

TV Sunday

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Jamie Foxx is a superstar. Last night he hosted "Saturday Night Live," doing wickedly funny imitations of Morgan Freeman and Sean "Puffy" Combs.

His sitcom "The Jamie Foxx Show," is a long-running hit airing on the WB on Friday nights. His debut

Who is the most popular TV personality in America among blacks? His name is Jamie Foxx. He has a hit WB sitcom and most white people have never heard of him. Until now. Foxx has the flashiest, funniest role in Oliver Stone's "Any Given Sunday" and just hosted "Saturday Night Live."

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21st Century

FOXX

R&B album performed respectably on the charts. His stand-up concerts draw big crowds.

And his complex, mature performance as the brash young quarterback in Oliver Stone's "Any Given Sunday" got the best reviews of a star-studded cast (outshining Al Pacino, Dennis Quaid, and Cameron Diaz).

"It's incredible," says Foxx. "I've been floating the whole time and I'm not coming down."

But unless you're African American, you're probably just getting to know who Jamie Foxx is.

His TV series — about a young comic from Texas who works in a hotel while waiting for his big break — has been a smash since its debut in 1996 . . . at least among blacks. Among African American viewers, it's been ranked No. 1 or No. 2 every year. But with today's fragmented Nielsen family, success among one demographic no longer translates into a wider audience.

"TV's gone through a change," says Foxx during a break from rehearsals for last night's "SNL." "It really is kind of separate now, sad to say. When there was 'Chico and the Man' and 'The Jeffersons' and 'All in the Family,' everybody could watch those shows together."

"Now, since there are so many networks and so many channels, you're kind of locked into your own kind sometimes, I guess you could say."

For a performer like Foxx — who idolizes all-around entertainers like Sammy Davis Jr. — being a niche player is not enough. The 32-year-old's master plan to overcome that — which basically involves working very hard and making the most of opportunities when they

arise — is right on track.

The next step is to end his sitcom — which is in the midst of its fourth season — after one more year.

"It's really exciting," says Foxx, about the chance to

juice up his show for a finale. "I want to finish it up with a bang. Now that the movies are happening, I can ask for more guest stars. Guest stars won't think, 'Oh, it's just the WB."

We'll have a little heat."

Foxx, who's always had a strong behind-the-scenes role on the show, also plans to bring a little more maturity to the silly goings-on that prompted him to label

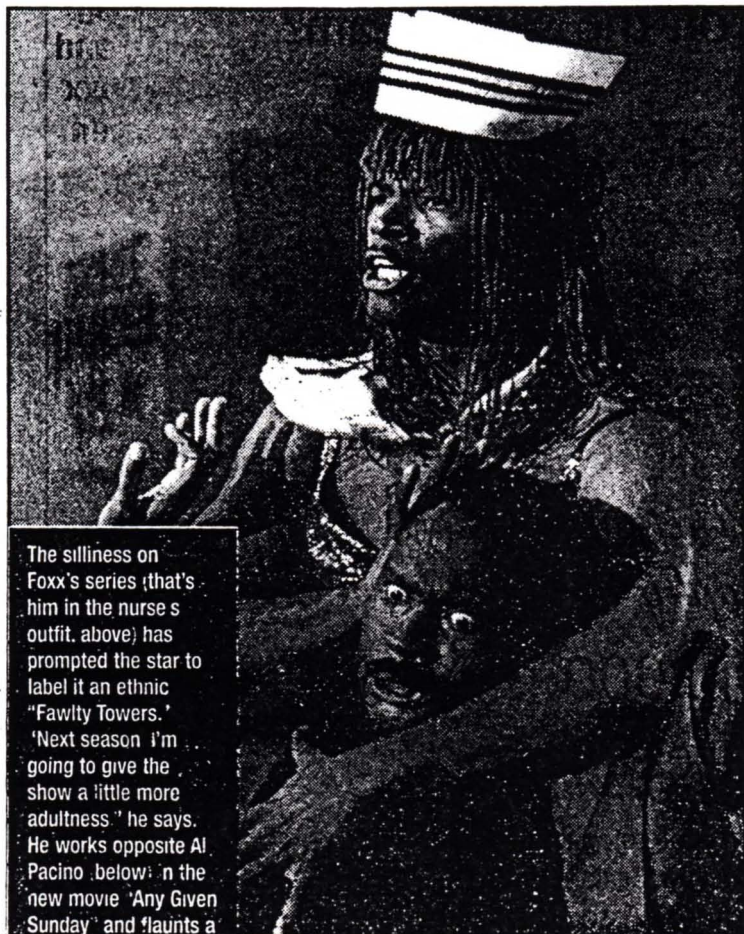
it an ethnic "Fawltz Towers."

"I'm going to change the show a little bit," says Foxx, "give the show a little more adulthood to it."

Since "The Jamie Foxx



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The silliness on Foxx's series (that's him in the nurse's outfit, above) has prompted the star to label it an ethnic "Fawltty Towers." "Next season I'm going to give the show a little more adultness," he says. He works opposite Al Pacino (below) in the new movie "Any Given Sunday" and flaunts a new image (left).

Show" is essentially a sitcom the whole family can watch, adding a little more edginess to it might bring some controversy — but that wouldn't be the first one for Foxx.

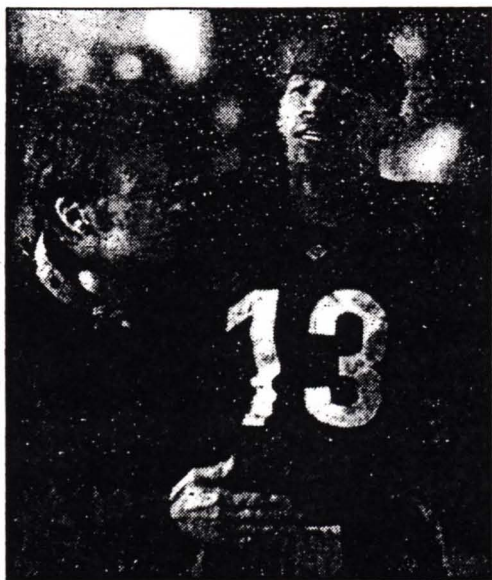
Born in the small town of Terrell, Texas, Foxx moved to L.A. to be a stand-up comic but found himself selling shoes at Thom McAnn. Then the big break came: a role on the acclaimed sitcom "Roc," starring Charles S. Dutton.

Shockingly, Foxx's character never made it onto the air.

"It was devastating," admits the actor. "I was in Atlanta, hanging out with this girl I just met." His voice drops to a smooth, lover's baritone. "Yeah, movies, TV, and everything." Ring. Hello? "Uh, yeah, Jamie; it's not looking good." OK. Wow. Scramble, scramble.

But then his real break came — an open casting call for "In Living Color" that Foxx's own representatives advised against his doing.

He beat out 300 people for a slot on the red-hot sketch



comedy show — which for a time was far more influential (and certainly funnier) than "SNL."

"To be on 'In Living Color' was the luckiest thing in the world for me," he says. "It was hot."

Foxx had changed his

stage name to the unisex "Jamie" because comedy club bookers were always looking for more women to balance out an evening. So it was appropriate that his break-out character on "Color" was Wanda the Ugly Woman, a ferociously

determined gal who owed a great deal to another idol of Foxx's — the late Flip Wilson's Geraldine.

Another appropriate twist? The network that aired "In Living Color" was Fox, though it proved just plain crazy by running the show into the ground after airing repeats two or three times a week.

"They burned it to a crisp," laughs Foxx.

But he'd already made his mark — even finally guest starring on a few episodes of "Roc." Then came more controversy.

Foxx got his own show, a harmless bit of silliness that clicked immediately with black audiences. But the Beverly Hills chapter of the NAACP labeled it as little more than buffoonery. (The sting of that charge was removed a bit when the national chapter for the NAACP nominated Foxx for Best Actor in a Sitcom.)

He soldiered on, finally fulfilling a dream of starring in a movie with 1997's "Boozy Call" — only to have Bill Cosby call it an embarrassment that should have never been made. Foxx answered his critics — sometimes angrily, sometimes adroitly — but always with humor.

Even "Any Given Sunday" had its tempest in a teapot: Foxx got a role earmarked for Sean "Puffy" Combs.

Combs says he dropped out after delays in the shooting schedule conflicted with his recording plans; others say he couldn't cut it as a quarterback.

Certainly Foxx could. A fine student in high school, Foxx was also a star quarterback — even though as early as second grade he knew what he really wanted to be was a comedian and a singer.

Now he's pushing towards the goal line with two more movies due out this year — "Inconvenient," a romantic comedy costarring Nia Long; and "Bait," a thriller-chiller caper flick co-starring David Morse.

Note that Foxx stars in both of them. It's definitely a whole new ball game.

"You don't really notice it until you see the box office," says Foxx. "The next thing you know you're talking to Alec Baldwin and Billy Baldwin and they're saying, 'Hey man, I heard the movie was it.'"

"You're talking to Samuel Jackson when you were just used to hanging with your homeys and kickin' it. That's a different thing."

"You have to open your eyes a little wider and make decisions a little more clearly because it really counts now," he says. "Because you can't go back."