

# JOE PISCOPO

Father of the Year vs. the Sleaze Kings

BY STEVEN X. REA

**J**oe Piscopo should be standing, his feet firmly planted, his arms crossed Cochise-style, his chin pointing up with pride. Behind him, in a steady breeze, the stars and stripes should flap and wave. There should be music: the "Star Spangled Banner" would do nicely. In fact, just put Joe where George Reeves used to be, towering there as Clark Kent/Superman in the opening credits of the Fifties TV series.

Joe Piscopo, American. "You know what I believe?" he says, sitting in his back yard, squinting a little in the hot summer sun. "My father came over here when he was nineteen, from Avellino, Italy. He settled in Newark and worked in New York in a hat factory. All the other nationalities, they called him a Wop bastard. My grandfather would literally have to fight his way to work, he had a lead handle on his umbrella and if they bothered him at the factory he'd beat the s-t out of them with this umbrella. So he worked there until he had saved enough to buy some buildings. Then he developed the buildings. He gave my parents a nice life and my father took that and blossomed that and he became an attorney, and he gave our family a great life. That's why I want to be even better. My father's a hero to me. I respect my grandfather. Those people are heroes to me. That's a lot of s-t to go through. Yeah, I'm an American.

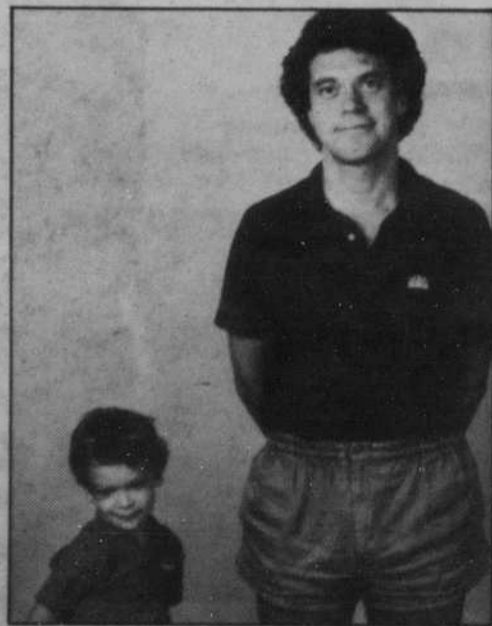
"You know what I mean? They came to America and they made it work. Sinatra did that." Piscopo stops, smiles.

"Isn't that hokey? The way I think like that? I am medieval in my thinking — if that's medieval."

Medieval, schmedieval. Joe Piscopo, 32, New Jersey born-and-bred, star of *Saturday Night Live*, is just a satisfied dreamer of the American Dream. He has a wife, Nancy, and a little ham of a kid, Joey — a skinny, grinning 4-year-old. There's a black half-Lab, half-mutt canine called All-Star, who wags his tail and (yes, really) smiles.

The Piscopos live on a couple of acres of prime Jersey real estate, tree-shrouded upper-crust suburbia, a half-hour's drive from Manhattan. The house is a modest two-floor affair, red cedar shingles with white trim. In

**Joey & Joe Piscopo decide to be serious people. Deep. Always thinking about life's important matters. Foolishness bits! It's irresistible, a sudden Silly Attack. Joey & Joe lose concentration. Joey & Joe agree never to concentrate again. "You got a deal, Pop," says Joey.**



DEBORAH FEINGOLD

the family room there's a wall of photographs of Piscopo's relatives — his grandfather, his father and mother, uncles, brothers, cousins.

On the counter by the kitchen there's this modern, slabby-looking statuette: the Father of the Year Award. "I got the Father of the Year award, man, I'm so proud of that," Piscopo says. "I'm not bragging. I'm showing you more out of astonishment than anything else. I'm the Television Father of the Year; Benny Goodman was the Music Father, I felt so out of place, but it was a real honor. I said, 'How did you pick me for the Father of the Year? I'm on *Saturday Night Live*. I'm the antithesis of what any kind of parental guidance should be.' But they gave it to me."

Piscopo is serious about this. "Drugs are out, families are in. No kidding."

He's a big amiable fellow. He has curly hair and a kindly, cartoonish face with eyes that pop out, twinkle. Sometimes when he talks — about Joey, or about his good friend Eddie Murphy, who has just bought a house a few minutes away — he almost lisps: it's a sweet, tender, sincere voice. Piscopo cares about his friends, his family, more than he cares about his career.

Still, his career is moving along quite nicely, thank you. The former DJ, dinner theater and TV commercial actor, comedy club emcee and standup comic has come into his own these last couple of years. His uncanny, manic caricatures of Frank Sinatra, Jerry Lewis, Andy Rooney, David Letterman and a gaggle of other celebs have made him — along with Murphy — *Saturday Night Live*'s star attraction. His recorded version of Sinatra doing a medley of Joan Jett and Foreigner tunes was one of the best comedy discs in years. Dick Ebersol, SNL's executive producer, had to up Piscopo's salary from the cast's weekly pay of \$13,500 to \$20,000 and offer him door-to-door limo service to lure him back on the show for the new season. Piscopo



has committed to do all 20 programs, unless a movie comes up, and then he'll do 15.

Even with all that, Piscopo's still not sure he made the right decision. "Yeah, it was tough," he says. "First of all, Eddie's only coming back half the time and it's no fun when he's not there. He's a great guy. He's just like a good friend to be around. So he's only going to be there half the time, and I don't think that my talent, what I do is — I don't have a real chance to showcase it on *Saturday Night Live*. I do characters, I do impressions and things like that, and that's great, I have a lot of fun, and it's amazing that I've gone as far as I have — not that I've gone far at all, honestly — just doing that. But what I really want to do, what I really look forward to is one day doing my own television show. I want to do my own half-hour weekly variety show. That's my goal. So I can address the camera, talk to the camera and be myself like I'm talking to you now. On *Saturday Night Live* I can't address the camera. I've got to do makeup, like if I have to do Sinatra or something, it takes me an hour to get into it and then I'm doing a couple of sketches and then I'll have to change into another character ... half the time I'm in makeup, so it's kind of crazy."

Though television is Piscopo's passion ("I'm a television baby," he says), like *SNL* stars Aykroyd, Belushi, Chase, Murray and Murphy before him, Piscopo is making the leap from the small screen to the big. His first venture: a co-starring role in *Johnny Dangerously*, a Thirties gangster sendup starring Michael Keaton (with whom he's worked on *SNL*) and Maureen Stapleton, directed by Amy (Fast Times at Ridgemont High) Heckerling.

"We're going to give movies a shot," Piscopo declares, tugging at the front of his dark blue NBC sports shirt. "I think I could be a great movie actor. I really have confidence in my acting, more than anything. But I can't believe it," he laughs, shaking his head. "I want



to stay in television. I really enjoy television. There's nothing I like more than to go 'Hey, hey, we have a really great show this week, *The Joe Piscopo Variety Half Hour*, with guest Eddie Murphy, it'd be like a dream. But movies, yeah, I haven't really been bitten by the movie bug.

"But I'm looking forward to *Johnny Dangerously*. I'm Michael's arch enemy, Danny Vermin. I'll put on my Italian voice and model myself after some of my relatives. We're shooting on the Fox lot, with all these great fake sets. Hosed-down streets, gorgeous cars.

"And then," he says, sighing, "I've got to come right back for *Saturday Night*. That'll be a grind. I'm trying to think what I can do on the first show."

Piscopo doesn't foresee any problems arising among the rest of the *SNL* ensemble and him and Murphy when they all gather again for the season premiere, even though Piscopo and Murphy are clearly the show's stars.

"Nah, I don't think there'll be any tension or anything," he muses. "I was going to say it's an ensemble show, but I don't know if it ever was. An ensemble show starring Chevy Chase, an ensemble show starring Bill Murray. I guess it never was. Naah.

"But right now I'm concerned because Barry Blaustein and Dave Sheffield — they were supervising producers and two of the premier writers up there, along with Pam Norris and Bob Tischler — Barry and Dave said they're not coming back and I don't know if Pam is coming back."

He laughs: "Eddie just left a message on my machine, he goes (adopting a haughty, effeminate accent): 'Hello Joe, this is Edward. I just talked to Barry Blaustein and he told me he wasn't coming back. Well, I guess we're all f---d. Goodbye.'"

No matter what happens with *Saturday Night Live*, it's clear that Eddie Murphy and Joe Piscopo are still the best of friends, despite what was said in *Rolling Stone's* June cover story on Murphy. The magazine reported that during one show, when scheduled guest host Nick Nolte bowed out at the last minute and Murphy hosted, Piscopo was upset that he didn't get to bask in the limelight. The story said that Piscopo wanted to host the show as Frank Sinatra.

**T**o say that thing about me hosting as Sinatra, I thought that was hysterical," Piscopo says. "Can you imagine hosting the show as Frank Sinatra? Hey, there's something that will hold up over an hour and a half. (In Sinatra voice:) 'And now, the musical guest, please welcome Lionel Richie, a wonderful groovy cat.'" Piscopo laughs. "What was I supposed to do?"

"That was an outright lie. It really bothered me. To the point, where you can't believe — I was so hurt. More than anger, I was just hurt by it. And I couldn't figure out where it came from. As far as me and Eddie, it just rolls off our back, because there are editors who are assholes. And I have a feeling the writer was

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