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QUESTIONS FOR SARAH SILVERMAN

Funny Girl

The comedian talks about her new sitcom, shock comedy, her adolescent depression and the significance of 'Borat.'

Q The opening credits of your new television sitcom, "The Sarah Silverman Program," include a scenic glimpse of a cemetery plot, as your voice explains that your parents are both deceased. Is that actually true? No. They're both pretty retired.

How do they feel about being knocked off in your show, which makes its debut on Comedy Central on Feb. 1? They're fine with it. It was a way to bring a little bit of pathos to a self-centered character. It's like Mr. Rogers said, There isn't anyone you couldn't love if you knew their whole story, and I figured if I added dead parents —

Even so, the show's protagonist, who is named Sarah Silverman, is not exactly Mr. Rogers's type. A model of political incorrectness, she becomes enraged when she is forced to watch a commercial for a humanitarian-aid group. Whom is she based on? I would describe her as ignorant and arrogant. The character is a lot of myself and a lot of my mother.

Much like Sacha Baron Cohen, you specialize in a kind of shock comedy that seems designed to give offense. What do you think of him? "Borat" was the most retarded yet most important movie I've seen in many years.

In the documentary "The Aristocrats," you set a new record for outrageousness by claiming, with a straight face, "Joe Franklin raped me," referring to the elderly television host. I heard that he threatened to sue you. I'm pretty sure he wasn't really mad. I think he was just milking the extra publicity.

Do you see your work as social commentary? I don't see it as anything. I try not to look at it. Deconstruction is a comedy killer.

How are things going with your comedic other, Jimmy Kimmel? Excellently! All my friends are comics, but I don't know that you would know them — Mark Cohen, Doug Benson, Todd Glass, Todd Barry.

Why don't you have any female friends? Tig Notaro, she's a woman. She's probably one of my best friends. She's a comedian.

Tell us about your childhood in Bedford, N.H., where you were the youngest of four daughters. Isn't your oldest sister a rabbi? She got into it on her own, after grad school, even. We grew up in a place with very few Jews. I didn't look like the other kids. I had hairy legs, hairy arms, hair everywhere. I looked like a little monkey.

This doesn't sound like a description of an idyllic childhood. I wouldn't want to do it again. I had a lot of depression as a kid.

During adolescence, you mean? From 13 to 16. I didn't go to school for months. It was so awful. I didn't know how to express what it was. I remember trying to explain it to my stepdad and saying, "I feel like that terrible homesick feeling, but I'm *home*."

Were you treated at the time for depression? I had very bad experiences with doctors. I got sent to a psychiatrist who put me on Xanax when I was 13. I went back for my next visit, and he had killed himself.

That's a pretty good story, but is it true? I swear to God. I had to wait for the rest of the hour for my mom to pick me up.

You eventually wound up at New York University, where you dropped out after a year to work in comedy clubs. I didn't really drop out. I just didn't go back.

Do you wish your new show were appearing on HBO, if only because Comedy Central bleeps out the swear words? No, I spent two years developing shows at HBO, right before this. I wrote two pilots with Larry Charles. Neither of them was even shot. They're so good too.

And then you were rescued by Comedy Central. Yes, I'm one of those lucky people who's attracted to people who like me. DEBORAH SOLOMON

Photograph by Jeff Minton

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