

# **PRETTY, PRETTY, PRETTY GOOD**

**Larry David and the  
Making of Seinfeld and  
Curb Your Enthusiasm**

**JOSH LEVINE**

*author of Much Ado About Nothing: The Biography of Jerry Seinfeld*

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# Introduction

## The Near Failure

*Curb Your Enthusiasm* is a show that divides people. There are those who love it, find it excruciatingly funny, and revel in its taboo-breaking humor, in the aggressive outbursts of its characters, in its depiction of social, moral, physical, and sexual humiliations. They see Larry David as a Freudian id out of control, unable to conjure up the social restraints that stop the rest of us from saying what we really think and feel. And yet they appreciate that Larry, for all his selfishness, his childlike and neurotic behavior, is a man who enjoys and even embraces life.

These fans see the show as a step up from the more conventionally framed *Seinfeld*, with its traditional set, three-camera shooting, punch lines, and laugh track. They consider *Curb* a far less comfortable show: darker, edgier, and more honest. They appreciate its use of improvisation and handheld camera work, the result of which is rougher and gives a more “real” feel to the show, despite the often-complicated plotlines. They appreciate its fearless examination of cultural attitudes to religion, race, physical disabilities, and sex — in a manner that, while highly politically incorrect, is in no way conservative or right-wing. They see it as just as funny as *Seinfeld* but in a more painful way.

And then there are those who can't stand *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, who have tried to watch it and find themselves unable to sit through its excruciating social embarrassments, its scenes of characters almost apoplectic with rage, saying things that should never be said, and its relentless references to sex acts, sex parts, rashes, bruises, injuries, urination, and defecation. What, they say, is enjoyable about any of that?

What's amazing is that the descriptions given by both sides are totally accurate. The show is all these things. And it is these things because of one man and his skewed, dark, hilarious, distressingly honest revelations of human behavior. Larry David.

As the co-creator of *Seinfeld* and the author of nearly sixty of its scripts, Larry David was already one of the most successful television creator/writers of all time before *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. His wealth has been estimated at somewhere in the vicinity of \$300 million and even as you read this it is growing rapidly from *Seinfeld's* syndication rights. Now, as the creator, writer, and star of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* — a show with a large, cultlike following compared with the blockbuster *Seinfeld* — he has become one of the most innovative artists of the small screen.

When someone is rich and famous it seems to the world to have been inevitable. But with Larry David, success was no sure thing. In his early forties, he was a little-known, modestly successful comic, receiving muted responses from audiences and low pay for his gigs. He had a crummy apartment and sometimes made barely enough money for food. He had tried some television writing, making money for short periods, but had made no impression on the shows he worked for. He was frustrated and even angry, not only by the lack of success but by the lack of understanding and interest from the comedy-club

audiences. In fact, he didn't like the audience much, which may be why they, in turn, didn't like him.

Larry David looked, in fact, like he was headed for failure. But even so, he refused to compromise, to change his act or his comic approach in order to pander to an audience that he considered to have grown soft and complacent from watching *Tonight Show*-style comics. He had a fresh, unusual view, not always a pleasant one, and though he was no intellectual (he didn't much like reading books) he had insights into ordinary, seemingly trivial aspects of human behavior that others had missed.

These innovations did not come from nowhere. They were rooted in his Brooklyn Jewish middle-class upbringing. They were rooted most particularly in Jewish comedy, a humor descended from the Jewish tumbler, the comic figure who would joke and ridicule and tease guests at traditional Jewish weddings back in the shtetls of Europe. It was a humor that found its way into American vaudeville and then into the mouths of the great Jewish comedians of the past (Groucho Marx, Jack Benny, Shelley Berman, Don Rickles, Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen), a dark comedy of cynicism, complaint, aggravation, aggression, humiliation, neediness, and restless energy — an insider kind of humor that by some miracle became popular with the larger American audience.

When his mother would phone Larry to ask how he was doing, Larry wouldn't want to tell her the truth. "Pretty, pretty, pretty good," he would say, each "pretty" qualifying the one before. It is very possible that Larry David could have continued to travel the small New York comedy-club circuit, scraping by, becoming ever more disgusted and bitter. Or he might have finally quit, to take on the kind of low-level job that he had

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worked in after college. But another comedian, an infinitely more successful one, as much a professional colleague as a friend, asked Larry for help. A television network had asked him to develop a show, and the comic, Jerry Seinfeld, had a hunch that Larry might be able to help him.

It was a good hunch.

# The End of the Beginning, or Farewell to *Seinfeld*

Each member of the audience, even family members, had to go through a metal detector to ensure that there were no secret recording devices hidden under shirts or in pockets. Each had to sign a confidentiality agreement; nothing of what was seen or heard would be told to anyone before the broadcast. They sat on bleachers before the stage.

This was the taping of the final episode of *Seinfeld*, the last before it went off the air forever (except, of course, in endless reruns). By this time the entire nation was addicted to the show, and its ending, at the height of its popularity, had been major news ever since the announcement. Coming out to warm up the audience, Jerry Seinfeld — the star, co-creator, and sometime writer of the show, who was most associated with its success — joked that the audience members, who had actually managed to acquire tickets, thought they were “hot shit.” He compared it to having seats on the Grassy Knoll for the Kennedy assassination. It was a cocky, even arrogant thing to say, but Seinfeld could easily get away with it. The show had made him the most popular comic on the planet.

He asked whether he ought to say something to make everyone cry. Actually, Julia Louis-Dreyfus was already crying.



Seinfeld reiterated to the audience the need not to tell people about the show before it aired. Jon Lovitz, one of the celebrities in the audience, yelled out, “Do you have any hush money?”

The taping was long and arduous; it didn’t end until 2 a.m. The ostensible director was Andy Ackerman, a veteran of the show. But there was another man moving about the set, helping actors with their line readings, deciding whether a take was good enough or had to be done over. Tall and lanky, balding and bespectacled, he gestured broadly with his hands stretched out, hummed under his breath, broke up laughing, or consulted the script in his hands. It was his script after all. He, Larry David, had been tapped to write the very last episode of the country’s most popular sitcom. And he had been given twice the airtime, an hour.

The television audience was not familiar with Larry David. Most did not know his name. Few knew what he looked like. They did not realize that he was as responsible — perhaps even more responsible — for the success of *Seinfeld* as Jerry was. He had written its most famous episode, “The Contest,” and many other great episodes, and he had presided over the first seven seasons of the show. He had come up with the idea that it would be about “nothing.” That it would break the conventional sitcom rules. That there would be “no learning, no hugging.” The character of George was based on him. Kramer was based on a man who had lived next door to him. Jerry’s parents were modelled on Larry David’s parents. Many of the story lines came from Larry’s own life. The show had made him very, very rich, but not famous the way that Jerry and the other actors on the show were.

If Larry David was frustrated by the lack of recognition, he

kept it to himself. But the press had written extensively about his writing the script as part of the lead-up to the airdate. The pressure had been on him to end the show on an appropriately high note.

Jerry had been running the show without his co-creator since Larry had quit in 1996 after seven seasons. But before the ninth began to film, he met with Larry to tell him he thought this would be the show's last. The characters, he thought, were getting too old to keep acting so immaturely. As Larry later put it, "All the dating would have been unseemly." Jerry asked Larry to come back and write the last episode. Jack Welch, chairman of General Electric, which owned NBC, personally offered Jerry \$100 million to keep the show on the air for another season. But Jerry, already rich beyond his wildest dreams, said no.

Even though Larry had wanted the show to end when he himself quit, the thought of it actually finishing made him feel quite depressed. He had been thinking about the last episode ever since he himself contemplated leaving. His first idea was a show without any story lines at all but just conversation about the usual little things that obsessed the characters. But after a few pages of writing, he found it boring and gave up. He also considered bringing Jerry and Elaine together romantically, but Jerry, on one of his off-season tours, had asked audiences about the possibility and the responses had been mostly negative. Julia had long harbored the idea that they drive off a cliff. Larry David's mother, who didn't like the episode in which Susan dies, begged her son not to kill off the characters.

Strangers offered Larry suggestions in the street. So did friends and people on TV talk shows. Larry himself told one of

the reporters who began to call regularly, “I haven’t really thought about it too much. It’s a difficult show to write a final episode for. The nature of final episodes is ‘big ideas.’ People get married, they go to Europe. It’s a big thing. So I don’t know what I’m going to do yet.” He also said, “I would say that, knowing George, you know more about me than you do if you speak to me. Because I feel like I’m the phony. I’m the fake. People who are talking to me, they’re not getting sincerity, for the most part. . . . I think George is much more real than I am.” It was the sort of ruminating that would eventually lead to Larry playing Larry on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

More articles appeared, raising the stakes. The *New York Times Magazine* asked, “Can the last episode ever do justice to the dozens that preceded it?” Larry took his time writing it. Or even starting. But one morning he woke at 3 a.m., heart pounding. He realized he had to get on with it. He gave it a code name title, “A Hard Nut to Crack,” and began.

The script that Larry finally sat down and wrote was possibly the least sentimental of any *Seinfeld* show. It begins with a new head of NBC giving a green light to the television show that George and Jerry had come up with years before. NBC loans its private jet to them, and they take Elaine and Kramer to Paris. Except that the plane has engine trouble and needs to land almost immediately. While walking in town, the foursome witnesses a very fat man being mugged. Instead of helping, they comment and laugh, and Kramer even videotapes the crime. The four are charged by a cop for breaking the new “good Samaritan law” and are put in jail.

There are several moments in the last show that anticipate *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. The meeting with the NBC executives is a precursor to several network pitch meetings from the second

season of *Curb*. The expression “walk and talk” will be rewritten as the more memorable “stop and chat.” The intention of Jerry and George to move to California to do the show anticipates the L.A. setting of *Curb*. There are several jokes about Ted Danson, a friend of Larry’s who will become a recurring character on the latter show. Even the plane getting into trouble is an earlier version of the plane ride that Cheryl takes in season six of *Curb*, which results in her decision to leave Larry.

But all that was in the future and totally unknown and undreamed of. A trial follows in which Larry brings many old characters to the witness stand — the Low-Talker, the Soup Nazi, Babu Bhatt — reminding the audience of past episodes. Despite the histrionics of the attorney, the characters are convicted and sentenced to a year in jail. Jerry gives a poorly received stand-up show to the other inmates. Our last view of them is sitting in a cell talking, as always, about nothing.

When Larry finished the last page of the script, page 152, he actually choked up.

When the show aired, on May 14, 1998, 76 million people tuned in. Advertisers paid NBC up to \$20 million for a twenty-second spot. And in the opinion of most viewers, and the newspaper reviews that came out the next day, the show was . . . a stinker. The last episode was a flat, dull disappointment. Or as the *Houston Chronicle* put it, “. . . one of the least loved conclusions in the history of television.”

It was not Larry David’s finest hour.

In 1995, during the seventh season of *Seinfeld*, Larry decided that he wanted out. Each year he had felt more pressure to produce great scripts and now, with the show at number one, the pressure was even worse. He had been grumbling about

the show from its earliest days, claiming he wanted it to be cancelled, but this time he really meant it. In 1993 he had married a television producer named Laurie Lennard; they were expecting their second child. He wanted to spend more time with the kids. Television, of course, works on a brutal schedule of days, nights, and weekends. So he wrote one last episode, a particularly edgy one in which George's girlfriend Susan dies from licking bad envelopes, and then he quit.

Jerry too had been thinking that the show ought to end. And the stars — Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Jason Alexander, and Michael Richards — knew that its creators wanted to finish on a high note and not wait until the show was losing steam. In fact, Larry assumed that if he quit Jerry would too, ending the show. After all, it was their mutual creation; it couldn't possibly go on without him.

But like an angry employee who made a pact with his fellow workers to hand in their resignations only to discover that only he is without a job, Larry found himself alone. Jerry, it turned out, wanted to keep going. And the actors, who were making a small fortune per episode, didn't want to leave either. And so Jerry decided to run the show without Larry. Larry wasn't at all happy about it, but there wasn't anything he could do. "I can't stop them from doing the show," he said. "I probably won't watch it."

It was perhaps an odd comment from the co-creator of a hit show. But then, Larry David wasn't like other people. *Seinfeld* had brought him from obscurity and near poverty to the pinnacle of show business success. But it hadn't changed him, not in any substantial way. And it hadn't made him any happier. He was still the same Larry.

## An Unfunny Kid

“I never thought I would be involved in anything successful,” Larry David once said. “My plan was to try and get by. Maybe at some point I’d get involved in a bank robbery or something.”

Born on July 2, 1947, he was the second son of Morty David, a Brooklyn clothier who would later retire and become president of his condo association, like Jerry’s dad on *Seinfeld*. Larry’s mother went to work for the Bureau of Child Guidance. Later she wanted Larry to take the civil service test, figuring that he better get himself a secure job — postal worker, teacher — with good benefits. (On *Seinfeld*, when George moves back into his parents’ house, his mother has the same idea.) His parents were both Democrats, sharing their values and eventually turning Larry into one too.

Larry shared a room with his older brother, Ken, who would later move to Oregon and give advice on computers and investments. Larry went to P.S. 52 and then Sheepshead Bay High School where his report card was filled with average marks because he didn’t much care. (Later an obnoxious comic in a *Seinfeld* episode would come from Sheepshead Bay. “We were right on the water. The whole atmosphere stank of fish.”) There was always a lot of yelling — between his aunts

and uncles, the families of his friends, and in the apartments next to their own. In just the same way, yelling would be a major form of communication on *Curb*. Larry liked sports and was considered a good athlete by other kids. His parents also forced him to go to Hebrew school, which he detested. He didn't much hide his feelings and got kicked out for laughing at the rabbi who was telling him off for some infraction. (Even now, when someone is yelling at Larry on *Curb* he can barely keep himself from laughing.) But his parents, horrified that he wouldn't be able to have a bar mitzvah, talked him back in.

"We're both from kind of middle-earth Brooklyn," said Larry Charles, who would become a producer, writer, and director on both *Seinfeld* and *Curb*. "You know, Brighton Beach, Coney Island, lower middle class, under the train tracks. We both understand that sort of *Lord of the Flies* sensibility that requires you to be very aware as you grow up. It's a very savage environment, in a lot of ways a very cruel and sadistic environment."

He was never known as funny, not by his family and not by his friends. But he liked to laugh, and he was a fan of Abbott and Costello, Bob and Ray, and especially the Jewish comic actor Phil Silvers. *The Phil Silvers Show* ran from 1955 through 1959. Later called *Sergeant Bilko* in reruns, it was also known as *You'll Never Get Rich*. It featured Silvers — the bald, glasses-wearing actor from Brooklyn — as Master Sergeant Ernie Bilko, head of the motor pool at a U.S. military base in Kansas. In episode after episode, Bilko worked to attain more creature comforts for himself and make life in the army easier. Often as not he would end up making things harder, not unlike the future star of *Curb*. The dialogue was sharp, and the multiple plots, though wild and fanciful, were always plausible and carefully worked out to resolve in the end, in a manner similar to *Seinfeld* and *Curb*.

There was also a good dose of physical comedy. It had a quiet, strong presence behind it in the creator, producer, writer, and director Nat Hiken. It would make a lasting impression on Larry. “I just thought that it was head and shoulders above any other show I had seen,” Larry said later. “You know, in analyzing it now, you could see that Bilko was a manipulative character who did a lot of unlikeable, despicable things. But because he was so funny doing it, it all just worked.”

With no sense of direction, Larry enrolled at the University of Maryland for a degree in history. “You never know when you might run into a discussion of the Franco-Prussian War,” he joked, indicating what he thought of its usefulness. The late sixties were in full swing but Larry hated the hippie era and felt alienated by it. He eyed the long hair, beads, and Grateful Dead T-shirts skeptically, believing them to make up another kind of conformity. He looked clean-cut and decent, a model young man in a suit and tie for his college portrait. Drug-taking scared him. He didn’t even manage to get any of that supposed free love available for the asking. (Later he would wear his hair long, in what is now called a Jewfro.)

But it was at university that Larry made a discovery: he could be funny. He began entertaining his friends with humor, recounting his disastrous dates in humiliating detail to heighten the comic effect. Very early on he learned to sacrifice his dignity for a laugh.

After graduation, Larry headed back to Brooklyn. He got a two-bedroom apartment, which he shared with a couple of others, and hit the pavement looking for work. Employment agencies found him several jobs, none of which lasted long. He worked for a bra wholesaler called E.D. Grandmont, selling “defective bras” as he put it. He claimed that he never sold



one. (In the 1993–1994 season George sells bras on *Seinfeld*.) Then he worked in a law office. After that he was a cab driver and finally a private chauffeur. For the latter job he had to wear a uniform and he would be highly embarrassed to be seen by someone he knew, waiting by the car for some rich woman to come out of a store on Fifth Avenue. But he claimed to like this job, especially when he worked for an elderly woman with poor vision who couldn't tell when he didn't wear the uniform. Later, he used it as the basis for a screenplay that went unproduced. Between jobs he collected unemployment insurance. He even joined the army reserves, a fact the fictional Larry would tell to his rather surprised manager in *Curb*.

It was back in New York that Larry got the idea to take an acting class in the city. He participated in class but never found himself particularly comfortable acting. Then one session the instructor gave the students the assignment of acting a monologue, but doing it in their own words — really a kind of improvisation based on specified material. Larry found this a lot more enjoyable than reciting lines and, even better, he managed to make the rest of the class laugh. “And I thought, hey, that’s for me. That’s what I want. I want a laugh,” Larry has said.

Once when he was in a play his parents came to see him. His father kept his opinion to himself; he didn't think his son had a chance of success.

It was shortly after returning to New York in 1970 that Larry went to a comedy club. As he watched the comics onstage, it came to him that he could do it too. But he didn't try it until four years later. He knew someone from college who was doing stand-up and asked him to have lunch in exchange for some advice on how to start. That's where he heard about the open mike nights at Gerde's Folk City in

Greenwich Village. More famous for being the site of Bob Dylan's first professional gig and for other music acts, the club on West Third Street (which closed in 1987) can also claim to be the spot where Larry David first got in front of a mike. At this time, he was tall and thin, ill kempt, and wore very big glasses. He had rather wild curly hair, already substantially thinning up top. He had written some material that included an imitation of Rod Steiger, an actor whose best films were several years behind him, and although the reception wasn't particularly warm the experience made Larry want to try again.

Larry's second try was a large step downward — to a lounge stage in the Gil Hodges Lanes, a bowling alley in Brooklyn where he tried some new material. But the third time was an even bigger step up, to *Catch a Rising Star*, the place where television scouts went looking for talent. Not that Larry was discovered that night. The place was glamorous and popular; people lined up to get in. It was rather intimidating for someone who still had no idea what he was doing. Again, he tried out new material, including a routine about a telethon to raise money for people out of work. Management asked him to come back the next week, and this time he felt the pressure to write new stuff — a pressure he would later come to know and dislike while writing for television. He came up with a routine about a kid masturbating who is caught by his mother (a topic he would return to many times). A trial is held, the kid is put on the stand, and so is his mother, who is accused of not supporting Israel. Larry was still not really connecting with the audience, or even being fully aware of their presence, but he got some real laughs, an experience that he found exhilarating. The club gave him a regular spot.

And so Larry began working the clubs, usually in late-night weekday slots. Eventually he got to work the more crowded weekends. From the beginning he wanted to tell the audience the truth about how he felt about things, especially what he couldn't say in regular life. Over time he worked up an act that, in his words, "I could do, and enjoy, and kill with on a Saturday night. But it still was difficult going on. Because I was taking my life in my hands."

He also played the Improv and the Comic Strip. He began to make friends with other comics and to hang around with them in the clubs even when he wasn't performing. Richard Belzer, Jerry Seinfeld, Paul Reiser, Carol Leifer (later a writer for *Seinfeld* and the model for Elaine), Gilbert Gottfried — all were struggling to make names for themselves and move up the comedy food chain. What Larry loved about hanging with them was that he didn't need to censor himself. He could say whatever he wanted. He even played on a comedians' softball team.

The David family had already started to worry about Larry, whose working life didn't seem to be going anywhere. They were, to say the least, surprised by this new career move, and dismayed. But Larry never asked for money. He scraped by on what he could make.

Larry often wore an old army jacket while performing. His hair, as Richard Lewis reported, looked like a combination of "Bozo" and "Einstein." The person in the audience he aimed for was "the lonely guy, the frustrated guy, the guy with no money — this is the guy who needs to laugh." But Larry David didn't try to win the audience's affection by acting as confidant, or best friend, or by making them feel good about themselves. His style was "willfully uningratiating" in the words of a later *New Yorker* writer. Some of his routines were obscure. For exam-

ple, he might open by thanking God that he wasn't born a Spanish landowner. Because if he had been, he wouldn't know whether to use the formal or informal "you" when talking to people. "I don't want them to feel so familiar that they can just help themselves to anything in the refrigerator."

He might address his Jewishness in an unconventional manner, for example by saying that he would have made friends with a Nazi if the man had complimented his hair. "You know, if he'd given me a compliment, Josef Mengele and I could have been friends." (This was later refined as Jerry's remark on *Seinfeld* that he would have been friends with Himmler if the man had owned a ping-pong table.) Or Larry would say, "You know what I really admire about Hitler? He didn't take any shit from magicians." Then he dramatized how Hitler would have forced a magician to reveal the secret of his trick. And of course there were masturbation jokes. He imagined being a professional masturbator. People would ask his advice and he would say, "You must practice!"

Larry would make fun of his poor skills with women. "They say that if you're over forty and haven't gotten married, you're either gay or there's something wrong. And I'm here to tell people tonight that there's something wrong." But his favorite opening, the one he came to use most often, was: "I'll tell you something about good-looking people. We're not well liked."

Not only did the audiences often not get Larry, they simply didn't like him. "I was in fear every night of going onstage in front of these audiences," he said. "I knew I had to go on, but I really didn't want to. It was bad. There were some bad nights." And despite his unwillingness to compromise his material, he had no plan of how to make it work. "I was

hoping that somehow I could get some kind of cult following, and get by with that. And you know what? That would have been fine with me. I just wanted laughs — that’s what I was after. I wanted to make a living, but I really was not interested in money at all. I was interested in being a great comedian.”

But what Larry found night after night was that audiences wanted the sort of easy, mainstream comedy that they saw on television. One incident during his time as a stand-up would become a famous and often-told story; he once got up onstage, looked out at the audience, decided that they were not going to appreciate him, and simply walked off again. Yet while the audiences weren’t taking to him, other comics thought Larry was great, a rare, unique voice. One of them was Jerry Seinfeld. The two comedians met in 1976, when Larry David had been doing stand-up for a couple of years. Seven years younger, Seinfeld was just starting out. There was no sign yet of the sensation that he was going to become. They weren’t exactly close friends, but they admired each other’s work and that was enough to bring them together.

“Our brains had a comedic connection,” Jerry said. “Larry was a guy open to discussing virtually any human dilemma, as long as it was something that not a lot of other people were interested in. I was exactly the same way. We weren’t interested in what was on the front page of the newspaper.” They began to help each other develop material. They would walk through Central Park or sit in coffee shops working on their stuff.

At this time, Seinfeld too was struggling, and he would continue to struggle until at least 1981, when he had his first appearance on *The Tonight Show*. He sold lightbulbs, waited tables, and even sold jewelry from a cart outside Bloomingdale’s.

Eventually he moved to Los Angeles hoping to do better, only to land a role on the sitcom *Benson* where his character was dropped after three episodes. But Jerry didn't suffer the feelings of frustration and anger that Larry did when he went onstage. Larry got angry when the audience wasn't listening. Comedy club-goers were usually young, noisy, and often semi-inebriated. Seinfeld has said, "A night club is a place where drinks and food are served; a comedian is not automatically the audience's focal point. You have to fight for their attention. And that's not easy to get. Larry had the material, but he never had what you would call the temperament for stand-up." Another time he remembered, "I was a huge fan. Most of the comedians were. [But] it wasn't easy in those days. It was just a matter of how much you could take, and he could take less than most."

A lot of people without the right temperament would have quit. Most did. But Larry persisted, a kind of self-torture but the only outlet he had for his form of comedy.

And then came television.