

What Williams tradition

recently zipped past its

75th anniversary?

TRIVIA

by Des Devlin

It was 16 years before Trivial Pursuit and 33 years before *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. It was the spring of 1966, and Williams students were enjoying the peculiar satisfaction that comes from knowing what the “G” in Maynard G. Krebs stands for (answer: “Walter”) and the birth of the biannual Williams Trivia contest, broadcast into the wee hours on WCFM.

Founder Franklyn Ferry '69 took a page from the College Bowl handbook, announcing that a new, eight-hour phone-in radio contest would coincide with the end of term. His game would focus on nigglingly memorable details from sports, film, TV, ads and comics. Says Ferry, quoting the 1960 movie *The Magnificent Seven*: “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

During the first-ever Trivia, Ferry ran out of questions. He called an impromptu time-out, returning a few hours later with two more hours of hot-off-the-grill material. (Example: “What was the slogan of Cott Quality Beverages before ‘It’s Cott to Be Good’?” Answer: “Life is great when you carbonate.”) Alas, by the time the host was ready to resume the game, Williams D, the contest leaders, had fallen asleep. And thus the team from Garfield House roared past their opponents to victory.

Ferry’s format was soon tweaked. In 1967, Cliff Low '69 added “Name That Tune.” The year 1968 saw the debut of hourly “Bonus Questions”—trivia considered so cruelly arcane that teams had 60 minutes to unearth the answer. Then came multi-question “Hour





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Bonuses” and four-hour-long “Super Bonuses.”

But the spine of the game has remained intact over the course of 76—soon to be 77—contests. For eight hours, the DJ reads a question, then plays a song. Teams scramble to call in the answer for credit. Whoever scores the most points wins.

Simple enough, but why has Williams Trivia survived from generation to generation? And why do participants of all ages continue to play long after they’ve left the Purple Valley?

“We as a species owe our survival to recognizing patterns and figuring out what those patterns mean, whether they are faces, antelope herd movements, cloudy weather or stock market

fluctuations,” says Robert Kent ’84, a California Web designer and martial arts instructor who has played Trivia with the same teammates for more than 20 years. “One of the special joys of Trivia is the opportunity to take pieces of data all jumbled up and out of their familiar contexts and put them back where they belong.”

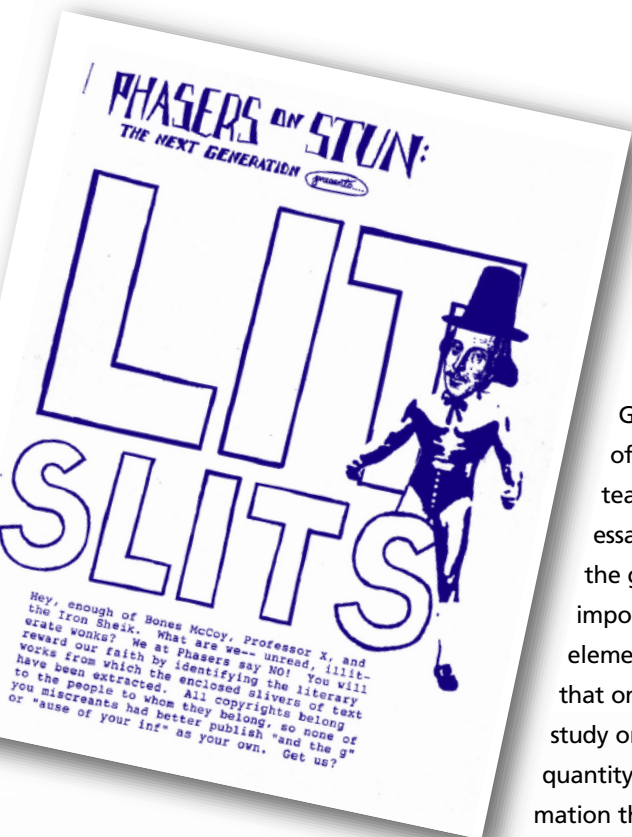
Chris Roosenraad ’94 of Virginia, son of a Williams professor, cites “the wildness, the craziness, the insanity of having one’s brain turn to tapioca, then being asked to remember mediocre baseball players from when you were in middle school.”

Gee Team (above) runs the spring 1975 Trivia Contest.

Ransom Notes (like the one running across the bottom of pages 20-23) are comprised of product logos for contestants to identify.

Ransom Note logos: B-Bisquick, uff-Puffs, y-Crystal Light, W-A&W, e-Degree, H-Harvest Crisps, a-Sears, v-Ivory, e-Cheetos, Y-Joyva, o-Land O’Lakes, u-Snuggle, r-Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups, K-Special K, i-Cinnamon Toast Crunch, t-Sprite, t-Mott’s Apple Sauce, e-ERA, n-Pepsi One, s-Crisco

we Have You



New Yorker Stephen Gardner '75, a key member of BOMO, the preeminent team of the 1970s, wrote an essay then about the lure of the game, observing: "An important anti-structural element of the Trivia Contest is that one should NOT be able to study or prepare for it. The quantity and nature of the information that one is 'tested' on is literally everything that one never learns at Williams."

Adds Virginian Arielle Kagan Masters '92, "Trivia provides an endorphin rush from the creation of new neural pathways, as our standardized testing-drilled minds delight in the freedom of making blindingly insightful connections between heretofore totally unrelated tidbits of sometimes long-buried data. Of course."

But perhaps we should go to the source.

Ferry described his creation as "a tremendous emotional experience. We don't deal in minutia, which may be defined as useless facts with no emotional value. Trivia concerns something you know but can't quite remember."

Ferry and Co. were hosting their fifth game in a row when they added a vital twist:

Whichever team won Trivia would create and host the next one, ensuring the contest's longevity.

The first decade's dramatic peak came in 1972, when the Bayonettes finished tied with the Grand Duchy of Fenwick. Trivia overtime ensued. The tiebreaker was a movie question: "What was the last line of *The Time Machine*?"

The Bayonettes had among their members senior and future Oscar nominee John Sayles,

described by a teammate as having "basically seen every movie ever." Game over.

Two notable teams debuted around this time. BOMO, known as the U.S. Steel of Trivia, allegedly peaked at 90-plus players. They boasted a massive comic book collection, plus an alphabetized list of songs on index cards. The team also awarded commendations to players who went beyond the norm—for instance, by breaking into the library to rifle through back issues of *Sports Illustrated*. Small wonder that BOMO would finish in either first or second place for 13 consecutive semesters. Such flamboyant efforts were referred to as "gusto," a trait not limited to BOMO. 1975 champs General Bumble reportedly claimed an all-important bonus by telephoning a librarian in Honolulu.

Much smaller, but equally legendary, are the Manhattan Skyliners. At the age of 14, Berkshires resident Jim Cohen first heard of the contest by chance and started playing. And playing. In fact, he's still playing. Solo or with cohorts, the Skyliners have been competing for more than 30 years. As part of the 75th contest, the Skyliners finally got to do a guest Hour Bonus; it was the first time they'd ever written questions for Williams Trivia.

Among the memorable moments was the debut of "Action Trivia," in which a scenario is announced and teams have an hour to whip up and rehearse a vignette and hurry to WCFM to perform it for judges. Early "actions" were simple acts: Make a Cootie Catcher or walk like a "Wild and Crazy Guy." Now, teams are expected to do life-size versions of the board game Mousetrap, demonstrate how the Red Sox can beat the Yankees, or re-enact the history of the British Empire in three minutes or less.

In 1976, General Bumble's Mike Ryan, then a senior, assembled a crisply edited montage of

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doo-wops, nah-nahs and other nonsensical syllables from popular songs. After a time, the "Audio Bonus" stuck. Today's contests typically feature two sonic sequences that have ranged from guitar solos to classical music, from musical laughter (i.e., "Wipe Out" or "Thriller") to the repeated word "monkey," and from movie dialogue to the opening sentence of *The Catcher in the Rye*, reconstructed in song clips. The spring 2000 game offered "100 Years of Song," in which each of 100 chronological excerpts represented a different year spanning 1900-99. Most recently, the team Click Here to Get Huge contrived the biggest production yet, a colossal 250-snippet montage of lyrics recreating the complete plotline of *The Wizard of Oz*.

1970s competition was fierce, and not always gentlemanly. "Phone jamming" occurred whenever a large team would tie up multiple operators, a procedural no-no. Some teams continued to call in after getting an answer, to deprive their competition of an open line. Even more devious was when somebody spliced their way into the College's phone system, actually fielding competitors' calls meant for the radio station and assuring their victims they'd gotten the answers.

Tom Gardner '79 of Bedford, N.Y., who joined the BOMO team as a high-school junior, played for seven years and then returned to competition via the Web in 2000, recalls that "being a 'phone person' in the 'ring dial' era was masochistic. The reward for eight hours of dialing was a purplish-black ring around the tip of your index finger from having dialed about 1,000 times over the course of the evening (no AOL Instant Messenger, no Touch-Tone, no redial). This was a



mark worn with great pride and distinction for one's travails."

Molecular biologist and North Carolinian Ted Benson '85, who has been competing since 1981, recalls phone cords being stretched onto the staircase landings in the vertical entries in Prospect House, "so that we had to coordinate up and down four floors simultaneously. 'Dial! Dial!' we would cry. When a caller got through, the person with the answer would have to lunge up or down several sets of stairs, rasp out the response, and then collapse with a point or two to show for it. Song after song after song."

In 1978, Alphabet Soup was the first team to specifically select songs to thematically complement its questions. (For a question about the

Ford-Carter debates, they chose the Knickerbockers' "Lies.")

Music matching offered a vast new area for creativity, crassness and witty hints.

In 1981, Grape Nehi

became the first all-alumni team—as well as the smallest, with only eight core players—to win. A year later, sophomore team Smedley Terrace (named after the parapet next to Driscoll Dining



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In Product Placement (above), contestants identify movies by products appearing in them.

Lit Slits (opposite page) are slivers of text extracted from literary works.

Product Placement: (from top) Zoolander, Wayne's World, Ghostbusters

Lit Slits: (from left) Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*, The Guinness Book of World Records, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*



TRIVIA



In Trash the Art Museum (above) contestants earn points by naming the style, artist and/or title of the paintings depicted.

Our Old Toys Do... Stuff (far right) recreates famous scenes in life, art, literature, etc.

Art Museum: 1. Rembrandt, "The Night Watch," Dutch; 2. Nevinson, "The Soul of the Soulless City (New York—An Abstraction)," Modern, Cubist; 3. Gallen-Kalela, "Swan of Tounela," Finnish; 4. Copley, "Watson and the Shark," American; 5. Demuth, "The Figure Five in Gold," Modern; 6. Kandinsky, "Improvisation," Early Modern; 7. Eakins, "The Champion Single Sculls (Max Schmitt in a Single Scull)," American 19th Century, Realist

Our Old Toys Do ... Stuff: Gulliver, captured by the Lilliputians



Hall) became the only group ever to win Trivia in both of its first two tries. (They'd won in 1981 as The Singleman Party.) The "Smedley-Singleman" switch reflected another change in Trivia: For the contest's first 15 years, teams such as Knights of Ni, Buda Bear, Wham-O, 12 O'Clock High, P.T.G. and Hold the Anchovies chose one name and stuck with it. Since then, teams have concocted fresh names for each game.

Arguably, the contest's heyday was 1986-87. More viable all-night teams competed than in any other period. Three of the four games were decided by two points, one point, and one-fifteenth of one point. The story behind that last absurd margin would ripple for the next 17 years. During the December '86 contest, the teams We Begin Bombing in Five Minutes and All the Sugar, Twice the Caffeine

were tied for first. In overtime, both teams answered the same three questions correctly and missed the fourth. It all came down to number five: "Name the three monarchies in Africa." We Begin Bombing did so. Twice the Caffeine correctly named two but guessed "Tonga" as the third and lost by 0.06 points.

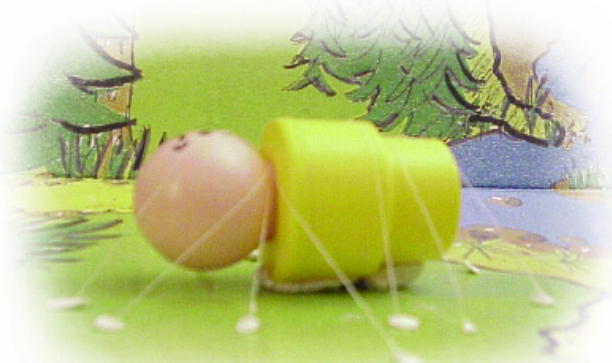
The team made a comeback two years later, trouncing the field by 65 points, the largest margin ever. For the next three contests Twice the Caffeine would host, the team always included questions about the tiny island nation that had cost them everything. Virtually every team since has followed suit, asking Tonga-related trivia as an enduring tribute.

Alumni began joining teams as early as 1970, but the practice accelerated in the late 1980s. Phasers on Stun played for a decade. "The Python team" has finished in first or second place 15 times over a 22-year stretch, frequently naming themselves after some Monty Python reference. "The Ballroom team" competed from Currier Ballroom until graduation forced them to other pastures.

Non-Williams "ringers" also started competing alongside Eph friends and relatives in 1970. But the winter 1994 broadcast was unique. In a one-time circumstance, the host team, How DARE They Challenge Me With Their Primitive Skills?, included no Williams students or alumni.

Powerhouse undergraduate teams—such as "the Tupperware team" (don't ask), which in 1995 earned a reputation as the "win-host-coast" team with five titles in 10 tries but no back-to-back wins—have gone on to become top alumni teams.

In 1993, listeners heard an unusual halftime break, when Chris Aylott '91 proposed over the air to Deb Tomaselli '92. (The answer to the most romantic Trivia question ever? "Yes.") The third and final tie game to date came in 1996. That contest also hinged on a single overtime question, as We Make Holes in Teeth! was able to identify the only U.S. library devoted to vanity press editions.





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of founder Ferry, returning to the airwaves for the first time since 1969. Besides guest-reading a question, Ferry thanked many of his 1960s Carter House colleagues by name and said, "I'll admit that having attended at the birth of something which has been pursued with such foolhardy

fervor by so many, for so long, is the source of some bewilderment. And not a little satisfaction." Following the game, a two-CD collection of audio clips from 40 of the previous 74 broadcasts was distributed to the groggy crowd.

With Trivia 77 already under our belts by the time you read this, it's clear that this strange and marvelous tradition will continue—as long as there are Ephs who consider the ability to speak Klingon almost as important as fluency in Latin, as long as students are as familiar with the works of Bill Watterson as Bill Shakespeare and as long as a crazed minority wants to study classic paintings not merely for their rare beauty but as items meant to be dissembled and presented in tiny little pieces. Long may Trivia perplex. ■

Des Devlin, husband of a Williams alumna, has participated in 40 consecutive Trivia contests. His teams have won 12 times and, he says, God willing, shall never do so again. Squandering his brain on useless activity comes naturally to him, as he is a writer for MAD magazine.

Album Cover Grid (left), in which contestants identify portions of album covers by title and artist, is considered by many to be the greatest Trivia bonus ever.

Trivia creator Franklyn Ferry '69 (bottom, at the mike) and John Oppenheimer '68 during the spring 1968 contest.



Album Cover Grid IDs: (top to bottom, left to right): Saturday Night Fever, Various Artists; Breakfast in America, Supertramp; Molly Hatchett, Molly Hatchett; Whipped Cream and Other Delights, Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass; Disraeli Gears, Cream; Equinox, Styx; Who's Next, The Who; Get the Knack, Knack; A Night at the Opera, Queen; Break Like the Wind, Spinal Tap; Back in Black, ACDC; Surrealistic Pillow, Jefferson Airplane; Beauty and the Beat, The Go-Go's; Bat out of Hell, Meat Loaf; Rumours, Fleetwood Mac; In Through the Out Door, Led Zeppelin; Fragile, Yes; They Only Come out at Night, Edgar Winter Group; But Seriously, Folk's ...; Joe Walsh; Fables of the Reconstruction, R.E.M.; Thriller, Michael Jackson; American Pie, Don McLean; Head Games, Foreigner; Blue Hawaii, Elvis Presley; Business As Usual, Men at Work

A year later, one team nailed a perfect score on the "Autobiography Titles" bonus by using a previously unexploited research tool called the Internet. Search engines would forever transform the contest, instantly rendering huge areas of well-loved trivia useless for competitive purposes. Many of the very best hour bonuses from the first quarter-century of Williams Trivia would be shredded in 10 minutes today.

When WCFM started broadcasting over the Web, teams began playing from afar, sending answers via instant messages or e-mail. Previous Trivia generations returned, notably a mini-BOMO that hasn't missed a game since 2000. Contests are accessible online in real time, with downloadable bonuses and updated scores. Ambitious long-distance teams have even managed to compete in Action Trivia by recording their performances and sending video attachments via e-mail to the radio station. The Web site wso.williams.edu/orgs/trivia/ serves as a contest archive.

A mix of generations was highlighted by the contests in 2000. In May, Make Way for Ducklings, MF, became the oldest team to win Trivia, with several of its players having graduated 15 years earlier. That winter, Holy Sack and the Resident Vomit Specialist were just the second first-year team to win its very first attempt.

Trivia celebrated its 75th contest in November 2003, attracting greater than usual frosh turnout, with two first-time teams finishing in the Top 5. Listeners also heard the voice