

RUSH JOB

© 1994 by Greg Bear

Radio Commentary by Greg Bear (aired July, 1994, KUOW, National Public Radio in Seattle.) For copies of tape and permission to broadcast, contact Wayne Roth or Brian Hyams, KUOW, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195, Ph: 206-543-2710

I was fortunate at a recent American Booksellers convention to come face to face with a remarkable phenomenon--one of the great characters of our age, radio personality and bestselling author Rush Limbaugh. Or rather, in a rare appearance, the man who becomes Limbaugh.

It's a truly remarkable transformation. Character actor Rob Linker, who weighs one hundred and twenty pounds sopping wet, puts on the pads and rubber appliances and heavy makeup of his most famous role--and voila, there stands before us arch-conservative talkshow meister Rush Limbaugh. "It's amazing how many people refuse to believe it's me," says Linker with a twinkle in his eye. "I ask them if they believe anyone real would think the way Limbaugh does, or say what he does--and they just stare at me." When I point out that one of our most popular presidents was also portrayed by an actor, Linker laughs and concedes it's easier to believe in Limbaugh.

The character of Limbaugh came gradually to Linker in his college days. "I read about fascist American radio announcers before World War II," he says, "and then the red-baiting announcers during the fifties and sixties. Real loud-mouths, dragging their string of true believers behind them like dead fish on a line. They always had the same attitudes, the same folkloric character, the same bawling, wheedling tone of voice--think of Paul Bunyan's ox given a microphone. Pretty soon I started doing Rush at parties. Women loved him. Oink, oink.

Then came the costume--just pillows and a bald wig at first. One day, a friend who also works in TV put me into real makeup, a true professional job. I gave a talk to a group of Young Republicans at my college, my alma mater, and they ate it up. One incredibly blond young woman in a cranberry polyester dress almost had an orgasm when I shook her hand. She asked if I was going to run for congress. I thought, 'Hey, maybe I'm on to something.' I met with Carroll O'Connor--the great character actor who played Archie Bunker. He gave me a lot of tips. "Then came the radio show... Personal appearances... The books. Late night visits to the White House to share ice cream and movies with Bill and Hilary." He gives his true Limbaugh chuckle, sounding like Wilfrid Brimley trying to portray the devil. "I leave the attitude behind when I go home each night. I was floored when I read how much Woody Allen admires me."

But how much longer can the success continue? "Hey," says Linker, now fully into his role, "How long can Bart Simpson hang on? When the show closes, off comes the latex and spirit gum, out pop the pillows... Maybe I'll go on Broadway, do a one-man show, you know?" And how could he top Rush Limbaugh?

"Maybe I'll play Mike Royko."

Linker stays in character from then on, sitting in his booth on the convention floor, signing autographs and promoting his new book. He actually wrote it, Linker says. "Accept no imitations. Who else would think of such things?"

Who else, indeed. For KUOW, this is Greg Bear.

