

How to measure a great comedian

By Christopher Molineux

There are many times that I wish to express my opinions in text regarding a certain style, technique or even performer but I find myself hesitant to do so. This is not due to a lack of conviction or a fear of reprisal but, rather, because of the slippery nature of the beast that is comedy. The question is, how can one make a valid appraisal of anything in stand-up when it seems implicit that it is all completely subjective? Is there any one criteria that can be used to measure the merits of a comedian or the techniques they use?



It would be valuable to consider a few possible candidates, namely originality, conviction, laughter and popularity.

Originality – Most particularly among comedians, originality is a most frequently used yardstick. This method of measure is also frequently used by reviewers, the general public and makes an appearance on the score-cards at every comedy competition. The problem with originality is it is both situational and non-qualitative. What seems original in one room in one town may appear completely derivative in another and by the time we find something that is completely original in all domains we are most likely to discover that it's obscurity should probably be maintained for the benefit of crowds everywhere. This brings up the obvious fact that originality can come in the broadest measures of quality – some is inspiring and hilarious while a large measure of originality could better be labeled as oblivious self-indulgence.

Conviction – This beast is worthy of consideration but can be dispatched swiftly in our current survey. Conviction both subtle and bombastic can provide the firmest and most genuine footing for a comedic performance but even more than originality it is a breeding ground for the most arrogant and empty of performances as well.

Laughter – Well, this is the one, isn't it? This is what so many people claim is the ultimate arbiter of stand-up. But it's not, and for too many reasons to be covered adequately here but I will take a stab at a few. To begin with, laughter is only one point on the spectrum of enjoyment and amusement that an audience can experience. On a laugh per minute scale the highest scores would be usually be made by impressionists, high energy prop acts, shock comics and the like, none of whom are destined to end up in any kind of pantheon of comedy. Acts such as Bill Cosby, Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks would be labeled as mediocre on a good day. Also, one has to consider where are we and who is doing the laughing? Certain acts are unbeatable on their own turf in terms of sheer laugh volume but the show doesn't translate past the county line. In addition laughter is a nervous condition that can be induced by many things that don't rank as great humour; shock and the artless violation of taboos are just two such examples.

Popularity Is the customer always right? In short... no. There are many ways to achieve a measure of success in show business and while talent is among them it certainly is far from the only way. If a 3rd rate comedian gets a small but memorable part in a hit movie, they become a headline act overnight. In fact a celebrity with no stage experience or material at all can hire a writer and instantly become a bigger draw than a talented and experienced (and original) comedian.

So what is the answer? Well, the easy answer is that a good comedian provides a balanced mix of all the above factors as well as a few others. There is, I feel, more to it than that. I think there are certain more nebulous criteria that define a truly great comedian and I will leave those for a later date..... I don't want to go over my time.