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Politically Incorrigible

She gets real nasty with people she likes

Each day for breakfast she eats nails and spikes

She wires her body with cords and with mikes

That's why that Linda is a Tripp

—lyrics from “The Linda Is a Tripp” by the Capitol Steps, sung to the tune of “The Lady Is a Tramp”

By JON MATSUMOTO
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

The producer and co-founder of the political comedy group the Capitol Steps, Elaina Newport, used to worry about her troupe running out of quality source material.

For 18 years, her team of former congressional aides has depended on political scandal, controversy and misstep to fuel its brand of musical satire. Such events as the Iran-Contra affair and Dan Quayle's “potatoe” gaffe have ensured that the Capitol Steps have had plenty to sing about.

But now Newport has a new concern in the aftermath of the President Clinton-Monica Lewinsky sex scandal. She worries that the bar for political misbehavior has been raised—or lowered—to such an absurd level that political satire may have become more difficult to pull off, at least when it comes to the personal conduct of elected officials.

“We try to be more ridiculous than whatever is in the news,” says Newport in a phone conversation. “But [with Clinton-Lewinsky] it was pretty difficult to be more ridiculous. One of the things we all think about is, ‘OK, how is the next scandal going to top this one?’ It’s going to have to involve five sheep! People are going to hear about an affair [in the political arena] and they’re going to go, ‘Well, so what?’”

Newport isn't exactly complaining, however. Business has been booming for the Capitol Steps since the former White House intern became a household name last year. In 1997, the group performed 421 shows. Last year, in the midst of Monicagate, it performed more than 565 public and corporate shows. (The Alexandria, Va.-based troupe operates up to four different five-member casts at a time.)

Not surprisingly, the various memorable characters and hard-to-believe incidents surrounding the scandal have provided Newport and group director and co-founder Bill Strauss with plenty of inspiration for song parodies. The Capitol Steps' current show and the group's 19th CD, “First Lady & the Tramp,” includes plenty of Clinton-Lewinsky material.

In the Capitol Steps' tradition of writing new lyrics to well-known tunes, Newport and Strauss have turned George Gershwin's “Love Is Here to Stay” into “Our Love Is Here to Stain” and “It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary” into “It's a Wrong Waste of Tiparillos.”

Newport believes most Americans were as amused as they were disturbed by the Clinton-Lewinsky brouhaha.

“It was a funny scandal in a lot of ways because Clinton maintained his popularity,” notes Newport, a former staffer for Sen. Charles Percy (R-Ill.) and Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.). “It wasn't like this desperate Watergate-type scandal with Nixon being forced out and it being ‘the dark days of our country’ type of thing. Everybody thought it was pretty funny. And they still like the guy.”



Co-founder Elaina Newport, top, peers into Capitol affairs with, clockwise, Mike Tilford, Brian Ash, Amy Young and Bill Strauss.

Newport believes the group can continue to perform song parodies about Clinton's womanizing for years to come, but material specific to Lewinsky will soon be dated.

Actually, the troupe's strongest new material has nothing to do with adultery or presidential misconduct. “Jesse the Body vs. Saddam I Am” wonders how relations between Iraq and the United States might proceed should the Minnesota governor and ex-pro wrestler Jesse “The Body” Ventura become president. (Ventura would immediately establish a Department of *Offense*, the song speculates.)

And moving from politics to culture, “Like a Suburban Drone” is a parody using the music to Bob Dylan's “Like a Rolling Stone” and sung from the point of view of an ex-'60s liberal. Today, the song's protagonist is a droning company man whose main concerns have to do with his minivan, his 401(k) plan and Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan.

Each live performance involves four singing comedians and a pianist. But the group also presents a few nonmusical sketches.

The Capitol Steps began when a group of Capitol Hill staffers performed at a congressional Christmas party in 1981. Since then, it's blossomed into a \$3-million-a-year industry involving 40 employees. The group has been criticized for being too soft in its parodies and for not exhibiting the type of trenchant commentary associated with political humorists such as Mort Sahl.

The Capitol Steps, whose members include both former Democratic and Republican staffers, tries to be as bipartisan as possible, Newport says.

“Yeah, [we've been criticized] for not being harsh enough,” she says. “There are people out there doing jokes about [Kosovo] refugees and things like that. It's never been our style to go over that line. [Plus] we're not coming from one [political] side or the other. We try to present both sides of every issue, sometimes within one song. Mostly we want to get everyone together and have a good time.”