

Tempo

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'Joe's Basement': The inside story

It's much the same as the outside story: Whimsical and weird

By Steve Johnson

Joe's basement, a place of infamy among Chicagoans with a penchant for extraordinary television, isn't.

It is really Joe's parents' basement and, although in the subterranean level of their Hyde Park home, it is closer in function to a rampus room, with beaten furniture, worn books and a plethora of video and office gadgetry. There are neither lawn-care nor automobile-maintenance implements in sight.

It is, however, the home of Joe Winston's easy chair and hassock, the couch-potato setting from which Winston, bare feet up, torso slumped slightly forward, hands and mouth engaged with a snack food, introduces his public-



Tribune photo by Chuck Brennan

Joe Winston reads his fan mail on "Joe's Basement." The idea, he says, is "to give people something different than regular TV."

access TV show, "This Week in Joe's Basement."

"I'm Joe," he says to viewers of city cable Channel 19 every Mon-

day night at 11:30, mouth more or less full, "and this is my basement." Things, often, progress from there.

When explaining TV shows to people who may not have seen them, it is usual to compare them with their better-known counterparts. In the case of "Joe's Basement," this is not easy.

You might call it "Real People" meets "SCTV," but that's not it.

You might call it "Late Night With David Letterman" meets one of the well-intentioned talk shows that local network affiliates air during zero-viewership hours, but that's not it either.

You might even compare it to the running "Wayne's World" skit on "Saturday Night Live," also ostensibly a cable-access show produced by young guys in a basement, but, as Winston says, "Wayne's World" has a two-camera setup. Get a life."

Winston, a 24-year-old native Hyde Park graduate from Yale with a psychology degree in 1988 and came back to Chicago to make films, once encountered a man in the offices of Chicago

Joe

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Access Corp. who he thought summed it up nicely.

"Hey, hey, that's Joe Basement," the man said.

"Hi, how ya doin'? Hope you enjoy the show," Winston said.

"What kind of show is it?" the man's friend asked.

"Well," said the man, "he sits there in his chair with the potato chips and he puts his feet up and, well, he does anything he wants."

"That," Winston says now, recounting the story, "is what I want people to get out of it."

Another viewer wrote in one time to point out that "your show seems to have a theme of 'What Weird Guys Do.'"

Cable-access is a wide-open field, "the electronic equivalent of the public park in terms of one's 1st Amendment rights," says Greg Boozell, program director of Chicago Access, which airs an average 40 hours a week of original programming on its five channels.

Among the offerings available on Monday night alone to the 289,000 Chicago cable households are "Motorsports Unlimited," a show about things with engines; "Global Philosophy for the Year 2001," about environmental issues; and "No Matter What," a motivational show where people who have overcome obstacles tell their stories.

So it is hard to say unequivocally that "Joe's Basement" is the most unusual offering out there, or even the best. But it certainly seems to be more ambitious than most—which tend to follow talk-show or call-in formats—especially in the time that staffers spend on production and writing.

What, after all, do you make of a show that based one episode entirely on man-in-the-street interviews in which black people are asked, "What do you think of

white people," and vice versa?

Although that episode earned the praise of the Tribune's TV critic and a 1st-place finish in the public-affairs category at last year's cable-access awards ceremony, it still opened with a wry touch: For his introductory snack food, Winston was eating Oreos.

At times, he says, the show is an exercise in "what happens if you let people on the street just talk to you. You get all these amazing things. And you can't believe somebody's actually saying this to a camera—just because you let them actually be themselves."

Paid in beer

And what do you say about a show whose premiere episode, in a parody of Andy Warhol movies, or a parody of parodies of them, featured the host drinking 3½ beers and reading a newspaper as a large clock beside him ticked off 30 minutes?

Those beers were one of the highlights for Winston in terms of compensation, and nobody else working on the show is paid either. Winston supports himself by shooting and editing wedding videos for and at VPA Teleproductions in Des Plaines, a firm that lets him edit his show there.

They produce a new "Joe's Basement" every two weeks, which means each episode runs two Mondays in a row. It began in August 1989, and Winston and staff decided in March 1990 to make it a series and get a regular time slot on Chicago Access. Applicants for new programs must have completed four shows, live in Chicago, and agree to submit new shows regularly.

When they did a call-in for the 16th episode (they have now produced 31), they realized they had a devoted audience, and now regular viewers write in and claim to be subterranean creatures, too, giving themselves names like "Sir Dada," "Sister Dada" and "King Zeke and his dumb drug brother Hal the Looper"

Although as host he gets the

lion's share of the attention and all the mail, Winston is quick to credit the show's staff, including writers Mark Audrain and Paul Pomerleau, and technicians Dan Margulies and Katalina Groh. "We're very egalitarian here," he says. "Whatever needs to get done gets done by whoever knows how."

"Not to be pompous about it," Winston says, but the overriding idea behind the show is "to give people something different than regular TV. The show is usually a lot slower paced, and we present a lot of things ambiguously but not purposelessly."

In the black people-white people episode, for instance, "I wasn't thinking, 'I'm going to do a treatise on race relations.' I thought, 'I'm going to challenge these people on the street and see how they jump.'"

One week, the show might return to Winston's high school, Kenwood Academy, to capture the drama of a girl crying as she is given detention; another week it might feature a "butt-creature"—one of the writer's posteriors made up to resemble something capable of speech—reciting Shakespeare. Or go from a series of absurdly funny monologues recited by a Ghostbusters plastic action figure to poignant ones—stories about a woman deciding whether to be an actress or a prostitute, or a man sleeping with an older woman for drug money—told by friends of Winston's.

"We're always straddling the line between documentary and fiction," says Winston, "and that's probably where we get most of our energy from, and that's where we can be original."

"I wouldn't mind mentioning that we're at the stage now where we want to go professional," he adds. "Single white male television show seeks—whatever." We wouldn't need a lot of money. I would think that should be very appealing to someone. We could be a cheap TV show."