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DVDs: The Big Lie of Saturday Night Live

Posted December 4, 2007 | 03:31 PM (EST)

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The people behind *Saturday Night Live* respond to the never-ending stream of comments about the sketch comedy's quality and how "it's not as good as it used to be" with two basic arguments.

One, they insist that everyone feels the most fondness for the cast that they grew up with -- that is, the group of players who dominated when the viewer was in high school and/or college. That makes sense. If "your" cast included Eddie Murphy and Billy Crystal and Martin Short in the early '80s, that's probably the standard you judge the show by. If "your" cast was the one dominated by Phil Hartman, Mike Myers, Chris Rock and Chris Farley, then that's the one you might love the most, at least emotionally.

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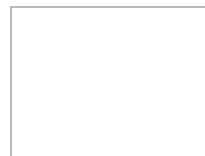
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Their other argument is that the show never really was as good as people remember, that fans edit out all the bad skits from their memory and savor only the good ones, holding current cast members and writers to an impossible standard of perfection that *Saturday Night Live* never achieved.

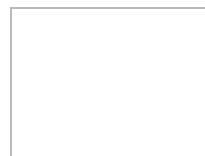
Baloney. And now, with the first two seasons of *Saturday Night Live* (\$69.98 each; Universal) out on DVD, we can see how wrong that is. Sure, like any sketch comedy show individual bits are hit or miss. But just like Johnny Carson can turn a bad joke into a funny moment, the sheer brilliant talent on-stage makes even so-so sketches have a life and a zing to them. Today, a funny bit like "Lazy Sunday" seems like manna from heaven. In the first few seasons, with brilliant cast members like Bill Murray, Chevy Chase, Gilda Radner and John Belushi on board, moments like that came fast and furious.

And the show wasn't locked into formula. Today, you can time when a musical guest will perform their two songs down to the second. Back then, if you had Paul Simon (and a Beatle -- George Harrison) on the show, naturally you got them to perform again and again, delivering five songs and two music videos in all. Why not? It's Paul Simon! And a Beatle!

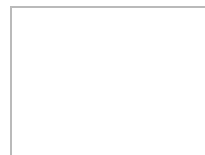
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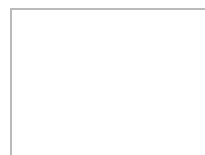
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The Coneheads. Land Sharks. Steve Martin doing Happy Feet. Gilda's Barbara Walters imitation. Dan Ackroyd's dead-on Tom Snyder. Every episode has a wealth of classic material. No future cast could compete with these actors and writers when the show seemed so fresh -- and had *SCTV* breathing down its neck to avoid complacency. Is anyone today feeling a competitive edge with *MadTV*? (On the downside, they're still apparently remastering these DVDs from the edited reruns, so minor elements are missing -- a major no-no for presenting classic TV properly. Plus, the episode breakdown feature often omits the second or third musical performances.)

This isn't to run the current cast down. But compare any episode from the first two seasons to an episode from today (or frankly, any episodes from the past 20 or so years) and you'll clearly see a show that has changed from seeming like its cast-members escaped from a mental institution to simply an institution, with all the weight and creative-sucking pressure that implies. Yes, *SNL* is in especially dire condition today. But even in other peak eras like the mid '80s, it was already standing in the shadow of the greatness of the first five years. Here's the proof.

Just as that boxed set brings us great news from a TV show's past, *Battlestar Galactica: Razor* (\$26.98; Universal) brings us great news from a current TV show's possible future. In its first two seasons, *BG* was the equal of any show on TV (including *The Wire*, whose brilliant fourth season comes out today (\$59.99; HBO), but which I haven't received yet). But in season three the creative team seriously lost the thread of what made the show special, making one disastrous creative decision after another. Now they've announced the fourth season will be the last. This TV movie "midquel" -- a new term I think I just invented for a movie that's not a prequel or a sequel but something which fills in gaps in the middle of a franchise's run -- is an excellent return to form, giving us hope that they'll put it together and deliver the finale we know *BG* deserves.

Also out this week: *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (\$34.99; Disney), the loud and long finale to Johnny Depp's fey pirate trilogy; *Superbad* (\$34.95; Sony), which for my money is more satisfying than *Knocked Up* and includes some amusing extras like "Everyone Hates Michael Cera - The Unfortunate True Story;" *Lady Chatterley* (\$29.95; Kino), the erotic drama sure to be a fixture on many critics' best-of-the-year lists; *24 Season Six* (\$59.98; Fox), the latest and least season of the action series which for some reason is always stronger creatively in odd numbered years; *Erik The Viking* (\$19.98; MGM), a silly comedy by once (and future?) Python Terry Jones which surely has the silly distinction of being the first movie presented as "the director's son's cut;" *Bill Maher: The Decider* (\$19.98; HBO), a stand-up gig by Maher who has found the perfect niche for his talent on the HBO politics show *Real Time*; *The Doll* (\$29.95; Kino), an early silent gem by the light-touched Lubitsch, which is paired with a substantial new documentary *Ernst Lubitsch in Berlin*; *7th Heaven Fifth Season* (\$49.99; Paramount), which features the wholesome -- but sexy -- Camden clan dealing with the usual travails of raising kids in a post-Waltons world; *Mariah Carey: The Adventures of Mimi* (\$19.99; Artist Nation), a concert film from her comeback tour that is the latest release by a major artist to be available only at an exclusive chain, in this case Best Buy; *Arctic Tale* (\$29.99; Paramount), a nature film about polar bears and walrus narrated with charm by Queen Latifah; and finally a bounty of gay titles, including the seriously silly supernatural TV soap *Dante's Cove: The Guilty Pleasure Collection* (\$49.95; Here!); *Boys Life 6* (\$24.99; Strand), a collection of shorts whose standout is *Bugcrush*; *East Side Story* (\$24.95; Wolfe), a sweet gay romantic comedy set in LA; and the Scissor Sisters concert film *Hurrah: A Year Of Ta-Dah!* (\$19.98; Universal), which also includes a substantial documentary and music videos.

So tell me, what's your favorite SNL era and/or your favorite cast members?

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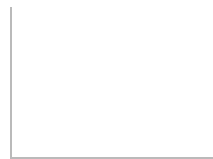
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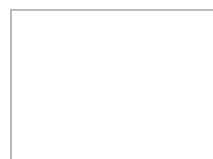
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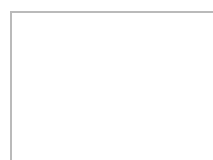
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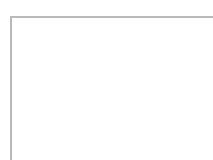
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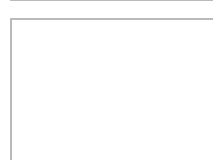
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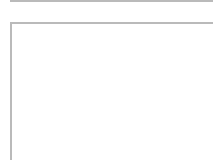
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brueso See Profile I'm a Fan of brueso permalink

I was in my first year of high school when SNL started. It's definitely has had peaks and valleys over the years. Usually I'm amazed when it consistently gets good again for awhile- when this happened in the Jon Lovitz, Phil Hartman, Mike Myers, Jan Hooks, Adam Sandler, Chris Farley years, I was surprised- and then I was even more surprised when after some drekky years, it came together again in the Will Ferrell, Cris Kattan period- but then that faded out too and its been pretty bad for awhile. I can generally only watch it for 15 minutes when I have to stop. They have tipped way too far over to celebrity impersonations. Phil Hartman, for example, used to do a good amount of those, but he had such a great range as an actor, he made countless normal Joes roles interesting without needing a celebrity ID to hide behind.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 01:56 PM on 12/07/2007

Fletch17C See Profile I'm a Fan of Fletch17C permalink

GILDA! If she is not considered an icon, she should be. There have been many talented women on SNL throughout the years, but no one compares to Gilda. She was fearless!

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 04:35 PM on 12/05/2007

misteruml See Profile I'm a Fan of misteruml permalink

Belushi. First five years. His Joe Cocker was the ballsiest, most insane comedy I've ever seen--and then there were the samurai deli owner, the dueling Brandos, and all the rest of 'em....God, how I miss him.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 11:30 AM on 12/05/2007

Halsey See Profile I'm a Fan of Halsey permalink

Toonses..the driving cat..the cat that can drive a car..the skit with Debra Winger..jokes about "man..that pussy can ride"..come ON...too funny...

and yes..Mr. Bill...oh nooo.....mr. hands...

chemical used in rocket fuel were found in samples of...

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and let's not forget..Eddie Murphy..doing the greatest hits of Buttwhet...unce..tice...phree times a mady...

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 08:55 AM on 12/05/2007

Alvin4NY See Profile I'm a Fan of Alvin4NY permalink

The thing about the original cast, is that they were already legends and trendsetters after one season. By the time the 2nd Season rolled around, it was required viewing by anyone who was young, hip, or interested in a curious take on the day's headlines. Everyone else has tried to follow that. The guests back then seemed to have a ball as well. I've enjoyed Mike, Dana, Jan, Nora, Eddie, Will, Cheri, Maya, Molly, and the rest from time to time. Would I plan my Saturday night around SNL now? Trying to get home early to see it? (or uh, stay up late to see it..?) Nah.... I Tivo it, and have a look without commercials. It's less irriatating then, if it's bad.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 08:17 AM on 12/05/2007

EngineerBill See Profile I'm a Fan of EngineerBill permalink

As a guy in his 50s. Of course I loved the original first seasons. And if you weren't there when they first came out, you will never ever fully appreciate how hysterical the "Mr. Bill" animations were before they were done to death.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 02:38 AM on 12/05/2007

JaneaneTheAcerbicGoblin See Profile I'm a Fan of JaneaneTheAcerbicGoblin permalink

Just for the record, Monty Python's Flying Circus beats the tar out of ANY of the SNL seasons.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 01:23 AM on 12/05/2007

JaneaneTheAcerbicGoblin See Profile I'm a Fan of JaneaneTheAcerbicGoblin permalink

I have seen shows from the 70's, 80's, and 90's, and I assure you there is a reason that they say the 1970's were the best. The concept of a late night American sketch show was fresh, the cast was very eager and young, and the writing was very crisp and it was actually edgy at the time. The show is not edgy at all these days. Too often today people equate poop jokes with edgy instead of interesting satire. And much of current SNL's satire/political material is terrible. Much of it consists of simply doing impersonations, instead of doing an actually witty, clever skit about politics itself.

The show itself was run very poorly even back in the 1970's (drugs, ego, rewriting sketches just before show time), but the material itself never seemed stale. I did like the mid 80's cast (Piscopo, Murphy, Crystal, Short, Guest, Shearer) as well. It was never nostalgia with me, it's all just "is it funny? Is it interesting?". And, quite frankly, most of the last few years haven't been funny, and have been atrociously dull.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 12:06 AM on 12/05/2007

auramac See Profile I'm a Fan of auramac permalink

The first few seasons were By Far the best- I always considered Farley a Belushi-wannabe. Belushi had so much more range- people thought Farley was funny (and he was, mostly) because he tried so damn hard. The second-best era was Eddie Murphy and Joe Piscopo, Billy Crystal was no slouch, Phil Hartman was great and so were Dana Carvey and Mike Myers. Today? Darrell Hammond's impressions. That's it. And he used to be better.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 11:20 PM on 12/04/2007

cinemaven See Profile I'm a Fan of cinemaven permalink

As someone who is unquestionably OLD, the cast I grew up with was the original cast. I was 16 in '75 and I've been a faithful viewer and fan since the first show. There were only a few years that left me completely disinterested... 1985 comes to mind. Or the early 80's when it was held together (brilliantly) by Murphy and Piscopo and the music but not by much else.

I love the show and every year I find a reason to watch and every year I see the same "it'll never be as good" argument. I do find it harder to sit through the musical acts since it's become the stuff I'm yelling at my son to turn down these days. I also enjoyed the looser format of the early years but that doesn't mean I don't appreciate the cast and shows today.

I'm amazed that it's been able to hold the same enjoyment for me after all of these years but it has and I suspect I'll have every season of SNL as they are released just as I have every "Best of" they've put out. Watching the shows is like reliving a part of my life. Each "news" sketch takes me back to that time and most of the musical guests evoke good memories.

I think the biggest lie of Saturday Night Live is that it's over.

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♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:33 PM on 12/04/2007

cadavra See Profile I'm a Fan of cadavra permalink

I guess I qualify as "old"--I was 25 when it debuted. The first five years and the Hooks/Hartman/Carvey/Miller/Lovitz era stand out to me as the peaks in the show's history. But not even in the Doumanian era was it as almost-unwatchable as it is now. Virtually every sketch has no premise and no payoff, just riffing on something the writers thought was funny, as well as the mandatory fixation on bodily functions. And the digital shorts are the worst. "Andy Pops Into Frame"? "Andy Punches People"? Compare them to, say, the classic sketch where Bill Clinton (Hartman) goes into a McDonald's and answers everyone's questions while eating their food, or even the recent "Glengarry Glen Ross" spoof set in Santa's workshop, and you'll see the difference between great comedy writing and jerking off in front of the camera.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 07:18 PM on 12/04/2007

rpence See Profile I'm a Fan of rpence permalink

Giltz nails it. No subsequent cast or writing crew ever came close to the first 2-3 years of SNL, though plenty tried.

Aykroyd, Murray, Radner, et al. on an off night were light years ahead of Sandler and those other frat boys at their best.

For that matter, the musical guests were a hell of a lot better back then, too.

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Bateman See Profile I'm a Fan of Bateman permalink

This might seem even more heretical than preferring the Sandler-Farley cast to the original SNL cast, but matched against the post-Ferrell/Oteri SNL, MADtv has had consistently funnier sketches and recurring characters. Even MADtv's video parodies are sometimes better than SNL's digital shorts (the only part of post-90s SNL that regularly makes it into water cooler conversation). And MADtv's Michael McDonald is this decade's most underrated comic actor. (Unfortunately, the fake comedy club format of this season's MADtv is a mistake and hopefully will soon be discarded.)

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 05:57 PM on 12/04/2007

jmpurser See Profile I'm a Fan of jmpurser permalink

Yes boys and girls, Saturday Night Live used to be a LOT funnier. Really.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 04:18 PM on 12/04/2007

Bateman See Profile I'm a Fan of Bateman permalink

I happen to think that the era of SNL's original cast is overrated. There is too much "humor" lazily relying on the mere referencing of drug use and unfunny loopiness substituting for craft. (For example, head writer and occasional performer Michael O'Donoghue's impression of Mike Douglas with needles in his eyes.) To be sure, the nadir of the show was the early to mid-80s, not the 70s.

To me, the unquestionable peak of SNL is the era of Sandler, Farley and the rest of the "bad boys" (and girls) of SNL. Chris Farley was a force of nature, an uber-talent never to be equaled. And Adam Sandler's absurdism was theoretical comedy that is, unlike the excesses of 70s-era SNL, actually funny (e.g. his minimalist Halloween costumes). And who can forget the years-ahead-of-its-time gay beer commercial parody?

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 04:04 PM on 12/04/2007

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