

MEMOIRS OF A GAGSTER

Standup Guys

Part 3 - In The Top Forty

In the mid-seventies, (you remember that decade from the Fox documentary, “That Seventies Show”) there were only thirty or forty comics in New York. One night Belzer and a few friends tried to count all the comics in the United States and they couldn’t even get to two hundred, now there are thousands just on Match.com alone. Politicians are beginning to appeal to the comedian vote.

I was lucky enough to find myself in that small select weird group, of guys and girls who worried too much, or who worried too little, and who laughed at things most of the world would cry about, or start a war over, and didn’t live life to the fullest as much as looked at life as a source full of material. Being a stand-up in the 70’s meant you could feel like you’re special while still feeling inferior.

We had no money, no hope of making money, and we maintained diets that had the nutritional value of carbon monoxide poisoning, but we had each other. An amazing camaraderie with funny, ego centric, self-centered, neurotic guys and girls like ourselves, who understood us. It was like group solitary confinement!

It was an innocent time, when we had all the time in the world, and when all that time was spent together. Late afternoon breakfasts and indigestion, hanging in the club bar before during and after shows, getting rejected by the same women, before during and after the shows. Nights when Andy Kaufman would come in after the customers cleared out, go on stage and for the next hour or so and become Elvis. There were weird nights, mostly at the Green Kitchen, when Sid Rosenbloom, a comic who had multiple sclerosis,

would climb out of his wheel chair, and crawl around the floor, and under peoples tables, or when Mark Schiff and I would send chicken dinners to the table of a couple of cute girls, or send an attractive woman twelve or thirteen beers at once (neither ploy ever worked, which was an unnecessary hardship since we never worked either). Comics, Gilbert Gottfried, Joe Piscopo, Larry David, Richard Morris, and Lenny Maxwell would spend holidays at my parent's house, eating delicious free food, smoking my neighbor, Lou Caporaso's, free cigars, spreading good cheer and slander packed insults while having deep philosophical discussions about issues like, "Would living forever make it appropriate to date a woman half your age." At one Christmas dinner Lenny Maxwell gave Larry a wig and told him it was made from LD's hair that they swept off the Improv floor. We never doubted that Lenny was telling the truth.

For a few months one summer after Catch closed for the night, we would gather in the showroom and gamble away our eight dollars cab fare betting on a mechanical horse racing machine brought in by, Buddy Mantia, a member of the amazing comedy team, "The Untouchables." And if we were lucky enough to win, we'd most likely lose it all on our all night poker games (to Buddy Mantia), where disputes were encouraged because there's nothing funnier, (other than comics at a funeral especially a comics funeral), than two comics, usually Mark Schiff and Buddy Mantia, threatening to beat each other up within an inch of their egos. The only punches ever thrown in a comic's fight were, of course, punch lines. There were the softball games, where we cursed at each other, bickered so much we had a new manger every week because every week ours would quit, but between the shouting, the crack of our already cracked bats, and the sound of balls going through our legs, we laughed and laughed and laughed. It was the

best of times, it was the worst of times, but more importantly it was our time (and we damn well made the most of it).

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A wise man once told a comic that if you wanted to be truly happy you have to give up one thing in life - your will to live. And the comic laughed at the wise man and said if I want to be truly happy there's only one thing I have to do and that's play softball! A few years I asked Larry David if was happy now that he was a huge success, and he replied, "I'm only happy when I play golf and I stink at that!" Leave it to LD to sum up the dilemma of a comic's life up in so few words.

Yes, spring was the best time of all for us because the comic Gods had given us softball. Glenn Hirsch (or should I say Gleeb), every year at our first practice would stand on the ball field in Central Park and announce "Guys, for the next 13 weeks we're going to be men again," as if we were ever men in the first place. Several members of the team were good athletes, but none of us would be considered jocks. By my definition a jock is someone whose body works perfectly without the use of their mind. A comic's body works despite the use of his mind.

The Improvisation played in the Broadway show league where the only spikes used were five-inch heels (most had taps on them), and for a few years, our collection of comic odd balls, were a very good team. (Not the first year in which we were so bad when we went into the batting cages and the machine would throw underhanded.)

On our team, the oddity that stood out amongst all our normal everyday oddities, like Robert Whul playing first base in a sports jacket, or Joe Piscopo having to be taught which leg to throw off of every season, or Larry David, (our, yes afro haired short stop),

who after making an error would accuse his own outfielders of talking about him, or Buddy Mantia hitting himself in the head with his bat (because he made an out with men on base or he made out with a man on base – just kidding the only time Buddy would ever get on his knees would be to pray to the heterosexual Gods, who answered his plea with more women than I'll ever see including aerial photographs of equal rights demonstrations) – (the oddity) was of having a team made up of sixty-percent left-handers (way past the ten percent in normal society). That means that most comics think with the right side of their brain, which might explain the similar location of our bald spots. (Actually I don't think of myself as bald, I think of myself as a man of skin).

I batted leadoff, then came in this exact order, or close to it, Glenn Hirsch, Larry David, Bobby Kelton, Robert Whul, Joe Rock (a singer no comic worth his neurosis would be named that), Joe Piscopo, Brandt Von Hoffman, and Chris Albrecht. On our bench was David Cey, Richie Cantor, Howie Klein, Richard T. Bear (singer slash piano destroyer) and for a few games Keenan Wayans. Not, a fearsome bunch. If all of us ran into a 90-year-old pigmy woman with severe arthritis in a dark alley at 3AM, she'd probably intimidate us.

Just when you thought you'd never find a less intimidating group of guys, came our arch rivals the Comic Strip, the Menches Of Second Avenue, where Jerry Seinfeld, Paul Riser, Larry Miller, Hyrum Kasten, Joe Bolster, Mark Schiff, George Wallace, and Dennis Wolfberg manned the diamond. In all my years in softball, I've never played in games with so many arguments and disagreements, most of which were from our own teammates. There were a few close contests, one where I made a running catch in the outfield, with the bases loaded and threw a bullet to second for a double play, ending the

inning, and my left arm (which at its peak had difficulty getting a ball off the ground), but to this day, I'm very proud to say we always beat the Comic Strip, had more laughs playing them, and I saved a game (perhaps the highlight of my comedy career).

The game I remember the most, was one in which the rain halted play right before the last inning, when we were trailing by eight runs. Bobby "King" Kelton (we called him King just because it sounded good) and I Johnny "Deck" DeBellis (Bobby and Larry called me that because I was so spacey I was dealing with a half a deck), for some reason like a torrential down pour, thought the game was going to be rained out and went to his aunt's apartment for lunch." We had finished our second or third sandwiches (we never know where our next free meal was coming from) when we saw our would-be desert being taken out of the fridge. Unfortunately the rain suddenly stopped. King and I raced back to the field, our mouths bleeding chocolate cake, and arrived too late to play.

It was the last inning and our team had miraculously scored five runs without us. Now there were two outs, the bases were loaded, we were still down by three runs, and Larry David was up. Larry was our last hope (back then that didn't give us much hope). Well, LD hit a shot into the gap clearing the bases and as Larry jumped on home plate, he was mobbed, yes actually physically touched (and he allowed it) by his fellow comics who were piling on their hero who just won the game. Well, sort of. The umpire had somehow miscounted the runs and said the game was only tied. I think Larry would have killed the umpire, but I don't think he wanted to touch another human being that day, and Buddy Mantia, whose temper made Larry's look like a Martha Stewart burp wasn't there (probably with, a then future, but now way in the past, Miss Universe). So the game and the ump's life continued. I'm sad to say the next inning we lost the game.

One of the funniest guys on our team, and not by design was a singer, Joe Rock, a big muscular good-natured guy and our catcher, (a position he chose because he could check out the girls, who he always assumed were checking out him). He possessed a high sweet singing voice; sort a Neil Young with the soul fullness of Kermit the Frog. (Actually he had a very nice voice, but this description is not as colorful as the above metaphor). Kelly Rodgers, the MC at Catch, told him that he should change his name, because Joe Rock didn't fit his high sweet voice. Two weeks later Joe strutted in and told Kelly, "I changed my name, bring me up as Sergeant Rock."

In the late 70's roller-skating was a big craze, but not for me. You had a better chance of seeing the Pope give a lap dance to the Village People. I lose my balance when I put on two different socks. For weeks now, Joe Rock had been telling me that he was writing a roller skating song, in which I was tempted to suggest a chorus on ball bearings. On the night he debuted his song, he strutted into Catch wearing shorts small enough you could mistakenly think he was Jewish, a Guinea-T so tight it shattered his blocked arteries, and of course, roller skates. I brought Joe on announcing his soon to be hit song. With his arms raised in triumph, Joe roller skated on to the stage and then immediately slid across it, knocking over the piano player, the microphone, and ended up on his ass, under the fallen ancient piano, whose loud crash was the closest it's ever been to being tuned.

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For a comic, no matter how old, how successful, how long you've been in therapy, or how much cab fare you made in one given night, there's almost no bigger thrill (other than the occasional "I think your sort of cute in an off beat kind of way especially in this dim light and at a certain angle when I squint my eyes" from a comedy club waitress) than writing and delivering a new joke that actually works. You've created something that the audience is responding to, that's so strong it has caused them to physically show their enjoyment (and at times their revulsion). It's as if you had the power of a God father and you were about to shoot someone and you told them a joke (even a bad one), and they laughed hysterically figuring their laugh might save their life (which it wouldn't) or it would be like Moses coming down from the mount, telling his followers a funny new commandment. Do you realize that if Moses would have been Italian he would have come down with the Ten Commandments plus the Fifth Amendment.

Comics are forever searching their mind, their conversations, their rejections, crumpled scraps of paper, thousands of ink scrawled napkins, and smeared blue palms looking for that new joke. Once while falling asleep I thought of a joke, woke myself up, from my sexual fantasy, one in which I die in the end, reached onto my second-or-third-hand-pre-owned-found-on-the-curb night table, felt around for a pen and than wrote a joke on the back of a cold slice of (first owner) pizza (which I ate around the next morning).

As I mentioned in the previous paragraph comics often get material from conversations, especially with each other, and no two comics argued more about the rights to a gag or bit than Larry David and Richard Lewis, although Larry David and

Bobby Kelton would come in a close second. There is a vague comic's rule. It's never been written anywhere, probably never even said aloud, or whispered on a death bed. But I will be the first to put the rule in black and white, so it can be read, memorized and past down verbatim from generation to generation of stand-ups. Below is the comic's conversation rule.

The first comic who mentions the subject matter gets any joke derived from that conversation unless the amount of that contribution outweighs the first say first keep rule." Sounds simple, except for the fact that to a comic's rules are not made to be broken as much as they are to be argued over until one of the comics gives in, they get a second, third, fourth and fifth opinion (which they might ignore completely), one quits the business, one pays the other (or for the check and cab fare), one does the piece on the Tonight Show (which would end a friendship), or they find out that some one else is doing a piece like it (then each comic would pretend that it was no big deal, while the acid in their stomach was splitting atoms). Then both comics would abandon the idea and split the check.

There were many a night when I'd return home, in the usual disappointing company of myself, (or if I was lucky someone slightly worse than myself but three times as desperate) to hear ten minutes of Rodney Dangerfield trying out jokes on my answering machine. He was so conditioned by his craft that he'd even leave spaces for laughs. (If it was any other comic I would have thought he was leaving me spaces to make me feel envious for not writing the jokes, or in order to help him write a better punch line than the one he had). Of course, the next day, I'd return his call with my opinions, and an occasional helpful thought.

Years ago Rodney and I were bouncing a round a punch line about a girl being ugly and seeing her image in a bowl of oatmeal, but neither of us could ever get it to work. Then one day I figured it out. It was so simple; “She had such bad skin she could see her reflection in a bowl of oatmeal.” Just by adding bad skin and then later making it her reflection it suddenly worked (although it didn’t help my relationship when I used my girlfriend’s name in the joke). Some times jokes are written in one quick burst and other times they have to be hunted down and then assembled, some missing a piece that takes years to find.

It took the combination of desire, discipline, and a vacuous social life that drove me to write from four to six hours a day, usually from late afternoon right up until the time I sniffed out a clean shirt to wear to the club. I don’t know who instructed me or where I got the idea from, or maybe it was instinct, accent on stink, that told me to write down just about anything I thought was a joke or a set up. And believe me most of it was not worth the effort to decipher my handwriting. But it did several things; it made me feel like there was a reason to at least sit up in the bed, it gave me a sense of accomplishment (in that the ink which covered several pages of my pads wasn’t from a leaky pen), it gave me a chance that I’d write something I could actually make funny or was itself funny, but most of all and this is very important, it got all the rotten stuff out of my head and onto paper so I wouldn’t keep pouring over the same infertile ground. Oh, and there was another purpose, and that would come in future (which by then I’d become a better writer and) when I read over all the e.e. commings look a like sentences and low and behold I’d find an idea or something I could now make into an actual funny joke, or even to use as a segue to another line.

Paul Riser once told me about a joke where he had written one part and then eight years later wrote another part of the line that made it funny. I've had germs a joke or and idea to turn a certain phrase in order to make it funny, but couldn't figure it out. Then years later looking over my notes with fresh (blood shot) eyes I suddenly saw how if I approached it from another angle, or added a word, or subtracted a phrase I could make it funny.

To see Rodney develop his six-minute Carson spot was the ultimate comedy learning experience. At home he'd work on jokes he'd written and supplement them with jokes that people sent him (which if they or any part of them worked, he'd always pay them for the entire joke). It's the reverse of eating at a dinner when you throw up half your food, but still have to fork over the five bucks to pay for the whole meal (which includes the tip).

Many night's I'd drive Rodney to the club, which is much safer than Rodney driving me, which is the equivalent of putting your "*love life*" in Freddy Kruger's hands, or safely riding a wild bronco through a slaughter house. If there was traffic Rodney would not hesitate to drive onto the sidewalk, or make his own private swerving lane that went in the opposite direction on a one-way street. It's pretty much a well known fact that Rodney would alter his consciousness with alcohol and such, which didn't improve his driving, or help contain my fear, but it would slow him up enough that pedestrians could both get out of the way and give a thumbs up to their blue collar hero. Rodney told me whenever he got stopped by a cop, they'd see who he was, immediately identify with his loser character and let him go with his autograph on the back of the ticket book, from which nothing was removed.

I was once with fellow comic Steve “No Chin” Mittleman, in Harlem (back when it was dangerous for any color skin that wasn’t bullet, knife, or fire proof) at 2AM, on a hundred degree summer night so humid you could leave sweat stains in the air. We’d just returned from a gig at a fraternity house where ducking punches, beer bottles and saliva for thirty minutes was considered working the audience. Noticing the throngs of people sweltering on the Harlem street corners, we decided not to stop at any lights. By the time the cops stopped us I counted five red lights we’d driven through, and a few illegal turns.

Seeing two white guys in Harlem with Jersey plates the cops immediately suspected that we were there to score drugs. After a closer look at both our innocent fear saturated mugs and seeing the comedy flyer on the seat, and then hearing our insightful explanation which went like this, “Officer, we’re comics coming back from a gig. It’s two am, a hundred degrees, and we’re two white guys in Harlem, we’re not stopping,” he thought for a minute. Gave us a stern look, then smiled and said, “Just slow down a little before you run the lights.” Sure you might be thinking this guy’s family was probably from down south (maybe even a Klan recruiter) so he let us go. In actuality, he was a realistic NYC cop, and gritty his partner, who was also smiling, was black. They both understood the times and reasons for our fear. You can say what you want about New York cops, but they can handle even the most absurd circumstances, and more times than never, make the right decisions.

Oh, there was this one night at the Improv bar, when a drunk passed out and fell off his stool and cracking the backs of roaches that were spread like peanut shells on a cowboy bar’s floor. Chris Albrecht immediately called the police, who not only showed

up quickly, but in number, six if I remember somewhat correctly. After all it was late, a long time ago, and one finger past my good counting hand. The men in blue circled the body, contemplating when, if and how they should lift him up, when he gained consciousness. They carried him to a booth and astutely asked him for his license, which was from New Jersey, and then noticed that the only car parked in front of the Improv was a Jersey car, which so happened to match his registration -- that's when the solution hit them. So they did what any good NYC cop would do back then, they took his keys, threw a glass of cold water on the drunk's face, carried him to his car, put him inside (sort of protecting his head) and told him to follow them to the Lincoln Tunnel, and then to proceed on his own into Jersey where he could be the Garden State's swerving problem.

Back to Rodney who, more sober than drunk would go on stage at the clubs and do a shortened version of his regular show. Halfway through he'd try his new jokes and gage the audience's reaction. He usually gave a joke a few tries before tossing it away (I wish my dates would give me and my condom that many chances). Sometimes he'd just use the set up and then write a punch line or vice versa. Every night he'd do two or three sets trying all or parts of the same material. He'd eliminate, move, or, even add a word.

So much of standup comedy is rhythm. Although his delivery was short and quick like teenage sex, each joke had a certain meter that fit Rodney like a three-fingered glove fits a clumsy butcher. In week or so he'd have a handful of jokes that were working. Then he'd string them together by subject matter, making up segues that were in line with the Dangerfield character logic, which gave him as much leeway as feather floating through outer space or a lawyer with the truth. He's the only comic I've ever witnessed (Wall street types can be seen practicing this at every happy hour) who during

his six minutes would be married, single, divorced, have girlfriends, no girlfriends, no children, several children, was sick, dying, healthy, and ugly. The one Dangderfield constant, besides his hand pulling on his shirt collar, the slight twist of his neck, and beads of sweat circling his red face like a dozen spitting knats, was that he was always the loser and always always always funny.

It two weeks he'd have three minutes or so of jokes working, getting the kinds of laughs that the easier, primed, TV audience would turn into applause.

Rodney was the most economical of one liner comics. By that I mean that he probably used fewer words to get from the set up to the punch line as anyone who has ever told a joke. He got to the punch line almost as fast as it took a woman to reject me - twice. At a rate of five or six jokes a minute, he'd have to have over thirty new jokes and then another ten or more when he sat down on the couch next to Johnny Carson. Back then he was at the height of his fame, so he was doing a Tonight show shot every six weeks. At sixty he was working harder then us 20-year-old diner studs, I mean duds.

From the Improv bar we'd watch Rodney on the Tonight show kill with jokes that sounded like he'd been doing longer than all the time the Catch mobsters spent in prison combined, even counting time spent on parole. A few days after he'd arrive back in New York he'd be in the clubs working on his next set.

A few years back I had spoken to Rodney, who for the first time in his life sounded happy. For the most part he'd walk around soulfully depressed, like a brooding Irish writer, just one drink shy of being happy (or occasionally a brooding Russian writer one gallon of Vodka short of being hopeless). One night we were walking to the Strip from Catch and I asked him if he ever went to a shrink? He said in a baritone that

seemed to get its depth and richness from a pain he tried so hard to drown out, “A are you kidding? I’ve seen every Austrian in America.” I don’t know why, but to me that said it all.

We were standing outside Catch one fall night and a fan from the audience approached Rodney (who was shy around most living creatures conscious or not) and said, “Rodney, you got color, you look good!” He replied, jerking his head side to side his head, “Pressure. Pressure!”

Another night, this time at the bar at Catch, a singer, Aaron Jack who wore his shirt open to his belt, either because it was the style, or he couldn’t remember how the buttons worked, asked if Rodney would have a picture taken with his young attractive girlfriend. Of course Rodney said it was okay. As they posed, she said, “Are you a regular here.” Not insulted by the young woman not recognizing him, he replied, “Yes, and I work the Improv and The Comic Strip too.”

At my wedding (where the words, “till death do us part” were overly optimistic by decades), my aunt followed Rodney around everywhere insisting that he looked just like her husband who died two weeks earlier. Rodney didn’t make a wise crack; he just kept politely saying he was “Sorry.” His last sorry was said as he was closing the stall on the bathroom door. She realized where she was, got the hint and left him alone the rest of the night.

One night Rodney hanging at the bar at Catch, probably waiting to go on, turned to a bunch of us comics and said, “Do you know what the worst thing about oral sex is,” No one gave him an answer, and he replied, “The view!” Everyone laughed and Rodney smiled just for an instant.

So, suddenly at eighty he seemed genuinely happy, I heard he was on antidepressants, or maybe it was his new wife. I was complaining about a difficult situation. And in a cheerful voice he said, “John, your talented, your funny and your still young, you got plenty of time. You’ll be okay!” That was the last time I spoke to him. It’s a good way to remember a very good man. **(To be continued)**