

Fans Feel Sadness, Not Sympathy, for Bill Cosby

As sexual-assault allegations regarding Bill Cosby have snowballed, admirers of his work have doubtless experienced hard-to-identify emotions. While those determined to defend the star at any cost appear increasingly foolish and tone-deaf, there should be room for sadness for those who grew up with Cosby now having those memories irrevocably tainted. That feeling of lost nostalgia has nothing to do with empathy for or sympathy toward the architect of all this seemingly horrid behavior.

Cosby is hardly the first public figure whose private behavior has cast clouds over his persona and career; indeed, he's merely the latest celebrity to reveal the perils of blind hero worship. Still, even compared with, say, the many athletes accused of crimes and misdemeanors during or after their playing days, Cosby represents an unusually uncomfortable situation, thanks in part to the fact his standup act was moored in exaggerated recollections of childhood.

In those early Cosby routines, rotund friends weighed 2,000 pounds and tall ones stood 6'9," making them useful for retrieving balls from the sewer. Cosby not only built an animated children's series (*Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*) around that, but successfully evolved his material by changing the perspective from the kid waiting for dad's punishment to the father wondering what to do with his son, or why there was no good way for a dad to take his young daughter to the bathroom at a football game.

Beyond working clean, Cosby tapped into these universal themes in a way that almost literally guided young men from seeing through the lens of a child to early (and eventually, older) adulthood. His transition to television, moreover, yielded a

historic breakthrough with his three consecutive Emmy wins, the first for an African-American lead actor, for the 1960s series *I Spy*. If *The Cosby Show* broke across lines of race in spectacular fashion two decades later, Cosby's ability to do that as a performer had long been established on stage, screen and vinyl.

Stripped of any context, the comedy routines still hold up, but there's no way now to separate them from their author. As new details emerge from his extended deposition, the charges of hypocrisy alone would be damning—given his Jell-O-pitching image and lectures about personal responsibility—even without the alleged criminality, rendered moot only by the statute of limitations.

Except for those who have chosen to circle the wagons around Cosby—which, for starters, requires ignoring the sheer tonnage of women who have come forward to accuse him—his work feels forever tarnished. The court of public opinion has delivered its verdict, and those who would still argue about “innocent until proven guilty” at this point simply sound desperate to defend him.

Viewed that way, his storied career becomes another memory that can't be summoned without considering the source, along with things like Michael Jackson songs and Roman Polanski films. For many, those works now come affixed with a mental asterisk. It's by no means a perfect analogy, but emotionally speaking a close cousin would be sports records stained by steroids or doping, from Mark McGwire and Barry Bonds' homerun marks to Lance Armstrong's racing victories. Yes, we enjoyed and celebrated them at the time, but the joy associated with watching then feels besmirched now.

When Armstrong's cheating was exposed, *New York Times* sports columnist William C. Rhoden wrote, “Perhaps we can agree, moving forward, that our sports heroes do good things but do not have to be good people.”

In theory, it should be possible to separate who people are from what they do—but not unconditionally, especially when victims are involved. What those who once embraced Bill Cosby's work should be allowed is grief—not for him, but for themselves, since they have experienced a kind of loss. And if anyone thinks Cosby is the last iconic figure that will let down those who once admired him, as Pete Rose might say, don't bet on it.