



Tears of a clown

Glenn Beck: The right-wing megastar embodies American popular culture at its most weird and offensive

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JIP TROSTLE

BY HAL CROWTHER

Last year my brother left me a phone message, recommending a rare visit to the world of television to check out a new face on CNN. Not just another radio right-winger masticating headlines, he said, but a creature from some even lower rung on the ladder of life, working an act so addled and inept that he had to be kidding, had to be auditioning for Comedy Central—but who was, in fact, dead serious. (Our era, in the words of the blog Eschaton, “begins the age when it is impossible to tell parody/irony/performance art from completely sincere product.”)

A few weeks later, steering the remote in the direction of the Weather Channel, I stumbled across Glenn Beck. My brother did not exaggerate. I was amazed, but mixed with my astonishment was something that felt like pity. How many days before the gnomes in charge would reverse the bizarre decision that had brought this poor fellow to the surface here, to CNN and national scrutiny, and pull the lever that would send him plummeting back to the cable-access netherworld from which he had inexplicably escaped?

It's a struggle to find useful comparisons. Late at night on one Manhattan cable channel, there's a Bible show called *Open Forum With Harold Camping*. Harold wears an undertaker's suit and a big yellow tie. He's about 90 years old and seems to have had a stroke or two; his eyes are glassy, his voice and movements are robotic and his warnings of imminent Armageddon are generically absurd. Next to Glenn Beck, Harold is the most improbable personality who ever scored his own TV show. Harold's excuses are extreme age and physical decrepitude, if not actual senility. Beck's excuse, like his path to celebrity, is a mystery.

On TV, a medium partial to pretty faces, he looks like the misbegotten love child Rush Limbaugh and Joan Rivers gave up for adoption: a soft, fuzzy-headed, pop-eyed Big Bird with a wet, petulant little mouth that emits a braying, wheedling voice better suited to a phone solicitor than an entertainer. In a medium where even the right affects expensive suits, Beck tends to dress as if he's still doing radio. He giggles like a prurient schoolboy when he's pleased with himself, which is way too often.

He weeps. I believe men should weep, and I've been known to, but not in public, not on camera, not on cue. In any manual for children trying to figure out the world of adults, a public weeper would be singled out as a key grown-up to avoid, along with men who can't keep their hands to themselves and those who consume right-wing radio. What else? Beck is pudgy (just speculating recklessly from a few cases, but is fascism fattening?), graceless, rude, hysterically ill-informed and to all appearances an idiot. Michael Savage, a Radio Right fearmonger who seems to be crazy rather than stupid, calls Beck “the hemorrhoid with eyes.”

Even for “conservative” media, where the bar is set so low and ratings are stimulated by feeding raw meat to the Cro-Magnon fringe and driving liberals mad with indignation, some of the things Beck has said are exceptional. He greeted the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress with “Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies.” His comment on last year's California wildfires was “I think there's a handful of people who hate America. Unfortunately for them, a lot of them are losing their homes in a forest fire today.” He recently begged his congregation to refrain from killing sprees, if possible, because one more Timothy McVeigh might destroy conservative momentum. A Beck tirade against volunteerism, to him a Hollywood/communist plot, concluded “It's almost like we're living in Mao's China right now.” (“It's loony-tunes TV,” marveled columnist Mike Littwin.)

Though Fox News audiences never hold their heroes to the highest logical standards, a few loyalists blinked last summer when Beck railed about Barack Obama's “deep-seated hatred for white people,” which presumably included the president's mother and family of origin. But my personal Beck favorite, an all-time Media Moron Highlight selection, was this wild swing at Al Gore in the spring of 2007:

“Al Gore's not going to be rounding up Jews and exterminating them. It is the same tactic, however ... You got to have an enemy to fight. Then you can unite the entire world behind you, and you seize power. That was Hitler's plan. His enemy: the Jew. Al Gore's enemy, the U.N.'s enemy: global warming.”

Glenn Beck, ex-Top 40 disc jockey, recovering drug addict and alcoholic, convert to Mormonism and the National Rifle Association, is American popular culture at its most incomprehensibly weird and offensive. He's also a huge success, a hit, a phenomenon—a star. By America's traditional standards of accomplishment (rarely including the artistic or aesthetic), Beck, 45, is one of the hottest properties in show business. A year ago his talk-radio ratings earned him a five-year, \$50 million contract with Premiere Radio Networks, a subsidiary of the Clear Channel conglomerate that also broadcasts Limbaugh. Last January, his TV show took the jump from CNN to the higher cotton at Fox News, where he abuses liberals, logic and President Obama as part of the Troglodyte Trio that includes Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity, the big bad wolves of brain-dead broadcasting.

Last month he leapfrogged over them all by making the cover of *Time* magazine. *Time* isn't what it used to be, but decades ago when I worked there, the cover story was a kind of sacred ritual, with venerable editors agonizing over the worthiness of cover subjects (they didn't have to be admirable, but they had to be momentous). The story by David von Drehle, a notably talented writer, was, of course, not positive about Beck or his influence, but it gave him some credit (“funny”? “a gifted storyteller”?) that made me wonder which rundown media neighborhoods my old friend von Drehle has recently been obliged to patrol. I can't shake the picture of this clown Beck—he calls himself ▶

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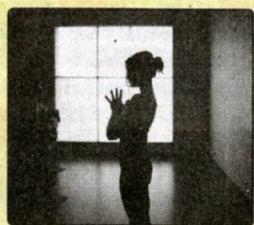
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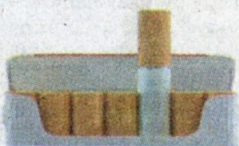
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“a rodeo clown”—decorating his huge office with *Time* covers: Churchill, Stalin, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Glenn Beck.

It's as if Clarabelle from *The Howdy Doody Show* had been resurrected, with his horn reprogrammed to issue reactionary boilerplate instead of plaintive honks—and a multitude had gathered to listen. In the eight months since I first called attention to Beck's strange ascent, he's risen from “Who?” to “God, not him again” in what may well be record time, even for the fast-forward freak show of American media. The neoconservative *Weekly Standard* hails him as “the man of the moment.” He's become a legitimate cause for alarm in magazines he couldn't begin to read, including *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*, which credited him with “taking the scalp” of Van Jones, a high-ranking Obama appointee who had unwisely signed a petition linking the Bush administration to the 9/11 attacks. When Jones was forced to resign, the White House retaliated with an ill-advised counterattack on Fox News, which only swelled Beck's ratings and enhanced his prestige with the Obama-baiting Republican fringe.

In Beck's profession—whatever that might be construed to be—there are at the moment no more mountains to climb. The cash, celebrity and personal vindication these triumphs represent would be galling enough for those of us familiar with his work. But the bitterest pill may be his “literary” career. The publishing industry is almost as frail and diseased as the newspaper business, and as certain a victim, in the long run, of America's rapidly declining literacy. Serious readers stopped complaining years ago that the best-seller lists were dominated by depressing trash. Still, this is ridiculous.

The year 2008, a bad year for most reactionaries and Republicans, was a banner year for Glenn Beck, best-selling author. He began that year at No. 1 on the *New York Times* nonfiction list with *An Inconvenient Book: Real Solutions to the World's Biggest Problems*. (Assassinate Al Gore?) At year's end he rose to No. 1 on the *Times* fiction list with *The Christmas Sweater*, a personal holiday epiphany, as Beck describes it, turned into a novel of sorts with the help of two ghostwriters. Other authors may have topped both lists, but I'm sure no one else has ever done it inside a single calendar year.

His next literary offering, the oxymoronic *Glenn Beck's Common Sense*, rode his current notoriety to the top of the nonfiction list and sold a million copies in four months. His latest, *Arguing With Idiots*, is now scaling similar heights. For writers and readers, especially for hundreds of us who've sent out books of our own with medium-high hopes and watched them stall out in the low five or even four figures, it hurts some to see those ads announcing “Over half a million copies in print” for the hardcover adventures of Glenn Beck. He loves to rub it in, gloating with particular glee that he outsold *Just After Sunset*, the most recent novel by Stephen King, a liberal who called Beck “Satan's mentally challenged

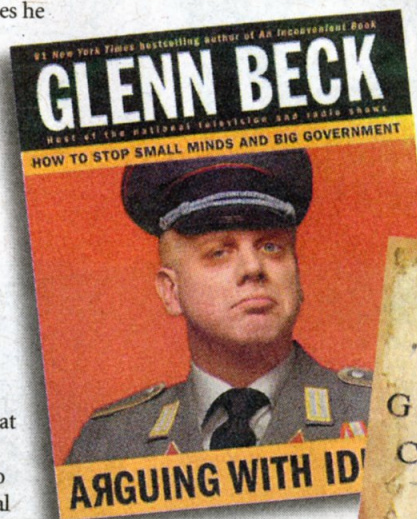
younger brother.” Instead of posting positive reviews, if indeed he has some, Beck's book ads showcase harsh words from his liberal critics:

“Glenn Beck shouldn't be on the air.”—Al Franken

“Finally! A guy who says what people who aren't thinking, are thinking.”—Jon Stewart

His tiny light is never hidden under a bushel. He promoted *The Christmas Sweater* with a 47-city tour of personal appearances, cruising our highways in a tour bus with the book's dust jacket freshly painted on both sides. There was also a *Sweater* stage show with a 10-piece orchestra and a “Broadway” gospel singer, closed-circuit simulcasts in

selected movie theaters, TV tie-ins and hybrid media links too cutting-edge for me to understand.



Philip Roth is no match for this author; neither is King nor John Grisham. This is publishing's grim future, when every book is attached to a celebrity, and every launch is a three-ring circus. Beck has just signed a contract with Simon & Schuster to produce books for juveniles and young adults. Soon the Pied Pinhead will be coming for your children.

In these hard times we're facing, people will complain about outrageous salaries for less deserving citizens. Plaxico Burress, the New York Giants wide receiver who went out drinking with a loaded Glock pistol in his pants, consequently wounding himself in the thigh, nearly vaporizing his privates and pulling a serious prison sentence, owns a \$35 million contract unrelated to his IQ. Outfielder Manny Ramirez of the Los Angeles Dodgers, who earns more than \$20 million a year, never matured much beyond the seventh grade. But Burress can catch the ball, and Manny can hit the ball, in each case as well as anyone who plays his game. Glenn Beck, who with his literary revenues outearns both of them, is a different proposition. He can't hit, he can't field, he can't run, he can't talk, he certainly can't think. He doesn't even look good in his uniform.

His incontinent rhetoric may strike you as fantastic, even psychotic, but in the alternate universe of talk media nearly everyone practices what a psychiatrist might call “belligerent projection”: Liars call their enemies liars, fascists call their enemies fascists, idiots call

their enemies idiots. Whatever it is that Beck does effectively, you'd do well to study it, those of you who are out of work or underemployed. On its surface, broadcasting is a simple game, an advertising medium ruled by ratings and numbers. Ears and eyeballs, as they actually say. At the time he was awarded his \$50 million radio contract, Beck was averaging 250,000 listeners per quarter hour. That doesn't sound like so many (Limbaugh averages 3.4 million), out of 300 million Americans. With such a pot of gold at stake, it seems that you, or nearly anyone, could come up with some gimmick, some bait that might lure the golden tenth of one percent to listen to you, too. Why couldn't you compete with Glenn Beck?

The sky's the limit for the one who can decipher and duplicate his appeal. In the lucrative but overcrowded format that includes right-wing talk shows and pure proto-fascist ranting, stars are revered for their infuriating arrogance, for obnoxious overconfidence that makes reasonable people groan and grind their teeth. All progressive Americans share the dream of strangling Bill O'Reilly with coaxial cable, or driving their SUVs back and forth across Rush Limbaugh's distended abdomen. What these stage villains do is mostly theater, mostly shtick. They sneer, they bluster, they brag; perhaps they're not sincere.

But there's an art to it, an element of Mephistophelian performance. Not everyone can play Iago, not everyone can do Snidely Whiplash with élan. Look at the pantheon of the far Right, and there's usually some hook we can grasp. Ann Coulter is essentially a kinky lounge act—Cruella De Vil menacing Democrats instead of dalmatians—but

she's also an anorexic blonde with a smart mouth and a daring hemline who sends out certain signals to the reactionary libido. To us, Sean Hannity may sound like a Holy Cross linebacker whose helmet absorbed too many burly forearms, or the cop's slow son who washed out of the police academy (actually his education didn't go that far). But to many middle-class Catholics, he looks like a handsome, clean-cut Irish altar boy who chose this instead of the priesthood so he could take better care of his mother.

That leaves Glenn Beck, who after only seven years on the national scene is well on his way to surpassing them all. He draws a slightly younger audience than Limbaugh or the Fox News fixtures: O'Reilly's average viewer, according to the Nieman Foundation, is 71 years old. On occasion Beck's audience tops 3 million and exceeds O'Reilly's army of surly septuagenarians. O'Reilly, unamused by this trend, recently raised an eyebrow at one of Beck's antic outbursts and suggested that his colleague was insane. Beck even owns a slight edge among women, who generally avoid the purple patriot formats. Yet there's no one, male or female, I'd dare accuse of finding Beck sexy. In spite of the dreadful things he says, he isn't articulate enough to raise liberal blood pressure in the O'Reilly-Coulter tradition. Numb discomfort

is what he provokes, much like what you'd feel watching a large snake swallow a rat.

In lieu of the meek, the mediocre will almost certainly inherit the earth, as democracy intended. But this is not about mediocrity. Mediocrity is so far above the place where Beck dwells, he couldn't see it by standing on his money. To make any sense of him, we need to go back to the roots of right-wing broadcasting, which are, in spite of all its authoritarian, capitalist, neo-monarchist rhetoric, essentially populist. This industry cultivates the worshipful attention of the flagrantly below average, some so far below that they believe the Republicans are the party of the common man. Its core audience is made up of people who never sat in enough classrooms or read enough books to be able to separate reasonable convictions from irrational fears and prejudices. Conceptually insecure, they need constant reassurance that people with access to microphones and TV cameras—important players, to them—can be just as irrational as they are. If you can comfort and legitimize this audience, they reciprocate by buying your books without reserve, though it's a question whether they actually read the books, or need to. It helps if these player/ authors, in spite of their outrageous compensation packages, seem common as dirt. And they don't come any more common than Glenn Beck.

Maybe he's not even faking, this one, not even conning his lowing herd of parishioners. Unlike Limbaugh and Hannity, who were early college dropouts, Beck never matriculated at all (of the Rabid Right's top tier, Bill O'Reilly is the only one with a bachelor's degree and the only one who was ever a journalist). College is no guarantor of wit or wisdom, but many of the hazy, ungenerous notions Beck mistakes for ideas could have been cleared up in History or Poli Sci 101. He likes to say that he isn't that bright. He seems to be the beneficiary of the same sympathy that made Sarah Palin, a joke or a scandal to most educated voters, a heroine to blue-collar Americans who saw her as the girl next door. The Sarah Palin syndrome—the Palindrome?—was also a boon to George W. Bush, who in spite of patrician origins was said to be the candidate you'd rather have a beer with, compared with Al Gore or John Kerry. (After six years of Iraq and Afghanistan, with the army and the treasury bled dry, the Constitution shredded and the economy on life support, did someone ask Mr. and Mrs. America, "Enjoy your beer?")

The Palindrome is part of anti-intellectual America's celebration of the ordinary, even the subordinary—the theater of accessible fantasies. Hillary Clinton is too smart, Angelina Jolie too beautiful, Caroline Kennedy too classy for most men to imagine in the passenger seat of their personal vehicle. But Sarah Palin? If you didn't date her or someone like her, your brother did. Who couldn't sing as well as Britney Spears? It takes a big ego to imagine yourself as FDR or JFK, but George Bush? Few aspire to handle a microphone and fill a TV screen like Edward R. Murrow, but who's so humble he can't imagine himself as the next Glenn Beck? Is this Beck's golden secret, that he's incapable of making anyone feel inferior?

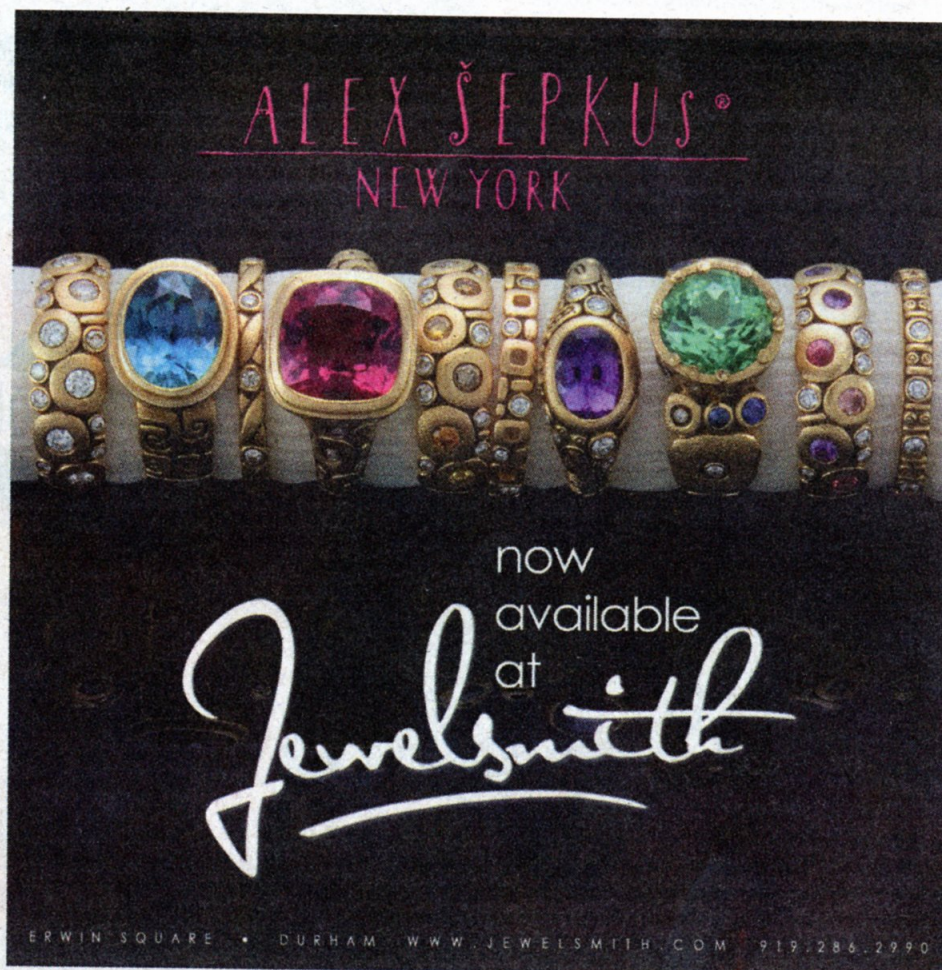
Here is the dark side of democracy, the rank soil where demagogues sink their roots. Thomas Jefferson believed that reason and democracy were a match made in heaven; Alexander Hamilton, wary of the mob, warned him that he was dreaming. Leveling can be a deadly poison when it affects electoral politics. I wouldn't have voted for Barack Obama if I didn't think that he was smarter than I am, at least smarter about the law and the things that might make him a competent president. Many voters don't agree. They seem more comfortable looking down on a president than looking up to him—or her. And they vote their comfort, which is one of the reasons this country has so few leaders and so many crises.

Broadcasting isn't rocket science and never was, but it's a critical source of information, and more vulnerable to raw democracy than our elections. What people want is what they damn well get. To me, Glenn Beck sounds like democracy's Final Solution, its cruel betrayal of the intellectual founders and their faith in the common man. This is a country where a man can do something he really shouldn't do at all—in essence, encourage people to be selfish and narrow-minded—and do it very badly, without any style or skill, and earn \$50 million for doing it.

Why is it that high school graduates who've published more books than they've read get national pulpits to lecture Americans on foreign policy, trade deficits and genetics? As the recession lingers, maybe their preposterous wealth will be their downfall. Beck, who earned an estimated \$23 million in the 12 months that ended last June, is a pauper compared with Limbaugh, whose contract is worth \$400 million, or Hannity, who signed an extension for \$100 million. Yet another ex-disc jockey, Howard Stern, signed a half-billion-dollar contract to talk dirty on satellite radio.

Chances are, they'll survive the recession and the Republican eclipse. Whatever follows, they won't have to give the money back. To me, these raging illiterates look like the last spasm before culture death, before the American experiment flatlines. To others, to people I seldom meet, they look like the triumph of the little man, and even the harsh words they speak meet someone's urgent needs, unfortunately. I wish good books could learn to fly off the shelves the way Glenn Beck's silly ones do. But let him keep his money—it won't buy him an intelligent audience or a bigger brain. Free speech is free speech, and it's not certain that he could make a living doing anything else. Our great national misfortune is his good fortune; he's had more than his share of the other kind. His mother committed suicide when he was 13, a brother also killed himself, and one of Beck's daughters has cerebral palsy. Fools suffer too.

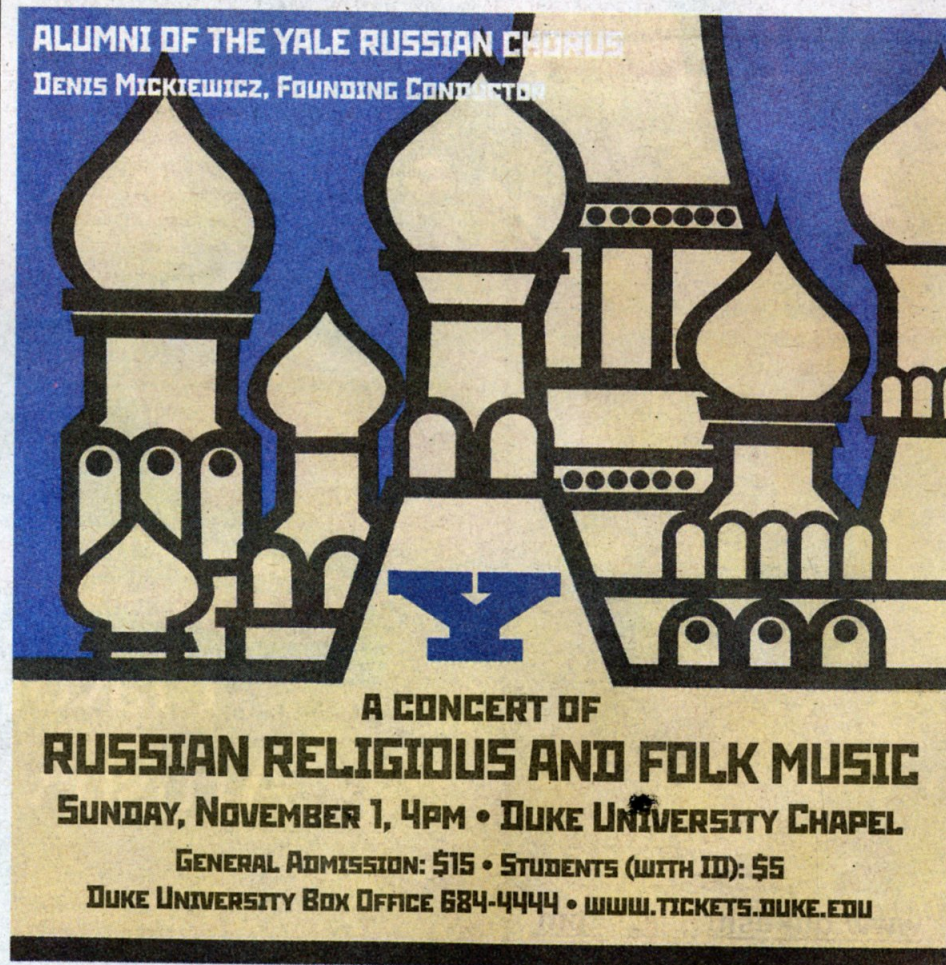
A letter to the editor of the *Progressive Populist* described Sarah Palin as "the canary in the dummy mine." Maybe that's what Beck is too, the last voice singing off-key just before the air gets too evil to breathe. Broadcasting was my beat, back when I was a much younger man. I was one of those idealists who thought the airwaves were a precious national resource. Tune in to Glenn Beck—just once, please—and weep along with me for what was and what might have been. ☒



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