

'Mike & Maty' prove to be a dynamic daytime duo

BY JOHN CROOK

"We're kind of like the 'Sleepless in Seattle' of talk show hosts," says Maty Monfort of her teaming with stand-up comic Michael Burger.

That's not entirely a flip comparison. TV critics around the country are hailing "Mike & Maty," airing daily on ABC, as one of the freshest and most appealing hours to hit daytime television in a long time.

"I think the show is different," Monfort says. "It's hip and younger and happier than most of the shows that are out there right now."

"TV Guide recently wrote that we were one of the three wholesomest hours left. I like that - wholesomeness, in the sense that we come on and we really just want people to have a good time with us, not to feel that we're the only ones having a good time."

The only downside: Her husband, Atlanta radio station operations manager Tony Novia, has to commute to Los Angeles on weekends to see her.

Born in Pinar del Rio, Cuba, Maria Matilde Monfort (her grandmother nicknamed her Maty) was only 18 months old when she and her parents fled the Communist country in 1967 and eventually settled in Miami. Years later, she took a job as

host of a local music video show to help pay for her studies at the University of Miami.

Thus began an eight-year association with Univision, a Miami-based Spanish-language cable service that made her face familiar in 18 countries. She became co-host of the variety show "Sabado Gigante" ("a really big Sabado," partner Burger translates helpfully), then served as host of "Hola America," a live daytime talk show.

Burger, a native of Long Beach, Calif., says he knew from the age of 12 that he wanted to be a talk show host and invested a lot of his school-time toward that goal.

"Kids used to say to me in class, once they got to know me, 'How far can you get the teacher off the subject?' If I thought history was going a little slow..." he laughs. "It's so sad, I used to think of school as really a loose framework for what I did. I was really playing this kind of subliminal talk show host, working on my craft. You know, try to do a nice, tight 10 (minutes) before recess. I guess it's just something I've always wanted to do. I knew it in junior high school."

Burger managed to earn a communications degree from California State University between gigs and

embarked on a successful unconventional career as a cruise ship comic and a warm-up act for TV sitcom tapings.

As the Undercover Comic, Burger attended corporate board seminars and retreats, where he was introduced as a newly hired CEO. He then would outline, poker-faced, radical business changes that would take the company in question into inevitable bankruptcy, to the thinly veiled panic and nervous laughter of his corporate "peers" who swallowed it all whole.

Clearly, "M&M" means a major shift in the way he manages his life.

"This thing airs five days a week. There lies the rub," he acknowledges. "I loved my life prior to this. It used to be that my biggest decision when I got up in the morning was whether to watch 'Bewitched' or 'Donahue.' Now I really have somewhere to go and somebody to report to."

Burger, who was signed for the show first, helped audition 85 female co-host applicants.

"I sat down and tried to discover, in 15 minutes or less, whether I could spend every morning with this woman. I mean, I haven't been able to do that in my personal life," says the 37-year-old bachelor. "I didn't know how I was going to do it for TV. We were looking for that little spark."

The "M&M" executives later told Monfort that when she walked in, they said to themselves, "Oh, God, please let her be able to speak!" Exactly 47 minutes later, she had the job.

Despite the accolades, "M&M" has faced an uphill battle for ratings, since the show inherited a less than prime timeslot in many markets.

"And we're proud of that," says Burger drily. "The show actually is part of a government relocation program. Until we prove our innocence, we cannot air. (In Miami we're) on at 1:30 a.m. People are going, 'Should we watch "Mike & Maty" or get ready to knock off a liquor store? Whaddya wanna do?' What kind of demographic is that? People watch this who are their own fathers. You need someone who's a little higher up the food chain dialing you in."

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