

Steady As He Goes

Familiarity Bred Delight in Leno's 17-Year Run on 'The Tonight Show'

By Paul Farhi | Washington Post Staff Writer | Friday, May 29, 2009

If Jay Leno's reign as the king of late-night TV had one consistent theme, it may have been this one: It pays to be consistent. Night after weekday night, Leno, America's lunch-bucket comic, never varied the tone, the format or even much of the physical appearance of "The Tonight Show," which he inherited from Johnny Carson in 1992. During a period when just about everything in television changed, Leno and "The Tonight Show" mostly didn't.

When Leno ends his 17-year run as "Tonight's" host tonight, he'll bow out (if only for a few months) as one of television's best-known and most widely liked performers. The occasion doesn't warrant the same end-of-an-era sentiment that Carson's retirement occasioned in 1992, because Leno isn't retiring. He's simply picking up and moving to a five-night-a-week prime-time NBC show in September, passing the "Tonight" franchise to Conan O'Brien, the show's fifth host in 55 years.

Except for a few brief periods, particularly in his rocky early years, Leno, 59, has kept NBC's late-night franchise atop the ratings, even as NBC's prime-time schedule waxed and (most recently) waned. Viewers have consistently preferred his genial, middlebrow approach to comedy over David Letterman's quirkier, more sharp-edged and sometimes downright grumpier shtick.

NBC did tweak a few things during Leno's tenure, not that they mattered much. Original bandleader Branford Marsalis walked out early, replaced by Kevin Eubanks. Forgettable announcer Edd Hall was replaced by even more forgettable announcer John Melendez.

By design, however, Leno didn't reinvent "Tonight" or late-night talk. The elements of Leno's show -- monologue, celebrity interviews, the desk-and-couch set, with a live band and studio audience -- were the same as those on the original "Tonight," hosted by Steve Allen starting in 1954.

Leno's signature contribution has been his nightly monologue, which is longer and more politically oriented than even Carson's was each night. In a conversation with reporters earlier this month, Leno noted that the monologue is "the most fun" part of the show. As a club comic, Leno said, he used to watch the news and then "run down to the Improv or the Comedy Store or one of the clubs and get onstage and tell that topical joke to the audience. It would get a laugh and I'd say to myself, 'This is a great joke [but] I only got to tell it to 85 people or 200 people.' The fun thing about 'The Tonight Show,' something happens, you write the joke and run out on the stage. It's like fresh-squeezed orange juice. There's the vine, here's the juicer and you get it right the same day."

Leno writes much of his material each day, structuring it like a newspaper, says Rick Ludwin, the NBC executive who oversees the network's late-night programming. "He opens with the top story of the day, moves to entertainment, sports, maybe a weather story," he said. "People who watch the show have watched the news right before and they want to laugh at what they've seen."

Over time, Ludwin says, the length of Leno's monologue has grown, from four minutes in his early "Tonight" years to sometimes as long as 12 minutes. In fact, NBC tweaked the show's set in 1994 to move Leno closer to the studio audience ("He felt more comfortable that way," says Ludwin), further emphasizing the stand-up aspect of his show. Leno for years has opened the show by walking out and shaking hands with audience members in another effort to underscore the comedy-club vibe.

The sheer volume of jokes alone may have made Leno the most "political" comedian on television. According to the **Center for Media and Public Affairs**, a Washington think tank that has tracked late-night political humor since 1988, Leno has told one-third more politically themed jokes than Letterman since 1992 (a staggering 33,331 overall through 2008) and almost five times as many as Conan O'Brien. During the 2008 campaign, he was also the most balanced of all the late-night comics, with quips and cracks aimed almost equally at Republicans and Democrats. What's more, "The Tonight Show" had more candidates as guests than any other late-night show, edging out "The Daily Show."

"He's really responsible for making late night a source of political humor," says **S. Robert Lichter**, the CMPA's president. "Carson had political jokes, but they were mostly filler. For Leno, it was the main thing. Whenever a public figure was involved in some personal foible, you knew you'd hear about it on Leno."

Leno's "Tonight Show" was never much about conversation, unlike Carson's, or Letterman's "Late Show" at times. Apart from a few memorable interviews -- a contrite Hugh Grant in 1995, Arnold Schwarzenegger announcing his candidacy for California governor in 2003, President Obama's appearance in March -- Leno has never matched Letterman's crackling, quirky and occasionally abrasive confrontations with celebrities (think Madonna, Farrah Fawcett, John McCain, Joaquin Phoenix, etc.). Leno is too pleasant and convivial a fellow to get under any guest's skin, and seemingly way too fascinated by whatever book, movie, TV show or recording his guests were plugging.

Nor did Leno go in for Letterman's absurd and sometimes subversive anti-stunts ("Stupid Pet/Human Tricks," "Will It Float?"). Leno's signature "desk" bits were conventional fare such as reading amusingly mangled headlines and interviewing astoundingly dumb people on the street ("Jay Walking") -- both bits that he'll take to his new prime-time show.

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