



Longtime card player, actor and comedian Norm Macdonald headlined a comedy show at the Atlantis Resort and Casino in the Bahamas as part of the PokerStars Players Championship (PSPC).

## Comedy in the Cards

Norm Macdonald talks about comedy, his new Netflix show, and his love for poker and Las Vegas

► by Sean Chaffin

**L**aughter echoes through the dark auditorium as comedian Norm Macdonald delivers joke after joke. His act is a seamless transition from one topic to another, a stream of conscious tour de force. The audience eats it up. This isn't a comedy club on the Las Vegas Strip or night spot in Los Angeles, Macdonald has made the trip to the Bahamas to perform for what can be a tough crowd - a room full of poker players.

The 59-year-old comedian knows the turf however, he's a longtime card player himself and headlined a comedy show at the Atlantis Resort and Casino in the Bahamas as part of the PokerStars Players Championship (PSPC). The free show was offered to all players in attendance, and he buttered up the crowd with a bad beat poker joke that most probably didn't expect. He wrote the bit only days before the show.

"The PSPC was a blast," he says of the trip to the Caribbean. "Writing jokes for poker players was fun. There are so many funny odd things that happen at a poker table that the jokes just write themselves."

And when it comes to writing jokes for a gambling crowd, Macdonald feels right at home. Originally from Quebec City, Canada, the actor, comedian, writer, and producer has been performing for more than 30 years. Most will remember his turn as the host of the

Weekend Update segment on *Saturday Night Live*. His dry wit and matter-of-fact delivery made him one of the best to ever sit in the update chair.

As host of the segment from 1994-98, Macdonald was known for his unrelenting ridicule of O.J. Simpson, with hilarious results, and frequently targeted Michael Jackson, Hillary Clinton, and Marion Barry. Viewers may also remember his impressions of Burt Reynolds, David Letterman, Bob Dole, and Larry King. He was eventually fired from the show after Don Ohlmeyer, president of NBC's West Coast division, had him removed from Weekend Update. Macdonald later told David Letterman and Howard Stern that he was fired because Ohlmeyer was a friend of Simpson's.

After SNL, Macdonald moved on to a successful film and television career. *The Norm Show* ran for three seasons on ABC and has appeared in numerous other shows. In 2015, he appeared as a judge in the NBC series *Last Comic Standing*, and continues a successful stand-up career. In 2016, Macdonald's semi-fictional memoir *Based on a True Story* made the *New York Times* bestseller charts.

In September, his new Netflix series *Norm Macdonald Has a Show* debuted to nice reviews. With three decades in entertainment, Macdonald still loves getting laughs and at his performance in the Bahamas, he made it look easy.



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### **Gambling Man**

While he may have been at the Atlantis to perform, one thing is certain - Macdonald was there to play some cards as well. In the 2000s, he was a regular online poker player and still mixes in quite a bit of live poker into his schedule. He played last summer at the World Series of Poker and in 2013 finished 20th for \$14,608 in a \$3,000 No Limit Hold'em event.

Macdonald now has career tournament winnings of more than \$44,000. In the Bahamas, he played some side action but also bought in the \$25,000 PSPC.

"I only lasted seven hours," he says. "That's the way it is with poker. Some days you get huge cards every single hand and other days you draw card-dead for seven straight hours. It just so happened that on that particular day, I got huge cards every single hand. The problem is I suck at poker."

A regular in Las Vegas, Macdonald has a long relationship with the city. He's been performing there for years, as well as other cities throughout the country, and is a frequent performer at the South Point casino. His trips to Vegas have turned out much better now than his first time gambling in Sin City.

"On my first trip to Vegas, it was me, my mother, and my aunt," he says. "Unbeknownst to them, I took my entire life savings, which at that point was about five thousand dollars. While my mother and aunt were checking in, I decided to play a little blackjack. Within five minutes I lost my life savings. I went back to the front desk and my mom and aunt were still in line. I spent the weekend watching TV while my mother and aunt played penny slots."

The bankroll may have been gone, but Macdonald's love of all things Vegas remains.

"I've long been a fan of Las Vegas," he says. "It combines my love of getting steaks free of charge with my love of losing tens of thousands of dollars in the time it takes to eat a steak."

### **Taking the Stage**

In the spotlight in front of an audience, Macdonald works a crowd like an artist uses a canvas. The jokes build on one another with his deadpan delivery smoothly segueing from one punchline to the

next. His unique sense of humor and approach to comedy has set him apart since those days on SNL.

His dry smile seems as if he's almost waiting for the crowd to catch up. Macdonald's timing is impeccable - all part of his plan to make the act look like it's always a work in progress, an off-the-cuff performance that just happens to work and brings big laughs.

"I change my act, mix it around, add new stuff," he says. "Mostly, I create on stage, knowing if it doesn't work I can retreat into well-rested material."

Much of his act comes from observation and finding the humor in most events and interactions most of us take for granted, such as the idiosyncrasies of poker players. The material went over well and his road manager, who has seen numerous performances, and was shocked at how funny the material was despite not ever performing it before.

"All my writing comes from listening," Macdonald says. "Most people never listen, except to themselves. If you can listen, you can relate."

In the new Netflix show, Macdonald engages in conversation with friends and comedians like Chevy Chase, David Spade, and David Letterman, but also personalities fans might not expect including Jane Fonda, Drew Barrymore, Judge Judy, Michael Keaton, and director M. Night Shyamalan. His quick wit and humor is on display throughout. It was Letterman who helped set the show in motion.

"The Netflix show came about because David Letterman decided he wanted to do a talk show and he asked me and my producer, Lori Jo Hoekstra, if we would do a show as well under his banner," he says. "Then the three of us went to [Netflix chief content officer] Ted Sarandos, who loved the idea."

"The reception to the show has been incredible. Everywhere I go people ask me when it's coming back. We are all still deciding what the next step should be. The beauty of Netflix is that there are no deadlines so you show something when it's ready to be shown."

While he couldn't confirm the show's return for a second season, Macdonald offered *Casino Player* some interesting insight in one of his comedy dreams - and of course it involves Las Vegas.

"My dream is to have a residency at a cool hotel in Vegas," he says. "But not on The Strip. I love the South Point. It would be called Norm's Room and it would be like old Vegas, when comics like Shecky Greene, Don Rickles, and Buddy Hackett ruled. I would be the emcee and book my friends to come and do comedy. All the poker players would hang out there. Then, after the show, we would go to the poker room - where Norm's Table would run all night long." ♠

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