

Yes, It Can

by Jameson Simmons

Yesterday, Joe pointed out the article [Can 'The Daily Show' Survive the Barack Obama Presidency?](#) by Dan Kois at New York Magazine. Dan seems to be a good guy and has a [fantastic Anti-Monster Routine](#). He makes some decent points about the shifting political framework, then gets into some misguided assumptions about Jon Stewart's demographics. But his analysis of the comedy situation significantly misses the mark. Partisanship and comedy simply do not interact, unless you're talking about fake partisanship (Colbert) or bad comedy (*The 1/2 Hour News Hour* on Fox News).

"How we gonna make this shit funny?" Jon Stewart plaintively asked [Tuesday night] on *The Daily Show*, in the middle of a series of lukewarm bits about Barack Obama's historic presidential victory. And it's a good question. During Tuesday's Election Night special, Stewart's *Daily Show* correspondents gathered around to weep for the end of the election. "We've been on the campaign trail for two years," Jason Jones cried. "What do we cover now?" It was a funny bit, but we think the correspondents were asking the wrong question. The end of the election campaign won't doom *The Daily Show*. The Barack Obama presidency just might.

Probably not. If you read Stewart's question the way I do, he's not referring to the Barack Obama presidency; he's referring to the historic and emotional Barack Obama *victory*. It was kind of impossible to be a cynic during the hours immediately after 11:00 Eastern. The moment was too big and too sincere. Sometimes there are moments like that – but they pass, the routine resumes, and there is plenty of dumb shit to make fun of. Such as our pliable and pack-minded media – which is typically where a lot of Stewart's material comes from (including the "What do we cover now?" bit). Though there was additional material from the campaigns during the last year or so, a lot of *The Daily Show*'s focus was still on the **way** the stories were covered by the cable networks.

(For example, their "Joe the Plubmer" coverage didn't focus on Wurzelbacher himself, but was a brilliant take on a bored media, tired of covering the same stump speeches over and over, pouncing on him. First, they swarmed his front lawn and charged him with cameras, then hours later, they turned on him, digging up past political affiliations and overdue back taxes. "Everyone gets their fifteen minutes of fame," deadpanned John Oliver. "What they don't tell you is, twelve of those minutes are a painful rectal exam.")

First of all, in one eventful day, the prototypical *Daily Show* viewer has been transformed: Once disaffected and angry at Washington's power structure, he's now delighted and hopeful about the new president and all that he symbolizes.

That he may be, but Washington is still Washington. There is still plenty to piss him off. Not to mention the inevitable shortcomings of an Obama presidency that cannot hope to achieve all of its high-minded goals, laudable though they may be. Saying that anger and disaffection will be impossible in a post-Obama world is like saying irony died on 9/11. Besides that, it gives the man way too much credit. People like him; they welcome the change. But if you think dead-eyed twentysomething hipsters can be "transformed," take another look at them after the E has worn off. They're the same sullen, self-obsessed misanthropes, thumbs sore from Twittering "air quotes" to each other in a desperate attempt to crowdsource their own individuality.

And if you're an Obama fan – eager to give Barack the benefit of the doubt, and proud and excited about the change you've helped bring the nation – do you really want Jon Stewart sitting on the sidelines, taking potshots at your hero?

If an Obama fan thinks his hero is that thin-skinned – or if that fan's affection for Obama is too fragile to survive a few wisecracks – then I don't foresee him getting through five minutes of a typical *Daily Show* episode without unplugging his television and diving under the covers to weep. The man doesn't go more than three minutes without making a "taint" joke – easily offended viewers don't last long.

Beyond the problem of audiences souring on Obama jokes is the question of whether Jon Stewart even *wants* to make Obama jokes.

Jon Stewart is a comedian. The first and only thing Jon Stewart cares about is *making people laugh*. Particularly people who are in the same room as him. He may love Obama. But he loves McCain (or once did) and never pulled punches with him. The job of a satirist is to make those jokes; label Jon a partisan, but you can't deny he's a smart man. He knows his show will not survive as an Obama love-in, and he wouldn't want it to.

Of course, *The Daily Show* has found ways to goof on the Obama campaign, but it's no secret that Stewart and his writing staff lean leftward. And *The Daily Show* differs from nearly all other popular political satire in that the show's strength is in its writers' outrage and anger at the powers that be.

Maybe a lot of us lefties are doe-eyed idealists with our heads in the clouds. But don't saddle Stewart's writers with that stereotype. If they fit any stereotype, it's that of cranky, whiny Jews. Know-it-all college graduates with chips on their shoulders. And nothing characterizes their work better than a deep, abiding cynicism. They have poked fun at Obama's messiah image, and they will continue to do so. Their hearts may be buoyed by hope, but those hearts are still black and bitter – they'll find something to grouse about.

For one thing, to paraphrase Sarah "Bible Spice" Palin, we don't know the real Barack Obama. The success of his presidential bid is due in large part to his impeccably managed public image. Obama moments we've seen on television have been expertly stage-managed, making it difficult to find a point of leverage for comedy. (Except for that showmanship, which Stewart has mocked.) Once he's in office and at the mercy of actual events, there will be more to laugh at.

If President Obama's administration is the love-in that progressives hope it will be, we think it's awfully unlikely Stewart's heart will be in Obama-bashing.

A huge "if." A preposterous and argument-ruining "if." Just because Obama represents a departure from Bush's secretive and stymying ways does not mean anyone expects him to be greeted as a liberator. Washington gridlock still exists. A divided and aggrieved electorate still exists. No one is stupid enough to expect the White House to turn into a rainbow candy factory on Inauguration Day. Not Obama, not the Democratic Party, not progressives – no one.

The guy teared up at eleven on Election Night! Not that we didn't, but still.

We all did. That's the point. You can't make that moment funny. Nor could anyone hide the palpable sense of relief. The electrodes had been removed from the nation's collective genitals. We'd made it through. It was a cathartic moment. A comedian who makes a joke in a moment like that is not displaying his non-partisan *bona fides*, he's being an asshole.

So let's say that Stewart's half-hearted Obama gags just keep on flopping on *The Daily Show*. ("Your William Ayers joke bombed," a sage Chris Wallace observed on last night's episode.)

Why should we say that? The gags won't flop. The Ayers joke may have felt "too soon" for the studio audience, who spent their afternoon working each other into a frenzy standing in line outside the show. They probably expected Jon to set comedy aside and just praise Obama for half an hour. Instead, Stewart began the necessary work of paving the way for President Obama jokes. If he has to throw out a few flops (and it's a rare night he doesn't) to get his footing established, it's worth it. He's not going to pull punches – and his audience had better get their mind right if they were expecting him to.

With Bush and Cheney heading off into the sunset, and Sarah Palin hopping a charter back to Wasilla, who's left to skewer? Roll call!

REPUBLICANS. Obama's win doesn't mean, of course, that the Republican Party is dead. There will still be plenty of Republican operatives, wing-nut school boards, and convicted-felon senators to belittle. But it's a lot less

fun – and brave – to kick the losers than it is to take the winners down a peg.

There will be plenty to mock as the conservative movement struggles to right itself and figure out how its pieces fit together. Bush's deficit spending alienated the fiscal conservatives; McCain's (onetime) centrism riled the religious base; Sarah Palin offended nearly everyone who saw her speak for more than 30 seconds (admittedly, very few people). As they fight to find their national identity, reconnect with their supporters, and check the Democratic agenda, there will likely be some funny moments that will not look like kicking someone while he's down.

OTHER DEMOCRATS.

So you're saying Obama is untouchable not because of the hope and idealism he shares with others in his party, but just because he's him?

THE MEDIA. Last night's episode included some great potshots at CNN's stupid holograms and NBC's stupid ice rink.

This really has always been Stewart's prime focus, and there's little chance of the media running out of fodder for him. Their completely unselfconscious all-out frenzy to sensationalize every instant is absolutely hilarious. Unable to justify eight hours of coverage for an event with a nearly certain outcome, did they blanch at the idea of clearing eight hours of airtime? No! They just filled it with silly gadgets like touchscreens and virtual charts and two window-washing platforms inexplicably scaling the face of 30 Rock.

Watching Anderson Cooper and Wolf Blitzer repeatedly congratulate themselves on that idiotic and glitchy hologram effect was the highlight of the evening. If you think the giddy enthusiasm of Obama's supporters makes them insufferable, you should've seen the glowing faces of Blitz and Coop. (My favorite part? Anderson Cooper insisting: "This is something you've never seen on television before." Then, two seconds later, he aptly compares it to *Star Trek*.)

OBAMA FANS. One *Daily Show* writer suggested as much to the *Times* on Election Night. "I get worried that all of us who wanted Obama will take themselves too seriously."

Ya think? I was surprised Stewart didn't make cracks about the weighty sincerity of Obama's acceptance speech on Wednesday's show – perhaps it seemed "too soon." But there's endless fodder in those who seek to idolize Obama, and I doubt Stewart will hesitate to skewer them, whether or not they sit in his audience. If you pay attention at the top of the show, you'll notice he frequently makes fun of a hard-core believer who's said something idiotic in the Q-and-A session right before the cameras started rolling.

Last night, he opened the show by mentioning that Obama had won, and was rewarded with a hooting round of applause. He leaned in and cracked, "I just said that to make sure my audience still has hands." Minutes later, when he mentioned that Californians had voted to ban gay marriage, the audience interrupted his joke with their boos. Stewart asked, "When did this become a call-and-response church?" The answer, of course, is a few years ago, when Stewart didn't clamp down on audiences interrupting his interview subjects with their jeers. But the point is, he's not so in love with his own audience that he can't make fun of them when they act like morons.

RANDOM CELEBRITIES. But then you're *The Soup*.

Or Kilborn-era *Daily Show*. (Which was a delight, by the way, but there seems little chance of Jon Stewart reverting to that.)

That the real highlight of Election Night was Stephen Colbert's begging a cockatoo to slit his throat suggests that the balance of power on the Stewart-Colbert axis might have shifted. We can see a future in which *The Colbert Report* becomes Comedy Central's late-night star, mixing Dadaist whimsy with legitimate critique of the Obama administration.

In my mind, Colbert has been the top of the ticket almost since his very first episode three years ago. Neither host is afraid to level legitimate critique, but Colbert hides his inside a charming, lovable buffoon in contrast to Jon's smart-mouthed curmudgeon. Stewart can annihilate hypocritical politicians and pundits with his crack team of sound-bite ninjas in the editing suite, but Colbert is more fun to watch, and often more incisive.

I don't think we should've expected too many highlights from the election night special. (Colbert's Christmas special, on the other hand, looks awesome!) Stewart's format doesn't work all that well live, and although he was able to prepare a lot of material based on how clear the outcome was, you have to think the main focus of the night was for Stewart and Colbert to get together on one stage and crack each other up. Which they did, producing some great highlights.

And, sad to say, in that future, Jon Stewart sits on the sidelines, happy that Barack Obama is the leader we all hoped he would be, but wistfully remembering his words from last night's episode: "Oh, George W. Bush impression, I'll miss you most of all."

I don't know if it's possible to so thoroughly miss the point of that line without willful intent. His Bush impression is terrible (and he knows it), and he uses it like a crutch. Over the last year or so, Stewart has admitted this – joking about its awfulness every time he does it, to the point where **that** reflexive bit of self-deprecating humor has become a crutch. The instant after that line, Stewart debuted his Obama

impersonation: he hunched forward, squinted his eyes, and croaked out a pinched: "Yes we can. Eh-heh-heh-heh." The joke is that he's a lazy impressionist and, most nights, fishes for cheap laughs from his devoted audience. The brilliance of the joke is: simply doing it was fishing for more cheap laughs.

There will be plenty more of those to come, and Jon Stewart has proved that nothing will stop him from chasing them down. It insults him as a comedian to assume that his politics might render him incapable of that.
