

Arsenio Hall

*America's hippest
late night guru*

"His show opens with a roar and roars all the way through...Hall raises his hand, separates his pointer and middle fingers, and says, 'Peace.'"

By E.J. Marshall III

Arsenio Hall's talk show quest began when he was twelve in Cleveland, Ohio. He would stay up much too late at night to watch "The Tonight Show" and he told his mother, "I want to do what Carson does."

Hall showed an early passion for performing and show business when he took up magic at the age of seven.

"Most kids had a paper route and mowed lawns to make money, but I was allergic to grass," he said, "so I did magic. My father [a baptist preacher] would do weddings and I would do magic at the reception."

Adolescence was not very easy for Hall. He grew up watching the Baptist preacher chase his mother out of the house with a gun.

Although he's not in therapy now he was five years old. "I 'tripped' really hard over their fights," Hall admitted.

In high school and he almost let his teachers and advisors convince him that applying to college would be a waste of time.

It was his mother who helped carry him through both times. She explained to him that if he let others ruin his life, then she didn't want him.

After graduating from Kent University, Hall decided that it was time to retire his magic bunny and cape. Real life was upon him.

Taking the challenge, he started doing stand-up comedy late in 1979. In a night club in Chicago, Arsenio was discovered by singer Nancy Wilson, who was so impressed by the twenty-year-old that she funded his move to Los Angeles.

Many other entertainers soon realized Hall's numerous talents.

He has opened for top name performers including: Aretha Franklin, Tom Jones, Wayne Newton, Patti LaBelle, Anita Baker, and Tina Turner.

Working with top shelf personalities helped Hall realize the lesson which his mother tried to instill in him years earlier. He was something.

Getting to Hollywood, Hall had his personal peak set — he was getting on Carson. Repeatedly, he auditioned, but would always find himself turned away because he was "too green" or too animated.

Hall made his transition to television in 1983 when he co-hosted the "1/2 Hour Comedy Hour. After that summer run, he left ABC to work with Alan Thicke in the short-lived "Thicke of the Night" series and went to co-host the long running musical variety show "Solid Gold."



Hall's unprecedented rise to stardom accelerated when Joan Rivers invited him to be a guest on "The Tonight Show" when she was subbing for Johnny.

The true push came in the thirteen uproarious weeks in which he became the interim guest on Fox Broadcasting's "The LATE Show." During his tenure, the show enjoyed some of its highest ratings ever. After his "LATE Show" stint he left, feeling disgruntled.

Hall has mentioned since his release from the show in 1988 that he didn't feel he had enough power over the show or its content.

"I had to buy my own clothes for the show and I just didn't feel, well, appreciated," Hall said.

From the bad taste left over from Fox's policies, Hall almost gave up television.

"When I told Eddie [Murphy] that I wasn't going to do TV anymore, he told me I was crazy. At one point he said, 'I'll even produce the show if you do it. 'Of course, I wound up producing it myself."

Hall's mind change took place when he had a guest appearance on "The Tonight Show" (yes, he finally made it on with Carson). During the commercial breaks, Carson and Hall began talking about Hall's work on "The LATE Show" and hosting talk shows in general.

"It was like discussing a girlfriend we both dated. I started missing 'her' and I had to have 'her' back," he said.

When the show was over, Johnny went home and Hall went to call his manager.

The deal made was with Paramount Pictures, an exclusive two-year, multifilm agreement which led to his acclaimed multi-character performance in the box office blockbuster, "Coming to America."

"The Arsenio Hall Show" premiered on January 3, 1989. For three weeks prior, commercials to advertise the show consisted of Hall standing in front of an empty stage saying, "Is this going to be done in three weeks?" Then, later, "I don't know what it's going to look like, but I'm sure it's going to be good."

"The show," Hall explained, "will be very unstructured. There's going to be a feeling of spontaneity and unpredictability. One thing is certain, I won't be sitting behind a desk."

It is Hall's unstructured approach which makes his

show so popular.

It opens with a roar and roars all the way through. The only moment when the show slows down is when, at the very end, just before darkness and credits, Hall raises his hand, separates his pointer and middle fingers, and says, "Peace."

The audience knows this one single statement is directed for them and them alone and is sincerely meant.

People were tired of the "Host, 2nd Banana, Band Leader" format. Hall has provided a variance to the talk show rut.

Hall feels good about being executive producer as well as host. "It gives me the kind of control I need to build this show. It's my own custom design. I have my people and they are good. We put on a show which will attract an audience of ages eighteen to forty-nine," he said.

With all the people, the money, and the attention one would think that Arsenio Hall, formerly of Cleveland, Ohio, has become what everyone expects of someone who has everything. Hall, however, is different.

When I met Mr. Hall before his show, he convinced me that once a person makes it big, they can still realize the importance of what matters.

Hall was standing behind studio 29 wearing a white blazer. It was fashionable, but warm looking, so I figured he was already in costume getting a breath of air. This misconception was corrected when Hall announced that the blazer was just purchased in a thrift shop, and that after the show that day, he and Sandi [the director of "The Arsenio Hall Show"] were going to go shopping for more of the same.

"They were having a sale," he said.

When Hall was twelve, he wanted a magic set and an etch-a-sketch for Christmas. What he got was a little stuffed dog. He was heartbroken.

Money was short and his mother, just recently divorced, sat young Arsenio down and explained the true meaning of Christmas. She told him the love behind the gift matters, not the money, never the money.

He still has that dog and it reminds him where he came from.

Arsenio, peace.