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TOPIC: ZAKEE'S APPEARANCE WITHIN AN EIGHT-PART
DOCU-COMEDY/SERIES ON CNN

HELLO WORLD,

MAY PEACE AND BLESSINGS BE UPON YOU. I JUST WANTED TO SHARE WITH ALL MY VIEWERS THAT FOR THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, CNN WILL BE AIRING A DOCU-COMEDY BY W. KAMAL BELL ENTITLED "UNITED SHADES OF AMERICA" ON SUNDAY NIGHTS (7:00 PM-PST / 10:00 PM-EST).

MR. BELL INTERVIEWED ME DURING HIS FILMING WHILE AT SAN QUENTIN STATE PRISON, SO CHECK IT OUT AND LEAVE "COMMENTS" ON THIS BLOG-SITE. (SEE ATTACHED "ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT" ARTICLE BY THE S.F. CHRONICLE.)

IN CLOSING, HERE'S A POEM BY MIA MCKENZIE: "A LONG TIME AGO, WHEN YOU WERE A LEEF THING, YOU LEARNED SOMETHING, SOME WAY TO COPE, SOMETHING THAT, IF YOU DID IT, WOULD HELP YOU SURVIVE. IT WASN'T GONNA GET YOU FREE, BUT IT WAS GONNA KEEP YOU ALIVE... IT WORKED FOR YOU. YOU'RE STILL HERE NOW PARTLY BECAUSE OF THIS THING THAT YOU LEARNED. THE THING IS, THOUGH, AT SOME POINT YOU STOPPED NEEDING IT. AT SOME POINT, YOU GOT FAR ENOUGH AWAY, SURROUNDED YOURSELF WITH PEOPLE WHO LOVE YOU. YOU SURVIVED... BUT THAT THING YOU LEARNED WHEN YOU WERE FIVE (5)

WAS NOT THEN AND IS NOT NOW DESIGNED TO HELP YOU 'BE FREE'. IT IS DESIGNED ONLY TO HELP YOU SURVIVE. AND, IN FACT, IT KEEPS YOU FROM BEING FREE. YOU NEED TO FIGURE OUT WHAT THIS THING IS AND WORK YOUR ASS OFF TO UNLEARN IT. BECAUSE THE THINGS WE DO AT ALL COSTS TO SURVIVE ARE NOT THE THINGS THAT WILL HELP US GET FREE. GETTING FREE IS A WHOLE DIFFERENT JOURNEY ALL TOGETHER..."

MY DEAR READERS, DOES THIS POEM SPEAK TO YOU AS IT DOES TO ME? I HAD TO COME TO PRISON IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND WHAT GETTING FREE IS ALL ABOUT. FOR ME, IT STARTED WHEN I FOUND THE ABILITY TO ACCURATELY SELF-REFLECT WITH GENUINE HUMILITY, INSIGHT AND INQUISITIVENESS, WHICH ALLOWED MY PSYCHOLOGICAL, EMOTIONAL AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT TO OCCUR. SO, TODAY, I CAN SEE AND ACCEPT MY IMPERFECTIONS AND SHORTCOMINGS WITH CLARITY AND DEEP CONSCIOUSNESS, AND I HOLD MYSELF ACCOUNTABLE TO GROW BEYOND THEM. SO WHAT WORKS FOR YOU?

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO LEAVE "COMMENTS" AND/OR YOU CAN CONTACT ME DIRECTLY AT MY ABOVE MAILING ADDRESS. ALSO, THE SEGMENT OF UNITED SHADES OF AMERICA WHICH I'M IN GIVES AN OBJECTIVE VIEW INTO MY WORLD HERE AT SAN QUENTIN STATE PRISON. CHECK IT OUT AND SHARE WITH ME YOUR THOUGHTS, OPINIONS, OR ANY FEEDBACK.

UNTIL NEXT TIME, MY DEAR READERS, TAKE CARE AND BE SAFE.

PEACE...

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Bell making TV shows that make people think

By David Wiegand

Berkeley comic W. Kamau Bell hasn't been doing a lot of TV since his ground- and genre-breaking talk show "Totally Biased With W. Kamau Bell" was canceled by FXX. This month, he's making up for lost time with the launch of both a new CNN series, "United Shades of America," and his first Showtime special, "Semi-Prominent Negro."

Other than hosting a couple of shows for Showtime from South by Southwest, he admits he was in a kind of "stumbly, bumbly what's-going-on-with-my-career" place after he and his wife and two kids moved back to Berkeley.

He had a lot of meetings with various cable news stations, including CNN, to talk about potential projects. CNN thought Bell would be great doing a show about a "black guy in white America," he says.

"And I was like, thaaaat's great, but can it not just be white places?" he recalls by phone from Philadelphia, where he has a standup gig for a college audience that night.

CNN liked Bell's count-

United Shades of America: Eight-part docu-comedy series, 10 p.m. Sunday, April 24, on CNN.

W. Kamau Bell: Semi-Prominent Negro: Comedy special, 10 p.m. Friday, April 29, on Showtime.

er-proposal to go all over the country having conversations about race. They also liked his idea that the series premiere on Sunday, April 24, would find him driving through the American South talking to members of the Ku Klux Klan.

If viewers feel a bit of tension as KKK members talk about the "mud races" and say it's an abomination for an African American man to be married to a white woman (as Bell is), he says he didn't feel threatened at all.

"Once I sat down and talked to them, I felt they were very misguided rather than very scary after a while," he says, and that includes attending a cross lighting (as it's officially called, not a cross burning). "This is just like a twisted men's group is what this is," he recalls thinking. "In some communities, this would be an Elks lodge."

"When you hang with them for a while, it's a

bunch of dudes that enjoy hanging out with each other."

Meeting KKK members, some in their traditional robes and hoods and others in everyday attire, gave Bell some insight into why the Klan still exists after all these years. Many of these men live in small towns, most are probably underemployed and their lives may not have turned out as they'd once hoped, he surmises.

"Instead of saying, what did I do to bring myself here, they decided it's my fault. Black people are to blame," Bell says. "It's easy to blame black people when there aren't that many around."

Future episodes will find Bell going to Daytona Beach, Fla., to talk both to spring-breakers and retirees, visiting Alaska's Point Barrow and hanging out with cops in Camden, N.J.

"I got to hang out with the police force," he deadpans. "Every black man's dream."

He is especially proud of the second episode in the series, in which he visits San Quentin State Prison. Bell's purpose in the "Behind the Walls" episode, airing on May 1, is to find out how spending a lifetime behind bars

* ZAWEE ↘



CNN

W. Kamau Bell (right) talks to prisoners on a foray into San Quentin State Prison as he explores issues of race in "United Shades of America."

has impacted these men. The episode asks the questions of whether a murderer can ever be rehabilitated and if he even deserves to be. Bell will return to San Quentin to screen the episode for the inmates the day before the show airs.

In another episode, Bell visits the real-life "Portlandia" to show a side of the Oregon city you probably won't see on the IFC series. In the city of laid-back hipsters that can make Berkeley look like Bayonne, Bell looks at the effects of gentrification on the black community.

Instead of sandal-shod hipsters drinking herbal tea, Bell finds "sad and angry black people" who have been uprooted from

their homes and are wondering, "What did you do to my neighborhood?"

"We could have shot it in Oakland," he says.

He isn't joking.

The CNN series showcases Bell's finely honed ability to tackle hot-button issues with smiling, disarming directness, something his standup audiences have learned to appreciate — and laugh at — over the years.

No matter how funny he is, though, he never loses sight of real issues, and the current presidential "circus" is providing him with a lot of material for standup.

"The stuff I do on college campuses is multimedia, so I just play a clip of Donald Trump and point at it," he says.

"I live in Berkeley, the land of Bernie Sanders, and what I talk about is how long it has taken my people, my liberal, progressive people, to take the threat of Donald Trump seriously."

Before Trump began racking up primary win after primary win, Bell began referring to him as "President Trump" to get people to understand that "Hey, it's not Lord Volde-mort. It's not like he won't show up."

Again: He isn't joking.

David Wiegand is an assistant managing editor and the TV critic of The San Francisco Chronicle. Follow me on Facebook. Email: dwiegand@sfcronicle.com Twitter: @WaitWhat_TV

save for Dave: photo of Zakke
on p. 2!

Datebook

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Siffedine Elamine / Roadside Attractions

S.F. Opera's fans go mod for director

By Tony Bravo

If you were wondering where all the go-go boots in the Bay Area were on Wednesday night, San Francisco City Hall had the run on them at the San Francisco Opera's A Nod to Mod Ball. The ball, hosted by the San Francisco Opera Guild, was a celebration of the Opera's next general director, Matthew Shilcock, who assumes leadership of the 93 year-old company on Aug. 1 from outgoing General Director David Gockley. Shilcock, 38, is British-born, so the evening's mod theme was planned as a nod to both his heritage and youth.

"When you think of the mod era the first thing you think of is the British invasion," ball Co-Chair CJ Van Pelt (with Maryam Muduroglu) said of how the guild arrived at the motif. "It changed the face of music and brought it to a whole new generation. We thought that it was the perfect match. Matthew is young and vibrant, and we think he's going to do the same thing for the San Francisco Opera."

From the unflappable Beefeater guards who stood at attention at City Hall's entrance to the modular projections by McCalls (the event's caterer and designer) to the Union Jack furni-

'Hologram's' winning view of coping with life's losses