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100 Entertainers Who Changed America: An Encyclopedia of Pop Culture Luminaries

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Barr, Roseanne (1952–)

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I am a big, fat, loudmouthed, pushy, Jewish b*tch, as I have been lovingly called by admirers all my life. (Barr 2011b, 97)

Perhaps the strongest influence in Roseanne's skewed worldview that makes her both an irreverent comedian and also a social critic in her own right is her beginning in life. Raised by a Jewish-cum-Mormon-cum-Jewish family in Salt Lake City, Utah, her mother and grandmothers—each in their own way—formed her divided and complementary perspectives on the role of women and were influential in her coming to a feminist politics. At present, Roseanne is in a similar position as a "child" of celebrity and Hollywood success as she is now one of Hollywood's strongest critics. In the introduction to *Roseannearchy*, written by her first husband, Bill Pentland, he discusses her reception in Hollywood: "Much of the Hollywood establishment simply viewed her as a spoiled brat, an 800-pound gorilla, a histrionic, salivating she-bitch. And she is ... She knocked the network suits on their asses by the simple virtue of presenting the truth" (Barr 2011b, xiv).

Roseanne made waves in Hollywood as a writer and as a woman. Her uncompromising personality and political critique of consumer capitalism and Reaganomics and the George Bush Sr. regime was a recipe for intense friction with television producers. Her tenacity to be heard was behind her sitcom's success and her continued voice in America as a social critic.

A housewife with three kids, Roseanne played with gender in her comedic performances. She spoke from a housewife's perspective with an all-too-real edge that polarized audiences. Starting in small comedy clubs in Denver, Colorado, Roseanne worked until getting her break on *The Johnny Carson Show*. In 1985, she performed her first HBO stand-up special, *The Roseanne Barr Show*, which she cowrote with her then-husband Bill Pentland. She won an ACE award for Best Female



Roseanne Barr, 1987.

(AP Photo/Mark Terrill)

Comedy and Best HBO Special. As one commentator wrote: "While Roseanne stood firmly in her flat shoes, chomped on her gum, and slaughtered grammar, she spoke her mind freely without a trace of self-deprecation or intimidation. Refusing to fulfill the expectations that a woman have a Barbie Doll figure, a correct education, a polite demeanor, an apolitical mind, and an obsession with her own attractiveness, Roseanne's early 'nasty, brutish, and short' image becomes her platform, her medium, her message" (Lavin 2004, 56).

Roseanne's realistic portrayal of working-class life in America was a notable exception to concurrent sitcoms that featured families living in houses they realistically could not afford given their working-class income (*Family Matters*, *Full House*, and later, *Blossom*). At the time, there was also an explosion of female-centered shows (*The Golden Girls*, *Kate and Allie*, and *Designing Women*); however, these shows were in the "kitchen" of prime time as they were aimed at female audiences alone. *Roseanne* tried to close the gender gap, and its critical reception reflected its popularity among different age groups and genders, eventually leading to multiple awards for her sitcom including Emmys and Golden Globes.

Roseanne's show was female centered without being aimed only at women. It had its group of women; the nervous work friend-*cum*-mother-in-law Crystal (Natalie West), the codependent

and slapstick little sister Jackie Harris (Laurie Metcalf), the passive-aggressive and grating mother Beverly Harris (Estelle Parsons), and her two daughters that represented Roseanne's own duality; the girly and bratty Becky (Lecy Goranson and Sarah Chalke) and the wisecracking and creative Darlene (Sara Gilbert). These women formed the female heart of the show, but it showed the group as more than an affinity of gender. The women on *Roseanne* worried about jobs, education, relationships, self-sufficiency, and money far more often than the world of romance or male expectation. Roseanne, or more particularly, her

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character, was the unruly center of this group of women that negotiated the different interests and personalities of its members.

Roseanne's realistic portrayal of both the hardships and joys of motherhood can be seen in her relationship with her daughters. She also parallels this dynamic through Bev Harris and her own negotiating of her adult daughters. When Darlene and Becky moved out of the house, for example, they, along with Jackie, often conspired to keep Roseanne not only from lashing out in anger, but also from her underlying neediness and dependence on her role as a mother. The unraveling Roseanne experiences when Darlene goes to college and when Becky gets married reveals the depths of the roots of motherhood in Roseanne's sense of self. Similarly, Roseanne unravels when Jackie goes away for police training, and throughout the series she continually struggles to let Jackie have a life of her own. Many times in the show the daughters and Jackie hide the truth from Roseanne, fearing how profoundly vulnerable and attached she is to her role as primary confidant and friend to each of them. We can see echoes of Barr's childhood in these scenes as she discusses her own mother's insatiable desire for the truth of Roseanne's life by constantly snooping through her bedroom and diary when she was a child—Roseanne's character would do this to Darlene and Becky as well. Her character frequently underscores her deep attachment to her family, and while she often makes light of this attachment, she gives voice to a very real pain; the pain of separation from the ones we love. The real Roseanne quips; "I love my family and my friends and I do whatever I can for them, even though they selfishly insist on living their own lives, and I allow them to do that, because we all have a choice to make in this world" (Barr 1989, 50)

Roseanne took control of how women were portrayed on her show because she was intimately aware of how her unruliness set her up for Hollywood control. Her producer, Matt Williams, wanted to "base the show on castration jokes ... recasting it from the point of view of the little boy. [Roseanne] wanted something else—something different from what she sees as the norm of television: a 'male point of view coming out of women's mouths ... particularly around families'" (Rowe 1997, 79). Roseanne dug in her heels and kept the show in her own voice: "I know I have a job to do while I am on this planet in this incarnation: To attempt to break every social norm, turn it back on itself and see it laughed at. This is the most fun thing there is on earth. I chuckle with glee if I know I have offended someone, because the people I intend to insult offend me horribly" (Barr 1989, 50). Roseanne caused tremendous friction while struggling to keep her vision for the show clear. Once it achieved critical acclaim and solid ratings, Roseanne gained more creative control over the show.

Her show depicted a fresh new narrative of American home life between a husband and wife. Dan Conner, portrayed by John Goodman, is "neither know-it-all, nor buffoon" (Mosher 2001, 181). Dan is a complex depiction of masculinity for the times in which Roseanne was writing. The decade after second-wave feminism's heyday, the Connors renegotiated family life and domestic labor, and depicted

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marriage as partnership rather than as adversarial. While they had their fights, the Conners were in love—they had sex and they didn't apologize for it. Dan is not simply a henpecked husband, he was a "fully realized fat man, both hard and soft, secure enough in his masculinity to openly fret about his relationships with his mother, children, and employees while letting Roseanne run the house, and willing to acknowledge a libido that frequently finds fulfillment in the Conner bedroom" (Mosher 2001, 182). As Dan Conner, John Goodman portrayed an expressive, tactile, and loving fat man. Goodman's obvious talent created a new form of fat performativity that contrasted with Roseanne's controlled-until-explosive, stressed-out housewife routine. In bringing Dan Conner to life, Goodman emphasized "the expressive use of his jowls, the emphatic waving of his bearlike paws, the suggestive movements of his girth" (Mosher 2001, 181). Goodman's comedic voice provided an equal partner to Roseanne's character, breathing believable life into their loving, sparring, and fun relationship. Goodman, as Dan, would flirt with Roseanne by doing impressions of Marlon Brando, a hillbilly, the hunchback of Notre Dame, and many others. Roseanne's raucous laughter at these impressions reveals the underlying intimacy at the foundation of their relationship—that is, if we don't laugh, we will cry. As an actress and writer, Roseanne knew how to give voice to the overweight Conners, having spoken from a position of fatness early on in her career. During her debut on *The Johnny Carson Show* in 1985, Roseanne says in her dry and caustic voice, "I'm fat, so I thought I'd point that out." This was followed by huge laughs as it broke the audience's tension surrounding her size. Pointing to her size as if it is no big deal, Roseanne was able to resist the stereotype of the fat comic who is funny *because* she is fat. Roseanne has always taken charge of how her fatness is perceived. She allows her body to be the brunt of a joke, but always on her own terms. She is able to speak to the desperation of a corpulent woman in a fat-hating society through comedy that turns the wound of rejection into an assertion of power that, ironically, is available to her *because* she is fat. Being an outsider to the feminine beauty ideals, Roseanne is allowed to be bitter, truthful, and hilarious. In her HBO special, she says, "You're not gonna lose no weight. Here's the key. Just be fat and shut up, and if you're thin, F*CK YOU!" (Barr 1987). Perhaps the most tender and funny place from which Roseanne creates laughter is from the pain of growing up fat. She recalls wanting to audition for a television commercial as a child and being told she was "too fat, too dark, and not pretty enough" (Barr 2011b, 80). The sting of rejection runs throughout her autobiographies, and her appearance is most often tied to this rejection. Being rejected for this commercial, she writes, "became the genesis of my one-woman crusade against everything that sucks. I swore that one day I would undo the patriarchal system of 'pretty means skinny!' ... all the other forces of evil would not get away with what they had done to me and all the other fat girls in this godforsaken world. I would make 'fat and loud' my war cry, and soon my enemies would be vanquished in the wake of my tidal power" (Barr 2011b, 80).

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Roseanne's particular form of comedy is in revealing the painful truth that underlies much of everyday life. Surely not the first to focus on truth-telling as comedy, the truth she told stung especially because of her subject position as a working-class fat Jewish woman. As she writes, a "comic needs truth to be funny. Without the sting that truth brings with it, you are, as my dad said, 'funny as a chapped ass.' I began to understand that the very definition of *nice* that most people accept is 'not upsetting the way things are'" (Barr 2011b, 243). It is not easy for a woman to be "not nice"; indeed, Roseanne thinks that being "not nice" is the very definition of upsetting the "natural" patriarchal order of things. In a story that she says taught her the most in her whole life, she describes an incident where her little brother was bouncing a ball in his maternal grandmother Bobbe's house. Roseanne's dad disciplined the boy, and her grandmother

said that playing with the ball was allowed. Roseanne's dad punched the boy in the back of the head to assert his authority in his mother-in-law's house: "The tension was unbearable. Bobbe rose, like a Goddess from her red kitchen chair, hobbled over to where my father was standing, breathing hard, like he always did when he had just proved something through brute strength and she slapped him across the face with all the power of her three hundred pounds. Time froze then, and I saw all the blood drain from his face. He had a slack jaw and saucered eyes. Then she spoke 'You do not hit MY grandchildren, do you understand?'" (Barr 1989, 15). The concrete battle for authority between Bobbe and Roseanne's father created the possibility of rupture in patriarchal authority on the basis of the strength of women's bonds of kinship. This rupturing of expected norms of niceness or feminine deference to patriarchal authority was for Roseanne a creative act of forming solid female ties that must stick together to resist male authority. Between seasons three and four, Roseanne divorced Bill Pentland and married Tom Arnold. Their highly public relationship was the subject of *Saturday Night Live* parody and multiple late-night jokes. At this same time, Roseanne lost a significant amount of weight and had multiple plastic surgeries. As she would later reveal in *Roseannarchy*, Arnold had been cheating and doing various drugs during their marriage. This celebrity-fueled media storm was short-lived (1990–1994) and ended explosively. Shortly after their divorce, Roseanne began a relationship with her then-bodyguard Ben Thomas, they married in 1995, and with him she had another child, a son. They divorced in 2002. Since 2003, Roseanne and her boyfriend Johnny Argent have lived on a macadamia nut farm in Hawaii where they grow their own food and host a politically themed radio talk show based out of Los Angeles. Roseanne refuses to marry again, which is fine with Argent. The two have submitted their life for perusal in the form of a reality TV show, *Roseanne's Nuts*, which follows her and her family on the farm in Hawaii. The apron-wearing farming woman Roseanne has let her hair go gray and now believes she is making atonement for her dance with the devil: celebrity. Her social critique is decidedly class-conscious: "Hollywood hates labor, and hates shows about labor worse than any other thing. And that's why you won't be

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seeing another *Roseanne* anytime soon. Instead, all over the tube, you will find enterprising, overmedicated, painted-up, capitalist whores claiming to be housewives. But I'm not bitter" (Barr 2011a). In the tradition of *The Honeymooners* and *All in the Family*, Roseanne's show was "a milestone in sitcom representations of the working class" (Mosher 2001, 180). Roseanne and Dan Conner held many different jobs, started businesses that failed, and struggled each month to pay bills and answer the requests of their kids for new clothes, lunch money, and college tuition. The Conners came into money once through a small inheritance (that they used to start The Lunch Box diner) and once through the "imaginary" final season where they win the lottery. The post-Reagan era Roseanne was writing in saw the erosion of social programs and outsourcing of American manufacturing jobs. Her critique of capitalism at the time of her show is as strong as it is now. As she writes, "The Reagan Revolution (same shit, different century) worked perfectly for the minority it was created to serve: the Palins who go around encouraging the chickens to vote for Colonel Sanders" (Barr 2011b, 112). Similarly, unhappy with President Barack Obama, Roseanne blasted Oprah for supporting his candidacy: "He has no ideas, no plan and nothing to add other than the cynical pacification of the masses with bedtime stories about hope, while calling Unions 'special interest groups' that need to be done away with ... You [Oprah] are a closeted republican and chose Barack Obama because you do not like other women who actually stand for something to working American women besides glamour, angels, Hollywood and dieting!" ("Roseanne Barr's Wild Tirade" 2008). While many criticized Roseanne seemingly losing sight of her working-class and social values in her rise to fame, she has launched herself back into the politics that made her famous, the

politics that she made popular and gave voice to, in her loud, nasal way. She has recently been sighted at Occupy Wall Street gatherings and has been widely interviewed on alternative media sites. She is also active in her social criticism on roseanneworld.com. She has even gone so far as to declare herself a candidate for President of the United States—and the Prime Minister of Israel “it’s a two-fer” she says—running for the Green Tea Party. She plans to bring forth a “divine matriarchy.” In her announcement speech, which can be found on YouTube, she continues speaking from the margins of power in society by turning the tables on the powerful: I will outlaw bullshit ... the patriarchy will inevitably start to crumble, as will the concept of war itself which is largely a large load of bullsh*t ... We will imprison the most dangerous people on earth using our strong military to find and arrest them. They won’t be hard to find as they are already sitting at the top of every giant ponzi scheme of a big multi-national corporation. Just one percent of the population. They kill dispassionately by stealing the wealth of entire communities and classes. They shall face a punishment more horrifying than death to them. These greedy souls will be forced to actually pay back the money they stole ... they will be required to clean the sewers and the land of all the toxins their profits have brought.

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In a time of widespread fat-shaming and vast economic uncertainty in America, Roseanne’s show seems as important as ever. She gave voice to her fatness, her womanhood, and to the working class of America who are sometimes lost in the glamour of TV ratings and multiple-camera shows. Roseanne blazed her trail and then saw it overgrown, lost in the 90s without a voice, giving way to new comedy blocks focusing on the young, successful, and childless: *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Will and Grace*, and others before giving rise to the fat guy/hot wife comedies of the 2000s (*King of Queens*, *According to Jim*). While an interesting parallel to *Roseanne* seems to be flourishing on the air in the Melissa McCarthy vehicle *Mike and Molly*, it lacks the biting, critical voice of *Roseanne*. Roseanne has declared war on Hollywood, and she has certainly tasted enough of the successes and bitter failures to rally her stump speech and speak to her fans and critics alike. She unapologetically gave her sitcom and her comedy a working-class woman’s voice, and she appears primed and refreshed to do it all over again.

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