

The Last and Final Grandstand of Comedy

By Kurt Kroeber

“Y’all ever shit on a duck?”

An uproarious bout of laughter brews from the audience at *Legendary Steve’s Comedy Palace Open Mic Comedy Night* at 9 PM on a Tuesday. But not from me. I’m no easy mark like these drunk philistines, wasting away countless nights slamming back enough \$2 tall boys and whatever whiskey is well to think anything is funny. I glance around at toothful guffaws chattering in open-mouthed approval and have to put my head down in my notebook just to mask my disgust. I pretend I’m too invested in my own writing to be bothered, but truth is I can’t stand looking at their stupid fucking faces one second longer. Who are these people? What makes them believe they have anything to say? Why do I keep returning to this narrow, poorly lit hellhole week after week, with its piss-stained floors and rotting wood bar top? Is this recurring torture really worth the five minutes of stage time? All I ever seem to hear are crickets and courtesy chuckles anyways. Not tonight, though. Tonight’ll be different.

Enough of the ol’ liquid courage and one after the other they all climb two steps up to a stage built with the care and consideration of a shantytown, thinking they’re the absolute funniest thing since Primetime Network Television™. They try out lazy premises, pathetic wordplay and tired routines that make me want to lift this bar stool out from under my ass and shatter it on the brick wall behind them.

“Cause let me tell you from experience, those corkscrew-dicked muthafuckas hate it when you drop a deuce on them. Hate it!” Another massive laugh rings out through

the bar and the guy next to me with a beard that has maybe never been shaved slaps me on the back like we're old pals. "Where does he come up with this stuff?" I pull my shoulder away and avoid eye contact as beardo chortles boorishly in my ear. If we all laugh at this derivative mediocrity it'll only help exacerbate the cohesive delusion that we're funnier than we actually are. That doesn't help anybody. I refuse to participate. I keep my lips sealed and turn my back to the stage. They have to *earn* my approval. Just like I'll earn theirs.

I order another scotch and soda, top shelf. The bartender has got his eyes planted firmly on the stage and barely acknowledges my presence, though he gladly takes my money. \$5 on a \$4 drink and doesn't even bring back change.

"Fuck ducks. Those bitches are mean. Wipe em all out, I say." These buffoons around me all whoop and shriek like they've never heard a single premise before. On stage the comic mimes his asshole as a Gatling gun, mowing down waterfowl like it's the invasion of Duck Normandy. "Duck Holocaust, baby." They all lose it, slapping knees and spit-taking their beers like it's the second coming of comedy Christ. I'm pretty positive I hear someone say "classic." Ugh. The comic takes a bow and hops off stage to a bevy of high fives and back pats from his buddies who all wish they could have a closer that strong for their sets. I sit and stew, sucking down my drink in the hopes that intoxication will help me to endure this nightmare until it's my turn.

"Anthony Lopes, everybody!" Richard King, the resident MC of this pathetic pageant, hollers into the microphone with an excitement to match the energy somehow surging through the room. As he introduces the next comic I can't help but appreciate Richard's ineffable charm. He's not very funny and at 400+ pounds there's not much

else going for him. Despite these shortcomings he has this kind of boisterous personality and friendly nature that makes him incredibly easy to like. He remembers everybody's name and that fact alone has probably taken him further than the merits of his comedy ever could. Though, with so many comics coming through week after week, there doesn't leave much room for Rich to fit much of his own material between acts anymore. Regardless, his hearty laugh radiates over every punch line and really helps to make an otherwise horrendous experience feel relatively welcoming.

"Kurt, right?" I look up from my notebook to see unsure eyes testing the water. He doesn't even know who I am. I nod. "You're up next," Rich says as he grips the edge of the bar and motions for the bartender's attention. "Do your best to keep it under 5 for us tonight, if you can. We're running kind of late and there's a long list after you." I smile reassuringly laughing in my head about how there's not much point going up after me. "Two tall boys" he shouts over the raucous cackle enveloping us. He and I sit in silence, neither one willing to extend the conversation any further.

I finish my scotch and head backstage, grateful that I don't have to extend that awkwardness any further. On stage a lackadaisical young lady discusses her recipe for lobster bisque that requires the tortured scream of the crustacean. "It's just not any good without it," she mumbles into the microphone. This is the best joke I've heard all night.

I black out and don't come to until I hear my name announced through the PA. As I step out into the lights I have to shield my eyes, taken aback by just how bright they are. Are they always this bright? Richard juts out his hand and I take it because I'm supposed to, not because I want to. No one wants to give stage time to someone who doesn't shake

hands. I'd get bumped to the bottom of the list with the old guy that just got out of prison and tells really off color jokes about women. Nobody wants that guy on stage.

I hit the mic with my lips and a buzz sears through the speakers. A beat of sweat dripping down my forehead as the audience waits patiently for me to speak. This is it. This is the feeling of being alive. Standing on stage with nothing to save me but the witty words of wisdom and sidesplitting stories I'd worked so many hours to concoct.

But I won't give them that. I've got something else planned. Instead, I melt.

I start to speak but my teeth rot and clatter out of my mouth onto the stage below. Eyeballs evaporate into the back of my head as my tongue crawls down my throat forming in its wake garbled quarter syllables into mismatched phrases that have no place uttered on this Earth. I think I hear screaming. At least I hope I do. That was the point, after all. But I fear maybe that it's just the sonic piercing of my eardrums putrefying instead. Skin stretches wide as internal organs liquefy into a puddle of ooze and hair and shit. This soggy sea of disgust, my newly molten essence, spreads across every inch of the stage. The dark gelatinous void of my soul becomes a new coat of lacquer and the hardened protein of my fingernails its sharp-edged corners. On the inside I laugh hysterically, my vocal chords having long since returned to their atomic dissolution.

Brain death comes last of all as I recede into my own sense of self-satisfaction, knowing that from here on out comedic expression will never be the same. That my name will be spoken in reverential tones and that future, lesser comedians will perform on this stage knowing and honoring the sacrifice I made to our craft. That *Legendary Steve's Comedy Palace Open Mic Comedy Night* at 9 PM on a Tuesday was the last and final grandstand of comedy. Pretty funny, huh?