

I'm A Playah

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By : Steve Balsky

A hip-hop satire of contemporary game shows



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I'm A Playah

Iâ m A Playah

â Okay people, weâ re on in seven.â

The assistant producerâ s voice echoed in Queen Latifahâ s mind as she reclined in the chair with the make-up assistant applying the foundation to her face.

What the hell have I gotten myself into? she thought. I go out there, thousands of viewers watching, not just the studio audience, seeing me host this god-awful exploitive game show? What was I thinking?

Then she remembered. Elliot Rosenthal.

Three months ago, the Queen was at her agentâ s office, Grabow Entertainment in Beverly Hills going over her schedule for the next month. Their motto is â putting show biz into your bizâ .

Bob Grabow did not seem positive. At sixty-five, he looked defined, wearing his double-breasted black suit and matching tie, sitting behind his desk with an air of confidence and power.

â Queen, I have some good news and bad news.â

â Lay it on me,â Queen said. She was decked out in her power lime-green business suit with matching slacks and high heels that cost her over \$ 1,000.

â Okay, your role in â Zombie Women from Marsâ has been forgone to Suzanne Somers. Said they wanted someone more â whiteâ , whatever that means. Itâ s bullshit, really. Nonetheless, the role is gone. P-Diddy said to the press that he would quote â rather work with Big Birdâ unquote than with you. The record contract has been nixed. Sorry. On the plus side, I did get you a spot on â Dancing With the Starsâ . You will be against Jamie Oliver, Chuck Norris and Valerie Bertanelli amongst others.â

â Valerie Bertanelli? Isnâ t she in a wheelchair?â the Queen asked.

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â Not yet, no.â

The Queen sighed. Never had her career sunk to such a low. She had been a rap star, hosted Saturday Night Live and appeared in several movies and TV shows. Now, her work slate was cleaner than Dove on a baby's blanket. She sank in her leather chair.

â Listen Bobâ !â !â

Just then the door of the office exploded like someone had put TNT on the hinges. In walked Elliot Rosenthal, a 31 year old bash, brazen movie and TV producer that was making some headways in Variety magazine. Apparently, he had secured a brilliant role for an aging Judd Hirsch on the TV series Hawaii Five-O and it was the latest buzz on the scene.

â Queenie baby!â he loudly proclaimed. â Do I have a deal *pour vous!*â He protruded both of his index fingers like guns as he spoke.

Queen Latifah stared at him with skepticism.

Mr. Rosenthal graciously extended his hand to her agent. â Bobby! Long time. You donâ t call me.. whatâ s golf taking up too much time? Anyways, hope all is well. Sorry for barging in like this, but I have no time to spare.â He turned his attention to Latifah. â Queenie..Do you mind if I call you Queenie?â

â No matter.â

â Okay great,â he said pulling up a leather chair and promptly sitting down. â I have an offer for you that you absolutely CANNOT refuse.â

Bob Grabow stared at him.

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“You like that?” Rosenthal added, “You know, the ‘Godfather’ reference? An offer you cannot refuse?” Remember that?”

Grabow nodded solemnly. “I remember.”

“Anyway,” Rosenthal continued, “I am producing a new show that is gonna rock the entertainment world into the middle of next week. I am talkin’ big, big, BIG!”

“That big, huh?” Latifah queried.

“Yeah, that damn big.” Rosenthal ran a hand through his already thinning brown hair. He wore blue jeans, a sport jacket and a Ralph Lauren pink shirt that Latifah could tell was ironed that morning. She smelled the faint scent of Drakkar Noir on his presence.

“Okay, so here’s my pitch,” Rosenthal continued. “The show is called ‘I’m A Playah..Bitch’ and it is like an all-black version of ‘Jeopardy’. None of this reality show bullshit. It is gonna rock the ratings. I already got sponsors and advertisers that are interested.”

Latifah’s eyebrows rose. “I’m a Playah?” “Don’t you think that’s racist?”

Rosenthal put on a fake scowl. “Racist? Baby, we are not in a racist world anymore. This is 2020! There is no white and black. It’s all a shade of gray. Especially in entertainment!”

Latifah eyed him while reclining in her seat. “Get Oprah.”

“Oprah?” Rosenthal waved his hands in the air animatedly. “Oprah is a gazillionaire eating bon-bons and caviar. No! No the people! ‘Queenie’..The *people* want someone they can *relate* to. Someone on their level. That someone is you baby..You.”

Latifah looked at Grabow. “What do you think?”

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Grabow put both elbows on the table and took a long swig from a Perrier bottle. "I think that we need to think about this."

Rosenthal leapt from his seat. "Think? What is there to think about? It's a sure thing. I love it and I love you. It's a match made in heaven. Wait until you hear the celebrity line-up for the opening show. Amazing! Absolutely amazing!"

Grabow stood from his chair and extended his hand. "Thank you Mr. Rosenthal, we will definitely consider your offer."

"Great!" Rosenthal stated with enthusiasm. "Just great. Here is a contract for you to peruse. I think the Queen will be most pleased with the conditions."

He pulled a rolled piece of paper from the pocket of his sports jacket and placed it on the table.

Queen Latifah unraveled the piece of paper as if it was the Holy Scriptures and scanned its contents.

"I'll think about it," she said.

Rosenthal stiffened. "Okay..Think about it all you want but I also want you to think about this.. your last movie 'Taxi' bombed. Even Jimmy Fallon that no talent asshole went on to better things. Yeah, sure you have some voices in animated shit and had appearances on TV shows. So what? Those are one shot deals. This something *long-term* baby! When was your last recording? I think Burl Ives has done more than you since then. I don't wanna say you're washed up..but then again, you don't exactly have countless knocks on the door, huh? Am I right?"

The Queen looked at Grabow. Grabow looked at Rosenthal.

"See?" he continued. "We speak each other's unspoken language. Let me know by Monday. Nice talking to you, sir." He extended his hand to Grabow which was gladly accepted in a firm shake.

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Rosenthal then turned to Latifah and said, "Think about it seriously Queenie. Or should I call you Dana Owens? Daughter of a cop. Born and raised in East Orange, New Jersey. See, I've done my homework. Now you need to do yours." He reached out and pinched her cheek. "Such a *shinah punnim*. I'd love to see that on TV again." With that, he exited the office with a confident swagger and slammed the door.

Now, here we are. The rabid crowd was chanting "Queen! Queen! Queen.." rhythmically and there she was, 50 years old with no other major career opportunities looking towards a bright future with guaranteed income. Along comes Elliot Rosenthal with one million dollars for one season and the rest goes from there. Or so she hoped.

Queen Latifah arose from her chair and made her way through the parted curtains onto the stage in L.A. The bright lights made her wince at first, but she readily got used to their glare.

"Hello America!" she bellowed with open arms. The crowd roared its approval. "Have we got a star-studded line up for you tonight on the debut show of 'I'm a Playah..Bitch.' If you aren't watching it, you are not a Playah!" The crowd once again raised their arms in triumph.

Queen cleared her throat and continued. "I would now like to announce tonight's celebrity line-up! Her shoulders straightened.

"Ground-breaking rapper..M.C. Hammer!" The crowd went wild as M.C. made the stage. *Yeah, right. Fresh out of bankruptcy is more like it*, the Queen thought.

M.C. cordially kissed her cheek and made his way behind the blue podium with microphone proudly present.

"And next we have acclaimed actor! Wesley Snipes!" The crowd exploded like it was the second coming of Christ. Most of the fans in the studio audience were black and held up signs reading "I'm a Playah" or "The Queen is in my Castle." Latifah snorted and thought *Yeah, Wesley Snipes. Fresh out of jail, more like*.

She cleared her throat and continued. "The next guest we have is recording legend! Janet Jackson!" The crowd stood on its feet for this one. Janet came out in a dazzling sequined red dress to the floor and politely kissed the Queen on both cheeks before taking her stance on the podium. *Yeah, what have*

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you done for me lately?, the Queen thought.

And last.. but certainly not least the maverick director Spike Lee! Okay, *this was a good one*, she thought. Spike came onstage. He respectfully shook her hand and assumed his position on the end of stage right.

Queen Latifah looked at camera three as directed. Folks, have we got a show for you! Very exciting, fast paced entertainment with some of the greatest stars in show business and who knows? You may learn something before it's all done. She made an internal wink to Bill Cosby for that one.

Okay let's go onto round one. She nervously pulled a cue card from the pile shoved into her right hand at the last minute before show time.

This man was the first black astronaut in space. A few seconds elapsed.

Spike?

Who is Guion S. Bluford Jr.?

Latifah clapped her hands and the crowd erupted. Yes, correct for \$ 200.

Next, this black 1897 inventor invented the pencil sharpener. Anyone?

Janet Jackson's spot enlightened.

Who is George Washington Carver?

Queen Latifah made an exaggerated frown for the viewing audience. I'm sorry, sweetheart. Carver invented the peanut. The pencil sharpener was invented by John Love. She thought in her mind, *I could*

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get to like this shit. And educate people too.

As time went on, the game became the equivalent of "Final Jeopardy" now called "It's the Dawg House."

At this point, Spike Lee had acquired \$ 20,000, Janet Jackson was close at \$ 16,000, M.C. Hammer was a contender at \$ 14,000 and Wesley Snipes had bankrupted himself with \$0.00.

Latifah felt her brow getting sweaty. She held the microphone upright and proudly proclaimed, "Okay people it's the Dawg House!" She felt the heavy lights upon her and continued. "This famous character in African-American history created the gas mask and then became renowned for using the mask to save workers trapped in a toxic fume-filled tunnel."

The sound of Ice-T's "The King of Street" played over the P.A. system as the contestants wrote down their answers on the computer slates.

After the ten second time period had elapsed, regrettably none of the contestants got the correct answer of Garrett Augustus Morgan. Spike Lee won the show with \$ 18, 000 which he donated to the National Black United Fund of Charities (NBUFC) , much to the crowd's approval.

After the show finale, Latifah wiped her brow and actually felt exhilarated. This was a chance for her to be in front of a crowd again, to demonstrate her captivating talent and to be charismatic which was so lacking in her past endeavors.

She made her way back to the dressing room and there, to her astonishment was Elliot Rosenthal with a bouquet of flowers and a beaming smile.

"See? I see! Did I tell ya or did I not tell ya?" he asked. "Stick with me and you'll go places. I know something good when I step on it."

Latifah looked downwards and smiled. "Yeah it was good and fun too."

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Rosenthal seemed to explode, "Good? Of course it was good! It was never supposed to be not good! I'm telling you, the networks are happy, the advertisers are happy, the public is happy! What's so bad? It's all good! And it is because of you."

Queen had a big smile on her face as she pulled out of the studio lot and made her way home. The live taping had gone well, the crowd seemed to have legitimately been into the groove and even the celebrities had fun. Next show it would not be an "all-star" version, but rather just regular intelligent contestants out there looking at their shot to fortune.

She had done well. Very well. Better than she would have imagined. Bob would be very happy indeed and who knows? May be this stint could lead to future work down the road.

The months went by and "I'm a Playah" "Bitch" generated some tremendous ratings. It beat *Falcon Crest* and *the Next Generation* as one of the hottest shows in that time slot, Wednesdays at 8:00 p.m.. Queen Latifah was very popular amongst the fans and people who barely knew she existed were now delving into her past. Her debut single from 1988 "Wrath of My Madness" had noticed a spike in downloads as of late. Critics were calling "I'm a Playah" as being "innovative", "daring", "pushes the envelope" and "immensely entertaining".

She entered the studio for another live taping of the show and made her way to her dressing room, heels clicking in the process. Today she wore beige slacks with matching top and red scarf for a contrast. She hadn't gotten to make-up yet so her age of 50 was showing despite her past dalliance with Botox injections.

"Morning Queen!" said Linda, her cosmetician.

"How you doin' girl? Make me look young again," Queen said, flopping into her chair and reclining backward.

Linda laughed and brought her swivel chair over to the recliner and began her magic.

As she got her makeup applied, Elliot Rosenthal burst into the room.

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Queenie "I got news for ya!" he beamed.

Queen had her eyes closed and hands extended so her glossy red fingernails could be re-applied. "Hi Elliot. Good news or bad?"

Rosenthal clapped his hands together. "Good..it's all good. Okay let's see! Pepsi wants you for an ad for their latest brand, Saturday Night Live wants you on again as a guest host and! drum roll please..we got call from someone who wants to be a contestant on the shows! Jake LaFortune!"

Queen Latifah's heart fluttered for a brief moment at the sound of the name. Jake LaFortune! This kid had made a stir on YouTube with his home made song "I was never perfect". Filmed and recorded it in his garage. He attempted his best to rap and never had a back-up band apart from some synthesizer tracks and drum beats from a computer program. He was a pretty boy and caught the eye of many a teenage girl and rumor was he got a studio contract and was in the process of recording a debut album. Definitely a hot prospect.

Queen said, "That's great, Elliot but why the hell does he want to be on our show?"

Elliott started at her incredulously. "Why? Why not??? I mean, you are searing hot right now, baby. He wants to be on one of the premiere shows on TV! Who can blame the kid? We haven't had a celebrity on since the debut show. Can you imagine what that'll do for ratings?"

Queen Latifah cleared her throat, "Right! but what does he know about black history? I mean, he's an 18 year old wannabe punk with a cute face. I don't want to compromise the integrity of the show." She now had two slices of cucumber over her closed eyes as Linda worked on her nails.

Elliot began to pace nervously. "Who cares what he knows, what he doesn't know. It doesn't matter. Its ratings baby, ratings! That's the name of the game. Getting a kid like him on there, it doesn't matter if he can tie his shoes."

Deep down Queen Latifah knew it was a mistake and she also knew she could not beat Elliot when he was in the kind of mode. There was still one more important issue nagging at her conscience. LaFortune was *white*.

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Queen had a meeting with Bob Grabow the next morning after another successful run of the show last night. Bob greeted her with a friendly hug, but he could tell something was on her mind.

â Queen, whatâ s wrong?â

Latifah removed her emerald green glasses and placed them on Grabowâ s heavy oak desk.

â Have you heard that Jake LaFortune wants to be on the show?â

â Who?â

â That kid making all the waves now. Sings â I was never perfectâ ? Big hit on the Internet.â

Bob nodded in recollection. â Oh yeah, right. I heard about him. And he wants to be on your show?â

â Yup.â

â Soâ lwhatâ s the big deal?â

Queenâ s eyes opened wide. â Whatâ s the big deal? Bob, are you serious? This is first game show we
â !I mean black people â !have had. We have made history based on the fact that it is all black contestants
with all black-themed questions. We canâ t just go burying that now cause some hot-shot white kid wants to
be on the show and get his chance at exposure!â

Bob looked pensive for a moment. â Yeah, but think what it would do for ratings.â

Queen immediately angered and stood up from her chair. â There you go! Ratings! You sound just like
Elliot. Ratings! Ratings ! Ratings! I know thatâ s the name of this business but this situation is different!
Itâ s more than just a showâ litâ s history!â

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Bob quietly said, "Sit down Queen. I see your point but..you are not the chief decision maker here. If the studio execs want LaFortune, they got him like it or not. And they don't care if you are happy with that decision or not. And if you continue to act this way, they can have you replaced with someone like Star Jones in a heartbeat."

Queen's eyes flared. "Star Jones? Star Jones? What the hell has she got that I don't? I'm sorry Bob, but I can offer something very different from her, hell from any other black woman out there!"

Bob held up his hand. "Okay, okay cool it. Sit down. Alright, I tell you what.. I probably shouldn't do this but for you I will get the contact info for this kid and you can speak to him yourself. Find out his intentions and stuff. If you still don't like him after the call we can discuss it further."

Queen nodded. "Fair enough. What about Elliot?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "What about him? I can speak to him and maybe we can put our heads together on this. Listen, I'll make some calls to a few agents out there and I'll get you LaFortune's cell number by tonight."

That night the Queen sat in front of her wall mounted plasma television with a glass of white wine. On the table in front of her was a small piece of paper with which she jotted down LaFortune's cell number after she got the call from Grabow.

She held the phone in her hand and stared at it for a moment before dialing. What exactly was she going to say to this kid? How could she express her resentment towards his intentions? She took a deep breath and dialed the digits listed on the paper.

After a few rings, the voice answered.

"Yo, wazzup?"

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â Um..Iâ d like to speak to Jake LaFortune, please.â

â Howâ d you get my number?â

â Wellâ ll..â

â No matter, if you want to contact me, go to triple W dot IloveLafortune dot biz and drop me a line,
â kay?â

â Jake, itâ s Queen Latifah.â

Pause.

â Yeahâ lokay...whatever.â

â No, it really is. I want to discuss your potential appearance on â Iâ m a Playah.â â

Another pause.

â No fuckinâ way man! (sound of bottle dropping) This is awesome! Oh manâ lcan I prepare for this a bit?â

Latifah rolled her eyes. â Thereâ s no reason to prepare for anything. Do you have a minute to talk?â

â A minute? Shit girl, I can rap with you all night, you want to.â

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Girl. Rap. Latifah was getting very angry very quickly. Exhaling slowly and taking a sip of the wine she continued.

â Soâ why exactly do you want to be on the show?â

â Oh girl, I can get it on, know what Iâ m saying? Iâ m making waves on-line! I got a fan base and everything. And justâ ljust being on that showâ lman it would give me a chance to show myself to the world.â

Uh-huh, thought the Queen.

She cleared her throat and said, â So, what exactly is your knowledge of black history and culture?â

She heard some noise in the background, then â Jakie, Jakie stop. Daddyâ s on the phone. Iâ ll take you out later..this is important shit. Sorry. Jakieâ s my cocker spaniel.â

â Fine,â Latifah said, shifting on her couch. *His dog is named after him.*

â Okay, so like, yeah, I know lots about the black culture. I mean, I was schooled on Run DMC yâ knowâ lnothing but respect for those guys. And like Michael Jackson? Never saw a guy dance like that before..and a guy at that! Man, that dude had moves that..â

Latifah cut him short. â I know how good Michael was. What about our history?â

LaFortune coughed directly into the phone and the said â Well, I know you guys were like slaves and shit, and that was just *wrong*, know what Iâ m sayinâ ? Ainâ t nobody should be anyone elseâ s slaves. I am firm on that.â

Glad to hear it, thought Latifah.

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“ And he continued, “ Obama was a real leader yâ know? The guy like changed history as we know it. Smith, is good, but Obama was da bomb!”

Latifah smiled at his reference. President Wil Smith was now the second black U.S. President and was making history in the White House in his own regard.

LaFortune continued, “ And Tiger Woodsâ !Heâ s old school but I mean no one can *touch* that motherfucker. He is so cool, so talented..man I would be a great addition to your show and would do them dudes some just respect, I figure.”

Latifah felt her dinner of sushi rolls, miso soup and teppanyaki churning in her stomach.

“ Jakeâ !I like what you have saidâ !but Iâ m sorry, I just cannot see you being a natural fit on the show.” With that she ended the conversation and closed down her cell phone.

Four days later, the Queen attended the studio for another live taping that was to be aired the next Wednesday night.

She was in the make-up room, once again with legs, up, reclined and cucumber slices placed on her eyes as Linda applied blush to her cheeks.

It was at that moment that Elliot Rosenthal barged in. Latifah could feel that his face was red even though the cucumber slices prevented her from full visibility.

“ What the hell?” he fumed, “ What the hell?”

“ Oh, Hi Elliot,” she said non-chalantly. “ Whatever is the problem?”

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He pointed a finger at her. "What is the matter? WHAT is the matter? Don't bullshit me, Queenie! You know exactly what the fuck is the matter! You don't talk to prospective contestants behind my back! you do not decide who goes on this show and who doesn't and now I got THIS!" He shook a piece of paper near her face.

Queen Latifah sat up and removed the cucumber slices from her eyes. The piece of paper was a notice from Jake LaFortune's lawyers saying that they were suing "I'm a Playah Bitch" for reverse discrimination in not allowing a white contestant on the show.

Latifah swallowed deeply but nonetheless felt that she had made a victory of sorts.

Rosenthal shook with anger, "One million dollars Latifah! One million dollars! Think about that for a sec. This kid wants nothing more than to mug for a camera on national television and you piss him off. Look at the cost of that! Just look!"

Latifah placed the paper down and spoke calmly. "I have read it Elliot and I am aware of its contents. I'm sorry it was so expensive a repercussion but I simply cannot allow a man of this sort on my show."

Rosenthal hurled his bottled water against the wall. "OH, pardon me!" he hollered. "When did this become *your* show? It was never *your* show. Yeah, sure you are on it, but it is hardly *your* show and you have no say in who is on it and who isn't."

He dropped his head for a moment and said in a low whisper, "Queenie! *you* are done."

She got up from the cosmetic recliner, neatly pressed her hand along her pink business suit and said, "I guess I am."

Several months later, Latifah entered her condominium and kicked off her high heels. She strode barefoot into the living room and turned on her plasma TV using the remote. "I'm a Playah..Bitch" was on and she smiled as she laid down on her sofa.

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The host was now Star and the contestants were a variety of MIT graduates, black and white alike. Their knowledge of black history was quite remarkable and Queen nodded in approval as she sipped her Starbucks latte.

The show was doing well, still top in the ratings despite her departure and she had acquired many new side jobs involving endorsements, record deals and public appearances.

Bob Grabow did not feel that her method of exit from the show was a wise one as it splashed the internet headlines but was nonetheless valuable to her career.

Jake LaFortune never made it on the show, nor did they ever have an "all celebrity" episode ever again but he did receive widespread acclaim with his rap ballad "I Respect."

I guess it all worked out in the end, she thought. Doesn't it always?

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