Bluestein. He's Madge Weinstein, a 59-year-old "bloated Jewish lesbian" with a penchant for overeating, hard-left politics, flatulence jokes, and "yeast infection advocacy."

The self-proclaimed "shock jock with no cock," Madge is apt to refer to the vice president as "Penis Cheney" and secretary of state Condoleezza Rice as a "cunt-faced whore bull dyke bitch." She calls liposuction "thigh abortion" and makes promises to potential advertisers like "If you sponsor me, I'll lick your balls." Add F-bomb attacks on the U.S. military's use of white phosphorus in Iraq, comparisons of Enron executives to serial rapists, a flamboyant roster of out-and-proud guests, and vivid descriptions of the bloated host's gassy constitution and stool samples and you have some of Madge's more radio-friendly witticisms.

"I think *Yeast Radio* is a really good example of a content producer who's not for a broad audience," said Mason Dixon, a video production designer and copresenter at the "Meet the Vloggers" symposium. "But the people who are going to like it are gonna love it."

Streeter—a 38-year-old father, air force veteran, and son of a Baptist minister—doesn't necessarily fit into what one might assume is the niche demographic for a show with a cross-dressing, openly gay, politically radical host, but he's one of Madge's most loyal listeners. "Who wouldn't love her?" Streeter asks. "She's a complete original. I love the irrever-



Richard Bluestein as Madge Weinstein, host of *Yeast Radio*

ence of her comedy. Her sheer outrageousness takes the edge off the monotony of my day."

Bluestein launched *Yeast Radio* from his Chicago living room in November 2004 with little but a microphone, streaming audio software, and a well-conceived persona. A month later he sent a demo reel to former MTV VJ Adam Curry, host of the podcast *Daily Source Code* and founder of Podshow.com, a distribution network that's attempting to monetize home-brewed Internet broadcasts by attracting sponsors and, eventually, offering premium content. Curry was instantly smitten and soon added *Yeast Radio* to the Podshow roster. According to the network, the show has attracted more than 40,000 subscribers since it was picked up in early 2005; factoring in unique downloads and listeners to Podshow's channel on Sirius satellite radio—the same uncensored, pay-to-play network that's now home to Howard Stern—its audience may be more than double that size.

"From day one I was totally in love with his concept," says Curry, who estimates he gets a dozen submissions per day from aspiring producers. "Madge is really what Howard Stern wants to be."

In person Bluestein is reserved, perhaps owing to his square-peg adolescence in Carmel, Indiana, where his family moved from New Jersey he was in fourth grade. "It sucked," says Bluestein, whose father is a renowned thermodynamics professor. "There were few if any other Jewish students in my classes and people constantly made fun of my religion, my eastern accent, and my lack of interest in athletics. I was always an introspective child with few friends."

Bluestein, who has a degree in accounting from Indiana University,

moved to Chicago in 1992 after getting fired from his first postcollegiate job at an Evansville firm. After settling into his new city, he worked in the health-care industry and began dallying heavily with narcotics, which culminated in a brief stint living in Amsterdam in the late 90s.

"I sought out drugs," he says. "I remember in high school phys ed class when the drug expert came in and showed the poster of all the different pills that we shouldn't take if we were offered them. I just kept thinking, 'I want one of those, and that, and that!' So finally I got some pot and then I escaped. My drug problem lasted until I returned from Amsterdam, crashed and burned."

Bluestein returned to Chicago in 1998, but having quit drugs, "I had nothing to interest me," he says. "So I bought a video camera and some editing software. That's how my video hobby started." He began posting experimental clips on a Web site he'd started (and still maintains), *insanefilms.com*. Then, with few qualifications to speak of beyond his Web clips, Bluestein answered an ad in the *Reader* seeking a director of photography for Kristie Alshaibi's *Other People's Mirrors*, a way-off-mainstream production exploring adult taboos. Alshaibi was sufficiently impressed with the novice filmmaker to offer him the gig.

"Cannibalism, rape, murder, group sex—I don't remember all of them, but I had to film them all," recalls Bluestein. "We shot a rape scene in one of the tunnels under Lake Shore Drive. Somebody actually called the cops. And in the cannibalism scene, our female protagonist ate this guy's balls. That was my introduction to filmmaking."

Once production wrapped, Bluestein continued to produce multimedia content for *insanefilms.com* and a separate Livejournal account,

incorporating video, audio, and heart-spilling text.

Emboldened by Alshaibi's envelope-pushing style, he also began performing in drag at Schubas with the Feast of Fools Cabaret, developing an alter ego that would crystallize on yet another film project.

"Some friends of mine were smoking pot and they called me and said they wanted to do a mockumentary like *Spinal Tap*, except with lesbian riot grrrls," says Bluestein. "They wanted me to play the manager of the band, this big Jewish woman who wants to fuck all the girls. So it just came out of that."

The film has yet to be released, but the band manager character gradually evolved into Bluestein's preferred online persona. "I had a lot of problems in my personal life from spilling all this shit on the Internet," he says. "It damaged some relationships and it became very difficult to be truthful. And when I wasn't truthful, I'd just become depressed. The Madge thing is perfect, because I can fictionalize my life."

Bluestein's contract with Podshow, from which he draws a full-time salary (neither he nor Podshow would disclose the specifics), includes a production deal that will allow him to develop new characters down the road. "I plan to have my own half-hour counterversion of Wolf Blitzer's *The Situation Room* on a channel like Comedy Central," he says. "I'd call it 'The Shituation Room.' It'll make *The Daily Show* look like Fox News." Bluestein is also currently developing *qpodder.com*, an online community for queer podcasters.

But despite *Yeast Radio*'s early success, Bluestein is still looking for a
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Our Town

[snip] **Land of shrinking opportunity.** Two of the world's leading cancer geneticists, Neal Copeland and Nancy Jenkins, are leaving the National Cancer Institute because of Bush administration restrictions on stem-cell research. They were set

to go to Stanford, because California voters had approved \$3 billion for such research. But now that antiabortion groups have tied up the money in court, they're going to Singapore's Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology. Irving

Weissman, head of the Stanford lab, told the San Jose *Mercury News*, "When they do their work, it will be for Singapore. They'll conduct their clinical trials in Singapore. The first place their work will be patented and used will be Singapore." —HH

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cess in attracting an audience, its following hasn't resulted in the sort of sustained paid advertising Podshow is designed to generate: the film *House of Wax*, starring Paris Hilton, is the show's lone sponsor to date. Still, Curry remains undaunted. "We're willing to subsidize our hunch that Madge will be something very big," says Curry. "This is going to be a huge community that is very tight-knit, thanks in no small part to Richard Bluestein."

"I'm ready to take on the world," Bluestein says. "Howard Stern may call himself the 'King of All Media,' but I'm about to become the Empress of All Things Tech, Politic, Media, and Yeast. Honey, everything's coming up Weinstein!" ■



LAURA PARK

Follow the Money

A Million Here, a Million There . . .

The City Council's cut of the 2006 budget.

By Mick Dumke

A sense of good cheer pervaded the last City Council meeting before the holidays, on December 14, where the aldermen finished weeks of discussing Mayor Daley's 2006 city budget by making a few amendments and signing off on it 48 to 1. Fourth Ward alderman Toni Preckwinkle was the sole no vote; the 33rd Ward's Richard Mell was absent.

Some aldermen, led by the Ninth Ward's Anthony Beale, would still like to add another nickel to the budget's 20-cent hike in cigarette taxes to cover the salaries of an additional staff member for each ward. Beale says his office receives around 100,000 constituent phone calls each year. "The job of alderman has really evolved over the years," he says. "We now have e-mail and faxes. We haven't upgraded our staff and offices to keep up with the times." In the meantime they'll just have to get by with what they've been allotted. Here's how it breaks down.

- Total 2006 City Council budget,

- including salaries, supplies, research costs, meeting costs, and ward-office expenses: \$39,677,808
- Percent increase from 2005: 7.99
- Percent increase in the national consumer price index over the past year: 3.5
- 2006 salary for an alderman: \$98,125
- 2005 salary: \$94,805
- Percent increase: 3.5
- Percent increase in the council's budget since the first city budget Richard M. Daley introduced as mayor, in 1990: 71.6
- Percent increase in the consumer price index over the same period: 51.2
- 2006 salary for council members in New York City: \$90,000
- 2006 salary for council members in Houston: \$44,400
- 1990 aldermanic salary: \$40,000
- Value of 1990 aldermanic salary in 2005 dollars: \$60,474
- Number of pay hikes aldermen have given themselves since 1990: 6
- Number of aldermen who've refused pay increases since 2002: 2
- Salary taken by the two, Margaret Laurino of the 39th Ward and Eugene Schuler of the 47th Ward: \$85,000

The past 16 budgets have included funds to cover the salaries of 50 aldermen, 3 full-time staffers for each, 10 administrators and aides to serve the council as a whole, and up to 25 staffers for the council's finance

committee, which oversees bonds, taxes, legal settlements, workers' compensation, and council spending. But each of the council's 19 committees also has a budget for "personnel services," which committee chairmen use to hire more staff. Tom Allen, alderman of the 38th Ward and chairman of the committee on transportation and the public way, says the chairmen like having a lump sum for hiring because they need "flexibility."

- Number of salaried council staff, not counting aldermen, listed in the 2005 (and the 2006) budget: 184
- Number (not counting aldermen) listed in November 2005 payroll records: 290
- Number of salaried staff listed in 2006 for president pro tem Danny Solis, the alderman who presides over the council in the mayor's absence: 4
- Number for finance committee chairman Ed Burke: 27
- Number of council staffers who earn more than aldermen: 6
- 2006 salary of the highest-paid council staffer, finance committee chief administrative officer Marla Kaiden: \$148,452
- Top 2005 salary not itemized in 2005 budget, for chief administrative officer Charles Lomanto: \$106,572

Staff titles don't always explain what the people who hold them do.

Legislative aides for one alderman or committee may help research or even draft ordinances; other aides are essentially administrative or clerical assistants. (Most of them are paid under the "personnel services" line item.) One of the longest titles is assistant council committee secretary in charge of committee rooms. "They do a variety of different things for the entire City Council," says Schuler.

- Number of assistant council committee secretaries in charge of committee rooms in 2006: 2
- Salaries for assistant council committee secretaries in charge of committee rooms: \$57,036 and \$61,188
- Number of legislative aides listed in the 2005 (and the 2006) budget: 2
- Number of salaried legislative aides listed in payroll records in 2005: 87
- Top salary for legislative aides listed in payroll records in 2005: \$78,828

The responsibilities of and funding for the council's legislative committees, some of which have been consolidated, are also wide-ranging.

- Number of committees in 2006: 19
- Number in 1990: 27
- Percent increase in funding for committee staffing and expenses since 1990: 61
- 2006 budget for the finance committee, the council's biggest:

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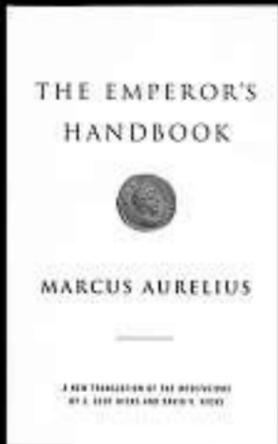
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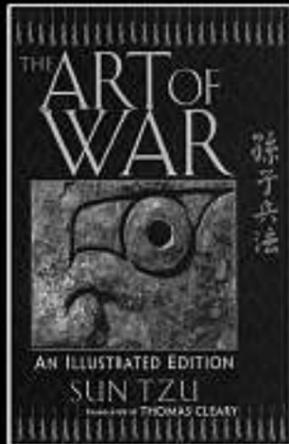
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