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Spotlight Weird Al's Imitation: A Funky Form of Flattery

By Richard Harrington Washington Post Staff Writer Friday, August 10, 2007; Page WE05

A quarter-century into his reign as king of parody, "Weird Al" Yankovic had his biggest chart success ever with the autobiographical "White & Nerdy," a stylistic doppelganger of rapper Chamillionaire's mega hit "Ridin' Dirty."

"First in my class here at MIT / Got skills, I'm a champion at D&D / M.C. Escher, that's my favorite M.C. / Keep your 40, I'll just have an Earl Grey tea / My rims never spin, to the contrary / You'll find that they're quite stationary / All of my action figures are cherry / Stephen Hawking's in my library. . . ."

Yankovic also invokes Segways, fanny packs, Wikipedia, Kirk vs. Picard debates and other signifiers of white suburbia. In the video -- his first big-budget, live-action video in seven years -- a Donny Osmond cameo subs for Krazy Bone. The parody was so spot on that Chamillionaire bogarted it for his official MySpace page before Yankovic could get it on his.

"At first I was, 'Hey, I'm gonna world premiere that myself!' Then I thought, how cool is it that Chamillionaire himself wanted to put it on his page," Yankovic says. Chamillionaire has also praised Yankovic's skills, telling Rolling Stone that "he's actually rapping pretty good on it. . . . I didn't know he could rap like that."

"White & Nerdy" got 6 million hits in its first three weeks, and, says Yankovic, "the video has been seen 30 million times from MySpace and YouTube alone." That helped "White & Nerdy" become Yankovic's first Top 10 single (and only his second gold single after 1984's "Eat It"). And it's probably responsible for the accompanying album, "Straight Outta Lynwood" debuting at No. 10 -- Yankovic's highest chart debut ever. And yes, Lynwood is the California town where he grew up.

The album includes Yankovic originals (about half of every album, in fact), the obligatory polka medley ("Polkarama!" serves up 50 Cent, Black Eyed Peas, Pussycat Dolls, The Killers, Modest Mouse in straight-ahead, sped-up polka style) and parodies of Usher, Taylor Hicks and Green Day.

It also unveiled what may be one of his finest -- certainly lengthiest -- achievements:

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Masterful mockery: Rewriting lyrics since 1979, "Weird Al" Yankovic has sold 12 million albums. (By Michael Blackwell)

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"Trapped in the Drive-Thru," an 11-minute animated parody of [R. Kelly's](#) overwrought sex epic, "Trapped in the Closet," describing in hilariously banal detail a couple's attempts to decide on and then pick up their dinner. (R. Kelly's 12-chapter original was so ridiculous it seemed itself a parody -- and he has just released chapters 13-22!) The "Trapped in the Drive-Thru" video was animated and directed by Doug Bresler (Doogtoons), who, says Yankovic, "spent several months on it." Not that there was any thought of anything but the full 11 minutes.

"I wouldn't want to do an edit," Yankovic explains. "Part of the joke is how interminably long it is -- it just goes on forever -- high drama of the mundane for 11 minutes."

Fans at Weird Al's concert Thursday don't have to worry about getting trapped in the [Warner Theatre](#). "We do the middle third -- enough to satisfy the people who want to hear the song and not so much that people who don't want to hear the song take a bathroom break," he laughs.

According to Yankovic, "R. Kelly does have a great sense of humor," which is why he signed off on the parody. Yankovic always gets permission from the original writers of the songs he parodies, though there is no legal requirement for him to do so. Most Yankovic parodies consist of the original song's music with his lyrics, so it's politic to maintain good relationships with artists and writers (particularly since Yankovic gets songwriter credits and royalties as the writer of new lyrics).

There have been a few exceptions: The prince of parodies has never been able to parody Prince, who has turned Yankovic down repeatedly. The first single from "Straight Outta Lynwood" was supposed to be "You're Pitiful," a parody of [James Blunt's](#) smash hit "You're Beautiful", whose protagonist is a 42-year-old man who still lives with his mother, wears a homemade Star Trek uniform and works as a Slurpee machine operator.

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