

He's riffing in Real Time

Bill Maher returns to speak more truth to power **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

Bill Maher has a full plate for a guy who's far from being Jay Leno. On "Real Time With Bill Maher," his HBO show returning from hiatus Aug. 24, he does monologues like Johnny Carson, conducts smart round-table discussions like the Sunday morning talk shows, and grills newsmakers à la Ted Koppel. He writes books, does standup gigs and even has a sure-to-be controversial documentary coming soon.

"I even love playing the red states," says Maher, whose newest HBO standup special, "The Decider," airs live from Boston on Saturday. "San Francisco doesn't need me. But when I play St. Louis or Salt Lake City, those people are really happy that somebody with my views has come to their town."

A perennial bachelor (and proud sometime guest at the Playboy Mansion), Maher, 51, born in New York and raised in New Jersey, knows what it's like to be unwelcome: In 2001, he lost his ABC show "Politically Incorrect" after echoing pointed remarks made by one of his conservative guests about the 9/11 hijackers.

"There was a time when I was afraid to go out of the house," says Maher, who was singled out during White House press conferences when single-minded patri-

tism uninterested in hearing dissent was perhaps at its peak. "I thought people would just slug me. It's quite a feeling to be America's No. 1 hated object."

But now Maher enjoys the acclaim of his one-hour talk-and-panel show Friday nights at 11 p.m. that draws in top politicians and thinkers. And the country, he says, is much more in sync with him.

"We're stuck with [President Bush] for the next year and a half," says Maher, who initially supported the invasion of Iraq. "What I'm sensing out there is frustration. There was acceptance of him and then there was hope ... There was a time when being against Bush was sort of un-American. Those days have ended."

So, with everything going his way, naturally Maher is going out on another limb.

His next project — and perhaps the

riskiest of his career — is a documentary about religion directed by Larry Charles (of "Seinfeld" and "Borat" fame). Maher traveled the world to make the film, a hodgepodge of interviews, news clips, comedy bits and archival film. At the Cannes Film Festival this past May, the film sold in 18 countries immediately and sparked a bidding war in the U.S. — even though every one of those buyers has up to now remained anonymous.

"No subject is [as incendiary] as religion," says Maher. "It's the ultimate final taboo. ... We spent a month in Jerusalem, the Vatican City, Amsterdam ... Then we came back and went to Florida — holy lands like Orlando ... we went to every truck stop ministry we saw along the Southern route, and worked our way up to Boston and then west to Salt Lake City.

"We tried to hit every religious spot we could," he says. "It just seemed endless, and you talk to a million people and you've done a million things and you don't know what you have. But when I saw the [film] I was thrilled because I thought, 'This is going to be funny.'"

Maher and Charles initially thought it would be a perfect end-of-the-year

release. "But even the atheists said, 'Not at Christmas!'" Maher says, laughing. So now the release is rumored to be spring.

"I pitched this movie by saying, 'I don't have to make fun of religion, it makes fun of itself,'" Maher says. "Then when I saw the [footage], I thought, 'That's true.' ... And then I sort of make fun of it, too." ♦

With major names spending "Real Time With Bill Maher," its host is hardly politically incorrect.

