

# Offering Homage to Something Bigger Than Yourself

By Carl Nelson

Having time to kill I stopped in during amateur night at The Attic Comedy Club in Columbus, Ohio just across from The Olde Towne Tavern. It is up a long flight of dark stairs and directly across the street from the bar, where I waited till the doors opened. I had spent some time, years ago, trying my wings at stand-up comedy in Seattle at the Comedy Underground. And as I nursed my beer at the street side window end of the bar waiting for customers to begin entering, I glanced around and noticed possible performers at the bar I thought I might see later. One especially, was occupied, leafing through some material while being interrupted by others. He had the rough dress, hair and hunched aspect of someone frazzled by their next comic insight. He'd scribble something now and then. It looked like serious mental chaos interrupted by an offhand gesture with the option of a skewering retort. I'd witnessed this behavior all some forty years before. The bar had a pleasant vibe with a comely tattooed bartender and an interesting racial mix of alternative types. And cold beer is cold beer. It's one of those things people don't like changed. They like their comedy irreverent and surprising, but they drink the same cheap draft beer.



The small club up the stairs was a near equal mix of performers and patrons. I saw the aspiring performers clustered around nursed drinks, chatting up their thoughts which is how comics schmooze, or nodding to friends who showed. Here and there some mimicry, and a bit acted out or evolving. It seemed some had their eyes out for ringers. It was Tuesday and attendance light but free. I bought a beer to help the till and found a seat in the small theater which held maybe forty people. It was a dim room (raw space) with various props scattered about surrounding a one step elevated stage – plus the mic. There was also a classical bust on a stand nearby with a green vine of some sort wrapped about the stand like ivy. A comic's tribute to culture, I would suppose.

They might have had too many wanting to perform, because each set featured two comics, instead of the usual one. They played off each other and the audience.

Where to sit is always a decision. In live events I like to be close to the action. But I'm extremely tall and stick up, so unless I'm well concealed in a dark corner I tend to get called upon, which I don't like. I have very little public persona to call upon, which is one reason I quit performing. I also have nil acting ability and an easily overwhelmed ego. I was a better audience member now and back then, except that back then I had wanted to know how my material would perform. That's the only thing that had gotten me up there... other than the thrill. I'm a bit of a thrill seeker. And socially, stand-up comedy is the bobsled run. Other than a misfired laugh now and then, dying is the default draw at these amateur shows. Leaving the rails and flying back off into the milling herd, would be one way. A slow lingering death would be another. Watching some poor beast at the back fringe of the herd being slowly taken down on Wild Kingdom? Live theater approximates it. In fact, I tried to capture a bit of it in a poem:

## Comics

Even if awful,

it's entertaining to watch them die.

Like a caterpillar dumped on the barbie,

at first they are in shock, numbed

by the cold audience.

Later they fester

till the final writhing...

when they billow up, rupture, and ooze goo.

If they were further along in their careers

– that is, assuming one –

they might counter punch and butterfly.

But not tonight.

The combative ones can generate a heckler,

who can sometimes birth a moth,

who will circle in the limelight

for some years after.

Others stand blinded like deer,

until other comics appear to remove the catatonic newbie

from behind the mic

and place them in a dark back corner by the bar,

where they come out of it, perhaps,

slowly.

By the end of the evening

they'll be mumbling.

In a week or two, they'll get back their erection,

and the other moths will welcome them

into the pattern.

Loud and vulgar are the hallmarks of a large number of upcoming comics. A performer needs to capture the audience's attention and then command it. And these are two prime methods. Another hallmark of an amateur – especially if they are somewhat gifted – is that they can be lazy, and instead of working up material to offer on stage, they'll wing it as if another 'natural' working the audience. Watching an audience member squirm in the spotlight is a draw, and to watch them pawed like a cat working a mouse has a lot of fun in it. As long as the comic is careful not to cross the line into bullying or meanness or flat out terrifying his poor prey, whereupon the crowd can turn on the comic and run them out of town, so to speak.

We were about three sets in when they spotted me. They had pretty well wrung out the poor graduate student they'd interrogated. A lot of fairly friendly laughter was generated, but it had turned a bit brittle. The comic had worn out his welcome. The gas was about gone from that interaction.

"You're really tall, aren't you," the comic on the right remarked leaning in. He made a few remarks about me boxing with a moose and then some other stuff and then, "What do you do?"

Giving him as little foothold as I could, I said I was "retired".

“Well, what did you do before you retired?”

“I sold copiers.”

“Ahhh...”

Like a snake coiling he began pacing back and forth trotting out a lot of impressions of business and sales and trying them on me, searching for a humorous angle. I wasn't responding much so he got worked up a bit about using a copier, heading into the blue region while pantomiming copier sexual abuse. “You mean to tell me that you worked all those years,” his voice rose, “selling those machines and you never tried to scan your butt or to send off dick pics?”

I didn't know quite how to respond.

“Nobody wanted one,” I replied.

This got a big laugh.

“He's funnier than we are,” the other comic remarked.

They moved along.

I've always been very struck by the way people will cluster and form groups around various interests. These groups will have leaders and followers, and exhibit extreme loyalties to the ideas and norms held in common. There will be outsiders and insiders, outer circles and inner circles, and a center of the Universe feeling of their position in the nature of things. Though they might be no more than a speck; they were a seed and the most centrally located of the future flowering. It's as if those involved are in a movie where in the opening scene we see the earth from space until as the camera moves closer and closer we see the US, a certain state, a certain town, a certain neighborhood, a certain home and finally a family at the dinner table, and then one person speaking. We begin. This is how a comic sees him/herself. Something like Job addressing God.

The comedians I encountered years ago were of the same stamp as the ones I'd just watched. Their world was young, full of opportunity – if they could just get its attention! And they had the faith of a missionary in their purpose.

The small theater group I participated in was the same way.

No matter where I've traveled, this same phenomena has reproduced itself. For example, hitchhiking during my youth through Memphis I was caught out and didn't want to sleep exposed outside, so I purchased a room I found for the night. It was three dollars, and I had to push an empty whiskey bottle away from the door to enter. I had thought I must have been as near to the disintegration of the human community as I could be. And yet, when I walked downstairs, there in the common area, a group of the unhealthy regulars, seated in a collection of Salvation Army discards were watching a small rabbit eared TV. Talking, smoking, coughing, commenting or simply staring at the tube from within the group, they were taking communion.

These small groups of lingering people would seem to occur wherever numbers of people find themselves. They hook up in a loose affiliation rather like molecules will form compounds. People naturally group and then they will orient depending upon their interests (or 'charge', in the molecular sense). And whatever their orientation, they peer off into the future of the association rising in pyramidal form to its apotheosis rather like the pyramid on the dollar pointing towards the all seeing eye. For example, the stage actors were apt to refer to live theater as their cathedral. Human communion forms the basis of the headiness.

I'm reminded of Moses leading his 'people' to the Promised Land. He had a hard time keeping them from disobeying God's commands.

"The golden calf episode (Exodus 32) was a pivotal act of

idolatry where Israelites, impatient for Moses' return from Sinai, coerced Aaron into crafting a divine image. Inspired by Egyptian and Canaanite fertility cults (e.g., Apis or Baal), it was an unlawful attempt to worship Yahweh through a physical, tangible form." – AI Overview

But Moses was dealing with a crowd, and crowds are fickle, and can shed allegiances on a dime.

The push in the New Testament was for a relationship with God, individually. And the Christian message and epiphany was one of personal redemption.

I find it interesting that the Jewish culture tends to be a collective one, cliquish and clannish, while politically they tend to lean Left. Whereas the Christian culture is individual, inclusive and politically tend to lean Right. One addresses crowds, the other speaks to the individual.

But, no matter one's position in life, the psychological camera zooms in until you are the lens through which the Universe watches. Even the ironical is treated this way. And I've never seen this realized as well in my recollection as in the very fine, recently produced movie, *Song Sung Blue* (released for Christmas in 2025). Great writing, near perfect casting, fine production numbers... it's a treat.

The subject of the story *Song Sung Blue* involves a Neil Diamond tribute act. As the movie plays, we are made to feel the immediacy of a simulacrum, a representation whose devotion to the authenticity of Neil Diamond's music, to my mind, far exceeds the honesty of Neil Diamond himself. Neil Diamond, to me, would seem to be the modern day pop manifestation of Tin Pan Alley. Whereas the authenticity of this tribute music is one hundred percent. It moves one's world off-center, in that the human reality of the tribute players seem greater than the human reality of the music they worship. And turning the screw further, it seems they locate a value in the music, heretofore

missed. Which is perhaps the driving message of the lead character, "Lightning" played by Hugh Jackman. His personal mission is to transmit the wonder of Neil Diamond's music to the world. And he doesn't slack in doing so. (Neil Diamond would have seemed to get in the way.) The music performs well. Lightning and his partner, Thunder (Kate Hudson) create a romping, celestial revue with the drive of a tent revival.

This is a generous inclination, to proselytize for the greatness of an art you can only reproduce, but not create. These people have thrown themselves into a traveling devotional troupe. They have found a usable god who they can revere practically. In an intense form of worship, they enjoy the god's blessings in the same performance as tribute is paid.

One day when I spent the evening photographing an Elvis impersonators' contest, there was that same sense of awe and sacrifice of one's personality to something far greater. The success was in getting it down correct to the last detail, (like Moses discussing with God just how the tabernacle should be designed and decorated down to the last dowel) and then in selecting the best song for the performer to realize his/her best performance.

Then to toss in the sweaty towel.

"Thank you very much..."