

...to the sports... on the indicators that  
 apart from the kind of mainstream topical  
 on Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" or the  
 and Update" segment on "Saturday Night

...said that the group adds a new song every  
 though some headlines demand an immedi-  
 John Kerry picks John Edwards as a running  
 o way you can't cover that in your next show."

...especially when they receive the lyrics for a new song, they  
 are supposed to perform that night. But veterans are used  
 to—and thrive on—the tight deadlines.

As quickly as new songs are written, though,  
 others have to be excised from the program.  
 "It's a tough call," Ms. Newport said. "You sort of retire songs  
 when the audience stops laughing." Comedy lovers plan-

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# Film on Ray Johnson Looks beyond Bunny

By Tom Isler

**T**here seems to be very little doubt in Frances Beatty's mind that the artist Ray Johnson killed himself in Sag Harbor in 1995 as his final work of performance art.

An art critic and art historian who hounded Mr. Johnson for 15 years for the chance to curate an exhibition of his work, Dr. Beatty received a call from Mr. Johnson one week before he jumped off the Sag Harbor bridge on January 13, 1995.

"Ray told me, 'I'm going to do something and you're going to be able to have your show,'" Dr. Beatty said in a talk at the Quogue Library recently, setting up last week's screening of the documentary film about Mr. Johnson, "How To Draw a Bunny" at the Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center. Palm Pictures will release the film, which won a special jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 2002, on DVD on September 21. The movie was also shown two weeks ago at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton.

Dr. Beatty, a resident of Quogue and New York and currently the director of the estate of Ray Johnson at Richard L. Feigen and Co., was one of the first people

allowed inside Mr. Johnson's house after his death. She found it hauntingly organized. All of Mr. Johnson's work was placed in neatly stacked boxes all over his house. There wasn't any untidiness anywhere, no work in progress on the table he used to create his proto-pop art collages and letters that he would mail to famous personalities in the art world. All of the framed artwork in the house was turned to face the wall—except for one piece,

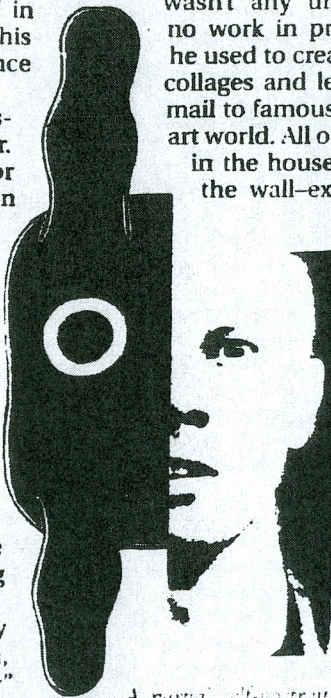
upstairs, at the far end of a small room: a photo portrait of Mr. Johnson, defiantly facing the room.

"The entire house was arranged like a work of art," Dr. Beatty said. "We weren't going to be able to preserve the house; Ray left no will and the proceeds from the sale of his estate was to be divided among seven cousins. The only

way to preserve this construction was to film it."

Dr. Beatty meticulously videotaped the house as she encountered it, beginning what she described as a "quasi-obsession" to create a film about Mr. Johnson and his art.

Born in Detroit in 1927, Mr.



A partial self-portrait is part of Ray Johnson's "Bunny Ray."



PAT ROGERS

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# JOHNSON: Film Looks Beyond 'Bunny'

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Johnson was more than an enigmatic figure, as documentary filmmakers Andrew Moore and John Walter discovered when they went to interview people who knew him best. On camera, many of Mr. Johnson's acquaintances admitted that they hardly knew the man who created such unique art.

Mr. Johnson's decoupage and collage work, with an emphasis on celebrity, presaged the type of pop art that was to receive its purest articulation by Andy Warhol. The work is humorous, often devious: a photo of James Dean augmented with two "mouse ears" fashioned from the red Lucky Strike cigarette logo. Mr. Johnson's flair for the ironic and esoteric performance art (beating a cardboard box with a belt while hopping on one foot) confirmed that he was a clown as well as an aesthete.

Mr. Johnson was also known for his bunny drawings, which ranged from cute, smiley faces to freakish depictions of bunnies with noticeably phallic ears and noses. He liked to label the bunny drawings as if they were portraits of famous artists: Warhol or Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

Perhaps Mr. Johnson's greatest contribution to the art world was founding the New York Correspondence School—which wasn't a school but, rather, a web

of connections that Mr. Johnson created by mailing collages and letters to artists and encouraging them to send them on to someone else or return them to Mr. Johnson. Either option would earn the mailer admission to the correspondence school.

"How To Draw a Bunny" is structured as a collage of interviews, still photographs, images of artwork, animation and close-up shots of Max Roach, who scored the film, playing the drums. And, like the portraits Mr. Johnson would make of his friends, the film ultimately presents just a profile of Mr. Johnson instead of an authoritative biography. After all, that's what Mr. Johnson left behind: his work, fanciful anecdotes in the memories of his friends, and little else.

The film does nothing if not encourage a mythic appreciation of Mr. Johnson's trailblazing work and his bohemian life. What makes the film so charming is its depiction of the way that Mr. Johnson found to make his art and live his life on his own terms, the quintessential bohemian. The artist Billy Name articulates that spirit best in the film, noting his own first apartment in lower Manhattan cost \$28 a month, with utilities included. The artists would make a few dollars at menial jobs to pay the rent and spend the rest of their lives being artists.

As for drug use, Mr. Name said

Mr. Johnson never found any need for it. "People would try to get high on things to get where Ray was," he said. "He was there all the time."

After the filmmakers and Dr. Beatty, the film's co-producer who raised the initial \$80,000 for the documentary, completed the project, the film found its way into the hands of John Malkovich and his partners at Mr. Mudd, a production company that Mr. Malkovich helped to found. He became the film's executive producer and helped the film navigate the different channels into Sundance, which put the documentary on the map.

The DVD due out in September includes extra material, footage of Mr. Johnson's memorial exhibition that was held in New York, as well as a still image gallery of Mr. Johnson's art and pieces of interviews that never made it into the final cut.

"I think it's a wonderful way of experiencing an artist's work," Dr. Beatty said. "Particularly with artists who do performance art. A DVD is the only way of experiencing that work."

Dr. Beatty said she's often asked why Mr. Johnson killed himself. "I always say he was not clinically depressed," she said. "He actually had \$400,000 in the bank—astonishing to everyone if you see the way he lived. There was no particular catalyst. The mystery to me is how he lasted as long as he did. What was going on in his mind was so excessive."

At times, he was also prescient, or seemed that way. One of the most startling moments in the film comes just before the end, when Dr. Beatty realizes on camera that the last piece of art Mr. Johnson sent her was a collage cut into a jigsaw puzzle—inside a film canister. "Isn't that an interesting coincidence?" Dr. Beatty asked in a recent interview. "Was there a message there? Did he also know that in addition to doing a show that I'd do a film?"

"That's the kind of thing that happens to you when you're involved with Ray, dead or alive," Dr. Beatty says in the film.

Mr. Johnson had hired a videographer to take footage of himself not long before his suicide. He had also had some of his performance art taped.

But whether Mr. Johnson was collecting material for a future film and as yet undisclosed filmmakers is almost beside the point. What Mr. Johnson did through his work and his social interactions was tap something so resonant that he could make life appear as art.

"What Ray did was heighten your awareness of everything around you," Dr. Beatty said. She only hopes—as perhaps Mr. Johnson did—that the film of his life will raise awareness of Mr. Johnson's creative genius.



The Capitol Steps take audiences around the

## COMEDY: A Sa

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ning to stop in at the PAC on Friday needn't worry, Ms. Newport said: Martha Stewart songs still have legs.

Ms. Newport, Mr. Strauss and Mark Eaton are the three main writers for the group, though everyone offers his or her input at one time or another. And, although they generally don't travel far from the group's headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia, the writers frequently perform as well.

Some political events are so outlandish that the parodies write themselves; with apologies to "Mary Poppins" composer Richard M. Sherman, Ms. Newport said she was particularly proud of her tongue-twister, "Super-California-Recall-Freakshow-Was-Atrocious." Other covers are so elegantly selected that the writing seems effortless; covering Aretha Franklin, the Steps sing about Hans Blix and his weapons inspections: "I-N-S-P-E-C-T. Show me where the warheads be."

Mr. Eaton said the songs they write the quickest tend to be better than the ones they "toil over for a couple of weeks." And some songs that the Steps think are golden will flop when exposed to the air inside a theater with a live audience. "Unfortunately, that happens a lot," Mr. Eaton said.

"We basically have to stay on page one," Ms. Newport added. Satire and parody work only when audiences know the targets of the jokes.

Though the Steps hold very little sacred, some subjects are off-limits.

"Some things just aren't funny," Ms. Newport said referring specifically to the attacks on September 11, 2001. At that time, the group dipped heavily into its non-political material—songs about Michael Jackson, for instance, or JOKS, set to "MVA." Another scare, and color-coded for its



"With Brothers" by Ray Johnson