



Photo: George Brainard



All Things
KINKY
in the Heart of **TEXAS**

Even in the Lone Star State, where bigger-than-life personalities are a way of life, there's never quite been a straight-talking Texan the likes of Kinky. → By Evan Dashevsky

When referring to Kinky Friedman, the term “renaissance man” gets thrown around quite a bit by lazy writers, so I won’t use it here. And besides, it hardly seems up to the challenge of describing the man and his career. Really, no one term or phrase is quite up to the task. His last name reveals a Yiddish ancestry, which found its way (by way of Chicago, where he was born) to the great bastion of Jewish-American culture, Central Texas. And Richard was the name his parents gave him, but he earned his more familiar moniker while at the University of Texas as an ode to his curly locks (rather than any particular sexual proclivity).

Kinky initially became known to the world as a musician with his group Kinky Friedman and The Texas Jewboys, a band his own press release describes as “The Frank Zappa of country music.” The Jewboys songs were often ironic, usually humorous, and always pret-

ty damn entertaining. Kinky managed to build an audience that included both country music aficionados as well as campus hipsters. This unique fete is best represented by the fact that the band landed an opening slot on tour with Bob Dylan as well as invites to perform onstage at the Grand Ole Opry. (Kinky is also quick to point out that he just recently completed a sold-out tour of Europe.)

Friedman later became a prolific author with a popular set of detective novels about a fictional detective who—by complete happenstance—is named “Kinky Friedman.” And in the past year, he’s released two non-fiction collections: *Kinky’s Celebrity Pet Files* which features profiles of his famous friends and their animal companions, and also *Heroes of a Texas Childhood*, which delves into the personalities which helped mold a young Kinky into the man he became. He is an ardent animal rescue advocate and founder of the Utopia Animal



Photo: George Brinard

Rescue Ranch, a no-kill shelter for stray, abused, or homeless animals. He is the owner of Kinky Friedman Cigars (which he lovingly refers to as “KFC”), which offers such product lines as the Kinkycristo, the Texas Jewboy, and the Kinky Lady. He has been a contributing pundit on the Fox News Channel, where he’s managed to become that network’s most beloved avowed Democrat. Of course, up until recently, he had been spending most of his time on his most recent occupation: political candidate.

Kinky ran for Governor of Texas as an Independent in 2004 where he placed fifth with 12 percent of the vote (he says he would have won had he ran as a Democrat then). Initially he was contemplating another run at the governor’s house for this year’s elections, but decided instead to run for Texas Agriculture Commissioner as a

Democrat. Why the change?

“I was leading in the polls when I dropped out, but the other fella [Democratic gubernatorial nominee] Bill White is very financially well-endowed and he’s also the darling of the establishment,” says Kinky on the phone from his ranch near Kerville in Texas’ Hill Country. “And, as Bob Dylan says, ‘money doesn’t talk, it swears,’ so I decided to get out and run for Ag[riculture] Commissioner and support Bill White.”

Bill White would go on to win the nomination with Kinky’s blessing, unfortunately things didn’t work out quite as well for Friedman. A few weeks after our interview the would end up losing in the primaries to Cattle Rancher Hank Gilbert. Before the election Kinky received the endorsements of the *Dallas Morning News*, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, and *El Paso Times*. But was it possible to overcome his bohemian cowboy past and convince the electorate of his sincerity? Another term often thrown around with Kinky is “humorist” (on the day of the election a Google search of “Kinky Friedman’ and humorist” netted 37,000 hits, while “Kinky Friedman’ and ‘Agriculture Commissioner,’ bagged a relatively paltry 8,350). Commentators on Kinky’s political aspirations have veered between giving his candidacies a serious treatment and passing them off as publicity stunts. Kinky himself even says “I’d rather be a musician than a politician. I’m a reluctant politician.” When he ran for Governor in 2006, his official cam-

campaign website offered both light-hearted takes on the issues mixed with more clear-headed analysis (i.e. on gay marriage: “they have as much right to be miserable as the rest of us,” while on an issue like education had more sober examinations “Texas has the eighth largest economy in the world, but we’re first in drop-out rates.”) The main goals of Kinky’s Ag Commissioner campaign was to support biofuels (with the help of fellow musician and Texan icon, Willie Nelson), farmer coops, and place no-kill animal sanctuaries in every county. His campaign headline was “Common Sense... Uncommon Honesty.” Unfortunately, as we all know, honesty and public office are partners who rarely dance together.

Part of selling oneself as a politician or as an entertainer is selling a brand. And brand Kinky is rarely seen in public without two

“So, you can’t say that *only* tobacco grown in Cuba could be that good. But, boy, can you tell the difference.”

things: a signature black Stetson hat, and a cigar. He smokes seven or eight cigars per day, which is an ambitious undertaking, so he can often be found puffing away on stage at political functions and on-screen during his Fox News appearances. For the record, in Kinky’s house, the alarm goes off at 7:00 am, and the first cigar is in his mouth at 7:01.

And for the time being, that day’s first cigar, and all the ones that follow, are a completely legal pursuit—despite what the anti-smoking forces (whom Kinky refers to as “hall monitors for adults”) would have happen if they got their way. Kinky, on the other hand, preaches the opinion that cigars are healthy, or as he lays out in a piece he penned in his role as a sometime-columnist with *Texas Monthly*: “whenever you see a 90-year-old geezer, most of the time he’s still puffing a stogie. But you almost never see a 90-year-old smoking a cigarette. This is because we cigar smokers religiously follow the wise example of Bill Clinton: We don’t inhale.”

Speaking of which, Kinky has never been afraid to declare his fondness for Cuban cigars. On one visit to the White House in the ’90s, he even offered a contraband stick to then non-inhaler-in-chief President Clinton. “Yeah, I presented him with one in front of a bunch of people. And he felt awkward about taking it, he thought it was illegal to do it or something,” Kinky recalls. “And maybe it was. I’m not sure. But I told him ‘remember, Mr. President, we’re not supporting their economy, we’re burning down their fields, one cigar at a time.’” When asked if that might have been *the* cigar that almost brought down a Presidency, Friedman responds, “You know, the timing was right. It was just about right. I don’t know and I can’t say definitively, but I wouldn’t be sur-



prised.” Circumventing U.S. law with elected officials and almost bringing down an administration—not bad for a day’s work.

It’s far more common, however, to see Kinky smoking one of his own signature Honduran-made cigars—a project he embarked on several years ago and continues to expand with offerings for nearly any taste. His original five Kinky Friedman Cigars are creamy, medium-bodied blends with a hint of spice and Honduran Habano wrappers. More recently he’s added Kinksters—Ecuadorian Connecticut shade-wrapped bundles, blended and priced for “frequent smokers”—as well as his take on the classic Cuban Habano, the Big Richard Special Edition, a complex with blend rolled from tobaccos aged over seven years.

Cuba’s future, though, remains of particular interest to this fan of that nation’s smokable forbidden fruit. On the possibility of Kinky Friedman Cigars someday being made with Cuban leaf, Kinky enthusiastically responds, “I’d love to try it out. Love to get down there. It’s like Kona coffee. Everyone was telling them, you can’t grow coffee trees there, it’ll be horrible, the soil is all volcanic and you won’t grow trees there. But it’s the best coffee in the whole world. They were 100% wrong. So, you can’t say that *only* tobacco grown in Cuba could be that good. But, boy, can you tell the difference. And I think Honduran is second best. Our cigars are Honduran.”

Honesty is a unique hobby for a businessman, and nearly unheard of as a pastime for a politician. As cliché as it is to say, Kinky tells it like it is. And that’s why, decades into his career, people are still listening to what he has to say, reading what he has to write, and smoking the cigars he endorses. So perhaps the best phrase to describe the man comes from former President and George W. Bush who called him “a Texas legend.” Or maybe the labeling game is unnecessary. Everybody in the Lonestar State knows exactly who you are talking about when you’re talking about “Kinky.”

Have You Seen the Size of Kinky’s Big Richard?

It’s pretty intimidating at six-and-a-half inches and an impressive 54 ring gauge. If you want the world to know the extent of your masculinity, try walking down the street with your fingers wrapped around your Big Richard. Just try not to hurt anyone with that thing.

But enough with the Freudian humor.

Introduced last year as part of KFC’s pursuit of a Cuba-like smoke. The Big Richard features a triple-fermented Honduran Habano Maduro wrapper around a Nicaraguan binder and a filler blend consisting of Nicaraguan, Honduran, and Panamanian leaf. The result is a bold and complex smoke. For more information on where to buy, check on at www.kinkycigars.com.

