



coverstory
BY JAY BOBBIN

Conan O'Brien hosts the series finale of "Conan" Thursday on TBS.

Conan O'Brien is no stranger to signing off from hosting a talk show, but that probably doesn't make it any easier for him now.

Famously a relative unknown (though he had written for "Saturday Night Live" and "The Simpsons") when he was tapped to succeed David Letterman in NBC's late-late-night slot in 1993, the gangly redhead won over an audience – primarily a young one – with his offbeat humor and eye for production. He then inherited "The Tonight Show" after Jay Leno left ... only for Leno to return and O'Brien to elect to leave NBC. After nearly 11 years, and despite the fact that it had been renewed through 2022, O'Brien's subsequent talk show "Conan" will end its TBS run Thursday, June 24.

While the almost-every-weeknight (except Fridays) "Conan" began traditionally in its structure, starting its hour with a topical monologue and then proceeding through comedy bits and celebrity interviews, its main difference has been (as it has in all of his talk-show ventures) O'Brien himself. Working within the genre's familiar format while eschewing it as much as he could (with assists from his affable longtime sidekick, Andy Richter), he has distinguished the program in part by taking it on location fairly often. And to some locations quite out of the ordinary, moreover.

First, O'Brien emulated talk-show legend Jack Paar by taking "Conan" to Cuba in 2005. Later that year, he went to Armenia (his assistant's native land), and subsequent years and episodes have seen him visit Qatar, Korea, Berlin, Mexico, Israel, Haiti, Italy, Japan, Australia, Ghana and Greenland.

That's a lot of passport-stamping, but at the start of 2019, "Conan's" length was reduced from an hour to a half-hour, loosening typical constraints of a talk show in a number of ways. O'Brien's wardrobe was more casual, and the host's desk was jettisoned ... decisions that would play through later when O'Brien did the show from his home during the start of the coronavirus pandemic. In July 2020, production moved to Los Angeles' Coronet Theater, where O'Brien did improvisational comedy early in his career.

Even though O'Brien is ending "Conan," he's not ready to give up being a public presence completely, understandable from his obvious appreciation of the media. He'll be staying in the WarnerMedia "family" by moving to the HBO Max streaming service, where he will produce a weekly series described as being in the variety genre.

While that may give O'Brien an easier schedule, the pace of doing a nightly program may turn out to be something he will miss, having done it for so long – so after the talk-show rebirths he's already had, don't be surprised if another lies in wait for him.

Conan O'Brien says goodbye to late-night TV ... again

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