

Still Kinky After All These Years

JENNIE ROTHENBERG

Deep in the heart of Texas, about an hour northwest of San Antonio, lives a one-of-a-kind cowboy. He shares his ranch with 70 homeless animals including dogs, cats, pigs and armadillos. He taps out best-selling mystery novels on an old typewriter. He has five girlfriends. And he wears a silver Star of David pendant on a chain around his neck. Meet Kinky Friedman, the man who intends to be the next Governor of Texas.

"Texas didn't get to be the Lone Star State by being politically correct," Friedman says. "We need more loose canons. During my campaign, I won't kiss babies. I'll kiss their mothers."

Such original thinking is exactly what fans have come to expect from "the Kinkster." Born Richard Friedman, Kinky earned his moniker some 35 years ago when he began growing out his dark, frizzy hair. In the 1970s, as singer and songwriter for The Texas Jewboys, Friedman paired country music melodies with unlikely Jewish

themes. In one song, a Jewish truck driver wins the heart of a waitress by ordering corned beef on rye. In another, a disgruntled hippie wanders into a synagogue: *"My book was backwards, couldn't read / But I got a good rise when I heard that rabbi*

sing / 'Boruch atoh adonoi, / What the hell are you doing back there, boy?'"

In the mid-1980s, Friedman set aside country music and began writing novels. He has written more than a dozen to date, each starring himself as a



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BRIANA

retired country singer who solves mysteries with the help of his real-life friends. In his 1997 book *Roadkill*, for instance, the Kinkster is called upon to rescue his onetime touring companion Willie Nelson from an ominous Indian curse. His eccentric literary wit has earned Friedman a host of new high-profile friends: Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush are fans of his books, and both hosted him at the White House during their respective administrations. As a token of thanks, Friedman offered each Commander in Chief one of his favorite illegally imported Cuban cigars.

Friedman's exposure to the nation's top politicians may have inspired his own bid for governor. His campaign slogans are "Why the hell not?" and "How hard could it be?" His official bumper sticker features the Texas flag with a Star of David replacing the five-pointed Lone Star. "I think Judaism's going to flourish when I'm governor," says Friedman who, despite his cowboy sensibility, does not speak with a drawl. "The only problem I have is that I can't get Texans to pronounce the word 'Jewish' right. It's always one syllable: 'Joosh.' And they pronounce 'Jew' with about eleven syllables: 'He married a Jeeeiuuuuuuwww!'"

For all his kitschy appeal, the former country singer can strike a surprisingly serious note when discussing politics. The first item on his web site, KinkyFriedman.com, is a plea to exonerate Texas death row prisoner and Jew Max Soffar, who Friedman believes was coerced into making a false confession. He writes a column called "The Last Roundup" for *Texas Monthly Magazine*—always on a typewriter, never

on a computer—and is not shy about appearing politically incorrect. The goal of his campaign, he says, is to restore independent thought. He recently cancelled the European leg of his book signing tour, in support of his new novel *The Prisoner of Vandam Street*, to protest European criticism of the United States. "I'm anti-Europe right now and anti-U.N.," says Friedman. "And I'm very pro-Israel."

Friedman, who attended Hebrew school as a child and was Bar Mitzvahed in Houston, first visited Israel in 1968 on his way back from serving in the Peace Corps. Earlier that same year, in the jungle of Borneo, Friedman had written the song "Ride 'Em Jewboy," an odd but sincerely moving piece that casts the archetypal wandering Jew as a cowboy wearing the "yeller star" and riding around the "old corral": "I'm, I'm with you, boy / If I've got to ride six million miles."

"Bob [Dylan] used to sing that song in the shower, but he never sang it onstage," says Friedman. "Willie [Nelson], on the other hand, recorded the song. I'm amazed at the reaction that Gentiles have had to it, which is quite often tears. For Jews, of course, it just makes them a little uncomfortable. Kind of like Jackie Mason said—people would come up to him after his shows and shake their heads. 'Too Jewish, too Jewish.'"

Today, Judaism and the Jewish State are still interwoven with Friedman's endeavors. He likes to joke that, if elected, he will appoint his Palestinian hairdresser, Farouk Shami, as Texas ambassador to Israel. In fact, he and Shami are launching a new olive oil business whose proceeds will benefit both Israeli and Palestinian

children. Friedman has enjoyed some measure of success selling food products—including Kinky's Private Stock Salsa and Kona Kosher Blend Coffee—in support of his animal rescue ranch. Later this year, he and Shami will introduce Farouk and Friedman's Olive Oil.

"Farouk is very close with Israeli mayors of little towns south of Jerusalem," Friedman says. "That's not very politically correct. In fact, he's been warned that it's somewhat dangerous." Despite their shared sense of roguish independence, Friedman and his Muslim business partner do not necessarily see eye to eye on issues like Jewish settlements and Palestinian statehood. "There are problems there," Friedman admits. "But the main thing is to show Sharon and Arafat what can be done. Both [Jews and Arabs] are ingenious people. They just don't work together at all. We're talking about putting aside any quarrels about other stuff and seeing if we can make a lot of money for kids. We'll see how that works out."

Adding the olive oil venture to his other activities—his animal care-taking duties, his book tour, and his purported five women—it would seem that Friedman had enough on his plate without also running for governor. But the self-declared Texas Renaissance man seems to have every intention of gathering the 45,000 signatures needed to run as an independent candidate.

As for his chances of winning, Friedman claims to be optimistic. "I've often said that people in the Texas Hill Country are familiar with two Jews: Kinky Friedman and Jesus Christ. And the only one they know personally is me." ●