FURTHER READING


Will Ferrell (1967–)

Will Ferrell, born John William Ferrell, is an American comedian and actor who is well known both as a performer (especially on Saturday Night Live [SNL] and in comedy films) and as a writer and producer (e.g., Funny or Die) of humor. He performs his comedic roles—from his parody of Jeopardy host Alex Trebek on SNL to the fictional news anchor Ron Burgundy in Anchorman—with a trademark style that combines dedicated seriousness with escalating physical humor. One of his most notable roles is his impression of President George W. Bush, whom he portrayed on SNL on many occasions between the years 1999 and 2018. Ferrell’s portrayal utilized a deadpan style of humor delivered with a straight face that was very popular with audiences.

Ferrell became known to a wide audience in the 1990s and is often considered to be a nonpolitical comedian whose career suggests that he prefers sketches that entail slapstick comedy over those that address political topics.

Based on what Ferrell has said on the topic, the beginning of his career as a comedian can either be regarded as the inevitable path for someone who discovered in his formative years that he likes to make other people laugh or as a deliberate career change and leap of faith of a sports journalism college graduate. In any case, Ferrell decided to move from Irvine, California, to Los Angeles in 1991 and to pursue a career as an actor and comedian. While he did perform some stand-up in the early 1990s, it is the year he spent at the improvisation comedy group The Groundlings that can be seen as a first major step toward becoming a famous comedian and actor. He was discovered there and only one year later was cast as a member of the famous NBC sketch show SNL, which he would leave in 2002 to focus on his film career.

Many of the characters Ferrell played and the sketches he acted in were very popular with SNL’s audience, and two separate Saturday Night Live: The Best of Will Ferrell DVDs were produced to showcase his work on the show. According to the SNL anthology Live from New York: The Complete, Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live as Told by Its Stars, Writers and Guests, “The case could easily be made that Ferrell and Eddie Murphy were the two most important cast members in the show’s history” (Shales and Miller 2008, 7).

FERRELL’S COMEDY

Ferrell has a notable talent for observation and imitation, which he translated into his signature celebrity impressions on SNL. These included his performance as the legendary radio and television sportscaster Harry Caray, which he had
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included in his audition for SNL; his portrayal of Jeopardy host Alex Trebek, to which he lent poise and seriousness that was reminiscent of the comedy of Buster Keaton; and most notably George W. Bush, even though Ferrell left SNL during the second year of Bush’s presidency.

Another noteworthy aspect of Ferrell’s performances is the physicality he uses in his roles. For his impressions, this means that Ferrell seems less interested in becoming an exact copy of a person and more interested in creating a caricature and escalating particular incongruous actions to the point where audiences will either cringe or burst with laughter. This second aspect, too, is present in Ferrell’s version of W. Bush.

Ferrell’s portrayal of the president was the most political sketch of his career. Looking at two sketches—one of Ferrell’s early performances as Texas governor George W. Bush and his reprisal of the role in January 2018—audiences can see how he developed the performance from a simple impression into a more sophisticated portrayal.

According to Ferrell, his initial rendition of Bush was inspired by Chevy Chase’s portrayal of Gerald Ford, and it followed the political impressions of fellow SNL comedian Darrell Hammond, who was performing parodies of Bill Clinton, Jesse Jackson, and Al Gore on the show during the same period. One of the first performances, on November 20, 1999, illustrates the initial approach Ferrell took, which can be described as essentially nonpolitical caricature of the candidate at the time. Matching Bush’s appearance by wearing a conservative dark gray suit and coloring his hair and eyebrows gray, Ferrell used a two-minute sketch in a newsroom setting to poke fun at the “wild youth” and drug use in Bush’s past, with which the press was confronting the governor of Texas at the time. The almost monothematic performance mimics a restless drug addict who twitches, makes references to partying, and finally feels so hot that he takes off his jacket and shirt.

To conclude the performance, Ferrell goes on to profess his love of the smell of a new book and starts frantically sniffing his autobiography. This early impression highlights the physical aspects of Ferrell’s comedic talent. The sketch itself is very simple and rests on the clash between the established conservative politician and the uncomfortable drug stories from his youth that had become a news topic. What renders it humorous is Ferrell’s performance, which embodies this clash by exaggerating and quickly escalating a drug addict’s mannerisms while at the same time doing an impression of the demeanor of the politician.

Ferrell returned to SNL on January 28, 2018, to perform another sketch that parodies Bush, derides Trump, and mocks viewers who reported feeling nostalgic for Bush’s presidency now that they were experiencing the challenges of President Trump’s time in office. Like a similar appearance of Ferrell as Bush at the 2017 White House Correspondents’ Dinner, this performance was calm and free of slapstick. Ferrell’s makeup reflected an older Bush, and he did not rely on dramatic antics to perform the cold open for this episode of SNL, which is set up as a parody of a presidential address.

Instead, he took on the role of a political commentator and a former president whose popularity has suddenly surged in comparison to the historically divisive
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next president from his party, Donald Trump. He parodied Bush’s misuse of Latinate words and the politician’s seemingly undeliberate self-deprecating jabs at his own lack of sophistication. Ferrell also uses the sketch to criticize the president for things such as the wars that were started, the state of the U.S. economy, and the vice president during the Bush presidency.

This humor is much like Jon Stewart’s on The Daily Show. It critically reflects on what it perceives to be a fallacious interpretation of current affairs, and it offers cathartic moments that allow viewers to release tension. That his form of political commentary through humor is effective is a direct result of Ferrell’s physicality and qualities as a method actor. On the level of his own career, the same skill set has allowed Ferrell to become more than a famous member of SNL and even to go beyond comedy in his more serious roles in Bewitched (2005) and above all in Stranger Than Fiction (2006). Despite such successful excursions into other genres, Ferrell the movie actor for the most part resembles his prior performances, be it as Ron Burgundy in Anchorman (2004), as Ricky Bobby in Talladega Nights (2006), or as Chazz Michael Michaels in Blades of Glory (2007).

Ferrell’s role as a performer has always been complemented by his qualities as a writer and producer of humor. The air of authenticity he lends to his sketches is likely grounded in the fact that he often writes his own jokes. When it comes to the production of humor, what stands out is the comedy video site Funny or Die, which Ferrell founded together with Adam McKay and Chris Henchy in 2007. The platform hosts humorous videos that often include the performances of famous actors and was perhaps at its peak in the 2000s, when it offered an alternative to the mediated comedy landscape that was dominated by cable television at the time.

Thomas C. Messerli

See also: Chase, Chevy; Saturday Night Live; Hammond, Darrell; Fey, Tina; Fallon, Jimmy

FURTHER READING


Tina Fey (1970–)

Tina Fey (1970–) was born Elizabeth Stamatina Fey in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania. While most recognizable as a leading actor on TV shows Saturday Night Live (SNL; 1997–2006) and 30 Rock (2006–2013) and films such as Whiskey Tango Foxtrot (2016), Fey is also an accomplished writer and producer. Rising to fame in the late 1990s, Fey became one of the leading American comics of the early twenty-first century due to her biting wit and topical jokes and her ability to mix a deadpan delivery with slapstick. Her use of satire as a form of political commentary is highly regarded; the “Fey effect,” a widely used term, is an attribution that
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