

Comedy Talk Shows

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HBO's executives have always recognized that, as a subscription television network, its programming must be similar enough to network fare to seem familiar and inviting to audiences, yet different enough to be worth paying for. HBO's approach to comedy is no different. As Chris Albrecht, then HBO's president of original programming, noted in 1996, "there are not a lot of places like us and we have to continue to explore and expand the boundaries of comedy content-wise and form-wise" to be successful.¹ Two years earlier, HBO had embarked on its own approach to reinventing that mainstay of late night network programming—the comedy talk show. As HBO searched for ways to increase its original offerings (as well as provide fresh alternatives for weekend viewing beyond its usual lineup of movies, stand-up comedy, and erotic documentaries), the comedy talk show became a logical vehicle for such experimentation and brand differentiation.

With the introduction of *Dennis Miller Live* (1994–2002) on Friday nights, the network launched what would become a series of successful late night comedy talk shows that provided the much-desired cachet as an innovator in television programming that the network continually seeks. Beyond Miller's run of nine years, these shows have included *The Chris Rock Show* (1997–2000) and *Real Time with Bill Maher* (2003–). This limited but award-winning set of talk shows has helped define the network as a place for brash yet smart and entertaining political humor beyond the pale of typical network talk show programming.

Miller came to HBO after a five-year stint as the "Weekend Update" anchor with *Saturday Night Live* (SNL [NBC, 1975–]), a comedic bit he carried over to his HBO show. But it was his signature "rant," a five-minute, smartly written screed against the ills of society and foibles of

pompous public people that came to define the show. Rock, also an alum of SNL, continued to employ SNL-type sketch-comedy routines on his HBO show. But Rock's unpredictable and sometimes confrontational interviews with popular African American celebrities, as well as his tendency to feature uncensored hip-hop musical guests, helped establish the show as the premier location for black talk and variety entertainment in the wake of network talk show failures by other African Americans—Arsenio Hall, Keenan Ivory Wayans, Sinbad, and Magic Johnson. Finally, Maher, too, came to HBO as a known entity, further building on the signature style of roundtable political discussion that he offered for nine years on *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* (on Comedy Central and ABC, 1993–2002).

Each of these HBO talk shows, therefore, has provided familiar material to viewing audiences yet also developed the genre beyond the tired formula of celebrity product pitches, scripted interactions between host and guests, and the ubiquitous house band and musical sidekick. Although each show begins with a comedic monologue and includes interviews with guests, it is here that the relationship to the Steve Allen–Johnny Carson–David Letterman brand of late night talk generally ends. With no concerns for offending advertisers about "controversial" political material and no strictures on the language allowed, each host went on to develop a successful talk show persona as an opinionated sociopolitical commentator with a no-holds-barred approach to what could or should be said about the state of the world. The result, in short, has been shows that are opinionated without being predictable, political without being boring, and entertaining without being formulaic.

Dennis Miller Live

Although HBO had never aired a late night comedy talk show prior to 1994, it had dabbled in topical political humor before. From 1983 to 1990, the network produced an American version of the British import *Not Necessarily the News*, a sketch comedy show that also included humorous slants on the news. And in 1993, HBO Downtown Productions, an affiliated production company that developed programming for Comedy Central, created *Politically Incorrect* for the comedy channel and witnessed the subsequent critical success of this new form of entertainment talk show that dealt directly with politics. HBO then

contracted with Dennis Miller for a six-episode run of *Dennis Miller Live*, a thirty-minute live comedy talk show airing weekly at 11:30 p.m. (EST) on Fridays and repeating on Sundays. Miller had just come from a failed attempt at a syndicated talk show that lasted only six months (during 1992–93), but was more famously known for his work on *SNL* from 1986 to 1991. *Dennis Miller Live*, which debuted on April 22, 1994, similarly focused on Miller's strengths as a caustic and biting commentator on the day's events.

The talk show format for HBO brought Miller out from behind the news and talk show desk. Standing center stage, Miller opened the show with a monologue of comedic material largely based on headline news stories and bizarre news oddities. The lack of regulation on language gave Miller's acerbic wit an added punch as a result of his notorious potty-mouth. This format allowed him to accompany typical jokes with commentary that, although it might not be funny, would be greeted by laughter or applause nonetheless due to his articulation and amplification of his audience's feelings. For instance, after beginning the July 13, 2001, show with a few jokes about Congressman Gary Condit's role in the disappearance of former intern Chandra Levy, Miller takes the joking a step further by boldly stating, "Fuck you, Gary Condit—you're a bad guy," to which the audience erupts in cheers. The jokes, then, are blended with Miller's strong-willed and pointed commentary, usually laced with profanity, with little differentiation between the two. Johnny Carson once said, "I just don't feel Johnny Carson should become a social commentator. . . . If you're a comedian, your job is to make people laugh. You cannot be both serious and funny."² Miller took the opposite approach.

This is seen most clearly in the next feature of the program—the five-minute segue between the monologue and the guest interview known as the "rant." Miller would begin by saying, "Now I don't want to get off on a rant here, but . . ." and proceed to soliloquize on that evening's topic of discussion (covering over the course of the show's run topics as disparate as affirmative action, disappearing manners, fame, and civil disobedience). As the defining feature of the show, Miller established his persona as a smart and intellectually nimble social and political critic through his mix of literary and cultural references (although detractors

found his persona "smug" or "smarter-than-thou"). The show won five Emmy Awards for comedy writing, largely attributable to the rants (material he also converted into four best-selling books).

After the rant, Miller would bring on a guest to discuss the topic he had just introduced. Sometimes the guest would have a connection to the topic (such as Dr. Joycelyn Elders on teen pregnancies), and sometimes not (as with Jon Stewart on bad habits). Although most of the guests were celebrities, they were not appearing to pitch their latest media projects, but rather to talk about the issue at hand. And as with the rant, there was no segregation between serious talk (like Oprah Winfrey) and entertaining talk (like Letterman). Miller's gift was the ability to be both serious and funny at the same time. The show would conclude with Miller reprising his bit from *SNL* in front of "The Big Screen," narrating photographs of politicians and famous people with what often amounted to verbal cartoon bubbles and funny captions. The feature added a lighter touch to finish off the program and ended with Miller's signature statement from *SNL*: "That's the news, I'm outta here." This part of the show, however, often seems like a return to Miller's previous comedic manifestation as the sophomoric guy in the corner of the room lobbing spitballs—amusing, but ultimately insignificant.

Dennis Miller Live ran for nine seasons and 215 episodes, finally going dark on August 30, 2002. Over those episodes, Miller (along with Bill Maher on *Politically Incorrect*) helped insert a healthy dose of politics into the genre of late night comedy talk. The program demonstrated that substantive conversations could occur in a thirty-minute show that still included comedy routines. It also showed that a comedy show could focus on a single topic of discussion with a single guest and that audiences were interested in political talk from someone other than the inside-the-beltway crowd. Perhaps most importantly, Miller proved that a talk show host didn't have to be a Caronesque Everyman—appealing to all, offensive to none.³ Rather, the talk show host could establish himself as a polemical and aggressive social commentator who, despite his assertiveness, was both entertaining and appealing. *Dennis Miller Live* helped HBO fill a void in its late night weekend programming while simultaneously creating the model upon which the network's next talk show would be built.

