

## 'SNL' Star Bowen Yang Discusses Diversity, Queer Identity On Show

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**anchors:** Sam Sanders

**Guests:** Bowen Yang, Michael Che

### Body

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STEVE INSKEEP: "Saturday Night Live" debuted its new season over the weekend in-studio. Jim Carrey played Joe Biden, who met Alec Baldwin's President Trump for a debate and brought a tape measure to be sure they were very far apart. The cast of "SNL" includes Bowen Yang. Last year, he became the show's first Chinese American cast member and one of the few openly gay cast members in "SNL" history. He spoke with NPR's Sam Sanders.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR PODCAST)

SAM SANDERS: For a few months this year, the cast of "SNL," like a lot of us, was working from home. The final episodes of their last season had the cast doing their own lighting, green screens in their apartments. These episodes looked like a Zoom call. Bowen Yang was a part of those shows. Here's his review of one of those sketches.

BOWEN YANG: I'm just going to be pretty hard-line and say that it was bad. Like, the comedy suffered.

SAM SANDERS: But no more. The new season of "SNL" premiered this past weekend. And the team was together in-person.

I'm so curious...

BOWEN YANG: Yeah.

SAM SANDERS: ...About how y'all pulled this off in the midst of a pandemic.

BOWEN YANG: I'm curious, too.

SAM SANDERS: (Laughter).

BOWEN YANG: I mean, I'm like, it's all going to be like a Schrodinger's cat...

SAM SANDERS: (Laughter).

BOWEN YANG: ...Situation, even for me, where it's like, we won't know if the cat's alive or dead until we open the box.

SAM SANDERS: (Laughter).

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BOWEN YANG: But, no, I think it'll be great.

SAM SANDERS: Bowen Yang, for his part, did pretty great. He brought back his character Chen Biao, the snarky, Chinese trade minister.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE")

BOWEN YANG: (As Chen Biao) OK. You're worried we're stealing your identity?

MICHAEL CHE: I mean...

BOWEN YANG: (As Chen Biao) Honey, your phone unlocks with your face.

(LAUGHTER)

SAM SANDERS: Bowen Yang began at "SNL" in 2018 as a writer. By the next season, he was in front of the camera. He's played Kim Jong Un...

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE")

BOWEN YANG: (As Kim Jong Un) What? That's like saying democracy is better than dictatorship. That's the kind of talk that get you poisoned, bro.

MICHAEL CHE: ...And presidential candidate Andrew Yang...

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE")

BOWEN YANG: (As Andrew Yang) I'm literally giving free money to people and I'm still in sixth place.

SAM SANDERS: ...Impressions made possible by his Asian identity. But Bowen has also had some really successful sketches rooted in being queer, like the one where he plays a former social media manager for the food corporation Sara Lee. He gets in trouble for posting too much from his personal life.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE")

BOWEN YANG: (As character) Yes, I did write this. Wow. OK. (Reading) Security downstairs stopped letting people into harness party at Sara Lee office. We have to do better. Must get rid of toxic in the community.

(LAUGHTER)

SAM SANDERS: These sketches, they have expanded the kinds of comedy "SNL" can do. And they've been incredibly popular. But Bowen doesn't want you to really see them as anything out of the ordinary.

BOWEN YANG: The more you see this, the more you'll get used to it. At this point, I'm just like, oh, I would love for there just to be a normal, mid-frequency response to you seeing a queer, Asian person on camera being queer and Asian...

SAM SANDERS: Yeah.

BOWEN YANG: ...Without digging into the politics behind - well, that's all they can do, like, that's all Bowen does is be queer and Asian or - in the same way that you don't sort of remark on the fact that a straight, white, cis cast member would come on, and that you don't assign those descriptors onto them in their performance.

SAM SANDERS: And so Bowen says, this season, he's maybe focused a bit less on what the audience actually thinks.

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BOWEN YANG: I kind of don't really care about how my tenure on the show is perceived in any particular way other than the fact that I want this to be - I want this to facilitate something better for the next person. Like, that's kind of, like, the only duty I'm bound to...

SAM SANDERS: I love that. I love that.

BOWEN YANG: ...On the show at this point.

SAM SANDERS: This season of "SNL," you will most likely see Bowen Yang a lot. He will most likely make you laugh, but just know he's not really doing it for you.

Sam Sanders, NPR News.

(SOUNDBITE OF THE SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE BAND'S "SNL OPENING THEME (1985-94)"

STEVE INSKEEP: Hear more of Sam's talk with Bowen Yang, where he says "Grey's Anatomy" may have inspired his whole career, on Sam's excellent podcast It's Been A Minute from NPR.

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