

“Live from New York, It’s *Saturday Night’s* Jews!”

The year was 1975. A country torn apart by Vietnam, Watergate and civil unrest tuned in to *NBC’s Saturday Night*, a subversive new comedy show that smashed every societal taboo as it rocketed to the top. “When I watched with friends, we felt that the show was addressed to us in ways that no one had done before,” remembers James Bloom, author of *Gravity Falls: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America*. “It was dorm room or drinking humor gone public.” No political, class, gender, racial or ethnic stereotype was off-limits.

The show, later renamed *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, was created by Toronto comedy writer and producer Lorne Michaels, born Lorne David Lipowitz. As a modern-day incubator of talent on a par with the Borscht Belt and Sid Caesar’s *Your Show of Shows*, it has launched the careers of numerous comedians and actors: John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray, Chevy Chase, Jon Lovitz, Gilda Radner, Alan Zweibel, Al Franken, Tim Meadows, Chris Farley, Mike Myers, Adam Sandler, Tina Fey, Will Ferrell and many more.

From the very start, Jews and Jewish humor figured prominently. “*Saturday Night Live* waved the wand and said ‘Let there be Jews,’ and there were Jews, on the network, on the show, openly discussing their lives in sketches, as writers and actors,” says Marilyn Suzanne Miller, one of the show’s original writers.

By now, the show’s 35th year, its archives are overflowing with Jewish sketches. One of the most talked about was the infamous *Jewess Jeans* “ad,” which aired in October of 1980 and cast political correctness aside to parody a popular Jordache jeans commercial. Written by Miller, it featured “Rhonda Weiss,” *SNL*’s resident “Jewish American Princess,” played by the late Gilda Radner. The faux-mercial featured a curly-haired Radner in tight jeans and rouged lips, smacking her gum and leading a wannabe, hip-swaying chorus with lyrics like “She’s got a lifestyle that’s uniquely hers, Europe, Nassau and wholesale furs... She’s got that Jewish look/She shops the sales for designer clothes/She’s got

designer nails/And a designer nose.”

The sketch was radical for its time. “There was something kind of naughty about the *Jewess Jeans* sketch...Can you do this kind of thing on TV?” says Robert Thompson, the director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University. “There were plenty of people who thought it was offensive. Even the word ‘Jewess’ was a contested thing.”

Slightly less controversial was Hanukkah Harry, a recurring character played by

Davis made public the Jewish pastime of guessing who is a member of the tribe. In their sketch, *Jew, Not a Jew*, with guest host Tom Hanks as the master of ceremonies, contestants had to do just that. “It took a few readings for *Jew, Not a Jew* to get on,” recalls Miller. “But the whole idea that a quiz show could be built around whether or not people were Jewish is just hilarious. It happens in everybody’s house. And they put it on TV.”

Two years later, as a loving homage to his then mother-in-law, Mike Myers created and played Linda Richman. With long lacquered nails, big hair, Barbra Streisand obsession and endearing Yiddishisms, sketches with Richman appeared regularly, making her America’s new favorite bubble. “I’m all *verklemt*,” “talk amongst yourselves” and “like buttah” (a frequent reference to Streisand) quickly became part of the popular vernacular. “I’d vote for Mike Myers’ *Coffee Talk* as the most iconic *SNL* sketch, simply because it popularized the word *verklemt*,” says Slate’s TV critic Troy Patterson. “This was a great melting-pot moment. In terms of the deployment of the Yiddish language in Jewish-American comedy, it ranks up there with Philip Roth’s shikses and the Oy! of Mel Brooks’ Moses

accidentally dropping his third tablet of Commandments. It’s fantastic shtick.”

Israelis were not exempt from *SNL* scrutiny. The show parodied their reputation as pushy and loud when Tom Hanks took on the persona of salesman Uri Shulenson, host of *Sabra Price Is Right* in 1992. With his unbuttoned black shirt, a flashy gold Star of David and a spot-on Israeli accent complete with constant repetition of words (“come-on-come-on-come-on”), Shulenson haggles with customers who have no intention of buying his shoddy and overpriced electronics products.

Members of Generation X laughed along with Adam Sandler’s 1994 *Hanukkah Song*. The lyrics explain the advantages of Hanukkah over Christmas (“Hanukkah is



Gilda Radner as Roseanne Roseannadanna in 1976

Jon Lovitz in the 1980s. The sketches—the fictional credits said they were sponsored by “Hallmark in Association with the Jewish Anti-Defamation League”—featured Hanukkah Harry rescuing Santa, the Easter Bunny and other gentiles in distress on his reindeer Moishe, Herschel and Shlomo. The good-humored Hasid’s gifts (socks!) were not always a hit with the gentile children but his goodness always shone through. In *The Night Hanukkah Harry Saved Christmas*, one unlucky gift recipient concludes, “If Hanukkah Harry is helping Santa, maybe that means that Christians and Jews, deep down, are pretty much the same. Maybe that’s the true meaning of Christmas!”

In 1989, Al Franken, now a U.S. senator representing Minnesota, and Tom

the festival of lights/Instead of one day of presents, we have eight crazy nights”) and famously plunged into a long list of Jewish celebrities: “Paul Newman’s half Jewish/Goldie Hawn’s half, too/ Put them together—what a fine-lookin’ Jew!...Harrison Ford’s a quarter Jewish—not too shabby!” As Bernard Timberg, a communications professor at East Carolina University, puts it, “Adam Sandler’s *Hanukkah Song* made it hip to be Jewish. It was a bridge into the next generation.”

At times the show pushed too far for the comfort of the real Anti-Defamation League. In a 1999 episode about Hanukkah, Christina Ricci played Britney Spears alongside *SNL* regulars dressed as Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston. Ricci’s Spears says, “Okay, y’all...Hanukkah is a special holiday where we as Christians take time out to think about forgiving the Jews for killing our Lord,” and Celine Dion talks about how her mother explained that Hanukkah was a holiday “celebrated by the people who own the movie studio and the plane.” ADL National Director Abe Foxman was not amused and blasted the sketch for perpetuating “two canards [that] are the basis for anti-Semitism for which we’ve paid a very, very high price.”

Some argue that Jewish-themed humor has been less prevalent on the show over the past decade. While *SNL* continues to attract its share of Jewish talent, it has moved on to other subjects. Current cast members Andy Samberg and Seth Meyers haven’t focused on the Jewish experience to the extent that their predecessors did. “I don’t think I’ve ever done anything comedically where the joke had to do with Judaism and Jewishness, but a lot of my heroes were Jewish,” Samberg, who counts Mel Brooks and Adam Sandler as his influences, once told the magazine *North by Northwestern*. Andrew Steele, a *SNL* writer from 1995 to 2008, says the show has changed with the times. “In the past, when [the writers and cast at *SNL*] pushed religious or racial taboos, it was new,” he says. “But today, it’s not really a target.”

That’s not to say that Samberg hasn’t toyed with tempting targets like anti-Semitic Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In 2007, a “love-struck” Samberg serenaded Ahmadinejad, played by fellow cast member Fred Armisen, with the hit *Iran So Far*. “You can blame the



Mike Myers as Linda Richman in 1993

Jews/I can be your Jim Caviezel,” he sings, referring to the actor who starred as Jesus in Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*, and, “You can deny the Holocaust/But you can’t deny there’s something between us.”

Today Jewish culture has gone mainstream, but the Jewish sensibility that is so much a part of American sketch humor is as strong as ever. In fact there are many who would argue that after 35 years it would be impossible to separate *SNL* from American Jewish comedy. “Even the non-overtly Jewish sketches were still Jewish in essence,” says *Chicago Tribune* media columnist Phil

Rosenthal. “When Gilda Radner played Roseanne Roseannadanna or Emily Litella, they weren’t Jewish characters—but you think of them as Jewish because of who played them and how they were played. Even the Coneheads represent the experience of Jews in the diaspora as they try to fit in, to assimilate.”—*Symi Rom-Rymer*

See the sketches mentioned in this article at momentmag.com/moment/issues/2010/08/SNL