



By **JOSEPH GUINTO** ♦ Photograph by **DAN MacMEDAN**

SHOWcase

LOWES

No longer wandering the Vegas Strip with only spare change in his pocket, **DREW CAREY** is now running the show(s) and loving every minute of it.

The laugh detonates like a building imploding. Rolling, roaring, rumbling. His face crumples like walls collapsing — forehead falling into eyes, eyes into cheeks, cheeks into chin — until Drew Carey is gone and there's just a massive, fleshy, smiling pile left. He laughs this way at your jokes if they're even vaguely funny. He laughs this way at his own jokes too. Not all of them, though — that would take too long. Because Drew Carey is always telling a joke. Or, if not a joke, a story that sounds like a joke. Even his serious stories include an implosion or two. And he's got a lot of serious stories from his past. Too many, really, for a man who laughs like he does.

For instance, there's the story about his glasses. It happened back in the early '80s, when Carey was splitting time between a seedy motel south of downtown Las Vegas and his brother's house in Southern California. He had just been kicked out of Kent State University and was working days as a waiter or bank teller or whatever paid the bills. On the weekends, he served in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves. In between, he gambled, hoping to become a high roller, a whale. "I really wanted to be a professional gambler," Carey says. "I can still remember the first casino I walked into. All the cocktail waitresses looked like goddesses. I watched people come in and play a \$25 table or a \$100 table. I was amazed at all the money, the glamour. I got really suckered into it."

Suckered. Good word. Carey never even came close to turning pro. Instead, he struggled. And he lived in squalor — his most frequent companions were the dozens of cockroaches that he shared his motel room with. "You couldn't get rid of those roaches, man," Carey says. "Every time I'd come home, there'd be cockroaches everywhere. I tried everything. I put out those roach motels. But the roaches would check in and check out and then go for a swim in the pool. They just wouldn't die."

But back to the glasses. One night, Carey took a walk to get away from the roaches. He was wearing a Marine Corps jacket and the glasses that have since become his trademark — the funny, dorky plastic black glasses that, since his recent LASIK surgery,

he wears only as a stage prop. It's hard to imagine someone getting worked up over Drew Carey in those glasses and a Marine Corps jacket. But it happened. A group of guys driving by made some disparaging remarks to him. Carey mouthed off in return. "So the guys pulled up to me," he recalls. "They said, 'How would you like to get a hole in your glasses?'"

Instead of shutting up, Carey mouthed off again. As the car drove away, someone inside the car shot at Carey. "They shot at me!" Carey says. They missed. He chased the car, got the license plate, and then filed a police report. "The cops were so blasé about it," he recalls. "I was, like, 'Come on. They shot at me!'" If there was an investigation, nothing ever came of it.

Actually, nothing much came of anything Carey did back in those early Vegas days. He was so unsuccessful in Las Vegas that he could barely even pay the rent in that horrible motel room with the cockroaches and the "water stain" on the wall. "They told me it was a water stain, but I know it was a blood stain," Carey says. "It looked like blood. And it was chest high." Boom. Implosion laugh.

It's a weird memory to trigger a laugh. But those early Vegas trials are indeed funny in retrospect. And now, with all the comedy- and television-career success that has come to Carey since he *left* Vegas, he's able to finally live out his Sin City dreams — he visits the city several times a month to hit the expensive blackjack tables. Interestingly, it

was also those early days that led Carey to a very unexpected place: *The Price Is Right*. Even if he didn't want the job of taking over for the iconic Bob Barker in the first place, it turns out that Drew Carey is the perfect person to hold the long microphone on that American daytime institution. He's perfect because he loves a winner and because the time he spent in Vegas taught him what it's like to want to win — and to *really* want to win.

"I'm so happy when the contestants win," Carey says. "These people, they're just regular people, and they get the chance to come on TV and have the best day of their lives. Just being on TV is great. And then they can win a car or something? The average household income in America right now is something like \$50,000. And you're winning a car, which is like \$24,000. The showcases are worth \$40,000. That's a lot of money. You can really make somebody's year by having them come on *Price Is Right*."

"Plus, I just love giving away CBS's money." Boom.

"A NEW CAR!" These words are not usually greeted by silence in *The Price Is Right's* home inside CBS Television City. But for the moment, they are. It's rehearsal time, just half an hour before the show's second taping of the day. The audience is still waiting outside, all lined up with their custom hand-painted "We Love Drew" T-shirts and their big yellow name tags. Inside, a dozen people are onstage. They're taking directions through headsets and moving about without speaking a word to each other. Only Rich Fields, the show's announcer, can be heard; he booms out the prizes on offer today — the car among them.

In 20 minutes, all that silence will seem a distant memory. "I hope you brought earplugs," says Bente Christensen, the show's set designer. "You're not going to believe the noise."

No one who has ever seen *The Price Is Right* would be surprised to hear that the audiences are loud and enthusiastic. But the actual noise and excitement levels inside the small studio defy description. And logic. The audience members scream — yes, scream — from the moment they are seated until the end of the show, taking only momentary breaks when Carey speaks to them during commercial breaks. He tells them

how people still call him "Jim" Carey, and he chats with them about their lives and careers. And he does not swear. At least, not today. Carey's stand-up act can be very raunchy, but he tones it down when he talks to *The Price Is Right* audiences.

The audiences, though, don't tone down a thing. Carey says he's never experienced anything like it before onstage. "You have all those hundreds of people directing all this power at you. You get all this love coming your way just because you're on a TV show and you represent money to them or a car or riches or whatever you represent. It's pretty amazing to be in the middle of it twice a day."

Onstage, Carey seems perfectly at ease directing contestants around the various games — Plinko, Flip Flop, the Range Game, and so on — but he hardly looks Bob Barker-esque in his suits. For some reason, the suits seem ill fitting. Which is interesting, because Carey had expected the job of replacing Barker to be a bad, ah, fit for him. That's why, when he was first approached about the position, he wouldn't even take CBS's calls.

Carey says he'd sworn off doing regular

network TV after *The Drew Carey Show*'s nine-year run on ABC ended unceremoniously in 2004. Critics, who hadn't been kind to Carey's sitcom from the beginning, continued to bash it as ABC dumped the show from its lineup. So Carey turned to his stand-up career, developed an interest in Major League Soccer (an interest that has culminated with his part-ownership of MLS's new Seattle franchise), and even got into sports photography. He took on anything but more TV. "I just felt like there were a lot of things I wanted to do in my life before I'm too old to do any of them," Carey says as we chat over dinner at a restaurant just outside the gates of CBS Television City.

But in early 2007, Carey got a call about hosting the new *Power of 10*. He didn't want that job at first either. In addition to his television aversion, he didn't want to be the host of a game show — he worried it might carry a negative stigma. "If I was going to host a game show, I don't know why I paid for all those acting lessons," he says, chuckling. "I mean, there goes my serious independent-movie career." Still, the *Power of 10* seemed like a good fit. The format, with questions

based on "what America thinks," would let Carey tell brief stories about his life and experiences. It would also let him be as outspoken as one can be on a game show. Carey has long been a proud political independent. So he took the *Power of 10* job. His success there led CBS to call him when Barker retired — even though the network had plenty of people, Rosie O'Donnell included, actively seeking the gig.

But when CBS called, Carey didn't answer. "When they first offered me the job," Carey says, "I was in a Cracker Barrel in North Carolina, taking a little road trip after having taped *Power of 10* in New York. I was checking my messages. I saw who it was and what they wanted, and I said, 'Nope. I'm going to eat.' There was no way I was going to put myself through that misery and have everyone make fun of me and trash me and tell me, 'You're no Bob Barker.'"

But that was just the point to CBS's way of thinking — Drew Carey isn't Bob Barker. There is no comparison. He's bigger, louder, and brasher than Barker. And yet, he's still somehow approachable. With his Cleveland roots, Midwestern accent, and those dorky glasses, he has just the right all-American

When in Vegas ... What Drew Carey does, and advises you not to do, in Sin City.

You'll probably find Drew Carey at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, unless he wants a quieter weekend: "I love staying at the Hard Rock," Carey says. "I always have a good time there. But sometimes it's a little too noisy for me. The one thing about the Hard Rock is that in the summer, the pool gets going at 10 in the morning. And if you have a poolside room, you're waking up at 9:30 or 10, and in Vegas, that's like the crack of dawn. Sometimes when I

go to Vegas, all I want to do is read and relax and gamble a little bit. So for a quieter weekend, I'll go to the Four Seasons. I can get room service 24 hours, and then I gamble when I feel like it."

Then again, you probably wouldn't be looking for Drew Carey in Las Vegas anyway: "When you're in Vegas, you're your own star," Carey says. "So when people see a celebrity in Vegas, they really don't care — whoever it is. But when it's me, especially, nobody cares."

Well, actually there was that one time when he was recognized: "I was at the Venetian, and someone saw me walking by the fountains in the front," Carey says. "They said, 'Oh my gosh, it's Drew Carey. Can

we get a picture?' There's like 10 people there. So, I go pose for the picture. They all gather around me. And right before the guy snaps the picture, a guy in front of me points at me and says, 'All right, *The King of Queens*!' Totally wrong show."

A Drew Carey tip for those visiting Vegas? Drink smart: "You don't have to go to Tao and all the after-hours clubs, where you have to wait in line and hope the doorman likes you and it's thump, thump, thump. Those are good if you're partying. I go to those places. But sometimes you want to drink and talk and get out of the casino. And there are actually a lot of good local places to go to that are away from the Strip. The best thing to do is to ask a bellman,

because they all go to those places after work. So just go up to one of those guys and say, 'Hey, where can I go and



just find a good drinking bar?' That's how I found the Double Down. It's a punk bar, not far from where the Hard Rock is. They have nothing but punk rock music on the jukebox. Everybody in there looks like they just got out of jail. But it's fun, and everybody is actually really friendly there. For

a serious dive bar, that's the place to go."

Another Drew Carey tip for visitors to Vegas is gamble smart: "People always say when they're winning, 'I'm ahead, so now I'm gambling with the casino's money.' When people get ahead, they play a lot looser and take too many chances. But the thing is, it's not the casino's money. It's your money. So you should be as careful with that money as you were with the money you showed up with. If you made money in the stock market and you got your quarterly dividend check, you wouldn't go, 'All right, I'm spending GM's money today!' Same thing with gambling. You made a risky, risky investment, and now it belongs to you."



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vibe. Or, as the network specifically told him, he is an "everyman." Eventually, the network brass convinced Carey that he was the right man for the job. "CBS said I have a lot of empathy," Carey says. "And I really do. When they say I have everyman appeal, I think it's because I don't come across as somebody who is above other people. I'm not doing a favor by letting you meet me. And some people in Hollywood really do have that attitude."

This empathy is clear during *The Price Is Right* tapings. During those commercial breaks, when he's talking to the audience, Carey sincerely apologizes to people who didn't win and congratulates those who did. And he hugs people. Lots of people. The day I visited, he even gave a woman a surprise 30th-anniversary gift from her husband. This is work, sure. But CBS has made the job pleasantly remunerative for Carey (*Variety* put his annual salary in the seven-figure range), and it certainly looks like he's having fun putting those Bob Barker comparisons to rest. "To be in this kind of environment and to work with really nice people is more than I could have asked for," Carey says. "And to get the kind of energy and love you get from these audiences — it's amazing. When I walk out of work, I feel great."

CAREY FEELS GREAT a lot these days. He's newly engaged and among the few to get something positive out of the writer's strike. A series of *Price Is Right* prime-time specials will begin this month to replace repeats of scriptless CBS shows. "Suddenly," Carey says, laughing, "I'm the most powerful man in Hollywood." He's also trying to conquer his early-life depression by turning to self-help authors — Dale Carnegie, Tony Robbins, and Wayne Dyer, among them. Through them, he's learned to stay positive, something he rarely was before his show-business career began.

His early life was anything but comic. His father died of a brain tumor when Carey was just eight years old. At age 18, when he was in college, he tried to overdose on sleeping pills. Then he flunked out and bought a bus ticket with money he'd received from his father's Social Security checks. "Greyhound had this Ameripass, where you could get on and off the bus wherever you wanted to," Carey says. "I had a backpack, and I would sleep on the bus at night, and then in the

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daytime, I would get up and wash up in the men's room at the Greyhound station. Then I would explore the town wherever I was."

Las Vegas was one of the few places where he decided to stay the night. "I got a motel room out at the edge of the Strip. Then I walked all the way down the Strip. I walked all the way to downtown. I just stared at the lights and thought, 'Man, this is the greatest place. Look at all the stars who are playing here. Look at all these big signs.'"

Carey decided to stay in Vegas for a while, hoping to become part of the glitz — and hoping to play blackjack at the expensive (back then) \$25 tables. Thing is, he was never able to afford those tables. Instead, he played the \$2 tables when he was flush and the \$0.25 tables when he wasn't. Mostly, he wasn't. Perhaps not coincidentally, his second unsuccessful suicide attempt, also with sleeping pills, took place in Las Vegas.

Still, Carey has no ill will toward the city. Though he was never able to make much money at gambling, he loved the thrill of it and learned the games well enough to become an above-average player, which he is to this day. That's why he makes frequent return visits to Las Vegas, and perhaps it's also why he tips so well. "I'm not playing for rent money anymore," Carey says. "So when I win, I just give everything away in tips. I've developed a reputation as a really good tipper."

He's also developed a reputation among his gambling cohorts as being a fun guy to hang around with. As part of the self-help life philosophy he developed to overcome his depression, Carey tries to remain positive — especially at the blackjack tables. "When I gamble, I do not allow any negative expression at the table," Carey says. "No negative comments. I tell people if they've never gambled with me, 'It's nothing to worry about. We're just here to gamble and relax. If you have any other emotions, you have to leave the table.' It's hard for me to be around anyone who is negative."

It's hard to imagine that anyone could stay negative around Carey for long, what with that detonation of a laugh. It's irresistibly infectious. And though he doesn't blast away audiences with his laughter too often, he's found one way to get his positive message out to the *Price Is Right* studio audience. He tells each group that comes in what he's learned from hosting the show.

He calls it "the Zen of *The Price Is Right*."

"If you watch football or baseball on TV, you're rooting against somebody," Carey says. "That's a negative thing. With *Price Is Right*, you can actually root for somebody to do well and hope for something good to happen to a total stranger. That makes your life better. You don't have to know anything about them; you just hope someone does

well, and that benefits you. Because that positive energy will come back to you." **AW**

American Way associate editor **JOSEPH GUINTO** wrote about China's wine market in our December 1, 2007, issue.

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