

Richard Lewis Interview

Richard Lewis' free form, uninhibited style has been likened to beloved talents ranging from Lenny Bruce to Jimi Hendrix. The N.Y. Post said; "Richard Lewis built the strongest stand-up comedy career on a blazing trail of neuroses since Woody Allen," but perhaps Mel Brooks put it best when he said, "Richard Lewis may just be the Franz Kafka of modern day comedy."

Richard is currently on his "Misery Loves Company Tour," having just wrapped his 6th season of Curb Your Enthusiasm where, playing true-to-life, he reprises his role as one of Larry David's closest friends. Among the accomplishments he is most proud of; Comedy Central has recognized Richard Lewis as one of the top 50 stand-up comedians of all time, he was charted on GQ Magazine's list of the '20th Century's Most Influential Humorists'.

JOHN: How come you're up so early?

RICHARD: I haven't slept since McGovern lost. I'm tired, put the tape machine on.

JOHN: It's on.

RICHARD: Okay, well, I'm not doing the interview. Take care Johnny.

JOHN: Bye.

RICHARD: I did this because you tricked me. You know that I'm weak and fragile. You're the David Copperfield of Comedy writers. You have a dark Jack Rubyesque side to you. You ask me something and it's almost like I smell gunfire. I'm not sure of even

the magazine. This is for the Farmer's Almanac? Let me give you a prediction there will be no soil in Iowa. Take care John.

JOHN I don't believe I have to ask a question.

RICHARD: The reason I'm talking over you is that you don't know how to ask a question. You have a degree in nothing. Don't you get it? I'm helping you. What's the name of the magazine? Is it Perfect Ten?

JOHN: No, they're history. This is my own interview.

RICHARD: Then I don't want to do it! I like that name, Perfect Ten, sort of a throw back to Bo Derek. I met her at a Deli. I got married two years ago, I'm monogamous. As we're speaking, I'm not exactly at a disco. It's LA...It's 7:45 in the morning. There's nothing to trigger that sex addiction, or as my therapist would say "It was an affection addiction." She said, "You got so bashed emotionally, you might like sex, but you wanted women to love you. Sex was just sort of a side effect." (laughing) Sex is a side effect to my lovemaking.

JOHN: That's a great way to put it.

RICHARD: So Bo Derek came over to me. And she looked absolutely drop dead killer. If I was single I would have asked her out. I have this need to ruin my marriage, so I told me wife that Bo Derek hit on me. Guys don't ever do this! I'm not talking to you, John. You're lost. You're gone. Puppets did better than you with women. When I got sober thirteen years ago, part of the way I could stay sober was being honest about myself. So I have to deal that aspect of my persona, defects that wanted me to medicate myself. So Ten comes over to me and says, "I've been a fan of yours forever." And I froze. When I was single, I was basically a consensual serial womanizer. I wasn't a scummy person. I

was manipulative. I wrote notes to people. “I hope you’re in love. I hope your married. I hope you have a boyfriend. I hope you’re happy, but if you’re not?” I wrote two things, which was the manipulative side. “I’m a decent person,” then I actually said this to one of the most beautiful women in the world, “I’ll take you for a tuna sandwich.” If you say a drink then you’re lumped in with all these sleezoids. But if you say a club sandwich, a Rueben sandwich, trust me it just makes the person feel less stressed. So what you do, is you have Rueben sandwich, and then you have twelve martinis. Any way, where were you?

JOHN: What happened when you told your wife about Bo Derek?

RICHARD: My wife’s hip, beautiful and independent. She says. “ If you don’t want to be with me. If you want to leave me for another woman, fine. I love you. We’ve had a great decade. Next. That’s the deal with her. She said, “I’d be devastated but I’ll get over it. I don’t want anyone that doesn’t want me.” I spent thirty years of my life wanting people who didn’t want me. I wanted to repeat my mother. When I got my first tonight show thirty years ago. I told my mother I was on the Tonight Show this week, and she said, “Who else was on?” It took decades of analysis and therapy to figure out that I didn’t trust women. Who the fuck cares anymore? At this point I’m just glad to move my bowels. Did you ask a question yet?

JOHN: I Remember when I went to see you in LA in the seventies you started leaning forward, the whole neurotic thing emerged.

RICHARD: There’s a thin line between narcissism, even if it’s a healthy narcissism, and entertainment. But I chose to go on stage to be validated because I felt so bashed. If I’m not going to talk about myself in front of strangers and see if they laugh and understand,

then what's the point of it? I don't want to tell people, "Did you ever notice about Kmart?" I don't want to tell anyone how they think or what they see. That's what happened to me. I take a great pride in three things as a comedian, the premises are real, I'm prolific, and I feel strongly that who I am on stage is the same as who I am off. I'm not saying that's a great thing. But to me that made me authentic. I said, let people know who Richard Lewis is because my family didn't take the time to know me.

JOHN: You're stage persona can't be mixed up with anyone else.

RICHARD: Rodney Dangerfield once told me, I was close to him, which was like being close to a Tornado. Dark. Brilliant. He said, "Hey, you know what you're doing, you have a persona." And that meant the world to me. Coming from him. How much more of a persona could you have? "I get no respect."

JOHN: Says it all.

RICHARD: I chose the metaphor, which is in the Yale Book of Quotations. "*Blank from hell.*" That I was a victim. The reason I wrote my book (The Other Great Depression) was because I blamed everything for everything and everyone for everything and now everyone knows I'm a recovering alcoholic. I take great pride and saying it on television, particularly with Larry David. I must have said it scores of times, "Larry don't push me, I'm fragile." I try to make it funny. If one person is watching "Curb Your Enthusiasm," or a talk show and I say, "I'm a recovering drug addict or alcoholic." And that person sitting in their apartment says, "I never knew that." And his wife says, "You see you're fucking up your life and Richard Lewis overcame this." And he tries to get help it's all worth it.

JOHN: When I saw you at Comix you were leaning against the back wall. You can't go any further back in that character.

RICHARD: I was also fatigued and it was a new club and I think the wall was falling down. I was trying to do the club and my back a favor. I have two bad disks. Plus I go so deep into my psyche it's debilitating to my body.

JOHN: You got me in therapy.

RICHARD: I got about 80,000 people in therapy. In fact there's one province in Iraq that goes to my therapist.

JOHN: You used to tell me that when I drove you across town I was driving in the fetal position.

RICHARD: Well, it was scary driving with you when you weren't looking at the windshield. You were the worst driver ever.

JOHN: I was nervous. It was my first night at the clubs.

RICHARD: When I drove Larry David over to the old Improv to Catch, he asked, "Mr. Lewis can I have a ride across town?" Of course he denies it. Do we have to talk about Larry? Only because Larry won't do interviews. I get on the average of fifteen calls a day saying Larry won't speak to us, can we talk to you about him. He hates P.R. I love him. The six years he gave me on Curb resurrected my standup career in a big way and I'm grateful.

JOHN: The last time I played stickball was with you and Larry. You could really hit.

RICHARD: Pete Rose signed my stickball bat because I beat him in stickball. Shawn Green, one of the few Jewish ball players, signed a bat of his "to the greatest Jewish stickball player." I was one of the greatest stickball hitters that ever lived. Larry couldn't

get me out. How far a field are you in this line of questioning, because right now I feel like a hunter.

JOHN: You keep making me laugh.

RICHARD: Someday that will happen to you.

JOHN: I don't think so. You're quicker than I am.

RICHARD: Well, that's because you're more like Willy Loman.

I'm more defensive that you are. I'm a cripple emotionally next to you.

JOHN: But you're happily married now.

RICHARD: I am, but I'm still, as my friend called me yesterday, an emotional hypochondriac.

JOHN: I'm pretty bad too. To me anti depressants are a food group.

RICHARD: Put that in the interview what do I care? You're going to put in all your one-liners and I'm going to come off as a social worker from Hunter.

JOHN: This is about you.

RICHARD: Well, I'm waiting. Here's what this interview is going to be. Lewis picks DeBellis' top thirty jokes. You're a charlatan. I get a list of all these people you interviewed, Mother Theresa, the Messiah. You interviewed one person, the inventor of the dill doe. But I'm doing this for you. And that's it. I don't give a fuck about anything, except my wife, relatives, a handful of friends, and my charities. By the way, my wife's charity is Urbanfarming.org. Its mission is to eradicate hunger. I'm on the board. It's unbelievable. It beautifies inner cities and educates the young, the elderly, and vets on how to grow food. To see them grow a garden, beautify where they live then feed their neighborhood, and to help other addicts as a recovering addict, it doesn't get any better

than that. Now that I'm monogamous, orgasms have gone down the food chain, those things are really important to me. How much can you do man? My balls are almost reaching the ground. If I have Elephantitis, it's over. I'm just going to watch the news at eleven. I'm not going to roll on stage.

JOHN: I'm actually going to ask you a couple of questions, now

RICHARD: It's about time.

JOHN: Who is out there now that you like?

RICHARD: Therapists?

JOHN: Only you would think I mean therapists. Comics.

RICHARD: When I was younger I listened to the greats: Winters, Nichols and May, Pryor, Carlin, Klien, and lots of Lenny Bruce albums. But once I started doing fairly well, I didn't want to hear anybody's jokes or premises. I didn't want to hear anyone doing a routine on a sweater because I'm really ethical about this and my brain would shut down and not think of sweaters for a long time. So I don't know who's good out there. When I hear someone's really phenomenal and I watch it with my wife, after five minutes, I'll tell her to turn it off. "I get it, the guy's really incredible." Then I want to go back to a hotel and look at my stuff.

JOHN: I can't go to comedy clubs unless it's to see a friend.

RICHARD: A friend I'll go see. But that's different. People say, "Why don't you go to the clubs here?" "Because I built the damn clubs." I have a ninety-foot face on the driveway. I'm a pasta at the Improv. I have a casino gig in a couple weeks; a thirty-five hundred seater and then I'll do a nightclub in San Francisco that seats 450. The point is, I will do that same kind of fearless set each night. I don't need to go to the Improv and

work out. A lot of that had to do with Letterman. He changed my life as a comedian in eighty-two when he got his show. He gave me my first big break. He was a big fan and he said, "You know you're a hit and miss standup on Johnny Carson because you're so physical and for the camera it's not good. Plus you're just so nuts. He said, "Just sit down be yourself and wail. You don't ever have to do standup again." And I never did.

JOHN: You were always spontaneous.

RICHARD: I have a lot of material in my head, but if something moves me that day, or moment I might take a half a shot up with it. Years ago, I used to think I had to put everything in six minutes and I needed to rush. Steve Landesberg, of Barney Miller fame, an old friend, and a wonderful comedian, was at the Improv when I started. He'd say, "Look at that light. Play to the camera. Those are ten million people watching. The studio audience is only three or four hundred, if they happen to laugh fabulous. If they applaud fabulous. If not, smile and move on."

JOHN: You were on Letterman every six weeks or so.

RICHARD: George Miller who sadly passed away might have done a couple more Letterman's than me. Among the living no one has done more. I've done sixty-five. It helped me get club dates which allowed me to pay the bills. I was living hand to mouth in a little apartment. I was running into superstars in airports saying, "Richard you're great, blah, blah, blah." But they have no clue that financially, if you're not in a series, or you're not a movie star, back then nightclubs paid nothing.

JOHN: When we started it was very different.

RICHARD: We were a handful by comparison to the number of comics now. We were a transitional link between the big stars of the fifties and sixties and took the torch and

handed it over to the mushrooming amount of comedians of the eighties. When I hang up and you realize you only asked me one question, are you going to a doctor?

JOHN: I might have to after this interview. What advice did David Brenner give you about the tonight show?

RICHARD: He said, "One Tonight show was like being at the Improv on a Saturday night for a hundred fifty thousand years." I'm psyched up when I do radio. I can reach hundreds of thousands of people in a market. And way psyched up when I'm on television. For people not to take it seriously is foolish.

JOHN: Are there any rumors about you that I don't know?

RICHARD: I have bouts of happiness.

JOHN: You actually sound pretty happy.

RICHARD: I'm on top of my house now wearing a dress with a gun to my head. How do you know? You don't know.

JOHN: I do know that at your lowest point your comedy was important to you.

RICHARD: I remember when I bottomed, I was hold up in my house doing blow for about six days and I was looking at myself and I was disheveled. I remember David Brenner told me that he had everything just from jokes. I sort of reprised that. I was looking at myself like I was on my way out. I felt pathetic. I've gotten everything I've gotten, all the good stuff from writing jokes and I said, "Am I going to just drop dead and lose everything and become homeless or go insane with a disease that I could actually stop?" It's not that I had cancer or aides. I was an alcoholic. If I just put the cork in the bottle, or didn't buy the cocaine I had a shot. And that's when I said, "No Mas." It took me a long time.

JOHN: I had no idea you were going through this.

RICHARD: Listen, I sold out Carnegie Hall in 1989. I did two and a half hours. I got two standing ovations. I was a functioning alcoholic in terms of my career. Toward the end I stopped standup for three years. I saw some shots on stage and I was bad. I didn't want to burn that bridge because that was all that I had. My life was out of control. Then I was on the TV show. I knew my part. I got my shit together for two days. I got four days off. I was an active alcoholic and I got terrific reviews. The show lasted four years. I wasn't happy, but I got through it. I remember at Carnegie Hall, after the show I got totally obliterated and I had to ask my sister, "Are you sure I got two standing ovations?"

A lot of people feel when you get depressed and your hopeless that's when people drink and do drugs. But for me I did it mostly when I was happy. I didn't feel like I deserved it. I wake up every day asking to be free of the obsession of alcohol.

JOHN: So what is your day like?

RICHARD: I woke up at four AM. I couldn't sleep knowing that I was going to be tortured by you. When I get off the phone I'm going to work out. Then I'm going to go back to sleep. Then I'm going to go to a few hotels with about ten thousand new premises and look at them. The more I look at them the more confident I feel on stage.

JOHN: Why do you go to hotels?

RICHARD: I like getting out of the house. I print out about five months of premises which is about five hours of new material. And I just look at it, underline stuff, and put X's next to things I like. I just keep looking at them so by the time I hit the stage I remember about a half hour of it. The other half hour I adlib and the other fifteen minutes are things I've been doing, but I never do it the same way. Every show is

different. Between shows I go into the green room, remember what I did, and look at my notes and come out of the gate with new stuff.

JOHN: That's confidence.

RICHARD: If I laugh when I write it down than that's all that matters. And if the audience laughs it's a bonus. I can't go back and repeat the first set because, if it worked out, I already know it's funny and it bores me to do it again. If I'm going to free associate for 70 minutes, I want to be surprised as much as the audience. And if the audience is with me I just go wild. I just keep adlibbing until it dips. Mostly I don't know what's going to happen.

JOHN: I'm blown over by your ability and the huge risks you take.

RICHARD: I'm not the only one who does it. But I do it more than most. That's why Curb is so great, because Larry writes these remarkable outlines, so all you have to do is be on your game and you'll be funny.

JOHN: It's like watching you and LD just being yourselves.

RICHARD: I come back from the show and my wife asks, "How did it go?" and I'd say, "I don't know. I got cranky. I yelled at him." Until he edits it I don't know if I came out good. I yell at him ninety percent of the time on that show. And I fight him physically seventy percent of the time. I once sprained his wrist and broke his glasses and I thought he was going to kill me. We have such a good relationship. It's funny because he's such a mogul out here. I love to walk on the set and you see a young actor or actress, say "Mr. David...etc." And I'll walk by Larry and go, "You're a piece of shit." And he laughs, because he knows what I'm doing. He doesn't need to be humbled. And I don't psychoanalyze this cat any more, so many shrinks ran from him screaming.

JOHN: I once asked him what it was like to have all that money. And he said, “the only time I’m happy is when I play golf, and stink at that.”

RICHARD: That’s true. Now that he’s gotten all the recognition --

JOHN: He’s happy.

RICHARD: But I think he’s having a hard time understanding why.

JOHN: Most comics are like that. But you actually sound really good. RICHARD: Don’t judge my happiness.

JOHN: I shouldn’t say you’re happy.

RICHARD: It’s none of your business. I’m feeling better than ever because I’m committed to a good woman. As someone from my past, you understand it. We’re cut from the same cloth. A woman who would take a bullet for you is something uncanny, baffling, and yet glorious.