

# THE Nation.

## Mad for Rachel Maddow

by **REBECCA TRAISTER**

July 30, 2008

*This article appeared in the August 18, 2008 edition of The Nation.*

In a year bursting with memorable moments in televised political punditry, the first may have come on January 8, when MSNBC commentator Rachel Maddow explained one of the quick-spreading theories behind Hillary Clinton's victory in New Hampshire, a surprise win that had knocked many of Maddow's on-air colleagues on their asses.

"You want to know who they're blaming for women voters breaking for Hillary Clinton over Barack Obama?" a delighted Maddow



VIRGINIA SHERWOOD/NBC NEWSWIRE VIA AP IMAGES

Rachel Maddow reports from the MSNBC newsroom in New York City, January 3.

asked co-panelist Pat Buchanan and host Chris Matthews, her eyes flashing. "They're blaming Chris Matthews! People are citing specifically Chris...not only for his own views but also as a symbol of what the mainstream media has done to Hillary Clinton."

Matthews sputtered dismissively, but Maddow wasn't done yet. "People feel the media is piling on Hillary Clinton," she said, "and they're coming to her defense with their votes." For Matthews, who'd been enjoying near rapturous pleasure over the presumptive early-season thumping of his personal hobgoblin, there could not have been worse news than that his own commentary might have paved the way for Clinton's triumph. Yet here was just this headline, delivered by Maddow, looking like Sylvester the Cat, practically licking yellow feathers from the corners of her mouth.

"I didn't mean it in a mean way at all," says Maddow over breakfast on a summer day many months and many MSNBC promotions away from that indelible January night. "But I knew that it was just going to blow his mind."

Matthews is far from the first talking head to get this treatment. Long before this primary season, clips of Maddow, an Air America host often invited on cable news shows as a ballsy gremlin of the left, zipped around the Internet. Her specialty was making Tucker Carlson's head explode, or getting under Buchanan's skin until all he could do was gibber at her about socialism. But presidential election cycles provide the hot klieg lights under which character actors mature into media leading ladies, and at 35, with fewer than five years of national broadcast experience under her belt, Rachel Maddow is the explosive star of the season. She's gone from being a popular guest analyst on MSNBC to an exclusive commentator to a regular guest host for the network's prize pig, *Countdown With Keith Olbermann*. Now there is increasing clang and clamor over the possibility that she will get her own show on MSNBC.

What's remarkable about Maddow's ascension is not its velocity--Hurricane Katrina made Anderson Cooper in less than a week--but the shifts in media it may demarcate. Maddow is one of the few left-liberal women to bust open the world of TV punditry, which has made icons of right-wing commentators like Ann Coulter and Michelle Malkin. Unlike her beautiful, bilious conservative female counterparts or the cocksure boys-on-the-bus analysts, however, Maddow didn't get here by bluster and bravado but with a combination of crisp thinking and galumphing good cheer. Remarkably, this season's discovery isn't a glossy matinee idol or a smooth-talking partisan hack but a PhD Rhodes scholar lesbian policy wonk who started as a prison AIDS activist.

All of which raises a crucial question: does Maddow's unlikely success, reliant on her ability to defy cliché and categorization at every turn, signal a move in punditry away from the thuggish and the angry and toward the lucid and sophisticated? Or has her powerful charisma and canny career management allowed her to break the rules--without actually breaking a mold?

When we meet, Maddow is halfway through an eight-night stand filling in for a vacationing Olbermann on *Countdown*, and she is vibrating with energy from the previous evening. She believes she has three distinct responsibilities when subbing: not messing anything up for the show's permanent stewards, keeping Olbermann's ratings high and just being Rachel Maddow. "Trying to do it as if I'm Keith isn't the best way to go," she explains.

Maddow fulfilled all three responsibilities in her July stint, showcasing her obvious facility with the medium while putting her own stamp on the program. Nonetheless, she still dwells on her anxieties about the mechanics of hosting--when to look at the camera, when to turn to the script--which she says Olbermann has tutored her on. "It's like rocket science, honestly," she says. "And I feel like I've got a learning curve that's like the Matterhorn! Holy mackerel!"

Of course, Olbermann recently told the *Kansas City Star* that his protégée mastered the technical stuff in about ten minutes, and that on the first night she stepped in for him, she didn't make a single teleprompter mistake, while he averages four or five a night. But Maddow's signature mixture of self-deprecation and gusto, her holy mackerel-ness, is as good a place as any to start thinking about her singular success. Everything about her radiates competence and a deft, bright careerism. She wants to succeed, makes no bones about campaigning for her own television show and yet evinces a regular-person charm and self-doubt that ensures you'll never mistake her ambition for bloodthirst or bullying.

Unlike her Air America founding classmates Janeane Garofalo and Al Franken, Maddow is not a professional comedian. Still, it's clear that she finds many of the characters lumbering across the tableau of American politics a total hoot. She finds her own story pretty hilarious, too. Asked if her television career is the culmination of a plotted path, Maddow laughs. "You mean when I started working on AIDS in prisons, was this where I thought it would end up? Yeah. This is pretty much it. Phase forty-seven of my master plan."

Maddow grew up in the Bay Area; she came out just before college in 1990 and became an AIDS activist at the epicenter of the epidemic. She earned a degree in public policy from Stanford before beginning work with ACT UP and the AIDS Legal Referral Panel. But Maddow had trouble breaking into treatment activism, which was then the rock-star world of AIDS policy. "It was boys' land," she says. "I knew like two women total who were doing treatment activism. And I didn't totally get it. I'm not like Barbie--'Math is hard!'--but it was a techie world, and I didn't feel like I could be all that helpful."

What she discovered instead was the nexus of the radical prison reform movement of the '70s and modern AIDS activism. It was an area where Maddow felt progress--like allowing secure hospices to take dying prisoners--was possible. "Dying behind bars?" she says fourteen years later. "Wicked expensive. And wicked stupid. And also mean. So let's make the hospices get what they want and also do the right thing!"

In 1995 Maddow traveled as a Rhodes scholar to Oxford, where she began a doctorate in political science, focusing on the intersection of the AIDS and prison movements. She moved back to the United States to finish her dissertation, crashing with friends in Western Massachusetts. "I wanted to live somewhere where I'd be unhappy," she explains. "And I have no interest in New England, hate winter, don't like the country, not fond of animals." More than a decade later, Maddow still divides her time between her home in Northampton, Massachusetts, and an apartment in Greenwich Village, both of which she shares with her girlfriend, artist Susan Mikula. The couple have been together for almost ten years, and Maddow calls their relationship "my proudest accomplishment."

After defending her dissertation, Maddow picked up work on AIDS in prison again, as well as a series

of odd jobs, from cleaning buckets at a coffee bean factory to being a handyman who didn't know how to fix anything. As part of her patchwork career, she attended an open audition to replace the "news girl" at the local radio station. She got the job and took a shine to the airwaves. When Air America launched in 2004, Maddow lobbied the network to bring her aboard. It did, hiring her to co-host *Unfiltered* with Chuck D and Lizz Winstead. When the show was canceled a year later, Maddow got her own two-hour weekday slot. "They had no business hiring me," Maddow says of the flier Air America took on her. "As it turned out, it worked out for them. I mean, I hope it did. I hope they're happy!"

Maddow is one of the only original Air Americans to be left standing after the company's rocky four-and-a-half-year history, and her mainstream success is an unqualified victory for the network. If she got plucked away by grabby television hands, it would be a tough loss. "We view her as a homegrown talent," says Air America chairman Charles Kireker, who has run the network since February. "We hope and expect to have her continue hosting a radio show on Air America for a long time."

In an e-mail, Maddow confirms her desire to host both a TV and a radio program: "If O'Reilly, Hannity and Beck can do that, so can I." Still, Kireker has reason to be nervous. Calling from the Netroots convention in Austin, he'd just come from a panel during which mention of a still-imaginary Maddow TV show prompted an eruption of applause. "We've seen the potential for greatness in Rachel for years," says Kireker. "What's so remarkable is that now it's coming so quickly. This election cycle has propelled it forward in a meteoric fashion."

No kidding. Love is too weak a word to describe how some people feel about Rachel Maddow. They lurve her, loave her, luff her. *New York* magazine's online *Intelligencer* column recently ran an item headlined *Why We're Gay for Rachel Maddow*, and the blogosphere is dotted with posts like "I'm totally gay for Rachel Maddow." The "gay for Rachel" meme appears to transcend gender and sexuality. Women, men, straight and not straight: they're all gay for her. In a year in which we have decided to become postracial and postgender, Maddow may embody a media in which adoring fandom is postgay.

That's appropriate, since part of the hypnotic hold Maddow has on her audience is that while she is one of the first fully forged stars of the "liberal media," her commentary is, in a funny way, also postpartisan. During an incendiary primary season, Maddow maintained an almost maddening equilibrium, expressing dismay and appreciation for just about every candidate. She was very hard on Clinton; her face still hardens when she talks about the 3 am red phone ad, which she calls "an abomination," and Clinton's war vote, which she says is "unforgivable." But Maddow also finds herself "frequently underwhelmed" by Obama. "He got it right in opposing the war," she says, "but his war policy stuff now is bullshit. It's total bullshit, and I've never been impressed by it. One or two brigades a month? You want your son to be in the last brigade?"

Contrary to widely held opinion, Maddow did not endorse a candidate in the primary. "I have never and still don't think of myself as an Obama supporter, either professionally or actually," says Maddow, adding that she feels "liberated by having a professional role in which it's probably better for me not to take sides."

"She is a civics geek," says Vanessa Silverton-Peel, executive producer of *The Rachel Maddow Show*.

"She wants to talk about AIDS in prison and the Constitution and the war in Iraq. Policy is her main focus. Not winning elections."

On radio, Maddow starts every day with war news. She focuses hard on policy and on the politics of the absurd. "I'm fascinated by the evil child actor twins that run Poland," she says, as well as inflation in Zimbabwe ("How many bails of hundred-dollar bills does it take to buy bread today in Zimbabwe?"). She's obsessed with the Iraqi national soccer team, librarians and cocktail mixology; she once said that she'd like to "professionally bully people about what they drink." Then there are her specialties: foreign policy, the GI Bill, veterans groups. "That's the most satisfying thing about being able to do my own story selection," she says. "You get to pick that stuff. And whoever is President or in control in Congress is not going to affect that."

It's ironic that Maddow, perhaps Air America's most successful product, has traveled through the looking glass of partisan journalism and come out the other side an electoral agnostic, a liberal in the purest, almost mineral sense of the word. She loves the country, loves the Constitution and loves what is moving about politics. A worldview shaped by these concerns, one that maintains a well-manicured distance from electoral *Sturm und Drang*, could be a powerful asset for Maddow and the rest of the left-leaning media, an inoculation against future tune-out should they get their wish--an Obama administration that could rob them of their fury-fueled audiences.

Maddow, who has not owned a TV since 1990, tries to limit her exposure to online and print criticism of herself. If and when she lands her own berth, and with it a nightly viewership unused to seeing a brainy lesbian with rock-solid expertise on military policy or the IAVA, that will become more difficult. She already bristles slightly when talking about how she gets all the girl questions. "I love the idea that I am the voice of woman," she says, gesturing at her T-shirt, baggy jeans and Red Sox cap. "Look at me. It's like: really? The one woman in the room is really mannish." In real life, as advertised on her website, Maddow dresses "like a first-grader" and hypothesizes that her mild androgyny might have greased her infiltration of boyworld punditry. "I look like a dude," she says. Of course, for her television gigs, Maddow gets coiffed and painted and dressed up in what she calls "lady clothes" to fit a more traditional bill, a process she says she used to "resist and get angsty about," but to which she has now surrendered.

When I ask whether some of her signature habits--the fascination with the evil twin Polish dictators, the obsession with the nuts and bolts of foreign policy--will go the way of her chunky glasses and naked lips, she balks. "The only reason I get these opportunities is because of my sensibility," she says. "I'm not being invited to do these things because of my looks or my facility with language. What they're after is the thing you're saying I have to trade off."

She continues, "My instinct sometimes is to trade it off. Like, 'Oh, I'm in the big leagues now so I better dial it back. But they don't want it dialed back. They are booking me or asking me to host because they like what they see.'"

---

### **About Rebecca Traister**

Rebecca Traister is a senior writer for *Salon*, where she covers women in media, politics and entertainment.

[more...](#)

---

**Copyright © 2008 The Nation**