

'I felt humiliated': Kamahl on racism, Hey Hey It's Saturday and cancel culture



'Friends of mine in America to this day, they can't believe that somebody would treat an artist with that amount of disrespect,' says Kamahl, now 86, about Hey Hey It's Saturday's racial mocking.

Australia's easy listening king says he 'kept smiling and pretending all was OK' as the taunts on the variety show kept coming

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When Daryl Somers, former host of Hey Hey It's Saturday, told the Daily Telegraph that "you probably could not get away with half the stuff you could on Hey Hey now because of political correctness and cancel culture", it reminded many viewers of two things.

One, that Hey Hey It's Saturday had already been cancelled twice: in 1999, after a 28-year run, and in 2010, when a brief reboot of the series was marred by an infamous blackface sketch.

The other, was the type of "humour" the Australian variety show traded in.

A montage on Twitter, compiling a series of incidents in which the singer Kamahl was racially mocked and belittled on the show, went viral. In another cartoon, he was depicted in a stew pot with a bone through his nose.



Kamahl says he doesn't think Daryl Somers encouraged the racist comments on Hey Hey It's Saturday, but he didn't stop it either. 'He was a bystander.'

The now 86-year-old said he often felt “humiliated” by his experiences as a regular guest on the show. Speaking to Guardian Australia this week, he said he had been invited repeatedly to appear on the show during the reboot, but “found reasons not to go” at the time.

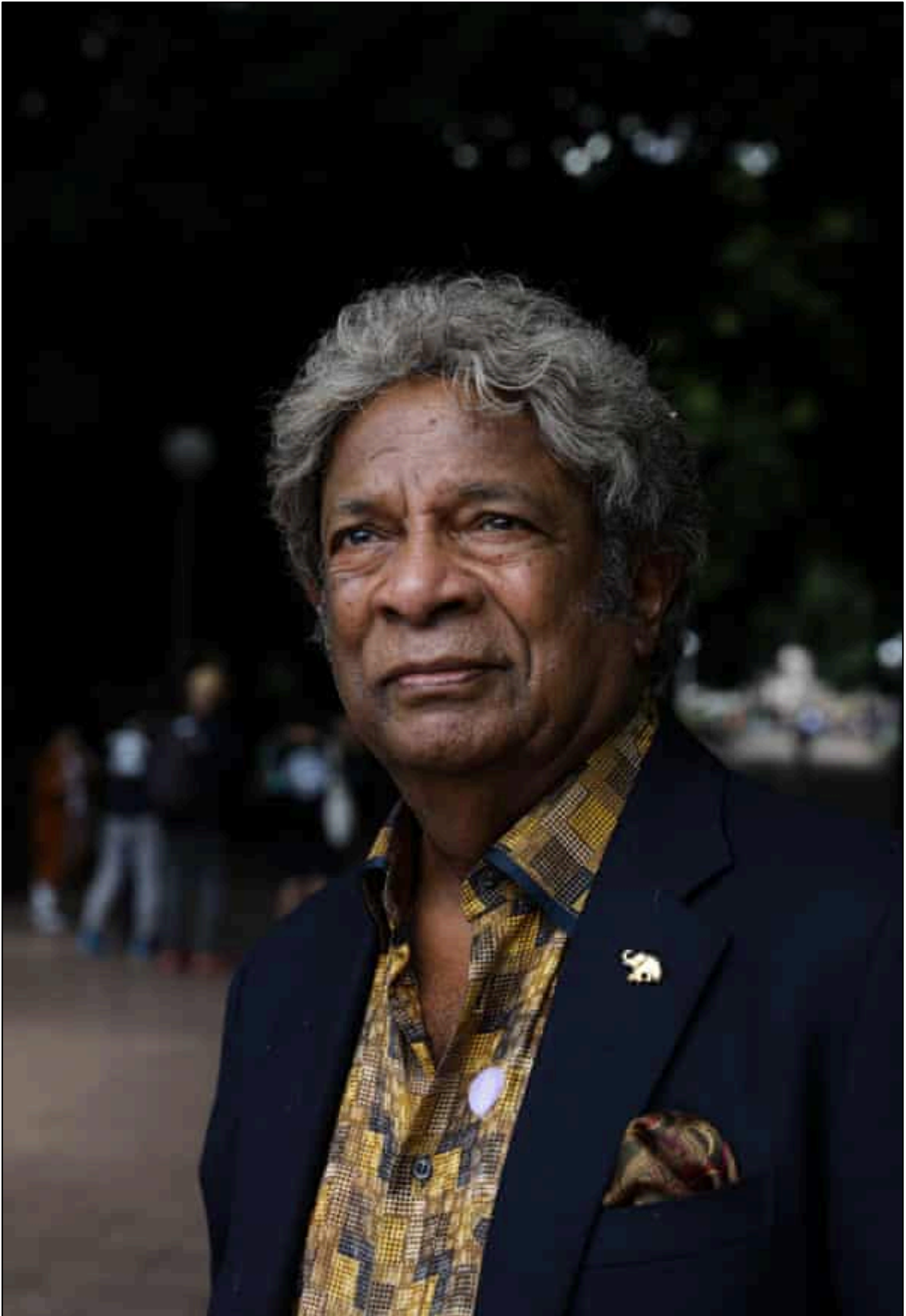
Kamahl has been the most recognised Australian voice of lounge and easy-listening music in a career spanning more than 60 years, performing on stages ranging from the Sydney Opera House to the Big Day Out rock festival. He has also raised millions of dollars for charities, including the World Wildlife Fund, via his 1975 hit The Elephant Song.

Kamahl accepted he had benefitted from the publicity generated by his appearances on the program. “My basic philosophy as far as television is concerned was, if you're an entertainer, if they don't see you on television, they think you're dead,” he said.

But, he said, he had little control over how he would be portrayed on the program, and that when he first appeared “I didn't realise it was going to be a minefield, of sorts”.

“There were a number of instances where I felt humiliated, but I didn't want to raise any objections or protest about it. I kept smiling and pretending all was OK.”

The worst incident occurred in 1984, when Kamahl was hit in the face with a powder-puff while performing, rendering him in whiteface. Somers' off-camera sidekick John Blackman quipped: “You're a real white man now Kamahl, you know that?”



'I know they call it cancel culture, but they're not stopping culture. They're only trying to limit unnecessarily vulgar or crude terminology or gags or whatever.'

“I found that quite offensive,” Kamahl said. “Friends of mine in America saw that and to this day they can’t believe that somebody would treat an artist with that amount of disrespect.”

Kamahl headlined the prestigious Carnegie Hall in New York City the following week, where he was introduced by comedy legend Bob Hope.

Kamahl did not blame Somers. “I always got along reasonably well with Daryl. I’ve never had any quarrel with Daryl at all, and I don’t think he had any ill-feeling towards me. I don’t think he encouraged it, nor stopped it. He was a bystander.”

Somers Carroll productions declined to comment when approached by Guardian Australia.

Kamahl has been asked about racism and his relationship with Hey Hey and Somers before. In 2009, in the wake of the blackface sketch, it was reported that Kamahl was prepared to sue Channel 9.

Kamahl, who had not seen the program at the time it aired and only became aware of it when a news crew turned up at his house the next morning, said that this had never been the case.

“They tried every angle to get me to say something that was controversial. And just as they were leaving the house, the journalist said ‘Kamahl, are you going to sue Channel 9?’ And I said ‘Oh, what a great idea’, which was a joke, but the next day it was on the front page.’

Kamahl, who was born in Malaysia to Tamil-Hindu parents, said that he had tried to explain that racism was a worldwide, societal, structural problem, referring to the so-called “untouchables”, the lowest-caste members of Indian society.

“I said, frankly speaking, I am more racist than Hey Hey It’s Saturday! But they were not interested in finding out my take on racism,” he said.

“I married an Indian. The Sri Lankans think that they’re a cut above the Indians. In India they have the untouchables, and no one talks about it. That is worse than slavery. I’m part of it, and I haven’t done anything to stop it. So we all have to be carefully taught,” he said.

As for whether Hey Hey would be cancelled were it to be brought back to television screens a third time, Kamahl said “I know they call it cancel culture, but they’re not stopping culture. They’re only trying to limit unnecessarily vulgar or crude terminology or gags or whatever.”

“If something has merit, if it is witty, if it’s clever, so be it. If it’s crap, maybe we can do without it.”