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Chris Farley

Commitment to the Gag

In the 1980s, I lived in downtown Madison near a garage that had been converted into a closet-sized theater. Chris Farley performed there with the sketch-comedy troupe Ark Improv, but the place seemed way too small for him. He was a big guy with a big personality, inclined to slam into walls and props.

Chris grew up in Madison in a devout Catholic family, spending his teenage summers in the 1970s as a camp counselor near Minocqua. He often impressed friends with his kindness, but he also had a wild side, which led to substance abuse during his college years at Milwaukee's Marquette University.

Farley moved back to Madison in 1986 and worked for his dad's oil company, where he specialized in making customers laugh. One desperate night, he turned up at Ark Improv's door in a drunken stupor, asking about an audition. He needed a direction—an outlet for his impulses that had no place in business or church. Could comedy be his salvation?

Chris soon wrangled an audition. With all eyes on him, and his future on the line, he fell violently out of a chair. Alarmed troupe members thought he'd had a heart attack until they realized he was joking. Impressed by his commitment to the gag, they hired him on the spot.

So began Farley's career of busting up the stage. In addition to his loud physical humor, it became apparent that he could bring out a character's quiet side. Clearly, Ark's one-hundred-seat theater could not hold him for long. He moved on to the major Chicago troupes ImprovOlympic and Second City, and in 1990, he ascended



For Chris Farley, pictured in 1996's *Black Sheep*, comedy was salvation.
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to comedy heaven as a cast member on NBC's *Saturday Night Live*. The show's cohort of young performers—Adam Sandler, David Spade, Chris Rock, Julia Sweeney, Tim Meadows—realized they couldn't top him. Indeed, they could barely keep a straight face during their scenes with Farley, never knowing what he'd do next.

His characters quickly entered the national conversation: the overweight Chippendales dancer, the overeating Gap girl, and the Chicago Bears superfan who suffers a red-faced choking fit in his chair, recalling that startling Ark Improv audition. His bellowing motivational speaker ("I live in a *van* down by the *river*!") had also appeared in embryonic form at Ark.

As much as I loved seeing Farley fall onto coffee tables, reducing them to splinters, my favorite SNL routine was the subtler "Chris Farley Show." Tapping into his real-life sweetness, he plays a self-loathing simpleton who has somehow landed his own celebrity talk show. His flop sweat and foolish questions are hilarious, yes, but also a little heartbreaking. You don't expect such vulnerability in a sketch-comedy character.

Farley had five great years on *Saturday Night Live* and three hit movies, including the much-loved *Tommy Boy*. Then, as periodically happened, his wild side reemerged. He died in 1997 during a drug and alcohol binge, despite his repeated attempts at rehab.

Showbiz stars traveled to Madison for his funeral at Our Lady Queen of Peace Church. Sandler later wrote a song about the mournful experience, confessing that “nothing was harder than saying goodbye / Except watching Chris’s father have his turn to cry.”¹

Farley was laid to rest in a modest chapel near Queen of Peace. It’s down the street from where I live now, and I occasionally wander in to pay my respects. Like Ark Improv’s converted garage, the place feels way too small for him.