

“STAND-UP COMEDY, BE A COMEDIAN, NOT A COMIC”

By Steve North, the Comedy Coach

The difference between the word “comedian” and the word “comic” is the difference between a successful comedy career and ... not.

A comic says funny things or makes funny observations, whereas a comedian is a funny person.

Think for minute about your favorite comedy person. Picture them. You smile when you think of them, right?. Are you smiling about a particular joke or material, or is it more about their own unique attitude, style, and point of view? Exactly.

There is a very good reason to care greatly whether someone is a comedian. As it turns out, if you really look back over the years and decades, the comedy performers who have had long lasting and versatile careers, -- who have crossed into a variety of formats, -- have all been comedians. So whether you’re an aspiring comedic performer or stand-up comedian, or somebody that wants to learn how to be funny, or a writer, or an actor, or a speaker; the absolute most important thing for you to understand first, is how to tap into your own comedic character.

Too many comedy beginners start by trying to be funny like someone else they’ve seen. Go to any “open mike” night and you’ll note that so many “performers” do an act that’s oddly reminiscent of every comic you’re ever seen. They are, in fact, performing different variations of every comic they have ever seen. You might as well call it, “comedy karaoke.” You can’t make it as a “cover band” playing other people’s hits. Just to illustrate this point, take a moment ... think of your top five favorite comedians. Feel their personalities and performances. Now name another performer that any of them are like. They’re all very different, aren’t they?

You will save yourself about five years, or maybe a whole lifetime, by first understanding who the funny you is first. What is your unique theme, attitude and focus? You can’t run headlong into jokes and material until you know where they are going to come from. Jokes and material only give you jokes and material. Learning to come from your comedic character gives you an act. Starting comedy by writing jokes is like buying a whole bunch of furniture before you know what place you’re going to live in.

Let’s talk for a minute about some of the differences between a comic and a comedian. The comic tends to be an observer and comes from a third person point of view and essentially says to the audience, “let’s you and I laugh about these things, people or thoughts on life.” The comedian, on the other hand, has a definite sense of him or herself ... the “I”. They impart a unique sense that you know them, and you know something

about their guts and who they are, at least in a comedic sense. They are “in their own act,” so to speak, unlike a comic.

You will also notice that comics write lots of material about items and issues of the day – politics, news issues, events, everyday life. Anywhere from five weeks to five years later, much of their act is obsolete.

Alternatively comedians’ material can last ten, twenty years, sometimes a whole lifetime, because the act is essentially about their comedic character.

There are some other basic problems with being a “comic.” The material that a comic does could essentially be given to the next comic, who could say the same exact words and get the same exact laugh. In other words, if you could give your jokes and your lines to the next performer and he would get the same laugh, why do we need you to perform it?

With many comedians, on the other hand, much of their material wouldn’t even be funny on somebody else. Imagine Jerry Seinfeld doing a Dane Cook line. Many comics could write their material on a piece of paper and hand it to the audience to read, and would get the same laugh as if they’d performed it. There’s something wrong with that picture.

Since a comic’s material isn’t really about the performer as a person, comics don’t get a lot of the nice goodies in show business that keep a career going over a long period of time, such as sitcoms and movies, and hosting shows. That’s because somebody throwing observations or jokes at you might make you laugh very hard, but nobody knows how to cast them. The comic tends to remove himself from the absurdity of life and points out what’s crazy about the external world. The comic is sort of above it all, asking us to laugh at other things through his observations. Problem is, the comic is not in his (or her) own act.

Many performers take this route because it feels a lot safer to make fun of the world than to expose yourself as something to laugh at. This may help someone’s short term self-esteem, but not their impact on the audience or their long-term success in their careers.

A comedian gives you the sense that they are under the foibles of life, that they are struggling in a funny way and you’re not only laughing at their material, but at them. Both comics and comedians have material and jokes, and sometimes a comedian’s lines may seem observational. But comedians have an extra sense of dimension, of knowing who they are and what’s funny about them and their overall point of view.

The comic may be accurate and skilled in what he asks us to laugh about. The problem is we don’t remember him, we remember what he asked us to laugh about. We remember the comedian because that’s who we were laughing at.

Because they are different beasts, there’s a very different way comics and comedians write, perform, and develop material.

Here are three levels of a piece of material, each one higher on the comedic food chain.

Completely observational ...

“My roommate tries to get women to commit to him too quickly. He goes on a first date, and asks the girl to marry him. I’m thinking, ‘what’s he going to do on a second date, the honeymoon? Third date, the divorce?’”

Personalizing it. Adding the “I” ...

“I seem to have this problem with trying to get women to commit to me too quickly. I go out on a first date, and ask the poor girl to marry me. What’s my plan for the second date, the honeymoon? Third date, divorce?”

Comedian, adding the comedic character ...

“My roommate tells me I try to get women to commit to me too quickly. That’s just not true. Like I went out on this blind date last Friday ... I waited over two hours before I asked this girl to marry me.”

Do you sense the extra dimension in the third piece? This extra dimension is part of the physics that propels comedians into longer and better careers than comics. Because with a comedian it’s personal, it’s about them and you’re laughing as much at them as their material. Even if a comedian tends to make observations, as long as there is still a unique sense of self and attitude coming through, the feeling you are laughing at them, then the performer is still a comedian.

Bottom line. ... be a comedian.