CHAPTER 2

Comics, Minstrels, Satirists, and Hacks
A History of Stand-Up Comedy in the USA

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The history of stand-up comedy in the USA starts with boats, slavery, and commerce as much as it starts with whistles, amusing stories, and wooden shingles scuffed with the imprint of dancing feet. Boat passengers rolling in from Long Island would have seen Bob Rowley, an enslaved man, dancing in Manhattan's Catherine Market – today's China Town – close to the boat slips on the Lower East Side. Known in the market as Bobolink Bob, his dancing pleased patrons and his signature whistle was picked up by performers across comedic cultural forms. These performers were known as *minstrels*. Their comedic performances were appropriated by white performers and repackaged as *blackface minstrelsy* – that is, white people darkening their skin to 'act' Black. In the early 1800s, men performing in blackface were called *Ethiopian Delineators*, ensuring that audiences knew Blackness was the explicit target of humour. This term shifted to *blackface minstrels* as more travelling performance troupes emerged. Blackface minstrelsy grew in popularity and was the dominant form of comedic entertainment by the mid-1800s. The institutionalisation of blackface minstrelsy created the backbone – the familiar performance tropes (call and response, monologues, sketches) and archetypal stock characters – of vaudeville and twentieth-century comedy forms such as radio comedy, television comedies, and stand-up comedy.[1] Comedic tropes are durable. Similarities in musical and performance tropes across regions in the USA can be traced back to African cultural traditions which were modified according to the political, physical, and cultural constraints imposed on those traditions. Historian W. T. Lhamon argues that 'Blackface was the first Atlantic mass culture' and to extend this logic further, stand-up comedy can be traced back to West African performance traditions.[2] Bobolink Bob is but a footnote in the history of comedy but the comedic conventions introduced by him and other minstrels – using comedic songs, stories, and dance to entertain an audience – withstood the test of time and can still be seen today.

Blackface Minstrelsy

Colonial settlers brought European performance traditions with them, but minstrelsy was the first original American performance tradition. Early influences were enslaved minstrels on plantations who would gather for corn-shucking dances, song, and worship and Black (and sometimes poor white) minstrels performing in northern urban markets. Playfulness, comic exaggeration, satire, and laughter were all part of these early performance traditions. The slave trade in 1619 in North America supported immense economic growth, and by the late eighteenth century the slave economy and the manufacturing of a caste system was deeply entrenched in the new republic called the United States of America. If you were among the thronging crowds gathered to watch Black men dance on shingles for money, eels, and public amusement at Catherine Market, you would have been watching freepersons *and* those who were enslaved. These early minstrels were entrepreneurs selling produce, poultry, or shellfish using performances to draw attention to their wares and any merchant who paid them to do the same.[3] These performances are part of the history of Black cultural production in ways that early blackface minstrelsy disallowed since Black people were prohibited from performing on stage until much later in the nineteenth century. This is not to say that early performances weren't fraught, uncomplicated, or uncontested. Lahmon describes these early market performances as creating patronage for a particular performance style that elicited audience appreciation for a variety of reasons, not all of them positive. Scant sources exist to paint the picture of audience reception but that this tradition carried on into blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville indicates audiences enjoyed consuming this kind of racialised comedic performance – as a means of connecting with folk culture, as a performance mode that reaffirmed racist assumptions about Others, and/or as a reflection of the current political and cultural climate in a rapidly industrialising nation with changing demographics.[4]

The Black minstrel tradition existed long before white men appropriated it. Elsie Williams documents enslaved performance traditions on plantations which she calls 'survivalist humor', a term that calls attention to humour as a coping mechanism for the millions of Africans wrested from their homelands. Black minstrels on plantations sang, danced, told stories, and played instruments. A painting dating back to 1790 in Williamsburg, Virginia's Ludwell Paradine House features enslaved Black musicians and dancers entertaining a group of fellow African Americans. As Williams describes it, 'the painting, while depicting slaves at work on

the plantation – at the same time – portrays a private folk behavior and locates the true genesis of blackface minstrelsy in a genuine folk figure and situation'.[5] Some performances included making a mockery of white European notions of civility embedded in comportment, social expectations, and ceremonial rites. In other words, white men watched enslaved people mimic white bourgeois pretensions, then re-presented this co-opted performance as 'authentically' Black, thus rerouting the mockery away from white people and onto African Americans. In New York City, the multiethnic neighbourhoods surrounding Catherine Market, such as Chatham Square, Five Points, and the Bowery, indicate that the earliest white men in New York City performing as Ethiopian Delineators in blackface were not simply enacting Northern white fantasies of African Americans. Interracial marriage and social mingling notwithstanding, white Northern men used exaggeration and ridicule to reinforce racist attitudes, social inequalities, and white cultural power, much to the delight of audiences. The public lionised the performances of white men travelling across the country as Ethiopian Delineators, such as T. D. Rice, George Washington Dixon, and Micah Hawkins, 'purport[ing] to do authentic black songs, dances, and jokes'.[6]

Performances in the early 1800s by Ethiopian Delineators were more improvisational and included dancing, comic monologues, singing, and clowning, but by the 1840s the minstrel show standardised into three parts. The first part consisted of a group of four or five white men in blackface (using greasepaint or burned cork). The two on each end of the semicircle were called the End Men, named Tambo and Bones, the names drawn from the instruments they played: the tambourine and bone castanets. The performer not in blackface was the interlocutor who acted as a straight man – the foil to Tambo and Bones. The jokes invariably made Blackness their target and were interspersed with songs and sometimes dancing. The second part, called the *olio*, produced some of the most long-standing comedic performance tropes and most resembles modern stand-up comedy. Comic monologues called stump speeches often featured a pretentious Black dandy character (called a Zip Coon) whose soliloquy was filled with mispronunciations and malapropisms demonstrating that Black people were unable to speak 'proper' English. This archetype of Black professional failure reinforced racist beliefs about the intellectual ineptitude of Africans. White men in blackface delivered cross-dressed 'wench' performances stoking Americans' delight in seeing Black emasculation (through watching men dressed as women), while such performances simultaneously perpetuated the image of Black women as highly

sexualised objects. (Such lascivious performances worked to exonerate the men who raped Black women and the white women who did nothing to intervene.) The third part of the minstrel show, the *afterpiece*, was a one-act sketch ending in a dance called the prize walk or 'cakewalk', a pre-Civil War dance tradition that began on plantations. Enslaved people would pair off and dance elaborately in a circle. That they were mocking the high-brow dances of white people was lost on the white people in attendance. The best dancers were rewarded with a cake. In the context of minstrelsy, this dance was reinstated making for double mimicry – white people making fun of Black people who were originally making fun of white people.

Before the Civil War, minstrelsy performances generally endorsed plantation life and slavery, while after the Civil War, they expressed nostalgia for a bygone era. The long-standing success of minstrelsy can be linked to its ability to adapt over time, its use of sexual innuendo – bawdy, at times homoerotic – and its focus on folk culture.[7] African American culture has fascinated whites since the invention of race intended to justify enslavement. Eric Lott wrote that '[t]he very form of blackface acts – an investiture in black bodies – seems a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of "blackness" and demonstrates the permeability of the color line'.[8] Blackface performance challenged race as a stable category while simultaneously strengthening a racial caste system by lampooning the race(s) placed at the bottom. In ways that were racialised, gendered, and classed, blackface performances created a 'formula for funny' that reinvented itself alongside the emergence of each new comedic cultural form.[9] Blackface minstrelsy found a comfortable home in vaudeville and expanded the mockery to include immigrants hoping America's promises of freedom and democracy would extend to them.

Vaudeville

The term vaudeville derives from the French phrase *chanson du Vau de Vire*, which translates as 'a song of the valley of Vire', a valley in Calvados, Normandy,[10] reputed to have inspired merriment and revelry with its musical traditions, which were mainly bawdy songs.[11] The word was changed to 'voix de ville', meaning street voices, and later became simply 'vaudeville'. This entertainment form began in the 1880s and was running at full tilt by the 1900s. Minstrelsy was reborn in vaudeville, which routinely featured *olios* and elaborate sketches set on plantations, songs with sexual innuendo, stump speeches, and 'coon songs' (a genre of music founded in stereotypes about Black people). Impresarios such as Tony

Pastor, B. F. Keith, and H. R. Jacobs standardised vaudeville throughout the 1880s, making it a commercial and widespread activity for the entire family, irrespective of class. Edward Albee, general manager for B. F. Keith, publicly stated, 'we are doing our share by making vaudeville more acceptable to the fastidious and the religious', with the results of expanded patronage and increased revenue.[12] Acts varied across theatres and among travelling troupes but vaudeville shows included a smattering of the following: juggling, acrobatics, regurgitation (usually with sharp or flaming objects), singing, dancing, musical acts, sketch comedy, minstrel acts, comedic monologues, trick cyclists, hypnosis and mind-reading, animal acts, and feats of strength. To maximise profits, shows ran back-to-back often beginning mid-day and ending late at night. Accessibility, an affordable admission price, and invoking a working-class sensibility made vaudeville the most popular entertainment until it could no longer compete with moving pictures in the 1920s.

Vaudeville was successful because it provided space for comedic response to crises in American culture – dramatically changing demographics, economic dislocation due to industrialisation, massive rural to urban migrations, and the subversion of traditional rural values.[13] Blackface minstrelsy or any mockery of racial and ethnic Others – from China, Italy, Germany, Ireland, Hungary, and Poland and, of course, African Americans, Native Americans, and Jewish people – became *the* comedic staple of vaudeville. While African Americans could now perform on stage, they were required to perform in blackface, meaning they too would darken their faces and use make-up to exaggerate facial features.[14] To perform in blackface as a Black American meant performing racist stock characters or controlling images established in the minstrelsy tradition. Elsie Williams identifies this period as one of accommodationist humour, that is African Americans and other performers of colour made complicit in their own mockery. In segregated areas of the country, racist depictions often stood in as truth-reinforcing white supremacist attitudes and beliefs.

Vaudeville offered a home to the earliest comedic monologists such as Charles Case, a mixed-race vaudevillian passing as white in the 1880s and 1890s,[15] and Beatrice Herford, a white woman who started entertaining audiences in 1885. Charles, who preferred to be called Charley, was born in upstate Erie County, New York on 27 August 1858.[16] He found a way to be Black with public approval – by performing comedy in blackface for more than twenty-five years. Blackface also 'hid' his identity, making it more difficult for the audience to identify his race. Importantly, Case

did *not* use stereotypes with his blackface act. Instead, he told elaborate stories about his parents and fictitious siblings and made 'off-beat observations about human nature'.[17] He and monologists influenced by him, such as Frank Fay who regularly sold out the Palace Theater in New York City with his comedy shows in the 1920s, set the stage for the next generation of comedic monologists who would use vaudeville stages as training ground before parlaying those talents onto radio and the silver screen.[18] These early stand-up comedians who went on to become comic legends of the twentieth century, such as Bob Hope, Jack Benny, and Milton Berle, modelled how to migrate across media before the advent of stand-up as a recognisably distinct cultural form.

Charley Case was ten years old and only dreaming of the stage when Beatrice Herford was born in 1868 into a large family living in England. Herford distinguishes herself somewhat from Case in that she performed in the format of a one-person show, which gave her more stage time (sixty-ninety minutes). At the time, theatrical and musical performances could last up to three hours and Herford had no interest in performing for such a length of time. In an interview, she explained this rationale: 'It is a favourite theory of mine that as a rule our programmes of concerts and entertainment are far too long … And I have a suspicion that all of us appreciate most what is not prolonged.'[19] Herford's performances proved the viability of a single *comedic* performer enchanting an audience for an extended period of time and dislodged the notion that performances need to last several hours to get your money's worth. She debuted in London and then delighted American audiences with her novel performances featuring a range of 'mirth-provoking' characters – a woman out on a shopping excursion, a store clerk, a woman at an agency seeking to hire domestic help, a book agent, a woman packing for a trip, or a long-term boarder.[20] She became known for her distinctive style of using clipped dialogue to transition between characters, vividly bringing to life entire tableaus.[21] Her brother, Oliver Herford, published Herford's early monologues, leaving records of one of the earliest character acts. Future comedians such as Stan Freberg, Bob Newhart, Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin, Whoopi Goldberg, Judy Gold, Mike Birbiglia, Maria Bamford, John Mulaney, and many more would mimic her zany character work.[22]

The Chitlin' Circuit and the Borscht Belt

Having already secured the whole family as revenue streams for vaudeville, entrepreneurs stood to lose profit if they were unable to secure the

patronage of African Americans subject to Jim Crow laws mandating segregation. The term Jim Crow derives from the legend that a white man named T. D. Rice donned blackface to impersonate an impoverished Black man named Jim Crow. The real origin of the term, routinely obscured by this oft-recited folklore, derives from 'a widespread African-American folk dance impersonating – delineating – crows, based in agricultural ritual'.[23] Growing up poor in multiracial enclaves in New York City in the early 1800s, T. D. Rice would have seen the minstrels in Catherine Market and more generally witnessed the cultural gesturing of performance from African Americans in his neighbourhood. W. T. Lahmon conducts a book-length exploration debunking this folklore cycle, writing: 'The apocryphal tales indicate instead, how distant our stories are from the way people produce culture and how starved they are for legitimating detail.'[24] Importantly, the Jim Crow minstrel character became the namesake for the set of local/state statutes systematically restricting movement, housing, and education and legitimising violence against Blacks. This speaks to the power of performance, specifically comedy, to introduce, reinforce, and sustain bigoted attitudes and beliefs that shape our laws, policies, who is seen as fit to govern, and the social and political institutions structuring society. In some cities segregated facilities meant deposing Black patrons to the balcony or back of theatre, but this sometimes caused problems because Black and white customers weren't laughing at the same things. Mostly, this meant exclusion of African Americans or separate entertainment venues across the country. In the late 1800s, Black entertainers formed their own travelling performance companies. Sissieretta Jones managed the wildly successful Black Patti Troubadours, a musical revue company performing in the vaudeville tradition. The company thrived for two decades but when Jones retired in 1915, they disbanded.[25] Seeing the marketability of Black performance troupes, in 1907 a group of theatre owners banded together to develop the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA), which became known as the Chitlin' Circuit (named after a dish made with pig intestines and connected to the creativity African Americans demonstrated when given the offal of animals to eat while enslaved). TOBA produced Black-only vaudeville shows in venues scattered throughout the eastern seaboard, Midwest, and South.

Performers on the Chitlin' Circuit would grace the same stages on which the Black Patti Troubadours performed but some venues, such as the Apollo Theatre and the Cotton Club in New York City, originally only allowed white patrons, barring people of colour attending as audience members

until the mid-1930s.[26] Some of the most famous venues on the Chitlin' Circuit included: the Pekin Theatre in Chicago, the Beacon Theatre and Lafayette Theatre in New York City, the Royal Peacock Theatre and Fox Theatre in Atlanta, and the Strand Theatre in Boston. Black performers suffered gruelling schedules, were paid lower wages than white performers, and dealt with inhospitable people and conditions on the road. It wasn't long before performers began resentfully referring to TOBA as: Tough on Black Asses. Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote that 'Crisscrossing black America, the circuit established an empire of comedy and pathos, the sublime and the ridiculous: a moveable feast that enabled blacks to patronize black entertainers.'[27] This circuit was home to some of the most formidable comic talent during the twentieth century. Dewey 'Pigmeat' Markham was born in 1904 and his career spanned the life of many comedy forms of which he took advantage. Formerly a tap dancer, Markham commanded the Apollo as house comedian, performing in blackface long after vaudeville theatres dimmed their lights. He is best known for his routine as a judge whose mockery of courtroom etiquette was reminiscent of the stump speeches delivered a century earlier during the *olio* portion of a blackface minstrelsy show.[28] Cultural historians cite his foot-tapping 1968 recording 'Here Come the Judge' as an early precursor of rap and hip-hop. Jackie 'Moms' Mabley, who was born Loretta Mary Aiken in 1894, started performing on the Chitlin' Circuit a year after TOBA launched and was the first female *and* lesbian comic to perform at the Apollo Theatre. She performed her brand of blue humour on stages from the 1920s to the 1970s, taking on a grandmotherly persona who spoke openly of desires for young men and wore a housedress or mismatched baggy clothing, while peering out from under a worn hat. Moms Mabley 'adopted appearance and speech that subverted the constructions of the sassy mammy',[29] and disarmed audiences who would otherwise have recoiled if she performed as herself – an intelligent, Black, gender queer, lesbian usually wearing 'men's' clothing. In 1923, she was performing at the best theatres in New York and by the 1950s she garnered the top billing wherever she went, earning $10,000 a week. Like Mabley, many comedians on the circuit became crossover successes, migrating to perform in front of white audiences, including Redd Foxx, Nipsey Russell, LaWanda Page, Dick Gregory, Flip Wilson, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Paul Mooney, and Whoopi Goldberg.

Stand-up comedy flourished in some respects in other cultural forms. Burlesque, wild west shows, circuses, and music hall performances featured emcees using jokes to entertain patrons between feature acts. Early humourists toured the country for speaking engagements – think: Dan

Rice, Mark Twain, and Will Rogers.[30] Film, radio, and television ushered in numerous cultural forms invoking the tropes and traditions that would later become associated with stand-up comedy, as when television variety shows featured a solo comedy act or when a radio programme such as *Amos and Andy* capitalised on racist comedic archetypes first disseminated by Ethiopian Delineators in the early 1800s. The Chitlin' Circuit survived the death of vaudeville in the 1920s and remains active today, coinciding with de jure and now de facto segregated entertainment spaces. The integration of performance spaces did little to dispel beliefs of Black inferiority, making it imperative to have Black-only spaces wherein comedians could joke about Black people and cultural traditions – warts and all – without fear of instilling or strengthening stereotypes circulating in popular culture. Indeed, the contemporary Chitlin' Circuit theatre saw a surge in the 1990s corresponding to the spike in cultural production by Black artists alongside a rise in Black middle-class consumers who could patronise the circuit.[31] Similarly, religious and social persecution made it necessary for Jews to create leisure and recreational spaces where they could safely congregate. This network of venues scattered throughout the southern Catskill Mountains which offered safe harbour to Jewish comedy acts became known as the Borscht Belt, referencing the beet soup common in Jewish cuisine.

Anti-Jewish sentiments began rising as Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany and Franklin Roosevelt rolled out New Deal policies. The stock market crash in 1929 and ensuing depression catapulted millions into poverty and the optics of Jewish financial success made Jewish people useful political scapegoats for the economically depressed.[32] Jewish people suffered anti-Semitism in a variety of forms: through anti-immigration laws, hiring practices, quotas in higher education, and stores barring entry. Jews also faced assimilation and pressures to adopt cultural traditions, dress, and foodways, and as a reward they were incrementally granted access to white privilege throughout the twentieth century. Jewish comedy drew from acculturation pressures but rarely focused on the indignities and suffering of those belonging to the Jewish diaspora. At times, Jewish comedy *did* reference a history of persecution, but like Blacks, Jews were compelled to perform in stereotypes. By the 1930s and 1940s – and as Jews needed refuge more than ever from rising anti-Semitism – an informal network of Jews in the entertainment industry crystallised into the Borscht Belt, a region in New York's Ulster and Sullivan counties that hosted millions of Jews vacationing in kuchalayns (boarding houses with shared kitchen facilities), cottages, bungalow communities, hotels, and resorts.[33] Comedians

regaled vacationers on hundreds of stages every night during summer months. Individual performers called tummlers (Yiddish for someone who generates excitement) would command the audience using all manner of songs, jokes, games, and antics to sustain attention.[34] The demand for comedic entertainers created the need for an extended one-person performance that Beatrice Herford modelled decades before and would become the standard for stand-up comedy specials by the late twentieth century. The Borscht Belt flourished until the 1960s but waned in the 1970s. Many comedians would hone their craft on stages in the Borscht Belt,[35] helping them to migrate onto Broadway, radio, television, and film. Some of them, such as Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, devoted stage time in their early careers to the small venues emerging exclusively for stand-up comedy and larger stages in the Borscht Belt. They would both go on to become comedy icons of the twentieth century, and in a sea of male comedians, they offered a model to young female comic hopefuls.

Early Stand-Up Comedy

By the mid-twentieth century, stand-up comedy was attractive enough for an audience to gather though these shows weren't in the palatial theatres in which vaudevillians performed. 'Pigmeat' Markham and 'Moms' Mabley were still performing comedy in theatres on the Chitlin' Circuit whereas mainly white comedians were booking shows in still-segregated pizza parlours, coffee shops, and nightclubs such as Hugh Hefner's Playboy Clubs. Small, dingy folk music venues also doubled as the earliest comedy clubs and over the next twenty years became all-comedy establishments in metropolitan areas such as the hungry i in San Francisco or the Bitter End in New York City. The emerging comic sensibility accommodated anecdotal humour, such as the stories that Charley Case and Frank Fay used to tell on vaudeville stages. Comedians such as Jean Carroll, Danny Thomas, and Sam Levenson reintroduced this style which remains a fixture in stand-up today.[36] Unlike the apolitical humour that avoided polarising audiences in the Borscht Belt and on radio and television programming, comedians such as Mort Sahl, Dick Gregory, and Lenny Bruce used political and social critique to address tensions fuelled by segregationist opposition to the Black Civil Rights Movement and the hunt for communists under the watchful eye of Senator Joseph McCarthy, not to mention the looming threat of nuclear Armageddon. The whispers of civil unrest in the 1950s turned into howls in the 1960s as Chicano/as, queer people, women, African Americans, and farmers all took to the streets for civil rights. US

soldiers withdrew from Korea and relocated to Vietnam to engage in a war against communism. Opposition to the war, social inequalities, and human rights abuses coincided with increased cynicism towards the government and authority, all of which found its way into stand-up comedy. Indeed, the public clamoured for the anti-establishment humour of comedians such as Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Lily Tomlin, Robin Tyler, and Paul Mooney who started performing in the 1960s and became voices of political protest in the equally tumultuous 1970s.

The 1970s provided fertile ground for experimentation, producing a small army of comic hopefuls willing to perform wherever they could. The LPs brought laughter into the homes of the masses and had the distinction of not being subject to the same censors muzzling comics on network television and radio programming. Los Angeles-based Laff Records single-handedly produced more comedy LPs in the 1970s than any other company.[37] Significantly, all their comedians were African American. This inexpensive and accessible media primed the pump for the subsequent comedy boom, together with the opening of comedy clubs such as the Improvisation and the Comedy Store on the West Coast and Catch a Rising Star, the Comic Strip, and Pip's in New York City.[38] Comedy club owners routinely exploited comedians by paying them little or nothing at all, promising, instead, room to hone their craft and eventual exposure to talent agents and television bookers. Comedians grew tired of performing with little or no financial reward, and in 1979 Tom Dreesen organised Comedians for Compensation to picket the Comedy Store in Los Angeles, which was a club run by Mitzi Shore. The strike was successful, not because Shore paid the compensation she agreed to (she didn't) but because it standardised a national compensation model for comedians. The outcome of the strike brought economic reassurance – to comedians who sought fair payment and to club owners who sought profitability in this venture – and led to the 1980s comedy boom. Over 300 comedy clubs sprang up in the years following the strike and hundreds of mainly coastal comics began touring, performing in national chains across the country.

Other factors in the 1970s, beyond establishing a national compensation model, led to the first comedy boom. Comedy became a more profitable investment, there were increased opportunities to perform on television, and comedians demonstrated that they could draw enough fans to fill arenas and movie theatres across the country. Phil Berger published *The Last Laugh* in 1975, a book devoted to exploring the craft of comedy which quickly became the bible for stand-up comedians. At the same time, venues devoted exclusively to stand-up comedy became profitable. As Kliph

Nesteroff explains: 'The Comedy Store and the Improv demonstrated the business model. *The Last Laugh* demonstrated the artistic model.'[39] The syndicated television show *Make Me Laugh* provided career-enhancing exposure for comedians, and in 1975 Home Box Office (HBO) aired an inaugural stand-up comedy special featuring Robert Klein, who was nominated for a Grammy for best comedy album that year. This successful experiment garnering nearly 600,000 new subscribers signalled what was to come: the explosion of comedy on network and cable television.[40] The next HBO special featured Freddie Prinze Sr emceeing a comedy revue or a series of sets by several comics. This became the template adopted by television for ensuing decades. In 1976, San Francisco hosted an international stand-up comedy competition that would become an annual affair, showing that comedy was attracting global attention.[41] A year later, Steve Martin, whose madcap comedy performances earned him film roles and repeated invitations to host *Saturday Night Live*, secured enough popularity to fill arenas with far more seats than a large theatre could accommodate. Never, at least for a comedian, had such a business enterprise proven lucrative.[42] Around the same time, Robin Tyler would use her notoriety as stand-up comic and social activist on the frontlines of the gay liberation movement to launch a series of annual women's music/comedy festivals on the West Coast and in Georgia that would last into the late 1980s. Movie offers transitioned from a trickle to a steady stream for Richard Pryor when theatres across the USA screened his special *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* in 1979. These commercial successes demonstrated that comedians had other ways of getting their content to the masses and producers outside of live performance and network television.

The 1980s signalled the institutionalisation of stand-up comedy – there was a critical mass of comedians, myriad ways of reaching the consumer, and standardised performances. African American comics had for a long time performed to audiences on an entertainment circuit separate from white comedy venues – by racist social design at first, but later as pursuit of profit in the 1980s supported by an upwardly mobile Black middle class. Because television ushered in greater visibility for many comics in the 1980s, more female and Black comics were able to cross over into the mainstream. Known for his crass and homophobic material, Eddie Murphy was the comedy superstar of the 1980s and droves of comic hopefuls sought to model a career on his seemingly overnight rise to stardom. Many comedians set their sights on securing a sitcom, a televisual vehicle that made comedians famous, such as Roseanne Arnold, Jerry Seinfeld, Brett Butler, Tim Allen, Martin Lawrence, Ellen DeGeneres, Ray Romano, Sinbad,

and George Lopez. Beyond sitcoms, the 1980s brought a cornucopia of employment opportunities and comedians migrated into any cultural form where comedy flourished. This included film, comedy writing, radio, sketch shows, and late night television. Comedians had to earn their chops on stage, but no longer was that the final destination.

Alternative Stand-Up Comedy

The 1980s comedy boom saturated the market and by the early 1990s there was a discernible lull in consumption. This allowed for greater experimentation because comics were less invested in making comedy that sold; instead, they were doing it for each other and the love of the craft. Pursuit of the non-traditional and unconventional gave rise to the alternative comedy scene which emerged on the West Coast in the 1990s. This comedy sought to investigate the boundaries of comedy – the gems mined from stream-of-consciousness prattle, anecdotal humour or storytelling, or comedic commentary on traditionally avoided topics such as death and trauma. It sought to shirk performance conventions and circumvent the comedy club circuit, opting instead for the kinds of venues in which comedians performed in the 1950s, such as comic book stores, coffee shops, pizza parlours, and music venues. This was especially appealing to minoritised comedians unwilling or unable to penetrate the nearly all-male club circuit and those who found comedy clubs unsafe spaces rife with misogyny, racism, and homophobia.

Alternative comics cultivated an approach to comedy that grew quickly, becoming mainstream by the 2010s. Most of those involved early on were white comics who had the means to create comedy without much compensation. Motivated by the desire for public venues where they could experiment, Kathy Griffin created a weekly comedy revue called Hot Cup of Talk, Laura Milligan did the same at a venue called Tantrum, and in 1994 Beth Lapides opened the wildly popular UnCabaret, all in Los Angeles.[43] You could find comedians such as Janeane Garofalo, Patton Oswalt, Dana Gould, Sarah Silverman, Andy Dick, Andy Kindler, David Cross, Tig Notaro, Jack Black, Maria Bamford, Bob Odenkirk, Julia Sweeney, and Jeff Garlin at these venues and others such as Largo and Luna Park in West Hollywood. The first wave of alternative comedy paved the way for another (much more racially diverse) generation of alternative comedians working in the early twenty-first century such as Marina Franklin, Hannibal Buress, Donald Glover, Eric André, Baratunde Thurston, Victor Varnado, and Baron Vaughn. Our concept of the 'alternative' is relative

to who we are. White male alternative comedy rejected the formulaic humour that had become the staple diet of consumers. Women's alternative comedy rejected gender conventions and social pressures to behave, even perform comedy, in particular ways. For example, Kristin Schaal and Maria Bamford routinely skewer gendered expectations by using seemingly foolish characters to critique female inequality. Black alternative comedy offered up Black 'nerd' humour, which was only technically 'alternative' because it deviated from racialised expectations about Blackness – from diction to language to mannerisms.[44] It allowed Black comedians a chance to perform on their own terms and without the pressure to perform in ways that conformed to racist notions of the Other. Pioneering Black alternative comedians paved the way for a new generation of Black alternative comedians including: Ron Funches, Phoebe Robinson, Amanda Seales, Jessica Williams, Michelle Buteau, Naomi Ekperigin, Calise Hawkins, Dulcé Sloan, and Rae Sanni.

Twenty-First Century Stand-Up Comedy

In many respects, the 1980s boom ended up diversifying the pool of comics and the 1990s bust provided new means of getting comedy to niche audiences. As the century turned, technology such as CDs and DVDs continued to work on behalf of the success and growth of alternative comedy, Black comedy, and queer comedy by placing more content on the market for consumers. Longer specials recorded to either CD or DVD could be sold to an ever-growing fan base. Because of the surge in televised opportunities for comedians in the 1980s, Black comics established a national audience for their humour in the latter twentieth century and in the twenty-first century revived the travelling revue format used in the past. Comedy tours featuring multiple performers reaffirmed the profitability of the large-scale arena events that Steve Martin and Richard Pryor modelled two decades prior. Producers invested in *Kings of Comedy* (2000), a filmed version of a national tour featuring comics Bernie Mac, Cedric the Entertainer, Steve Harvey, and D. L. Hughley. This model venture was exceedingly profitable and set off a scramble to secure profits. *Queens of Comedy* (2001) came next, then the *Blue Collar Comedy Tour* (2003) and *Comedians of Comedy Tour* (2005). These comic showcases travelled the country just like early Ethiopian Delineators and vaudevillians, using the same revue format that Freddie Prinze Sr made popular in the 1970s. Showcases assured a broader fan base – if you like this comic, you will like this one too – and calcified allegiances based on gender, race,

and profession, although the designation 'blue collar' also offers rhetorical beard for comedy fans to congregate around whiteness and masculinity.

In the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11, humour was aimed at the perceived villain and there was a sharp rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Arab humour. Arab American, Middle Eastern, and Muslim comics organised a calculated response rebutting the character assassinations aimed at entire nations and millions of practising Muslims. Shortly after the attacks, in 2003 Dean Obeidallah and Maysoon Zayid co-founded and co-produced the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, which is still held annually. From 2005 to 2011, Maz Jobrani, Ahmed Ahmed, Aron Kader, and Dean Obeidallah performed in the *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*, a turn of phrase used by then President George Bush Jr to describe the countries he believed responsible for terrorism in the West. The popularity of this tour and other commercial enterprises around Arab American comedy signalled the collective desire to consume comedy that contextualised conflicts – domestic and global.[45]

There was a proliferation in comedy production and consumption during the 2010s. Technologies continued to offer new ways of accessing stand-up comedy. As a result, consumers could sift through comedy content on streaming services and online to find their preferred comedians. This decade's stand-up comedy was characterised by an explosion of new media, the relaxing of censorship, and experimentation. Maria Bamford performed her comedy in non-traditional venues such as a bowling alley, a bookstore, and in her parent's living room. Chelsea Peretti put live animals in seats at her comedy special and Drew Michaels incorporated no audience at all. Another outcome for stand-up comics was that international comedians could take advantage of the growing revenue stream. In 2018, Tasmanian native Hannah Gadsby became an overnight sensation in the USA when Netflix released her special *Nanette*. While Canadian and US borders have long been porous for comedy production, there was a spike in specials from international comics outside of North America. From the UK, Suzy Izzard has long been a comedy commodity and US audiences have also been charmed by Ricky Gervais, Gina Yashere, Stewart Lee, Amer Rahman, Trevor Noah, Daniel Sloss, Katherine Ryan, Rosie and Nicola Dempsey – known as Flo & Joan – John Oliver, Bridget Christie, London Hughes, and many more.

The global pandemic of 2020 meant that comedians had to be innovative to sustain their careers as clubs shut down and people quarantined at home. It would be inaccurate to call this period a bust: this would belie the copious comedic cultural production that continued

to take place. More accurately, stand-up comedy saw seismic shifts in production, distribution, and consumption, most of which eliminated third-party vendors. Comedians weaponised media platforms in the service of comedy, pumping out content in micro-doses over TikTok and Instagram, ramping up podcast output, and telling quarantine jokes over Zoom to hundreds of viewers. Jenny Ylang used a social simulation game called Animal Crossing to reach her fans, writing jokes for her cat-character who performed shows on a fantasy island. Outdoor shows emerged – in parks, on rooftops, at drive-in theatres – once states began lifting shelter-at-home ordinances during the summer of 2020. Comedians shared their quarantine experiences, weighed in on the upcoming election that would end with Donald Trump losing the popular and electoral votes to stay in the presidential office, and took a stance for/against Black Lives Matter protests erupting across the country. The pandemic reminded us of how nimble and adaptable comedians can be and the resurgence of live comedy in the aftermath of the pandemic revealed the value we confer to stand-up comedy as rhetorical weapon and entertainment commodity.

Any attempt to make legible a history of stand-up comedy will fall short of capturing all the kinds of comedy performance and the vast number of performers using comedy to comment on the world around them. It was born of so many other comedic cultural forms – minstrelsy and vaudeville chief among them – and continues to be a generative force shaping who we are as individuals, as communities, and as a nation. While comedic forms will come and go, history demonstrates that we will always find ways of incorporating comedic stories, songs, and dance into our entertainment landscapes, which is just a contemporary iteration of a performance tradition connecting us to our minstrel ancestors performing in Catherine Market.

Notes

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