

Delayed Gratification

The truth behind Lily Tomlin's long, strange trip out of the closet

Lily Tomlin is full of surprises. Did you know, for example, "back in the old early feminist days in the '70s," she worked with a bunch of women in Eugene on what would become her signature show, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*?

You also might be surprised to learn that the Emmy, Tony, Peabody and Grammy winner—who didn't officially come out in the press until 2001—has been openly gay for her entire career, only nobody was paying attention.

Jim Radosta: What was the biggest inspiration for all of your characters?

Lily Tomlin: Living in an old apartment house with all kinds of people and growing up in a black neighborhood and having parents from the South and living on the farm in the summers, then coming back and living in inner-city Detroit.

We didn't have a TV until I was 10, so radio was very important to me—just listening to those characters on the radio and the whole scenario of people relating just by their voice. I just put shows on from the time I was probably 7 or 8 years old, and I tried to make the other kids in the old apartment house be in the show.

I was mad for it. I was moved and amazed and horrified and loving the way people behaved.

JR: I was pleasantly surprised that your 2005 Portland show directly identified your sexuality, considering you'd previously kept that aspect of your life quiet. What prompted you to address it in recent years?

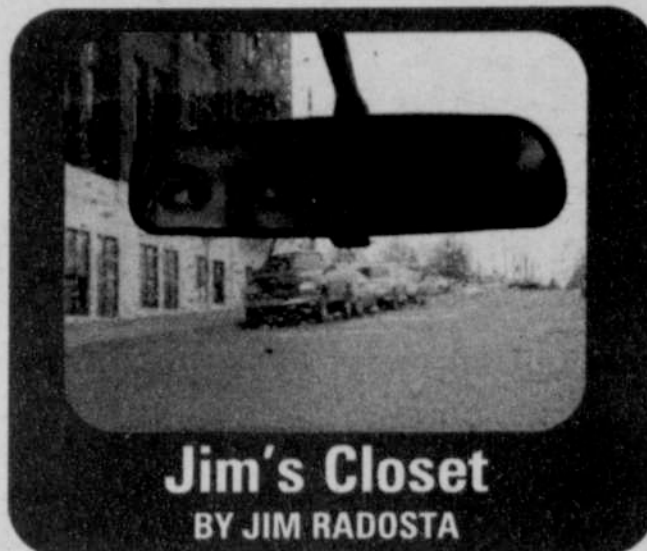
LT: I go back to the early '70s. I was on

Laugh-In. I got literally famous because of Ernestine. There was no tabloidization of the news, and people didn't write about anything that personal, unless it was conventional.

Everybody in the industry was certainly aware of my sexuality and of Jane [Wagner, Tomlin's partner since 1971]. We always worked together. In fact, I remember when we were doing a special together in the early '70s, one of my writers, who was a really great person, but she said to me, "You know, I think you and Jane should come to work in different cars." [Laughs] I said, "Well, why would we do that?" So she was concerned that people were talking about us and somehow it was going to hurt us.

I've told this story, too, to illustrate the difference in the culture: It was '73 and I was on the Carson show, and Johnny, knowing full well, he said, "Don't you ever want to have children?" The audience just stopped dead, because even that short time ago, it was very unorthodox and suspicious for a woman to say in public that she didn't want to have children. It just wasn't accepted. And I said, "Well, Johnny, if you mean do I want to bear children biologically, I don't!" The audience was pregnant with tension, and to break it I said, "Who has custody of yours?"

In '75 they offered me the cover of *Time* to come out—because they needed a gay story, not because they wanted me to come out or because they were going to do anything particularly correct about gay life. For me at that time, it was sort of like when they asked me to do "Ma Bell" commercials as Ernestine when I first went on *Laugh-In*; I literally burst into tears when they told me and didn't take the offer. It was a different time; I came out of the '60s, and we thought your integrity as an artist was the most important thing in the world.



Nothing's going to happen except in its time—that's been my experience in this life.

JR: Was the decision to address it now slightly politically motivated?

LT: In interviews I always reference Jane and talk about Jane, but they don't always write about it. [When *Time* and *Newsweek* printed simultaneous articles in 1975] one of them said I share a house with my friend or my roommate or something, Jane Wagner, and one said I live alone. They both knew who I lived with and why, but they didn't print it.

I don't even like to talk about this because it sounds windy: My mother was very Christian and Southern—she was a wonderful woman. My brother's gay—we're both gay—and it was a source of great, uh, pain for my mother. Not that she didn't love us and was devoted to us, but it was awkward for her with her Southern family. [Chuckles] She was just happy not to read it in the paper.

In fact, in '71 or something I did a big interview in *The New York Times*; it was just when Maria Schneider had been in *Last Tango in Paris*—she was a young girl and had a much darker, European kind of image—and she said something like, "You could say that I've slept with 50 men and 20 women." So I just happened to be interviewed after that interview ran, and I told my interviewer, "You can say I've slept with 50 women and 20 men!"



Clockwise from top left: The many faces of Lily Tomlin include Ernestine, Edith Ann, Madame Lupe, Marie, Lud and Trudy.

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