

Ribbed and Roasted

With a sense of humor to match his hedonistic habits, Hugh Hefner gamely submitted to skewering

Almost everyone remembers the 2001 Comedy Central Roast of Hugh Hefner, which took place just two and a half weeks after 9/11, when the New York City skyline was still black and smoldering. Gilbert Gottfried made a risky, too-soon joke about air travel but then won back the audience with his filthy version of "The Aristocrats," giving grief-stricken America permission to laugh again. Hefner, in his 70s and with multiple young girlfriends, gamely tolerated a night full of gloves-off jabs about his aging body and unorthodox sex life.

But it wasn't Hef's first time on a dais getting roasted by his celebrity friends.

Decades before the raunchy late-night special entertained Comedy Central audiences, *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast* was airing on NBC, and in 1973 Hefner was in the hot seat.

The program was based on the early 20th century tradition of Friars Club roasts—private dinner shows for the entertainment elite, intended to affectionately insult a guest of honor with material that often ran blue. Martin's cleaned-up version, shot in Las Vegas, was a good-natured, black-tie affair with mostly scripted, PG-13 shtick and a martini-infused, Rat Pack vibe.

How did a magazine publisher end up as "man of the week" on a televised comedy roast? Hefner had befriended Martin along with Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. back in the 1960s. Together they were part of the hip Hollywood in-crowd, evoking an urbane style of masculinity that aligned closely with PLAYBOY's own brand of sophisticated bachelorhood.

In fact, Hefner knew his way around a soundstage; he had charmed television audiences before, with *Playboy's Penthouse* in 1959 and *Playboy After Dark* in 1969, programs that offered viewers a glimpse into star-studded soirées full of beautiful women. By 1973 Hefner

was skilled at crafting his public persona as a debonair Casanova and bon vivant.

Participating in a comedy roast was an extension of this self-mythologizing, and as a genre, the roast had much in common with Hef's vision of PLAYBOY: creativity, rebellion against political correctness and hedonism raised to epic levels.

The jokes from the Dean Martin roast were largely flattering, referring to Hefner's swinging lifestyle full of "booze and broads." A sense of admiration, rather than hostility, was the theme of the evening. Although Hef was pushing 50, sportscaster Howard Cosell commented on his "taut, agile body," and nightclub comic Jackie Gayle marveled at his

attainment of "fame, fortune and girls galore."

Indeed, the worst thing the participants could come up with about Hefner was that he was a sex-obsessed hedonist. Martin introduced him as an "American success story" who'd picked himself up out of the gutter but "unfortunately left his mind there." Actress Audrey Meadows joked that "Hugh shows women as they really exist, in the mind of every red-blooded American pervert." Entertainer Joey Bishop reminded the audience that "we're all here paying tribute to a smut peddler."

Hefner, sporting a shag haircut and side-swept bangs, puffed his trademark pipe and smiled. When it was his turn at the podium, he quipped, "I never really realized it was possible to have this much fun sitting up." ■



"This guy really leads a swinging life," cracked Dean Martin about Hef during the 1973 roast. "I was up in his mansion once and I saw his bedroom. He gets so much action, he's got the only waterbed with whitecaps."

BY **SASCHA COHEN**