

## Super Fan

by Tom Farley, Jr., and Tanner Colby,  
Author of *The Chris Farley Show: A Biography in Three Acts*

### **Conan O' Brien**, *writer*:

When Chris first got to the show, I met him hanging out in the conference room outside Lorne's office. He was dressed kind of like a kid going to a job interview. We chatted for a bit. I liked him right away.

I came in and out of that conference room several times during the day, and Chris was still waiting. Lorne would do that to you, make you wait a long time. At the end of the day, I was feeling bad for him, so I said, "Hey, kid. I'll show you around the studio," and I led him on kind of a mock tour where I pretended to be in charge of everyone. Chris fell in and started playing along with me. After that I left and went home. I came back to work the next day, and Chris was still waiting outside Lorne's office.

He had this energy, even when he was sitting there waiting for his meeting, rocking back and forth in his ill-fitting sports jacket with his tie all pulled off to the side. He seemed really earnest about doing the show. You just had the feeling that he was going to be a lot of fun and he belonged here. It was like the show -- and I don't mean this to sound condescending -- but it was like the show had been given this new golden retriever puppy.

From the day he arrived at *Saturday Night Live*, Chris Farley was already suffering comparisons to the other outrageous, larger-than-life figure in *SNL* history: John Belushi. When Chris died seven years later, eerily, at the same age as Belushi, those comparisons became gospel. In truth the two men shared far more differences than similarities. Still, in life and in death, Chris has borne the accusation of trying too hard to

follow in Belushi's footsteps -- an accusation with varying shades of truth. Yes, Chris looked up to and admired his predecessor, but whatever influence Belushi's ghost had on a young Chris Farley paled in comparison to the truly dominant forces in his life: his father, his family, and his faith. As far as drugs and alcohol went, Chris's bad habits were very much his own, seeded in his DNA and showing up at keg parties long before Belushi's demise. And if Chris followed Belushi in more positive ways, he was hardly alone.

In the comedy epidemic of the twentieth century, John Belushi was Patient Zero. The twin blockbuster successes of *Saturday Night Live* and *National Lampoon's Animal House* fundamentally changed the landscape of being funny. Movie studios began churning out huge blockbuster comedies like *Ghostbusters* and *Beverly Hills Cop*. Stars like Eddie Murphy, Mike Myers, and Jim Carrey beat a well-trod path from sketch-comedy cult status to Hollywood fame and fortune. Second City and ImprovOlympic grew from regional theaters into multiheaded corporate enterprises, churning out hundreds of aspiring comedians every year and spawning scores of other schools and venues across the country. Chris Farley and his friends were the first generation born into and weaned on that era. Their reverence for it and obsession with it was the common denominator that bound them together.

It all began in 1975 when producer Lorne Michaels assembled the original cast of SNL and took to the air live from New York every Saturday night. Following his departure in 1980, producer Dick Ebersol took over the show. Ebersol presided over some difficult years but also cultivated the stardom of Eddie Murphy and assembled the all-star cast of Billy Crystal, Christopher Guest, and Martin Short.

In 1985, Lorne Michaels returned. The show needed new direction, and he needed a job. After a rocky start, he went back to the drawing board in 1986 and assembled the cast -- Dana Carvey, Phil Hartman, Jan Hooks, Nora Dunn, Jon Lovitz, Kevin Nealon, Victoria Jackson, and

Weekend Update anchor Dennis Miller -- that would breathe new life into the show. Mike Myers came aboard in '89, but otherwise no visible changes were made, or needed, for the rest of the eighties.

Then, in the fall of 1990, a slow transition began to take place. Nora Dunn and Jon Lovitz left; Chris Farley and Chris Rock entered. Far younger than the established cast, the two became fast friends and soon found themselves sharing an office. Farley and Rock were the only performers added that fall. Tim Meadows, Chris's Second City cast mate, would come on board at midseason.

Back in the writers' room, Jim Downey, a freshman writer in *SNL*'s early years, had assumed the reins of head writer and producer. At the core of the writing staff was a group that had led the resurgence from the show's mid-eighties nadir: Robert Smiget, Jack Handey, Bob Odenkirk, and Conan O'Brien. Meanwhile, Tom Schiller, Al Franken, Tom Davis, and Marilyn Suzanne Miller -- also veterans of the show's original writing staff -- had all come back for an additional go-round. Added to that was a very young team of stand-up comedians -- Adam Sandler, David Spade, and Rob Schneider -- whose age and sense of humor would ultimately bring about a generational shift at the show. Both on camera and off, *SNL* found itself with a varsity squad and a junior-varsity squad. It was an odd mix of talent, but it worked well. For a while.

Chris arrived in New York in October. His older brother, Tom, had lived in the city for many years, and together they found an apartment for Chris on Seventh Avenue, just north of Times Square and right around the corner from the show's Studio 8H in Rockefeller Center. The canyons of midtown Manhattan were a striking contrast to the cozy comforts of Chicago's Old Town, but Chris soon discovered the Carnegie Deli, St. Malachy's Church on West Forty-ninth Street, and a fine Irish pub called The Fiddler's Green, all within a small walking radius. He had made his home again, scarcely able to believe what that new home was. As many latter-day *SNL* writers and performers have

said, anyone who works at the show is a fan of the show, first and foremost. And Chris was surely that.

**ROBERT SMIGEL**, *writer/coproducer*:

I was a coproducer as well as a writer, and so I got to go with Lorne to Chicago to scout the Second City show. Hiring Chris was probably the easiest casting decision Lorne's ever had to make. In all the shows I scouted before or after, I'd never seen anybody leap out at you from the stage the way Chris did. Lorne hired him the next day.

**JIM DOWNEY**, *head writer/proclucer*:

There was so much buzz about Farley that our checking him out was almost pro forma. It was kind of automatic.

**LORNE MICHAELS**, *executive producer*:

I'd had something of a concern that maybe he was too big, personality-wise, to play on television. Theatrically, he was sort of playing to the back of the house. But after we saw him, there really wasn't much doubt.

**ROBERT SMIGEL**:

Lorne invited me to be in on his meeting with Chris. Chris showed up, and he was in full altar-boy mode, lots of "yes, sirs" and bright-eyed alertness. He was so transparently on his best behavior that you kind of had to laugh and wonder if it was inversely proportional to his worst behavior. Lorne talked about the show and what would be expected of him, and Chris just kept sweetly nodding his head in agreement. Lorne had been told, at that point, about Chris's problems. I don't remember exactly what he said, but he told Chris, in so many words, that it wouldn't be tolerated. He even said something to the effect of "We don't want another Belushi."

## **LORNE MICHAELS:**

It wasn't presented to us that Chris had any sort of problem, just that he was still a little young and liked to party too much.

## **TOM FARLEY:**

All the cast and writers were sort of strolling in over the course of that first week. Chris immediately gravitated to this younger, newer crowd of writers and actors: Rob Schneider, Adam Sandler, and David Spade. They were coming on as writers. The only two new cast members were Chris and Chris Rock. They got all the press.

## **DAVID SPADE, *cast member:***

I had done four shows as a writer/performer. Then it was summer break, and when I got back Farley and Rock came on as featured players. Sandler came about six months later.

I met Chris the first day, walking over from the Omni Berkshire, where *SNL* had put us up. I saw him downstairs, and I'd heard about him. We talked and then we walked over to 30 Rock together. I thought he was funny. He was a nice Wisconsin dude, a genuine, sweet guy. I was out from Arizona. I'm not really a bad guy. We just gravitated to hanging out all the time and stayed buddies ever since.

## **MARCI KLEIN, *talent coordinator:***

I first met him the day he started. He was wearing this English driving cap and looking very Irish. He was very quiet and deferential, very nervous, like I was the person in charge or something, which I thought was funny, because I wasn't. He would get so nervous; that was one of the things that was really charming about him.

**CHRIS ROCK**, *cast member*:

We both got hired the same day, which was probably one of the greatest days of my life. We were the new guys, and they threw us together. The funny thing was that everyone was worried about *me* -- I lived in Brooklyn and didn't want to move to Manhattan, because I couldn't park on the street and I couldn't get a cab. I said it in the *Live from New York* book: Two guys named Chris both get hired on the same day and share an office. One's a black guy from Bed-Stuy and one's a white guy from Madison, Wisconsin. Now, which one is going to OD?

The above is an excerpt from the book *The Chris Farley Show: A Biography in Three Acts* by Tom Farley, Jr., and Tanner Colby. The above excerpt is a digitally scanned reproduction of text from print. Although this excerpt has been proofread, occasional errors may appear due to the scanning process. Please refer to the finished book for accuracy.

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