

# LIVE FROM NEW YORK, IT'S SATURDAY NIGHT!

*In our Third Bathroom Reader, we covered the origin of Saturday Night Live. Why write about it again? Because it's one of the most influential TV shows of all time. Over the years, it has had its ups and downs, but it remains essentially the same show Lorne Michaels devised back in 1975.*

## A CONSERVATIVE MEDIUM

In the late 1960s, America's youth spoke out against the war in Vietnam, against racism, and against a government they saw as a growing threat to the freedom of speech. How did the big three TV networks react to this dissent? They mostly ignored it.

Take the popular variety show *Laugh-In*, which was marketed to younger people. It featured a head writer who also happened to be a Nixon speechwriter. The result: More fluff than substance. And *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* coasted along fine until Tommy Smothers began speaking out openly against the war. CBS swooped in and quickly canceled the show in 1969. By the end of the decade, the message was clear: "The revolution will not be televised."

## UNDERGROUND COMEDY

In the early 1970s, the revolution took an unexpected turn: it showed up in underground comedy. *MAD* magazine and *National Lampoon* spread the anti-establishment message on their pages; comedy troupes such as Second City in Chicago and Toronto and The Groundlings in Los Angeles performed cutting-edge satire with no rules, no limits, and no censorship—all things that TV network executives stayed well away from. To them, comedy was Johnny Carson and Dick Cavett for adults, and *The Brady Bunch* and *Gilligan's Island* for kids.

There was, however, one word that the network brass has always pricked up its ears for: ratings. And NBC's late-night Saturday ratings were so low in 1975 that they were giving away advertising spots in the time slot as a free bonus to attract primetime advertis-

ing deals. They blamed the low ratings on the time of night rather than on what they were broadcasting: *Tonight Show* reruns. But everyone was growing tired of having Johnny on six, and sometimes seven, nights a week. NBC was ready to replace the reruns with something else. They were considering a weekly variety show hosted by impressionist Rich Little and singer Linda Rondstadt.

They gave the task of creating the new show to a young executive named Dick Ebersol, who didn't even bother pursuing Little; he wanted to do something new and fresh that younger viewers could identify with. A fellow executive told him, "Dick, there's only one guy you should talk to."

### LORNE MICHAELS

By the time he was 30 years old, Canadian Lorne Michaels (born Lorne Lipowitz) had graduated with an English degree from the University of Toronto, sold cars in England, starred as one-half of a comedy team on Canadian television, been a writer for *Laugh-In* (all of his jokes about Nixon were rejected), produced a TV special for Lily Tomlin, and submitted an idea for a late-night variety show to NBC—twice.

But the timing for his show wasn't right until 1975, when Ebersol sought him out. At their first meeting, Michaels told Ebersol: "I want to do a show for the generation that grew up on television." His concept was already mapped out: an anything-goes comedy show featuring edgy satire, commercial parodies, fake news, rock music, and a celebrity host. It had to be live—a practice network television had abandoned in the 1970s—otherwise it wouldn't have the spontaneity it needed. Ebersol agreed and pitched the idea to the network, selling it as a "youth" show and pointing to the dismal ratings NBC was getting in the 18 to 34-year-old market. To Ebersol's and Michaels's amazement, the network was convinced... mostly.

### HEEERE'S JOHNNY

By the 1970s, Johnny Carson had as much clout as anybody at NBC. The *Tonight Show* had done so much for the network that what Johnny wanted, Johnny got. And one thing Johnny *didn't* want was competition. Worried that a new comedy show would compete with his "King of Late Night" status, Carson summoned Michaels and Ebersol.

But one of Michaels's strengths was his diplomatic skill—he calmly reassured the “Great One” that his show would be very different than Carson's: no interviews, a bunch of unknowns, a completely different format aimed at a completely different audience. Carson was duly impressed with the two young men and gave them—and the network—his approval. He would come to regret that decision.

### PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Michaels signed a deal with NBC, fittingly, on April 1, 1975. He and Ebersol were given Studio 8H on the 17th floor of New York's Rockefeller Center. Michaels wanted to call the new show *Saturday Night Live*, but ABC was putting together a show by the same name—hosted by Howard Cosell and featuring the “Primetime Players.” So they called it NBC's *Saturday Night*, then just *Saturday Night*. (The show wasn't called *Saturday Night Live* until the March 26, 1977, episode.)

Michaels began a search for “enlightened amateurs”—comedians who, according to Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad in their book *Saturday Night*, spouted “drug references, casual profanity, a permissive attitude toward sex, a deep disdain for show business convention, and bitter distrust for corporate power.” Michaels wanted to combine that rawness with the style of his all-time favorite comedians: Monty Python's Flying Circus.

Michaels approached one of the hottest comedians of the mid-1970s, Albert Brooks, with the idea of hiring him as the permanent celebrity host. Brooks declined, saying that he wanted to focus on a movie career. He did, however, offer an alternative idea. “You don't want a permanent host anyway,” he told Michaels. “Every show does that. Why don't you get a different host every week?” So they did. But they still needed a cast.

### STAR SEARCH

That summer, word of the new show quickly spread through the show biz world. Ads for auditions went into trade papers all over the country. In New York, comedy clubs put their best acts on when the *Saturday Night* people arrived. But Michaels wanted more than stand-up comedians, he wanted socially conscious performers who could act, improvise, do impressions, sing, and dance. He scoured the ranks of *National Lampoon*, comedy troupes, even serious reper-

tory theaters. Michaels could only pay his performers \$750 per episode, but he was offering something most couldn't refuse: exposure on national television. One more rule: none of *Saturday Night's* talent would be over 30 years old.

### THE NOT READY FOR PRIMETIME PLAYERS

First hired was Gilda Radner, whom Michaels had performed improv with in the 1960s. In 1975 Radner was with Second City in Chicago, along with Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray, and John Belushi. Michaels was reluctant about Belushi—who was known as much for being uncontrollable as he was for being a brilliant comedian. But Belushi did so well as a samurai pool hustler in his audition that he was hired over Murray, who had already signed a tentative deal with ABC's *Saturday Night Live*.

From the improvisational group The Proposition he found Jane Curtin, who fit the bill as the “white bread” woman, and from The Groundlings in Los Angeles, Laraine Newman. She was chosen partly for her audition performance and partly for her red hair, which would offset Curtin's sandy blonde and Radner's brunette locks. To round out the appearance of the cast, Michaels wanted a black man. He'd originally hired Garrett Morris as a writer. But even though Morris had no comedic experience, Michaels was impressed with his acting ability in the 1972 film *Cooley High*, so Morris was made a cast member instead. Now that the cast was set, they needed a name. Michaels mocked ABC's Saturday-night show by calling NBC's performers the “Not Ready For Primetime Players.”

In addition to performers, Michaels also sought out talented young writers, including the team of Al Franken and Tom Davis, a cynical *Lampoon* writer named Michael O'Donoghue (who was responsible for a lot of *SNL's* darker material), and a former *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* writer named Chevy Chase. Chase wanted to act, but there was no more money in the budget for cast members, so Michaels signed him as head writer (which actually paid more money than the players were getting). Michaels and Chase immediately became buddies, and Chase got preferential treatment, including the “Weekend Update” job, much to the dismay of the cast. It was a sign of things to come.

***The cast and crew were set. Now all Michaels and Ebersol had to do was make a show. Turn to page 199 for Part II of the story.***

# SNL PART II: ON THE AIR

*Lorne Michaels had all of the ingredients for Saturday Night, now he had to figure out how to mix them together. (Part I is on page 79.)*

## BARELY CONTROLLED CHAOS

The scheduled air date for the first episode of NBC's *Saturday Night* was October 11, 1975. Just about everyone—from the executives to the crew—didn't see the show lasting an entire season... except for Lorne Michaels. He reassured his worried cast and writers on the 17th floor that their grandchildren would be watching reruns of the first episode in history class. But no one was convinced. And the chaos of the final week leading up to the premiere didn't help matters.

By the time Saturday rolled around, Michaels had no lighting director (he had fired two already); the antiquated sound system had broken down; and instead of the brick wall they were promised for a backdrop, they had a ton of uncut bricks piled in the middle of the floor.

While Michaels was busy ordering script changes and settling various arguments, Ebersol brought news that the network had ordered the show's celebrity host, George Carlin, to wear a suit and tie—the embodiment of everything *Saturday Night* was against. (Carlin compromised by wearing a sport coat with a T-shirt underneath.)

## THE FIRST SKETCH

A lot of thought went into the best way to begin the show. Michaels wanted people to know from the get-go that they were seeing something different. His solution: Begin with a “cold opening.” When the clock struck 11:30 p.m., viewers were pulled immediately into a sketch featuring Michael O'Donoghue and John Belushi as, respectively, professor and student.

**O'Donoghue:** “Let us begin. Repeat after me. I would like...”

**Belushi** (*in a thick foreign accent*): “I would like...”

**O'Donoghue:** “...to feed your fingertips...”

**Belushi:** “...to feed your feengerteeps...”

**O'Donoghue:** "...to the wolverines."

**Belushi:** "...to thee wolvereeenes."

*This goes on for a few minutes until O'Donoghue clutches his heart and keels over. Belushi sits there, shrugs, then grabs his heart and keels over. The puzzled audience is left hanging for a moment, and then Chevy Chase enters wearing a stage manager's headset. He looks at the two figures lying on the floor, then breaks out into a big grin and says to the camera: "Live from New York, it's Saturday Night!"*

The show didn't go off without a hitch, but despite a few miscues, they had pulled it off—within the allotted budget—a feat that impressed the skeptical NBC brass.

### SHOCKING COMEDY

The ratings for the first few episodes were considerably better than those for *Tonight Show* reruns (although still not enough to pull in major advertising dollars), while the initial reviews were a bit mixed. But a big boost came from the highly touted TV critic Tom Shales:

*NBC's Saturday Night can boast the freshest satire on commercial TV, but it is more than that, it is probably the first network series produced by and for the television generation.... It is a live, lively, raucously disdainful view of a world that television has largely shaped. Or misshaped.*

Younger viewers agreed. Here was a show that actually *made fun* of television. Dick Ebersol referred to it as "the post-Watergate victory party for the Woodstock generation."

As much as kids loved the show, grown-ups hated it. Johnny Carson echoed a lot of aging comedians' views when he described the Not Ready For Primetime Players as a bunch of amateurs who couldn't "ad-lib a fart at a bean-eating contest." It was a completely different brand of comedy than they were used to. Comedians like Bob Hope and Milton Berle made their audience comfortable, then made them laugh. By mocking the establishment, *Saturday Night* made some viewers uncomfortable. Just to make fun of politicians in general wasn't enough, this new show singled out specific politicians, particularly presidents, and ridiculed them. All of a sudden, the revolution was being televised.

### "I'M CHEVY CHASE AND YOU'RE NOT"

The first season belonged to Chase. Because he anchored "Weekend

Update,” he got to say his name every week, and he was the only one who did. The show opened without naming any of the cast, so Chase’s tagline, along with his clumsy portrayal of President Ford, thrust him into the spotlight. He alone was nominated for an Emmy Award and then was named “heir apparent to Johnny Carson” by *New York* magazine. The other cast members were jealous—especially Belushi—creating an intense air of discord backstage.

But it didn’t matter. Chase left shortly into the second season to pursue a woman (he married her) and a movie career in Hollywood. He later called his departure one of the biggest mistakes of his career. Michaels, on the other hand, realized that the show had an amazing potential to make stars, so he added the cast members’ names and pictures to the opening credits. Meanwhile, ABC’s *Saturday Night Live* was canceled, so Bill Murray was available to replace Chase in 1976.

## SECOND SEASON SUCCESS

The ensuing season saw the cast, writers, and crew start to really come together. Recurring characters like the Coneheads and the Bees (which Belushi always hated) were quickly becoming household names. Catchphrases like “Jane, you ignorant slut” and “No Coke, Pepsi!” were becoming part of the national lexicon.

In the first season, Lorne Michaels had to search long and hard for willing hosts and musical guests; in the second season, they were calling him. When stand-up comedian Steve Martin first watched the show in a hotel room, he was blown away. “They did it,” he said to himself. “They did the show everyone should have been doing.” And then he made it his goal to be a part of it, which he did in the second season. He has since gone on to host *SNL* more times than anyone else.

## HIGH TIMES

Another part of the show’s success: drugs. “From the beginning,” say Hill and Weingrad, “grass was a staple of the show, used regularly and openly.” Cocaine was also used, although by fewer people and behind closed doors. One of *SNL*’s early masterpieces, a sketch called “The Final Days” that chronicles Nixon’s downfall, was written by writers Al Franken and Tom Davis while they were on LSD. Drugs found their way into the sketches, too, something

that some cast members, most notably Chase—who once demonstrated the proper way to “shoot up”—would later regret. But it was just this kind of humor that made *Saturday Night* so popular with the youth culture.

### THE BLUES BROTHERS RULE

By 1977 Belushi and Aykroyd were the show’s big stars, and they often flexed their muscles by threatening to quit if they didn’t get their way. Meanwhile the women—Radner, Newman, and Curtin—were feeling alienated by the drugged-out and sexist behavior of the men. Michaels was running himself ragged trying (unsuccessfully) to keep everyone happy, while Ebersol was under constant pressure from the network to curb the controversial subject matter.

In 1978 Chase hit it big with his movie *Foul Play*. Aykroyd and Belushi knew that movie careers were waiting for them as well and left after the fourth season to make *The Blues Brothers*. Instead of replacing them, Michaels hired only one new cast member, comedian Harry Shearer (who, years later, would add his vocal talents to *The Simpsons*).

### FEATURED PLAYERS

In his quest to find the next big star, Michaels devised a billing called “featured player.” Because they didn’t have full cast-member status, he didn’t have to pay them as much. He tried out band member Paul Shaffer (of David Letterman fame), writers Al Franken, Tom Davis, and Don Novello (Father Guido Sarducci), as well as Brian Doyle-Murray (brother of Bill), and Peter Aykroyd (brother of Dan). The result: A disastrous 1979 season.

Bill Murray and Gilda Radner, who dated on and off during *SNL*’s previous years, now couldn’t stand each other. In fact, Murray couldn’t stand anything about the show—the writers, the cast, his parts—and spent most of his time launching tirades. Laraine Newman and Garrett Morris were both battling depression, drug addictions, and the realization that Hollywood didn’t want them. Lorne Michaels was also exhausted, and when contract negotiations broke down for a sixth season, he quit.

***Things looked bad for Saturday Night Live. Could it get worse? Turn to page 309 for Part III of the story.***



## SNL PART III: EDDIE

*When its tumultuous first era finally ended, Saturday Night Live had no big stars and no producer, but NBC wasn't about to give up on it. (Part II is on page 199.)*

### SATURDAY NIGHT DEAD

**S**In the summer of 1980, only a few months before the fall season started, associate producer Jean Doumanian was promoted—against Lorne Michaels's departing advice—to executive producer. The remaining cast and writers, who agreed with Michaels that Doumanian wasn't up to producing the show, also left. Could *Saturday Night Live* survive without any of its original talent?

Hundreds of wannabes tried to get on the revamped show. Doumanian's plan, basically, was to “do what Lorne did” and find seven unknowns—three women and four men. She ended up with Gail Matthius, Denny Dillon, Ann Risley, Gilbert Gottfried, Joe Piscopo, and Charles Rocket, whom Doumanian envisioned as the new star. She still wanted an “ethnic”—so dozens of black and Hispanic comics were brought in to audition. One standout was a foul-mouthed, 19-year-old kid named Eddie Murphy. Doumanian had someone else in mind, but talent coordinator Neil Levy talked her into hiring him. Still, she only made him a featured player and limited his on-air time.

The ensuing season was bad, probably *SNL*'s worst. After the first new episode, Tom Shales echoed the public's sentiments when he wrote, “From the 7 new performers and 13 new writers hired for the show, viewers got virtually no good news.” As the ratings began to sag for “Saturday Night Dead”—as it was being called—morale at Studio 8H hit an all-time low. No one could stand Doumanian or the show's arrogant star, Charles Rocket, who sealed his fate by saying the F-word on live television. Both were fired in the spring of 1981.

### MR. MURPHY'S NEIGHBORHOOD

Few other shows could have rebounded from such a debacle, but NBC still had faith in *Saturday Night Live*. Dick Ebersol replaced Doumanian. Knowing that recurring characters and biting com-

mentary had propelled the show in the 1970s, he set out to recapture that early magic. He fired the entire cast—save Murphy and Piscopo—and brought in new faces. Mary Gross and Tim Kazurinsky were recommended by their friend John Belushi. Young comedians Brad Hall, Julia-Louis Dreyfus (later of *Seinfeld* fame), and Gary Kroeger were brought in. John's younger brother Jim Belushi, also a veteran comedy troupe performer, joined the cast reluctantly in 1983 (he hated being compared to John).

### OTAY!

Ebersol's first move: let Eddie loose. Murphy's characters, such as Gumbly, Buckwheat, and Mr. Robinson (an urban parody of Mr. Rogers), became as popular as Belushi's samurai warrior and Radner's Roseanne Roseannadanna from the original cast. Ebersol later admitted that "it would have been very difficult to keep the show on the air without Eddie."

But Murphy's growing stardom soon alienated the other performers, especially his friend Joe Piscopo, the show's second-most-famous cast member. After starring in the hit film *48 Hours*, Murphy became too big for the show, even television in general. He left after the 1983 season to make *Trading Places* with fellow SNL alum Dan Aykroyd. To this day, Murphy—not Dan Aykroyd or Bill Murray or Mike Myers—holds the record as the highest-earning former SNL cast member.

### STAR POWER

In 1984, trying to fill the huge void left by Murphy's absence, Ebersol did something new for SNL: he hired established names, hoping they would attract viewers. Billy Crystal's Fernando ("You look mahvelous!") and Martin Short's Ed Grimley ("I must say!") were funny, but they weren't Murphy. And viewers wanted Eddie Murphy. In fact, the highest rated episode of the entire 1984–85 season was on December 15, when he returned to host the show. At the end of a difficult season, Ebersol had had enough. He quit.

*Here we go again: no producer, low ratings. Would Saturday Night Live rebound? Of course it would!  
Turn to page 427 to find out how.*

## SNL PART IV: “WELL ISN’T THAT SPECIAL”

*Part III of our history of Saturday Night Live (page 309) ended with the show once again in shambles—no producer, low ratings, an unhappy cast. It needed a lot of help. Who better to save it than the man who created it?*

### NEW BEGINNING

Lorne Michaels returned to NBC in 1984 to develop a new show for Friday nights called...*The New Show*. He was having trouble trying to make it as good as *SNL* without copying his original show—and it showed. *The New Show* limped along for 12 weeks getting low ratings and poor reviews. Michaels decided he’d had enough of television. A film that he co-wrote with Randy Newman and Steve Martin, *The Three Amigos*, had just started filming when NBC president Brandon Tartikoff called and offered him his old job back at *SNL*. Michaels initially turned him down, but when Tartikoff threatened to cancel the show instead, he relented and moved back into his old office on the 17th floor of Rockefeller Plaza. The first order of business: hiring a new cast.

### SATURDAY NIGHT DEAD #2

NBC called the 1985–86 season a rebuilding year—most fans and critics called it a disaster. Michaels experimented with established Brat Pack stars Robert Downey, Jr., Anthony Michael Hall, and Joan Cusack, as well as veteran actor Randy Quaid. Everyone else he added was a no-name. Nothing seemed to click.

What went wrong? Among other things, NBC executives had decided that the show was too important to leave alone, so the 17th floor was invaded by “strange men with clipboards” scribbling secret notes to take back upstairs. The writers now had to get network approval for any even slightly taboo subject. They blamed their unfunny scripts on an un-funny cast.

Was it the scripts or the cast? Either way, what resulted was a string of shows met with dead silence from the studio audience and shrinking ratings from the television audience. Toward the

season's end, Tartikoff couldn't take it anymore—he decided to put *Saturday Night Live* out of its misery. Michaels flew to Los Angeles to reassure Tartikoff that the show would rebound, that there were bright spots emerging. Tartikoff agreed to give him one more season to turn it around.

The bright spots Michaels was referring to were the only three cast members who would survive that season: Nora Dunn, Jon Lovitz and Dennis Miller.

### BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

Having learned his lesson of hiring names over talent, Michaels returned to his 1975 tactics and once again scoured the improv circuit. Now his main goal was to see not only who was funny, but also who worked well with others.

The first new cast member hired for the the 1986 season was stand-up comedian Dana Carvey. Michaels was impressed by Carvey's talent for impressions, as well as his brain full of ideas and characters. Michaels also found Jan Hooks, Victoria Jackson, Kevin Nealon, and a young Canadian comic named Mike Myers. (As a boy in 1972, Myers had starred in a TV commercial—his mother was played by Gilda Radner.)

The cast was completed by Phil Hartman. His versatility in front of the camera is well documented, but what was even more important for the show's renewed success was what he added backstage. "Phil was a rock," remembers Jan Hooks. Jon Lovits called him a "big brother." "He was my mentor," said Mike Myers. Now Studio 8H had something it had sorely been lacking: a family atmosphere—and it showed in front of the camera.

### SCHWING!

As in the past, memorable recurring characters and political satire propelled the show, and *Saturday Night Live* enjoyed its third golden age. A few standouts:

- Dana Carvey's Church Lady, Garth, and George Bush. On Bush: At first, "I couldn't do him at all...but then one night I just sort of hooked it, and it was that phrase 'that thing out there, that guy out there, doin' that thing,' and from there on it was easy."
- Mike Myers's Simon, Sprockets, and *Wayne's World*. Conan O'Brien, a writer for the show from 1988 to 1991, recalls Myers's

first week: “He came to us and said he had this character named Wayne who had a cable show in his basement. We politely told him that we didn’t think it was his best idea... I felt sorry for him. I thought, ‘This poor kid is going to have to learn the hard way.’” But Michaels liked the character and later worked with Myers in 1992 to produce a feature film based on it. *Wayne’s World* was the only movie derived from an *SNL* sketch to earn over \$100 million.

- John Lovitz’s compulsive liar Tommy Flannagin and Master Thespian. He created the character when he was 18 but never thought it would work on *SNL*. “I was just goofing around,” he remembers, “saying ‘I’m Master Thespian!’ And now they’ve built an entire set for it.”
- Phil Hartman’s Frank Sinatra. Joe Piscopo, who’d done Sinatra on the show 10 years before, says that the Sinatra family hated Hartman’s impression. “I think there’s some kind of law: Don’t even attempt to do Sinatra unless you’re Italian.”

## TOO MANY PEOPLE

In his quest to create stars, Michaels continued packing the stage with featured players. He struck gold in 1990 and 1991 by adding a slew of comics who had grown up watching *SNL*: Tim Meadows, Adam Sandler, Rob Schneider, David Spade, Chris Rock, Chris Farley, Ellen Cleghorne, and Julia Sweeney. The opening credits in 1991 seemed to go on forever, and there were more people backstage than ever before.

In fact, viewers barely noticed when Carvey, Lovitz, and Hartman left the show because the new, younger performers were catering to a new, even younger audience, taking on subjects such as shopping malls, frat parties, and MTV.

Sandler, Rock, and Farley emerged as the new big stars. In addition to bringing back much of the rebellious anything-can-happen comedy that recalled the early days, the young cast members brought back another backstage tradition: drugs. Especially Farley, who did everything in excess. (Unfortunately for him, his hero was John Belushi. Both died of drug overdoses at the age of 33.)

Most critics called *SNL* in the early-1990s a “juvenile” show, but that was fine by NBC. The 18 to 34 demographic brought in the highest advertising dollars—and the show remained high in the ratings...for a while.

## SATURDAY NIGHT DEAD #3

By 1995 the writers were finding it increasingly tough to find new material for overused characters, which resulted in yet another a succession of seemingly endless and pointless skits. Once again, the show had become difficult to watch. The network pressured SNL to clean house one more time, and Michaels agreed:

No one anywhere was saying, “SNL is doing what it’s supposed to be doing,” or “These people are funny.” So we had to let Adam Sandler go with two years on his contract, and Farley with a year. And Chris Rock had gone on to do *In Living Color*.

It was time for a new cast.

*The roller-coaster ride continued. To read about SNL’s long crawl back to the top, go to page 490.*

\* \* \*

## DEEP THOUGHTS BY JACK HANDEY

- The face of a child can say it all, especially the mouth part of the face.”
- “For mad scientists who keep brains in jars, here’s a tip: Why not add a slice of lemon to each jar, for freshness.”
- “I wish I had a kryptonite cross, because then you could keep both Dracula and Superman away.”
- “Can’t the Marx Brothers be arrested and maybe even tortured for all the confusion and problems they’ve caused?”
- “The crows were all calling to him, thought Caw.”
- “Why do the caterpillar and the ant have to be enemies? One eats leaves, and the other eats caterpillars.... Oh, I see now.”
- “Consider the daffodil. And while you’re doing that, I’ll be over here, looking through your stuff.”
- “Instead of a Seeing Eye dog, what about a gun? It’s cheaper than a dog, plus if you walk around shooting all the time, people are going to get out of the way. Cars, too.”

# SNL PART V: SPARTANS RULE!

*We've noticed in writing this long piece about Saturday Night Live that it probably drops more names than any other article in the BRI's history. Here are some more. (Part IV is on page 427.)*

## **O**UT WITH THE OLD

Michaels weathered the latest storm of critical attacks and did yet another shake-up after the disastrous 1995 season. The only surviving cast member was Tim Meadows (against NBC's wishes). And the revolving door kept on bringing in new faces: Impressionist Darrell Hammond; MTV's Colin Quinn; stand-up comics Tracy Morgan and Jim Breuer; and from the Los Angeles-based improv group, The Groundlings, Cheri Oteri, Jimmy Fallon, Chris Kattan, Ana Gasteyer, Chris Parnell, and Will Ferrell.

In the late 1990s, *SNL* entered its fourth golden age. How? By getting back to basics. Tom Shales and James Miller explain the resurgence in their book *Live from New York*:

In 1996 and again to an even greater degree in 2000, *Saturday Night Live* returned to its richest vein of humor, American politics, and in the process rejuvenated itself for the umpty-umpth time. The cast was prodigious, the writing team witty and self-confident, and the satire biting.

Will Ferrell, according to many critics and cast members, emerged as one of the funniest people in *SNL*'s history. His George W. Bush, along with Darrell Hammond's Bill Clinton and Al Gore, kept the *SNL*'s presidential-bashing alive and well. Even the real Al Gore studied *SNL*'s send-up of the 2000 presidential debates "to help understand where he had gone wrong with his own debate performance."

## SATURDAY WHITE LIVE

While *SNL* has been hailed for its no-holds-barred takes on politics and television, it's had less than a stellar track record when it comes to dealing with women and minorities. Many who

were there refer to the 17th floor as a “good ole’ boys” organization, which is no surprise considering that most of the writers and cast have been white men. And as uneven as the comedy has been over the years, so too has been its take on racial relations.

### TOKEN PLAYERS

In the 1970s, Garrett Morris’s biggest complaint was that the all-white writing team only gave him stereotypically black roles (he once performed “Proud Mary” dressed as Tina Turner). “I was hired under the terms of the Token Minority Window Dressing Act of 1968,” he half-joked. “I get to play all parts darker than Tony Orlando.”

But that began to change when Eddie Murphy first got exposure as a commentator on “Weekend Update” in 1981. “There’s a different kind of black man on *Saturday Night Live* now,” he announced to the world as he held up a photo of Garrett Morris. The next season, Murphy produced and starred in a short film for the show in which he was made up to look like a white man... to see how “the other half” lived. That, along with his portrayals of James Brown and Stevie Wonder, brought the show a black audience.

Damon Wayans joined as a featured player in 1985, thinking that he would take over where Murphy left off. He was wrong. Wayans wanted to improvise his in-your-face brand of racial comedy; the writers wanted him to read his “one line per skit” off of the cue cards. He protested when he purposely flubbed a skit on live television—a cardinal sin according to Michaels—and was fired that night. Wayans would soon get to showcase his talents on Fox’s variety show *In Living Color*, which was a huge hit for the fledgeling network. And NBC noticed.

### READY TO ROCK

“I got hired because *In Living Color* was on,” said Chris Rock, who joined in 1991. “*SNL* hadn’t had a black guy on in eight years, and *In Living Color* was hot, so they had to hire a black guy.” Rock fared somewhat better than Wayans, most notably with his break-out character, urban talkshow host Nat X: “This week’s list—the top five reasons why white people can’t dance,” he would say wearing a huge afro wig, “Why only five? Because THE MAN won’t give me ten!”



That joke hit pretty close to the mark, though, as Rock watched Farley and Sandler each get in twice as many skits. Like Wayans before him, Rock didn't really get to showcase his talents until *after* he left the show.

Tim Meadows has the distinction of being on the show longer than anyone else, and though he had some popular characters (such as the Ladies' Man), the writers never gave him anything too controversial to say. Why? Meadows's heyday fell between the Rodney King riots in 1992 and the O. J. Simpson Trial in 1995—a time when race relations in the United States were tense.

In recent years, Tracy Morgan has added his brand of street comedy to *SNL*. Like Rock and Wayans before him, Morgan was heavily inspired by Eddie Murphy. And like Murphy, he's getting to speak his mind on "Weekend Update" commentaries: "Racial profiling? I'm all for it—if ya' ax me, I say, 'Shake 'em down!'"

## BROADENING HORIZONS

While there have been more women than black people on *SNL* (and only two black women, Ellen Cleghorne and Danitra Vance), very few have been given equal footing with the men—and thus very few memorable characters.

But that trend, too, has been changing. The two stand-outs in recent years: Cheri Oteri's cheerleader (with Will Ferrell) and Molly Shannon's neurotic Catholic student Mary Catherine Gallagher. And although she had no breakthrough characters, Ana Gasteyer showed as much impressionistic range and musical talent as anyone on the show since Phil Hartman—a talent that landed her in a lot of sketches.

In 1999 Tina Fey took over as head writer (the first woman to do so). She completely revamped the struggling "Weekend Update" segment by co-anchoring it with Jimmy Fallon, reminding viewers of the chemistry that Dan Aykroyd and Jane Curtin had back in the 1970s. *Saturday Night Live* was as funny and current as ever, but would soon face one of its most daunting tasks.

## FROM THE RUBBLE

Only two weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, *Saturday Night Live* began its 27th season on uncharted ground. Lorne Michaels knew that the words "Live from New York" would

have a greater resonance than ever before, so he planned the opening very carefully. After an emotional speech by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who was surrounded by New York firefighters, longtime SNL friend Paul Simon performed a soulful rendition of his song “The Boxer.” Then an unsure Lorne Michaels asked the mayor, “Can we be funny?” After a brief pause, Giuliani returned with, “Why start now?” It was perhaps the first good laugh on TV since the tragedy and a sign that life would return to normal.

### SIX DEGREES OF SATURDAY NIGHT

After nearly three decades, hundreds of the entertainment industry’s biggest names have crossed paths with *Saturday Night Live*, from Robin Williams to Oprah Winfrey to Paul McCartney to Madonna. It’s tough to flip through the channels for too long without seeing some evidence of SNL’s impact: (click) *The Chris Rock Show*; (click) David Spade on *Just Shoot Me*; (click) *Stripes* with Bill Murray; (click) a commercial for *Austin Powers*; (click) “Tonight on *Conan*: Steve Martin, followed by Molly Shannon, with musical guest Elvis Costello” (who made his U.S. television debut on SNL).

As *Saturday Night Live* enters its fourth decade, the show continues to collect Emmys and praise from critics, who marvel at the show’s longevity. Tom Shales continues to hail SNL, calling it a “weekly miracle.” When asked how he’s kept the show funny in the 21st century, Lorne Michaels answered: “I think that we’ve got those non-suck devices working again.”

\* \* \*

### RANDOM SNL FACTS

- Youngest host: Drew Barrymore, on Nov. 20, 1982, 7 years old.
- Five hosts cast members most liked working with: Steve Martin, Tom Hanks, John Goodman, Alec Baldwin, Christopher Walken.
- Short list of wanted hosts that have never appeared (so far): Johnny Carson, Tom Cruise, Bill Clinton.
- Other SNL alums: Ben Stiller (1989), Janeane Garofalo (1994), Kevin Meaney (1986), Jay Mohr (1993–94), Chris Elliot (1994).