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Night Life

Stand-Up Comics At d.w. eye

By Britt Robson



Comedian John Wagner gets a hearty chuckle.

Who can deny the therapeutic value of comedy? There are some people who are so damn funny they assume the powers of faith healing; reaching deeply inside of you for laughter so large that it nudges your soul on the way up, wreaking joyful chaos throughout your body as your brain struggles forward to catch the next punchline.

Yet if comedy is the stepchild of inner peace, it still is not quite part of the family. Cracking jokes in heaven is an incongruous notion and the best of comedians would have a thorny time breaking through in a roomful of monks; even the Moral Majority seems to be a pretty humorless bunch. Serenity is a comic void because comedy is the flip side of fear; from the inane slapstick of Jerry Lewis (physical misfortune) to the acerbic slang of Richard Pryor (racial animosity), successful comics spend their time rattling skeletons in the closets of the human psyche. Curiously, the effect they produce is one of mirth.

Ultimately, then, comedians are to be admired for their honesty. Turning anxieties inside out requires that a person become intimate with his or her own nightmares, a daring, highly individualistic endeavor. For example, George Burns and Lily Tomlin are both very funny people, but give them each other's material



d.w. eye owner Don Merriss: All that it took was blood, sweat and beers.

and the chemistry fizzles, the inspirational source disconnects.

What makes the amateur comedy at Clifton's *d.w. eye* on Thursday and Friday nights such an uplifting, fascinating experience is not so much the quality of the humor but the developmental process

of self confrontation by the amateurs. Many of these budding humorists are using *d.w. eye* as the first, maybe the only, stage in what is an improbable career; vulnerable and unpolished, their performances are public searches in the dark for that entrance to the psychic closet. While they grope, the audience pushes and pulls with competitive friction and communal support, at once daring and begging the laughter. Given the circumstances, it isn't surprising that the best received one-liners are often caustic appraisals on a previous litany of failed jokes. "It helps to have a few of those handy," one newcomer concluded, "because what works in the lunchroom isn't always what works onstage."

Burdens of silence are the perfunctory initiation fee for any aspiring comic, however, and those with keen perceptions and an agile wit demonstrate tangible progress from week to week, or just in the context of a single set. Like avid prospectors mining a riverbed, they sift through their freshly penned material, hoarding, analyzing and reassembling those nuggets of truth that prompt laughter and recognition. Because the comedy stage is one of the few remaining places that rewards honesty, these amateurs are literally finding themselves.

Take Mike Irwin, a neophyte comic

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Night Life

who garners an increasingly enthusiastic response from the crowd with each succeeding trek to the d.w. eye stage. Along with the pervasive themes of television and sex, Irwin focuses his humor on obesity and born-again Christianity. A rotund fellow, Irwin obviously has come to terms with his sizable girth; his religious satire, however, leaves him uneasy. "I used to be a born-again Christian, so I know where the humor is in that situation," he remarked. "I also know how seriously some people take it, though, and I don't know how far I want to go with it."

Then there is Alex Bernstein, a high-school student whose parodies of teenager/parent conflicts are incisively, comically accurate. "After Alex had gotten laughs with his family bits, he tried to get into more adult humor," one d.w. eye employee observed. "Instead of being 17 years old, he tried to be 25 and it didn't work."

The honesty cuts both ways: amateur nights also bring in their share of comics who resort to anti-gay or anti-female humor, juvenile titillation (passing wind jokes lay many eggs) or blatant hostility. One performer's concept of comedy was little more than a lame collection of insults, a stance as self-revelatory as Irwin's weight.

On Saturday nights, the pros invade the d.w. eye spotlight and the occasional hearty chuckle is supplanted by the outright belly laugh, character development yields to developed characters and stand-up comedians are more likely to sit down and do impressions, mime, group skits, play a bawdy song or two, then stand back up and knock your ears off with an outrageous phrase. The quality of Saturday nights at d.w. eye proves that there are a plethora of anonymous loony tuners out in the Midwestern hinterlands — people like Will Duerst from Milwaukee, Tony Williams from Xenia, Bob Batchelor from Louisville — who are willing to drive their dilapidated Plymouths to Cincinnati and do a couple of sets that would shame many *Tonight Show* guests and hacks on the Vegas circuit who are pulling in four figure advances for their tired routines. In comparison to those buffoons (Milton Berle, Phyllis Diller, George Jessel), d.w. eye's Saturday headliners are earning peanuts, which may be the best joke of all for Don Merriss.

Merriss, the owner of d.w. eye, has a better sense of humor than the name of his club would indicate. (Although there are signs in the bar warning against drunken driving.) At first glance Merriss

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seems to be a plastic fantastic Los Angeleno, but beneath the shellac is an engaging, forthright soul who has parlayed his blood, sweat and beers into a five-fold increase in business since he bought what was then Hoagy's Candlelight little over a year ago.

Last October, Merriss introduced Saturday night amateur comedy on a trial basis and the cash registers sang for more. Fridays, then Thursdays, were included, pros were invited in for Saturdays; like a gambler holding hot dice, Merriss continued to raise the stakes. Recently, d.w. eye climbed another rung on the comedy ladder, with special monthly bookings of national acts, a policy that compels Merriss to rotate the house in his tiny establishment (one hundred people is capacity seating) and expel the neighborhood beer drinking regulars. "I want the place to get a reputation for having the best comedy available, but I don't want to lose my friends, my natural clientele," Merriss admitted. "These monthly specials are the compromise."

As if that weren't enough activity, d.w. eye has a mini-theater, screening movies in back, pinball and darts in the basement and a vacant lot outside that will be transposed into a Japanese styled beer/wine garden this summer. Such a three-ring circus is a far cry from that opening night in October when, as the club's regular MC, Roger Naylor, remembers it, "the first comic we ever had onstage froze after about two minutes. He just stood there, staring into space with his mouth open." Perhaps he was peering into the future, watching all those earnest comics climbing out of their jalopies, driven by the simple desire to make people laugh. □

Night Life Guide

d.w. eye, 277 Calhoun Street in Clifton, opposite the University of Cincinnati. Tel. 281-9462

Hours: Comedy begins around 9:30. Amateurs on Thursday and Friday, professionals on Saturday. To get a seat on Saturdays, you should be there at least an hour in advance. Monthly specials on an irregular basis, which will be Wednesday-Saturday, with separate admission for different sets Friday & Saturday.

Dress: Casual.

Price: Door charge is \$1 on amateur nights, \$2-\$2.50 for the regular pros, slightly more for special attractions.

Drinks: Reasonable. About \$1.50 for mixed drinks, \$1 for regular beer, \$1.25 for imported beer.

Parking: Practically non-existent on weekends, a little better on Thursday.

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