The Singing Computer

Prairie Honeys: Computer a performance art vaudeville act by Eric Hughes and RU12 October 1 in Memorial Union, E12. For information call 253-7400 or 493, or PO Box 59, MIT Branch, Cambridge, MA 02139.

The show started half an hour late because RU12 lost their ticket. Later, when Eric Hughes walked in wearing a UPC bar code sports shirt — part of the "New Fall Left-Brain Fashion Collection" — I knew we wouldn't be going to a traditional vaudeville act.

The performance consisted of many short technology-based skits, from slides featuring new-wave telephones to jokes about micro-chips and barcodes. Although Hughes said that the show was going to be "close captioned for the computer illiterate," a few members of the audience confused me afterwards that they had problems keeping up with the techno-humor.

For an average MIT student, though, there would be no problem at all. About half way through the performance, Hughes broke from talking about "Art from the Left Side of the Brain" to touch upon "Science from the Right Side of the Brain." "It's not really science, and it's not really magic — it's just real," explained Hughes, as he set up an experiment that Philip Morrison had allegedly told him about. Hughes then attempted to demonstrate the properties of non-Newtonian fluids by slamming his hand into a bowl of liquid corn-starch. It didn't work.

Eric Hughes then was to an old MIT group. He says that he likes to hang around during IAP and will be here again this year. In addition to performing, Hughes writes regularly on technology and humor. He is the coordinator of the Boston Bennecita Celebration, which will be bringing the "Fall Buildings to Boston for the Year 2000 Weekend." (He showed a slide of how they're going to get the World Trade Center into Boston Harbor.)

Hughes' co-bonus, RU12 is a DEC Rainbow 100 personal computer equipped with a "DecTalk" speech synthesizer. Throughout the show, RU12 mumbles, speaks and sings. The singing, including a rendition of Frank Sinatra's "New York," was by far the entire's most understood. A bit harder was the report from the Olympic Boxing Committee, broadcast "live" from a computer warehouse on Route 128. Unfortunately, most people in the audience found the sabre acts, such as "speed-listening" and the "consultants user's guide for consultants assistants" just plain unintelligible. It was a shame, because the material was very funny.

The show was recorded direct to a laserdisk under the auditorium. From there it will be transferred to a time capsule with a sign saying "do not open till 2032." Hughes thinks that it will be safe.

Mobius is an artist-run, alternative performance space, primarily for use by experimental art and artists. It is supported, in part, by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities and through the Boston Arts Lottery. A bit off the beaten track, it's well worth the four-block walk from South Station.

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