



This is Jeopardy: The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show

Episode Eighteen: Live from New York...It's Jeopardy!

A Production of Sony Music Entertainment, and Sony Pictures TV

Buzzy Cohen: When a show has been on the air as long as *Jeopardy!* has, it's almost inevitable others will poke fun at it.

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompson: *Let's see our categories. We got big girls...I don't know...You better...I'm gonna pray on this...They out here saying.. and as always, white people...*

Buzzy Cohen: That's not Art Fleming — or Alex Trebek — or even Mayim or Ken you're hearing. And this is not a clip from the *Jeopardy!* you know and love, which you might've caught onto.

On screen, the stage and lecterns are familiar. As is the iconic blue game board. But this is from a 2016 sketch on Saturday Night Live called *Black Jeopardy!* And instead, it's comedy legend Kenan Thompson at the helm.

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompson: *Okay, Keely, you're our returning champ. You pick.*

Contestant: *Okay, let's do you better for 200.*

Kenan Thompson: *Okay. The answer there. You need hot sauce, duck sauce, soy sauce and safety pins. Keely.*

Contestant: *What is you better take your ass to the kitchen and look in the packet drawer?*

Kenan Thompson: *Yeah. Yeah. The packet drawer. Yeah. Yeah. Every kitchen's got one, you know.*

Buzzy Cohen: SNL has been on the air since 1975 and is still peerless in its grip on the culture.

From Dan Aykroyd's impersonations of Jimmy Carter and Richard Nixon...to the launch of Wayne's World...to Natalie Portman shedding her good girl image in an expletive-laden rap...these moments have endured. They're comedic flashpoints that we still talk about today.

But even on a show that millions of Americans tune into each week, not every sketch breaks through the noise...except for *Black Jeopardy!*. It's the second most-viewed sketch on SNL's YouTube channel — with over 76 million views.

ARCHIVAL:

Contestant: *Let's go. I ain't got it for 200.*

Kenan Thompson: *All right. The lady from Sally May says, Your student loan is past due, Rashad.*

Contestant: *What is, I ain't got it because I died. You talking to a ghost.*

Kenan Thompson: *Yeah, that's right. That's right. That's right. Yeah. You can't bill what's not there...*

Kenan Thompson: *When my phone blows up from, like, my people, that's when I know we hit, you know, a bullseye in the culture.*

THEME MUSIC

Dave Schilling: *Jeopardy!, SNL, they hearken back to a time when we all kind of had these similar touchstones, these similar cultural experiences.*

Buzzy Cohen: I'm your host Buzzy Cohen, and This is Jeopardy!: The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show. On today's episode, we tell the story of how *Black Jeopardy!* came to be and what it can teach us about *Jeopardy!*.

THEME MUSIC OUT

ACT 1

Buzzy Cohen: Look, *Jeopardy!* is no stranger to parody. In fact, at times, *Jeopardy!* has gotten in on the joke itself. Here's Alex Trebek playing uhhh...Alex Trebek in a 1997 episode of *The Simpsons*. Marge Simpson is strapped for cash, so she goes on *Jeopardy!*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Marge, you were down \$5,200.*

Marge Simpson: *But Mr. Trebek.*

Alex Trebek: *I asked you before the game if you knew the rules and you said you did. Judges!*

Bart Simpson: *Run, Mom!*

Buzzy Cohen: Over the years, Saturday Night Live has often parodied game shows — like Family Feud or Wheel of Fortune. And *Jeopardy!* wasn't spared.

One of SNL cast member Will Ferrell's most memorable characters was his turn as an exasperated Alex Trebek on the Celebrity version of the game.

ARCHIVAL:

Will Ferrell: *Welcome back to Celebrity Jeopardy. Before we begin the Double Jeopardy round, I'd like to ask our contestants, once again, please refrain from using ethnic slurs. That said, let's take a look at the scores. Sean Connery has set a new Jeopardy! record with negative \$230,000.*

Contestant: *You think you're pretty smart, don't you? What with your da gon' mustache on your greasy hair.*

Will Ferrell: *Look, what did I just say about ethnic slurs?*

Buzzy Cohen: Ferrell established himself as a comedy heavy-hitter during his time on SNL and that was due in no small part to his work on the *Celebrity Jeopardy!* sketches — starting in the '90s, SNL writers would go on to create 15 different versions of the *Celebrity Jeopardy!* sketch.

It was an iconic sketch that poked at just how different the game of *Celebrity Jeopardy!* was from regular *Jeopardy!*

Dave Schilling: I'm Dave Shilling and I am a writer of many things, but mostly I write about culture.

Buzzy Cohen: Dave Schilling is a comedy scholar, of sorts. And in 2018, he wrote an oral history for *Vulture*, the entertainment and culture outlet of New York Magazine, on how the *Black Jeopardy!* sketch came to be.

Dave Schilling: I think one of the reasons why we love *Jeopardy!* is because these are people who have a wealth of knowledge that far outstrips what the average person has. But *Celebrity Jeopardy!* is more like if you went on *Jeopardy!*, what would it be like? And the sketches kind of took that to, to such an extreme.

ARCHIVAL:

Contestant: I speak a little French. You're an ass bite. Pardon my French.

Contestant: My name's French.

Contestant: Yeah. Well, who gives a damn.

Will Ferrell: Moving on.

Dave Schilling: You have, you know, Burt Reynolds being kind of unaware or Sean Connery, you know, being very, very vulgar. It was both making fun of the celebrity and like finding the kind of, um, particular things that each celebrity was being mocked for.

Buzzy Cohen: *Celebrity Jeopardy!* was a popular recurring sketch, with some of the biggest stars of the SNL cast to ever grace the stage. And that's in no small part because it was the perfect vehicle for impersonations:

Norm MacDonald played a nonchalant, wise-cracking, gum-chewing Burt Reynolds. And Darrell Hammond created a famously belligerent Sean Connery — who *hated* Alex Trebek, and appeared in almost every sketch.

But once Will Ferrell ripped off the mustache and stepped away from the lectern — *Jeopardy!* was kind of off limits to SNL writers and cast members looking to break through. Will Ferrell had done the thing, and he'd done it well. So who'd want to go up to bat with him?

Kenan Thompson: You know, that guy's a legend and a hero of, you know, all of us.

Buzzy Cohen: That's Kenan Thompson, who's been a cast member of SNL since 2003. He has the longest tenure of anyone in the history of the show. But when he joined in the early aughts, he was the new guy.

Kenan Thompson: *So we don't wanna, number one, step on toes, but number two, also like underserve in, in such an arena that is so sacred or whatever. So if you're gonna step there, you gotta come with it.*

Buzzy Cohen: But Kenan is a sketch comedy veteran in his own right, getting his start as a child actor on Nickelodeon's All That and Kenan and Kel in the '90s.

Here Kenan saves the president from an ominous display of Orange Sodas in Kenan and Kel:

ARCHIVAL:

President character: *Hey, check out the groovy orange soda display. Wow.*

Kenan Thompson: *Hey, Mr. President, look out! No! Look out! Back away!*

Buzzy Cohen: Sometimes, he plays the straight man — simply reacting as zanier characters bounce off him. But he also takes center stage.

You might've seen him in his most popular SNL sketches — Diner Lobster and What's Up with That.

In this 2010 clip from the What's Up With That sketch featuring Robert DeNiro and Robin Williams, Thompson, as host Deondre Cole, frequently interrupts his guests by bursting into an improvised, stream-of-consciousness song.

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompspon: *Uncomfortable silence.*

Robert DeNiro: *Oh, no, you don't. This is wrong. This is disrespectful. You're being disrespectful.*

Keenan Thompson: *I'm being disrespectful...*

Buzzy Cohen: By the time the idea for *Black Jeopardy!* arrived on his desk, Kenan had been a cast member for over 10 years. And in that decade, he'd found writers he clicked with.

Bryan Tucker: My name's Bryan Tucker. I'm a writer at SNL. I've been a writer there for the past 18 years.

Buzzy Cohen: When Bryan first came on in 2005, he was immediately drawn to Kenan.

Bryan Tucker: Kenan had been there for about a year and a half, and I saw him reading things at our table and I, and he was really, really funny. And I thought to myself, no one's really writing for this guy, you know, and he could be special here. And so I also did not have cast members that I was writing for regularly. I was new. And so he and I developed an instant relationship.

Kenan Thompson: Me and Bryan Tucker worked together a lot, you know, like, I would say I worked with him probably the most because he's just, you know, as excited about the Black zeitgeist as I am. You know what I mean? He is white. He is from North Carolina, so he's like very white, but he loves Sanford and Son. He loves the Jeffersons.

Bryan Tucker: For many years I've written for several Black comedians. Uh, my first job was on the Chris Rock Show. I wrote for Dave Chappelle on his show.

Buzzy Cohen: The idea for *Black Jeopardy!* came from Bryan's personal experience working in comedy.

Bryan Tucker: So being around, um, funny Black people, you know, sometimes I would feel, uh, that I wasn't quite, you know, there. I didn't have their same experiences.

Buzzy Cohen: And he realized there was something perfect about the format of *Jeopardy!* that could help him tease out that feeling.

Bryan Tucker: *Jeopardy!* is a great format for a comedy sketch because there's so many elements to it. You can have fun, different contestants. You can have an overall theme.

But the best part is you can do a setup, and then you can do a punchline. Often sketches are very character based, where it has to come from someone's attitude or the dialogue or whatever. And with *Jeopardy!*, you can just write straight up jokes. You can cram in, you know, a lot more jokes in a short amount of time than you could a traditional sketch.

Buzzy Cohen: The seed of an idea for a new *Jeopardy!* sketch took life when Bryan brought it to fellow SNL writer Michael Che.

Bryan Tucker: The sketches that seem to do best are sketches that just fall out of me and other writers instead of ones where we have to think all the time. So when I pitched it to him and we got together to do it, and it came very easily, I thought, okay, this can be something.

Buzzy Cohen: Bryan and Michael wrote the script with Kenan in mind as host. They just felt he would be absolutely perfect for it.

Bryan Tucker: Because he's got such a good natured warmth underneath in everything he does, things that might feel controversial or uncomfortable. People trust him, and so he can say those things and make them work.

Dave Schilling: The reason why Kenan Thompson stands out so much to me is his face.

Buzzy Cohen: That's critic Dave Schilling again.

Dave Schilling: He has this incredibly elastic face, but it's also a very warm, welcoming face. He's got the same affability and warmth that Chris Farley had. But Chris Farley was a physical comedian, right? He would throw himself through a table to get people to laugh.

Kenan doesn't have to do all of that physical stuff. He just kind of can make a face, like an aside to the camera with his face and make you laugh.

Bryan Tucker: If you're gonna have a race-based game show, put it in Kenan's hands and everyone feels, oh, this is gonna be fun.

Buzzy Cohen: It turns out, Kenan was a big fan of *Jeopardy!* He used to watch it growing up in his family's home in Atlanta.

Kenan Thompson: I used to love *Jeopardy!* because it would always remind me how dumb I was, you know what I mean? It makes you wanna be smarter and better yourself.

Buzzy Cohen: There's really nothing like a hard round of *Jeopardy!* to remind me of all I don't know. It always makes me want to be smarter.

Kenan Thompson: *Black Jeopardy!* was definitely one of those weeks where I was not looking for it, you know what I'm saying? Like I was just kind of chilling and kind of seeing whatever the world was gonna deliver. And of course here comes [Bryan] Tucker with that one.

Tucker said, *I had an idea like, now stay with me... Black Jeopardy!*. I was like, *I get it 1000%*.

Buzzy Cohen: Whether he was expecting it or not, Bryan Tucker and Michael Che delivered.

MUSIC: Slow building beat

Kenan Thompson: *Black Jeopardy!* was just strong. It's just chock full of jokes. It was just so undeniable, you know, joke potential in it.

Buzzy Cohen: He found it funny for a reason everyone else did. There's a certain cultural idea of the people that go on *Jeopardy!*. Kenan tried to describe it.

Kenan Thompson: *They live like a very quiet life. Maybe some wine, maybe some classical music playing, but just not a lot of noise and not a lot of headaches.*

Buzzy Cohen: It reads....kinda white! White like green bean casserole or winter sports or — Buzzy Cohen.

And you can hear what Kenan's talking about even when the big blue board does include clues about Black American culture...like when Professor Sam Buttrey went viral by getting a clue about Doja Cat right. No one was expecting it.

ARCHIVAL:

Ken Jennings: *This "feline" not only got "freaky deaky" with Tyga, she also told us to "get into it (yuh)", So we did (yuh). Sam*

Sam Buttrey: *Who's Doja Cat?*

Ken Jennings: *Yeah, you're a fan. I can tell.*

Buzzy Cohen: But that's not to say that Black contestants haven't excelled on the show. Matt Jackson and Ryan Long both reached super champ status. And Colby Burnett has dominated not one — but two — tournaments. But Kenan's read remains kinda true.

The *Black Jeopardy!* sketch subverted all those ideas. It asked: What if the canon of knowledge that *Jeopardy!* asked you about was completely different?

But first, it had to be funny. And to get on SNL, it had to kill. So the *Black Jeopardy!* team had to get past some pretty tough critics. On a show like SNL and like *Jeopardy!* too, there's a lot of people that need to buy in to get it on TV.

Bryan Tucker: *We have a read through on Wednesday, and then if people like it, it gets picked for dress rehearsal on Friday and Saturday. I do remember that we were a little nervous about it because we thought people would look at the title of it and be like: A Jeopardy! sketch? Hasn't SNL covered that ground far too much already and too well?*

But we had run it by Louis CK who seemed to like it.

Buzzy Cohen: Louis CK was the SNL host for that week's episode — March 29, 2014 to be exact — and his character was integral for the jokes to land. And he was game.

Lorne Michaels, the creator and longtime producer of SNL, liked it too.

Kenan Thompson: *So they let us run with it and then once it's in my hands as far as like the writing is concerned—then it's on me kind of just to maestro through basically as the host.*

Kenan Thompson: So our contestants are Amir.

Contestant: How you doing?

Kenan Thompson: Keely.

Contestant: What's up?

Kenan Thompson: And um, Mark. Well...surprised to see you, Mark.

Contestant: Yes. Well, I'm a professor of African American Studies at uh, Brigham Young University, so I just thought I'd give this a try.

Buzzy Cohen: In this first iteration, Louis CK guest stars as the lone white contestant who thinks he has a shot at winning the game. That is not the case.

Contestant: Cool. Uh, so let's do a Pssh! for 600.

Kenan Thompson: Okay. Raheem wants to borrow your bike to go to the store right quick. Mark?

Contestant: Uh, what is No way, Jose. Well, that's gotta be at least close, right?

Kenan Thompson: Let's just move on and hear about today's prize, Johnny.

Buzzy Cohen: Even in *Black Jeopardy!*, Johnny Gilbert is still announcing...

Black Jeopardy! came back again in 2015 — this time, with Elizabeth Banks guest starring. She plays a well-intentioned liberal white lady who's shocked by her inability to play the game.

True to the OG *Jeopardy!* format, this next clip is a video clue featuring SNL cast member Leslie Jones.

ARCHIVAL:

Contestant: *What's up? In 1943, an artist named Archibald Motley painted the picture behind me. My question is, after all these years, who killed Tupac?*

Kenan Thompson: *Allison?*

Contestant: *Okay, I, I think I'm getting the hang of this. I'm gonna say, Tupac was killed by a corrupt justice system that threatens us all.*

Kenan Thompson: *Oh, I'm sorry, but that was a trick question. The answer is that Tupac is still alive.*

Buzzy Cohen: *Black Jeopardy!* killed again. But to be like the real thing, it needed to have staying power.

Kenan Thompson: *I think that was the challenge, like doing it again. You know what I mean? The second time I was like, okay, well how's it gonna be different from the first? And it was different enough, but it wasn't like super duper different.*

Buzzy Cohen: To make a sketch that could last, they needed to hit on something truly new. How they found that is after the break.

ACT 2

Dave Schilling: *Black Jeopardy!* was very surprising to me because I didn't expect it to be particularly original.

Buzzy Cohen: That's culture writer Dave Schilling again.

Dave Schilling: *SNL has had game show parodies since the beginning, and so it all felt very cliché. Of course, they're gonna do a game show parody and *Jeopardy!* is the biggest game show in America.*

So the idea of doing it again just seemed lazy on its face, but then you watch the sketch and it's such a perfect engine for comedy and it's such a perfect way to articulate those ideas of the Black community being its own kind of special world and people going into it and not understanding it.

Buzzy Cohen: In 2016, the SNL writers brought *Black Jeopardy!* back — with one major shift in the makeup on stage.

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompson: *The board is yours, Keely.*

Contestant: *Let's stay with "Bruh" for 400.*

Kenan Thompson: *All right, "Bruh." He's been playing for a while now, but he's still putting up big numbers. Jared.*

Jared: *This is easy. Who's my man? Jaromir Yawger yo?*

Kenan Thompson: *You say Yama say what now?*

Jared: *Come on, dog! He's a hockey player. The man won the Art Ross trophy four years in a row, fam.*

Kenan Thompson: *Jared, I know you're speaking English, but uh, it ain't my English.*

Kenan Thompson: **I feel like the original concept was everybody was Black and you know, there's this one white person like, what is this show? And then we did it with Drake and it was like the differences of Black and that was cool.**

Buzzy Cohen: On SNL's third go around with the sketch, the team found a new thing to say. It highlighted the differences in Black identity.

And Drake — as a Black Canadian — shows not everything is universal. But connection is always possible.

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompson: *Jared, I think Canada's messing with your Blackness. Man.*

Drake as Contestant: *Why do I have to be your definition of Black? Huh? You're judging me before you even know me. It's making me so angry inside, dog.*

Kenan Thompson: *You just said the secret Black phrase of the day, Jared. You win the game. Alright. Oh well. The slow jams means it's time to wrap it up. Tune in next week when we give away two tickets to the Sister, Sister reunion show.*

Buzzy Cohen: With a solid format, Kenan, Michael, and Bryan — plus writer Sam Jay — started to push what they could say with the sketch. They were ready for some bigger swings.

In October 2016, just weeks before the presidential election was to be decided, Tom Hanks was the guest host.

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompson: *Our contestants are Keely.*

Contestant: *Hi.*

Kenan Thompson: *Shanice.*

Contestant: *Okay now.*

Kenan Thompson: *And Doug.*

Contestant: *How are you doing, sir?*

Buzzy Cohen: On stage, Tom Hanks sports a t-shirt emblazoned with an American flag, imposed onto a bald eagle. Plus, a Make America Great Again hat.

Once again, a white contestant was competing on the *Black Jeopardy!* stage, but this time — the result was unexpected.

Kenan Thompson: *Oh, hey Doug. You sure you're ready to play Black Jeopardy!?*

Doug: *They told me a fella can win some money, so let's win me some money. Get er done.*

Kenan Thompson: *Well, I admire your confidence.*

Bryan Tucker: We have Kenan on one side with, again, his good natured and warm personality. And then on the other side we have another beloved figure, Tom Hanks, who, when he's the person with the Make America Great Again hat, other

hosts might leave people very uncomfortable. But, again, in his hands, you trusted him.

And once he starts answering these questions, they realize that these two have a lot in common. They don't trust authority. You know, they are worried about technology. They have people in their community that are very close rather than trusting people on the outside. Tom Hanks has a sturdy wife that, you know, and he loves her body. You know, stuff like that.

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompson: The board is yours, Shanice.

Contestant: Let's go with "they out here saying" for 200.

Kenan Thompson: Okay? The answer. They out here saying the new iPhone wants your thumbprint for your protection. Oh, okay. Then Doug.

Doug: What is I, I, I don't think so. That's how they get you.

Kenan Thompson: Yes, yes. That's it, yes.

Contestant: I don't trust that.

Contestant: Me either.

Doug: No, I read that that goes straight to the government.

Kenan Thompson: Well, that is not bad, Doug. The board is yours.

Kenan Thompson: Tom Hanks was a punch because, you know, that's when we brought in like the real current, you know, politics of it all.

He was adding little tidbits up to the live show, like, you know, finding this character. And he really liked locked it in at the live show and made it make sense. It was so believable and it was a beautiful moment. It was a moment of clarity for communication between two different sides of the aisle.

Contestant: Okay. Let's go to "they out here saying" for eight.

Kenan Thompson: Okay. The answer: They out here saying that every vote counts. Oh, Doug, again.

Doug: What is, come on, they already decided who wins before it happens.

Kenan Thompson: Yes, yes, yes. And the Illuminati figured that out months ago. That's another one, Doug.

Doug: Okay, we're, uh, we're doing it.

Kenan Thompson: While laughs are happening, you know what I mean? It's a very healing kind of experience, you know, to touch on, not necessarily absurdities, but extremities.

Buzzy Cohen: This one was a smash. It launched thinkpieces, receiving all kinds of press coverage. Vox called it the best political commentary of the election.

And the Tom Hanks sketch also prompted texts to Kenan from his friends and family.

Kenan Thompson: When my phone blows up from, like, my people, that's when I know we hit, you know, a bullseye in the culture. Because like, I don't hear from them every week, you know what I mean?

Sometimes they tune in sometimes, like they enjoy the show, but they won't actually start hitting my phone until it's something that, you know, kind of touches home for them. And I, I get that, but it'll be like, all my friends would text me like, you know what I mean? Like the whole Atlanta, which is like very Black.

So I know we just did something for the culture. It's fantastic. And that, that always feels real good.

Bryan Tucker: I've written hundreds of sketches on the show and often I still try to write something that will appeal to everyone, you know, politically and culturally. And I've never done something that has done it as well as that.

Buzzy Cohen: Some said the sketch spoke to something aspirational, at a time when a lot of people didn't feel hope about the future of the country. According to the Pew Research Center in 2016, 49 percent of registered voters said they were worried the future would be worse compared with life then.

Dave Schilling: I think one of the reasons why *Black Jeopardy!* is one of the most beloved recurring sketches on SNL in the modern era is because of the time that it was released into the world.

This is Dave Schilling.

Dave Schilling: You know, we're at the tail end of the Obama era, race has been on everybody's mind for those eight years, right?

Race is on everybody's mind all the time, but it became more apparent and more part of the conversation in a more substantive way because of who the president of the United States was. So this sketch comes along and really shines a light on that, but makes that difference funny and something to celebrate. *Black Jeopardy!* made the rapport between Black people feel like a good thing.

Buzzy Cohen: Even Kenan, who'd been making people laugh his whole life, was awed by the response to *Black Jeopardy!* — and the power of comedy.

Kenan Thompson: Our comedians are, you know, kind of our frontline heroes as far as attacking trauma, you know what I mean? And attacking pain or attacking absurdities or things that are irking you, you know what I mean?

They take those uncomfortable conversations and, and bring it to the table. Like, let's eat, you know what I'm saying? Let's sit down and really get into this.

Buzzy Cohen: You'd think a wildly viral sketch might make Bryan Tucker and Michael Che's lives easier, but it actually turned up the pressure for them. And they didn't touch it again for two years.

Bryan Tucker: Every time we did *Black Jeopardy!*, Michael Che would be like, okay, that's the last one. And I thought, well, maybe we could do another if we thought of an idea that seemed unique. And so then when we did the Tom Hanks one, it went over so well, you know, it was in the middle of the 2016 election. It got a lot of media attention and we thought, okay, that's our grand finale. We should just step off and leave. But then, Chadwick Bozeman came.

Buzzy Cohen: Ah yes — the acclaimed Chadwick Bozeman. In 2018, he starred as T'Challa in *Black Panther* — and became a superhero legend in his own right. The first movie in the franchise grossed 1.3 billion dollars and made Chadwick a household name.

Kenan Thompson: Chadwick was having the most explosive moment I've ever seen a Black actor have in my lifetime.

You know what I mean? I've never seen anything more explosive than that *Black Panther* Week. It was crazy.

ARCHIVAL:

Chadwick Boseman: *I want to be a great king, Baba. Just like you.*

Buzzy Cohen: Black Panther had sparked something for Bryan, too.

Bryan Tucker: *And I had the idea after watching the Black Panther movie. I was like, you know, people in Wakanda grow up so much different than Black people in America.*

They have such a utopia. And then if someone like that came over here, what would they think? And I ran it by Michael Che and he was like, maybe, you know, this character and this movie is so important to the Black community. We can't mess this up. And I said, I understand.

And then when we ran it by Chadwick, he was like, maybe, you know. He also is very protective of the character, understandably. Of course. Michael Che agreed, let's at least talk about it. Let's at least send it to the table. And if people don't like it, then it won't be on the show.

Buzzy Cohen: This time around, the stakes were so much higher. And the writing didn't come as easy.

Bryan Tucker: *We were like, this has to hit a hundred percent. Everyone has to feel good about it. And so if the first Black Jeopardy! took Michael Che and I maybe two hours to write, I'll bet this one took six or seven hours to write.*

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompson: *It's your pick, Shanice.*

Contestant: *Let's stick with "Fid'na" for 400.*

Kenan Thompson: *All right. This is the reason your cable bill is in your grandmama's name. T'Challa.*

T'Challa: *What is to honor her as the foundation of the family.*

Kenan Thompson: *That's really nice. It's wrong, but that's really nice.*

Dave Schilling: *As much as Obama was important to putting Black people into a mainstream lens in American culture.*

Buzzy Cohen: Dave Schilling again.

Dave Schilling: Black Panther really did that and really put Black ideas, Black thoughts, Black concepts into, the kind of, the primary culture of America. And so having Chadwick on that sketch really kind of put a bow on it.

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompson: *Let's keep going.*

Contestant: *Let's stay with "Grown ass" for 600.*

Kenan Thompson: *All right. You send your smart ass child here cuz she thinks she grown. T'Challa.*

T'Challa: *What is to one of our free universities where she can apply her intelligence and perhaps one day become a great scientist.*

Kenan Thompson: *Okay, well the answer we was looking for was out my damn house, but you know what? I'm gonna give it to you, T'Challa. Y'all must not have no mean streets in Wakanda. All right, the board is yours.*

Buzzy Cohen: Chadwick's appearance as T'Challa was another smash hit, solidifying Black *Jeopardy!* in the SNL canon and underlining SNL's role as a culture maker.

And like SNL, *Jeopardy!* is also a beloved American staple — so when you have one playing off the other, what does that teach us?

Dave Schilling: SNL and *Jeopardy!* are American institutions and it's hard to really quantify how important they are to our society, our culture.

Buzzy Cohen: After the break, I pass the mic to a new host.

ACT 3

Buzzy Cohen: In putting together this episode, my producer Rob talked to a lot of people about *Black Jeopardy!* — how it came together, and what it means.

He's also a lifelong fan of *Jeopardy!* — and *Black Jeopardy!* host Kenan Thompson fan. And so to finish telling this story, I'm very excited to be passing the mic over to him.

Rob Dozier: Some of my earliest memories are sitting at my great grandmother's feet in the living room of her Harlem apartment with Oreos and milk...listening to the smooth steadiness of Alex Trebek's voice as he presented clues—and shouting answers at the TV.

I watched almost every day as my great grandmother wore every answer she got correct as a badge of honor. She got a lot more answers than I did.

Watching *Jeopardy!* with her introduced me to worlds far from my own — knowledge about important people and achievements and events in history. And it instilled in me that the pursuit of knowledge was a noble one..regardless of whether that knowledge had application to my lived experience or if the people delivering that knowledge looked or sounded like me or the people I knew.

What's undeniable, though, is that I loved *Jeopardy!* I relished in impressing the adults around me with random facts I could hold in my mind, and I did it often.

Similarly, my experience watching Kenan Thompson on television started earlier than I can remember. But it spoke to something different in me.

ARCHIVAL

Presenter: *And now all that presents a semi educational moment everyday French with Pierre S. Cargo.*

Kenan Thompson: *[French line]...Please remove your banjo from my belly button.*

Rob Dozier: Kenan talked like the people I knew. His comedic sensibilities felt familiar. In my eyes, we came from the same world, even though he grew up in Atlanta and I grew up in New York.

But it's not just that I related to him. It feels like he's *always* been making me laugh. He's been on TV my entire life. He joined the cast of Nickelodeon's *All That* in 1994, which is the same year I was born.

And today, he's rounding out his 20th year as a cast member on SNL.

I could always catch him on TV somewhere, even when I wasn't trying to. I'd flip the channels and there he was. With one glance to the camera, he can communicate multitudes, in the same way the people in my family can.

When I spoke to him for this episode, I kind of felt like I knew him. Turns out, that sense of familiarity I feel with him is something lots of other people feel too, and he's reminded on the regular.

Kenan Thompson: *Like, is it invasive? Whenever I'm outside sometimes, yes. But at the same time, it's a trade off for the feeling that I get when people genuinely tell*

me that they have enjoyed what I do. You know what I'm saying? And like, that's not time wasted.

Rob Dozier: I wanted to know what that felt like — to make people laugh for decades — long enough for an entire generation to grow up and start lives. Turns out it's everything he's dreamed of.

Kenan Thompson: I always wanted to be, you know, a group kind of performer or entertainer or part of something that brought joy to people's lives on a daily basis. The way that I am now is at such a level that I never expected.

Rob Dozier: When I first saw Kenan on *Black Jeopardy!* back in 2014, I thought it was hilarious. It worked because someone as beloved as him felt good hearted even while mocking a beloved staple of American TV. But I think it spoke to something bigger than just poking fun at *Jeopardy!* for being buttoned up.

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompson: What up? What up? What up? Welcome to Black Jeopardy! I'm your host, Alex TreBlack. Now I'm just playing. I'm Darnell Hayes. It's Jeopardy!'s 50th anniversary and we finally got our own.

Rob Dozier: It also sparked something for me. I realized, maybe *Jeopardy!* and SNL actually have more in common than I initially realized. Both shows demand a certain level of knowledge of the viewer, but of course slightly different *kinds* of knowledge.

Every episode of SNL is a smorgasbord of popular culture references, everything from movies to music to politics, nothing is safe from the mockery. But to be in on the joke, you have to be in the know. Who's made the most recent faux pas on Capitol Hill? What's in theaters right now? Who's the guest host for that week and what are they known for?

And similarly the *Jeopardy!* viewer is curious and at least aspirationally knowledgeable about the world and its history.

But something the *Black Jeopardy!* sketch made light of is that the game of *Jeopardy!* favors the sensibilities of some demographics more than others. *Black Jeopardy!* did that by reimagining the game in an alternate universe where those values were turned on their head.

ARCHIVAL:

Kenan Thompson: *Uh, let's check out our categories. We got: It ain't like that...Who's tryna?... I don't know you... Shakin my head...What had happened was...And as always, white people.*

Rob Dozier: *Black Jeopardy!* handled what could be tricky social commentary with ease. The whole concept of trivia is that there is a realm of objective human knowledge that with the right research and commitment, anyone can tap into. In that spirit, a game like *Jeopardy!* is, in principle, fair. Everyone comes to the game on an even playing field, because the knowledge they are challenged to recall is freely available to all of us.

But...*Black Jeopardy!* poked a few holes in those assumptions. Not everyone has access to the same information. And it illustrated the feeling of being an outsider, who's expected to have access to a canon of knowledge they're not familiar with.

It also challenges the concept of knowledge itself. Is the ability to recall facts about the world and history the only way to demonstrate intelligence? What if it were...different? What if being able to read a room, or navigate cultural norms, or crack a joke that makes a group of people laugh were all ways that were also recognized as demonstrating our intellect?

As much as this was a clever appraisal of *Jeopardy!*, Dave Schilling thinks it really landed because it revealed something about SNL as well.

Dave Schilling: *It has historically been a very white television show. I think that's why these sketches endure and they transcended just the regular churn of Saturday Night Live is because you don't see sketches like this very often.*

You don't get these really particular Black references on SNL every single week. It is a rare treat, and when you get it, it's rare that they're quite as incisive and clever as these sketches.

Rob Dozier: And of course...

Dave Schilling: *Black Jeopardy!* would not have worked without Kenan Thompson as the host, as the straight man, as the guy making the faces and being just a charming, fun, warm and welcoming kind of comic figure.

Rob Dozier: This got me thinking about how we develop relationships with the people on our TV screens like Kenan Thompson and Alex Trebek. People who are there week after week, for years—and in these two cases, people I've been watching since I was a little kid.

I think it has as much to do with them as it does the shows that have come to define their careers. *Jeopardy!* and SNL debuted 59 and 47 years ago respectively. That's a long time to be in American homes, week after week, year after year.

Dave Schilling explained to me why he thinks both shows have such staying power.

Dave Schilling: SNL and *Jeopardy!* are American institutions And I think one of the reasons for that is these are institutions that were developed. At a time when we all watched the same stuff, you know, there weren't a million options for entertainment.

They harken back to a time when we all kind of had these similar touchstones. Saturday Night Live and *Jeopardy!* also share an adherence to format. You always are gonna get the same thing no matter when you tune in. It's gonna be the same. And that feels nice.

Rob Dozier: Kenan told me, the two *Jeopardy!* hosts actually got to meet, kind of like a crossover episode. It was backstage at the 2019 National Hockey League awards.

Kenan Thompson: He just went in, you know what I mean? He was like, *Hey man. You know what I mean?*

I think he referenced *Black Jeopardy!* in his opening line. Like he said some lines from it and he was just like, *man, that was classic and don't you just love comedy?* And he was just so relaxed and chill. I thought he was gonna be more, you know, kind of uptight or you know, nerdish. But he was, you know, super smooth, you know? And I was like, *oh, Alex is a player. He's out here like with mad swag. I was like, okay. Alex was such a force, you know, and kind of handholding people into it's okay to not be as smart as you think you are, but, you know, keep studying and working hard.*

Rob Dozier: Two titans of entertainment and mutual fans of one another—even if one famously parodied the other. You can't have a parody if the first thing isn't iconic.

Alex said you know you've made it if you've been parodied. And that's true—*Black Jeopardy* hits because *Jeopardy* is so big and so beloved. And we don't have to choose—we can love them both.

THEME MUX IN

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