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Comedian for Senator? Don't Laugh

By [DAVID CARR](#)

MINNEAPOLIS, June 13 - The swells who showed up before Al Franken's speech at a Democratic fund-raiser to down finger food and punch were thrilled to see him, all the more so because he continues to make threatening noises about running for the Senate here in 2008.

A former writer and performer for "Saturday Night Live" and more recently a radio host on Air America, Mr. Franken has used his outsider status to hurl humor-based invective and indignation at the powers that be, but he is considering becoming part of what he so frequently assails.

On Saturday evening he worked the crowd as if being accosted by strangers in a sweltering tent redolent of meatballs was his idea of a good time.

It can get mighty personal mighty fast for a native son whom everyone seems to know.

"I jumped ya twice in Thief River Falls," said a middle-age woman in greeting at the pre-speech party in a tent next to the Ted Mann Concert Hall at the University of Minnesota here. The seeming inference of long-ago sexual congress would cause deep blushing elsewhere, but it actually meant that Faith Rud and Mr. Franken had bonded in a far more profoundly Minnesotan way: she had used jumper cables to revive his Volkswagen bus on a cold night long ago after a college gig.

Mr. Franken, who left Minnesota at age 22 but has made a habit of coming back frequently, has suggested he may move his radio show to the state sometime next year. His delivery manages to be caustic and laconic, an unhurried savaging of all that is conservative and Republican, all wrapped up to a trumpeted call to arms.

"In this country, we are going through a very dark period," he told his audience, "and someday your grandchildren are going to ask what you did, and you are going to tell them, 'I worked my butt off,' " he said, exhorting the audience to work to turn out the current administration. He is a public person who likes his public and enjoys a microphone. (He was heckled last week for going on too long while accepting an award from Talkers magazine.)

Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jesse Ventura have already demonstrated that star power can create its own legitimacy in politics, but given Mr. Franken's penchant for going over the top and staying there, he may serve as a test of just how far a celeb-pol can go and still have a valid shot at being elected. A ferocious, unreconstructed liberal, he may show up for the troops as part of U.S.O. tours, but he believes that the war they are fighting is little more than a criminal conspiracy at the highest reaches of government. Mr. Franken can give a speech. He knows the issues. But could he be too partisan for politics?

"There is an intersection between humor and truth," said Sandra Yue, who attended the speech. "He has a sincerity and commitment that I think people will respond to." Before and after the speech at the University of Minnesota here, many people thanked him for rushing back to Minnesota after Senator Paul Wellstone died in a plane crash to campaign for Walter F. Mondale as the senator's successor. The effort failed, and Norman Coleman, a Republican, ended up in the Senate. Mr. Franken and others believe the seat rightfully belongs to the Democrats.

"Aren't you sick of Republican lectures about family values?" he said, mentioning Rush Limbaugh's battles with prescription drugs and Bill O'Reilly's alleged penchant for using the phone to titillating ends. (A sexual harassment lawsuit brought against Mr. O'Reilly was settled last year.)

The prospect of a comedian running for the office sparks belly laughs in some and genuine interest in others.

"Al is no better or no worse, no more or less qualified, than anyone else who has expressed interest in running in 2008, although that is a long way away," said John Van Hecke, campaign manager for the Minnesota House Democratic caucus. "Al says what a lot of people are thinking, but says it in a way that is a lot funnier than almost anyone."

A spokesman for Senator Coleman said that his office would not comment on a potential opponent in a race that is a few years away.

Mr. Franken continues to hedge his bets, partly because Air America seems to be gaining some traction.

"I am not sure that I am running yet," he said, sitting in the concert hall's green room before his appearance. "Part of the calculus is where the radio show goes. I don't want to leave them in the lurch."

There would not seem to be much of a fit between Mr. Franken and his re-adopted home state. Minnesota Nice, as it is called, means that when the woman serving coffee at Caribou, the local doppelgänger of Starbucks, asks how you are doing, she really wants to know. Although Mr. Franken is affable and sports a backpack jammed with wonky articles and books, he is not exactly Minnesota Nice. His last book was titled "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them," and he spends enormous amounts of time on his three-hour radio show truth-squading and savaging various people on the right.

Then again, Minnesota is a place of enormous, and not easily explained, contradictions. A place where lions of the Democratic party - Hubert H. Humphrey and Eugene J. McCarthy - once strode the earth, it takes voting very seriously, with a 79 percent turnout in the 2004 general election. Yet in 1998 it elected a professional wrestler to run the state. Minnesotans, who show up in droves at the state fair to marvel at seed art and butter sculptures but also show up en masse at the legitimate theater, are their own darn thing. So frequently cast as droll practitioners of the art of common sense, they have displayed some fairly atavistic tendencies, electing Mr. Ventura out of nowhere as both a slap and a jolt to the system. In their own quiet way, they remain mad as hell and are not going to take it anymore.

On Saturday the crowd of about 500 Minnesotans was hungry for Grade A red meat with a side of invective, and Mr. Franken did not disappoint. He pointed out that he had been married for 30 years and said, "If I get in a debate with Norm Coleman, I plan on asking him, 'Don't you want two people to have what you and your wife have?' " He paused as the roar grew in acknowledgement of the fact that

Senator Coleman and his wife, Laurie, spend significant amounts of time apart because of her acting career.

The laughter filled Mr. Franken with glee, but in the next moment, he choked up while talking about touring with the U.S.O. He is surprisingly raw, breaking down when he mentions his father and, minutes later, screaming with indignation when he talks about money that has gone missing that was intended for redevelopment in Iraq. In that sense he is not remarkably different from Senator Wellstone, known to rattle a lectern with his sheer volume.

"I'd like to think that somebody like me, who says what he thinks and gets his facts right, has a place in politics," Mr. Franken said much later on Saturday, sitting in the Brave New Workshop comedy club on the south side of Minneapolis, where he started performing while in high school. Mr. Franken grew up in St. Louis Park, a Minneapolis suburb, and was admitted to Blake, a competitive and expensive prep school, because, he said, "they needed some Jews to get their SAT scores up."

Minnesotans, as Garrison Keillor has pointed out, are plenty smart in general, just not too fond of showing it off. They are more than willing to invite a prodigal back to the potluck supper that is life here, and to lampoon their own cartoonish dimensions at the same time. At the end of Mr. Franken's speech, he received a thunderous ovation - and a special gift from Margaret Anderson Kelliher, a Democratic state representative from Minneapolis.

She presented him with a Crock-Pot, along with some advice: "Nothing says 'I care' quite like wild-rice hot dish for the neighbors."