

Can we talk?

Talk shows: better than a therapist's couch

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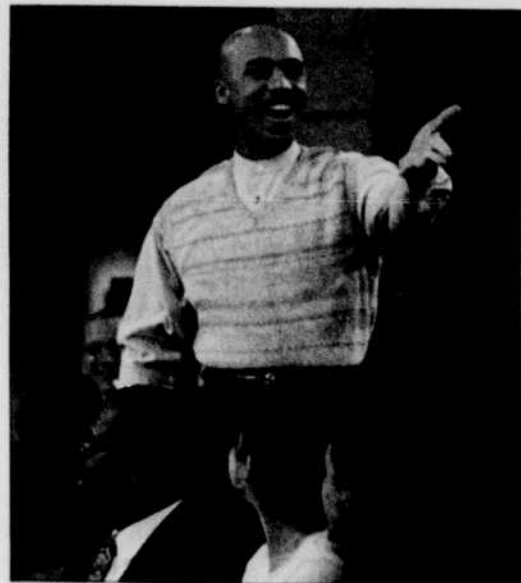
Americans are obsessed with other people's embarrassments — Hugh Grant, Bob Packwood and Courtney Love come to mind. We like outrageous stories. "We've been through 20 years, at least, of making an industry of the private lives of famous people," says talk show host Jerry Springer. "The talk show simply takes the very same subject matter and opens it up to regular people."

Students are no exception — they're among the thousands who inundate the various talk shows with letters and calls promoting their own sounds-too-weird-to-be-true stories.

"It's an amazing phenomenon that people would go on national television and talk about things that you'd think they'd want to keep to themselves," Springer says. "I'd never go on my show."

Real life meets daytime TV

Kenya Mitchell* was sitting in her dorm room — bored. Mesmerized by the scene on TV, she did what any wired talk show fan would do. She escaped the monotony of college life by calling the *Montel Williams Show*.



A student's bizarre love triangle tickled Montel Williams.

The Southern Illinois U. junior phoned *Montel* to share the details of a tangled love triangle. In simple terms, Mitchell's boyfriend's ex-girlfriend didn't quite seem to grasp the concept of "ex."

The bitter ex-girlfriend slashed the tires of Mitchell's dad's car, sent her death threats by mail and constantly harassed Mitchell over the telephone, Mitchell says.

"Basically, she's a loony tune and went berserk," she adds.

The producers fell in love with her colorful story and called back the next day. She was in the Big Apple within 24 hours, surrounded by Nielsen-conscious producers and luxurious accommodations — with *Montel* picking up the tab.

But Mitchell didn't show up with her boyfriend and his ex in tow. She recruited two friends to play the roles.

Tension from the sour relationship was too high for the real boyfriend and ex to be on the show with her, Mitchell says. "I would have gone to jail."

The producers hinted that Mitchell should save her fiery words (she called the ex a "bitch" off the air) — and perhaps a smack or two for the ex — for on the air, but she refrained. Mitchell says she chose her clothes and words carefully to avoid embarrassment or exploitation.

The *Montel* staff didn't suspect anything fishy — Mitchell and her friends pulled off the scam.

But be warned about lying your way onto a talk show. If the producers of the *Jerry Springer Show* find out that a story is fictitious, it costs the guest big bucks.

"Guests sign a statement saying that everything they'll say on the show will be truthful," Springer says. "If they lie about anything, they're liable for the production cost of the show — which is about 80,000 to 100,000 dollars."

Getting some

Stressed coeds enjoy 60-minute sabbaticals from the reality of classes and exams. It's often a relief to see that *your* social woes are nothing compared with those of the weirdos on talk shows.

And bizarre topics like "All of my babies' mothers hate each other," "Marry me or else" and "Call me crazy... but I love my cheatin' man" capture and titillate the college audience for a few mindless moments.

"We definitely watch talk shows to make fun of people," says Rachel Smith, a junior at the U. of Texas, Austin. "The worst thing that could possibly happen to me would be going on a talk show. It would be humiliating."

Ain't too proud to beg is the mantra for talk show guests, but some students say they'd never go the distance.

"I wouldn't want the whole world to know if my girlfriend dumped me for another guy — or another girl, for that matter!" says Billy Menz, also a junior at UT.

Patricia Priest, who earned her doctorate at the U. of Geor-

gia, wrote her 1992 dissertation on why people go on talk shows. She says people enjoy seeing faults in others.

"It's a lot of fun for college students to watch as a group and ridicule people," she says.

And Priest should know. She conducted in-depth interviews with 50 former talk show guests, then published her findings in her new book, *Public Intimacies: Talk Show Participants in Tell-All TV* (Hamp-ton Press, 1995).

"So much of TV is formulaic," Priest says. "You never know what's going to happen on talk shows. They're choreographed for fireworks."

Just another group session

Some students aren't satisfied with merely watching the shows. Dave Alexander, a graduate student at Western Carolina U., N.C., wanted a piece of the action. His story: His girlfriend regularly accused him of cheating. He insists it was just flirting.

Alexander, accompanied by his ex-girlfriend — she finally broke up with him — and a friend, flew to

New York. It all happened just 24 hours after he left a message on the *Maury Povich Show* phone line.

"I expected to be attacked [verbally] by the audience," he says. But the crowd lent Alexander a sympathetic ear while Povich played devil's advocate.

One woman started crying during a commercial break, Alexander recalls, and the producers scrambled to get the tears on film.

But talk shows aren't all hype and circumstance. Alexander says the show provided a venting session for both himself and his ex-girlfriend. After leaving New York, they got back together.

Psychologist Karen Sykes says going on talk shows is a way for some people to purify themselves of their problems. But many go on just for the glitz.

"The guests are intrigued with the notoriety of being seen on TV by millions," Sykes says.

But people aren't necessarily looking for catharsis. Springer says talk shows are an extension of our culture of openness.

"My goal is to have a show that continues to educate, be open and have no censorship. It's a forum on television for people to talk about things that affect them," Springer says. "This isn't brain surgery — this is entertainment."

*Name has been changed

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TALK SHOW HOST
JERRY SPRINGER



What's Jerry Springer's topic today? Spring breakers who are obsessed with talk shows?