



Letterman's trademark: the boyish grin.

Staff photo by Peter Monsees

# The gig on Letterman

*For insomniacs, to know him is to love him*

**By Bill Glovin**  
Staff Writer

David Letterman, fresh from a racquetball game and still dressed in sweat clothes, sits behind a cluttered desk in his Rockefeller Center office. Behind tortoiseshell glasses, he could be a scientist searching to unravel the mystery of the funny bone.

An NBC publicist had prepared the visitor for this encounter: "David's always asked the same old questions about the past. Stick to questions about comedy and the show and he'll be more receptive."

The idea of another interview doesn't exactly thrill Letterman.

"It's not so much that I mind doing the interviews," he says. "It just doesn't seem

that healthy to sit around and talk about yourself all day."

\* \* \*

David Letterman isn't someone you'll get to know well or hear a lot of jokes from in 40 minutes of conversation. Although he's in front of a TV camera almost every night, in person he's a little shy and reluctant to get wrapped up in himself. At least 30 interview requests come in each week, says the publicist, and Letterman is still trying to decide when he'll have the time to sit down with *Playboy* for one of its long question-and-answer sessions.

Eight years have passed since Letterman packed his bags and left a comfortable radio talk show in Indianapolis to peddle his sense of humor in the TV world of Los Angeles. Whatever you may think of

Letterman, he's now a bona fide star, having achieved fame and security in a business characterized by transitoriness. His time is filled by 10- to 12-hour days in the office and the long commute to his Connecticut home. He's reluctant to admit that he's forced to live a somewhat isolated existence — the price he pays for national television exposure and for having his face splashed across the cover of *Rolling Stone* and *Success* magazines.

Much of "Late Night with David Letterman," his outrageous and sometimes informative talk show, is spent spoofing the glamour and hype of show business — whether it's with a guest ejector seat or a skit on the actor behind the actor. Paul Shaffer, the witty band leader, serves as Letterman's Ed McMahon and Doc Severinsen rolled into one.

Letterman would just as soon have you go off and talk to his staff — the people who are his friends and who have been

with him since the comedy clubs in Los Angeles and the traumatic days of his ill-fated morning show. A production assistant's attitude is typical of the staff's loyalty: "The network might assign me to an assistant director spot somewhere else if I asked, but I've been with the show from the beginning, and that means something around here."

The show generated a stir in the industry when it replaced Tom Snyder in the 12:30 a.m. slot two years ago. It now attracts almost 4 million viewers each night, but the Neilson ratings only count the insomniacs, not the clusters of college students who sit around a single TV on the campuses, where Letterman has found a large audience.

The average TV watcher who likes Letterman has a problem, however, because he or she is usually asleep by showtime. Although Letterman admits that even he is seldom up late enough to consider watch-

ing the show, he doesn't aspire to be on any earlier.

"The pressure you encounter at 11:30 is 100 times worse than at 12:30," he says. "We're at a nice little niche in the programming day where there's a lot less at stake, and where there's more room to be creative, goofy, and make mistakes."

This laid-back approach to making a late-night talk show was apparent on a recent day of taping. Well before the day climaxed at 5:30 p.m. with the taping of the show in front of a live studio audience, the staff, minus Letterman, had talked over ideas at a morning production meeting. After a break for lunch, they assembled in studio 6A for a relaxed two-hour rehearsal. Dressed in T-shirt and jeans, Letterman sat back with his Perrier, mumbled a few lines or an occasional suggestion, and schmoozed with writers, productions assistants, and anyone else who

See LETTERMAN, Page D-2