



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

Episode Nineteen: Stars...They're Just Like Us (Jeopardy! Contestants)

A Production of Sony Music Entertainment, and Sony Pictures TV

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert: *From the Sony Picture Studios, this is Celebrity Jeopardy! And now here's the host of Jeopardy!, Alex Trebek.*

Will Ferrell: *Thank you, Johnny. Welcome to Celebrity Jeopardy! We've got three wonderful celebrities playing for charity.*

Buzzy Cohen: That's not Alex Trebek. It's Will Ferrell...in an iconic sketch on Saturday Night Live, which was a parody of *Celebrity Jeopardy!*

We talked about this sketch, and the subsequent, brilliant *Black Jeopardy!* — with Kenan Thompson — in our last episode. If you haven't listened to that yet, go back.

SNL's very first *Celebrity Jeopardy!* sketch hit the airwaves on December 7th, 1996 – only four years after the real *Celebrity Jeopardy!* was first broadcast. The concept was so successful that SNL writers repeated it 15 times over the years. I mean, c'mon. How often has *that* happened?

Will Ferrell played an often irritated Alex Trebek. A range of SNL cast members — and guest hosts — played celebrity contestants like Neil Patrick Harris or Kathie Lee Gifford. And some of these impressions? They were spot on.

Here's Winona Ryder doing Björk...

ARCHIVAL:

Winona Ryder: *Sometimes when I look at my veins and my hands, they remind me of these two snakes that laugh.*

[Audience laughing.]

Buzzy Cohen: Amy Poehler, as a tiny, dog-toting Sharon Osbourne...

ARCHIVAL:

Amy Poehler: *Hello, Alex. Hello, Ozzy. I miss you, Ozzy. Minnie say hello to Alex — Alex say hello to Minnie!*

[Audience laughing.]

Buzzy Cohen: And Jim Carrey, in a surprise cameo, as Matthew McConaughey.

ARCHIVAL:

Jim Carrey: *What are any of us doing here? Whether I get your question right or wrong, free will is an illusion. And life is a game that plays us.*

[Audience laughing.]

Buzzy Cohen: The comedic schtick was simple. Fame is not usually a contest of wits. And Hollywood is not usually seen as the smartest town in America.

But it was more than that...the sketch was playing on the idea that celebrity rewards things like looks and charm — whereas *Jeopardy!* has always been a celebration of knowledge over everything.

MUSIC: *Exciting optimistic beat*

Buzzy Cohen: In many of the *Celebrity Jeopardy!* sketches, Will Ferrell as Alex Trebek held extremely low expectations of the contestants...

ARCHIVAL:

Will Ferrell: *Let's take a look at the board. The categories are continents, theater, potpourri, potent potables, numbers, words that rhyme with dog. And finally, the Renaissance. And you know what? Let's just replace that last category with shapes.*

[Audience laughing.]

Buzzy Cohen: Even with the host dropping hints, contestants usually ended up in the red.

But as much as his SNL counterpart was fed up with celebrity contestants, the real Alex Trebek? He saw the real *Celebrity Jeopardy!* for its true value...and potential.

Putting celebrities on the *Jeopardy!* set gave actors, comedians, news anchors, and politicians the chance to step away from their everyday roles and be seen in a new light — as *Jeopardy!* contestants.

Luminaries of the silver and small screen could dominate the buzzer...star athletes could put their intelligence to the test...and — perhaps most importantly — fans could enjoy the novelty of seeing a loudmouthed comedian, White House press secretary, and bestselling novelist face off against each other.

Sometimes, these appearances would even open up a new portal of fandom, allowing celebrities to be seen in a whole new way.

THEME MUSIC

Buzzy Cohen: If regular *Jeopardy!* was for everyday smart people to make it big, *Celebrity Jeopardy!* was a chance for famous folks to show they had smarts, too. If going on David Letterman was a way for a celebrity to “arrive,” so was an appearance on *Celebrity Jeopardy!*

Plus, think about those ratings.

I'm your host, Buzzy Cohen. And from Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV, This Is Jeopardy! The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show.

This week...we revisit some of the most star-studded *Jeopardy!* games of all time...and hear from one champion who's never lost a game of *Celebrity Jeopardy!*

ACT 1

Buzzy Cohen: Back in the Art Fleming days of *Jeopardy!*, sometimes, for a funny stunt, famous faces would make appearances.

Here's Art Fleming introducing a special guest...

ARCHIVAL:

Art Fleming: *But now my friends, I'd like you all to meet a very devoted fan of Jeopardy! He's also one of the most talented men in the entertainment business. Here he is in his most famous comic creation, the 2000-year-old man...Mr. Mel Brooks!*

Buzzy Cohen: By the way, Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner originally created this comedic sketch, about a "2000-year-old man," back in the '50s.

This clip is from 1972, when Brooks came onto *Jeopardy!* to celebrate the 2000th episode of the beloved quiz show.

ARCHIVAL:

Art Fleming: *Thank you, Mr. 2000-Year-Old Man. By the way, did you have television game shows 2000 years ago?*

Mel Brooks: *You're pulling my cane. Are you kidding? [Audience laughing.] We had, we had this show, this show 2000 years ago. We had Jeopardy!*

Art Fleming: *Jeopardy!, 2000 years ago?*

Mel Brooks: *It wasn't such a hippie dippy happy game then. [Audience laughing.]*

Art Fleming: *Well, how did you play Jeopardy!?*

Mel Brooks: *Very serious game...the minute you left your cave...Jeopardy! [Audience laughing.]*

Buzzy Cohen: Today, *Celebrity Jeopardy!* is hosted by Mayim Bialik...it's a full-fledged tournament with its own time slot. But how did it all begin?

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music

Buzzy Cohen: 1992 marked the very first *Celebrity Jeopardy!* tournament. It was the brainchild of *Jeopardy!* producers and Alex Trebek.

Rocky Schmidt: **Well, *Celebrity Jeopardy!* came about because all the producers and Alex really realized that there were and are very bright celebrities out there that wanted to, or might be interested in showcasing that fact.**

Buzzy Cohen: That's longtime supervising producer Rocky Schmidt.

At this time, Alex was purely the host — no longer one of the producers of the show. But he had a few people in mind to cast.

While Rocky and Alex were in Hawaii doing a contestant search, they went out to dinner at a restaurant in Honolulu.

Rocky Schmidt: *At the table next to us was Carol Burnett. And so they started talking and, and he, I think it was the time when we were considering doing Celebrity Jeopardy! He said, If we do Celebrity Jeopardy!, would you play? And she was game for it and said, Yes, absolutely. And was, I think, the first solid booking we had.*

Buzzy Cohen: And with that...what was just an idea became reality.

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert: This is Celebrity Jeopardy! Now entering the studio are today's celebrity contestants, the co-host of Television Live with Regis and Kathy Lee, Regis Philbin. Abby in the long-running Knots Landing, and the star of the TV movie, The President's Child...Donna Mills. And actress, comedienne, star of stage, screen, and television...Carol Burnett. And now here is the host of Jeopardy!, Alex Trebek.

Buzzy Cohen: For that first game, the *Jeopardy!* contestant department had also fulfilled one of Alex's wishes by casting the legendary presenter Regis Philbin.

Harry Friedman: They came out of the same era.

Buzzy Cohen: That's former Executive Producer of *Jeopardy!*, Harry Friedman.

Harry Friedman: They were like-minded in their respect for the audience. And both of them came from that school of hosts that started out as broadcasters, and they wore that title with great pride. So they had a lot in common, and Regis was just a lot of fun. You could not be around Regis and not have fun.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: What's the charity you're playing for?

Regis Philbin: Uh, Cardinal Hayes High School...

Alex Trebek: *Are you a graduate of, uh, that high school?*

Regis Philbin: *Yes, I am a South Bronx...why do you say that with a, with a question in your voice? Yes, I did graduate from high school!*

Alex Trebek: *I never had any doubts about that, Regis.*

[Audience laughing.]

Buzzy Cohen: The notion that Alex Trebek hated celebrities? That was purely an invention of the SNL writers.

Harry Friedman: *Alex loved the celebrity version of the show. It gave him a chance to meet some people that he had always wanted to meet. So he was a fan of theirs. They were a fan of his.*

Buzzy Cohen: Alex was at the peak of his *Jeopardy!* fame — and as the sleek, mustachioed host of America's favorite quiz show, he was excited about a new iteration of the game.

Harry Friedman: *But it was also very interesting to see how some of these immensely powerful people came to the set. And they were a little nervous around Alex. I think he intimidated them a little bit. One celebrity said, I kind of feel like I've come to the principal's office and I better have the right answers.*

Buzzy Cohen: That wasn't the case for Regis. They were peers.

He wasn't intimidated by Alex...but he *was* experiencing other challenges in the game.

Harry Friedman: *Regis was not doing very well with the signaling button. Plus, he came up against two contestants in that episode who were legitimately very smart, Donna Mills and Carol Burnett, who just seemed to know something about everything.*

ARCHIVAL:

Donna Mills: *Italian food for 300.*

Alex Trebek: *The Italian word for spring. It describes pasta dishes made with fresh vegetables. Donna.*

Donna Mills: *What is primavera?*

Harry Friedman: And Alex just departed — he, it was, this was so unusual for him. He departed from his usual rhythm of the show and asked *Regis, excuse me, Regis, could you, could you press that signaling button for me?*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: Before you get to select again, I would like to ask a favor of Regis. Regis, would you ring in please?

Regis Philbin: Can I ask a favor of you, Alex? Is this thing working? Thank you for checking.

[Audience laughing.]

Alex Trebek: Good. It works.

Regis Philbin: Sure. Well, I'm talking about the game.

Alex Trebek: It works. You don't.

[Audience laughing.]

Alex Trebek: Donna — Donna, select.

Regis Philbin: If I can think of an answer, I'd give it to him.

[Audience laughing.]

Donna Mills: Italian food for 400.

Buzzy Cohen: As *Celebrity Jeopardy!* found its groove in subsequent seasons, the production team realized that their potential contestant pool was particularly busy. Bookings were difficult...

Harry Friedman: A lot of times it came down to them saying yes, because a lot of 'em were scared to do it, and we certainly understood that. They didn't wanna look stupid.

Buzzy Cohen: As actor Simu Liu put it...

ARCHIVAL:

Simu Liu: *I'm very nervous 'cause, um...I feel like there's no show that exposes stupidity like Jeopardy! does.*

[Audience laughing.]

And so I feel like the stakes are very high here.

Buzzy Cohen: For those that weren't scared to test their knowledge in front of the whole nation, Harry says it was a win-win-win.

Harry Friedman: **The first win is for the audience because they get to see celebrities do their best to impress Alex and the other players and the viewers. The win is for the celebrities because they get to demonstrate that they are more than just even the sum of the roles they've played or of the success they've achieved. And then the third win is for the charities that the celebrities are playing for.**

Buzzy Cohen: This is one of the coolest things about *Celebrity Jeopardy!* Movie stars don't need extra cash — so on *Celebrity Jeopardy!*, the winnings go to a charity of their choice. To date, more than 250 celebrities have competed, and the show has raised close to \$11 million dollars for charity. Like Harry said, it's a win-win-win. And *Celebrity Jeopardy!* has historically delivered some of the highest ratings in the quiz show's history.

But look...not *everybody* likes it.

There's a contingent of the *Jeopardy!* fan world that doesn't think it takes knowledge seriously enough. And to be fair, when it comes to the game material on *Celebrity Jeopardy!*, Harry Friedman said it plainly.

Harry Friedman: **Yeah. [Laughs.] It is easier.**

Okay, so *Celebrity Jeopardy!* clues *are* easier than what you'll find on the regular show.

Harry Friedman: **We have some general idea what some of the celebrities know and what they don't know, but we try to base it on general knowledge.**

But if you've seen *Celebrity Jeopardy!*, you'll know — certain famous folks have struggled just as much as any other *Jeopardy!* contestant...whether they're bested by the buzzer, struggling with stagefright, or just don't know the answers to clues. Some prepare. Others don't. Some of them are longtime *Jeopardy!* fans and they know how it works. Others aren't as familiar...and it sometimes shows.

In regular *Jeopardy!*, you've probably seen how easy it is for super smart people to not do so well on set. And for celebrities with big profiles, a *Jeopardy!* loss can set them up to fall even faster and harder.

Take this moment from a 2022 game with comedians Reggie Watts and Iliza Shlesinger, playing against chef Eddie Huang.

ARCHIVAL:

Mayim Bialik: *The Hungry Eye in North Beach in this California city helped begin the tradition of a red brick wall behind the comic. Reggie.*

Reggie Watts: *What is The Improv?*

Mayim Bialik: *No. Iliza.*

Iliza Shlesinger: *What is Hermosa Beach?*

Mayim Bialik: *No.*

Iliza Shlesinger: *What? I'm pretty sure it is.*

Mayim Bialik: *Eddie? What is San Francisco?*

Buzzy Cohen: But keep in mind — many celebrity contestants *are* serious contenders on Stage 10. Like actor Brendan Hunt, who plays the lovably gruff Coach Beard on *Ted Lasso*.

Before that show really took off, Brendan wasn't really a celebrity — he was just another actor/writer living in Los Angeles, trying to make it in Hollywood. He qualified for regular *Jeopardy!* and made it into the contestant pool but wasn't called up to compete. Remember, many more people qualify for the regular show than can be used each season.

Then, when *Ted Lasso* premiered at the height of the pandemic, Brendan's star soared, and he finally made it onto *Celebrity Jeopardy!* in early 2023...and he acquitted himself very well.

MUSIC: Curious beat with momentum

Buzzy Cohen: Here's one other way *Celebrity Jeopardy!* differs. When you have public figures on stage, the *Jeopardy!* writers often have more fun with the clues.

It's a different sort of ballgame when you can have fun with a household name...through the writing of a clue.

Harry Friedman: *Washington Post star reporter journalist Bob Woodward was on the show and as well as was Peggy Noonan.*

Buzzy Cohen: She was Ronald Reagan's speechwriter.

Harry Friedman: *And a question went to her about Watergate.*

ARCHIVAL:

Contestant: D for 800, please.

He's the shadowy Watergate source. Two words, four letters and six letters. [Audience laughing.] Peggy.

Peggy Noonan: Who is Deep Throat?

Alex Trebek: You are right now. Let's pause. Wait a minute, we're gonna pause here, but let's not go away just yet. Bob, we've been waiting over 30 years for this.

[Audience laughing.]

Who is Deep Throat? Come on. You can make headlines once again on national television.

Bob Woodward: How much do I get if I answer?

[Audience laughing.]

Alex Trebek: An inconceivable amount of money.

Bob Woodward: He is an inconceivable person.

Alex Trebek: All right, well done.

Buzzy Cohen: Here's another example of how writers play with celebrity contestants. Sometimes, they'll write out a whole category of clues that sound like they're directly referencing the celebrity. But then it turns out the category is a red herring.

MUSIC: Exciting techno beat

Buzzy Cohen: How about the time comedian Joel Kim Booster was on? Those sneaky writers titled a category “Fire Island.” You’d think it was about Booster’s film of the same name...or maybe the vacation destination in New York where it was set...but the clues all featured islands that have experienced high temperatures.

Who doesn’t love a bait-and-switch in the form of wordplay?

More, after the break. Stay with us.

ACT 2

Buzzy Cohen: The democratic spirit of *Jeopardy!* — the idea that anyone with a penchant for knowledge can make their way to Stage 10 — and maybe even succeed — that’s part of what keeps the game engaging, timeless, and accessible, really, for anyone with a mind for trivia.

Yeah, there are professors, doctors, and lawyers...but there are also administrative assistants, ride-share drivers, and bartenders who dominate the game.

But there’s also something funny about seeing extremely familiar faces behind the lecterns, whether the famous folks are jockeying for Daily Doubles, sweating through their face powder, or nervously stumbling through an interview with Alex Trebek.

Here’s host Mayim Bialik.

Mayim Bialik: **The rhythm of the game is very different because they banter a lot. It definitely changes, you know, the rhythm for me because I was often having to stifle, um, laughing really hard because there’s some really, really funny people that we had on. And also sometimes with actors, when they get things wrong, they get funnier.**

Buzzy Cohen: Like this moment from a *Celebrity Jeopardy!* game with actors Michael Cera, Brianne Howey, and Zoe Chao...when Brianne brought her fellow contestant in on the *Final Jeopardy!* action.

ARCHIVAL:

Mayim Bialik: **Calling him "the embodiment of pure intellect" in December 1999, Time magazine named him Person of the Century. You have 30 seconds. Good luck.**

[Final Jeopardy music plays.]

Zoe Chao: *Ooop!*

Mayim Bialik: *Let's begin with Brianne...[Laughter.]*

Brianne Howey: *Oh...fabulous.*

Mayim Bialik: *What did you come up with? Who is Michael Cera? [Laughter.]
Unfortunately, that is not correct.*

Buzzy Cohen: The correct response? Albert Einstein.

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music

Buzzy Cohen: Like with any game of *Jeopardy!*, you can't predict how every game will go — and which celebrities will rise to the top of the contestant pool.

Harry Friedman: *It seemed even more so in the early years that the athletes wanted to disprove the dumb jock stereotype, and they usually did that extremely well.*

Buzzy Cohen: That's former EP Harry Friedman.

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert: *He's one of the greatest NBA players in history. Here's Hall of Famer and the NBA's all-time leading scorer — Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.*

Buzzy Cohen: Not only is Kareem Abdul-Jabbar considered one of the best basketball players of all time, but he's a well-known author and public intellectual...and thrice-over contestant on *Celebrity Jeopardy!*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *This man's 1807 Steamboat run up the Hudson led to an 1824 Supreme Court decision on interstate commerce. Kareem.*

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar: *Who is Fulton?*

Alex Trebek: *Robert Fulton is right.*

Harry Friedman: He was awesome. Just absolutely awesome in the realm of his knowledge. Being a voracious reader that he is, and just innately smart.

Buzzy Cohen: Plus, you've got to think about how often an athlete can just kill it on the buzzer. Reaction time, amiright?

But it's not just jocks proving their smarts. As Harry remembers...

Harry Friedman: Probably the best example of that is Cheech Marin, who came on the show and everyone thought, what is he doing on *Jeopardy!*? And he's just, you know, a comedian and a stoner.

Buzzy Cohen: Actor Michael McKean thought the same thing when he competed against Cheech, too.

Michael McKean: You know, you go, oh man, this guy's been smoking pot since 1961. How, how hard is this gonna be?

Not so fast.

ARCHIVAL:

Cheech Marin: Biblical Sense, 600.

Alex Trebek: In Genesis, he tells God I heard thy voice in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked. Cheech.

Cheech Marin: Who is Adam?

Alex Trebek: Correct.

Harry Friedman: Well, it turns out he's an accomplished artist and world class art collector and very smart.

Buzzy Cohen: Cheech Marin wasn't just good. Remember that very first *Celebrity Jeopardy!* Tournament — that game with Regis Philbin, Carol Burnett, and Donna Mills?

Cheech fleeced the competition in that tournament — and took home the crown, becoming the first *Celebrity Jeopardy!* grand champion.

Michael McKean isn't the only contestant to underestimate Cheech.

News anchor Anderson Cooper has been on the show four times...and played against Cheech in a quarterfinal game of the 2009-2010 Million Dollar Celebrity Invitational.

After that game, Anderson went on the Ellen Degeneres Show to relive his worst moments.

ARCHIVAL:

Anderson Cooper: *I was against Cheech Marin from Cheech and Chong. [Audience laughing.] And I got really cocky 'cause I was like, I mean, come on, Cheech Marin, he's, you know, the synapses can't, you know, he has been smoking a lot. The synapses can't be really sharp. I'm gonna kill him. I went on...he destroyed me. [Audience laughing.] He just, he, he's so fast on the buzzer and he's so smart. He knows everything.*

Buzzy Cohen: Cheech credits his *Jeopardy!* appearances for more than just the glory of the win and the donations to charity.

Harry Friedman: **He has said many times that his appearance on *Jeopardy!* changed his life. It sent his career in a different direction.**

Buzzy Cohen: Cheech has said that being on *Jeopardy!* made people take him more seriously. They realized he was a true Renaissance Man. He even began to take on new roles outside of comedy...like in the 2016 thriller “Dark Harvest” and the 2023 historical drama “The Long Game.”

For Harry Friedman, a lot was on the line in 1997 for the very first *Celebrity Jeopardy!* Power Players week in Washington D.C.

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert: *From Washington D.C., this is Power Players Week on Jeopardy! Here are tonight's celebrity guests.*

Buzzy Cohen: Power Players was like any other *Celebrity Jeopardy!* tournament, but with some extra meat on the bone. It was set in the nation’s capital and populated by plenty of pundits and politicians. And all the pressure for a successful week was sitting on Harry’s shoulders.

Harry Friedman: **We did have a lot to prove. We needed to prove that we could successfully do *Jeopardy!* on the road and do it without a lot of technical glitches. That the show could attract some really, really big names from the world of politics and the media.**

Buzzy Cohen: Some of those big names? They included Reverend Jesse Jackson, Jr., former White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers, novelist Tom Clancy, and Colorado congresswoman Pat Schroeder.

Since Power Players was taping in D.C., there were even opportunities for some extra-special cameos...like this *Final Jeopardy!*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: Welcome back, ladies and gentlemen. The category for Final Jeopardy! is the U.S. Senate, and because we're in Washington D.C. I would like to present this clue as if I were presenting a bill in Congress, but I'm not qualified to do that, so I'm going to need some help. I need somebody who is recognized, somebody who has the credentials, somebody who has, uh, well look at that...

[Audience clapping and cheering.]

Alex Trebek: Here is Senator McCain.

John McCain: The category is the U.S. Senate. In 1958, the U.S. Senate was made up of this many members. You have 30 seconds.

Buzzy Cohen: By the way, that answer is 96.

But none of the contestants got this Final Jeopardy! — not Tavis Smiley, not Christie Todd Whitman, or Tim Russert. Just like on the regular show, they just couldn't summon that right response in time.

MUSIC: Slow building beat with curious suspense

Buzzy Cohen: We've talked about a few winners in *Celebrity Jeopardy!* But with over 250 names in contention, who reigns undefeated? Whoever it is must know a lot...

Michael McKean: To not know what the little groove underneath your nose is called...who cares?

More...after the break.

ACT 3

Michael McKean: There is something about being focused on the chore, being focused on what you're there to do, that kind of takes all other responsibilities away.

Michael McKean: My name is Michael McKean. I've been watching *Jeopardy!* since I was in high school, when Art Fleming took us through the stone age of said platform. And I've always watched the damn show.

Buzzy Cohen: Years before actor-comedian Michael McKean made his name in show biz, he was a nerdy, musically-minded teen growing up on Long Island.

Michael McKean: When I watched *Jeopardy!*, I was generally alone. And, you know, I was just this kid, you know, with a lot of time on his hands, a guitar and bad skin, and that was my life.

Buzzy Cohen: Michael's career spans decades. From his breakthrough role as Lenny on *Laverne and Shirley* in the 1970s...

ARCHIVAL: Michael McKean as Lenny

Lenny: Hey, you know I'd be glad to hang around and help all you girls get these decorations up.

Laverne and Shirley: No no no no!

Buzzy Cohen: To his appearances as a cast member on *Saturday Night Live* in the '90s.

Not to mention his iconic roles in many of Christopher Guest's mockumentaries, from *Waiting for Guffman* to *A Mighty Wind* and *Best in Show*.

ARCHIVAL: Michael McKean as Stefan Vanderhoof and John Michael Higgins as Scott Donlan in "Best in Show":

Stefan Vanderhoof: The Pom was no problem.

Scott Donlan: Oh no. Pom broke his gait. He might as well have taken a dump.

Stefan Vanderhoof: That little Yorkie, you know, I was amazed. She finished outta the money.

Buzzy Cohen: A year before Michael McKean would appear as Stefan Vanderhoof in the unforgettable *Best in Show*, the *Jeopardy!* contestant department reached out.

Michael McKean: *In 1999, they approached me to do the show. I said, **This is amazing. And they said, Well, hold on now we got enough people, but we just need a standby.***

Buzzy Cohen: In the end, Michael made it off the standby list.

ARCHIVAL:

*Johnny Gilbert: From the Sony Pictures Studio, this is **Celebrity Jeopardy!** And now here are today's celebrity guests. He plays Paul Lassiter, the hard-pressed press secretary to the Mayor of New York on the ABC sitcom **Spin City**. Please welcome Richard Kind. She won an Emmy for her portrayal of Ellenor Frutt on the ABC Legal Drama **The Practice**. Here's Camryn Manheim. He's the film and television comic who hosts Comedy Central's **Uncomfortably Close** with Michael McKean...here's Michael McKean.*

Buzzy Cohen: As a contestant, Michael was cool, calm, collected — and he knew his stuff.

ARCHIVAL:

Michael McKean: *S words for 500.*

Alex Trebek: *A complete sentence needs a predicate and one of these. Michael.*

Michael McKean: *What is a subject?*

Alex Trebek: *Right.*

This sushi ingredient must be extremely fresh to be served raw. Michael.

Michael McKean: *What is shrimp?*

Alex Trebek: *Yeah.*

Michael McKean: *Swords for 800.*

Alex Trebek: *The swords the Romans and Vikings used had this quality, which could probably work for them or against them. Michael.*

Michael McKean: *What is, uh, double-edged.*

Buzzy Cohen: And then the moment arrived. It was time for *Final Jeopardy!*

Michael McKean: I think Richard was in the lead and the thing came up and it's sports, and Richard turns to me and he goes, *That's it. I lose, I — I'm gonna lose this. And I said, Richard, uh, I think we're both gonna lose, I don't know anything about international sports.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Here comes the clue. Jan Ullrich, the only German ever to win this event has been nicknamed Der Terminator. 30 seconds. Good luck.*

[Final Jeopardy! music plays.]

Now we come to Michael McKean. He had \$8,900. His response was, what is the Tour de France? Jan Ullrich won it in 1997.

[Shrieking from the audience.]

That was Annette O'Toole, Michael's wife, out there in the audience. He risked \$6,500. So he has the lead with \$15,400.

Buzzy Cohen: In case you missed it, as Alex pointed out, that shriek in the background was actress Annette O'Toole, who is also Michael's wife and a fellow *Jeopardy!* enthusiast.

To this day, Michael and Annette have a nightly routine of sitting down for *Jeopardy!* together.

Michael McKean: *When we watch Jeopardy! now, my wife and I — we're, we have equal blindness in some of the same areas. Geography comes up and we just go, No, no, we're not gonna be able to answer any of those.*

Buzzy Cohen: So when it was time to prep for his own turn on stage 10, he knew just what to focus on.

Michael McKean: *I drilled myself on, you know, state capitals, world leaders and all these things I didn't have at the tip of my tongue. So I was ready to go.*

Buzzy Cohen: But besides prepping the way many other contestants do, Michael just has a head for random facts, like all great *Jeopardy!* contestants.

Michael McKean: *Some knowledge is more important than others. I mean, to not know what the Nuremberg Trials was about...that's not a good thing. That's a hole in*

your learning. To not know what the little groove underneath your nose is called...who cares? I mean, I actually know what it is, of course. Or else I wouldn't have brought it up. It's called the philtrum. You don't need to know that, but if you just happen to remember it, you go *Philtrum is this*. And the hard things on the end of your shoelaces are *aglets*. Now, there's no real use for that unless you wanna tell somebody. [Laughs.]

Buzzy Cohen: And...Michael has what may be a secret weapon.

Michael McKean: I cut the end of my right thumb off with a table saw, not intentionally when I was 18. And you know, there was too little of it to sew back on, so they just kind of let it go. And I have this weird gimp thumb. It's a little short. But I think maybe having a little less weight, there's not as much pull against the downward movement—listen, I'm not a physicist.

Buzzy Cohen: I mean, neither am I...but we dove deep into buzzerland on this show, and as you probably know by now, any number of things could be an advantage in terms of buzzer speed.

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music

Buzzy Cohen: In 2006, Michael took the *Celebrity Jeopardy!* stage again...this time, facing off against actor Hill Harper and Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. The Secretary of EDUCATION! He was up against it.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *One legend says that this magician who helped King Arthur used his powers to build Stonehenge. Michael.*

Michael McKean: *Who's Merlin?*

Alex Trebek: *Right.*

Michael McKean: *Uh, Stonehenge 800.*

Buzzy Cohen: Remember how *Jeopardy!* writers like to wink at their celeb contestants with special material? Well, Stonehenge plays a famously comic role in McKean's classic film, “This Is Spinal Tap.” Which makes this category pretty fun to watch.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Today, some archeologists believe that Stonehenge was used to track and observe these two heavenly bodies. Michael.*

Michael McKean: *What are the sun and the moon?*

Alex Trebek: *Yes.*

Michael McKean: *Uh, Henge 1000.*

Alex Trebek: *During the summer solstice, modern-day people who act like these Celtic priests hold ceremonies at Stonehenge. Michael.*

Michael McKean: *Who are the Druids?*

Alex Trebek: *Druids. Yes, indeed.*

Michael McKean: *I, I beat 'em pretty good, as I recall. I was just...I think I was better on the button.*

Buzzy Cohen: Yeah. Damn. That is buzzer domination.

In 2010, the biggest moment of Michael's *Jeopardy!* career presented itself in the form of the Million Dollar Celebrity Invitational...where contestants would compete for a million dollars to donate to the charity of their choice.

The stakes? They were higher than ever.

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert: *This is the Million Dollar Celebrity Invitational!*

Michael McKean: *I kept winning until I got to the million dollar show when I was up against Jane Curtin and Cheech Marin.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *This Aussie actress had a daughter on July 7th, 2008, a Monday, but named her Sunday Rose. Cheech.*

Cheech Marin: *Who is Nicole Kidman?*

Alex Trebek: *Yes. This Asian country originated capsule hotels like the one seen here. Jane.*

Jane Curtin: *What is Japan?*

Alex Trebek: *Yep. Exodus chapter 16, verse 31 says the taste of this bread that rained down on the Israelites was like wafers made with honey. Michael.*

Michael McKean: *What is manna?*

Alex Trebek: *Manna — right.*

Michael McKean: **Cheech and Jane are just — they're sharks. They were very tough.**

Buzzy Cohen: At the end of the *Jeopardy!* round, Cheech — former *Celebrity Jeopardy!* champion from the 1992 tournament — was in the lead with \$3,600.

And even though Cheech was the only one to get *Final Jeopardy!* correct, remember, this was a two-day total point affair for the finals. So when Cheech, Jane, and Michael's points were tallied up for the win, they went across both days.

And with all of that, and Michael's clever wagering, Michael was crowned champion.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Yesterday he earned \$31,600, which gives him a two-day total of \$35,700, which means that his charity, the International Myeloma Foundation, will be receiving \$1 million dollars! [Audience clapping and cheering.]*

And Jane's U.S. Fund for UNICEF, \$250,000 and Cheech, the Hispanic Scholarship for \$100,000. Michael, congratulations. Always a pleasure. The streak is alive. He has never lost on Jeopardy!

Buzzy Cohen: Michael McKean is one of an elite squad...he's a real beast...almost untouchable.

If only Andy Richter had had a chance to best him at the buzzer.

ARCHIVAL:

Andy Richter: *Let's do, uh, the Wild West for 200.*

Mayim Bialik: *The Oregon, Mormon, and old Spanish were famous these via which settlers from points east reached the west. Andy.*

Andy Richter: *What are trails?*

Mayim Bialik: *That's right.*

Andy Richter: *Uh, the Wild West for 300.*

Mayim Bialik: *Seen here, this vehicle that gave way to the railroad was the subject of many a Western movie. Andy.*

Andy Richter: *What is a stage coach?*

Mayim Bialik: *Yes.*

Andy Richter: *Uh, Wild West for 400, please.*

Mayim Bialik: *Deadwood is in South Dakota...this other fatal-sounding town, notorious for Old West gunfights is in Arizona. Andy.*

Andy Richter: *What is Tombstone?*

Mayim Bialik: *That's right.*

Andy Richter: *Uh, wild West for 500.*

Mayim Bialik: *Based on this nickname, frontierswoman Martha Jane Cannery must have brought trouble along with her. Andy.*

Andy Richter: *Who is Calamity Jane?*

Mayim Bialik: *That's her.*

Andy Richter: *Uh, the Wild West for 100.*

Mayim Bialik: *The Autobiography of former slave Nat Love tells of his days of riding, roping, and shooting as a famous one of these. Andy.*

Andy Richter: *What is cowboy?*

Mayim Bialik: *That's right. You just ran that category.*

[Audience cheering and clapping.]

Buzzy Cohen: In the 2010 Million Dollar Celebrity Invitational, Andy had to leave prematurely...something to do with a little Late Night TV situation.

ARCHIVAL:

Andy Richter: *But I couldn't come back for the semifinals because Conan and I had lost the Tonight Show and he was prohibited from being on television so we went on tour to keep the band paid, which was really fun but I would have liked to have played.*

Buzzy Cohen: Andy Richter did get a second chance at *Celebrity Jeopardy!* in 2022...and he finally got taken down in the quarterfinals. He was dominating the game in ridiculous fashion — crushing celebrity opponents left and right — but in a stunning upset, actor Simu Liu took him out.

ARCHIVAL:

Mayim Bialk: *What did you write down?*

Simu Liu: *Uh...what is Vatican City?*

Mayim Bialk: *That is correct.*

[Audience cheering.]

Mayim Bialk: *Surrounded by Rome...Vatican City is correct. Simu, how much did you wager?*

Simu Liu: *Uh, I wagered all of it.*

Mayim Bialk: *Wow! All right! That gives you \$23,200 and puts you in the lead for the moment. Let's go over to Andy Richter. Andy, did you come up with Vatican City? You did not.*

[Audience gasping.]

Mayim Bialk: *What is Lichtenstein? That is not correct. And how much did you wager? \$2200. That gives you \$18,900. Simu Liu, you're our new Jeopardy! champion. You're advancing to the semifinals. Congratulations!*

Simu Liu: I don't, I don't think anybody was expecting that. Um...

[Audience laughing and clapping.]

Buzzy Cohen: But that's the beauty of the game — every game, every set of contestants, is different. So it leaves open a lot of shoulda, woulda, and couldas. And even today...Michael McKean still thinks about how things might have gone, if Andy's schedule had allowed.

Michael McKean: I would've been toast. I watched him do at least two games from the monitors. I watched him just take 'em apart. I mean, he was just, he knew everything. He was great on the button. He threw himself into it and he was awesome. So, he would've won the million dollars.

Buzzy Cohen: Rematch, anyone?

THEME MUSIC

Buzzy Cohen: Thank you so much for listening to This Is Jeopardy! The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show. This'll be our last episode for a little while — but please check out any of the other episodes you might have missed along the way.

This Is Jeopardy! The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show is a production of Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV.

It's hosted by me, Buzzy Cohen.

This episode was produced by Mia Warren.

The series producers are Julia Doyle, Rob Dozier, and Mia Warren.

Associate producer is Serena Chow.

Our series editor is Sarah Kramer. Executive producers are Lizzie Jacobs, Tom Koenig, Sarah Kramer, Michael Davies, and Suzanne Preté.

Production management help from Susonya Davenport and Tameeka Ballance-Kolasny.

Our theme song was composed by Hannis Brown. Sam Bair engineered this episode.

Special thanks to Charlie Yedor and Steve Ackerman.

And a big, big thank you to the *Jeopardy!* staff and crew for all of their time and help on this. Shout out to Alexa Macchia.

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CITATION

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