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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
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Who's The King Of Late Nite? Craig Ferguson

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Last night (Tuesday/Wednesday from 12:30 am to 1:30 am), Craig Ferguson delivered another brilliant night of TV by simply doing away with the audience and talking for one hour to one guest. Of course, he loaded the deck by making that guest the endlessly witty, clever, insightful, thoughtful talk show-guest-of-your-dreams Stephen Fry. But still, it was an arresting, wonderful hour akin to the glory days of Dick Cavett when he would just spend a day or two or an entire week talking to someone that fascinated him (and therefore us).



Craig Ferguson and Stephen Fry roamed over the landscape: their friendship, the remarkable success of pal Hugh Laurie, drug addiction, Fry's bi-polar disorder (is disorder rude? bi-polar-ishness?), Twitter as it links to poetry and telegrams and the missives of our Founding Fathers, as well as the rather remarkable suggestion that Fry (a genuinely beloved figure in the UK) might consider becoming a US citizen. If you missed it, [do watch it online](#). The show reminded me how much I enjoy Ferguson, how refreshing he is and of an idea I've had but yet to execute.

For months now I've planned to spend a week and watch every minute of every major late night talk show and then declare a winner. Who is the king of late night, I wanted to know. Of course, I've watched everyone in bits and pieces and I'll tape any show with a guest I'm especially keen on, particularly

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musical guests. So let's face it: I already knew who I believed was the king of late night.

I hoped to be -- and was open to being -- surprised or at least discover something new about some of the hosts. But would my ranking change much? I doubt it; not after years (sometimes decades) of watching these people work. My plan was foiled by all the late night folderol, which threw everything into turmoil. But the result of years of watching and a certain keen anticipation for my proposed task -- which led me to pay closer attention even to the likes of Jimmy Kimmel -- is this:

DAVID LETTERMAN -- is in a class of his own. He's already ascended to the pantheon, alongside Johnny Carson, Steve Allen, Jack Paar, Dick Cavett and just a few others. He's not coasting by any means. But his legacy is assured, so he doesn't get ranked alongside the others.

JAY LENO -- gets no respect from critics like me and certainly his monologue doesn't deserve it. But he can squeeze out the odd strange fact from a guest a la Larry King just by his own disingenuousness. He's a genuinely nice guy so it's interesting that his funniest bits involve (gently) mocking the stupidity of regular folk via Jaywalking.

JIMMY KIMMEL -- bad standup, bad with guests unless that guest is his ex, the hilarious Sarah Silverman.

JIMMY FALLON -- makes Jimmy Kimmel look good. He's the Merv Griffin of late night, with every guest a dear dear friend and his most penetrating comment being "that's hilarious" or "that's great" followed by a giggle. He's so nervous and awkward in interviews it's painful to watch, with Fallon invariably gushing or talking over the guest or coming up with some inane comment. Perfectly likable guy in other contexts but a genuine flop as an interviewer of any sort, which is indeed a major job of the talk show host. You feel bad for him.

CONAN O'BRIEN -- he was just starting to get his rhythm in the earlier time slot. I pooh-poohed the idea that a guy who'd been doing a talk show for more than a decade could need time to adjust but 11:30 is indeed a whole new ballgame. Happily, Andy Richter had finally moved to the couch where he belonged. But even after all these years, Conan remains a very, very bad interviewer unless the guest is someone he deeply cares about or is a woman he's deeply attracted to. He can be funny on his feet of course. But Conan is glued desperately to his note cards and regularly makes the most awkward transitions imaginable, ruining any possibility of believing for a moment that he and his guest are actually just talking rather than hitting on pre-arranged talking points. The comedy bits save him, as does Richter's invaluable presence.

Which brings me to...

CRAIG FERGUSON -- the new king of late night. (With Letterman as the philosopher-king some miles above him and already sainted/knighted/whatever one does with great late night talk show hosts). He's been charming the pants off us for some 1,000 shows now and doing it effortlessly. I wondered if his signature tossing away of his note cards when a guest sits down is a pointed slam at Conan but he doesn't seem a nasty person. It's just his way of ensuring that they talk and he stays focused on the conversation rather than some scribbled idea for a question. He has the gift of gab of course.

Craig proved last night he doesn't need an audience. But he proves every night that he barely needs guests. Ferguson can chat away and be thoroughly engaging for more than half an hour before he brings out a guest. Then if he gets into a good rhythm with someone, he regularly just keeps talking with them and bumps the other guest and the musical act (if any). I do feel sorry for the second guest or the musical act (as well as the booker) because they are shunted aside so very often. But they're probably enjoying themselves too much in the green room to care. He can be silly, serious, insightful, frivolous and just about any other appealing adjective you can imagine. His most important gift is perhaps the ability to make us believe he's just having fun, just trying to please himself and do what amuses him. And that we're just clever enough to be in on the fun and enjoy it too.

The puppets, the musical lip-syncing numbers that sometimes open the show, the end of show moment where he rambles about what we've learned on the show that night, all of it is loose and silly enough to create an air of potential anarchy when of course he works like the devil to prepare so he can relax during the taping and let things happen. Like Letterman, he enjoys himself and is very funny. Like Cavett, he can speak intelligently about almost anything. Like Paar, he can dive into a serious monologue and do genuine soul-searching (about the death of his father, out of control pop stars, Rush Limbaugh and Haiti) that is absolutely riveting. Like Johnny, he allows his guests to shine; nothing gives him more pleasure than an entertaining guest. He is, indeed, the new king of late night.

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Pelicanx2 05:39 PM on 3/15/2010

2 Fans

Yep Craig is the King. He has the same honest connection to his audience that Carson had. He makes you feel like you could both sit down somewhere over coffee and talk about anything.

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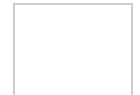
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TheHarView 12:28 PM on 3/12/2010

3 Fans

I have not watched all of the late night talk show hosts, but I couldn't disagree more with the negative comments on Jay Leno. I love his monologue and find it consistently much better than anyone else other than the great late Johnny Carson. But Jay is on a par with Carson and that rises to greatness in the world of comedy. Jay is superb with guests, especially ones he has teased such as Palin, Seacrest, Simpson, various Presidents and so forth. His Jay Walking and Battle of the Allstars might seem to tease others, but I get the feeling he actually loves them and the teasing is just fun. I also feel they love him in return.

Jay rules, has ruled for years and still has lots of fuel in the tank.

Read me: <http://TheHarView.blogspot.com>

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texshelters 09:52 AM on 3/02/2010

15 Fans

Good article. I agree with most of the points, except...

Sarah Silverman is NOT funny. No one has yet explained what makes her funny. She over reaches and mostly just shocks. Her schick is tired and NOT funny. When was the last time she actually wrote a joke.

On the other hand, Mr. Furgeson is naturally funny and charming and doesn't have to kiss a dogs ass to get cheap laughs. Did I say Sarah Silverman is NOT funny?

Peace,
Tex Shelters

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skippy2008 11:21 PM on 3/09/2010

65 Fans

Couldn't agree more!

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lubilu 02:19 AM on 3/02/2010

0 Fans

About the no promotion thing - I think that's absolutely genius and done very deliberately.

Firstly it fits in perfectly with the no-budget, no-band, holes in the roof schtick.

Secondly, note how many people on this thread say that they 'discovered' Craig. People get to Craig on their own, make their own decisions about him and become immensely proprietorial. Word of mouth is through the roof and CraigyFerg's Robot Skeleton Army (of which I count myself a proud member) on Twitter is rabid.

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Ripley in CT 12:31 AM on 3/01/2010

46 Fans

Love this guy. Hate that he's on so late. But love this guy.

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DemoGoddes 06:16 PM on 2/28/2010

15 Fans

WorldWide Pants!

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anothersunnyday 06:10 PM on 2/28/2010

3 Fans

no kidding.

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HDR 02:38 PM on 2/28/2010

82 Fans

I dislike Fallon enough to the point of feeling sorry for him. He had Horatio Sanz as a guest for like 35 mins. Wow, either he owed him or the guest well was drying up.

As for Kimmel: he's on only cuz ABC weaseled out on Maher and fired him for being relevant.

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Travis Bonnett 12:33 PM on 4/02/2010

7 Fans



Good point about Jimmy Kimmel, but the good thing about Bill Maher not being on ABC anymore is that on HBO he is allowed to be himself where as on ABC his teeth would had been taken out.

And to be completely honest, I haven't watched a lot of Kimmel since his show premiered, in what 2003?

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robsolo 01:35 PM on 2/28/2010

9 Fans

I like Craig. I don't watch his show oftet but his book was great. I had the audio book so it was really cool to listen to him tell his stories (as it were).

I guess Jon Stewart wouldn't be considered late night talk show...but I like still him better.

But this, 'JIMMY FALLON -- makes Jimmy Kimmel look good....it's painful to watch,...genuine flop as an interviewer of any sort... You feel bad for him.'

is SOOOOO spot on. I cringe whenever I watch his show (which isn't that often for that exact reason.)

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Travis Bonnett 12:37 PM on 4/02/2010

7 Fans



On the subject of the interviews, I think the rankings would go #1 Craig Ferguson, close #2 would be either Stewart or Colbert, then Letterman would be 4th, then I don't know.

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Dots 12:40 PM on 2/28/2010

36 Fans

He's the best. Then Bonnie Hunt who is still relegated to daytime.
I'm still deciding about Wanda Sykes.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

PlayTOE 06:49 AM on 2/28/2010

1009 Fans



Johnny Carson -- raised the bar on late night TV to a whole new standard. He had a connection to

his guests and audience that was outstanding.

David Letterman -- is class, but still has not surpassed Johnny.

Craig Ferguson -- Is the first late night host since Carson to live up to that same high standard of both humor and honesty. He is the new king of late night.

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PatA 01:49 AM on 2/28/2010

383 Fans

Bring on the hate! I just drove in from Austin where I spent about an hour with Craig Ferguson. Of course my daughter and about 1500 people were there.

He was hysterical and made good use of the "f" word. In fact, I doubt that I've ever laughed more at that word. He was brilliant in his use of THE word.

My daughter has never watched his late night show so she was a bit taken aback and alarmed when he closed the show with "Oops, I've Done it Again" and I leapt to my feet and joined in the singing. Leather Boy and the other guy were there and besides "singing" with him for the closer, they both came out and danced around just before Craig came on.

IT WAS WONDERFUL!!!!!!!!!!!!

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matildagage 10:42 PM on 2/27/2010

3 Fans

DARN RIGHT he's the king of late night! My favorite by far. TV schedule as follows: Stewart, Colbert, then Ferguson. Oh my, how I love this Scottish lad.

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bigmamarosycheeks 08:40 PM on 2/27/2010

1 Fans

Just discovered Craig Ferguson this year and I LOVE him!! He's sweet and so very funny.

You are right on--Letterman and Ferguson are great men of late night.

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Okieborn 08:11 PM on 2/27/2010

136 Fans



Letterman and the rest are toast !!

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