

I Am Not a Politician Satirist Al Franken Has Fun With Politics, But Only As An Observer

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Al Franken believes he would make a good political candidate, but a lousy office-holder.

In fact, after writing his last political satire, Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot, the former Saturday Night Live writer and humourist says some people really did approach him about running for political office.

"Saying 'You're fairly articulate, you've been married once, you're very, very good looking,' " he says with a straight face.

"And I tried to explain to people that I'd be terrible because of the pressure. I'm very indecisive, as it is, in my own life and the idea of making decisions for other people that affect their lives, I would be crushed by the stress."

Which is what happens to the fictional version of Al Franken in his new satirical book, *Why Not Me?*.

With the same droll humour he brought to his SNL characters and to *Lateline*, his recently cancelled NBC-TV sitcom, Franken successfully challenges Al Gore for the Democratic party's presidential nomination.

His campaign seems hopelessly inept, hinging as it does on a single silly issue: an attack on bank ATM machines. Then, the Y2K bug clears the Jan. 1, 2000, hurdle with one major exception: there is an ATM computer meltdown and millions of customer accounts are wiped out.

Franken is swept into office, only to face a severe bout of depression, since he doesn't know what to do next. The issue is solved when the new president's campaign methods -- including using 1-900 lesbian-sex telephone services for finances -- are exposed, he is impeached and thrown out of office after only 144 days.

The whole mess is then chronicled in a Bob Woodward insta-book entitled *The Void*.

Franken says the Monica Lewinsky scandal erupted just as he began writing *Why Not Me?* and for a while, he feared real events -- including the possible ouster of President Bill Clinton -- could overtake his plot.

With the exception of a few, brief references, he decided to ignore the whole thing and hope for the best.

"Every night on late night TV, there would be about 20 oral sex jokes," he says, admitting even a comic like him with a reputation for edgy humour felt uncomfortable at times.

"I wanted to talk about presidential campaigns, not scandal."

After 15 seasons as a writer and occasional performer on SNL, Franken left the show after the 1994-95 season when his request to anchor the Weekend Update fake news segment was rejected.

"It was not a sore point, but probably the best thing that ever happened to me."

Franken says he never became a leading cast member because producer Lorne Michaels didn't want to lose him as a writer.

Today, he disagrees with those who say that after nearly 25 years, the show should be put out of its misery. He says there are few places on network TV for sketch comedy, especially when it's being done live.

"I root for it every week. I'm disappointed a lot, but . . . I really think there's a place for the show and there are some really talented people working there."

As for his now-defunct Lateline, Franken is distinctly more bitter.

In the sitcom, he played an over-confident but bungling TV journalist who is fighting for a crack at the anchor job. He suggests network executives just didn't get its unusual mix of lowbrow and highbrow humour and failed to promote it properly.

"I question to some extent the taste of the people there," he says. "If the people that are there now had been there when Seinfeld started, then Seinfeld would have been cancelled. When I deal with them, I feel like I'm dealing with technocrats."

As for all the other former SNLers who are moving into prime-time sitcoms, from Jon Lovitz (Newsradio) to Norm Macdonald (The Norm Show), Franken rejects the suggestion it's necessary to make concessions to fit the comedy limitations of prime time.

He says one of his most successful SNL sketches, Stuart Smalley, the fey believer in 12-step self-help programs, was fairly gentle in its humour. He parlayed the character into a successful book (I'm Good Enough, I'm Smart

Enough, and Doggone It, People Like Me) and a so-so movie (Stuart Smalley Saves His Family).

In a whirlwind visit to Toronto as part of his promotional tour for Why Not Me?, Franken dodged the perennial question about why Canadians seem to be so successful at exporting comics and comedy to the U.S.

"Maybe it's something about the cold," he replies cautiously, adding that he is a Minnesotan and has always been a fan of "north country comedy."

So it's a northern thing?

"Oh, I dunno. I like to say that so I can be included."

AL FRANKEN

Lives: In New York City with his wife and two children

Books: I'm Good Enough, I'm Smart Enough and Doggone It, People Like Me!; Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations; Why Not Me? The Inside Story of the Making and Unmaking of the Franken Presidency

TV shows: Saturday Night Live (15 seasons), Lateline

Quote: "A number of people said 'You're well-known, talk on your feet, you're smart.' Yeah, but I'd be terrible. 'Oh that doesn't matter!' "

-- Franken, describing how Democrats urged him to run for office in real life