

Watergate Wit

Though the Watergate revelations grow grimmer each week, nightclub audiences these days must be getting the impression that the debacle is the world's funniest subject. Comics across the country are milking Watergate for every plausible or implausible laugh that it is worth. At least a dozen records and albums featuring Watergate humor have already been released, and countless funnymen have built acts around the scandal.

At the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D.C., satirists Mark Russell and David Frye have packed in crowds of Washingtonians, Republicans and Democrats alike. "CIA now stands for Caught In the Act," Russell tells his audience. Russell also is credited with having originated such often-heard quips as "impeachment with honor," "bail to the Chief," and "Nixon has a staff infection." "In the twelve years I've been at the Shoreham," says Russell, "I've never had anything like the past two months. The audiences love the whole spy thing, like McGovern picked up a grapefruit and heard a dial tone."

Frye, who became famous doing impersonations of Nixon, claims he gets his biggest guffaw when he has Nixon say: "The odds are 100 to 1 that I'll be

impeached, 50 to 1 that I'll resign. That is not the reason that I am today signing a prison-reform bill. There will be a two-bedroom suite for anyone who has once held the highest office." Far from alienating his audiences with Watergate gags, says Frye, "the only danger I've had is not going far enough. If I hold back, the audience is disappointed." Frye has already recorded an album of Watergate humor, in which he mimics the voices of Nixon, George McGovern, Hubert Humphrey, Billy Graham and others. In one sequence, Frye's Nixon visits the Godfather for help. "You want justice?" asks the Godfather. "Not necessarily," replies Nixon.

In Chicago, the Second City revue has a brand-new skit about a newlywed couple honeymooning at the Watergate. "What would you like for lunch?" the bridegroom asks. "A ham sandwich," replies the bride. Instantly a waitress bursts into the room with the ham sandwich. "If you want anything else," she says cheerfully to the dumbfounded couple, "just talk loud."

Two Second City alumni, Jack Burns and Avery Schreiber, have released an album called *The Watergate Comedy Hour* with a blueprint of the infamous building on the back cover. One sketch has Nixon and John Mitchell in secret conversation in a telephone booth. Says Nixon, "I knew nothing about the entire incident, and last year you told me you knew nothing about the entire incident. Now one of us is full of the old crapola. Which one of us do you think it is, John?" "U-h-h-h . . . me?" asks Mitchell queasily. "Attaboy, John," says Nixon.

Comedian Mort Sahl, never slow to satirize, also has an album that he calls *Sing a Song*

of Watergate . . . Apocryphal of Lie! ("Richard M. Nixon, born 61 years ago in a log cabin in Whittier, California . . . in a blue suit . . ."). Both New York Disk Jockey Don Imus and Comic Dickie Goodman have recorded mock interviews with Watergate figures, whose answers are couched in snatches of rock hits. Sample from Goodman's *Watergate*: "Mr. Nixon, what will your position be on the Watergate from now on?" "No more Mr. Nice Guy," bawls the voice of Alice Cooper.

WGAR, a Cleveland rock station, promoted a Watergate Weekend, with local disk jockeys supplying musical-answer "interviews." "Senator McGovern, what would you have said if you had known your office was bugged?" "Hello, walls," moaned back Faron Young's record of the same name. WGAR plans another weekend with a giveaway fillip—electronic "buggers," small gadgets for doing in insects.

Non-professionals, too, apparently cannot resist the urge to take playful potshots at Watergate. Six-term Missouri Democratic Congressman William L. Hungate got to tinkering at the piano one day and in 15 minutes plunked out a ditty he calls *Down at the Old Watergate*. Based precariously on the English tune *Down at the Old Bull and Bush*, Hungate's composition was recorded by the Democratic National Committee, and for six weeks anyone calling a certain Washington telephone number could hear:

*Come, come, come and play spy
with me
Down at the old Watergate.
Come, come, come love and lie
with me
Down at the old Watergate.**

Hungate says that some 53,000 persons called the number, some from as far away as California.

The streets, too, have blossomed with a bumper crop of stickers, buttons, posters and one-liners: FOUR MORE YEARS—AND TWO OFF FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR; FREE THE WATERGATE 500; NIXON BUGS ME. Even old 1968 campaign buttons reading "Nixon's the One" have been sported for possible misinterpretation. In California, wags predict that a well-known ice-cream company is about to introduce a new flavor called "impeach-mint." Midwesterners say that "even John Wayne has been implicated—they found hoof-prints outside the Watergate."

A lot of Watergate humor is strained, and some of it is aimed below the belly laugh. A few radio stations have refused to air Watergate records, not only because of the cruelty of the material but because of its inanity. But for nightclub comics, no end to the use of Watergate jokes is in sight. In fact, Mark Russell says that the trend has just started. "They're moving past the bit players to the main act now."

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SIMON NATHAN



DAVID FRYE AS NIXON

COMEDIAN MARK RUSSELL



DAVID KENNERLY