Overtones Ege Journal of English Studies Vol. 2 (2023)

Hey, Hey, Hey, It's Fat Albert: Bill Cosby's Junk-yard Paradise

David Livingstone
ORCiD

Abstract: The children's television programme *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* was, along with *Sesame Street*, a pioneer project blending entertainment with edifying educational content. Launched in the early 1970s, this animated show, mixed with live scenes involving Bill Cosby's commentary, opened up a whole new world to child viewers. Set in inner city Philadelphia, with many of the scenes in a junk yard, the programme not only acquainted the child viewers with African-American culture, music and language, but also provided useful lessons on a range of still very much relevant topics: racism, sexism, bullying, teasing, etc. This article article primarily focus on the first set of series which ran in the first half of the 1970s, which corresponds to the author's own exposure to the show.

Keywords: *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, Children's Television, Bill Cosby, African-American Representation

Introduction

The animated television series for children from the 1970s and 1980s, *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, was the brainchild and project of the American comedian, actor and, up until recently, imprisoned sex offender Bill Cosby. Bill Cosby, once known as America's Dad, is now a social pariah, after being accused and convicted of multiple rapes and assaults. There seems no reason to question Cosby's guilt, although some supporters refuse to acknowledge the obvious facts. I will not, however, delve into the question of his moral character. I believe we can separate the art from the man, as we have time and again throughout history. I will also not discuss here Cosby's most well-known television creation *The Cosby Show* which was broadcast from 1984 to 1992 and which was the most popular programme in America for five years running. I would like to instead focus on an animated (for the most part) Saturday morning cartoon which I watched religiously as a child, *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* which ran from 1972 to 1976. The show continued under a slightly different name, becoming more overtly outspoken in terms of the politics and educational message, as *The New Fat Albert Show* from 1979 to 1981 and as *The Adventures of Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* from 1984 to 1985. Although the premise and format is more or less the same for all 8 series, I would like to focus on the first several series from the early 1970s as they correspond with my own initial viewing and childhood. *Fat Albert* was loosely based on Cosby's own childhood in Philadelphia in the 1940s. The stories revolve around a group of prepubescent African-American boys, spending most of their time in a junk-yard. Each episode is framed by a live action sequence with Cosby introducing the topic and bringing the sequence to a close. Each episode also concluded with a song, supposedly played by the children, connected once again with the theme of the show.

As a middle-class white child living in a small Midwestern town, when the show was broadcast, the cartoon was truly revolutionary. *Fat Albert* opened up a fascinating imaginative world, the urban landscape of which, inhabited by an eccentric cast of characters, captivated both myself and millions of my peers. I will argue that Cosby's project was of great importance, not only for teaching the particular moral lessons of each episode, but also for allowing the viewers to make friends and identify with this foreign world full of grotesque, but

Livingstone, David. "Hey, Hey, Hey, It's Fat Albert: Bill Cosby's Junk-yard Paradise." *Overtones Ege Journal of English Studies* 2 (2023): 37-43.

nevertheless lovable, characters. *Fat Albert* both normalized and familiarized African-American youth culture for several generations of children and even adults.

Prior to this programme, Cosby had achieved fame as a stand-up comedian, which is where the first reference to the character of Fat Albert actually comes from in a skit included on his record *Revenge* from 1967. In the piece, Cosby describes a childhood game (later depicted a number of times in the cartoon) called "buck buck", involving boys jumping on one another to see who can bear the most weight. Albert is described as "the baddest buck buck breaker in the world [...] [He] weighed 2,000 pounds, and he'd kick the door to his house open and you could hear him say 'Hey, hey, hey!' We built a little ramp for him to walk down so he could build up speed because he couldn't hardly run" (Cosby, "Revenge"). The line "hey, hey, hey!", voiced by Cosby for Fat Albert, soon became one of the most recognizable phrases in America.

Cosby also makes reference to other members of Fat Albert's Junkyard Gang in his stand-up routines and on his records including Weird Harold, his brother Russell and of course he himself, Bill. The gang is colourful to say the least. Fat Albert, despite being greatly overweight, is athletic, intelligent and a natural leader, as well as being the moral conscience of the group. Cosby himself described his main hero as follows: "[He] was invented by me because in those days, the '60s, a fat person was stereotyped to be someone always giggling, laughing, and lacking in any kind of strength enough to take charge" (Hamblin, n.p.). Bill is of course based on Cosby himself and is arguably the least striking member. Russell, based on Cosby's actual little brother, is short and chubby, but very much able to stand up for himself, being able to put the older boys, especially Rudy, in their place with his sharp wit. Mushmouth has a pronounced speaking impediment, speaking a variation of so-called Ubbi Dubbi (Hey-buh Man-be). Cosby also commented on this distinct character and his manner of speech: "[W]e also had a fellow [Mushmouth], and we showed how having a speech impediment, too, a kid with a problem—within their own fellows who could understand them, they all felt good with and around each other" (Hamblin, n.p.). We never get to see Dumb Donald's actual face as it is always covered by a hat, with holes provided for his eyes. Weird Harold is the tallest of the bunch, while Bucky has a pronounced overbite. Finally, there is Rudy the trouble-maker of the gang and the snappiest dresser. All of the members of the so-called Junkyard Gang play a home-made instrument in the band, whose topical song always brings each episode to a close.

The opening sequence was the same for each episode with the theme song and Bill Cosby's appearance as the moderator and master of ceremonies:

> Hey, hey, hey! Here's Fat Albert And I'm gonna sing a song for you
> And Bill's gonna tell you a thing or two You'll have some fun now
> With me and all the gang Learning from each other
> While we do our thing
>
> Na, na, na, gonna have a good time
> Hey, hey, hey!
> Na, na, na, gonna have a good time
> Hey, hey, hey! (Cosby, "Opening Sequence")

As the introductory song fades out, we see Cosby usually fiddling around with something at the junk-yard. He launches the particular show with the following lines: "This is Bill Cosby coming at you with music and fun. If you're not careful, you may learn something before it's done! Hey, hey, hey!" (Cosby, "Opening Sequence").

The first year of the show in 1972 covered a wide range of topical concerns including teasing a short, extremely small boy, Peewee in the episode *The Runt*. The episode opens up with the boys in the gang calling sides for a game of basketball, a ritual which is inevitably painful for the less athletic kids in the group. Peewee, who no one even notices at first due to his diminutive stature, asks if he can play, only to be turned down by Albert and ridiculed by Rudy (the least tactful of the boys): "[B]ut if we need somebody two feet three, we'll call

you, ha, ha, ha" (Cosby, "The Runt"). The other boys join in the laughter and Peewee walks off in obvious humiliation. He is finally allowed to play after an injury to Rudy, only to lead his team to ignominious defeat. The following day, Albert invites him to practice baseball in order to find out what he's good at, only for everything to go wrong once again. Peewee is the hero in the end when the boys are challenged by another neighbourhood gang to an American football match. The ball rolls into a hole in a tenement wall and the boys' pet duck, who has gone to fetch it, gets stuck. Peewee is the only one who can fit in the hole and ends up rescuing both the duck and the ball, to the great relief of the leader of the rival gang who was afraid he would get punished for losing his bigger brother's football. He thanks Peewee as follows: "Peewee you are really cool man. I ain't ever gonna make fun of you little dudes again, short is beautiful man" (Cosby, "The Runt"). This is of course a variant on the "black is beautiful" slogan from the 1960s which was aimed at developing pride amongst African Americans about their skin colour and culture. The refrain from the final song aptly brings the message home.

> Don't look down on a small guy.
> Don't look down on a small fry.
> You just might be surprised, yeah.
> There's a pretty big man inside. (Cosby, "The Runt")

Another episode, *The Stranger*, revolves around a new girl in the neighbourhood and school, Donald's cousin Betty. She is from the American south and is initially made fun of for her accent and associated with certain 'hayseed' stereotypes. Upon hearing about her from Donald, the gang begins making faces and bring up various caricatures about both girls and southerners.

> Bill: Them dudes in the south, man, are really dumb, they don't know nothing about talking good English right or anything.
> Rudy: And you know what else? Them cats from the south always have a stupid grin on their face. (Cosby, "The Stranger")

As he says this the camera pans on Mushmouth with a silly expression on his face and the irony of the boys criticising someone else for incorrect English is certainly not lost on the viewer. The boys once again literally learn their lesson (in this case about King Arthur) with Betty's help and end up becoming friends, with the exception of stubborn Rudy. The song has a delightful mixture of lyrics and visuals.

> When you meet someone new, they might seem strange to you, cause they're different.
> But that's something you can't condemn, cause you're just as strange to them, just as different.
> Think of all your friends, they were strangers too when you first met them. (Cosby, "The Stranger")

During the last line quoted above, the distinct, extremely different, faces of the boys are shown, underlining the point of the song. As the following lines are sung, the viewer sees the gang shuffling along with their distinct strut only to have their hands transformed into completely identical brown balloon heads.

> Wouldn't it be really strange if all were the same and not different.
> What if we all had the same face, the same name, the same taste and not different.
> How said it would be, not to have your own identity. (Cosby, "The Stranger")

The episode gently but firmly teaches not only tolerance, but celebrates eccentricity and diversity.

Another interesting episode touching on some similar issues is entitled *Four Eyes* and concerns a boy Heywood who is too embarrassed to wear glasses. Due to his short-sightedness, he is ridiculed for being clumsy. When he finally overcomes his fear and gets glasses, he turns out to be extremely good at sports, amongst other

things. “Heywood had the last laugh. And what made it even better was that he found out that glasses opened his eyes in a lot of ways. And his glasses opened the gang’s eyes too so the kids have worked up a song that tells you more about it” (Cosby, “Four Eyes”). The concluding song for the episode is not only witty with its amusing word play, but also encapsulates the theme of the episode succinctly:

> He was a clumsy Humpty Dumpty, sitting on a wall.
> Even when he stood still, he tripped, stumbled and fall.
> A walking disaster, he bumped into everything, but since he got his glasses, look what’s happening.
> Four eyes, four eyes, you’re the coolest kid in school.
> Four eyes, four eyes, we wanna be just like you. (Cosby, “Four Eyes”)

The episode, *The Tom Boy*, is particularly progressive for the day, questioning traditional gender stereotypes. The episode introduces Penny, a new girl in the neighbourhood, who beats the boys in various sports, only for Fat Albert to defeat her in turn in the traditionally female realm of the kitchen in a baking contest. The episode kicks off with Cosby darning a sock:

> I supposed you’re wondering what a grown man is doing knitting a sock. Well it’s my thang and I enjoy it. The only part that’s really wrong with it is that I don’t know how to finish this thing. The main thing is whatever you like to do, you should do it. If you dig it, do it. It’s not a sissy for a man to knit or cook. It’s not wrong for a girl to like tough sports like baseball or even football. So why is everyone getting so uptight because Fat Albert loves to cook. (Cosby, “The Tom Boy”)

The boys are won over in the end and celebrate Penny’s accomplishments in their song:

> In baseball she can really hit. When she’s pitching well that’s it.
> In football she runs like the wind. And I tell you it’s embarrassing.
> How she learn to do that? She’s a girl.
> She’s a tomboy and she can’t be caught.
> She’s a tomboy gives it all she’s got.
> She’s a tomboy believe it or not.
> She’s a tomboy, she’s a champ. (Cosby, “The Tom Boy”)

Season two gets even more topical dealing with increasingly controversial topics including drug dealing and divorce, amongst other things. *Mom or Pop* revolves around Flora, a new girl at the school, who becomes immediately suspicious as she keeps to herself. The boys find out her parents are separated and she is struggling to come to terms with it. In order to cheer her up, they literally give her the royal treatment, naming her Miss Junk-yard USA and providing her with various attempts at entertainment. Although they succeed in cheering her up, they end up overhearing another argument between her parents and Flora ends up running away on her birthday. While her parents and even the police are out searching for her, the boys find her back at the junk-yard clubhouse. Her parents are relieved and begin to think about the consequences of their behaviour. The final song seems to be aimed, for a change, at grown-ups instead of children.

> All that fussing and fighting, it won’t solve a thing.
> Hurt and pain is all it will bring.
> Don’t you ever think about the ones who really love you and how it hurts when you cause a scene. You can be together and still be miles apart. You can be so here and still be so far. (Cosby, “Mom or Pop”)

The episode *How the West was Lost* tackles prejudice directed at another minority. Yet another new child in town, Johnny, is a Hopi Native American who does not fit the stereotypes from the movies with the “savage

Indians" and "good guys" the boys have seen. Although he shows the Junk-yard Gang he can climb and swim, Rudy (the Doubting Thomas of the group) is still sceptical about Johnny being a real Indian as he does not fit the stereotyped images. Rudy initially teases him incessantly:

> Rudy: Yeah I got a test for you and what I want to know is are you an Indian or are you a chicken?
> Johnny: Ok Rudy what's with you?
> Rudy: If you're a real Indian like you say, do a rain dance and make it rain.
> Johnny: Ah Rudy, the rain dance is just a ceremony, dancing won't make it rain.
> Rudy: See.
> Johnny: But my Dad says he can make it rain.
> Rudy: oh yeah, how?
> Johnny: By washing a car. (Cosby, "How Was the West Lost")

Johnny not only puts Rudy in his place, but also reminds the viewers that Native Americans also spend time doing mundane 'ordinary' tasks associated with city life, such as washing one's car, with no horse in sight. Cosby brings the message home with his commentary:

> Can you believe this? Rudy actually has the gang doubting that Johnny is a real Indian. You can't blame kids too much for being confused. We've all been fed a lot of baloney about our Native Americans so when we're finally given the straight story, we find it hard to accept and that's the trouble with having a fixed mind, too many of them are fixed wrong. (Cosby, "How Was the West Lost")

The kids finally realize they have been misled by all the stereotypes about Native Americans and go to the library to read some books which are more objective, and this is years before the publication of 'corrective' texts such as Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. They also make friends again with Johnny before he moves away. Cosby and his team of writers were quite ahead of their times and progressive in drawing attention to the manner in which Native Americans have been and still are stereotyped, caricatured and pigeon-holed. The programme, as a whole, was obviously combating equally pernicious views concerning African Americans.

Although originally part of the second version of the show *The New Fat Albert Show* from 1979 and later versions, mention should also be made of the revolutionary Brown Hornet character. Much has been made of late about how the recent critically acclaimed film *Black Panther* has finally depicted black superheroes and provided African American children (and others of course) with a role model, someone to admire and look up to, someone who actually looks like them. This was anticipated, however, over forty years ago with the cartoon within the Fat Albert show involving the African-American superhero the Brown Hornet, a variation of the Green Hornet television show and hero.[1] A comic book treatment of this hero is mentioned back in the earlier series and Cosby also made use of the Green Hornet, in a different form, in an earlier radio show. The full-blown cartoon segment of the show, beginning with "it's not a bird, it's not a bee, it's the brown hornet", ended up replacing the closing songs by the Junkyard band and served a similar function, mirroring the dilemma dealt with in the main sequence involving the Junkyard gang. Although the Brown Hornet cartoon is not particularly impressive in terms of animation and story-line, it makes a very powerful impact as we witness the Junkyard gang glued to the television in their clubhouse, proud and inspired to have a hero to watch and emulate who shares their skin colour. This positive role-model was all the more powerful when one recalls the long history of derogatory portrayals of African-Americans in popular culture, most famously/infamously in the Blackface Minstrelsy tradition.

[1] Green Hornet was a masked superhero who was the subject of a radio programme starting in 1936, a television series in the 1960s with the legendary martial artist Bruce Lee in the cast and several more recent films.

Conclusion

Although obviously very much didactic in style, *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* does not come across as something "educational" and merely instructive. The urban cool prevented the message from coming across as too preachy. This fairy-tale junkyard world made children around the country feel less isolated and weird, no matter their colour, body type or gender. The show preached tolerance for difference and dealt with a range of problematic topics which children and adolescents were and still are very much concerned with: obesity, speech impediments, shortness, ugliness, gender stereotypes, racism, alcohol abuse, drugs, divorce, bullying, etc. The television programme also made African American inner city culture attractive, even in a junkyard. Bill Cosby actually chose the show as the subject of his doctoral dissertation and wrote: "No other show previously on television has concerned itself so much with identifying with black children. For the first time black children have the opportunity to see themselves through the animated characters of Fat Albert" (Cosby 1976, 67). It also served to reverse and/or correct established stereotypes associated with black people: crime, violence, drug use, absent father, unemployment, lack of interest in education. Cosby further argued in his dissertation that the show served to "establish in the minds of millions of television viewers and educators that black children are not by nature stupid or lazy; they are not hoodlums, they are not junkies. They are you. They are me. The fact that the 'Kids' are black is neither minimized nor exploited. They are people. Their problems are universal" (Cosby 1976, 67). This message certainly sunk in with the children I grew up with, but L. Wayne Hicks points out interestingly that, "[i]ronically, Cosby's messages sank in more with middle class and lower-income white children than they did with lower-income black children, according to a study CBS conducted in 1974" (n.p.). This is puzzling to say the least, but it might be right, perhaps because African American children looked elsewhere for their entertainment, enjoying shows which were not so close to home. David Kamp also points out the possible mixed feelings the show evoked with African-American child viewers: "The program's goofiness belied the fact that it was about poor black kids whose real-life analogs weren't so carefree" (169). This could very well be the case, but the show definitely pioneered the exploration of previously "taboo" themes, which were very much an issue among the African-American community.

Personally, the closing sequence was always my favourite with the gang jamming on the home-made/ready-made instruments they found at hand. It seemed to be saying that anyone can be a musician, even if you could not afford the fanciest, newest brand and type. You could improvise and make up songs based on your own life experiences. The show also instilled a love of language, with many of the lines still sticking with me up until the present: "[H]ey, hey it's Fat Albert", the Ubbi Dubbi "language" of Mushmouth, the amusing and witty insults and put-downs and the poetic nicknames given to the characters. The show was one of the first to popularize African American slang and culture among the mainstream white culture and arguably paved the path for a range of sitcoms with primarily African-American casts which debuted in the 1970s (*The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*) and of course the hugely popular *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* in the 1980s and 1990s. Bill Cosby may have become a well-deserved social pariah, but Fat Albert lives on, at least in the present author's imagination, "Hey, Hey, Hey".

Works Cited

Cosby, William Henry. *An Integration of the Visual Media Via Fat Albert And The Cosby Kids into the Elementary School Curriculum as a Teaching Aid and Vehicle to Achieve Increased Learning*. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Massachusetts, 1976. <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4218&context=dissertations_1>.

Cosby, Bill. "Four Eyes." *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kj5WqGxOr4U>.

———. "How the West Was Lost." *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zA-1K9680Y>.

———. "Opening Sequence." *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiWEyUMm5Lo>.

———. "Revenge." *YouTube* < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42yGK7pvgVc>.

———. "The Stranger." *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXhrUzSs2Q4>.

———. "The Tom Boy." *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Du0em2IfexM>.

Hamblin, James. "The Origin of Fat Albert: How Bill Cosby Did Obesity Right." *The Atlantic* 27 September 2012. <www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/09/the-origin-of-fat-albert-how-bill-cosby-did-obesity-right/262817/>.

Hicks, L. Wayne. "Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids." <http://www.tvparty.com/satfat.html>.

Kamp, David. *Sunny Days: The Children's Television Revolution That Changed America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020.