



THE HOST WITH THE MOST

WHEN IT COMES TO ENTERTAINING, MARGARET CHO WILL MAKE YOU LAUGH, MAKE YOU DANCE AND MAYBE MAKE YOU MAD ENOUGH TO CHANGE THE WORLD. JUST DON'T EXPECT HER TO MAKE YOU DINNER.

— ERIN DEJESUS

It's not that Margaret Cho doesn't like a good party. The 38-year-old comedienne has alluded to crazy binges and memorable nights out in her hysterical, politically charged standup — including specials like *Notorious C.H.O.*, *Revolution* and 2005's *Assassin*. But when it comes to entertaining at her own home, she gracefully bows out. "I'm the worst," a surprisingly subdued Cho laughs. "I'm not that organized. My house is always a mess, I always never have enough things to drink. I have a lot of friends and I like to hang out with them... but I go to their houses."

The thought of Margaret going Martha does seem a bit outlandish — this is, after all, a woman who jokes about raunchy sex acts with her mother sitting in the audience. But it's obvious that her role as a "host" extends far beyond mixing cocktails and sending out invitations, and in that respect, Cho is quite the entertainer. From hosting the 2006 OutLaugh Festival to her gig as master of ceremonies at this summer's True Colors tour, Cho proved that she could keep a show flowing while simultaneously leaving the audience rolling in the aisles.

And even if Cho aspired to a Stewart-like domesticity, her schedule probably wouldn't allow for much party planning. Following on the heels of True Colors, Cho is busy making music videos with her friends, working on a burlesque revue and looking ahead to a possible standup tour in early '08. Does she ever allow herself a vacation? "This [work] is all fun for me," Cho says. "Taking a break is boring."

"THE VIEW FROM HERE IS PRETTY FUCKIN' GAY..."

Relaxing in her home in California, Cho can now look back and reflect on the whirlwind that was the True Colors tour. The multi-artist bill (which featured Cyndi Lauper, Erasure and the Gossip, among many others) wrapped less than a month before our chat, after hitting an astounding 16 cities in three weeks.

"It was totally like rock 'n' roll fantasy camp," Cho says. "You're brought from one location to another. You're put into bed at night, you're fed, you're pampered for the whole time... and all you have to do is perform."

Not that performing was necessarily easy. As the official tour host, Cho improvised between sets, riffing on everything from lesbian gym rats to papal fashion sense to vagina-themed rap, all as roadies jostled with equipment behind her. She maintains that each night was simultaneously fun and stressful. "I think I had the hardest job of the tour," she says. "I was out there in between

every act, making sure everything went smoothly. You don't know how long things are going to take or how long people are going to be. You just have to keep going."

Egging her on, however, was an audience that embodied Cho's core fan base. Though married (to a man) since 2003, Cho still freely recounts sexual experiences with lesbians and identifies as queer. Also a self-proclaimed fag-hag, she's as familiar with gay culture and homophobia as she is with feminism and racism; all of her experiences come out in her comedy.

"I love that queer comedy is having a renaissance right now," says Cho. "There's a lot of great people out there, but you kind of have to get [past] other people's ideas about homophobia, all their prejudices." The complications of being labeled as a queer artist, she says, can cause self-doubt. "People expect you to focus so much on your sexuality when maybe you're not that kind of comic. It's a weird situation."

"THIS IS BEAUTIFUL THAT ALL OF US IN THE GAY COMMUNITY CAN BE TOGETHER... AND TALK ABOUT WHY GEORGE BUSH HASN'T BEEN IMPEACHED YET."

"Everything is political, and everything has a political agenda," Cho says. "You just don't know whether it's overt or not." But Margaret wears her politics on her sleeve, targeting red state stalwarts including the Bush administration and the Christian Right. During her *Revolution* tour, her message of tolerance, self-love, anti-hypocrisy and gay rights became a call to arms; by *Assassin*, it had evolved into a mantra. "They have no right to call themselves Christians, because they have no Christianity to them," she asserts in *Assassin*. "They have no kindness, they have no compassion, they have no charity. I want Jesus to come back and say 'That's not what I meant!'"

Cho's greatest recurring theme, however, has been her struggle with weight and body image. In 1994, Cho famously dropped 40 pounds to star in *All-American Girl*, the first network sitcom to feature an Asian-American cast. But she has long hinted that her body image issues stem from an early age, when her father made unflattering comments about her weight. It's a deeply personal demon that Cho shares with countless audiences, then turns into an assault on popular media images of beauty. "When I tell my story, I think that it helps other people," Cho says. "And that helps me in return."

Her next project, *The Sensuous Woman*, attacks this head-on.

A touring variety show that features belly dancers, comics and burlesque, *Sensuous* makes a semi-permanent stop off-Broadway at New York City's Zipper Factory, running until late October. The spirit of the show, a celebration of the female body, has attracted huge audiences — “women, men, gay, straight, everything,” she brags — at previous stops in LA, San Francisco and Chicago.

“[The show is] about finding peace with where we are physically,” Cho says. “Peace in our body, feeling sexy and beautiful, and allowing ourselves to just be — as opposed to being on a diet all the time or exercising like crazy. It’s about being happy now. When we see dancers who enjoy their bodies, who are sexy and having fun, it gives us permission to enjoy our bodies and to enjoy ourselves in the process.”

And in addition to her familiar comedy-with-a-message, *The Sensuous Woman* allows audiences to see a different side of Margaret Cho: Margaret the dancer. “I love burlesque dancing, and I love doing it. I’ve been training,” she says. “The show is really wild, it’s sexy, outrageous... and very exciting.”

In the end, it seems like when it comes to entertaining, Margaret Cho would rather invite you to listen to her favorite gay musicians, debate her politics and watch her belly dance than have you over for dinner, a trait she shares with her oft-imitated mother, who eschewed entertaining except when it came to family. “Korean people always have dinner things,” Cho says, remembering the big extended-family get-togethers of her youth. “Food is a really big deal; so you have people over for that.”

Does she ever think about becoming more domestic, rearranging her life in a way that would leave her hosting holiday parties? To Cho, why bother when 1) restaurants exist, and 2) it would take precious time away from doing what she really loves — pushing people’s buttons.

“This is me, you know?” Cho says. “I do [what I do] because I love it. I can’t really change that.” ❖

