

MAKERS

WOMEN IN COMEDY

BACKGROUND:

MAKERS: Women In Comedy tracks the rise of women in the world of comedy, from the “dangerous” comedy of 70s sitcoms like Norman Lear’s *Maude* to the groundbreaking women of the 1980s American comedy club boom and building to today’s multifaceted landscape. Today, movies like *Bridesmaids* break box office records and the women of *Saturday Night Live* are often more famous than their male counterparts, but it didn’t start out that way. Early breakout female comics had to keep their jokes within the safe context of marriage, motherhood, and a man’s world. But they still found a way to be subversive. As Joan Rivers puts it, “I was furious about having to get married... It all comes out on stage. So that’s what I do onstage. I really tell them the truth.”

Soon comedy became a vehicle for women to take on some of the most sensitive and controversial issues of the day. On television in the 1960s, entertainers like Carol Burnett and Mary Tyler Moore illuminated the core issues of feminism with humor that was both sly and truthful. But it took a powerful male producer to bring the most provocative feminist characters onto the screen. *Maude*, who Lear introduced to audiences in 1971, was a feminist firebrand on her fourth husband, strong and independent with a razor sharp wit. “When *Maude* was on the air,” Lear tells us, “I used to get letters from the First Lady, Betty Ford.... And she always signed every letter ‘*Maude’s* #1 fan’.” When *Maude* chose to have an abortion at 47, religious groups protested, but the episode was watched by 65 million Americans.

The tough and macho world of standup comedy was less welcoming of women than television was. In the early 1980s, when the comedy club boom was in full swing, women were a rarity. A few female comics broke through anyway. Roseanne Barr, like Phyllis Diller a generation before, was a mother and housewife, but unlike Diller, who belittled herself to gain mainstream acceptance, Roseanne Barr didn’t give a “#&%” what you thought of her. Her appearance on the *Tonight Show* made her an overnight sensation, and launched a wildly successful television series. With success, Roseanne opened the floodgates. Female comics, from Ellen DeGeneres to Margaret Cho and Kathy Griffin, began to break through. Of course obstacles still remain, for instance, until very recently, appearing too attractive or feminine was perceived as a liability for a female comic. Even Chelsea Handler - who is known as a blond bombshell - used to wear ugly clothes and no makeup on stage so that the audience could focus on her comic chops. The “pretty isn’t funny” taboo was shattered once and for all with the rise of shock comic Sarah Silverman, whose fearlessness appealed widely to her generation.

From Chelsea Handler to Amy Poehler and Tina Fey, female comics have finally become mainstream. And today, the very idea of being *out* of the club is even laughable. As Joan Rivers says “There is no such thing as women’s comedy. What are you all talking about? Done, over it. Next!”

The program includes interviews with contemporary comics, including Chelsea Handler, Mo’Nique, Sarah Silverman, Joan Rivers, Ellen DeGeneres, Jane Lynch and Kathy Griffin, who talk about where women started in this competitive, male-dominated profession and where they are determined to go. Produced and directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady. Narrated by Leslie Mann.

Expanding on the critically acclaimed PBS documentary **MAKERS: Women Who Make America**, which told the story of the modern American women’s movement, each documentary in this six-part PBS series examines the impact of the women’s movement on six fields once largely closed to women: business, space, Hollywood, comedy, war and politics. In each field, women have pried open, and profoundly reshaped, the central institutions of American life and culture. In the last half-century, women have fought their way into nearly every sphere of American life, from the battlefield to the comedy club, the soundstage to the Senate. Through intimate interviews with trailblazing women known and unknown, viewers are given a rare glimpse – sometimes funny, sometimes sad, and always candid – of what it was like to be pioneers in their fields. Directed by some of the country’s leading independent filmmakers, **MAKERS** brings to life new and unforgettable stories that every woman, man, girl and boy should know. Other documentaries in the **MAKERS** series include **Women in Hollywood**, **Women in Business**, **Women in Space**, **Women in War**, and **Women in Politics**.

MAKERS is also a growing archive of women's stories. At makers.com you can meet over 250 Makers including more MAKERS: Women in Comedy:

Carol Burnett spent the 1960s garnering acclaim for both her musical and comedic abilities. It earned her the deal that made her the first female host of a TV sketch and variety show with *The Carol Burnett Show*. To date the series remains the most successful prime-time variety hour. Burnett has authored two *New York Times* best sellers, *This Time Together: Laughter and Reflection* and her autobiography, *One More Time*.

Margaret Cho is a groundbreaking stand-up comedian best known for tackling head on stereotypes around race, sexuality and gender. Her one woman show, "I'm The One That I Want", toured the country to national acclaim and was made into a best-selling book and feature film of the same name. Several acclaimed tours have since followed including Notorious C.H.O., Revolution, Beautiful, Cho Dependent, and her most recent MOTHER.

Ellen DeGeneres, an entertainment pioneer, best known for *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. She's been included in *Forbes's* "100 Most Powerful" and *Time's* "100 Most Influential" lists and has hosted the Oscars, the Emmys, and the Grammys to wide acclaim. She is the best-selling author of *Seriously...I'm Kidding*, *The Funny Thing Is...*, and *My Point...And I Do Have One*. Her many humanitarian efforts include anti-bullying campaigns and support for Hurricane Katrina victims, as well as animal rescue, global warming and breast cancer awareness organizations.

Nora Ephron was a best-selling writer, director, and producer. Her career as a screenwriter began with a television movie titled *Adam's Rib* (1973). She went on to write, direct and produce 15 films, but she is best known for her romantic comedies, such as *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), and *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993). Her most recent film, *Julie & Julia*, was released in 2009 to rave reviews.

Jane Lynch is a singer, actor and comedian. Her breakout role came in 2000, when she played a dog handler in Christopher Guest's mockumentary *Best in Show*. Many know her as Sue Sylvester, "Glee"'s aggressive cheerleading coach, for which she won an Emmy in 2010 and a Golden Globe in 2011. In 2011, Lynch also hosted the Emmy Awards and published her memoir, *Happy Accidents*.

Tig Notaro is a comedian. She has made appearances in a number of television shows and late night shows, including "Officer Tig" in "The Sarah Silverman Program" and as a regular on "Conan." In May of 2012, Notaro made her debut on NPR's "This American Life" with Ira Glass. In August 2012, Notaro learned she had Stage 2 breast cancer and went stage at Largo the same day. She began her now legendary set with, "Good evening, hello. I have cancer. How are you?" After a double mastectomy, the cancer was contained and Notaro is now in remission.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

The following questions are grouped together by overarching themes raised in MAKERS: Women in Comedy.

General Lead-ins

After viewing MAKERS: Women in Comedy, are you more likely to think women are funny?

Did watching this program inspire you to support women in comedy? Anger you for how women have been treated and discounted?

When asked to name "famous comedians" more often than not, people will list vast numbers of men before getting to the women. Having watched *MAKERS: Women in Comedy*, can you name 5 female comedians?

Gendered Values Associated with Comedy

According to Joan Rivers and other female comedians, comedy was very "masculine". Is that still true today?

Why do people continue to think that women aren't funny?

Comedy started as a boys' club. And today, many critics, such as Christopher Hitchens and Jerry Lewis, argue that "women aren't funny". Why are funny women threatening?

Phyllis Diller became a comedy icon in the 1950s by poking fun of her appearance and dressing down, while in fact she was really quite elegant and chic. Many other women in comedy became successful for being self-deprecating. Why do many female comedians belittle themselves to appeal to a mainstream audience?

Many female comedians comment about appearance. Phyllis Diller joked about how “ugly” she was. Roseanne Barr pushed “not caring”. Chelsea Handler admits to downplaying her looks to gain acceptance, and Sarah Silverman quashed the notion that “pretty isn’t funny” and used “the vessel that she’s in to push the jokes”. Why is appearance such a huge theme in comedians’ lives? Is it the same for men?

Humor as a Tool for Change

Joan Rivers realized that comedy could be used for something radical - to riff openly on the unfair treatment of women. Comedy was a gateway for acknowledging that women were treated differently and often not kindly. Comedy has been a similar crutch to address disparities around race and sexuality. In the long run does that use of comedy benefit these causes or further mask the harshness of their reality?

In the 1960s, shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Carol Burnett Show* used unfair working conditions women experienced as a base for their jokes. How can humor shed light on injustices and stereotypes?

Saturday Night Live debuted in the 1970s. It brought satire and sharp commentary on women’s changing role in society to a mainstream audience. Laraine Newman, one of the first females on the show, said it was clear that “comedy was going to be the new rock ‘n roll.” How can comedy - like rock ‘n roll - affect society?

Barriers for Women in the Field

Though women were increasingly in front of the camera, they were still rarely calling the shots behind the camera. In fact, it often took male producers to bring the strongest female characters, like *Maude*, to TV in the 1970s. What differences do you imagine if more women were behind the scenes?

For women on SNL, getting screen time was challenging. Being in such unwelcomed territory wasn’t always comfortable. Think about being “the only one” - how would you go about making change?

Comedy clubs in the 1980s often refused to book more than one woman a night. How does competition like this - many women vying for one spot - affect women negatively?

By the 1980s, the stand-up comedy scene was in full swing and about 95% of the comedians were male. Ellen DeGeneres says that women weren’t treated with same respect as men. What do you think the experience would be like for a woman to try to enter the field as this time?

In the 1970s The Comedy Store in L.A. decided to open a separate room (The Belly Room) for female comics. How did segregation affect female comedians?

In 80s and 90s, sitcoms began featuring women that actually resembled America - career-driven, single mothers, divorcees. Yet, the writers’ room of these shows often only had one female. Why is it important to get more women in writers’ rooms?

When the stand-up scene faded, TV “brick wall” comedy shows became popular. Many women comics didn’t fit the traditional punch line, TV mold. How did women adapt and contribute to the “alternative” comedy scene?

Changing Landscape

Jane Lynch says, “I don’t know if it ever occurred to them [Tina Fey and Amy Poehler] that they don’t *deserve* a seat at the table.” Are women’s views on what they deserve changing?

The idea of being “left out of the club” today is laughable. Sarah Silverman says women run comedy. Joy Behar wants this to be the last documentary she does on women in comedy because “it shouldn’t be relevant.” Do you agree?

How is social media creating opportunities for a new generation of female comedians?

TURNING POINTS FOR WOMEN IN COMEDY:

1951 *I Love Lucy* premieres, created by Lucille Ball and Desilu Productions.

From 1967 to 1978 *The Carol Burnett Show* is a staple of prime time TV proving that women can entertain and amuse.

Once billed as “The Funniest Woman in the World” Moms Mabley is a relatively unknown comedic force, mostly a consequence of the racism and sexism that surrounded women and comedy for most of the 20th Century.

In 1986, Ellen DeGeneres appears on *The Tonight Show* and becomes the first comedienne that Johnnie Carson invites for post-performance chat.

1988 Roseanne Barr debuts *Roseanne*.

1996 Lizz Winstead and Madeleine Smithberg create *The Daily Show* eventually launching the careers of Samantha Bee, Jessica Williams and others.

1999 Tina Fey becomes the first female head writer at *Saturday Night Live*.

2002 Whoopi Goldberg gets her EGOT (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, Tony) the only comedian and African American to have done so.

2011 *Bridesmaids*, grossed over \$288 million, toping producer Judd Apatow’s other successful films, including *Knocked Up!*. *Bridesmaids* also is Apatow’s first film to receive an Academy Award nomination.

2013 Amy Poehler and Tina Fey co-host the 70th Annual Golden Globe Awards.

2014 Jessica Erbaum convinces her bosses Adam McKay and Will Ferrell to create Gloria Sanchez Productions to produce more female based comedies.

By 2016 we will see Chelsea Handler’s solo show on Netflix.

To see and support women in comedy, check out:

On TV: *New Girl*, *The Mindy Project*, *Veep*, *Inside Amy Schumer*, *Playing House*, *Portlandia*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Broad City*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Cristela* and coming soon *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*.

On film: *The Heat*, *Frances Ha*, *Admission*, *Tammy*, *Obvious Child*.

