

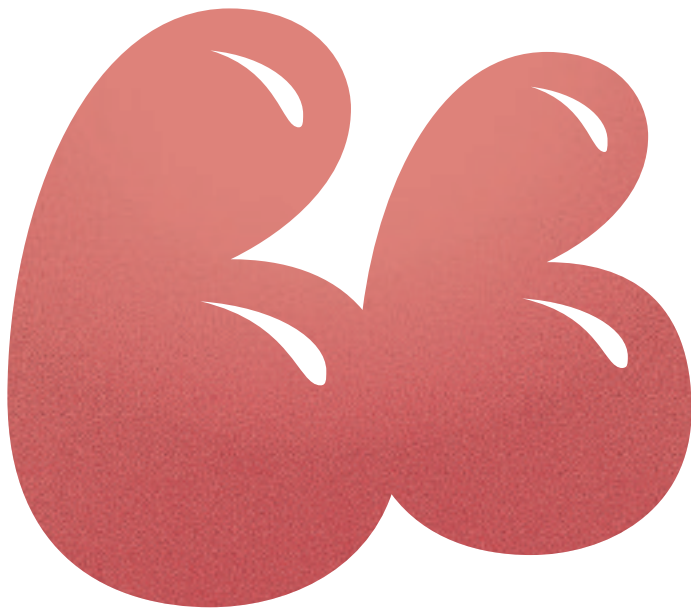


**Bowling**

**BOWEN YANG** is the breakout star of *Saturday Night Live* and he's about to get bigger with a role in blockbuster musical film *Wicked*. Jessica Prupas finds out how the comedian feels about levelling up

**PHOTOGRAPHS:  
BEN LAMBERTY**





There's no such thing as a healthy way to experience fame," Bowen Yang tells me. We're sitting at a third-wave coffee shop in Brooklyn; the *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) star has just come from his *Vera* cover shoot. He gazes over his iced latte as he says this but, metaphorically, he's staring over a cliff: soon the film version of musical *Wicked* will come out, in which Yang plays a supporting role. Though he's been in many films before, this is by far his highest-profile gig. When it's released, a lot more people will know his face, if not his name.

He is currently, in his own words, occupying a "Goldilocks zone" of fame: famous enough that he can basically do whatever he wants, but not so famous that he's the subject of rabid stan accounts or scrutinised for partying a bit too hard at Coachella. Since he joined SNL in 2018, he's cemented himself as the show's breakout star, captaining its most widely seen sketches – like one in which he plays the iceberg that sank the *Titanic* ("That was a really long time ago. I've done a lot of reflecting to try and move past it," the iceberg tells *Weekend Update* anchor Colin Jost) or, more controversially, as internet-famous baby hippo Moo Deng impersonating pop star Chapell Roan (more on that later).

But, even though SNL is a comedy institution that lives on broadcast television, *Wicked* is a whole other beast. The mega-blockbuster promises to introduce Yang to people who aren't plugged into internet-viral comedy, or





*Opening pages:  
Shirt & trousers:  
Versace  
Tank: Lucas Stowe  
Shoes: Giuseppe Zanotti  
Necklace: Jonas Studios  
Earring, watch & ring:  
Cartier*

*This page:  
Tank: Lucas Stowe  
Vest: Ouer  
Coat: APPARIS  
Trousers: R Swiader  
Shoes: Giuseppe Zanotti  
Watch & ring: Cartier  
Bracelet: Luis Morais*

to even more people outside the USA where *SNL* isn't a major cultural force.

It's a strange place to be in, that liminal space between broad recognition and mainstream fame. And it can do strange things to people. Yang has spoken previously about how the gruelling shooting schedule for *Wicked* – which required him to fly back and forth between London, where the movie was filming, and New York on his breaks from *SNL* – put him in a dark place. He realised, in the blur of planes, cars and film sets, there were some major things in his personal life he needed to address. "It was a great time to reflect and also spin out a bit," he recalls.

His career was going better than ever, so it was a classic "Why aren't I happy?" moment. "There's such a dissonance between the circumstance and the interiority of it. I learned that that doesn't go away talking to other people. That is the human condition, to feel insecure, not worthy. I let myself feel that dissonance and hopefully I have the right takeaway from it."

It's another familiar feeling, though the vast majority of us won't have experienced it: the trappings of fame. The strings and surplus requirements of success. There are things from the old days Yang misses. "I'm nostalgic for how scrappy it was. There were no stage gates to clear." He's talking about a time, before *SNL*, when he was coming up with a cohort of queer come-

dians that included Julio Torres – who later created surreal comedy *Fantasma*, in which Yang also stars – Joel Kim Booster and Yang's *Las Culturistas* podcast co-host, Matt Rogers. They often performed together in a sketch show organised by writer-performers Aaron Jackson and Josh Sharp at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in New York. Each of them has found success in their own way now, and need to navigate the expectations of agents, managers and the public. "It's funny, back then we didn't need to be given permission to do something and yet there are so many more doors that are open now for everybody. Two things can be true: the old days were a little more free and the current circumstances give us latitude to do what we want.

"You're in this superstructure that is a little bit daunting," he continues. "And no matter what we do it will always be a little mystifying to us and I guess that's by design. You're supposed to have a lot of people say yes or no. I miss not having to machete my way through a bunch of periphery."

It's a position neither Yang nor his cohorts imagined for themselves. "What's really heartening is that we're all navigating this in an agnostic way because we're like, oh, we never thought this would happen."

Yang was born in Brisbane, Australia, but grew up in Montreal, Canada, and then Aurora, Colorado, in the US. His parents are both

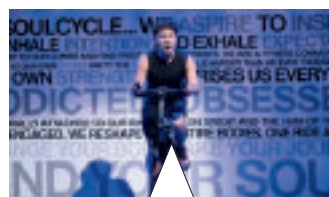
*Below: Tank: AMI  
Trousers: Ouer  
Coat & trench: AKNVAS  
Shoes: Giuseppe Zanotti  
Sunglasses: VADA  
Earring: Annele  
Watch & ring: Cartier*

*Right:  
Suit & shoes: LUAR  
Shirt: Lucas Stowe  
Jewellery: Cartier*



## LIVE FROM NEW YORK BOWEN YANG'S BEST LINES ON SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE

**As the Titanic iceberg:** "My publicist was very clear. I'm not here to talk about the sinking. I'm here to promote my album"



**As a SoulCycle instructor:** "This morning I Googled racism... I flushed my computer down the toilet – I don't need that negativity in my life"

**As gay Jafar:** "If [Ron DeSantis] thinks he can somehow prevent Disney World from being gay, that carpet has flown"



**As a straight version of himself:** "I've got to keep up appearances with the whole gay thing. It's sort of my meal ticket"







**“The old days were a little more free and the current circumstances give us latitude to do what we want”**

Shirt: Lucas Stowe  
Over shirt: Silk Laundry  
Coat: APPARIS  
Shorts: Ouer  
Shoes: Camper  
Jewellery: Cartier

from China. His father, Ruilin, an engineer, grew up in a straw and mud hut in the Inner Mongolia region. Ruilin's parents were illiterate and as a child he read books for hours by candlelight, eventually pursuing a doctorate in mining explosives. Yang's mother, Meng, a retired physician, is from the north-eastern Liaoning region. Yang spoke Chinese to them at home and, like many immigrant parents, they had certain expectations of their son. When he joined the local improv troupe in Colorado, they were bemused.

“It didn't make any sense to them. They were like, you should be home studying, doing your homework. If you're doing anything it should be like an engineering club,” he remembers. “They came to see a few shows in high school and it just wasn't for them. Especially my dad, he was like, ‘Everyone is being so silly.’ Being frivolous is, like, tantamount to murder or something awful.”

The divide between Yang and his parents was compounded when Ruilin caught Yang using gay chat rooms on the family computer when the comedian was in high school. His confused and distressed parents offered a trade off: he could go to New York University (where his sister was enrolled) after graduating, but only if he attended conversion therapy. He took the bargain. But Yang insists they weren't guided by any sort of pernicious ideology – they were just totally in the dark. “A lot of people assume

my parents were religious. And I think it's because it's a way for them to make sense of it themselves. It's mostly out of being uninformed. The main thing my parents were saying was, ‘We've never

encountered this in China and so it therefore must be a Western invention.”

Yang's identity as a gay man has, somewhat unwittingly, become his calling card on *SNL*. He'll often pull from queer culture in his sketches. Take the hilarious “Sara Lee” sketch – which Yang wrote with Torres, then a writer on a show – in which Harry Styles plays the cake mix company's social media manager, intent on leaving thirsty comments from the corporate account (“Wreck me, Daddy,” he writes under a photo of Joe Jonas). “I've never laid claim to any of that,” Yang says, referring to his identity as a queer comic on the show. He has in the past received criticism from the queer community for attempting to translate parts of the culture to a mass audience.

“There is something to be said about anything queer being compatible with an institution like *SNL*, totally get that. I understand the idea that it's about simplifying or watering down an idea for a general audience. People are protective of their queerness and so anything that compromises that is anathema to it. I don't love compromise, but my parameters right now are within that. We've definitely gotten the note [from producers] that something's too queer. ‘This is a little too blue, a little too lewd.’”

The aforementioned Moo Deng-Chappell Roan sketch – a *Weekend Update* segment back in September – caused an uproar in some queer circles online. Roan fans chastised



Yang for “mocking” (in the words of a now-edited *Variety* headline) a queer woman struggling with her mental health – at the time, Roan was asking fans to respect her boundaries as a newly ultra-famous artist.

Yang defended the sketch on Instagram, saying that the piece was meant to be supportive and that “everything she has ever asked for has been reasonable”. When I speak with him, the controversy is fresh; I ask if the backlash surprised him. “No, it honestly didn’t. But I was rolling my eyes at straight publications using specific language because it’s disingenuous, it’s for clicks. That is something I bristle at because I’m like, I know what’s going on here, and you’re distorting the truth in a way that conserves your business model and it’s not in service to what actually happened.”

The week after I speak with Yang, Roan plays *SNL*. After the show, Yang posts a photo of him and Roan hugging during the curtain call.

Despite that one blip, Yang tells me he mostly feels shielded from the glare of the mainstream press. But, he adds, “I think working at *SNL*... you feel like you’re removed from what’s going on culturally and yet you kind of aren’t. You can feel like you’re Statler and Waldorf from *The Muppet Show* and laugh in your seats from the balcony, and yet the light does shine on you.”

He’s had a long day and so I ask if he wants to end it there. He’s on a break from *SNL* this week and I can only imagine that he wants to be supine on his couch. We say goodbye but as he’s walking out the door, two giggling girls ask shyly if he’ll take a photo with them; he smiles and obliges. There may be a lot more of that soon – or maybe not. Maybe the Goldilocks zone is just right.

From top right: As Pfannee in *Wicked* and as Moo Deng on *Saturday Night Live*

Above:  
Tank: Lucas Stowe  
Under tank: COS  
Coat: Amiri  
Trousers: R Swiader  
Shoes: Loewe  
Watch: Cartier  
Necklace: Luis Morais

## WICKED FUNNY

BOWEN YANG’S CV



### BORN

Bowen Yang was born in Brisbane, Australia, on 6 November 1990. The family moved to Montreal, Canada before settling in Aurora, Colorado.

### EDUCATION

He attended Smoky Hill High School in Aurora and graduated from New York University with a degree in chemistry. He planned to go to medical school and took the MCAT entry exam, but burst out of the exam room before finishing, called his parents and informed them he’d like to pursue comedy instead.

### FUN FACT

He is the first-ever Chinese American cast member on *Saturday Night Live*.

### KEY WORK

#### Saturday Night Live (2019–)

Though he began as a writer on the show before being made a cast member, Yang is without doubt the breakout star of this generation of featured players.

#### Awkwafina Is Nora from Queens (2020–23)

Comedian Awkwafina plays lead Nora in this semi-autobiographical sitcom and Yang is her snarky cousin Edmund, who underachiever Nora fails to measure up to.

#### Fire Island (2022)

Yang plays unlucky-in-love Howie in this queer romance set in the titular Long Island holiday enclave.

#### Dicks: The Musical (2023)

Hilarious and surreal basement-sketch-show-turned-musical-film in which Yang stars as none other than God himself.

