



VERY USEFUL ADVICE

This month's column may seem to be depressing and gross but, if you push on 'til the end, you will be rewarded with "Very Useful Advice" (as Winnie The Pooh might say).

"The comedy club business has certainly peaked."

"All of the weaker clubs have closed."

"The attendance has declined across the country."

I hear these comments and predictions of doom all the time. And they are sort of true. I say sort of true, because while attendance *is* down in most clubs, I think we're now in a leveling-off period. A couple of weeks ago I was talking to Tom Sobel, the man who books The Comedy Caravan out of Louisville, Kentucky, and the guy who gave me my start in the comedy club business. He has a very distinctive voice, and anyone who works for him eventually learns to do an impression of him. "Ahh, Mac... I'll tell you, bud... it's not like the old days, my friend. Right now on my computer, I have... uhm, let me see... ahh, approximately 387 comedians listed as available. And, ahh, that's just this week."

"Man," I replied, "When I started in this business ten years ago there weren't 387 comedians, period."

And I think that's the problem. Everybody's a comic now. A waiter at a club finds out what the comedians get paid and decides that he wants to be a comedian. Being a comedian has become almost a fad. In the beginning, clubs were springing up everywhere and people were captivated by the novelty of live stand-up comedy. It was a growing, swirling cycle, feeding on itself. More people were interested in coming out to see live entertainment, more clubs sprang up, more comedians found work, and more people became comedians.

But after a while the audiences began to notice something. A great many of the comedians were the same. They wore the same clothing, did the same 7-11, McDonald's and fart jokes, and appeared on the same TV shows that began to sprout up on every channel. Comedy was no longer special.

But, I think we have hit bottom and are re-

bouncing. The weaker clubs have closed, and the comedians who were just following the fad are dropping out. Whether or not this is true, or just my fervent hope, is yet to be seen.

Anyway, as I made my way warily into the Des Moines Funny Bone on Tuesday night for the first show of the week, all these things were on my mind. Bad comedians, dwindling crowds, and overexposure of comedy on television. Would I even have a job in a year? Sometimes the road gets lonely, and haunting thoughts creep in and take over your brain. I walked in the front door. The ticket seller was explaining to a large group of people that we were sold out. They would have to come back tomorrow. "Sold out?! Things were going great. The comedy business was booming!" (Funny how little it takes to swing me from a bad mood to a good mood when I'm away from home.)

The week progressed well, and soon it was Saturday night. We had two shows and in between them I was hungry.

Comic's attitudes toward food on the road vary a great deal. One guy I know lives on potato chips and ice cream sandwiches. Another carries a little book and writes down all the calories he consumes, along with the percentage of fat. I fall somewhere between the two. Unless I take good care of myself, my extended travel schedule wears me down, and I easily catch a cold. This has led to my Friday and Saturday night habit of eating piles of fresh fruit between shows.

I walked across the street to the Hy-Vee Supermarket and returned with a bag of grapes, an apple, a peach and a banana. It was 10 p.m. and, since I hadn't eaten since my breakfast (at about noon), I wolfed down my fruity feast as I set for the second show.

In a club, my set generally lasts 45 to 60 minutes. As I was waiting in the back of the room, the head waitress approached me for the customary pre-show watch synchronization. "How much time you doing?" she asked.

In a comedy club, the management is very concerned about "walk-outs," people who leave without paying their tabs. So the wait staff and the closing performer always coordinate the

time for the ending of the show. That way all the checks can be collected before that time. I answered her, "They seem to be in a very good mood, how about 50 minutes?"

That meant that she would instruct the staff to start collecting people's money about 30 minutes into my show. That's one of the little rotten things about closing the show in a comedy club. From the stage you can really tell when people get their bills. Their attention level drops about 50 percent for about five minutes while they sort out who had what and who's paying for whom.

The show was going fine, but I began to feel strange. About 15 minutes into the show I began to sweat for no reason. A bit later I began to feel sort of dizzy. My mind began to wander. I was loosing my power to concentrate on the show. I was thinking only of not passing out. "Take slow deep breaths," the little voice in my head was saying. This had never happened to me. It just seemed to get worse and worse. I was trying to not let people see my hands shaking. I had to lay down. I couldn't lay down. I had 15 minutes of show to get through or the wait staff wouldn't get all their checks collected. I was really regretting having told them 50 minutes.

My closing trick has developed over a great number of years from a five- or six-minute trick to a 20-minute routine involving many twists and turns that all eventually lead back to the big finish. Lucky for me I remembered the six-minute version. My stomach was churning so loudly that I was afraid that it would drown out my voice. The heck with the checks, I had to get off the stage.

I sped through the shortened version of the trick, thanked the audience volunteer, and ran straight from the stage to the bathroom and threw up a bushel of fruit.

As for the "Very Useful Advice," I was kidding. But would you really have read a whole column of gloom and doom about the comedy club industry that ended with me vomiting if I hadn't promised you something useful at the end? Actually, I do have something practical to relate to you — stay out of the comedy club business, and always wash your fruit. ♦