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Everybody's Talkin': A Tabloid Talk Show Round-Up

To celebrate talk show host Sally Jessy Raphael's birthday today, we're taking a look back at the queens and kings of tabloid talk.

LAURIE ULSTER · FEB 25, 2015

Sally Jessy Raphael with her signature red glasses became a queen of tabloid talk shows in the 1980s and 90s.

Happy birthday to Sally Jessy Raphael, who's celebrating her 80th birthday this week. Raphael was one of the very first talk show hosts to start doing "confrontation shows," taking the foundation built by Phil Donahue and putting her own distinctive spin on it. With the exception of Oprah Winfrey, who tried to keep things a little classier, the hosts that came after Donahue took the talk show format to its extreme, covering the (mostly) daytime television landscape with crazy stories, wild behavior, judgmental audience members, and discussions that went from a whisper to a scream in just minutes.

The choice of episode themes was abundant as people rushed to get their personal lives featured on TV, favoring national exposure over the anonymity of private therapy. Here's a smattering of actual episode titles to whet your appetite:

- My Life as a Stripper
- Medical Horror Stories
- Brothers Confront Their Trampy Sisters
- I Hid A Dead Body
- Help! My Woman Looks Like A Man
- Moms Confront the Boys Who Dumped Their Teen-Age Daughters
- You Like To Floss That Body But Are You A True Hottie?
- Marriage: Hillbilly Style

Want to know how to tell the difference between one host and all the others?

We've got you covered.

SALLY JESSY RAPHAEL

Show title: *The Sally Jessy Raphael Show*, and later, *Sally!*

Aired: 1983-2002

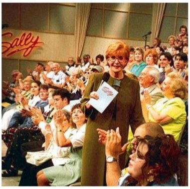
Episode titles:

• You Tormented And Teased Me, Look At Me Now

• Teens Confront Cheating Parents

• I'm Standing By My Criminal Man!

Raphael was a radio broadcaster with an advice show when Phil Donahue suggested she try to make the move to TV. His instincts were sharp; she auditioned, got the gig, and her show ended up running for almost 20 years. She rewarded him by becoming his biggest competitor. At first she emulated what he was doing, but as the times changed, Raphael's show embraced less Donahue-like topics and headed into more titillating territory.


Raphael connected with her audience members and got up close and personal with her guests.

Raphael specialized in surprise paternity tests, confrontations, and on-air revelations. She got up close and personal with her guests and gave them her opinion about the choices they were making. She didn't live a glamorous TV life and her audience knew it, and connected with her, valuing her opinions and often approaching her in the street or in supermarkets to ask her advice about their own lives. One day she'd be doing a show about unfaithful parents, the next day the audience would spend an hour helping her choose new frames for her glasses. She also enjoyed having celebrities on, which classed things up a bit: Audrey Hepburn was her all-time favorite guest.

For those who miss the woman in the red glasses, you can find her on the web. She's active on Facebook and Twitter, where she reconnects with former guests, shares pictures of herself, and expresses her opinions as feistily as ever.

MORTON DOWNEY, JR.

Morton Downey, Jr., a.k.a. "The Mouth," turned up the volume on the confrontation era of tabloid talk shows. (Photo: www.mortondowneyjrhome.com)

Show Title: *The Morton Downey, Jr. Show*

Aired: 1987-1989

Episode titles:

- Strippers For God

- Nudists in Atlantic City

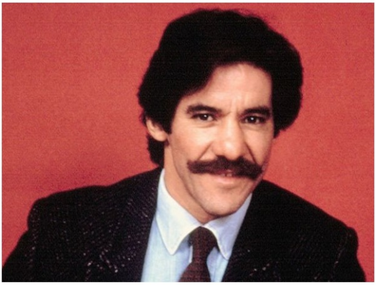
- Mike Tyson's Divorce

Raphael may have kicked off the confrontation era, but it was Downey who took it to its fullest expression. Nicknamed "The Mouth," he took "in your face" to the next level, screaming at his guests, blowing smoke at them from his ever-present cigarette, calling them names, and encouraging a lynch mob mentality in his audience members. Unlike with most talk shows, his demographic was primarily male, and his in-house spectators were the white dudes who were feeling disenfranchised by a changed world. The show called them "loudmouths" and encouraged their worst behavior.

His signature phrase was an uncompassionate "zip it!" and his favorite description was "pablum-puking liberal." He was the first talk show host to be openly hostile to his guests, and disagreements often escalated into screaming matches. He once told guest Ron Paul that he wanted to put a cigarette out in his eye, and physically intervened during a shoving match between Roy Innis and Al Sharpton. But when his offscreen antics started to get bigger than his onscreen ones, the show started losing advertisers. At one point he claimed he'd been attacked by neo-Nazis who held him down while they drew a swastika on his face and tried to shave his head. But the swastika was backwards, and it soon became apparent that he'd drawn it on himself, while looking in the mirror, and the entire incident was a fabrication.

His show went off the air a few months later, but it had lasting impact. No one else would be as extreme as Morton Downey, Jr., but he gave everyone leeway to take things as far as they liked.

GERALDO RIVERA



Geraldo Rivera started his career as legitimate journalist before he jumped into the world of the talkfest.

Show Title: *The Geraldo Rivera Show* and then *Geraldo*

Aired: 1987-1998

Episode titles:

- My Ex Hired a Hitman To Kill Me

- Devil Worship: Exploring Satan's Underground

- Men in Lace Panties and the Women Who Love Them

Geraldo Rivera came from a background in legitimate journalism. He'd been working in the field for decades and was the host on *Good Night America* when it revealed the Zapruder film to the public for the first time. But his credibility went downhill after his live special *The Mystery of Al Capone's Vaults*. The vault had been hyped up as the find of the century and then was revealed, on live TV, to contain nothing but dirt and a couple of empty bottles. He left objective journalism behind, for a time, and jumped into the world of the talkfest.

Geraldo Rivera after his nose was broken during one of the most contentious episodes of his show.

In his show, Rivera encouraged conflict. Each episode (up until the last few seasons) opened with a graphic of a fictional supermarket tabloid magazine cover featuring that day's subject, a splashy headline, and the show's logo, which was the word "Geraldo" written in Rivera's hand. After that it was a free-for-all, each subject milked for as much drama as he could squeeze out of it.

The most famous episode was early in the show's run. Rivera's guests that day included white supremacists, anti-racist supremacists, black activists, and Jewish activists. Insults led to physical violence and eventually a full-scale brawl. While smarter audience members edged their way towards the exit, security personnel moved in and Rivera himself tried to break things up, getting his nose broken in the process.

Near the end of his run, as ratings dropped, he toned down the show and tried to veer away from the trash TV he was known for, but it was too late, and the show was canceled in 1998.

JENNY JONES

Jenny Jones was an actress and comedian before she hosted her own show.

Show title: *The Jenny Jones Show*

Aired: 1991-2003

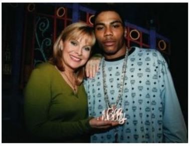
Episode titles:

- Bimbo School

- You May Shake It For Money But Leave Those Sexy Clothes At The Club, Honey!

- The Lie Detector Will Reveal What's True, Are You Sleeping With My Boo?

Jenny Jones wasn't a journalist. She was an actress and a comedian, and when she was tapped to host a talk show, she studied up by going to a couple of Donahue tapings. Why not learn from the master?



Jenny Jones and one of her musical guests, rapper Nelly.

At first, her show focused on fashion, exercise, makeovers, and somewhat serious discussion topics. While the makeovers remained, the general tone shifted to more personal stories, and the ratings started going up. Paternity tests, out-of-control teens, talent contests, feuding neighbors, and secret crushes became Jones' staples. Her show was also the very first to feature performances from hip hop artists and younger, hipper bands. Usher, Ludacris, Nelly, and OutKast were all guests, and Dinosaur, Jr. played for the last time on her show before they disbanded.

But it wasn't all light, even when it was supposed to be. On an episode called "Same Sex Secret Crushes", a gay man confessed his crush on an associate, who was so freaked out by the situation that he murdered him a few days later. The murderer claimed (accurately) that the show producers had led him to believe it was a woman who'd be revealing the crush, and the producers ultimately discovered that he had a history of mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse.

Despite the ensuing court case, the show continued for eight more seasons, and remained less contentious than the other talk shows that sprung up around at the same time, providing a lighter, friendlier alternative.

MAURY POVICH

Maury Povich hosted "A Current Affair," one of the first shows to be labeled infotainment, before his talk show premiered in 1991.

Show title: *The Maury Povich Show* then *Maury*

Aired: 1991-present

Episode titles:

- Hot and Sexy Opposites, Now They're In Love
- My Controlling Husband Makes Me Sell My Body
- Stop My 14-Year-Old From Beating Me and Prostituting

Povich, like Rivera, started out as a journalist. For four years he hosted *A Current Affair,* which was one of the first shows to be labeled "infotainment," providing a mix of celebrity gossip and human interest stories.

The Maury show is still on the air and actively seeking guests willing to share their scandalous stories.

When *The Maury Povich Show* premiered, it featured somewhat serious topics, like gang warfare, but soon moved on to cover makeovers, phobias, sexual infidelity, and what became one of its trademarks, paternity tests. In many cases, the test results were revealed at the end of the episode, while Maury grilled the men beforehand to find out what

they'd do when they found out.
Polygraphs were another favorite in-show tool, producers blissfully ignoring the experts who insisted that they didn't really prove anything. And guest updates were and still are among his most popular episodes.

When the topics changed from the serious to the scandalous, so did the tone. The audience was encouraged to taunt and boo, and viewers were often treated to footage of the guests arguing backstage after the show.

Maury is still on the air, and actively soliciting new guests and audiences. A glance at the website indicates they're looking for people whose mother's social media profile is sexier than theirs, whose grandmother dresses too sexy and needs a makeover, or whose teenage son is obsessed with porn. Good stuff.

JERRY SPRINGER

Jerry Springer left a political career to become a reigning king of tabloid talk. (Photo: NBC)

Show Title: *The Jerry Springer Show* (informally called *Springer*)

Aired: 1991-present

Episode titles:

- Racist Moms

- A Cross Dresser Wants My Gal

- I'm A Breeder for the Klan

Jerry Springer came to fame through politics. He was a political campaign advisor to Robert F. Kennedy, had a failed run for Congress, and was elected to the Cincinnati city council in 1971. A scandal forced his resignation in 1974 but when he came clean about it – he'd hired a prostitute, and was caught because his check to a massage parlor bounced – he won back his seat a year later. By 1977, he was mayor.

JERRY
Springer

Springer talks the talk on his show that has been on the air since 1991.

His show was initially more political, with guests like Oliver North and Jesse Jackson, and subjects like homelessness and gun politics. A few years on air and a new producer resulted in more tabloidy themes, and the guests changed to everyday people getting confronted during the course of the show for adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, racism, and more. New topics included breast size, porn addictions, and sex changes, all played for scandal. Guess what? The ratings went up.

Still on the air today, a typical episode begins with a title card warning that the show may be inappropriate for children. Then Springer himself enters by sliding down a stripper pole, while the audience chants his name. His friendly handshakes may kick off the show, but what it's most famous for is its on-set brawls. Guests are brought on one at a time, each new one increasing the tension until the conflict erupts and in-house security comes in to break it all up. Then Springer wraps things up at the end with "Jerry's Final Thought", where he addresses the camera and summarizes, with some compassion, his opinion of what happened on the show that day.

There have been frequent accusations that the show is scripted and guests are coached into picking fights with each other, but Springer has learned to roll with the punches, both literally and figuratively. The talk show drama also inspired *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, a musical that premiered in London in 2003.

Current show topics? Stripnotized, Busted By Your Bestie, and offers to meet or confront past guests. The show's website is also looking for virgins, strippers who stole someone's man, men who are too hairy and want to be shaved on air, and men or women who want to swap spouses. Both the Springer and Povich websites have the question "Are you involved in a family drama and want to be on our show?" prominently posted, and conveniently, both shows tape at the same studio in Connecticut. Take your pick.

MONTEL WILLIAMS

Former Marine Montel Williams gives a shout out to the military on an episode of his talk show.

Show title: *The Montel Williams Show*

Aired: 1991-2008

Episode titles:

- I Shot Myself

- Discovering My Husband's Affair

- When Anger Hurts

Montel Williams definitely has the most unusual career path for a talk show host. He was a Marine, and a special intelligence officer who traveled the world with the military. He spent three years aboard submarines, speaks fluent Chinese and Russian, and was decorated nine times during his 15 years in service.

He eventually became a motivational speaker, which is what made him so good at being a talk show host. He was able to connect with his guests on a more intimate level, and while his topics ranged from trashy to inspirational, the tone of the show was often geared more towards resolving issues than simply provoking people. His specialty, however, was the on-air surprise: your girlfriend is really a man, your son is gay, your boyfriend slept with your mother, etc. He was no stranger to the sensationalism found on other shows, but he also tried to be uplifting, talking to people who pulled themselves out of bad situations or saved themselves from danger.

Williams used his skills as a former motivational speaker to rev up his audiences.

In 2008, he was a guest on *Fox & Friends*, where he took the show's hosts, and Fox News, and all news media, to task for its lack of attention to the Iraq War and its excessive coverage of Heath Ledger's death. Fox stations withdrew their support from his talk show, and four days later, the announcement came in that it had been canceled. The network repackaged it as a "best of" syndication series, but no more new episodes were created.

RICKI LAKE

After appearing in John Waters' movie "Hairspray" and the TV series "China Beach," Ricki Lake launched her own talk show in 1993.

Show title: *Ricki Lake*¸then *The Ricki Lake Show*

Aired: 1993-2004

Episode titles:

- Mom, Let Me Do It in the House or I'm Gone

- I'm a Prostitute and Proud of it

- I Want You To Be My Man So Stop Wearing My Dresses

While Ricki Lake covered the same range of topics as the shows that came before hers, it put a spin on things, addressing a much younger audience. Lake targeted college students, young adults, and Generation X instead of trying to reach the 25-and-older group everyone else was after. They'd take familiar topics and turn them around. If another show did "My Daughter Dresses Like a Tramp," Lake's version of the same story would be "My Mom Thinks I Dress Like a Tramp."

Lake had come to talk shows via acting. Her big break came when she starred in John Waters' hit movie *Hairspray* and she went on to appear in more of his movies as well as co-star on the TV series *China Beach*. When *Ricki Lake* premiered, Lake was the youngest person in history to host her own talk show.

As a host, she was particularly beloved by her audience. She covered personal subjects like parenting skills, romance, prejudice, and other social issues, and her fans would egg her on with, "Go Ricki, go Ricki!" She wasn't immune to the talk show surprise, though. When a guest was holding back, she'd bring out someone else who knew the inside story, announcing their arrival with the sound of a doorbell chime. Then the confrontation was off and running.

ricki
THE RICKI LAKE SHOW

When Ricki Lake's show premiered in 1993, she was the youngest person in history to host her own talk show.

With the current dominance of reality TV, people have found a new outlet for their misbehavior. Daytime shows are now frequently celebrity-driven, or centered around health and/or cooking, and the angrier crowd gets to fight it out in prime time. After that, they graduate to competition shows that give them yet another shot at notoriety. Times have changed, but apparently your bad choices will still make you famous.

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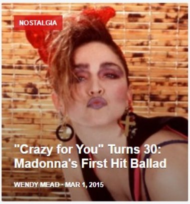

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