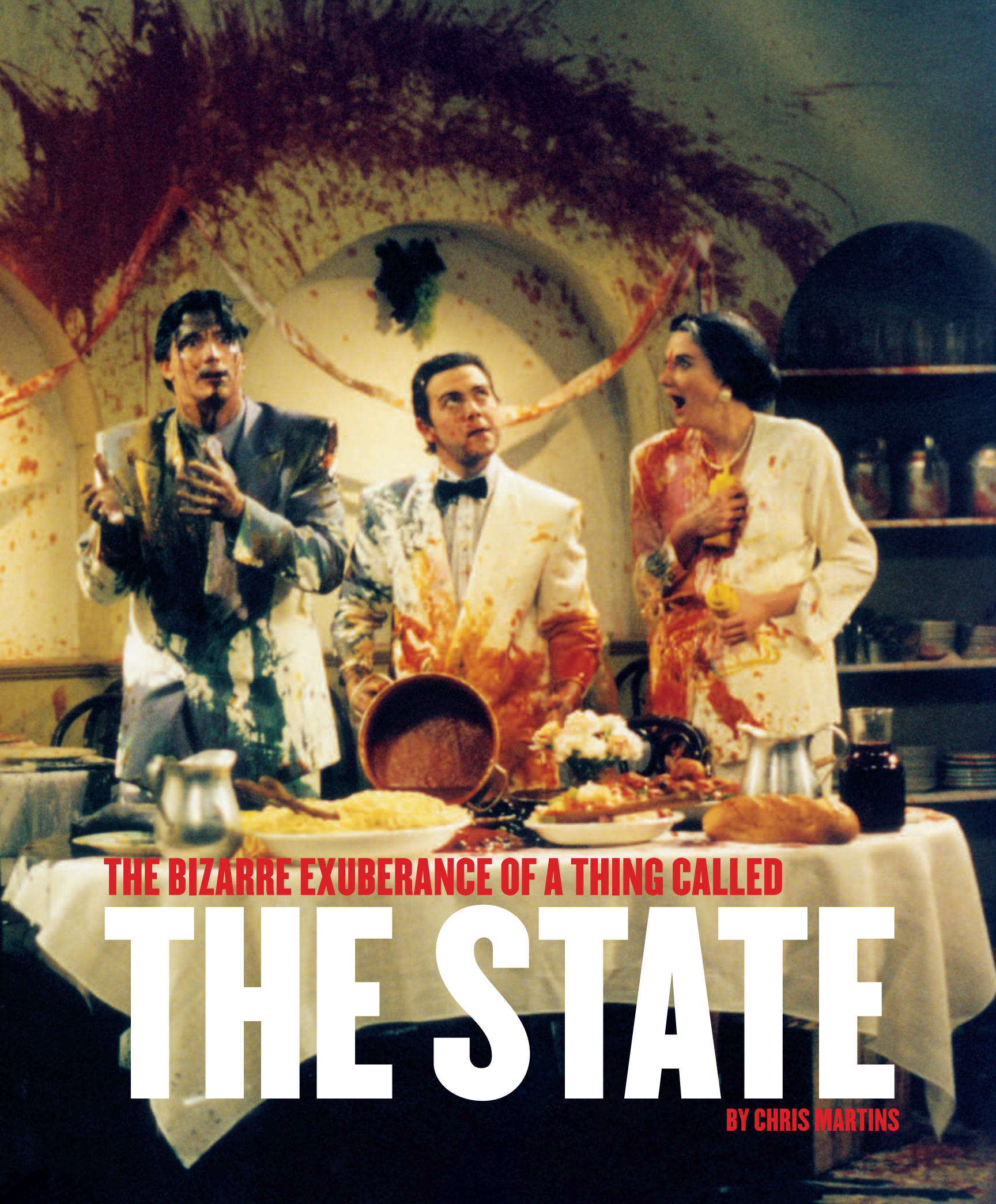




**PEOPLE REALLY
LIVE THIS WAY!**



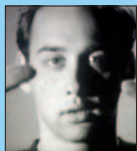
THE BIZARRE EXUBERANCE OF A THING CALLED

THE STATE

BY CHRIS MARTINS



STATE I.D. YOUR QUICK GUIDE TO THE WRETCHES AND SKETCHES THAT MADE UP THE STATE



DAVID WAIN

I was... the whipping boy.

Favorite Stater: Me. It's a certain indefinable charisma, raw skill and talent, and I think it's just also...looks.

Favorite sketch: I have a great fondness for "Taco Man" and "Popes-a Visit."

Least favorite: "Gunter Brothers"—three guys who all just do the setup and none of them do the punch line. I loved it but it got cut down to 10 seconds.

We are now in a State of... confluence.



THOMAS LENNON

I was... a creepy, white, Middle American person.

Favorite Stater: For utter nonsense, I look to David Wain.

Favorite sketch: "Cannonball Run Credits" was so ahead of its time. All we did was recreate the credits shot for shot and line for line. Funniest thing we've ever done.

Least favorite: "The Boner Song." So abjectly unfunny that it actually makes me mad and embarrassed to this day.

We are now in a State of... New York and... [see Ben's answer]



BEN GARANT

I was... the heartthrob who fucks chickens.

Favorite Stater: Mike Jann looking over his shoulder with a cocktail in that weird brown leather jacket.

Favorite sketch: "Porcupine Race-track." It had a choreographer and extras and a train... It was huge.

Least favorite: "Manzelles," from the CBS special. I know everybody loves it

and I know "it's great," but I just don't understand it.

We are now in the State of... [cont. from Tom's answer] ...California, mostly.



KERRI KENNEY

I was... the chick.

Favorite Stater: Kevin Allison. He made me laugh every time.

Favorite sketch: "Porcupine Race-track," both to make and to watch. A close second is "Taco Man."

Least favorite: I'm definitely embarrassed about "Real Estate Lady." Not funny.

We are in now a State of... [silence].



KEVIN ALLISON

I was... the authority figure who turns out to be insane.

Favorite Stater:

Showalter, playing with weird ways of talking. It's the most retarded thing in the world.

Favorite sketch: "Taco Man." There's something very funny about the subtle way that the logic is (or isn't) working.

Least favorite: "Dinner at Marky Mark's"—cut from the show. We were trying to get some pop culture in. Horribly forced.

We are now in a State of... reconnecting.



MICHAEL JANN

I was... tall, silent and sleezy.

Favorite Stater: Tom. There was something so cold-blooded about his attack on the audience. He was deadly.

Favorite sketch: "Manzelles." The way they run and move, everyone standing around in their stupid costumes that I

designed... Still makes me laugh.

Least favorite: "Miraculous Fetishist," which I wrote. It looks *really* great and it's pretty much, all the way through, unfunny.

We are now in a State of... decline.



KEN MARINO

I was... the handsome Italian with anger management problems.

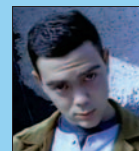
Favorite Stater: Kerri.

She could be sexy to completely goofy. She was a chameleon, and enormously talented.

Favorite sketch: "\$240 Worth of Pudding" is the definition of what made *The State* different.

Least favorite: "Louie and the Terrorists." We were a bit lazy with recurring characters; we didn't really want to do them.

We are now in a State of... a long pause before I come up with a fairly bland answer.



JOE LO TRUGLIO

I was... the sap, and the guy with weird buggy eyes.

Favorite Stater: Kevin.

I find him rubbery and funny. And I like his expressions.

Favorite sketch: "Cutlery Barn" and "Cannonball Run Credits."

Least favorite: "Prom," where we all go to the prom of some high school, hang out and think of gags.

We are now in a State of... sponges.



MICHAEL IAN BLACK

I was... the gay guy.

Favorite Stater: Kerri.

She can do these outlandish, crazy characters and you never

feel like she's overreaching.

Favorite sketch: "Pudding" pointed the way toward that absurdist yet familiar world the group would inhabit.

Least favorite: This horrible rant I did about *The Real World* and how they got to go to Mexico. Stupid.

We are now in a State of... mild disrepair.



MICHAEL SHOWALTER

I was... the sensitive collegiate guy.

Favorite Stater: Tom.

He's got an energy completely different from everyone else's. The humor is internal.

Favorite sketch: "Waltons' Theme." We're a '70s Christian a cappella group singing *The Waltons* theme and suddenly our mouths start bleeding.

Least favorite: I wish we'd only done the one "Doug" sketch.

We are now in a State of... awkwardness.



TODD HOLOUBEK

I was... just being Todd.

Favorite Stater: Mike

Jann. He could just stand there, have no lines, and be the biggest laugh of the sketch.

Favorite sketch: "The Bearded Men of Space Station 11." Almost everyone was a straight man, which we never really did.

Least favorite: None. We scrutinized everything endlessly.

We are now in a State of... wonder.

AND NOW, ON WITH THE SHOW...



"Porcupine Racetrack"

WE'RE IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS

on a gorgeous afternoon—Ken Marino, Joe Lo Truglio and myself—drinking from dew-dappled beer bottles, crunching salted almonds and breathing freely in the clear air as we round the subject of the key to success in comedy. Today, *The State*—the briefly aired sketch comedy show that these two helped helm—is legendary, but its debut on MTV in 1994 was greeted by scathing reviews. “Eh,” offers Ken, “we were trying something new; if you didn’t like that, you didn’t respond to it. I hate critics who go too far, but I understand why people didn’t—” half a beat: he scrunches his right eyelid, twists up his lips, pushes his left eyebrow toward the heavens, and then *BRRRRRRRAAAP!* “—get it.” The air is clear no more; in fact, it smells funny. “That was so planned,” says Joe, lowering his head in disgrace—or reverence.

Timing.

It was the near mid-’90s and reality television was still a new idea. So was having a president named Clinton. So was the World Wide Web. A string of goofy names—Buttafuccho, Bobbitt, Gillooly, Kato—were charged with keeping scandal fresh for the diminishing attention spans of TV viewers everywhere, just as the network blamed for that generation’s main deficit (MTV, of course) began to venture into longer form programming. And amidst the buzz bin of pop culture weirdness that would eventually spawn such monstrosities as *Celebrity Boxing* and provide VH1 its *raison d’être*, wedged in between two differently disturbed late night cartoons (*Beavis & Butthead*, *Aeon Flux*), emerging from this bizarre slacker mess yet somehow existing apart from it all, was *The State*. Ten guys, one girl, all of suburban stock, naïve enough to think they could change comedy, cocky enough to

actually do it.

The State (all 11 of them) formed at NYU in 1988, and after a brief post-grad stint creating segments for Jon Stewart’s *You Wrote It, You Watch It*, MTV offered them 11 cubicles and a shot at a series. They wrote furiously, acted furiously, filmed, directed and edited furiously, and when they were done, they’d created a show amongst shows: fiercely irreverent, endlessly energetic, unapologetically silly. From its first episode, *The State* was a constant barrage of sketch (averaging less than two minutes per) that never bothered waiting around for the laugh. Just as we’d begun to decipher the cracked motivational gibberish of Michael Ian Black’s Captain Monterey Jack (“Brrring, brrring. Hello, cheese? No. Cheese can’t dial a phone!”), or, say, pulled ourselves back up onto the couch after shouting about our balls with Marino’s infamous Louie, Thomas Lennon would sucker punch us in the gut with an absurdist dream where two men in velour leisure suits are rubbing their asses in \$240 worth of pudding. The group fought MTV’s mandate for recurring characters, but did them so well (see Michael Showalter as Doug, the troubled teen who can’t out-cool the authority figures in his life), while ever excelling at the esoteric (Kevin Allison as a mailman with a passion for taco delivery) and pimping plain nonsense (Ben Garant singing about—and wearing a dress made of—bacon).

The key to *The State*’s success was indeed timing, but *only* in that they didn’t adhere to any of the normal rules thereof (which included ignoring the never-ending circus of ’90s cultural flubbery). Unfortunately, the group’s insolence toward timing would also be its downfall. After a mere three seasons (26

episodes) and less than two years on air, the State left MTV for the big leagues. But their under-promoted 1995 Halloween special on CBS (with musical guests Sonic Youth, no less) was a complete flop. They were fired, along with an executive at the network indirectly outed as a racist by the State via their damning *Details* feature, “They Died Laughing.” And die laughing they did. Sort of.

The State’s comedic diaspora began with *Viva Variety* in 1997 and has grown to include a staggering amount of work created by Staters in various permutations. On the small screen: *Viva* (actually based on a *State* sketch), *Stella* (David Wain’s *enfant bizarre*), *Reno 911!* (duh), the upcoming *Michael Ian Black Doesn’t Understand* (an outgrowth of his VH1 *I Love the...* residency) and hundreds of commercials directed by Michael Jann (his work for the State was mostly behind-camera). On the big screen: *Wet Hot American Summer* (classic), *The Baxter* (Showalter’s moving rom-com deconstruction), *Diggers* (Marino’s paean to blue collar New England), *Reno 911!: Miami*, Black’s upcoming *Wedding Daze*, Lennon and Garant’s *Balls of Fury*, and Marino and Wain’s *The Ten* (featuring cameos from every member, co-starring Kerri Kenney). None of which has done anything to stem the tide of *The State* zealots (re: us) calling for the series’ release on DVD. Well, it’s finally going to happen (though we can’t say when), and rumor has it a reunion is in the works (read on).

In honor of all of beautiful hilarity, we’ve wrangled the State’s original 11 members (Todd Holoubek left when the group went to CBS) and after a series of interviews (some more flatulent than others), *Filter* proudly presents...

THE STATE OF THE STATE BY THE STATE AN ORAL HISTORY

David Wain: I think part of what distinguished *The State* was that it didn't come from bitterness like so much comedy does. We were actually coming from a place of really having fun. It was inclusive.

Todd Holoubek: I don't think you can really say what it was about *The State* that worked so well. In the end, you look at other comedy groups—Monty Python and such—and it's just the relationships between those people. You take those people, you put them in a room and what comes out is their combined effort. We created our own reality.

Michael Ian Black: It was about energy and aggression; we were like a hurricane. We were so exuberant with what we were doing and I think that was appealing to the audience. Also, the viewer could sense the organic nature of the group, the fact that we were an existing collaboration—because you would never put together 10 white guys and a white girl for television—and that we really just wanted to be the best at what we were doing. If you look at a show like *SNL*, so much of what they do is clearly about “What is going to appeal to our audience?” and we were never that. We were the audience, so the bar kept getting higher in terms of what it would take to make the group laugh. Or not even higher... it would just move all over the place.

Ben Garant: We would much rather do a joke that made no sense than one that anybody else had done anything slightly like. Like if a sketch ended with someone looking at the camera saying, “That's not a dog, that's my wife!” we would say, “No, it's been

done.” We were all weird historians of *Monty Python* and *The Young Ones* and *Kids in the Hall* and everything else, so we would all argue about how we had to make this unique. The result was...our sketches are really fucking weird.

Thomas Lennon: The punch lines don't necessarily make a lot of sense, but nobody did them before.

Kerri Kenney: Also, we just hated topical humor. We hated the idea of “Uh-oh, somebody's in the news! Let's give 'em a real pie in the face!”

Lennon: I think the closest thing we ever came to a political sketch would be “Popes-a Visit.”

Kenney: Which basically was about getting pasta sauce on your shirt.

Ken Marino: We'd worked together all through college, so we created this voice or point of view. By the time we had our own show, if it made us laugh, we put it on the air.

Wain: I'd been in a sketch group called Sterile Yak as a freshman at NYU. Sophomore year it was time to add new members and we didn't want to—we thought that we were the best. But Todd left in order to start this junior varsity squad, the New Group, and whoever was interested in the freshman class joined. I felt like the old veteran of comedy; I'd been around the block and I was pretty obnoxious about it. I remember seeing the very first show the Group ever did, which was in February of 1989. I went with all of the older guys and I remember being like, “Holy *shit* these guys are good. How do I get involved?”

Kevin Allison: I sat in the audience that night and I

was just blown away. I decided, no matter what, I was going to figure out a way to get in. I investigated to find out what classes the members were taking, signed up, then started going to bars with them afterward. It was a couple of years of drunken lunacy as an audition, and eventually, Michael Black was like, “You're really funny. Do you want to be in our group?”

Black: My entire social schedule was built around sketch comedy, which sounds incredibly lame, but it was. From the group's inception there was a manic drive. To spend the amount of time that we did in a stuffy, smoky theater rehearsing, for hundreds of hours, material that we would perform two or three times is insanity. We all thought in a very abstract way, “Wouldn't it be great if we can do this for our whole lives?”

Joe Lo Truglio: Ecstasy, *American Gladiators*, bongos and David Attenborough's wildlife documentaries—that pretty much sums it up. One of my favorite college memories is going on writing retreats at Ken's folks' place in Hop Bottom.

Allison: Ken Marino's family had a cottage on a pond in the Pennsylvania countryside. And one time we were down there, as the group, and we were like, “Oh God, we're here in the country...they must have awesome country food!” So we went out in search of a restaurant. We drove forever, finally found this diner, and ordered our food, going crazy about how good it was going to be... Well, it took about an hour to come and it was terrible. When we got in the van afterward,



“Where’s the Mousey?” (left) and “The Jew, the Italian and the Red Head Gay”

someone started screaming out of exhaustion, “That was such a fucking disaster!” and all of us joined in. The screaming never stopped. Eleven people in a van, screaming for 45 minutes. We were delirious.

We really did become like a family. We were together morning, noon and night. Even while we were at MTV, we’d show up to work at 9, the day was over at 6 or 7, and then it was time to head out to bars and continue coming up with ideas.

Marino: It was an amazing time at MTV because that was pretty much our first gig out of college. We’d go to the office and there were people working for us. We’d go out at night to the Barrow Street Ale House, write skits on a napkin, come in the next morning, type them out, and the art department would start building props. It was surreal. They weren’t paying us much, but they were putting money into a show that we had pretty much complete control over.

Michael Showalter: It was very exciting. We were young and it was kind of a crazy party, but one thing I think we all remember is how endlessly perfectionist we were about everything. And yeah, I think we thought we were pretty awesome. Definitely.

Wain: It’s more that we had a real cocky absolute unwavering confidence in what we were doing, which is crazy in retrospect, but at the same time that helped us. We’d sit down with MTV and be like, “No, screw you. We’re doing it our way and if you don’t like it you can shove this offer up your ass.”

Holoubek: Every episode was the product of hours

and hours of solid work. It’s a miracle it didn’t kill the show. We wrote all day and all night, and the pitch meetings... With 11 people, there were three thinking about the concept, two analyzing every joke, a couple looking at every word...

Wain: We really had a system down of being brutal with the material. There was no politeness in the room. Of course, we fought all the time and emotions ran high, but we got along better than you could have ever expected. I’ve always felt that quantity is as important as quality in sketch. We wrote and tossed and worked so many sketches before we actually chose what would get shot.

Garant: There were two camps in *The State*. Some people really liked anti-humor—a guy walks into a bar and nothing happens—and there were others who loved a hard, solid joke: at the end of the sketch he gets hit in the head with a plank. Those two sides found a middle ground where every sketch was a combination between weird nonsense about tacos and then somebody gets hit in the balls. It worked out really well.

Holoubek: It’s more like there were 11 camps; we’re all very strong personalities.

Allison: So many of the sketches were very loud and high energy and part of that was the competition. We all wanted to stand out from one another, which caused us all to get louder and bigger. We would joke about the fact that there are some sketches where you can literally see—Michael Black especially—shoving other members out of the way of the camera.

Black: The entire group was predicated on competition. It was lions in a zoo fighting over a scrap of meat, and the meat was airtime. But that said, we also functioned as a pack—I don’t know that lions are a pack...what are they? A family? A tribe? A gathering? Whatever lions are, we were. We might have been somewhat sick and emaciated lions, but we were fighting over scraps and that’s a great thing. I don’t know that it ever got ugly.

Kenney: As I recall, David once punched Ken in the back of the neck.

Garant: And I think Ken laughed.

Lennon: Which, of course, made David even angrier. Mike Jann tried to punch Ken once too.

Marino: It was nothing. David gets hyper about stuff. I’m sure Tom said me and Mike Jann almost got into a fight. We butted heads, but I don’t remember fist-fighting. I will say that, in that room, there was a lot of naked foursquare going on.

[Allison: I actually went at Ken once, too.]

Kenney: When we started at MTV, our office was the studio where they now shoot *Total Request Live*, and we shared it with *Beavis & Butthead*.

Garant: They got picked up about the same time we did; they did their first six episodes while we were producing our pilot. And we had this giant office and we’d taped out a space on the ground where we would play foursquare in the afternoon.

Lennon: With very complicated rules.

Kenney: Tom and I played naked and we videotaped

I WOULDN'T PUT IT PAST DUSTY HOFFMAN TO WRITE SOMETHING ABOUT FATIGUES.

—KEN MARINO



it for some reason.

Garant: So we were playing foursquare in the same wing, divided only by cubicles, where 40 people were meticulously drawing, and they hated us. And at one point Joe was editing the sketch “Ride,” listening to Lenny Kravitz over and over again...

Lo Truglio: The sound was up too loud, I suppose, and one of them came over and said, “*Will you please turn that down!?*” And I was like, [flips the bird], you know? And there was a gasp. The next day a production assistant came over and said, “Look, you really offended one of the producers and, don’t worry, you’re not going to lose your job, but you’re going to have to go over there...” I remember laughing like, “Oh, *really?* I’m not going to lose my job?” I was a completely arrogant prick. So I went over with a five-dollar check, an apology card, flowers and a horrible painting of a clown that I bought in Times Square.

Marino: We would put our foot in our mouth a lot. I don’t think we knew how good we had it at MTV. Creatively, they really did let us do whatever we wanted once we got past that first season. When we went to CBS, we realized how good we’d had it.

Lo Truglio: But in terms of writing material and doing what we wanted to do, CBS was very *laissez-faire*.

Marino: Right, ’cause they had already cancelled us.

Garant: It’s corny, but at the time there was this unspoken vibe that we really were going to take down *SNL*, chase out all these old people doing sketch comedy. It’s weird that we even thought like that, because that’s not how comedy or TV works but we thought that comedy at the time was bad and we were going to fix it.

Lennon: It’s widely misinterpreted that MTV cancelled us, which they never would have done. The show was as cheap as almost any TV show could possibly be—we made the same amount as we were making on unemployment when we weren’t shooting. It was doing terrific with ratings and then for some reason we took the CBS deal, which I don’t think any of us will ever fully understand. It was a disaster.

Lo Truglio: The deal was, “Listen guys, we want to pick you up for a Saturday night series, and first we want you to do a couple of specials—one for Halloween and maybe New Year’s Eve; don’t worry about the ratings. Let me stress again: *Don’t worry about the ratings*. This is strictly a workshop. We’re going to let you guys do your thing, then we’re going to start the series the following year.”

Showalter: I don’t have a lot of nostalgia or regret about it per se. On the one hand, yes it was a mistake—there was a lot of life left in the group and we stopped at the peak of our popularity—but I think the 11-headed monster, as we like to refer to it, was becoming somewhat unwieldy.

Black: We were on a trajectory and that trajectory got interrupted by the fact that we had the lowest rated program on network television...for the one airing that we had—for our Halloween special that aired right after *Picket Fences*. In conjunction with that, the group was going through tremendous growing pains. I don’t know if it would have lasted much longer if we hadn’t gotten fired.

Kenney: My way of describing the way it happened

was that Tom and I were in the CBS art room making masks out of paper plates and glitter. It was Halloween day and we’d wrapped our bodies in toilet paper and we were going to come out and surprise the group as sparkle-mummies and we got called into our producer’s office for a very serious discussion, which was that we’d been cancelled.

Lennon: I don’t know if I was aware, that day, of how close it really was to being the end of the group. We went back to our desks and started writing jokes, right?

Garant: Yeah, we were like, “It’s just a setback; let’s keep going.” Then we had an album deal with Warner Bros. and the album never came out, and the book didn’t sell because we weren’t on the air, and the movie deal fell apart, all over the next several months, but we kept pluggin’ away. I mean, it really was done that Monday morning after the special aired. We didn’t have a TV show, and without a TV show, we still saw ourselves as this comedy group, but everyone else just saw 11 people writing jokes in a room on 32nd Street for no reason.

Allison: It was kind of our mantra back in the day that we believed in our chemistry and we wouldn’t let anyone tear us apart. We were always very defensive about it—that we were going to stay together forever, one artistic entity. Honestly, I think toward the end we started to lose faith in that. All the practicalities of life just started hitting us left and right and once people started to see what other possibilities there might be, it started the process that makes it too complicated for us to get back together now.

Black: It had to do with our history. We started as an



**WHEN I TURNED 30,
IT DID ACTUALLY
OCCUR TO ME
THAT I SHOULD
PROBABLY GO TO
EVERY MEMBER
OF THE STATE AND
APOLOGIZE.**

— MICHAEL JANN

egalitarian college comedy club—one for all and all for one. When we made the transition into a professional arena, it became clear that certain people had certain strengths and others didn't, and there was a mounting frustration about that. The ideal and the reality of the group were not meshing. Some people would come in and just bang their heads against the keyboard for half a day and they were still given the same voice as everyone else; some felt they hadn't earned it. Conversely, there was resentment from the other side because writing was power in the group: If you wrote it, you cast it; if you cast it, you cast yourself. And whereas someone like Ben could write five or six sketches a day, Kevin might spend three or four days on a piece. If that didn't do well, it was a real blow. In the end we tried to create a hierarchy as an attempt to make people feel better, but it had the reverse effect.

Wain: It was inevitable that some people would break off and that's what happened when Mike Black, Tom, Ben and Kerri did *Viva Variety* for Comedy Central. We were all pretty pissed.

Allison: We had also been playing around with coming up with a show for Comedy Central as a group, so it came as a surprise that those guys had gone there themselves and decided the fate of the group by accepting that show. By saying, "Yeah, we'll do *Viva*," they were saying, "We can't do the State anymore." The rest of us were out of a career. It was bitter, but they acted in their own self-defense, and wisely.

Lennon: It was a part of the nail in the coffin of the State, without a doubt, and I know for a fact it really

stung the rest of the group—people were very, very angry about it.

Garant: They came to the taping of the pilot, looked around, and they were in the audience instead of up on stage with us. It really hit some of them for the first time that it might be over. It was pretty brutal, but over this past couple of years, the hatchets seem buried. After having gone out and looked around, we all realize, I think, that these are still the 11 funniest people we know.

Wain: People ask who our influences were; the truth was, more than anything, each other. The State is basically where we went to college and grad school, and the projects that we've created over the years have a certain cohesiveness. I think it's amazing that more than half of the members of this group have now directed feature films.

Black: We never really broke up; we just stopped working together *en masse* for good reasons. We came right up to the edge, but we never quite went over that line where there were irreparable schisms, and part of that has to do with our failure. When you succeed together, inevitably problems arise. In failure you remain a kind of band of brothers...we few who've been through this battle.

Kenney: I would think about the State ending like my parents dying—the idea of that actually happening...I can't even wrap my head around it.

Showalter: The group, in spite of having gone our separate ways to a certain extent, is still intricately woven. There's a shit-load of material coming out and

the creative teams are all State people. The sensibility and the mentality and the players still exist.

Black: That "Damn the torpedoes!" attitude...it's something I think we've fought to hold onto. I definitely have a real iconoclastic streak in me born out of those experiences. I feel like professionally in my life, no matter what I do, no matter where I go, I will always be a member of that group. I've often wondered about other performers, if they have that one thing that they can go back to...

Marino: Tom, Ben and Kerri invited everyone from the State to be a part of the *Reno 911!* movie and it was the first time since CBS that we all got to be around each other for a day. That was really special and when David and I were casting *The Ten*, we took a cue from them. We were able to fit every member of the State in there. Different people have different sized parts, depending on their availability. Mike Jann was out of the country, so we just have a picture of him, which a naked guy is holding over his crotch. I hope that's just the beginning.

Lo Truglio: We all want to do something again. What that project is, I don't think any of us are sure yet, but there's definitely interest from everyone in the group.

Black: ...like Henry Winkler will always be the Fonz.

Lennon: And now more than ever it does feel like we actually, weirdly, years later are part of some collective or something.

Michael Jann: Um, yeah... Who's the State? **F**