Review: Dave Chappelle’s 8:46 lends catharsis, insight, and some laughs

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Dave Chappelle’s *8:46*.
In Dave Chappelle’s latest impromptu performance, distributed by Netflix via YouTube, Chappelle responds to those calling for his voice during America’s current racial reckoning. In particular, he addresses a call-out by CNN anchor Don Lemon who demanded during a broadcast that Chappelle and other African-American celebrities speak out on the killings and protests taking place in the country and around the world.

This call comes in an era where celebrities and companies can immediately and directly reach millions of people—and some have done so more effectively than others, with each degree of response receiving its own backlash. In Chappelle’s case, his material has always met the issue of race in America head-on with equal parts analysis and hilarity—typically with blue jokes sprinkled throughout. It’s what made his Comedy Central show a paradigm-shifting success and why, after decades in the business, his commentary is still highly sought after, as rare as it has been in recent years.

Chappelle says he didn’t want to “step in front of the streets and talk over the work these people are doing.” But in formulating *8:46*, his personal connections to George Floyd, John Crawford, and a slave-born black bishop from South

Carolina (among others) reminded him, and all of us, that no one has the luxury of saying “this isn’t about me.”

My palms are sweating

Tuning into *8:46* for the first time, I had palpable anxiety from the outset. This wasn’t helped by an opening scene of masked audience members getting their temperatures checked and quietly filling the socially distanced outdoor seating. It’s a stark reminder that while you’re watching *8:46* for Chappelle’s commentary on one deadly plague, we’re still in the firm grip of another one. Chappelle later notes that this is, in fact, the first concert gathering (not in cars) in the US since most of the country went into lockdown for the COVID-19 pandemic.

- An audience member gets his temperature checked
  YouTube/Netflix
- Audience members are socially distanced.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Chappelle lightens the mood.
  YouTube/Netflx
- Chappelle cracking jokes.

A Grammy award-winning comedian, Dave Chappelle has made a uniquely successful career out of turning the toughest and thorniest topics into thought-provoking meditations while reliably making people laugh. *8:46* leans heavily toward the tough and thorny side, while still provoking laughter during a few bright spots. There are joyful moments, but as Chappelle points out early in his 26-minute set, his personal thoughts and celebrity aren’t what’s needed right now. “You kids are excellent drivers,” he says, referencing the protesters. “I’m comfortable in the back seat of the car, so carry on, young ones.”

He later declares, “It’s hard to figure out what to say about George Floyd, so I’m not gonna say it yet,” ostensibly

preparing us—and perhaps himself—for the heavy truths he's about to tackle. Chappelle's comedy has always had a supremely casual feel. His sets effortlessly portray his likability, even through the touchiest subjects. He exudes a calmness, confidence, and playful nonchalance that's equal parts comforting and mesmerizing. In his brief effort to avoid diving directly into the pain and anger of *8:46*, his likability and poise don't waver. He strikes up a short back-and-forth with an audience member and delivers a few quips before facing the subject at hand.

To shift one's perspective

This portion begins with the story of what he calls the scariest 35 seconds in his life. It was his first time experiencing an earthquake, specifically the Northridge Earthquake of 1994, which killed 60 people and injured 9,000 more. Calmly, he recounts the details of what went through his mind during the 35 seconds he thought he wouldn't live to tell about. Then he pulls out another figurative stopwatch.

"This man kneeled on a man's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds! Can you imagine that?" Chappelle yells. His voice reaches a rare level of rage. Momentarily, his regard for the audience's comfort dissolves, and the anger of millions is personified through his own. "He knew he was gonna die," Chappelle continues. "He called for his dead mother. I've only seen that once before in my life: my father on his deathbed called for his grandmother."

Enlarge / Chappelle checking his reference notes.
YouTube/Netflix

He then brings up another reference point for the special's titular number: Chappelle himself was born at 8:46 am. His voice tightens, as though holding back tears, betraying briefly the immense sadness that underpins the short narrative. This tense release is followed by a succession of off-the-cuff one-liners. A defense mechanism, maybe, but a welcome one.

He sits back down, his head bowed. He reads his journal for reference, takes a deep breath, and continues.

> *"We saw ourselves like you see yourself."*

He then tells the story of Christopher Dorner, a black former

U.S. Marine and LAPD officer who, after witnessing and reporting an instance of police brutality from his partner, was fired from the police force and denied rehiring through the formal appeals process. Soon thereafter, Dorner vowed to wage “unconventional and asymmetric warfare” on the LAPD, killing four people, including police officers and their family members. He was killed in a standoff with police who located him in a San Bernardino cabin. Multiple misidentifications of Dorner’s truck were made in the manhunt, leaving an elderly woman, her daughter, and a white man injured in two separate hails of mistargeted gunfire.

“One of their own was murdered,” Chappelle explains of the police’s hunger for Hammurabian justice. “So how the fuck can’t they understand what’s going on in these streets? We saw ourselves like you see yourself.”

Enlarge / Socially-distanced seating.
YouTube/Netflix

Throughout the next few minutes, Dave paints a vivid picture of America today. Masterfully and respectfully, he lays out a succession of stories with a mesmerizing cadence—though neither Chappelle's rhythmic retelling nor text on a screen could ever do justice to the lives lost.

The murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, John Crawford, and the mass shooting of nine black churchgoers in South Carolina all took place after Dorner's police killings. All but two were perpetrated by police, and only mass-murderer Dylann Roof was indicted on murder charges. In the absence of legal consequences for these murders, lethal retaliation was once again leveled against police officers—twice—each time at the

hands of black former US Marines.

“What are they doing? Why would our guys do that—black people from the military? Because they believed, just like they did when they were [joining the military] that they were fighting acts of terror,” Dave explains.

Chappelle recalls this being the first time he thought he needed to leave the country. “[They] will never understand,” he realized. “I’m tired of explaining to these people something that’s so goddamn obvious.”

These words echo in my head all too clearly; it’s the same sentiment I and many others are currently struggling with. But Dave says the only thing that kept him from falling into abject despair was watching Kobe Bryant’s last game in the NBA—a moment that appears to have been a valuable reminder of how much his own talents can lift up others.

The beauty and the tragedy

In wrapping up, he tells one more personal anecdote. The night after the election of Donald Trump, Chappelle hosted *Saturday Night Live*, where he delivered a rather hopeful monologue, wishing Donald Trump luck and expressing that he’d give Trump a chance, demanding that he give them, “the historically disenfranchised,” a chance too. Oh, the simpler times of late 2016.

“Here’s what I said on *Saturday Night Live* that I got completely wrong,” he says with a long exhale. As I mentally prepare for the obligatory, “I was wrong about Trump,” he instead corrects a historical inaccuracy. He says his statement, which noted that no other black people had been invited to the White House since Frederick Douglas until Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s presidency, was incorrect.

“It happened one other time before that: Woodrow Wilson,” he

explained. In 1918, after the lynching of a wealthy black man in South Carolina, President Woodrow Wilson accepted a delegation of black residents from the state, lead by Bishop William David Chappelle. “It’s where I get my name—he’s my great-grandfather who was a slave when he was born,” Chappelle continues, “These things are not old. This is not a long time ago. It’s *today*. That man’s wife was the woman that my father called on, on his deathbed. And they were slaves!”

“And [they] say, ‘Why isn’t David Chappelle saying anything?’ Because David Chappelle understands what he is seeing. These streets will speak for themselves, whether I am alive, or dead. I trust you guys, I love you guys,” he says, concluding the special. He leaves the stage where our eyes, hearts, and minds are transfixed, and we’re left to turn back to the world, where a funny familiar face isn’t explaining and empathizing with all that you see. It’s a tough reality to go back to, but he’s right. We’ll speak for ourselves. But, wow, isn’t it nice to have an intelligent and sympathetic shoulder to rest on, even for 26 fleeting minutes?

Enlarge / Bishop William David Chappelle, Dave’s great grandfather, who lead a black delegation to Woodrow Wilson’s White House

Archive.org/Project Gutenberg
The beauty of Dave Chappelle's comedy is that it never takes him long to arrive at a thoughtful, neatly tied-together narrative or anecdote that ultimately makes a sharp point or gut-busting joke. He'd previously held the record for longest stand-up set at six hours and 12 minutes of joke telling, and this special was taped only two weeks after George Floyd's murder. His speed, stamina, and accuracy are unparalleled. The tragedy of this special is that he didn't have to do much to link his life to that of George Floyd, nor for the reality or context of it to pierce us as sharply as it penetrated him.

I can't say Dave Chappelle has never let me down. In recent years he's expressed views on the LGBTQ+ community, particularly those persons identifying as transgendered, that I fully oppose—and he's been stubborn to change them. Previous to this, for an almost unheard-of period of time, it seemed he simply couldn't miss. And in *8:46* he nails it again. This track record plays no small part in his singular ability to set up an impromptu live show in the middle of a pandemic, have it taped and distributed by the two largest video platforms in existence, and garner tens of millions of views in a few days.

And who else could do *all of that* to speak about *this?*

Dave lamented calls for him to speak up when so many other voices need to be heard. But in sharing his personal experience, through pain and laughter, he once again holds up the mirror to America—only this time the reflection is changing.

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