

THE LAST JERRY FAGIN SHOW

By John Morressy

The other networks were wiped out, and they knew it. After this there would be no more "Big Three." There would be only a single network, and Jerry Fagin would rule it like a king.

The others tried to put up a fight, of course. There are no good losers in this business. One network threw together a nude musical version of the Kama Sutra. Another did a live eighthour report on torture and execution of political prisoners around the world. The PBS stations had the best solution: They reran the Fischer-Spassky match.

But only the Jerry Fagin show could offer a real live honest-to-H. G. Wells alien from outer space as a guest. The projected audience was 99.3 percent of all potential viewers. It was figured that 0.4 percent would tune in to the other networks purely out of habit, and the remaining 0.3 percent would be watching their own canned reruns of The Lawrence Welk Show.

Given Jerry's personality and the nature of the television industry, the wipeout was inevitable. A cage of tigers can be pretty impressive, but if you drop a gigantic dinosaur into the cage, the tigers all of a sudden turn into pussycats. And Jerry Fagin was looking like a very big tyrannosaurus rex. He had been one all along, but he kept the fact hidden. Most people thought he was a pussycat. Those of us who knew better said nothing-and kept our jobs.

Jerry Fagin was a funny man, as everybody knows. He had half a dozen foolproof comic characters, but he didn't really need any of them. He could stand in front of a camera deadpan, hands in his pockets, looking up at the ceiling, and reel off a monologue that had everybody helpless with laughter. He was born with pure comic instinct. At a party I've seen him zero in on the one person out of, maybe, two hundred total strangers who could feed him perfect straight lines.

Jerry was probably the funniest man I ever worked for, and I've worked for them all. Along with all the funny he had a streak of pure killer. But Jerry had talent, and, more important, he had luck; so the killer side hardly ever showed. He always seemed to be on the scene at the right time or to know just the right person and have something on him.

So he wound up, at twenty-nine, hosting Late Night Live. At thirty, he was the hottest thing

in the industry. The Late Night Live title was forgotten. Everybody called it The Jerry Fagin Show.

Jerry could play an audience like Horowitz playing the fiddle, or the piano, or whatever the hell Horowitz plays. You know what I mean. He took small-town talent-show winners and made them into stars of their own. Just by holding up a book, he could turn a piece of schlock by an unknown hack into a best-seller. He could take a clubhouse errand boy and make him into a political figure. And he did. And they always paid.

The payoff was never money. By this time Jerry wasn't worried about money. He wanted other things. He just hung in there and smiled and played kindly Uncle Jerry until he needed a favor. He never had to ask twice. Everybody knew that what Jerry Fagin had built up overnight he could tear down just as fast.

When the alien ship landed in Washington, Jerry counted up his LO.U.'s and decided that it was pay-up time. He must have called in every one he had to get that thing on his show, but he succeeded. At the personal request of the President, no less.

The alien was called Twelve. He came from a planet with a name that sounded like cowflop being tossed into a mudhole. Some White House speech writer tagged it Brother Earth, and that was the name that stuck, over the protests of the enraged feminists.

Twelve looked like a human being designed by a committee and built by nursery-school dropouts. He seemed to have started out to be symmetrical, but missed. Two arms and two legs, like us, but they were of different lengths and thicknesses and set just a bit off center. Body lumpy as a potato, with a smaller potato for a head. Two eyes, a nose, and a mouth, but they moved around like the features of a melting snowman. Above one eye was a shiny spot. Twelve called it the weiox and tried to explain its function. No one understood a damned thing he said about it. They figured it was some kind of ear and let it go at that.

Aside from his weiox and a few other small details, mostly internal, Twelve made himself pretty clear right from the start. It turned out that he had been orbiting Earth for the last sixty-three hailumes, which was somewhere around twenty-seven of our years. All that time he was monitoring our broadcasts. And since most of his source material was supplied by television and radio, he had picked up a peculiar view of humanity.

For one thing, I think Twelve never really grasped the fact that there's a difference-most of the time, anyway-between a sitcom rerun and the Eleven O'Clock News, or an old Cagney movie and a junk-food commercial. They were all new to him, and all equally real. Or unreal. Or whatever.

Twelve's civilization had no word for entertainment. The concept simply did not exist for them. They did have some kind of music, but it wasn't an art form; it was a part of their

digestive process. And that was all. They had no drama, no literature of any kind, no art, and absolutely no sense of humor.

They didn't have wars, either, and Twelve didn't seem to know what weapons were for. So everyone breathed a lot easier.

Now, it was clear to me that if you're going to interview something like Twelve on television, live-before the biggest audience in history-you go get Severeid out of retirement, or you hunt up a Lippmann or a Cronkite or somebody serious like that. You want the kind of people who cover elections and moon landings. You don't want Jerry Fagin.

But nobody asked me. Jerry Fagin landed the alien and scheduled him for a Friday night show. Then he sat back, read the headlines, listened to his telephones ring, and gloated.

I watched the show by myself that night, and, I certainly didn't gloat. I had been alone most of the past month, ever since Jerry dropped me from his staff, loudly and publicly. In this business there is nobody as untouchable as a loser, and an out-of-work comedy writer is a loser of the Hindenburg class.

So I settled in, hoping to see Jerry screw up and blow his big moment and knowing all the time that no matter how big a son of a bitch Jerry Fagin might be, he was a pro and this would be the show of his career. But I could hope.

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At the same time I didn't want to see Jerry completely wrecked, just badly damaged and

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requiring some repairs. Humiliation and disgrace were fine, but I didn't want him ruined. He was still my best potential source of income, and I was starting to feel the pinch. Trouble tonight, and Jerry would be calling me back, asking me to polish up some of the failureproof routines that had helped put him where he was. And I'd be there. I was not about to turn down the best-paying job in the business just because Jerry had made me look like a

fool in public and closed every studio door to me. I mean, I have my pride, but I have my bills, too.

I started watching early, so I could savor the full hype. Spot announcements every fifteen minutes. On the Seven O'Clock News, a special five-minute report on the universe. At eight, ninety minutes of interviews with astronauts, starlets, clergymen, science-fiction writers, senators, a rock group, and the president of the Descendants of Prehistoric Alien Visitors. During the nine-thirty commercial interludetoothpaste, deodorants, and detergents hawked in skits starring, respectively, teen-agers and aliens, secretaries and aliens, and housewives and aliens-I started drinking. I could tell it was going to be better than a one-bottle night, and I wanted to start early and avoid having to rush things later on.

After the barrage of commercials came a special one-hour feature on alien visitors as depicted by Hollywood. Sixty minutes of blobs, globs, bugs, slugs, crawling eyes, brain-eaters, body-snatchers, mind-stealers, worms, germs,

robots, and androids, and every ten minutes a screaming reminder of tonight's once-in-alifetime Jerry Fagin Show.

What kind of impression all this was supposed to make on Twelve, I could not imagine. Maybe they made sure he was nowhere near a television set.

At ten-thirty, a longer, louder announcement. Then, after the mature-viewer commercials-wine, tampons, and laxatives peddled, respectively, by diplomats and aliens, female skydivers and aliens, and grandmothers and aliens-a half-hour special to remind the viewer who might have forgotten that there are nine planets in the solar system, that we are but a grain of sand on the shore of the great ocean of infinity, and so on. Very profound stuff, delivered like Sermonette or an insurance commercial. I kept on drinking.

Eleven o'clock brought the traditional mix of news, commercials, and station ID, and then, at eleven-thirty, came The Jerry Fagin Show. It was presented like the Second Coming.

The familiar Jerry Fagin theme was gone, and so was the studio orchestra. In their place was a selection from the The Planets, performed by the Hollywood Symphony and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Billy Bragg. Jerry's applecheeked, white-haired butterball of an announcer, did no clowning on this sacred night. He marched on camera with the step of a man in a college commencement procession. He was in white-tie and tails. I took another big drink.

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As I should have anticipated, Jerry was playing with his audience. After the solemn buildup, the show opened with a young comic. Billy appealed for a big hand for the kid in his first TV appearance, and the poor jerk-his name was Frankie Mars, for God's sake-came on and did a monologue about aliens landing in Brooklyn. It was the thirty-first one I'd heard since Twelve's arrival. There were alien-andPuerto Rican jokes, alien-and-cop jokes, Jewish mother-and-alien jokes. I found it all very cozy and familiar. I had stolen a lot of those very same gags for my early sketches.

The comic died, and he was followed by a singer who did a new number written in honor of Twelve. The only lines I can remember are "The whole room rocks, and I shake in my socks, when you jiggle your eyes and wink your weiox." The rest was a lot worse.

The singer gave it all she had, but she went down like the Titanic, same as Frankie Mars. Scattered applause from three relatives in the studio audience, silence from everybody else. The entire home audience was either in the bathroom or at the refrigerator. Comics and singers they could get anytime. What they wanted was Jerry and his guest.

That was a distinct Jerry Fagin touch. Subtle and deadly. I could picture him setting it up: the Uncle Jerry smile and "This will be the biggest

audience in history, and I'm going to give some new talent a chance." And it's not until they're on camera that the new talent realize that they couldn't hold this audience if

they stripped naked and sacrifice themselves to a trash compactor. I wondered why Jerry had picked this particular comic and this particular singer to destroy. Probably an interesting story there if I could dig it out. I drank to their memory.

Jerry sauntered on camera, white-tie and all, and was greeted with five solid minutes of uproar. He stood with his hands in his pockets, looking humble and saintly, and when the noise died down, he made a little speech in which he used the words honor nine times and privilege eight. Grateful came up eleven times in just over a minute.

Then Twelve appeared at last. I turned the welcoming ovation low and took a good look. He moved smoothly for something as lopsided as he appeared to be. The lumpy, grayishbrown plastic sack that covered his pale body didn't help his looks much. He looked like something that stepped off the cover of a cereal box, and those wacky, wandering, off-center features were halfway between a nightmare monster and an idiot mask.

I turned up the sound. The people in the audience were still applauding wildly, and Jerry let them go on. But when someone whistled. Jerry held up his hands for quiet. Twelve's eyes and nose moved around a little and then were still.

"Our guest has requested one courtesy," Jerry said. "Whistling sets up a painful feedback in his communication apparatus; so I must insist that no one whistle during the show."

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"Thank you, Mr. Jerry Fagin," said Twelve. His voice rolled out in a deep, gluey flow, like gravel being tumbled around in syrup.

"Thank you for consenting to appear on our show, Mr. Ambassador. It's a great honor." Jerry said.

Once Jerry got started thanking he couldn't stop himself. He thanked the President, Congress, the armed forces, the American people, the audience, the network, his friends, his sponsors-individually, by name-his parents, and his current wife, then went on to thank the rulers of Twelve's planet, the spaceship industry there, and everyone else-right down to Newton, Galileo, and Einstein-who might possibly have had a bearing on Twelve's appearance here. The only name he didn't drop was God's. Maybe he should have thrown that in.

Finally, after all the preliminaries and all the back-patting, Twelve got his chance to speak. This was the big moment, the message to humankind from outer space, the voice from the stars. Everyone listened in absolute silence.

And Twelve was boring as hell.

It's ridiculous to think that someone who has actually crossed interstellar space with word from another world could be dull, but that's what Twelve was. He may have been dynamite on his own world, but on Earth he was a dud. It wasn't entirely his fault. In his monitoring he had picked up every cliché in the English language, and he was using all of them. That burbly voice didn't help, either.

By the time Twelve had assured everyone that he looked upon his mission as a great and historic challenge, that he came in hopes of establishing a lasting friendship between our two great peoples, that a new era in the history of the galaxy was dawning and he was proud and humbled to be given the chance to serve and so on and so on-it sounded as if he had memorized every campaign handout of the past forty years-Jerry could smell trouble. The studio audience was fidgeting noisily. People were coughing and shuffling their feet.

I caught the quick flickering of the eyes, the giveaway that Jerry was getting edgy. I could almost hear his brain going. Here was Jerry on the biggest night of his career, the biggest night in television history, and his

guest was bombing. He could picture that audience of a hundred ninety-two million American viewers scratching their bellies and saying. "Hey, Honey, what do you say we switch over to the naked dancers on Channel 8?"

So Jerry made his move. If Twelve couldn't carry his weight as a guest, he'd just have to pay his passage any way he could.

Twelve was gurgling on, ending a long speech about interplanetary solidarity. I returned my attention to him. ". . . With shared hope for the future and with a deep and abiding faith in the basic decency and fundamental goodwill of the fine people of Earth that encourages me to predict a new age of brotherhood and justice in which races will ask not what the galaxy will do for their planet but rather what their planet can do for the galaxy," he said.

There was polite applause. Twelve looked pleased, but he wasn't in the business. The applause was the kind that sounds in every performer's ears like a death rattle.

"Gee, that's just the way my daddy used to put it," Jerry said, turning to the audience.

That drew the first laugh of the evening. Everyone recognized the tag line of one of Jerry's oldest characters, Dummy LummoX the Clumsy Cop. It gave the audience something safe and familiar to deal with. They knew how to react now.

"But in a higher sense, this night represents only the beginning of what I venture to call the Galactic Age," Twelve went on, "for there is much to be done before we march together with arms linked in friendship and trust to meet the challenge of the future."

"That sounds mighty good, but we do it different back home," Jerry said.

The audience caught that one, too, and gladdened my heart. It was the tag line of my very own character, Elmo Klunk the Shitkicker Aboard. Elmo was one of Jerry's dependables, sure to make an appearance at least once very two weeks. The audience loosened up and laughed a bit louder, and longer.

I poured another drink, a bigger one, and edged forward on my chair. It isn't every night that you get to see an alien visitor turned into a stooge. "We're honored by your tribute, Mr.

Ambassador," Jerry said, "but I'm sure you understand our audience's curiosity about your planet and its customs. For instance, I'm told that you have no comedy on your world."

"It is correct, we have no comedy."

Jerry nodded sympathetically. "I've run into the same problem. You must need new writers."

I felt that one right between the shoulders. Welcome to Pearl Harbor, this is your host. Jerry Fagin. If my glass hadn't been nearly full. I would have thrown it at the screen.

Twelve, after a pause, burred, "It is correct, we have no writers."

"I'll let you have mine. You still won't have any comedy, but you'll be getting a great bowling team."

Again Twelve paused amid the laughter to evaluate Jerry's line and said, "I know this bowling that is the work of your Saturdays in the regressing hailumes. We have no bowling."

"No comedy, no writers, no bowling. Tell me, Mr. Ambassador, what do your people do for entertainment?"

"It is correct, we have no entertainment. I do not grasp the concept."

"It's simple. Entertainment is what you do when you're not working."

Twelve was silent for a longer time. Clearly he was having trouble with Jerry's lines, which weren't saying what they appeared to be saying. The audience tittered with anticipation. Finally, in a gurgle that already sounded to me to be a bit defensive. Twelve said, "When we are not working, we sleep."

"Like all those people who used to watch the other networks. I see. But

seriously, Mr. Ambassador . . ." And Jerry went on, a little faster now, confident, feeling the audience with him. They were laughing in the right places, waiting for the lines they knew he was going to feed his stooge from outer space.

Jerry jumped from topic to topic, always balancing the serious question with the quick punch line or asking a dumb question and then going statesmanlike, until the audience was helpless and Twelve didn't know what the hell was going on. Those syrupy responses came slower and slower. Each pause was longer than the one before. Finally, when Jerry got on the subject of reproduction, Twelve gave up completely and sat very still. Except for his eyes and nose and mouth. They were crawling around his face like flies trapped in vanilla pudding.

By now Jerry was sailing. The biggest audience in TV history was watching him, and he was showing them that nobody and nothing, not even a creature from another world, could top Jerry Fagin on his own show. I caught the wild, piercing gleam of ego in Jerry's eyes as he stood up, tousled his hair, and boomed out, "Well, I'll tell you the whole story, citizen, but you'll have to promise not to interrupt me. If there's one thing I can't stand, citizen, it's an interrupter."

He was slipping into a favorite character. Senator Wynn Baggs, the filibuster champion of Washington. The audience applauded and

howled with delighted recognition as Jerry ranted on.

All this time Twelve sat like a statue, watching every move that Jerry made. He didn't look angry or insulted. At least, nothing on that Silly Putty face suggested irritation. As far as I could read him, Twelve was fascinated. It was as if he had Jerry under a microscope and couldn't believe what he was seeing. And Jerry ate up the attention like a kid with a hot fudge sundae.

Then Twelve threw up both his arms in a "Eureka!" gesture. I could almost see an oldfashioned light bulb go on over his head. For the first time that night his features stayed put. The audience got very quiet all of a sudden.

"This is a tohei-meiox!" Twelve announced suddenly, as if that explained everything.

Instinctively Jerry topped him. "If it is, you'll wipe it up. But I ought to warn you-the producer's wife loves it."

Twelved worked his face around into something like an untidy smile. "Now it becomes clear what is my role in this ritual," he said. His voice sounded a little less gooey.

When Twelve began to get up, Jerry had the first whiff of trouble ahead. He bounced to his feet while Twelve was still halfway up, and with a big smile at his guest he said, "Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for honoring us by consenting to appear on The Jerry Fagin Show. It's been a great pleasure and an exciting experience for all of us, and we're sorry you have to rush off, but we know how crowded

your schedule is." Stepping to the forestage, Jerry began to clap. "And now let's have a big hand for the ambassador," he said to the delighted audience.

That didn't stop Twelve, who was acting like a kid who has just learned the facts of life. "In my ignorance I assumed that this was to be a hoeimeius encounter. I employed my fourth voice. Had I known that it was to be a toheimeiox, I would have spoken thirddishly. Please forgive me, Mr. Jerry Fagin."

On the last few words, as Twelve took his place at Jerry's side, his

voice had changed completely. It was really weird. I wondered whether Jerry had somehow shocked the alien into instant puberty. In seconds Twelve had gone from that Bumpy gurgle to a flat, staccato, nowhere-in-particular accent not a hell of a lot different from Jerry's.

"Please take my wife," he said.

Nobody made a sound. They probably all thought Twelve was going out of his head. So did I, for just an instant, and then I recognized that line and had my first clue of what Twelve was up to.

I didn't believe it. It was too crazy. But when Twelve wobbled his face a little-just a little, very nervously-it all became clear: He was mugging for a laugh. This crazy-looking thing from outer space that couldn't even get a fourword one-liner straight was trying to be a standup comic. I felt kind of sorry for the poor blob. Imagine coming all that way and bombing on your very first appearance.

What I didn't know at the time was that Twelve learned fast.

"Thanks again, Mr. Ambassador," Jerry said, edging away. "You've been a wonderful guest, and we hope you'll visit us again whenever your demanding schedule permits."

"It's a pleasure to be here, Jerry," Twelve said, stepping in front of his host, talking directly to the audience. "I would have been here earlier, but there was a holdup in traffic. I stopped for a light, and two men held me up." He did a quick jerk of his features-eyes left, nose right. The audience laughed. They were cautious about it, but they laughed.

"We're all sorry to hear that, Mr. Ambassador. And now our next guest, the wellknown-" Jerry started to say, but Twelve went right on.

"The producer took me to dinner at this place on Fifty-fourth. The salad wasn't bad, but I didn't like the little men in loincloths who kept dipping their arrows into the Russian dressing."

"-Well-known star of stage and screen who for the past three seasons has been delighting viewers with her portrayal-" Jerry tried again, louder, pushing in front of the alien.

Twelve rolled his eyes in opposite directions and blinked his weiox. "I asked the waiter if the lobster Newburg was any good. He said, 'Where did you see that on the menu?' I said, 'I didn't see it on the menu. I saw it on your tie.'" The audience laughed harder and longer this time. They liked him.

Shoving Twelve aside, Jerry snarled, "This lovely and talented lady who has won the hearts of millions of viewers with her portrayal of the zany, lovable Mrs. Pregnowski in-"

Twelve reeled, staggered back, waved his arms, did a flying leap into the air, and came down in a classic pratfall with a noise like a bagpipe assaulting a whoopee cushion. The audience went wild, applauding and cheering, drowning Jerry out completely. When Twelve climbed to his feet, his nose doing a back-andforth crawl like a slow pendulum, he had to signal for quiet before he could be heard.

"The producer said, 'I hate to eat and run, but the way I tip, it's absolutely necessary,'" he said, spinning both forearms around like propellers.

The material was lousy, sure, but I could see that Twelve had a great natural delivery. With a good writer, he could go, places. A show of his own, maybe.

What happened next, I will never believe was an accident. The camera cut to Jerry, purplefaced, restrained by four elderly security guards and a weeping producer. It held on the group. One hundred ninety-two million viewers heard Jerry scream, "Get that mush-faced intersteller son of a bitch off my stage! Shoot him! Drop a light on him! He's killing us!"

Which was an exaggeration. Twelve was doing wonders for the show. He was only killing Jerry.

We call the show Twelve at Twelve now,

even though it still comes on half an hour before midnight. The producer felt that Twelve at Eleven-thirty would only confuse people.

But Twelve is a great guy to work for. It's a nostalgia trip just talking to him. During those years he was monitoring, he heard all the great ones-Berle, - Gleason, Caesar, Groucho, Carson, you name them-and memorized every gag, every shtick, every bit of business. He just didn't know what the hell to do with his material until he saw Jerry putting it all together. Now Twelve is like a guy who's found his true calling. I think he's going to stay right here on Earth, and in the business, for good.

Twelve is also a very hard worker. He drops in every afternoon to run through the monologue for that night's show. We've already come up with some lines that everyone in the world recognizes. I've seen "Well, wink my weiox" on everything from kids' lunch boxes to bikinis, and a day doesn't pass without my hearing someone say, "Please take my wife," and then seeing him collapse in hysterics. Even Henny Youngman used it when Twelve had him on the show as a guest.

We have a good running gag going on Twelve's dumb friend from home. Old Thirtyone. And if a line goes flat, all he has to do is jiggle his features and the audience breaks up.

He's even developing into a good impressionist. Some of his impressions are weird-he's the only one I know who does all the members of the Politburo while simultaneously trying to get a stuffed elk into a Honda-but his Jack Benny is nearly perfect.

What convinces me that Twelve is in the business to stay is that he's learned to be sincere. Two nights ago he graciously had Jerry back as a special guest to celebrate Jerry's new afternoon quiz show. They were hugging like a couple of high-school sweethearts.

Twelve was beautiful. A real pro. He ended the show by wiping his eyes, putting an arm around Jerry, and saying. "This crazy guy is my dearest friend on your whole wonderful planet. Everything I have, I owe to Jerry Fagin."

I could tell from Jerry's expression that he'd love to collect.

But my money is on Twelve.