

## JUST HAVING FUN

### 'Weird Al' Yankovic built his career on parodies of everyone from Eminem to Michael Jackson

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The weird thing about "Weird Al" Yankovic is how oddly normal he seems.

It's not a just-like-us normal — Yankovic is, after all, a music star who calls his accordion his "axe" and who turned several rockin' tunes into the medley, "Angry White Boy Polka." This prince of parody wears garish shirts and graduated first in his high school class at the age of 16.

No, he's not like us. But somewhere between his long, curly locks and his goofy grin is a guy who is thoughtful and subdued — and who listens to a lot of *Blue's Clues* and *Star Wars* music with his 5-year-old daughter, Nina.

"She pretends she's R2D2 and I'm Chewbacca usually," he said while in Toledo recently to promote his upcoming July 6 concert at the Toledo Zoo. "Chewbacca is by far ... my number one role around the house."

OK, maybe he's a little weird. Rest assured, though, there's a well thought out method to his madness that has allowed him to be the king of comedic songs for a quarter of a century. Yankovic hasn't just been willing to "Dare to be Stupid," in the words of his 1985 album; he's found a way to poke fun at everyone from Michael Jackson to Eminem while making them happy about it.

"I've developed enough of a track record that a lot of artists actually look at it as a real homage, a tribute, to get the parody," he said. "It's sort of a rite of passage and a sign that they've achieved a certain level of success in their career."



'Weird Al' Yankovic poses at the riverfront downtown. He appears July 6 at the Toledo Zoo. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

#### MULTIMEDIA

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#### See his music videos:

["White & Nerdy"](#)    ["Eat It"](#)  
["Amish Paradise"](#)    ["Fat"](#)  
["Like a Surgeon"](#)    ["Smells like Nirvana"](#)

Yankovic, 48, got his start while still in high school in California, submitting homemade cassettes of his songs to the nationally syndicated disc jockey Dr. Demento, and gradually developing a modest cult following. He finished college with an architecture degree and worked in a mailroom before landing his first record deal.

Since then, he's scored three Grammys, made a dozen studio albums, and skewered countless musical artists and genres. His most recent effort, 2006's "Straight Outta Lynwood," was his highest-charting album yet, peaking at No. 10 on the Billboard 200. It featured the popular track "White & Nerdy," a send-up of Chamillionaire's hip hop hit, "Ridin'."

The secret to his popular songs and videos is simple.

"I just basically latch on to whatever the current popular genre is, whatever the current pop culture is, and I shamelessly follow along," Yankovic said. "I'm sort of the pop culture Cuisinart. I take all this stimuli and I regurgitate it in hopefully humorous fashion."

Most of the time, though, it's not a matter of being struck with instant inspiration as he decides which hit will be his next victim; it's a deliberate process.

"I don't always listen to the radio, and every single song that comes on I don't think: Now how can I screw this one up?" he said. "Some of the best ideas are spontaneous, but a lot of other times I ponderously pour through the Billboard charts."

Complicating matters these days is that there are so many different charts to look at — albums, airplay, Internet, ring tones, and more.

"It's kind of hard to determine what a hit song is these days because pop culture is so fragmented and segmented."

An accordion player since the age of 7 — though he's not related to the late polka legend Frankie Yankovic — "Weird Al" writes original compositions too, but he's better known for the parodies. To avoid any ill will, among other reasons, he avoids political commentary in them and always asks the original artists for permission. Few turn him down.

"It's pretty rare," he said. "Prince is the one guy that's consistently said 'no' over the years. He just is not a fan of parody, I guess."

It certainly helped that Michael Jackson — whose hit song and video "Beat It" were remade by Yankovic as "Eat It" — gave his permission early on.

"All of a sudden, people were going, 'Oh, well, if Michael Jackson said it's OK, maybe this guy is credible.'"

Yankovic's latest album was supposed to include a parody of the James Blunt song, "You're Beautiful," called "You're Pitiful." While Yankovic said the singer gave his blessing, leading him to write and record the song, the record company didn't. So "Weird Al" pulled it from the CD ... but not other venues.

"I was ticked off enough that we decided, having put so much work into it already, I figured that this isn't going into a vault or closet. I want people to hear it," he said. "We leaked it to the Internet."

Yankovic usually inserts one or two songs that never made it onto albums into his concerts.

"Those are sort of like surprises for people that come to the show," he said.

Rest assured, Toledoans, that none of these surprises will poke fun at your hometown.

"I shall not mock Toledo," Yankovic promised during his recent visit.

He can't say the same for the Buckeye State.

"I think I kind of dissed Ohio as not having the best Mexican food in one of my songs, 'Taco Grande,'" he said. The song's lyrics go: "Oh boy, pico de gallo.

They sure don't make it like this in Ohio."

It was nothing personal, though.

"We did have Mexican food for lunch today," he said.

*"Weird Al" Yankovic performs at 7:30 p.m. July 6 in the Toledo Zoo Amphitheater. Tickets are \$49.50, \$39.50, and \$29.50, and are available from Ticketmaster outlets, by phone at 419-474-1333, online at [www.livenation.com](http://www.livenation.com), or at the zoo box office.*

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