

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

EACH DAY, TALK-SHOW PRODUCERS COMPETE IN A RACE AGAINST TIME TO CONVINCE THE BEST, BRIGHTEST AND BIZARREST PEOPLE TO BARE THEIR DIRTY SECRETS IN FRONT OF MILLIONS. SOME HAVE A FEW DIRTY SECRETS OF THEIR OWN. By Tom O'Neill • Photographs by David Rose

LESS THAN TWO WEEKS AFTER SHE REMOVED HER own breast implants with a disposable razor, Laura Thorpe of Bloomfield, N.M., was booked to appear on *The Maury Povich Show*. But before the Povich staff, or “the Maury people” (in daytime talk-show parlance), could get her out of her trailer park, *Sally Jessy Raphael* coordinating producer Amy Rosenblum had Thorpe, her unemployed husband and three kids on a plane to New York. That night, Rosenblum treated the family to an Easter dinner and then — a fatal mistake — left them unattended at their Manhattan hotel. The Maury people tracked Thorpe down. Two mornings later, dazed and disoriented because of her medication and a spreading infection, under the guise of Povich’s “just wanting to talk to her,” Thorpe was spirited out of her hotel lobby and into the Maury offices.

An hour later, Thorpe was in a new dress, under bright lights and onstage before a live studio audience — her family never even knew she had left the hotel. Incensed, the *Sally* people refused to pay Thorpe’s hotel bills or air fare home. Meanwhile, the Maury people said her wounds were “still seeping, dirty and gross” and put her in a hospital — just as soon as she finished taping the show.

“She was a horrible guest anyway,” says a *Sally* source, “and just for the record, she didn’t rate.”

With 17 talk shows crowding the daytime airwaves and an all-talk cable channel on the horizon, guests these days had better rate. As producers scramble to fill their panels with the deliriously dysfunctional and the momentarily famous, the competition for guests has reached such a frenzy that stories like Thorpe’s are becoming standard operating procedure. Producers, who for the most part have been colleagues at some point in their careers (the business is only slightly less incestuous than the families it puts on the air), have discarded their unwritten code of conduct, and in a new climate of fear, mistrust and deception are hardly speaking.

“It gets very, very ugly,” says Mary Duffy, the supervising

producer of *The Montel Williams Show*.

“It’s horrendous,” agrees Burt DuBrow, co-creator and executive producer of *Sally*.

They know what they’re talking about. The behind-the-scenes world of daytime talk has turned into a war zone. Tales of manipulation, misrepresentation, outright lying and bribery are commonplace. Producers routinely steal guests from competitors, luring them with offers of money, trips, even (according to one guest) the possibility of sex with staffers. And with talk shows proliferating on a monthly basis, it’s not going to get better any time soon.

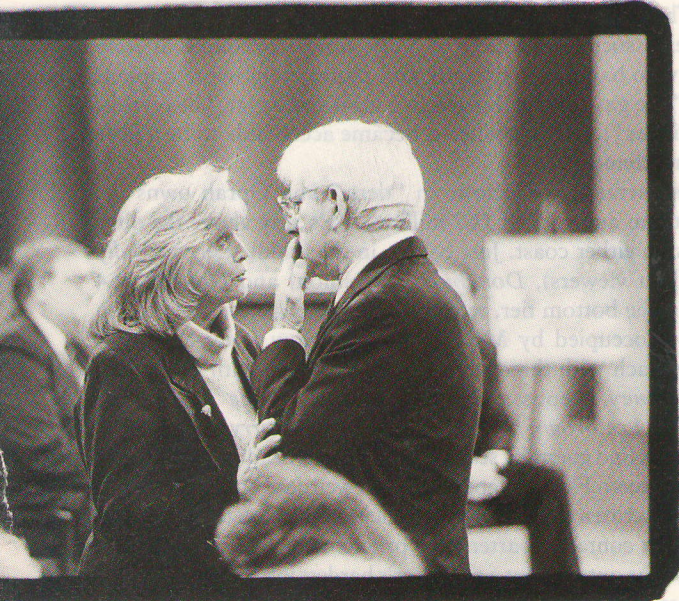
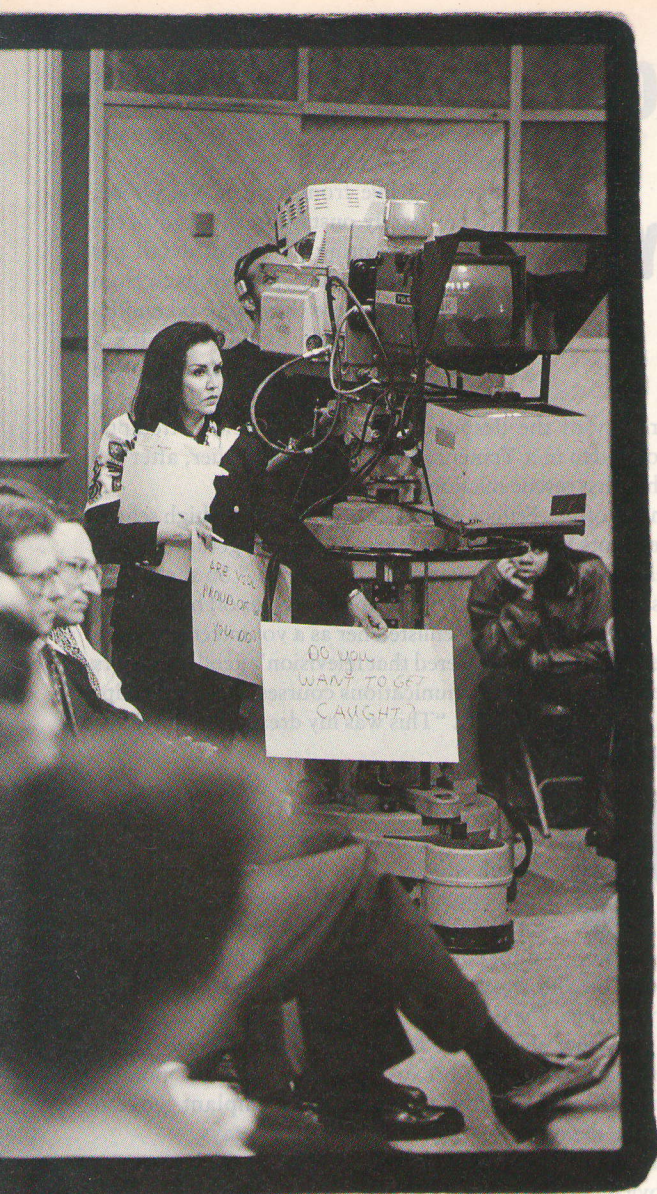
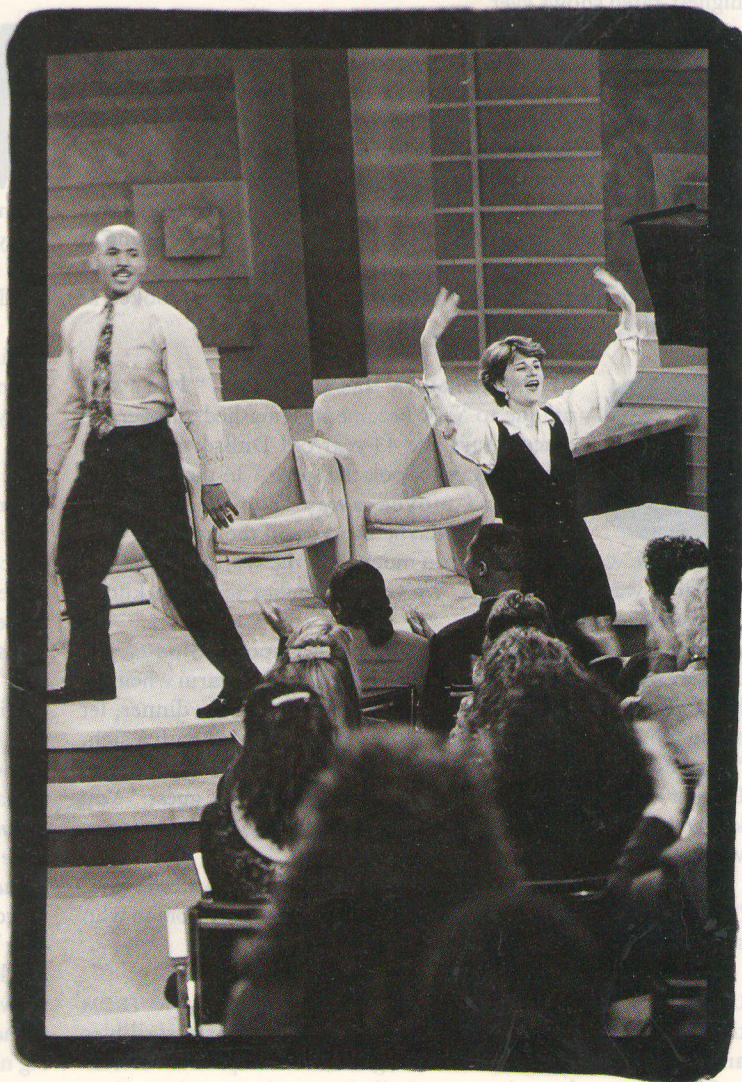
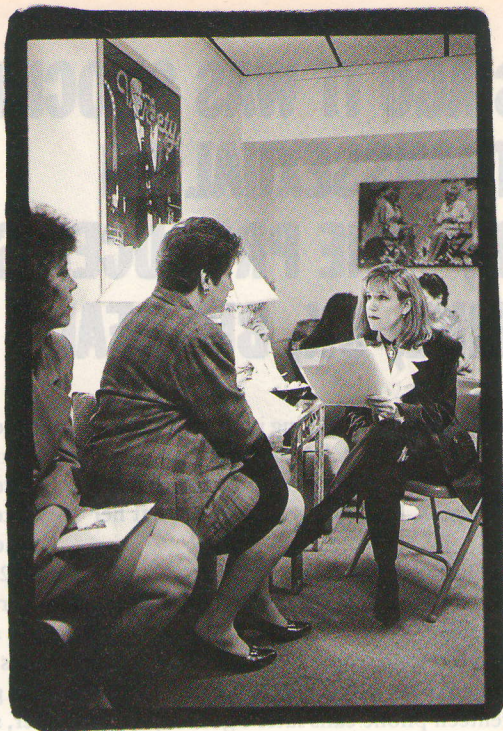
Why the boom? For one thing, talk is cheap. With the average show costing about \$6,000 an episode (most of it for guest expenses), talk shows can be produced for chump change compared with the cost of a daytime soap. In fact, no new soaps have been introduced on daytime TV in six years. “As one soap dies, another talk show blossoms,” boasts Diane Rappoport, executive producer of *Maury*. And it’s no coincidence. Talk shows offer many of the same thrills as soaps — sex, betrayals, villains and victims. “Viewers want to see real-life people instead of actresses talk about affairs,” says Cathy Chermol, executive producer of *The Jane Whitney Show*. “It fulfills the same needs.”

“THIRTY SECONDS — BING! BANG! BOOM! — AND I CAN TELL whether a guest is going to be any good,” says Mary Duffy, 33, supervising producer of *Montel Williams*. She’s reflecting on her 10 years in the industry from her office high above Times Square. “Ten years ago it was shocking to see a transsexual on television,” she says. “Now it’s like, ‘OK, big deal.’ Audiences are more demanding.” The intense redhead has just left a message for a former colleague at *Sally*, now producing *Jane Whitney*, demanding that he delay broadcasting a show that features a guest who has agreed to appear first on *Montel*.

Like many in the business, Duffy earned her chops at *Sally* and can even trace the beginning of a major upheaval in the industry to a specific show she produced there. “Oprah had



TALK, TALK, TALK: Pressure-cooker deadlines and the bruising battle for viewers mean daytime-talk producers do triple duty (clockwise from top left): Sally producer Rose Mary Henri cues an on-camera Raphael, while backstage, fellow "Sally person" Amy Rosenblum interviews prospective guests; Montel producer Mary Duffy whips up the studio audience with help from the host; Donahue producer Pat McMillen in a pre-show huddle with the boss.



"TEN YEARS AGO IT WAS SHOCKING TO SEE A TRANSSEXUAL ON TELEVISION," ONE PRODUCER SAYS. "NOW IT'S LIKE, OK, BIG DEAL."

just come on the scene," recalls Duffy, swiveling in her chair, "followed by Maury, Montel and the others. It was like, 'We have to come up with something different.'" On a plane to Arizona for a remote broadcast, her then boss, Burt DuBrow, asked what her first show was going to be.

"Mistresses," answered Duffy with some satisfaction.

"Oh?" he said. "And what will you do to make it go over the top? What about the other side?"

She thought he was joking but soon realized he wasn't. He wanted her to convince the cheated-on wife to face her nemesis on national television. "Seventeen phone calls later I got her," says the still-incredulous Duffy. "It was amazing television. One of our highest-rated shows ever."

"It was," says DuBrow, "a helluva show."

And the birth of a new genre: conflict television. DuBrow and Duffy changed the course of talk TV forever. Now there were two sides to every story (and, notes Duffy, a doubled workload). Soon all the shows fell into line with the I-caught-my-mother-in-bed-with-my-boyfriend, my-husband-goes-to-gay-bars, everybody-I-have-a-baby-with-my-sister-has-a-baby-with-too shows. The last show was Amy Rosenblum's baptism by fire at *Sally*: "They were cursing at each other from the minute they came out, and I literally thought I was going to get fired," recalls Rosenblum, 36. "Then I looked at Mary Duffy, and she was like, 'Whoa, great show!'"

BUT THE FORMULA HAS ITS LIMITS. "WHAT WAS unique to *Sally* became mishmashed all over the place," says the 43-year-old DuBrow. "All the shows began to look the same." In the past year, *Sally* has moved away from the conflict approach. "Maybe we crossed the line," she concedes. "We were competing too much, and the word *exploitation* probably was here with us. We've got families too, you know. We have to sleep at night."

Duffy, who left *Sally* last year for a senior spot at *Montel*, is a classic example of the talk producer: tough, smart, warm when she has to be and single. Producers rarely have time for dinner, let alone families. "You give up a lot for this," she says with a sigh. "It takes up your whole life." Just then the phone rings. It's Rob Dauber, the *Jane* producer she's battling with over the guest. "You know I trust you guys," says Duffy to the producer she once worked with, "I just can't be screwed on this."

Hanging up the phone, Duffy is triumphant. "Great!" she says, "I got it in writing. You gotta." The disputed guest? A woman who says she invented a love potion.

LIZ FRILLICI, TEARS IN HER EYES, IS ECSTATIC. TURNING AWAY FROM the *Maury* stage, she wipes her eyes and furiously scribbles another question for Povich to ask, guaranteed to produce another flood of tears from the guest. Frillici's associate producer, Izzy

Rudzki, is also crying. During a break she whispers, "No matter how many times you read the story, when you actually hear it, you just lose it."

Speaking live from Yemen, via phone, with her family onstage in the studio, the guest is recounting in tearful detail her attempts to bring her children back from that country, where they were taken illegally by her Yemeni ex-husband. It's a heartbreaking story, a point driven home again and again and again by the show's

insistent replay of the despondent mother's suicide attempts, captured on video in a Yemeni hotel room days earlier, after the failure of her first rescue mission.

Later, in her office, Frillici, a fortysomething former high school teacher, recounts her arrival at *Maury*. "I tried to get into television 20 years ago, but they wouldn't hire women." So she taught history instead and was a "talk-show addict" in her off hours. Five years ago, when her daughter enlisted her as a volunteer at a Jerry Lewis Telethon, Frillici discovered that television's gender barriers were gone. A couple of communications courses and internships later, she landed a job at *Sally*. "This was my dream," says Frillici, seated at her desk.

WHEN HE LAUNCHED HIS SHOW, POVICH LURED Frillici from *Sally* for her ability to get the tough stories. Her biggest coup to date was convincing Marilyn Beers, the mother of the Long Island girl imprisoned in a dungeon beneath the garage of a family friend, to be on the show last year. "The biggest joy of the story," says Frillici, "was when they told me that a caravan of cars from the other shows was following her on her way to do us. To me, that's fair game, because it's a sport at that point." But ask her about her show's tactics in the implant-woman affair, and she demurs. "It wasn't my show," she says.

An industry insider blames the great decline in civility on the entry of Povich into the talk sweepstakes. The ex-anchor of *A Current Affair* apparently didn't forget his bag of tricks when he left Fox. "That's when the climate changed," says Barry Poznick, 24, a former associate producer at *Sally*, now a producer at *Joan Rivers*, who handled — literally and figuratively — the implant fiasco ("She gave me her breasts in a mayonnaise jar," he reveals, "over dinner"). "That's when it became acceptable to be a little more underhanded."

Insiders arrange talk shows in "tiers," and Oprah owns the top. With an audience of 11.7 million, she's way above the dirty dealings on either coast. Just below, in the middle tier, are *Sally* (5.7 million viewers), *Donabue* (5.5 million) and *Geraldo* (4.4 million). The bottom tier, where success is measured in years on the air, is occupied by *Maury*, *Montel*, *Jenny Jones* and *Jerry Springer*, each with three years on the air. Even with two years, *Jane Whitney* is eons ahead of newcomers *The Ricki Lake Show*, *The Les Brown Show* and *The Bertice Berry Show*.

Producers find guests by scanning newspaper headlines (one pores over small-town Florida papers for the "weirdest, strangest stuff") and letters written to the show, by soliciting them on the air and by networking contacts (bartenders, private-detective services) and friends on the outside. But a producer's hardest job is convincing the big names, the Amy Fishers and the John Wayne Bobbitts, to come on their show instead of Oprah's. The producers of *Oprah*,



Above: For 20 years, Liz Frillici taught high school history, watched talk shows in her off hours and dreamt of being where the action is. Her dream led to a production job at *Maury*. Left: Sally Jessy Raphael with producers Rose Mary Henri and Amy Rosenblum.

Donahue and *Sally* can ride the coattails of a hard-earned trust in their nationally recognized hosts; not so the competition.

"You have to implore them and become their best friend," says *Jane's* Cathy Chermol, 32. "You have to make them think if they don't do it, they're letting you down. It's all in the way you work them on the phone."

Or maybe you could just pay them. Last year, for the first time in 26 years of talking, Phil Donahue, one of the most respected names in the business, paid a guest. Yes, says Pat McMillen, 50-ish, who's been with him since day one, she felt compromised by the \$25,000 given to each of the cops who beat up Rodney King. "But," she says with a sigh, "Phil didn't. He said: 'Everyone else is doing it. We aren't in the ballgame if we don't.'"

Of all the producers interviewed for this article, only McMillen is forthcoming about paying guests. The rest deny it with a song and dance worthy of a Daytime Emmy — despite what in many cases is compelling evidence to the contrary. *Jane's* Chermol, after being confronted with the facts regarding a certain group of boys called the Spur Posse (three of whom said they each received \$1,000 to appear on the show), said, "Well, if we've paid one in one hundred guests, that's a lot."

No question, the Spur Posse members were one in a hundred. From Southern California, these all-American boys created a scoring system based on the number of girls they had sex with. Nine of them, aged 15 to 18, were arrested on charges including rape by intimidation and child molestation (their youngest alleged victim was 10), and the producers went into a feeding frenzy. (The charges were eventually dropped.)

"It's a horrible story if it's true," says Barry Poznick of *Joan Rivers*, "but from a producer's point of view: They're good-looking, they could talk, they're like every jock in every high school in America. It was perfect."

Once the talk shows turned their sights on the Posse, the ever-competitive members turned their sights on who could get on the most shows for the most money.

"It was shameful," says Joyce Shehan, one of the Posse moms who pleaded with the producers not to put her son on. Another, Diane Howard, says her two sons "were out of the house and in a limousine an hour and a half after they said yes to *Maury*. I mean, out, packed, gone."

Oprah, *Donahue*, *Sally* and *Montel* all booked the Posse, but backed out when the boys demanded [Continued on page 90]

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["Talk Shows," cont. from page 81] money, opting to do Posse-related stories instead. "Let the other shows have them," says Burt DuBrow. "We're not playing that game." Joining the chorus of indignation, Mary Duffy glowers and says, "These boys say they're scoring points for having sex with women, and we're going to pay them?! That's not why I'm in the business!"

Apparently, not so *Jenny Jones*, *Jane* and *Maury*.

Self-proclaimed Spur Posse founding member Dana Belman explains. "We didn't say we weren't coming on unless we got money, we just said, 'We're going on *The Home Show* because they're giving us \$500.' Then *Jenny Jones* said, 'We'll give you \$1,500 if you come on us first.'"

POVICH MADE MORE ENTICING offers. "He tried to set us up with the girls that worked on his show," claims Billy Shehan, 19 at the time. "He said: 'I got girls, and they're all single. I take pride in my women.' It was like, 'They'll want to hook up, too,' you know?"

Maury flew eight of the Posse nine to New York and sequestered them in a hotel under assumed names — for eight days (the show was on hiatus and didn't want to lose them). But the *Maury* people, whom you'd have thought would have learned from *Sally*'s mistakes, didn't leave the boys under lock and key. Three of the Posse, realizing they could do better than the \$110 a day *Maury* was paying (with a promise of \$300 after taping), called *Jane*. They sent a limo.

"I certainly wasn't going to say no," says Chermol, elaborating that she'd previously asked the *Maury* people for the boys when they were finished and was turned down cold.

"They tried to get them back," she continues, "but I had a producer sleeping with them in the hotel. That's the key: Once you have them, you can't leave their side." Indeed. That producer took his underage charges for a night on the town, winding up at Texas Gold, a Manhattan strip club. "He probably blew a grand on us that night," marvels Chris Albert, 18 at the time.

To ensure no more defections from his camp, the *Maury* people increased their remaining Posse members' per diems to \$210 (paid by check, for which they were transported first thing each morning to a check-cashing establishment), according to Posse member Jeff Howard.

A spokesperson for *Maury* denies paying Posse members, and says the boys were

provided with "expense money to cover incidentals such as transportation, meals and phone calls." And Povich's alleged promise to "hook up" the Posse with the women on his staff? "Ludicrous."

As for *Jane*'s deal with the boys, Chermol says: "We gave them travel and shirts from the Gap — which we were totally criticized for. They weren't given a check from the show." Posse member Chris Albert confirms Chermol's "no checks" assertion: "Right after the show," says Albert, "they gave us ten \$100 bills apiece." Calling his four days under *Jane*'s care "awesome," Albert says, "The thousand bucks doesn't even account for half the stuff they gave us. We didn't need pocket change the whole time we were there."

"They were treated like kings," says a disgusted Mrs. Howard. "It wasn't to find out the truth, it was all for ratings."

THE POSSE MEMBERS BUBBLE OVER WITH FOND memories of their talk-show tour, but not all guests are so appreciative. Last September, soap opera star Brent Jasmer took a hit on both sides in the daytime talk-show war. While his show, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, teetered on the brink of cancellation, a casualty of the talk surge, his personal life was irreparably changed by *Geraldo*.

The adopted son of a couple from Oregon, the 28-year-old actor was reunited with his birth mother and sister on *Geraldo* — against his wishes. "Looking back now, I think, Oh, God, how could I have been so stupid?" says Jasmer, who went on the show, he contends, only after he received repeated assurances from the producers that they wouldn't try to find his mother or reunite him with her.

The actor, who's been conducting his own search for years, appeared with his adoptive parents, he said, "to publicize a positive adoption and tell millions of adoptees like myself that searching is OK." But it backfired when *Geraldo* stunned the family by introducing his biological mother and a sister he never knew existed.

Jasmer's first reaction was "to take my parents and get the hell out of there" (*Geraldo* immediately put the mike in Jasmer's adoptive mother's face and asked, "How do you feel now?"), but he didn't want to hurt his birth mother. So he sat frozen, "as my life flashed before my eyes."

Later, his biological mother told him that after she'd been notified of his existence, she read in a soap opera magazine that he didn't want to be reunited with her on television so she tried to back out. The *Geraldo* people told her it was an old article, says

Jasmer, "and that I had changed my mind." The actor, who plans to sue the show, is astounded by the show's deception but says the emotional wounds and manipulation by the host cut the deepest. "I'd been anticipating this moment for about 26 years," says Jasmer. "What gave him the right ...to alter my life like he did?"

Within a month of Jasmer's appearance, two women claim they were similarly deceived by *Geraldo*. The sisters-in-law agreed to appear on a show about in-law problems but only after being promised that their abusive brother-in-law wouldn't appear. Guess what? They also plan to sue. *Geraldo* spokesperson Jeff Erdel calls Jasmer's charges "completely false. We thought we did something very nice for an individual that was trying to find his mother. There was positively no attempt to deceive anybody."

How do "the people" feel about what they do? Ask them and they'll tell you they're providing a kind of national therapy service. Says *Sally*'s Rose Mary Henri: "They say, 'Look at that person. They went on *Sally*, and now the therapist is helping them. I need to do that. *Sally* will help me.'"

AND THEY HAVE LETTERS. LETTERS THAT ARE pinned above desks, letters written on grocery

bags, napkins, tissues — "the first thing they could get their hands on," says *Donahue*'s Pat McMillen. "Those are the best kind."

It can't be denied that the medium has helped people. Even saved lives. In the early days of talk TV, Donahue put an alcoholic on the air and his phone lines lit up with people saying, "God, it's not just me." The phones kept ringing through the years as one show after another exposed the details of drug addiction, sexual abuse and eating disorders. The hidden ills of society have been brought to the forefront of the nation's consciousness via talk shows, and America has learned through watching and listening how to help itself.

Each producer has a list of victories. Liz Frillici of *Maurycy*: an 11-year-old girl who spoke up about being sexually abused and inspired a slew of others to do the same. Pat McMillen: a woman who walked out of an abusive marriage after watching *Donahue*. Cathy Chermol of *Jane*: a woman who promised to stop having unsafe sex. The *Sally* producers: a Ku Klux Klan member who, after facing a hostile audience, renounced her ways on a follow-up show.

Ask producers if they'd go on their shows, however, and they stiffen. The one who did, in a rare moment of spontaneity, pulled her spot at the last minute. "I shared something

very personal on a show I was producing," says Amy Rosenblum of *Sally*, "but after it was over I decided it would have been too hurtful to someone in my family."

Only one producer, dropping her official facade under a guarantee of anonymity, admits misgivings. "You don't know if their story will help someone else," she says. "We're not trained psychologists. We don't really know what's going to happen to this person. You go home and deal with next week's show, they have to go home and deal with their lives."

Even the consolation Brent Jasmer, the soap star suing *Geraldo*, took in a producer's confession to him after the show that she "just can't do this anymore" is punctured by another producer's scornful explanation: "That's just a ploy. They say that to everyone." ■

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SUCCESS DOESN'T SUCK
Nirvana
 The Rolling Stone Interview With
Kurt Cobain

NONE-A-DAY
 Will the FDA Take Your Vitamins Away?

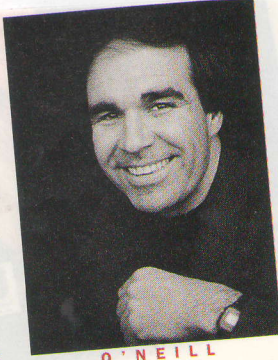
LIZ PHAIR
 Babe in Boyland

1993 ANNUAL MUSIC AWARDS

WINNERS	LOSERS
PEARL JAM	STONE TEMPLE PILOTS
DR. DRE	MEAT LOAF
SOUL ASYLUM	WHITNEY HOUSTON
CYPRESS HILL	SUEDE
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BEAVIS	BUTT-HEAD

IN THE NEW ISSUE of *Rolling Stone*, our man in Nirvana, Kurt Cobain, rages on (and on) about stardom, fatherhood, the death of grunge and why he's never been happier in his life. PLUS: Pearl Jam, U2, Soul Asylum and Beavis and Butt-head top the 1993 Music Awards. And the losers? Meat Loaf, Stone Temple Pilots, Whitney Houston and ... Beavis and Butt-head. **ON SALE NOW**

appeared in British *GQ*, British *Vogue* and *Glamour*. **TOM O'NEILL** first ventured into talk-show territory for *US* in 1991, chronicling his experiences in the audience at daytime shows in "I Was a Talk-Show Zombie." Now he goes behind the scenes to uncover the cutthroat and often underhanded competition among the producers of these shows to line up the most scandalous guests (page 78). "It's a very closed, secretive world," says O'Neill. "Nobody would talk until the producer of *Donahue* went on the record. Then everybody was eager to be included." O'Neill has written about Charlie Sheen and Janine Turner for *US*; he also contributes to *Premiere* and *New York*. ■



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OSTLY FEMALE, NOW AND THEN

... is now operating under the aegis of her female-oriented production company, ... "It sucked!" whines Ashleigh Aston ... of the child stars of *Now and Then*, after ... "It did not suck, Ashleigh. Stop that!" ... in her best mommy-producer-ese, adding, ... y very good, *smarty pants*." • Later, con- ... n wardrobe test for next week when she ... om producer to actress (in what's basically ... ore executes what she calls "bargain-base- ... turns for the amused crew. Dressed in the ... actor, an uptight journalist whose painful ... told in flashback, Moore lets down her hair, ... moves her glasses and seductively bares a ... oulder. "This is where I get undressed," she ... whistles and whoops. "No movie would be