

So Who Wins The Big Prize? It's the Host

By JOE RHODES

LOS ANGELES

THE audience members, 325 people who had waited outside for nearly three hours, shivering in the wet breezes of a California midwinter storm, were going nuts before he even walked onstage, screaming as if they were at a pep rally, dancing in the aisles, chanting his name, making so much noise they barely even noticed that he'd begun speaking, that Drew Carey was already asking, "What's the first item up for bids today on 'The Price Is Right'?"

The ratings for "Price," America's longest-running game show are down — by 9 percent since Mr. Carey took over as host from Bob Barker in October — but you'd never know it from the enthusiasm of the crowds that still pour into Studio 33 (since last year also known as the Bob Barker Studio) of CBS's Television City complex in Hollywood. They show up wearing their homemade "Drew Is the Man" T-shirts, erupting with high-decibel elation whenever Rich Fields, the announcer, asks one of them to "come on down!"

And Mr. Carey, who initially passed on the offer to succeed Mr. Barker, seems equally pleased to be there. CBS claims to be unconcerned with the ratings downturn, writing it off as part of an overall slip in daytime viewership and inevitable after

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the high numbers that accompanied the final days of Mr. Barker's tenure.

er?' my first thought was: 'Are you kidding me? I'll get murdered.'

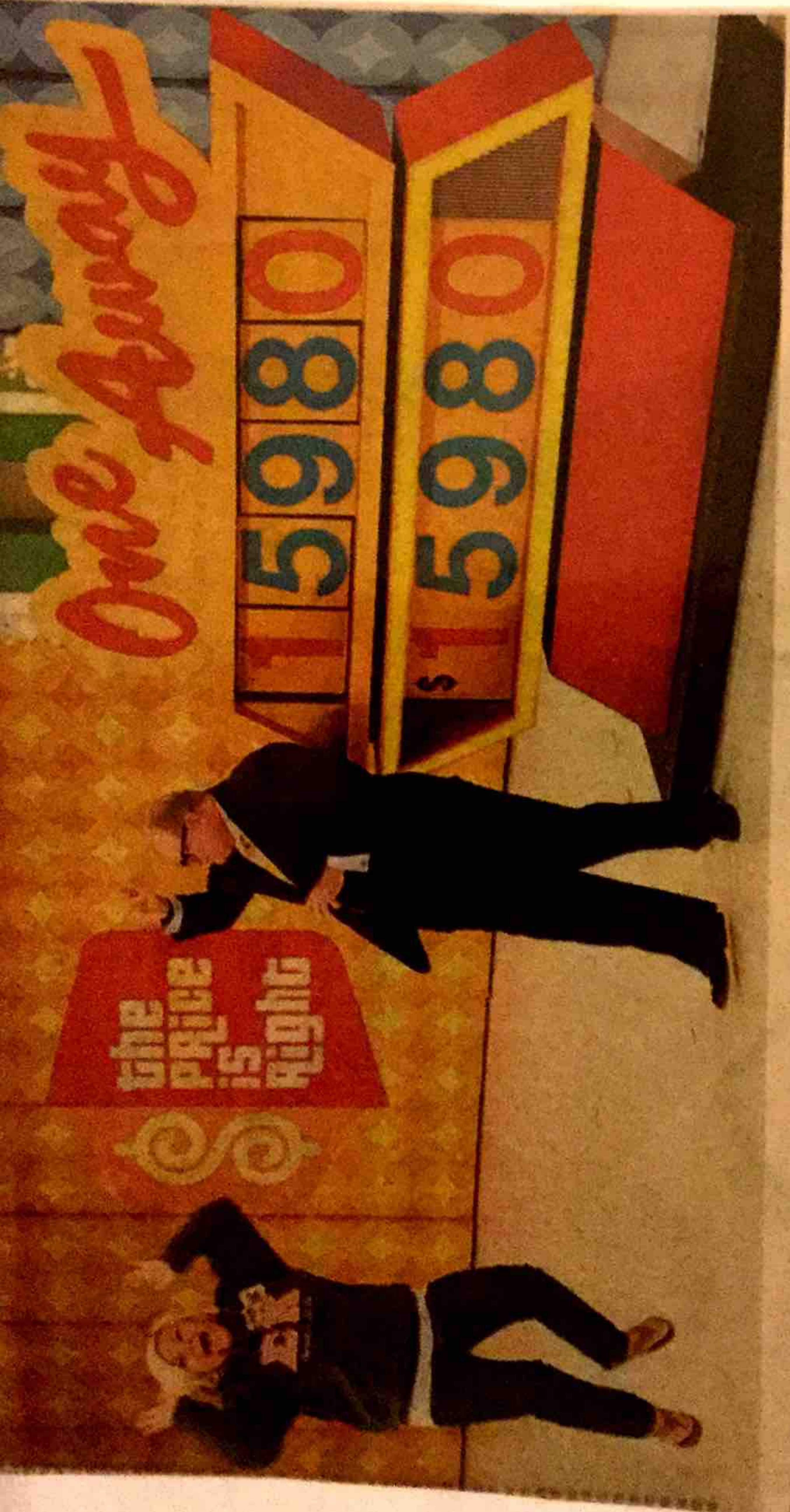
Mr. Carey would only do the show with Mr. Barker's blessing, which came at a lunch meeting last summer. "Drew has done exactly what I would advise any young host to do, which is to not worry about how it was done before," Mr. Barker said in a telephone interview. "You've got to go out there and do the show the way you want to do it. It's your show."

"The Price Is Right" is slightly looser with Mr. Carey in charge. He talks to the contestants more and is not opposed to cracking an occasional joke about some of the lower-end prizes, the porcelain knickknacks and "constipation caplets" aimed at the older audience members. But the jokes are gentle, not cutting, and the general structure of the show has not changed.

Nor have the contestants, who, as Mr. Carey is quick to point out, are chosen from the general audience. "All you've got to do is show up, and you have a chance to be on the show. If you want to know what America's like, watch 'Price Is Right.'

"And for every single person that makes it onstage, it's like a Joseph Campbell journey, an everyman plucked from obscurity to attempt a journey, with obstacles placed in their way. And I just want to be a good guy for them, so they can win money. I'm there to help them on their journey."

Mr. Carey, 49, said that in the past two years he has undergone a "huge spurt of spiritual growth," having immersed himself in texts from the Bible to books by Wayne Dyer and Marianne Williamson. The result is a changed attitude about comedy, show business and himself.



Drew Carey (with a contestant, Amor Raciano) thought being host of "The Price Is Right" "would be fun and cool."

ROBERT VOETS/CBS

For six consecutive Fridays beginning Feb. 22, CBS will bring back its occasional prime-time version of the show. (Regular episodes will continue Monday through Friday at 10 a.m.) Touted as "The Price Is Right Million-Dollar Spectacular," the prime-time shows — for the first time with Mr. Carey — will feature chances to win a \$1 million showcase of prizes, as opposed to those worth \$15,000 to \$40,000 usually offered during the daytime show.

Mr. Carey may have had higher-paying and higher-profile gigs — nine years of sitcom stardom on "The Drew Carey Show," eight years as host of "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" — but none that seem to satisfy him quite so much as giving away cash, grandfather clocks and Brand New Cars on a daytime game show.

"When they first approached me," Mr. Carey said, recalling an early conversation with the "Price Is Right" executive producer Syd Vinnedge, "Syd asked me, 'What do you like to do best?' And I went, 'I love leaving big tips.'

"He said, 'Well, on 'The Price Is Right' you get to give away money all day.' And I thought, yeah, that's a good way to spend your day. I thought it would be fun and cool. I don't see how I could ever get tired of it. How do you get tired of joy?"

Not that he didn't have doubts about succeeding Mr. Barker, 84, who as host of the show for 35 years seemed as integral to its success and identity as its gigantic spinning wheel and other pricing games.

"When they first approached me and said, 'Would you think about taking over for Bob Bark-

"I've thought about changing my name, I've changed so much," he said, "If Drew Carey now met Drew Carey from 5 or 10 years ago, I wouldn't recognize him."

Although he was known as a generally good guy, famous for those big tips and hanging out with fans before and after stand-up shows, Mr. Carey said he was carrying a chip on his shoulder through all the successful years of his sitcom. In his 1997 autobiography he wrote about a difficult childhood and adult battles with depression. He was not as carefree as he seemed.

"That chip on my shoulder, that's a fear of not being accepted, a fear of not being good enough," he said. "It was like: 'Here's little Drew Carey from Cleveland, and they're not recognizing that I've done something with my life. Hey, why aren't you recognizing it?'"

"A negative review or comment about me in general would really get to me. Not always, but when it did, I would be upset for days, weeks and months. Now I genuinely don't care. Whatever anyone has to say about me that's bad, I'm fine with it. Work it out, brother. Whatever you need to do."

Mr. Carey's stand-up act, he said, is "just as dirty as ever," but he is more conscious of not being unnecessarily mean. "Whatever you do to another person, you're doing the same thing to yourself," he said, acknowledging that he's rethinking a few Paris Hilton jokes in particular. "If you're hateful to another person, you're hurting yourself."

"But, hey, I'm still fun," he said. "I'm more fun than I was before. Because I'm not worried about anything. Because I'm not afraid of anything."