

LOU COSTELLO MENTIONED PATERSON IN EVERY FILM HE DID, BUT JOE PISCOPO GAVE US A JOKE WE COULD CALL OUR OWN. HERE ARE TWELVE PAGES OF YUKS AND THE GARDEN STATERS WHO PROVIDE THEM.

“You from
JOISEY?”

I’m from
JOISEY.

What Exit?”



“WHAT EXIT?” IT’S LIKE “JESUS WEPT,” EXCEPT THAT IT GETS A LOT more laughs.

Joe Piscopo, the architect of the 25-year-old Garden State gag, blames it all on the Cape May–Lewes Ferry. “I was on my way back from a stand-up gig in Virginia,” he says. “People are out of their cars, and I see this woman look at my plates. She comes flying over, and in this high-pitched voice says, ‘Hey, you from Joisey? I’m from Joisey!’ She was so sweet and so excited to have found another local, but it was a little freaky.

“So the rest of the way home, I’m writing the bit in my head,” Piscopo says. “My brother Richie helped me come up with the character, Paulie Herman. We had him working in a chemical plant in Piscataway, and we used *Herman* because of the voice that Al ‘Grandpa’ Lewis used to call Fred Gwynne on *The Munsters*.”

Piscopo had just joined the cast of *Saturday Night Live* in the first season after the original Not Ready for Prime Time Players and producer Lorne Michaels left the series. Some of the original writers remained, but new producer Jean Doumanian had the support of no one, and the rest of the new cast were fighting to make their own marks on the show. “All the original writers, like Michael O’Donoghue and other cerebral types, hated the skit,” Piscopo says, “but they finally let us do it, with Deborah Harry, who is also a Jersey Girl, playing opposite me. All of a sudden, I just ad-lib, ‘What exit?’ and the audience went wild.”

Still, Piscopo remains conflicted. The show aired on February 14, 1981, but not everyone saw it as a Garden State valentine. “Before that, people who made jokes about New Jersey were from somewhere else, and it *felt* that way,” he says. “You can make

a joke about a place you know—a place that you love—and it’s more understood.” But *What exit?* became a universal catch phrase, one of the rare successes in that transitional season.

“After that, we decided to do a filmed shot for the next show. We’re filming just off of Exit 14A in Bayonne, when I take a look around and it just hits me. I am in the middle of fourteen lanes of traffic, oil refineries with open flames—*open flames!*—coming out the stacks, planes flying overhead, and as funny as it sounds, I could only think, *God, I love this state*.

“For me, it opened the door to a prime-time special on ABC called *Joe Piscopo’s Jersey Special*, and I even did an album called *Jersey*. I wrote it because it was funny, but it was also out of love. Hey, I still live here, don’t I?”

He just won’t say what exit.

—DAVID CHMIEL