

‘LIVE FROM NEW YORK...’

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

It was rude, crude and most definitely unrefined. They even called the repertory cast “the Not Ready for Prime Time Players,” which alerted viewers they weren’t about to watch a comedy show that had been carefully thought out, written and rehearsed.

But it didn’t take long for “Saturday Night Live” to become a staple of weekend television and a major topic of watercooler discussion the next week at school and at work.

“NBC’s Saturday Night” debuted on Oct. 11, 1975 — a half-century ago.

THAT FIRST EPISODE

“NBC’s Saturday Night” kicked off with what is now a trusted comedy staple: A cold opening. Head writer Michael O’Donoghue appears to be giving an English lesson to John Belushi, who repeats increasingly absurd phrases back to him. Suddenly, O’Donogue has a massive coronary. So Belushi dutifully leaps to his feet and has one too.



Producers offered actor and comedian Albert Brooks a job as permanent host of the show. Brooks suggested they bring in a different host every week. George Carlin was guest host that first night and delivered four comedy monologues. He was supposed to appear in several skits as well, but that idea was canceled after Carlin had spent most of that week stoned.



The first episode included two musical guests, each of whom sang two songs. Billy Preston performed “Nothing from Nothing,” which had been a No. 1 hit the previous year and Janis Ian sang “At Seventeen,” which had peaked at No. 3 the month before. In addition, Paul Simon made a brief appearance to plug the next week’s show.



One of the night’s most memorable performances was by then-unknown comic Andy Kauffman, who stands motionless as a tiny record player plays the “Mighty Mouse” theme. Until the line “Here I come to save the day” is sung, when he suddenly mouths the lyrics and motions with his arm. Kauffman would appear frequently over the show’s first five years.



The original plan had been for show producer Lorne Michaels to host a fake news broadcast during the show. He grew concerned about having to cut skits featuring other actors while preserving time for his own bit, so Michaels handed off that duty to Chevy Chase who, over the course of the season, became the show’s breakout star.



Puppeteer Jim Henson was hired to create a weekly segment featuring adult-themed Muppet characters. The show’s writers hated writing for the segment and it showed in the work. By the season’s 15th and 16th episodes, it had become a running gag that the days were numbered for “The Land of Gorch” segments and characters.



SNL’s FIRST SEASON ON THE AIR

To fill late Saturday night airtime in the 1960s, NBC broadcast reruns of “The Tonight Show. Starring Johnny Carson” But in 1974, Carson began pestering the network to save those reruns for weeknights, which would allow him to cut back his workload to only three nights a week.

The network set out to come up with a clever plan that would not only meet Carson’s needs but might also boost NBC’s dismal Saturday ratings. The idea was to draw in younger audiences with a 90-minute late-night variety show that would be broadcast live from the RCA “30 Rock” New York building and would feature the hottest musical acts and comedy sketches heavy on political satire and other topical humor.

NBC brought in Canadian writer and producer Lorne Michaels — who had worked on “Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In” and “The Beautiful Phyllis Diller Show” for NBC — to flesh out the plan.

A month before Michaels’ show premiered, however, ABC launched a live variety show, “Saturday Night Live with Howard Cosell.” NBC was forced to call its new show “NBC’s Saturday Night.”

The first season of “NBC’s Saturday Night” was nothing short of amazing. The second episode, hosted by Paul Simon with Randy Newman and Phoebe Snow as additional musical guests, featured 10 musical performances — including a Simon and Art Garfunkel reunion.

In the season’s seventh episode that December, guest host Richard Pryor was featured in a sketch in which Chase administers a word association test that goes awry when the words become increasingly racially offensive.

The the 10th episode the next January, Belushi performed a blues song wearing a hat, sunglasses, and a bee costume while Dan Aykroyd accompanies him on harmonica. This would become a running skit that would evolve into the Blues Brothers.

By March, ABC’s Howard Cosell show had been canceled. For its 16th episode on March 13, NBC renamed the show “Saturday Night.”

The 17th episode on April 17 was hosted by President Gerald Ford’s press secretary, Ron Nessen. Ford helped out by recording the show’s opening: “Live from New York, it’s Saturday Night!”

Michaels would occasionally appear on camera. In this scene — from the 18th episode of that first season, in April 1976 — Michaels brandished a \$3,000 check he promised to pay the Beatles if they reunited on his show.



Four years later, John Lennon told an interviewer that Paul McCartney was staying with him that weekend in his apartment near Central Park. They had watched “Saturday Night” and considered dropping in, but they decided they were too tired.

The May 29 episode is remembered by fans for a sketch in which the show ridicules NBC canceling “Star Trek,” seven years before.

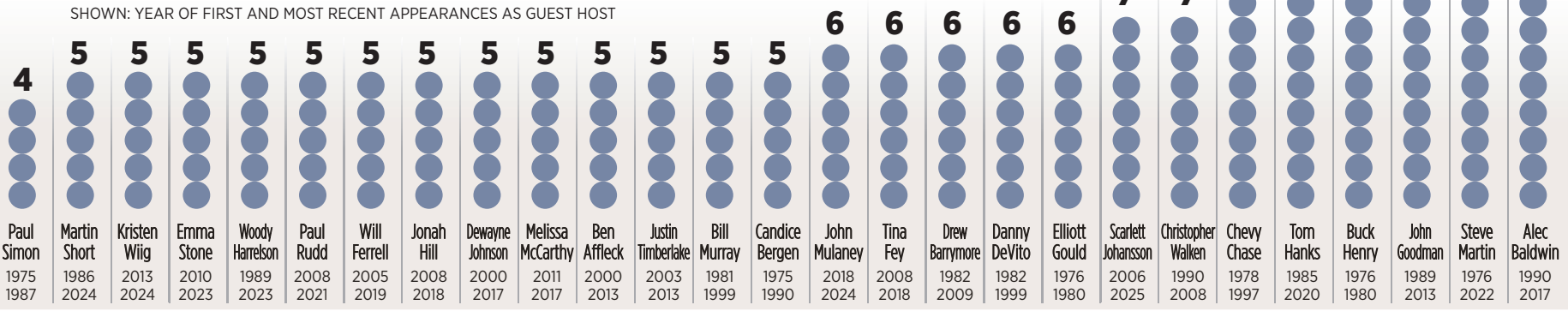
in a Comedy-Variety or Music Series. In addition, Chase would win an acting Emmy.

That spring, “Saturday Night” would win four Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Comedy-Variety or Music Series and Outstanding Writing

Over its 50 seasons on the air, “Saturday Night Live” has won 98 Emmy Awards and four Peabody Awards. Its 51st season kicked off on Oct. 4.

‘THE FIVE TIMER’S CLUB’

Over the years, it would become a running gag that a guest hosting for the fifth time was inducted into an exclusive club that met in a secret backstage lounge. In fact, 26 guests have guest-hosted at least five times, some have hosted quite a few more times than that. And while Paul Simon has hosted “only” four times, he’s made 11 appearances as the show’s musical guest.



Sources: “Saturday Night Live FAQ: Everything Left to Know About Television’s Longest-Running Comedy” by Stephen Tropiano, “Live From New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live as Told by its Stars, Writers & Guests” by Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller, “Saturday Night Live” by Anne Beatts and John Head, NBC, the New York Times, Deadline, Internet Movie Database, History.com

ALL PHOTOS FROM NBC STUDIOS AND SNL STUDIOS