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### Samantha Bee (1969—)

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## Profiles

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### **Samantha Bee (1969–)**

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Samantha Bee is a Canadian American comedian, actress, television personality, and political commentator. Born in 1969 in Toronto, Canada, Bee grew up mostly with her grandmother after her parents divorced when she was an infant. Growing up in the 1970s, she watched the shows of many successful female comedians, such as Carol Burnett, Catherine O'Hara, and Andrea Martin. After one year of study at McGill University, Bee transferred to the University of Ottawa. While there, she took her first classes in drama and theater, which would be the first steps toward her future career. She worked as a waitress in Toronto while doing commercials and voice-over jobs, including a stint as the title character of a children's theater rendition of the Japanese manga series *Sailor Moon*.

In those Toronto years, she also cofounded an all-female sketch comedy troupe called The Atomic Fireballs. The group was named after a particular kind of candy and is where Bee met Allana Harkin, who later would be a producer of, and a correspondent on, the show *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*. Two years into her membership on The Atomic Fireballs, the group was known for their theatrical skills and the polished quality of their sketches. When interviewed about the origins of the group, the members noted that when looking at sketch comedy, they saw female comedians being typecast over and over again. The years with the Fireballs gave Bee an opportunity to hone her comedic timing and writing skills, which would eventually lead to more opportunities, including an audition for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

### **THE DAILY SHOW YEARS AND OTHER PROJECTS**

Following the small amount of fame she gained with The Atomic Fireballs, representatives of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* invited Bee for an audition as a correspondent on their show in the spring of 2003. Her run on *The Daily Show* was the longest of any correspondent during Jon Stewart's time as host. Bee's Canadian origins gave her a unique perspective on the strange American political customs and events she was assigned to cover. She worked directly in the field, crafting consistently humorous and cynical commentary. In the episode of April 30, 2015, Jon Stewart and his team prepared a special "Goodbye" episode for Bee with some of her highlights at *The Daily Show*.

Particularly memorable are Bee's visits to the Republican National Convention in 2008 following the news that Bristol Palin, Sarah Palin's unmarried daughter, was pregnant. Bee directly skewered attendees by blatantly asking taboo questions, such as unsuccessfully coaxing them into saying the word "choice" when referring to Bristol Palin's decision to carry out her pregnancy in 2008. Issues such as these, which focus on the rights of females or minorities, are a common thread in Bee's work over the years. Some of her other notable performances included a production about skeptical (mostly educated, upper-middle-class liberal) parents opposed to immunizing their children and a skit in which she examines the appearance and attractiveness of female cable news anchors.

When Jon Stewart announced that he was leaving *The Daily Show*, rumors circulated that Samantha Bee would be named his successor, but Trevor Noah was named as the new host. In the same period, cable channel TBS offered Bee her own show, which she accepted, ending her career at *The Daily Show*.

Bee participated in other acting projects outside of *The Daily Show* during the 2000s. These included the HBO Canada television show *Good God* in 2012, which followed the career of a character named George Findlay as he works in a conservative news network. Bee's role on the show was as Christian morning-show host Shandy. She received a Canadian Screen Award nomination for her performance on the show in the category of Best Supporting Actress in a Comedy. Along with her husband—fellow actor, former *Daily Show* correspondent, and comic Jason Jones—Bee writes and produces the TBS show *The Detour*, which is based on Bee and Jones's own experiences on family road trips with their children. The show has been well received by critics and airs on TBS weekly. Bee is also an author, her first book being a collection of essays about her life as a young comedian in Toronto and playing correspondents on *The Daily Show* entitled *I Know I Am, But What Are You?*, which was released in 2010. She also authored a children's novel titled *Cracking Up*, which is set to be published in 2020.

### **FULL FRONTAL WITH SAMANTHA BEE**

After departing from *The Daily Show* in 2015, Bee began working on her own satire show, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* on TBS, which has been coined "evidence-based comedy." The show was executive produced by Bee, along with longtime friend and fellow comic Allana Harkin. Bee and Harkin wanted the show to actively remedy the lack of diversity in comedy writing rooms, avoiding "white dude comedy." They implemented a blind application process and created a packet that would help inexperienced writers apply as a way of leveling the playing field for those aspiring to take part in *Full Frontal*. Currently, the show has an even gender split and features a diverse staff of different backgrounds and experiences.

The show began airing in February 2016. With *Full Frontal*, Bee was the first woman to host a late-night satirical news show of this stature. Despite this, she was still overlooked by media before her debut. In September 2015, *Vanity Fair* published an article in which they interviewed the "titans" of late-night television;

on the cover was a photo of 10 male hosts, dressed in suits, drinking bourbon. Angry about the exclusion of women in the article, Bee responded quickly by tweeting an edited version of the image in which her head appeared atop a tattooed centaur with laser-beaming eyes. Her tweet got thousands of likes and retweets, and it received widespread media attention, which also discussed her growing popularity and the tone of her show. She continued to gain more notoriety, as evidenced by such things as the September 2016 title of Ross Douthat's *New York Times* column, "Clinton's Samantha Bee Problem." In the column, Douthat argued that comedy shows such as Bee's polarize the public and turn voting Republican into an act of rebellion.

A typical episode of *Full Frontal* includes three separate acts, each addressing topical stories related to current events. Unlike the majority of satirical news programs on the air, Bee does her show standing up and without a desk. She usually wears a colorful blazer, giving her opening statements about the topic at hand while occasionally cutting to a correspondent or herself in the field for further insight. Similar to programs such as *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight*, the items are the result of in-depth research and news analysis, delivered by long monologues frequently interspersed with visual jokes on the large screens in the background.

### SIGNATURE COMEDIC STYLE

Bee's jokes during these segments are quick-witted and fueled by sarcasm and real anger about the ridiculous nature of politics and American society. Compared to her fellow satirists and comedians, Bee's tone is more serious at times and strongly emphasizes the gravity of a situation. Fueled by fury, with deadpanned remarks, dropping vicious nicknames for politicians, and using obscenities, Bee's humor is typically Juvenalian rather than Horatian. Juvenalian is satire in which the comedian expresses contempt; Horatian is gentler in nature.

Whereas hosts of other comparable shows (e.g., Jon Stewart) often "insist that their agenda simply is 'to make people laugh'" (Baym 2005, 260), Bee is more open about her intentions to inform citizens and influence public opinion. Bee stays away from promotional interviews with entertainment celebrities, which is atypical of late-night television shows, but she does engage in humorous interviews with powerful politicians, such as President Barack Obama and Senator Elizabeth Warren, with a very serious undertone and theme.

Since the start of the show, many of her segments have gone viral online through the show's YouTube channel or Facebook page, on which shorter segments of *Full Frontal* episodes are uploaded. In particular, a segment entitled "A Totally Real, 100% Valid Theory" that aired leading up to the presidential election questioned whether Donald Trump is illiterate. Following numerous conspiracy theories about Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, Bee and her team decided to create a similar theory of their own. By taking random scraps of evidence and turning them into a theory, they produced a seemingly convincing video about Donald Trump having difficulties reading.

A clear example of Samantha Bee's satire in *Full Frontal* can be seen in her interview with the Republican state representative of Texas, Dan Flynn, about abortion. Both strongly disagree with each other, which gives the interview a very serious undertone. The segment provided detailed information about regulations, statistics, and pro-versus-con arguments, similar to most news segments, but Bee also showcased her ability to inform and entertain simultaneously by reacting with humorous expressions and delivering funny lines.

During the 2016 election season, Bee's segments covering the process were praised for their humor and feminist angle. Overall, the show has been positively received by critics, receiving an Emmy nomination in 2016 for Outstanding Writing for a Variety Series and two Emmy nominations in 2017, one for *Full Frontal* in general and another one for Bee's event Not the White House Correspondents' Dinner.

Different from *The Daily Show*, the jokes on *Full Frontal* focus less on satirizing the mainstream media and more on political issues. Given the increased hostility toward the press following the election of Donald Trump, Bee and her team decided to create an event called Not the White House Correspondents' Dinner. The live event parodied the real White House Correspondents' Dinner and was televised. Various comedy acts roasted CNN and its current president, Jeff Zucker, for their partisan pundits' argumentative television. The event raised money for the Committee to Protect Journalists and featured people who spoke passionately about the subject of journalistic freedom. Allana Harkin expressed how much *Full Frontal* relied on quality journalism.

Sometimes the harsh jokes on *Full Frontal* fell flat. When correspondent Michael Rubens reported from the Conservative Political Action Conference, he joked that bowties at the event had been replaced with Nazi-style hairdos. The video showed attendees with cropped cuts, including Kyle Coddington's. Coddington, however, had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of brain cancer, which was the cause of his look. The team behind *Full Frontal* offered an apology for their remark.

## FEMINISM ON FULL FRONTAL

In early November 2016, leading up to the election, *Full Frontal* passed Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* in viewers in the 18–48 demographic, averaging 724,000 total viewers compared to 600,000 since the beginning of the year. And viewership of the program continued to climb, experiencing a "Trump bump": more than 2 million viewers by the beginning of 2017 and over 4 million by the summer of 2017.

From the first episode, it was clear that *Full Frontal* would deal with important issues from a feminist perspective. Episode one opens with a (staged) press conference in which reporters only ask questions related to Bee's gender. Her responses are standard but interspersed with comedic over-the-top clips, such as one showing a horror sequence in the woods, depicting Bee as a witch, accompanying her statement that creating the show took a little magic.

When tackling online harassment related to her appearance on television and brand of comedy, Bee confronted the issue with the Samantha Bee Rape Threatline, joking that people who wished to do so could call to leave threatening comments. In other episodes, Bee draws attention to online harassment through ridicule in the game Real or Fake, in which she has to distinguish real hate messages sent to her from those that her writing team made up.

*Full Frontal* often highlights numerous problems with how the media and society tackle social injustice outside of sexist norms. A prime example of this was her segment titled “White Plight,” which aired in early January 2017, in which she mocks strong believers of reverse racism, the idea that discrimination faced by white people in the United States is of the same caliber as institutional racism experienced by black people and other marginalized groups. Some uncommon themes discussed on the show include Islamophobia, Native American legislative issues, and ignorance shown by various conservatives at the Republican National Convention related to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Samantha Bee has successfully raised significant funds for the organization Planned Parenthood by selling T-shirts emblazoned with the phrase “nasty woman.” The shirt refers to the final presidential debate of the 2016 elections in which Donald Trump called Hillary Clinton the same term. Bee’s ambitions helped land her in the prestigious 2017 *Time* magazine list of “100 Most Influential People” for helping to highlight women who seek to make a difference in politics.

*Mark Boukes and Eugenia Quintanilla*

*See also: The Daily Show; Noah, Trevor*

## FURTHER READING

- Baym, Geoffrey. 2005. “The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism.” *Political Communication* 22 (3): 259–76.
- Bee, Samantha. 2010. *I Know I Am, But What Are You?* New York: Gallery Books.