
Tim and Eric's Awesome Show, Great Job!: Metacomedy

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From the original edition of *How to Watch Television* published in 2013
by New York University Press

Edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell

Accessed at nyupress.org/9781479898817



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 **NYU PRESS**

838 BROADWAY, 3RD FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10003 • www.nyupress.org

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Abstract: Sketch comedy is a staple of American television, with styles ranging from mainstream to alternative and even experimental forms that target a young, predominantly male audience. Jeffrey Sconce explores the highly experimental approach of *Tim and Eric's Awesome Show, Great Job!*, connecting it to the history of metacomedy as playing with comedic form with reflexivity and ambiguity.

In the fall of 1975, the premiere episode of *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975–present) featured a somewhat puzzling performance in the show's final half-hour, an “act” befitting the program's ambition to showcase comedy generally considered “not ready for prime time.”¹ As immortalized in the unlikely biopic *Man on the Moon* (1999), comedian Andy Kaufman stood alongside a portable record player on an otherwise empty stage, remaining more or less inert for some fifteen seconds after his off-camera introduction by house announcer Don Pardo. Kaufman then dropped the needle on a record—a scratchy 45rpm of the theme song from *Mighty Mouse*. The first laugh is one of recognition—the audience pleasantly surprised by this unexpected sonic memory of what had been a staple of U.S. television since the mid-1950s. Twenty-seven seconds into the bit, the song arrives at its chorus and most memorable hook, a moment when Mighty Mouse himself joins the singers to announce: “Here I come to save the day!” Here Kaufman suddenly erupted into a grandiloquent performance of lip-syncing, miming the rodent superhero word for word while extending his arm heroically aloft. Kaufman then resumed his awkward silence. Twenty seconds later, the song appears to return to Mighty Mouse's musical cue. A nervous Kaufman prepares to repeat his miming act. But it's a false alarm—the song goes into another verse without the singing mouse—and Kaufman looks slightly embarrassed at having missed his mark. A full thirty seconds pass until once again Kaufman and Mighty Mouse exclaim, “Here I come to save the day!” Realizing now this is the entire “act,”

the audience response is even more enthusiastic at this second repetition. Having mimed the line twice (and with one flub), Kaufman takes advantage of an instrumental break to drink a well-earned glass of water. The chorus returns once again, and in the “rule of threes,” Kaufman silently belts out the signature line a final time. With that, in just under two minutes, the “routine,” the “bit,” the “act,” is over. Having been won over by this audacious performance of essentially nothing, the audience erupts in thunderous applause.

A resolutely underwhelming performance delivered “poorly” (again, Kaufman screws it up at one point), Kaufman’s low-key pantomime evoked a series of enigmatic questions, both for its audience in 1975 and for subsequent commentators on comedy and culture. Was this performance “for real” or was it a hoax of some kind? Was this meant to be “funny” or “not funny,” or was it funny precisely because it wasn’t actually all that funny? Discussions of Kaufman are as liable to reference conceptual art as television comedy, elevating Kaufman as the most esoteric performer among a group of comedians emerging in the early 1970s who increasingly subjected comedy to the logic of avant-garde performance. Filmmaker/actor Albert Brooks, for example, began his career appearing on talk shows as a terrible ventriloquist (and then later as a “talking” mime). Steve Martin’s early stand-up integrated shtick learned while working at Disneyland (prop comedy, animal balloons, juggling) with a persona alternating between low idiocy and high Dada. Michael O’Donoghue, the original head writer for *Saturday Night Live*, occasionally closed the show by doing impressions of various celebrities subjected to six-inch steel spikes driven into their eyeballs. Writing in *Time* in 1981, critic Richard Corliss dubbed this sensibility the “Post-Funny” School of Comedy.² Philip Auslander has described such routines as “anti-comedy,” a practice focused on the vulnerabilities and potential “failures” of public performance.³ Given that audiences often found (and still find) these performances to be extremely funny, perhaps the most useful term would be “metacomedy”: stand-up, sketch, and even narrative comedy that is explicitly about the art of comedy itself, a foregrounding of its expectations, conventions, and execution.

Elements of metacomedy have continued to thrive among various “alternative,” “underground,” and “edge” comedians over the past thirty years. Though very different in terms of their material, Gilbert Gottfried’s archly stylized Catskill classicism and Sarah Silverman’s blankly feigned naïveté both draw attention to the conventions of stand-up and the mechanics of the joke. Sasha Baron Cohen’s turns as Ali G, Borat, and Bruno, meanwhile, continue the Kaufmanesque interest in blurring the line between performance and reality (even if, as is the case with Cohen, the audience is always “in” on the joke). Perhaps the most sustained recent exploration of the anti/metacomedy sensibility has been the television work of Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim, a team from Philadelphia who

have produced two series for the Cartoon Network's *Adult Swim* block: *Tom Goes to the Mayor* (2004–2006) and *Tim and Eric's Awesome Show, Great Job!* (2007–2010). “Tim and Eric” (as they are typically billed) are also regular contributors to the online/HBO collaboration *Funny or Die*, and in 2011, they completed work on their first motion picture, *Tim and Eric's Billion Dollar Movie*. For the moment, the fifty episodes of *Tim and Eric's Awesome Show, Great Job!* (henceforth *TAEASGJ!*) remain their best known work. Ostensibly in the genre of sketch comedy, each episode features an often dizzying eleven minutes of sketches, sight gags, parodies, animation, guest “stars,” and free-form improvisation. Some episodes purport to have a “theme” or return briefly to a central story spine; others do not. Even with this anarchic play of elements, however, certain recurring themes and devices appear from episode to episode, joined together by a comic style that both builds on and extends their metacomedic sensibility.

While much of *TAEASGJ!* conforms to the quality standards of professional television, the series also frequently cultivates the look and feel of “public access” TV by foregrounding the odd personalities, awkward performances, technical mistakes, and obsolescent technologies that typify such low-budget productions. *Uncle Muscle's Hour*, a recurring bit across the series' five seasons, is perhaps the most emblematic of this approach, each installment featuring a poorly performed video of a song by Casey, an apparently mentally challenged and/or emotionally disturbed teenager, and his “brother,” whose contribution to each performance is to dress in a costume appropriate to that week's song. Filled with frame rolls, glitches, and tracking errors, the performances appear to have been shot and edited on poor quality VHS tape, augmented with cheap graphics and Chiron effects that date the videos to the 1980s. Further complicating matters, *TAEASGJ!* also features a handful of recurring and one-off performers who either do have a background in public access (singing ventriloquist David Hart) or who occupy the lower echelons of “showbiz” that one typically associates with the access ethos (comedian James Quall). These segments also frequently make use of the high-key lighting and dated graphics typical of low-budget studio production, reaffirming the “non-professional” status of these performers who, in the end, are rather difficult to decipher in terms of intent and execution.

One might argue that this emphasis on the impoverished style and talent associated with public access is simply a form of parody—an exaggeration of access conventions for comic effect. And yet the conflation of Tim and Eric's invented personas with the seemingly “real” guest appearances—all embedded in the program's rapid cycling of other sketches, bits, and cutaways—works to obscure the status of any single performance. Much as Kaufman's performances compelled viewers in the broadcast era to question what was real and what was not, *Tim and Eric's* vacillation between performing “fake” ineptitude and showcasing apparently

authentic amateurism elicits a similar confusion in the era of multichannel cable. One of Kaufman's more notorious bits, for example, involved "sabotaging" a live late-night variety show (ABC's *Fridays*—a short-lived competitor to NBC's *Saturday Night Live*) by refusing to play "stoned" in a sketch and then getting into a fight with cast member Michael Richards and stage manager Jack Burns. Such a stunt would be difficult if not impossible to stage today—Internet spoilers would doubtlessly give away the joke either before or immediately after the incident, while the fragmentation of the broadcast audience into ever smaller niches would make the hoax, even if "successful," an isolated incident on an isolated channel far away from the attention of any cultural mainstream. One could argue *TAEASGJ!*'s highly fragmented structure has adapted this metacomedic strategy of confusing "reality" and "performance" to the environment of a 100+ channel cable system, replicating a logic of channel-surfing that also so often suspends viewers between the real and the parodic. Though Tim and Eric themselves are clearly "performing" their various roles (especially for regular viewers of the show), figures like Hart and Quall maintain the ambiguities of intent and execution once associated with Kaufman—are they "for real" or not? Are they in on the joke? These ambiguities are further cultivated by shuffling these moments of apparent amateurism within other familiar and equally degraded media forms, such as the infomercial, the public service announcement, and the corporate training video. Whether Tim and Eric *intend* to fool viewers by walking the thin line between real and parodic uses of public access or authentic and fake infomercials is not really important; the very look and structure of each *TAEASGJ!* episode effectively camouflages these sketches within the larger anonymous flows of the cable universe, thus making them available for various misapprehensions and confusions.

Each time Casey and his brother take to the stage to sing a recent composition ("Cops and Robbers," "Hamburgers and Hot Dogs," "Big Spider"), the performance invariably ends with a sweaty (and perhaps snotty) Casey spontaneously vomiting, seemingly overwhelmed by a sudden burst of anxiety or emotional trauma. Ostensibly a more disgusting version of comedy's patented "spit take," Casey's vomit variations (ranging from discrete burps to full-out projectile launches) speak to *TAEASGJ!*'s interest (one might say "fixation") with what is generally regarded to be the lowest form of comedy: "bathroom humor"—fart, shit, piss, cum, menstruation, snot, and vomit jokes, frequently made in conjunction with the various "naughty" body parts that produce these substances. Freud famously argued that all jokes are ultimately about displaced aggression and/or sexuality. In this respect, Tim and Eric's comedy is decidedly "pre-genital," distilling "toilet humor" into a particularly stylized and self-conscious form of regressed sexuality. Emulating the style of an educational public service spot for children, for example, Tim and Eric dress as small boys and rap about the benefits of sitting down while "peeing." A

fake infomercial extols the virtues of the diarrheaphram—a device for preventing diarrhea flow—that, in the cloacal logic of young childhood, conflates a butt-plug with a woman’s diaphragm. Leaving no orifice unprobed, a group of seniors on a double-date learn the benefits of the Cinch “food tube,” a device that allows diners to avoid the stabbing dangers of the fork by having their food mixed in an industrial blender (with “softening cream”) and pumped directly into the stomach (but only after first having all their teeth removed to better accommodate the tube’s insertion down the esophagus). Such sketches and other cutaways frequently enhance this fascination/revulsion with the body’s functions and fluids by amplifying various bodily sounds (kissing, lip-smacking, sniffing, stomach growls, churning intestines) extremely high in the mix, making them all the more alien and even unsettling.

Many have argued that “low” body humor typically works to deflate—if only symbolically and temporarily—those people and institutions that profess to have power over others (kings, popes, and presidents, after all, still have to go to the toilet). *TAEASG!* seems to take populist innovations in toilet humor as a challenge. Consider the “poop tube.” Reversing the logic of the earlier “I sit down when I pee” rap spot, this bit presents a fake commercial for a device that allows the user to defecate while standing and even remaining fully clothed. While the existence of such a ridiculous device may or may not be humorous in and of itself, the ad continues with a laborious description of how the contraption’s constituent parts (“fecal pump,” “liquefier,” and “flow spout”) actually operate, accompanied by images of men sloppily spraying their liquefied waste into urinals and trash cans. Somewhat inexplicably, the “poop tube” has been designed so that its “flow spout” vents to the front of the user, thereby making the device even more disgusting (and thus more comedic) in its operation. As a decidedly “anal” form of humor grounded in the forbidden (and thus repressed) sexual fascination with the pleasures and processes of defecation, “shit” jokes are typically the product of a more or less clever process of “displacement” (the “joke work,” as Freud called it) that makes these underlying associations return in ways that are surprising and thus amusing. Here, however, the shit joke undergoes little to no such revision. What is usually approached obliquely in such humor is made crudely explicit—the sights and sounds of shitting; the juvenile punning typical of excretion humor (the commercial’s pitchman is B. M. Farts, son of Whetty Farts); the revulsion of contamination (a boy is seen with liquefied feces dripping down his face); and even the infantile rebellion of missing the toilet (a man attempts to aim his flow spout at a public urinal, but unfortunately the device does not allow for great accuracy). The “poop tube’s” ostensible target may be the never-ending parade of useless “As Seen on TV” products advertised day and night on cable—but as a metacomedic gag, the bit works more to call out the

existence and conventions of shit humor generally, taking a usually simple joke and making it both overly graphic and overly complex. It is, in this respect, an extremely intricate and even sophisticated treatment of the lowest of the “low” gags in comedy’s repertoire.

A similarly reflexive logic informs some of the “character work” on *TAEASGJ!*, in particular a recurring bit featuring Tim and Eric as the “Beaver Boys,” two young men who share a love of shrimp and white wine. Dressed in white from head to toe and donning caps bearing the image of their favorite crustacean, Dilly and Krunk spend much of their time in clubs performing their signature dance move—the “beaver bounce”—in an attempt to attract women. “Beaver Boys” can trace its origins, at least in part, to an influential sketch appearing in the early years of *Saturday Night Live*. While comedy teams dating back to the days of vaudeville and silent cinema have exploited male anxiety over approaching women, Steve Martin and Dan Aykroyd’s “Wild and Crazy Guy” routines of the late 1970s cohered a set of conventions that have remained staples of this sketch genre ever since. Martin and Aykroyd played Nortek and Georg Festrunk, Czech brothers who had recently escaped from behind the Iron Curtain and relocated to the United States. Dressed in distinctly outmoded foreign outfits and speaking with exaggerated eastern European accents, the brothers seemingly dedicated all their time and energy on a quest to score “fox-es” and their “big American breasts.” Though they typically failed to “score,” each installment nevertheless ended optimistically with Nortek and Georg sharing their celebratory catchphrase, “We are two wild and crazy guys!” Given that sketch comedy on U.S. television continues to court and thus cater to a male adolescent audience, this stock premise—two men/boys united by a shared subcultural wardrobe and limited worldview futilely attempting to impress and seduce women—has remained an extremely durable formula in American comedy. Beavis and Butt-head, Wayne and Garth, and the Roxbury Guys all provide unique inflections on this basic formula; Sasha Cohen’s “Borat” continues the Festrunks’ difficulties with language and women while shedding the amplifying device of the brother/friend.

Given this extensive lineage of brothers and buddies comically attempting to attract unattainable women by performing their various versions of “cool,” Tim and Eric’s “Beaver Boys” routine becomes, in its simplicity, surprisingly more complex. On one level, the Beaver Boys are yet another entry in this long tradition of sketch humor, two more guys hopelessly unable to perform whatever it is that they think women will find attractive. In their first appearance, for example, the Boys approach two women sunbathing on the beach and simply begin demonstrating (without invitation) various postures they know how to do. Their posing, however, has less to do with the sexual “peacocking” associated with beach culture than with a child’s attempt to impress his mother (Dilly shows the girls

FIGURE 8.1.

As enamored with shrimp and white wine as they are with women, Tim and Eric's "Beaver Boys" parodically replicate earlier acts like Steve Martin and Dan Aykroyd's "Wild and Crazy Guys."



that he can walk sideways like a crab). The Beaver Boys can certainly be enjoyed as yet another exercise in moronic masculinity, and yet their drastically reduced stylization suggests—in true metacomedic style—that the bit is as much a parody and/or commentary on this particular form of sketch comedy. For example, while most of their predecessors created and occupied fairly elaborate subcultural worlds (eastern-block emigrants, stoner kids, Long Island club rats, Kazakhstan) complete with accompanying lingo and wardrobe, Dilly and Krunk appear united by nothing more than an odd affinity for shrimp and white wine—their commitment to this imaginary “lifestyle” reaffirmed in their pledge to wear white clothes and a shrimp cap wherever they go. Essentially prelingual, they have no catchphrases (although while they are dancing in the club, an off-screen computer types and reads out the various moves the two are performing, including, of course, the “beaver bounce”). The duo demonstrated little to no “development” over their appearances, although in their final bit, Dilly and Krunk did somehow manage to attract a “hot” pair of identical twins. This seeming success, however, is only fleeting as the premise once again reasserts its inviolable logic. Out to dinner with these no doubt hard-earned dates, Dilly and Krunk notice a waiter serving shrimp entrees at a nearby table. In a comic series of repeated double takes, they look (in unison) back and forth from their dates to the nearby entrees, vacillating between excited exclamations of “twins!” and “shrimp!” The arrival of a chardonnay at the next table seals their fate, compelling the two to abandon their dates in order to binge on the shrimp and white wine. In disgust, the hot twins get up and leave. While other recurring bits in this genre have worked to find novel variations for what is an essentially “one-joke” structure, Tim and Eric’s “Beaver Boys” instead foreground the rather relentlessly repetitive logic of such shtick—even reducing it to a pure form of mathematics: “hot girls = shrimp” but “shrimp + white wine > hot girls.”

Nigel Tufnel and David St. Hubbins, guitarists for the renowned (mock) metal band Spinal Tap, once famously observed, “It’s such a thin line between stupid and

clever." In *TAEASGJ!* and their other projects, Heidecker and Wareheim's focus returns again and again to this thinnest of lines. When the routines work, they produce some of the cleverest stupidity on television; when they fail, the bits can be insufferably stupid, even painful. Of course, judgments of "success" and "failure" are subjective, perhaps nowhere more so than in comedy—a genre particularly sensitive to the likes and dislikes of personal taste. But this, too, is emblematic of the contemporary turn to metacomedy. *TAEASGJ!* can certainly be enjoyed strictly as "low" comedy—a carnival of pratfalls, funny voices, and gross-out gags. But the series also positions itself as a form of "avant-garde" humor, a comedy less interested in transgressing social propriety than the formal rules and conventions of comedy itself. In this respect, it epitomizes sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between "avant-garde" and "popular" taste.⁴ Bourdieu argues the "avant-garde" (as both a style and a community) values form over function, and thus approaches an art object (be it painting, theater, film, or even television) with a more detached consideration of technique and convention (what Bourdieu calls "the aesthetic disposition"). "Popular" taste, on the other hand, values function over form, expecting form to remain essentially invisible as the work enacts the desired function of entertainment (through laughter, drama, beauty, sentiment, etc.). Crucially, Bourdieu argues these tastes are not innate, but are instead linked to issues of class and education. The "aesthetic disposition," in other words, must be learned, and the opportunity to master it is afforded only to those with the time and resources necessary to study the history and forms of art.

TAEASGJ! suggests that even television—long-considered the lowest and most debased of the visual and performing arts—has both "artists" and an audience who have now cultivated such a disposition. For some, no amount of discussion or defense will make the "poop tube" anything other than an infantile gross-out gag. For connoisseurs of comedy and television, however, such gags speak to an ongoing appreciation for valuing form over function, making *TAEASGJ!*—like so much other "avant-garde" production—an uncertain study in the cleverly stupid and stupidly clever.

NOTES

1. In the early day of *Saturday Night Live* the show's cast was billed as "the not ready for prime time players," a comic riff on the competition on ABC (Howard Cosell's "Prime-Time Players"), but more importantly a comment on both the talent of the players and the expectations of primetime formats.
2. Richard Corliss, "Comedy's Post-Funny School," *Time* (May 25, 1981): 86–87.
3. Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

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