

**On TV, World Wrestling Federation
CEO Vince McMahon is a conniving,
manipulative, thoroughly evil CEO,
hated by millions across the country.
But the reality (whatever that is)
is even stranger. BY NANCY JO SALES**

BEYOND FAKE



HAMILTON, ONTARIO, IS A CITY OF SOME 350,000 people that, with its strip malls, fast food, and overweight children, feels just like America—but off. NATION OF MASTURBATION, reads a hand-scrawled sign. Hordes of fans standing in line outside Hamilton's Copps Coliseum on a Sunday evening were clad in the cryptically encoded T-shirts of the World Wrestling Federation, on which they'd spent up to \$40. AUSTIN: 3:16, said one, bearing chapter and verse from superstar wrestler Stone Cold Steve Austin's "bible," the citation reading, "I just whipped your ass."

Small boys held up posters that said: SUCK IT. The WWF was in town for its *Sunday Night*

Heat show, which is broadcast live in the States and eventually reaches 110 countries, in eight languages. The buzz in the crowd was about what might happen tonight in the ongoing agon between beloved, neo-Nazi-esque Steve Austin (that was the name of the Six Million Dollar Man) and his evil boss, and WWF owner Vince McMahon—in real life rumored to be a \$200 million man. ("That's what my motorcycle's worth," says Vince.)

"Vince McMahon is gay!"

"He's an idiot!"

"He's not fair!" said Matt Ferraro, Greg Gilbin, and Geoff White, all 13.

"He's the biggest con man I've ever seen!"

"He hates Stone Cold because he's not the kind of wrestler Vince McMahon *wants* him to be—all dressed up in a tie and suit," Matt said.

"Vince is *corporate*," Greg explained.

Another fan, Mike Malecki, who was 17 and had peroxided hair, stood nearby, listening, grinning. "Vince McMahon is a genius," he said. "He's the P. T. Barnum of our era."

A WWF EVENT BEGINS WITH THE EXPLOSION OF \$15,000 worth of pyrotechnics. Fiery rockets scream in the air; giant booms jar the sternum. A

Stone Cold Steve Austin flips his "archenemy" McMahon his trademark symbol. But Austin, says Vince, "is really playing the part of Vince McMahon."

Wagnerian heavy-metal-hip-hop score seems to guarantee the approach of the apocalypse, and looming TV screens flash images of bald-headed, boot-stomping Steve Austin marching through streets that have been set ablaze. The WWF has a new attitude, which the corporate offices call "Attitude."

Backstage at Copps, Vince McMahon was going over his lines. "You really gotta be pissed here," one of his writers, Vince Russo (also editor of WWF magazine, circulation 475,000), was telling him.

McMahon—or "Mr. McMahon," as his villainous persona is known—nodded. With his perfect pompadour (he once told the *New York Times*, "I work around my barber's schedule") and pumped torso ("It's no big deal that at one point I took steroids," he told me), he's an odd and somewhat intimidating presence, part Jerry Lee Lewis, part hit man. He is 53; wears perfectly tailored Armani suits; has small, hard eyes.

"We're all just little boys here," Vince said, attempting a twinkle. "It's just a blast to go out and be a kid in a certain environment."

Out in the arena, a wrestler named Val Venis was cupping his crotch and gyrating all over the ring as the mammoth TV screens showed dangly, foot-long hot dogs being placed in buns. Venis, so his storyline goes, has seduced away Teri, the "wife" of "preacher" wrestler Dustin Runnels—formerly a slithering drag-queen type called Goldust—with his sexual prowess, of which Val is very proud. "I came, I saw, and I came again!" is his tag line.

"We're storytellers," Vince explained. "This is a soap opera, performed by the greatest actors and athletes in the world. I'd like to say that it's the highest form of entertainment." Vince's deep, southern, Sergeant Friday voice went soft. "I immediately fell in love with it from the first contact."

Vincent Kennedy McMahon is a third-generation promoter; his father, Vincent James, was a legendary character out of Damon Runyon whose Capital Wrestling events headlined Madison Square Garden hundreds of times. Those were the days—the forties, fifties—when pro wrestling was attended by men in hats and still pretended to be real, and its good guys ("babyfaces") and bad guys ("heels") power-slammed each other on television in black and white. Today, McMahon's WWF characters project more the psycho, gang

member, serial killer. One, Al Snow, totes a dismembered mannequin head (female), which he mutters to amorously. And then there is Vince himself.

The crowd in Hamilton was now looking up at images of Vince intercut with footage of Mussolini. "VINCE SUCKS!"

In the past six months, McMahon has become perhaps the biggest star in pro wrestling—though not as a wrestler, but as himself. His war with Stone Cold Steve Austin has made the WWF's *Monday Night Raw* show (broadcast live on the USA Network) the No. 1-rated program on cable. "The WWF—and wrestling in general—is hotter than it's ever been," says Dave Meltzer, a wrestling pundit and publisher of the *Wrestling Observer*

when they see Vince McMahon and his "bodyguards" step into the ring. "You suck, Vince!" "Boo!" Vince, puffed up, stiff-necked, never breaks out of character. If pro wrestling, as Andy Warhol said, "is America," then McMahon is everything America loves to hate and perhaps wants to be: the rich boss with the "Corvette collection," the "many beautiful homes" he boasts of.

VINCE IS SEXY!—a woman in her thirties with blonde pigtailed tied up in yarn flapped a sign at a WWF-TV camera. The WWF does everything in-house, from its makeup lady to its satellite transmission; everything in the \$500-million-a-year company is controlled by Vince.

Vince took up a microphone and surveyed the Canadian crowd, his fleshy lips trembling. "Everyone knows I am a man of my word," he said.

"BULLSHIT! BULLSHIT!"

"And," Vince boomed, "I will strip Stone Cold Steve Austin of the WWF title!" The fans went crazy.

Just then, and there's always a "just then" in a WWF story line—openly called a "story line" since 1982, when Vince decided to admit that the sport was fake (the WWF calls it "sports entertainment"), thereby releasing his company from costly licensing fees and drug testing by state athletic commissions—just then, Stone Cold Steve Austin, disguised as a cameraman, flung his 250-pound body from the steel cage suspended over the ring, and landed on Vince, "punching" at his face as Vince squirmed beneath him like a piece of bacon frying, his shiny, two-tone loafers kicking.

"AUSTIN! AUSTIN!"

Redneck renegade Steve Austin has been assaulting Vince at least once during almost every show, going back to the spring, when their boss-employee warfare started pushing the WWF ahead in the ratings against its competitor, Ted Turner's World Champion Wrestling—something that delights McMahon no end. (Vince and Ted have a personal rivalry that McMahon has also manipulated into a story line, wrestling-style; for a while, the WWF had a corn-cob-pipe-smokin' country-bumpkin character called "Billionaire Ted." "Ted and I do not get along," Vince says.)

With TV viewership up more than 50 percent (10 million viewers per week), the WWF is bigger now even than it was



Stone Cold Steve Austin douses Vince last May. "I'm not, uh, very respectful to authority figures," says Austin.

Newsletter. Celebrities are back in the act. Dennis Rodman and Jay Leno have wrestled on TV with the WCW. Mike Tyson refereed for the WWF in March, Anthony Mason and Jason Williams sat ringside at Madison Square Garden in August at the WWF's Summerslam. The WWF's Fatal Fourway October 25 at the Garden promises to draw a new crop of stars hoping to look in-the-know.

In Hamilton, Vince was now ready to make his entrance, his face full of amusement and cunning as he listened to the fans howling for his blood. "It doesn't bother me when they boo," he said. "It means they care."

"FUCK YOU!"

The fans explode with delighted rage

"EVERYBODY WOULD LIKE TO BE ABLE TO PUNCH



Young fans express their deepest feelings in Anaheim, California. The slogan they spell out is used often in official WWF paraphernalia.

in the eighties, when McMahon made wrestling huge the first time around, by spiriting it away from UHF, cheesy sets, and bad lighting to NBC, CBS, and the spectacle of rock and roll. Vince, the unhippest of men, and yet one of the great manufacturers of hip, got then-megastar Cyndi Lauper to "manage" the WWF's Captain Lou Albano; he hired Aretha Franklin to sing "America the Beautiful" at his first Wrestlemania extravaganza in 1985. Vince—in a move that could make you think that if pro wrestling has become entertainment culture's heart of darkness, then he truly is Kurtz—persuaded Muhammad Ali to jump into the ring at the event and take swings at taunting wrestlers who dipped and dodged away. Bruno Sammartino, wrestling's world champion for most of the years between 1963 and 1977—the pre-Vince years—says, "McMahon made wrestling trash."

But Wrestlemania I was around the time people first started calling Vince McMahon a genius—of who-knows-what,

but certainly crass salesmanship. In 1987, Wrestlemania III (at which the main event was Hulk Hogan vs. Andre the Giant) pulled 90,173 people into the Pontiac Silverdome, setting the world record for the largest indoor audience attendance (a statistic WWF employees repeat like a mantra). Hulk Hogan was the WWF's biggest star then, and with his take-your-vitamins, say-no-to-drugs message for kids, he was the perfect action figure (WWF sales of which soared) for the Reagan era.



"Hogan couldn't wrestle his way out of a wet paper bag," says Bruno Sammartino.

And then came the fall. In 1993, the U.S. Attorney in Brooklyn charged McMahon and the WWF's parent company, Titan Sports, Inc., with conspiring to provide WWF wrestlers with anabolic steroids between 1985 and 1991. Vince was personally charged with possession and intent to distribute and faced up to five years in prison. ("And you know where they would have put me," he told me ominous-

ly, "in a cell with someone just like me"; he allows he is "truculent by nature.") Ex-wrestlers like Superstar Billy Graham were making the talk-show rounds, saying the WWF was filthy with steroid abuse and that "the Hulkster" himself had shot up so many times he had a scar the size of a tennis ball on one hip.

Without offering steroid abuse as a reason, the WWF put Hogan (now a star again with the WCW) temporarily out to pasture. By the time of Vince's trial in 1996, the WWF's first wave was already well over—live attendance had dwindled, TV viewership was down. To make matters worse, a sex scandal involving a ring boy and a high-level WWF executive (not Vince, but a crony) had broken; and Vince himself had been accused of sexual harassment by a female employee. People were saying the WWF was going under, and McMahon was finished.

How they underestimated him. "The government plays to win," Vince says, "and so do I." McMahon pleaded innocent to all six charges against him and came off with a single conviction, "conspiracy to defraud the FDA." It still irks him. "I defy anyone to tell you what that means," he

THEIR BOSS IN THE MOUTH," SAYS STEVE AUSTIN.

says impatiently. "What am I, a doctor?" Some believe the case against him could have been won, but "the Feds blew it, and McMahon had good lawyers," says Phil Mushnick, sportswriter for the New York Post, whose reporting on George Zahorian, a doctor with WWF connections who was convicted of steroid distribution, brought on the government investigation of Vince and his corporation.

"There's still steroid use throughout wrestling," says Dave Meltzer. A WWF wrestler, Brian Pillman, died of a heart attack just last fall; he had been a steroid abuser. Vince invited Pillman's widow, Melanie, on the air the night after his death. He held a microphone to her lips as she mourned for the cameras.

AND NOW MCMAHON IS BACK. IN September, Titan Sports acquired the Debbie Reynolds hotel-casino in Las Vegas. Vince gets a certain gleam in his eye when he talks about the plans for the new venue, "Stone Cold betting chips, Undertaker tattoo parlor—the Sable lingerie shop!" (The Undertaker is the WWF's gothic, Frankensteinian wrestler; Sable—or "Sable Bomb"—its scrappy silicone blonde.) The WWF is also hunting for a spot in Manhattan to erect its first, Planet Hollywood-style "Wrestlemania Café." "There is just so much you can do with this company," says Vince, "and I feel like we're just beginning."

It does seem strange that McMahon's rebirth as a corporate player is coincidental with a WWF story line—its most popular ever—capitalizing on an image of him as a vicious corporate monster. Vince insists that the real theme of his life has actually been the one that's being played out in the husky persona of Stone Cold Steve Austin—a "wild man" who fights dirty and would rather bash in your head with a metal folding chair than take a meeting. "After you really get to know me," Vince says, "you'll see that Stone Cold is really playing the part of Vince McMahon."

"I'm a man running wild, heading for the top. . . . Along the way you're going to see a lot of men drop," go the lyrics to a song Vince once wrote for a record label he was trying out.

Near the end of the show in Hamilton, Stone Cold Steve Austin's body, in black boots and bathing suit, lay sprawled face-



Vince enlisted Kane (in red) and his brother, the Undertaker, to protect him from Steve Austin. Of course, they failed.

down on the mat—the Undertaker and his "brother" the mute Kane, had whipped him jointly after Vince had fixed the match with some last-minute, low-down rules.

"You who just got your jollies from what Steve Austin just did to me," McMahon growled triumphantly at the crowd in Hamilton, "he who laughs last laughs longest!"

And then, to the horror of the fans, Vince leaned down and literally stripped Stone Cold of the title belt the rebel wrestler had fashioned for himself. "Look at it—it has a skull on it!" Vince shouted with disgust, shaking it at the crowd.

"FUCK YOU, VINCE!" "Unfair!"

"It's mine! It's mine!" Vince screamed, waving the belt and dashing from the arena, with the suddenly revived Steve Austin in hot and sweaty pursuit.

Outside—filmed on cue for the WWF cameras—Vince jumped into an awaiting white stretch limo and sped away. The USA Network cut to *Pacific Blue*, a cute-cops-on-bikes show set in California, with a lot of skin.

Minutes later, as the disappointed Canadians were leaving the Copps arena, upsetting trash cans, McMahon reappeared through a side entrance, still holding the title belt. "We had to take the long

way around—they caught us, they were beating on the car!" He laughed, and for a moment he did indeed look like the 12-year-old boy he claims to be, deep down. His "bodyguards"—most of them old friends who've seen Vince through a lot of ups and downs—rocked back on their heels, smiling at him.

"Oh, you can bet they'll be watching tomorrow night to find out who's the new champ," Vince said, tossing Stone Cold's belt to one of his minions.

"Here," he said with a little sneer, "take this."

THE CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS of Titan Sports, in Stamford, Connecticut, is a \$10 million mirrored monolith which the WWF announcers refer to as Titan Tower ("The folks up at Titan Tower won't like what Stone Cold's up to now at all!" etc.). The building flies a gigantic black WWF flag, which, with its "edgy" new ATTITUDE logo, looks a lot like the Jolly Roger.

Here, 300 employees do "Mr. McMahon's" bidding, creating and overseeing the WWF live events, merchandising (clothing, action figures, video games), pay-per-view, home video, new media. "The model is Disney," says president of new media Shane McMahon, Vince's 28-year-old son and the future, fourth-generation successor to the empire. Inside the office complex, the framed pictures everywhere of "product" show freakish men in fluorescent tights.

Vince was casual in slacks and eating a Power Bar in his office when I came to see him. I was followed by Jay Andronaco, head of the WWF's media relations, a man who would later trail me on the road with the WWF to make sure I didn't stray out of his sight even on trips to the ladies' room. Here in Vince's office, Andronaco pointedly set a small tape recorder in the middle of Vince's wide glass conference table; they would be taping me, too. "As much as you will learn about our business," Vince said mildly, "I'll learn a lot, too; I always do. I'll learn a lot about you."

Later, the Post's Phil Mushnick told me he believed Vince had had detectives shadow him after Mushnick began writing stories about steroid use in the WWF, and Vince had brought a civil suit against him. "He hired Fairfax Partners, old FBI

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"THIS MR. MCMAHON CHARACTER," SAYS M

agents," Mushnick said. "I walked right up to one and asked, 'What does Vince think he's digging for?'" Vince eventually dropped his suit. And in 1995, *The Village Voice* published a piece about a "fixer," Marty Bergman (husband of Vince's trial lawyer, Laura Brevetti), who had attempted to taint one of the main witnesses against McMahon—his former secretary Emily Feinberg—by posing as a producer from *A Current Affair* and offering her money (Feinberg refused).

Vince munched his Power Bar. "This character that is on television," he began, "this Mr. McMahon character—oh, my God. Some of the things I have said and have done. He's the most reprehensible individual on the planet. He's a horrible human being . . . uncaring, a powermonger, manipulative, very manipulative, always trying to get what I want and being very clever about it. Art imitating life and vice versa." Vince's juggling of pronouns—*he* and *I*—seemed interesting.

Vince shook his head, smiling. "It's fun," he added, "because some of it's true, you know what I mean?"

Dave Meltzer likes to call the trend in pro wrestling toward meta-story lines "dual reality": "You acknowledge that the matches are arranged," he says, "but the money angle is that the internal machinations and backstage things you pretend the viewer is let in on are 'real.' They

want you to believe all that is real."

The key angle with Vince seems to be that a lot of his faked real is real. "It's ironic that I now play an authority figure," Vince said in Connecticut, "although it's easy for me to. I know all the right buttons to push because I've been there, on the flip side of it."

Then he started talking about his dad.

Vincent K. didn't meet Vincent J. (Vince stresses he is "*not* a junior") until he was 12 years old, when the elder McMahon was already a figure of national prominence. "It was one of those things. My mom was married five times," Vince said. "It just didn't happen for us." He grew up with his mother in Pinehurst, North Carolina, and describes his childhood as rough, but adds, "There are just no excuses for anything. I read about some guy who has excuses for his behavior," Vince said, "because he comes from a broken home or he was beaten or was sexually abused or got into the wrong crowd or whatever the case may be—all of

which have occurred in my lifetime. But those are no excuses."

He said, "It was very late" when he and his father met. Vincent J.'s wife, Juanita, brokered a meeting between the long-lost children, Vince and his older brother, Rod (who's now in the steel business in Texas); Vincent J. was not the engineer of the reunion. "I saw my dad and

I just immediately fell in love with him," said Vince, depicting wrestling boss Vincent J. as "big and handsome," with a tendency to jingle a handful of change while lost in thought. "He would take me to shows at the old U-Line arena in Washington, and I remember the crowd response and these larger-than-life individuals. The passion was just so strong, I just knew that I wanted to do that as soon as I saw it."

"Of course, I wanted to be a wrestler," Vince said. "My dad always knew that I wanted to be in the business from the first exposure. The summer of '59, I was 14 years old, and my favorite wrestler was naturally a villainous type, Doctor Jerry Graham. He had peroxided hair and wore a red river-boat-gambler-type shirt. He had a 1959 blood-red Cadillac convertible."

"Washington, D.C., that summer of '59, I'd sneak out of my dad's office and go riding around town with the good doctor—and, oh, my God—he would light cigars with hundred-dollar bills, run red lights, curse anybody he wanted to curse. And I just thought he was the coolest guy. He was a wild man, he would do anything he wanted to do. So my dad was very upset when he found out I was sneaking around town with Jerry Graham, because he didn't think he was a very good influence on me."

"That same summer, at a place right outside of Atlantic City while my dad was away, I talked my stepmom into peroxidizing my hair, and of course when my dad got back he blew his stack. That same summer, Dr. Jerry Graham gave me my first set of weights, called Healthways. I had the red shirt, red pants, and also I bought the red shoes. "I think my dad was probably a little afraid."

And for years, Vincent J. wouldn't hear of his son joining the family business; he was "balking all this line." Every Sunday over dinners with his father in Gatorsburg, Maryland (where Vince had moved with his young wife, Linda, to "be near my dad"), he continued to make his pitch: Let me in. Meanwhile, Vince was supporting his new family (Linda and Shane; a daughter, Stephanie, came later) at jobs he despised—as a salesman for the Maryland Cup Corporation, the Victor Concomitor adding-machine company, and, as if to tell everyone he really did feel like he was in prison, even breaking rocks at a quarry. "It



Stone Cold Steve Austin (foreground) punishes a hapless opponent.

CMACON. "HE'S A HORRIBLE HUMAN BEING."

IN THE FAST LANE, MCMAHON SAYS, "YOU JUST

was an honest day's pay," he says—as well as what Vince would later use to such effect in the arenas, great imagery.

Not to be outdone in that area, perhaps, in 1972 his father finally sent 27-year-old Vince up to Bangor, Maine, the outermost point of his "territory." (The old wrestling bosses operated within these strictly prescribed areas; Vincent J.'s territory was the biggest and most lucrative, the whole Northeast.) Bangor was wrestling exile. Vince said, "He told me, 'If you don't make it, don't ever ask me again.'"

But Vince did make it. Not only that, but after he came onboard as a television announcer for Capital Wrestling (in the shows of the seventies, he's swimming in his suit and seems to fear the athletes he's interviewing will attack him), he then proved to be an innovator in TV production techniques (nobody had ever seen wrestling in slo-mo before), which helped his dad's business grow. "And it was really good," said Vince. "It was making more money than it had ever made, and so my dad was thinking it just can't get any better than this—and he was looking to get out." In 1980, "my dad was retiring, and it scared me to death."

At first, Vincent J. refused, however, to sell his business to his son—who, despite his success as a company man, was himself going through bankruptcy. "I'd, uh, gotten in with some bad accounting people, I'd gotten into the cement-block-building business, the construction business, the quarter-horse business..." And yet Vince somehow managed to raise the money he needed for the purchase (in ways that are not entirely clear from his own account—something about a "guru" and a "real sharp guy").

But his dad nevertheless gave him a rather punishing deal: "If I didn't pay them the next quarterly payment, then they got to keep the money and get the business back. I really don't believe any of us thought I was gonna make that last payment," says Vince, "or even second payment, but I did it by using mirrors." And then, in a move that changed pro wrestling forever, Vince commenced invading the territories, buying out local leagues, and making his (formerly named) Worldwide Wrestling Federation national, a monopoly, and the first pro-wrestling conglomerate.

"My dad's phone started ringing, but he didn't really have any control then—now he was working for me. I got so tired of



hearing threats on my life. I said to one guy, 'If you wanna blow me away, you're way far behind; somebody might beat you to it.'"

"I'M STONE COLD STEVE Austin, like Vince McMahon says, a corporate nightmare. I don't dress up a whole lot. Sometimes my language is a little offensive. I drink a few beers on TV. I'm not a yes man. I do what I want, when and how I want. I'm not, uh, very respectful to authority

figures."

In Detroit's Joe Louis Stadium, hours before the WWF's *Monday Night Raw*, Stone Cold Steve Austin (Steve Williams is his real name) was sitting straddled on a bleacher after just having eaten a ham dinner in a backstage cafeteria with the other wrestlers. He was wearing his signature leather vest (it says HELL YEAH!) and a baseball cap that read AUSTIN. His shaved head was smooth as shoe leather. His icy-blue eyes glittered under long, blond lashes.

He was giving his take on the appeal of his character: "I think every now and then everybody would like to be able to punch their boss in the mouth, go out there and drive a truck into a building, sitting on top of it drinking beer—everybody likes to see that."

But before all that got worked into his story line (wrestlers typically share creative control of their characters with Vince and his writers), Austin was no big sensation. He joined the WWF three years ago as The Ringmaster, billed as a technical whiz, and he always got booed. Until one day, Austin started "saying a lot of Clint Eastwood stuff into the microphone, and the fans just started cheering me instead of booing me. Especially when I flipped people off on TV. And Vince didn't really like that."

"The real Vince is not the Vince in the ring," said Austin. "There is a parallel there; not as much as you see on TV. But I've certainly had my, uh, warnings about flipping people off and things like 'at."

"But I gotta be me out there. And there's not been a whole lot Vince can do about it."

Among the many, many Stone Cold Steve Austin products now being marketed by the WWF is a black foam hand with a finger being "flipped" (\$10).

Austin says he got the idea for the name Stone Cold after reading a book about serial killers. "And it's kinda worked out."

THREE TIMES IN ONE WEEK, STEVE Austin brutally attacked me. . . . Vince was bellowing, chastising the fuming Undertaker and Kane in front of the 20,000 fans packed into Joe Lewis Stadium in Detroit; the mammoth wrestlers had been roped into an arrangement, supposedly, to protect Vince from Stone Cold Steve Austin. But Austin had managed that night to drive a Zamboni into the arena, to the edge of the ring, leap from it, and, again, give Vince another "beating."

"But you didn't live up to your end of the deal. . . ." Vince hissed, face contorted. "So I'm not going to live up to mine!"

Vince had promised to award one of the victors against Austin the title belt. But instead, Vince gave the brothers the double finger; the Austinian reference ignited the fans—"Noooo!" Just then, Kane and the Undertaker started pummeling Vince, tossing him out of the ring and dumping a set of heavy metal steps on him.

Now, for one psychotic moment, Vince had truly "become" Stone Cold Steve Austin—fighting and losing to the same adversaries Austin had fought and lost to the night before in Ontario.

"Paramedics" rushed in.

Minutes later, backstage, as the home viewers were shown an ad for *Bride of Chucky*, Vince readied himself on a stretcher, cutting up with the camera crew, his greasy pompadour somehow unmussed. The cameras started rolling; Vince was hefted into an ambulance, twisting in pain.

"Don't drop him!" someone yelled.

The fans in the arena watched the action on their giant TV screens. Vince was really hurt?! "Yeah!"

"That's one way to get the boss outta here," joked one wrestler standing nearby,

watching Vince being driven away in the ambulance.

Before there was Stone Cold—mania, or a "Mr. McMahon," for that matter, there was Bret Hart, a long-haired, sweet-faced Canadian wrestler who stood for decency and integrity and, up until late 1997, was Vince's main draw. Vince, not "himself then," wore standard-issue tuxes, posing as a slicker version of his longtime announcer role. He didn't yet try to let the fans in on the fact



DIDN'T THINK ABOUT THE PEOPLE BEING HURT."

that he was the owner of the WWF. He wasn't yet a star.

"I thought of Vince McMahon as a father," Hart says in an upcoming A&E documentary, *Hitman Hart*, scheduled to air in December. Hart felt such a sense of loyalty to McMahon and the company that had made him (he'd been with the WWF fourteen years), in fact, in early 1997, he turned down a \$9 million offer from the WCW, like a true corporate soldier. But Vince, who was losing his ratings war with Ted Turner, started taking the WWF in a direction with which Hart was uncomfortable—upping the heat on story lines with racist and homophobic overtones and characters who seemed like escapees from lunatic asylums. (In this, Vince was actually going in a direction the WCW had already played with, but doing it harder.)

Hart balked. He was a traditionalist, born into a wrestling family; his own father, Stuart, had owned a Canadian wrestling territory that had, in fact, been bought out by McMahon during his westward expansion of the eighties.

"Something strange was happening," Hart says. "The guys the American fans are supposed to hate were becoming the heroes."

With Vince's okay, Hart actually started telling the fans—at events, from the ring—that he didn't "respect" their shifting moral center; he wanted them to "examine themselves" for cheering bad guys like the up-and-coming Stone Cold Steve Austin; he criticized them for not caring enough about America's poverty, racism—health care! A whole new level of reality was entering pro wrestling—reality reality—which, within the context of wrestling, felt doubly weird.

The fans waved signs at Hart:

IF YOU DON'T LOVE AMERICA THEN LEAVE IT.

Vince liked the energy; he encouraged Hart to call the U.S.A. "a giant toilet bowl." Overnight, Bret Hart became a "heel." But the Canadian fans still loved their Hitman; for a country that has always felt trapped in the awkward position of having to base its identity on not caring about national identity, in contrast to its blustering next-door neighbor, Hart was probably the closest thing there'd ever been to a nationalist hero in Canada's pop culture.

In late 1997, Vince let Bret Hart know that now would be a good time for him to

leave the WWF; shattered, Hart brokered another, substantial offer from the WCW. And then Vince asked Hart to go out by losing his title belt in, of all places, Montreal. "Vince asked me to lose in Canada. That would have been like committing suicide," Hart says—meaning emotionally; plus, it could also affect his contract negotiations with the WCW, because it would

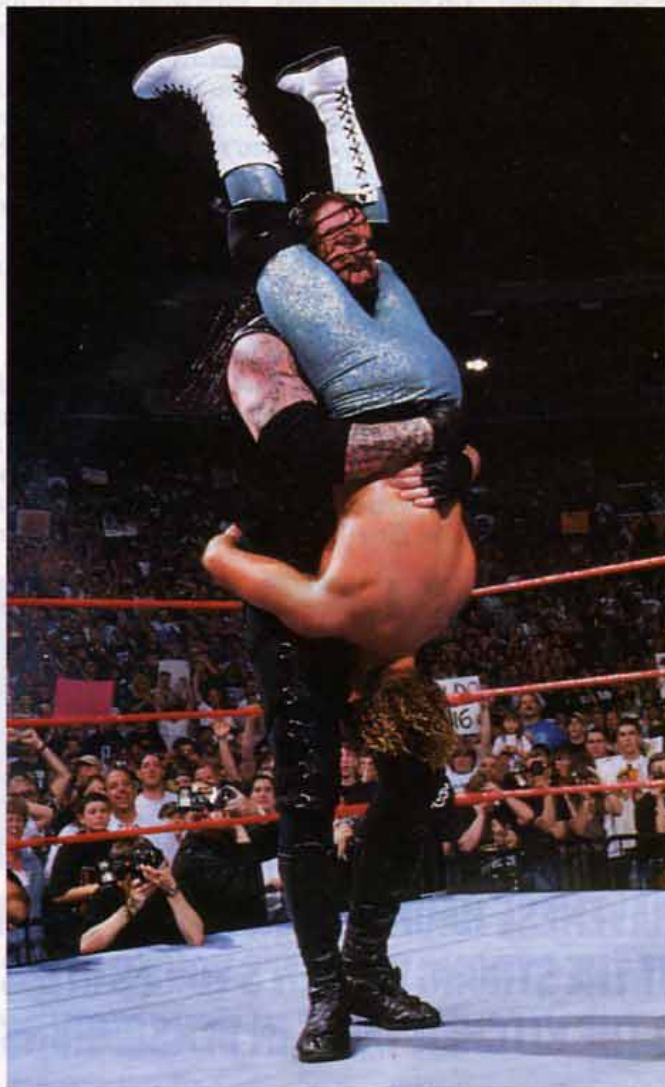
was the biggest pro-wrestling story ever."

The people smelled a fix, and they hated Vince for it. "He was getting booed," says Meltzer. "And he decided to go with the flow."

"WHEN YOU'RE ON THAT FAST TRACK," VINCE told me that day up at Titan Tower, "you just didn't think about the other people who were being hurt."

"I'm not like a lot of men. You'll find me to be more sensitive and things of that nature than most guys."

It's hard to know what's real anymore about Vince McMahon. "There's nothing real about him," says Meltzer. But that's made Vince's wrestling show realer than it's ever been. And that, too, is part of McMahon's art. "Whether anybody likes it or not, I'm tellin' you—HE'S IN CONTROL OF THIS ENTIRE SITUATION!!!" said his own WWF magazine recently. "It's a human chess game, and... before you know it... CHECKMATE!"



The Undertaker, six feet ten and 320 pounds, plants a victim. He and Kane recently "beat" Vince so badly he went to the "hospital."

make him look like such a jerk with the fans. But Vince said okay, we'll do it your way—you can go out on a disqualification.

Hart's opponent on November 9, 1997, at Montreal's Molson Center stadium was the cocky, pretty-boy wrestler Shawn Michaels, whom Vince had been pushing as his next big star. Michaels had Hart in Hart's own signature move—a "sharpshooter"—but he was not pinned when, Hart says, he heard someone say to the ref, "Ring the bell."

"It looked so bad on TV, it was not a professional-wrestling finish," says Meltzer. "It looked like mob thievery. This

ON THE LAST MONDAY NIGHT RAW show, live from the Nassau Coliseum, Vince came down the ramp to the ring in a wheelchair (he was temporarily "crippled" by the Undertaker and Kane); storm trooper-like bodyguards and two snapping German shepherds protected him as he faced off with Stone Cold Steve Austin, who could do little besides stand there. No beating up on Vince today.

"Kill him! Kill him!" urged the fans.

"You violated me, Austin, you violated me!" moaned Vince (referring to a previous "assault" by Austin in Vince's hospital room, where Austin had bashed an enema tube at Vince's behind). "What you did to my rectal area! But let

me tell you something, as much humiliation as I have suffered, you're gonna suffer more. . . . I will fire your ass!"

"You stupid bastard," shouted Stone Cold, "you ain't got the balls to fire Stone Cold Steve Austin!"

"I don't have the balls?" said Vince McMahon. "I've got balls the size of grapefruits! And... you're gonna be picking the seeds out of your teeth!"

The crowd went wild; in an era when nothing shocks, Vince was shocking them. "Vince! . . . Vince! . . . Vince!" Now the fans were actually cheering for McMahon.