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## Joan of Snark: Still crackling at 76, comedy queen coming to North Beach

by dan pine

It's a logical first question to ask Joan Rivers: "So who are you wearing?"

And not surprisingly, the iconic funny lady, red-carpet fashion maven and walking billboard for Botox has a ready answer.

"I'm wearing something from the Joan Rivers QVC jewelry collection," Rivers says by phone from the privacy of her Seattle hotel room. "And that's mainly it."

Rivers was in Seattle as part of her latest concert tour. Even after more than 40 years in the spotlight, Rivers, 76, still enjoys the intimacy of the small to medium-sized clubs in which she started.

On Oct. 2 and 3, she'll be at Cobb's Comedy Club, a 400-seat venue in San Francisco's North Beach.



Joan Rivers

"I do everything," she says. "I just love working, from the Venetian in Vegas to a comedy festival to Cobb's. [The clubs] are fun because you can say more things, be more relaxed and ad-lib."

Long before young audiences got to know her as the scary lady who won TV's "Celebrity Apprentice" in May, Rivers catapulted to fame when Johnny Carson ruled late night and women were a rare sight on a comedy lineup. Her classic line — "Can we talk?" — was no joke: She always loved kibbitzing with audiences.

There was something about that caustic wit that took Rivers to the top of the comedy world and made her a fixture on "The Tonight Show," on Las Vegas stages and, later, on the attacking side of Hollywood red carpets.

(One recalls the Rivers joke about Elizabeth Taylor at a time when the screen legend was struggling with her weight: "Liz is the only person I know who stands in front of the microwave and yells, 'Hurry!'").

But don't bring up the old days with her. They're, well, old. "I don't give a s— about the early days," Rivers snaps. "I'm for right now."

Her "right now" includes hosting a new cable show, "How'd You Get So Rich?," overseeing her jewelry and skincare product lines (she's celebrating 20 years on QVC) and even writing mystery novels.

"I go through any door," Rivers says. "When they said 'Do you want to design jewelry?' I said 'Let's go!' I figure I'll try everything. The only thing I did not do and I'm a little sorry about it: In India I didn't ride an elephant."

She needn't feel bad about it. Not too many Jewish girls from Brooklyn end up riding on the backs of pachyderms.

Born Joan Molinsky to Russian immigrants, Rivers grew up in a Reform household, attended Sunday school and was confirmed. She says a lot of it stuck for her, especially "what Jews believe ethically. You try to be a good person."

(That's the theory, anyway. But when visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Rivers says, she was knocked down when "some pushy lady tried to get her note in ahead of me.")

Though she graduated from Barnard College in 1954 with a degree in English literature, a Lenny Bruce standup performance turned her around. Comedy became her passion.

She became a staple on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and "The Tonight Show," back when Jack Paar hosted the show. Eventually she became Carson's permanent guest host (though the two famously feuded later when she got her own show).

Though her humor often drew on her Brooklyn Jewish past, and Rivers has been held up as a paragon of Jewish humor, she rejects the label. "There is no such thing as Jewish humor," she says. "It's all universal. There is no ghetto or wall around it."

In the early 1990s she and her daughter, Melissa, began turning up at red carpet events, becoming Hollywood's twin fashionistas. Rivers also became a repeat customer of plastic surgeons, with her thoroughly remade face and body now the butt of jokes.

Rivers doesn't care one bit.

"I do jokes on plastic surgery and aging," she says. "It's certainly all in fun. If I can make you laugh, I don't care how."

It's not all fun and games for Rivers. She has also devoted energy to charity work, including pediatric AIDS, guide dogs for the blind, osteoporosis awareness, Tay-Sachs disease testing and Hadassah.

Busy as she is, Rivers says she enjoys the role of family matriarch, hosting the annual Passover and Chanukah parties. Her 7-year-old grandson, Edgar (named for Rivers late husband) is usually the guest of honor.

"I don't see any arc in my life," Rivers says. "I always think where I am is the best. I wouldn't be one day younger, one day older."

**Joan Rivers** appears Oct. 2-3 at Cobb's Comedy Club, 915 Columbus Ave., S.F. \$53.50-\$55.50.  
Information: (415) 928-4320 or <http://www.cobbscomedy.com>.

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