

TV giant Don Francisco celebrates 50 years of 'Sabado Gigante'

By Yvonne Villarreal of the Los Angeles Times

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MIAMI — At 71, Don Francisco is an institution in the Spanish-speaking world as the unmistakable and singular host of “Sabado Gigante,” which means “Giant Saturday.” The sturdy Chilean-born showman is the enduring attraction in a weekly three-hour cavalcade famous for its bikini-clad models, slapstick sketches and madcap contests, and which has become a welcome weekend siren call to the Latino diaspora.

“Sabado Gigante’ is its own unique thing,” said Chon Noriega, director of UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center. “It’s that little-bit-of-everything approach — the scantily clad girls, the circus acts ... when you come across it, you’d be surprised at how long you sit there watching it. I don’t think some people would like to admit it or feel comfortable being entertained by it because it is sort of the lowest-common-denominator approach to entertainment.”

Francisco’s show, which combines the sensibilities of such English-speaking classics as “Benny Hill” and “The Carol Burnett Show” with a splash of “American Idol,” lives up to its sizable name. It airs in more than 40 countries and boasts tens of millions of weekly viewers, including more than 2.2 million in the United States, most of them in Miami, New York and Los Angeles.

Like Francisco, the largely unchanging show has defied the capricious tastes of several generations and has proven indestructible to the competition for five decades. Last Saturday’s four-hour special, which was taped the previous Wednesday night, officially marked the show’s golden anniversary.

“This is one of those feats that we will never see again in television history — never,” said Cesar Conde, president of Univision.

The show’s fame is hardly confined to Spanish-speaking audiences. Thanks to its incredible longevity, many English-speaking Americans have at least heard of the program, if not tuned in on occasion to see the wacky proceedings unfold. In perhaps one of the surest signs of modern American cool, Comedy Central’s Stephen Colbert regularly parodies the Miami-based program by posing as Esteban Colberto, host of the Spanish language newscast “Colberto Reporto Gigante.”

While it’s a required stopover for Latino celebrities promoting their projects, the show has also attracted an enviable list of English-speaking guests through the years including Jerry Lee Lewis, Tony Bennett, and Bill and Melinda Gates.

In recent years, its guests also routinely feature American politicians eager to reach out to the nation’s fastest growing and increasingly influential minority. During the 2000 presidential campaign, Francisco interviewed George W. Bush at his Texas ranch as well as Democratic candidate Al Gore.

On a traditionally difficult night in American television, the show continues to register solid ratings and even has some traction with the younger demographic. Among adults 18- to 49-years-old, “Sabado Gigante” is usually in the top five nationwide for its time period regardless of language, and often ranks

first in New York, Miami, San Francisco, Phoenix and Los Angeles.

“Everyone wants to advertise on it. It’s considered family friendly,” said Danielle Gonzales, managing director of the Chicago-based multicultural ad agency Tapestry. “It may not be the water cooler program, but it’s tried and true. It’s like a good pair of blue jeans.”