

Jerry Springer: Chigaco's my kinda town

Contributed by Sally Howard
Sunday, 24 September 2006

Slick politico, titan of TV sleaze, country crooner, cultural icon; Jerry Springer's certainly a man of the world, but it's Chicago he most likes to call home...

What I love most about Chicago, says Jerry Springer, through a curl of cigar smoke which momentarily obscures his trademark teak tan, 'Is the fact that it's middle America with ethnic diversity.

I like middle America – let's face it, it's made me what I am today. And Chicago's large, but still mainly Midwesterners, it hasn't lost its small-town Americaness. But you also get more Polish people than you do in Warsaw here. There's a tremendous ethnic diversity, which means the music's all here – the jazz, the blues – and it also makes for some great restaurants.

It's easy to see why Chicago, Hemingway's 'city of the big shoulders', is a comfortable fit for Jerry Springer.

Of robust working class stock, well-polished yet summarily dismissive of pretension, Springer and his home city – where he occupies a 'modest' penthouse in the Hancock Center – have much in common.

The second city's inherent contrasts serve the two Springers well: the silken-tongued politician who enjoys shadowy old-world dining in Buckingham's at the Chicago Hilton; or the man the viewers of his TV show see, who stuffs his maws on Italian steak sandwiches at Chicago institution Mr Beef with the best of them.

Chicago's unique marriage of big-city slickness and big-shouldered work ethic also perhaps makes it the natural capital of talk-show America. Along with The Oprah Winfrey Show, of whom Jerry comments: 'A lovely, classy lady – compared to her I'm just a clown with a little circus act', The Jerry Springer Show has been based in Chicago since its inception.

Fifteen years on, the show's parade of perversion and family dysfunction is still one of the city's top draws, with 50,000 tourists a year shuffling up to subject themselves to the NBC building's metal detector for the show's biweekly tapings.

Springer, however, is a Londoner by birth – the only thing, he says, which prevents him running for the White House (as a Democrat). Born to German-Jewish parents who fled the Holocaust, Springer's parents 'chased the typical American dream,' and Springer spent most of his childhood in a rough, mob-ruled area of Queens, to which he attributes his everyman finesse: his ability to talk the talk with middle-class politicians and horse-loving zoophiles alike.

Politics was the natural course for the young Springer, and a passion that still courses just beneath his well-moisturised skin. His first job after college was working as one of Senator Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign aides.

Jerry then joined a law firm in Cincinnati and moved into the political arena himself and in 1977, at the tender age of 33, was elected Mayor of Cincinnati.

A few political scandals followed, then a change of career to Emmy-award winning TV journalist and, in 1991, to his most well-known manifestation: Jerry Springer talk-show host.

The common thread in all of the above – the overweening urge to be liked and respected – is evident as soon as you meet Springer, when he fixes you with his unblinking owl-like stare and shakes your hand, the firm handshake of the politician with a flirtatious final squeeze.

Asked how he feels about his legend – his status as the undisputed overlord of trash TV, whose name is a byword for the worst excesses of American life – he's unapologetic, but smoothly self-deprecating, careful to distance himself from the patina of Springer sleaze.

'The show's fun and I don't mean to disrespect the fact I've been doing it for 15 years. But no-one with a straight face is going to suggest that this is helping humanity,' Rolling one of his beloved Cuban cigars between his thumb and forefinger, he continues.

'It's just a mirror of society. There is no difference between people in different worlds, except people on my

show don't have a command of the English language as well as some of the so-called proper people. Attuned to my raised brow Springer the politician swiftly readjusts.

'We all have secrets. I mean who in the British royal family couldn't be on the Jerry Springer show?'

Unfortunately, there was no sign of HRH last June, when Springer filmed his UK shows: 'But that just proves it — I had expected British guests to be more sedate, but found them to be even noisier and more argumentative than Americans.'

This universality of human experience, however depressing the notion may be, is perhaps one reason for The Jerry Springer Show's continuing success (even after 15 years, the show is still screened in 100-plus countries worldwide).

It's also perhaps a reason for the Springer phenomenon's cult status.

The controversial Jerry Springer The Opera stage show is itself a testament to the overarching influence of the Springer cult.

The show, as anyone who's seen it will agree, is by no means complimentary. The foul-mouthed first act offers for our consideration a man who cheats on his fiancée with a 'chick with a dick', a man with a dirty-diaper fetish, a masochist dressed in a baby-doll outfit singing 'Mama Gimme Smack on the Asshole,' and a fat woman who dreams of being a pole dancer.

By the final act, Springer himself is condemned to hell after being shot by a disgruntled assistant. However, Springer supported the project from the start, perhaps aware of the gains in being seen capable of poking fun at himself — ever the politician.

'You know. I wish it were about someone other than me, but I thought they did a great job. When I met Michael Brandon I offered my condolences,' he deadpans.

'No-one should have to go through life looking like me. I told Michael, 'You poor thing, have you considered surgery? It's the pinnacle of your career — and you have to play me.''

Imagine having to put that on your resume... 'I was Jerry Springer'.

It's easy to see how Springer maintains his popularity. His self-deprecating wit is sweet chloroform, loosening any detractor's criticism.

He disarms the interviewer by peppering his conversation with frequent references to his elevated sense of self: 'You have to be a bit egomaniacal to be a politician, or a TV personality. I know that, it's a character flaw.'

The egomaniac in Springer has driven him off along a few pockmarked dirt tracks in his route to fame.

Not least Springer's little-documented country music career. 'Country songs are invariably about broken relationships and divorce and cheating,' he said at the time. 'Who slept with whom. I guess I saw it as an extension of the show — the themes are consistent.'

When I casually drop the country music project into the conversation, a smile ignites Springer's face (until now a picture of measured response) and he leaps up excitedly to fish around in his CD collection for the fondly remembered album.

After 10 minutes of bemusedly fiddling with stereo knobs 'I can't work this darned thing — shall we get one of the boys from the show?' we sit there in silence to appreciate 'Dr Talk', the title track of the album Springer released in the late 90s, which pokes fun at talk shows, his characteristically mellow intonation overlaying twangy, blue-grass style backing.

Springer takes a puff from his cigar and, as quickly as the smoke clears, his brief window of self-absorbed reverie passes and he's back on razor sharp form.

'The more people drink, the better I sound. I was Billy Ray Cyrus' opening act for a few of his concerts. But I suck. I'm not ready to go after Garth Brooks.'

Springer then looks me directly in the eye, the unnerving steel of the politician challenging me to interpret him as it would be so easy to do, as a man consumed by his own fame, blindly lead to self-aggrandisement.

The cigar box, from which he has offered me a cigar, which now hangs moist and fibrous at my lips, is softly closed and it's clear that, for now, Jerry is done with being Jerry of the magazine interview.

It's time to don another hat: The Jerry Springer Show, and to mediate between a warring trio, fists flying and naked breasts swinging as Brett's 18-year-old girlfriend, annoyed Brett won't give her a baby, admits to sleeping with the man who runs the local DVD shop.

Later, when two shows have been put to bed, Jerry will take time out to become the Jerry the world seldom sees, kicking back in his favourite cigar lounge in Chicago, Fumatore, in the Gold Coast/Lincoln Park area. Then he'll just be one of his adopted town's good old boys, winding down after a hard day's work in the time-honoured way.

Springer's Chicago

Fumatore 1723 N. Halstead Chicago, Illinois 312-266-9521.

Founder John DePalma created this haven in response to the city's recent anti-smoking legislation. It's a great place, in the European club style, but with a neighbourhood feel.

The Capital Grille Chicago, 633 North St. Clair Street, Chicago IL 60611. Chicago is a meat lover's paradise. Visit Capital Grille for the finest dry-aged steaks with award-winning wines.

Polish quarter: The third largest concentration of Poles in the world. Visit the fascinating Polish museum of America at 984 N. Milwaukee Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60622-4101. And try a Polish sausage or two while you're in town.

La Strada Ristorante - 155 North Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL One of the US's top Italian restaurants. Hearty northern Italian, the way Chicago likes it. 'Veal is the deal' here. Great piano bar.

Allen's - The New American Café 217 W. Huron St. 312-587-9600. Great casual American cafe with global influences. Iowa prime beef, duck breast, rabbit loin and fresh fish are great. Venison is often a special. A great bar crowd and wonderful cuisine.

The Melting Pot. 255 W. Golf Rd. Schaumburg, IL 60195 847-843-8970 For the best fondue in Chicago, and the flaming turtle desert is incredible.

The Grill on the Alley - best shortribs and great place for lunch or dinner, it's near home so I often lunch here alone. Outdoor dining with view of Michigan Avenue during the summer is the real Chicago.

Buckingham's Restaurant at the Hilton Chicago. 720 S. Michigan Ave. 312-922-4400 - an old world gem. A steakhouse with dark wood, brass and mirrors, like the most exclusive chamber of an old-boy institution.

{mos_ri}