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TV giant Don Francisco celebrates 50 years of 'Sabado Gigante'

An entertainment institution in the Spanish-speaking world, Don Francisco aims to stay on top of the game with his long-running variety show 'Sabado Gigante.'

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Don Francisco has hosted the Spanish-language show (which translates to "Giant Saturday") since 1962. (Michael Robinson Chavez, Los Angeles Times / October 27, 2012)

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Photos: A history of 'Sabado Gigante' guests: From Pele to Bill Gates

By Yvonne Villarreal, Los Angeles Times
October 27, 2012 | 5:00 a.m.

MIAMI — Don Francisco is running late to his own party — peculiar, considering he arrived six hours before it started.

One of Latin America's top entertainment personalities is holed up in his dressing room at Univision's studios as frenzied fans just outside line a red carpet where celebrities



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are slowly making their way into the big show. As he quietly watches the procession on his dressing room monitor, his longtime assistant begins the intricate ritual of preparing his pre-show meal that includes branzini fish with rocoto chile paste and a tossed salad.

PHOTOS: 50 years of Sábado Gigante: From Pelé to Bill Gates

"After the break," announces one of the hosts from the red carpet, "Don Francisco!" The adoring throngs scream in delight as the ringmaster of the longest-running variety show in TV history squeezes a lemon over his salad and chuckles. After a half-century in show business, he knows they can wait a little longer.

At 71, Francisco is an institution in the Spanish-speaking world as the unmistakable and singular host of "Sábado Gigante," which means "Giant Saturday." The sturdy Chilean-born showman is the enduring attraction in a weekly three-hour cavalcade famous for its bikini-clad models, slapstick sketches and madcap contests, and which has become a welcome weekend siren call to the Latino diaspora.

"Sábado Gigante' is its own unique thing," said Chon Noriega, director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center. "It's that little-bit-of-everything approach — the scantily clad girls, the circus acts ... when you come across it, you'd be surprised at how long you sit there watching it. I don't think some people would like to admit it or feel comfortable being entertained by it because it is sort of the lowest common denominator approach to entertainment."

Francisco's show, which combines the sensibilities of such English-speaking classics as "Benny Hill" and "The Carol Burnett Show" with a splash of "American Idol," lives up to its sizable name. It airs in more than 40 countries and boasts

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tens of millions of weekly viewers, including more than 2.2 million in the United States, most of them in Miami, New York and Los Angeles.

Like Francisco, the largely unchanging show has defied the capricious tastes of several generations and has proved indestructible to the competition for five decades. Saturday's four-hour special, which was taped Wednesday night, officially marks the show's golden anniversary.

"This is one of those feats that we will never see again in television history — never," said Cesar Conde, president of Univision.

The show's fame is hardly confined to Spanish-speaking audiences. Thanks to its incredible longevity, many English-speaking Americans have at least heard of the program, if not tuned in on occasion to see the wacky proceedings unfold. In perhaps one of the surest signs of modern American cool, Comedy Central's Stephen Colbert regularly parodies the Miami-based program by posing as Esteban Colberto, host of the Spanish-language newscast "Colberto Reporto Gigante."

While it's a required stopover for Latino celebrities promoting their projects, the show has also attracted an enviable list of English-speaking guests through the years including Jerry Lee Lewis, Tony Bennett, and Bill and Melinda Gates.

ENVELOPE: The awards insider

In recent years, its guests also routinely feature American politicians eager to reach out to the nation's fastest growing and increasingly influential minority. During the 2000 presidential campaign, Francisco interviewed George W. Bush at his Texas ranch as well as Democratic candidate Al Gore.

President Barack Obama, who sat down with Francisco in 2010, is slated once again to drop by the program before Election Day. (Republican candidate Mitt Romney has been invited on the show, but has not yet committed to an appearance.)

On a traditionally difficult night in American television, the show continues to register solid ratings and even has some traction with the younger demographic. Among adults 18- to 49-years-old, "Sábado Gigante" is usually in the top five nationwide for its time period regardless of language, and often ranks first in New York, Miami, San Francisco, Phoenix and Los Angeles.



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"Everyone wants to advertise on it. It's considered family-friendly," said Danielle Gonzales, managing director of the Chicago-based multicultural ad agency Tapestry. "It may not be the water cooler program, but it's tried and true. It's like a good pair of blue jeans."

Except for his fascination with Jack Paar, Art Linkletter and Ed Sullivan, Francisco might never have put on this particular pair of jeans. Francisco, born Mario Kreutzberger to Jewish parents in Chile, traveled to New York City decades ago at the direction of his father with the intention of studying fashion design. But that plan soon crumbled as Francisco fell in love with American television.

The 21-year-old soon returned to his native Chile just as television was developing and launched his own program on Canal 13 in 1962. The loud and flamboyant show, originally aired on Sundays as "Show Dominical," soon became a hit and moved to Saturday nights a year later and changed its name.

"Our program is a mixture — it's like a soup," said Francisco while walking the halls at the Univision complex, where the show has been shot since 1986. "We're a mix of different ingredients. We discuss a lot of issues important to the Latino community — immigration, health problems. It can't always be games."

PHOTOS: 50 years of Sábado Gigante: From Pelé to Bill Gates

And it might not always remain in the same comfortable but predictable format, says Francisco, who is calmer and more matter-of-fact than his clownish TV persona. He acknowledges to being consumed lately with keeping the show relevant, even stopping a young person in the studio halls to ask if they prefer three-minute or five-minute segments.

There's even talk of an English-language version. Francisco said they're in talks with a producer and in search of a host to make a pilot.

"That used to be the future," Francisco said, pointing to a nearby television. "But today, there are so many platforms that you really don't know what the future in television is — not in Spanish, not in English, not in any language."


But for now, on his way to the red carpet, he's focused on the night's grand performance — and getting a piece of lettuce off his face before facing the audience.

"In my soul, it doesn't feel like 50 years," Francisco said while adjusting the sleeves of his tuxedo jacket. "In my body, I can feel it. I don't have the elasticity that I had 50 years ago. But the show energizes me ... how could it not? We'll see if I say that in 2022 when we're celebrating again."

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don.danielson at 9:16 AM October 30, 2012

An institution. Glad to see he still has it. ¡Viva Francisco!

Jonas Castro at 3:40 PM October 27, 2012

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