

Wayne Federman
What Happens Next – 03.27.2022

Wayne Federman:

I teach a class in the history of stand-up comedy. What is a stand-up comedy? What are we even talking about? Stand-up comedy is one person standing in front of an audience with the expectation of evoking laughter.

Laughter, it's the mission statement of the job. You have to stand there all by your lonesome trying to make them laugh. It's terrifying. When it doesn't go well, we refer to it as bombing. It's thrilling when you connect with a crowd and you go on this comedic journey together, and together is the key word. It's an interactive art form. It's very intense. I know because I've been doing comedy for over 40 years.

Now since stand-up has become commercialized, which is "oh I can make a living doing this," there's always been a premier booking. Back in the Vaudeville days, the premier booking was in New York City, the Palace Theatre. If you did well at the Palace Theatre, you could tour the country. It was a stamp of approval. After the Palace, there was the nightclub generation, the number one place to play during this era, that really would solidify you as a comedian that could go to Vegas and open for Mitzi Gaynor, if you did well at the Copacabana in New York City.

The Copa was the new Palace. And then television hits, The Ed Sullivan show, and then, Johnny Carson became the king of late night. David Letterman, Garry Shandling, Robin Williams, Jim Carrey, Jay Leno all converge on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson.

Other new venues pop up, an HBO special, a whole hour on cable television. Then hosting SNL was a big thing. There's cable television, Evening at the Improv, and then the internet.

Starting in 2006 with Bo Burnham doing that little song from his bedroom in Hamilton, Massachusetts. He's more popular than thousands of comedians who have toured these clubs for decades. Now we have podcasting, Barack Obama is doing a podcast with Marc Maron on WTF. Little podcast shows, not out of Studio One at NBC, out of his garage. And then streaming specials on demand. The company that embraced stand-up right now is Netflix, we get Bill Burr, Ali Wong, John Mulaney.

I'm gonna leave you with this, before we get to the Q&A part of this with young Larry. Stand-up comedy is a generational art form. It's very ephemeral, it's for this time, and the power of it dissipates as time goes on. And that's because social norms, acceptable language, topics, and the way we speak changes.

Cutting-edge comedians were the funniest people ever, can seem out of touch, hackney or even unfunny to current generations. It's the nature of the art form. So there you go. The definition of stand-up, how stand-ups become popular and those destinations, and why stand-up comedy doesn't tend to age that well. It's sort of like milk. It goes bad.

Larry Bernstein:

Most old TV comedies taste like spoiled milk. An exception seems to be physical comedy. Take the I Love Lucy skit when Lucy takes a job at the chocolate factory. Few words are spoken, the machine starts to move faster, and we see the panic in her eyes when she starts to eat the chocolates. That is chocolate not milk. Why is this scene timeless?

Wayne Federman:

Great question. Physical bits do tend to have a little longer life. However, I feel like pie in the face, pie fights, I don't know if those are still funny. Stand-up, unlike a physical comedy bit like what Chaplin does where he's dancing with the potatoes on the end of the fork, that sort of is still wonderful to watch. I wanna be very careful here. Because for someone to say, "That's not funny," maybe Larry, saying, "That's not funny to me anymore." As opposed to that's not funny as if you know what funny is and what funny isn't.

Larry Bernstein:

Is Chris Farley falling on the table timeless?

Wayne Federman:

Physical comedy tends to have a basic human reaction. It's like what Mel Brooks used to say, "If I cut my finger on a piece of paper it's tragedy, but if somebody else falls into a manhole and dies, that's comedy." I know you think I'm dodging this question, but I'm not.

Larry Bernstein:

Does successful stand-up require a long humorous story with a narrative arc?

Wayne Federman:

It can be. Usually, it's little comedy bits that are strung together as opposed to a long arc of a story. There are comedians that do long form. Mike Birbiglia does long form story.

And then, all the way through are great jokes. Others that do the complete opposite, one-liner comedians: Rodney Dangerfield. Steven Wright. Jokes aren't connected in any way. Henny Youngman was known as the king of one-liners. He started in the '30s, so that's been going on for a while.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, you mention that in the 90s standup comedy clubs expanded dramatically and then fell on hard times. What happened?

Wayne Federman:

I just love how serious you are, Larry. It's killing me.

We were oversaturated with clubs and comedians and club owners both got super greedy. It was like the price of a movie. Now, it was three times that price with drinks.

Plus people could see standup at home on Evening at the Improv. There was definitely a retrenchment.

But, there's still comedy clubs in most major cities in the United States.

Larry Bernstein:

How does a young comic get discovered now?

Wayne Federman:

The internet. There's a new phenomenon called front facing comedians. They were comedians that use their cellphone and flip the camera around and just (laughs) literally just tape themselves doing a bit or doing a character, or in the case of one-woman lip-synced Donald Trump press conference about COVID, and she ended up getting a CBS show and a Showtime special.

The old school way of doing open mics, getting into a comedy club, and touring these clubs still exists, but there's myriad ways of getting in right now. Comedians do it every day. I love it.

Larry Bernstein:

In your opening remarks you mentioned that the premier booking locations used to act as gatekeepers. Who plays that role now?

Wayne Federman:

If you want to do SNL, you got to go through Lorne. If you want to be on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, there's a booker you have to please. There's still a lot of gatekeepers that you have to impress.

If you have enough fans and followers, people will want those fans to come to the clubs, and there's many comedians that tour on the strength of their podcast.

There's been SNL cast members that have gotten on the show because they put up a YouTube video of their impressions that was seen by SNL, and they got on the show.

Larry Bernstein:

Many of the great comedians pivoted from stand-up to TV sitcoms. Is that still the natural career progression?

Wayne Federman:

If we go back to Jack Benny and Fred Allen doing their standup acts in vaudeville, they jumped on the chance to do a radio show. Same with Bob Hope.

When you're a standup comedian, you've already proven that you know how to unlock laughter from audiences, and then they can put 'em into a sitcom.

Bob Newhart, who had incredible comedy records starting in 1960, got the Bob Newhart show, he was a perfect fit for it.

Don Rickles had a string of failed sitcoms.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book you mention that Don Rickles had three shows a night in Vegas at midnight, 230 am and 5 am which was called the breakfast show.

Wayne Federman:

Vegas was a very interesting experiment in how to keep people in a casino. That was the whole mission statement of Las Vegas. Every minute a customer was in the casino meant money for that building.

They would put these acts in the lounge to keep audiences there as long as possible.

Carson was headlining in the main room, he or Sinatra would come over to see Rickles in the lounge, a yokel from the Midwest could see this big headliner, "Oh, my god, there's Sinatra sitting next to me being made fun of by Don Rickles. This is incredible."

You never knew what was going to happen. Lounge performances were improvisational and Rickles had to work some crazy hours.

Larry Bernstein:

My dad once went to see a Don Rickles performance, and he told me that he was still laughing from two jokes ago. Rickles would be firing off so many jokes that the audience simply couldn't keep up with him.

Wayne Federman:

He was just a machine. He had a bunch of lines ready to go. On top of that, he was an extremely gifted improvisational comedian. No matter what the situation, he would have a sarcastic comment. It was a rapid-fire Gatling gun of comedy that came at you and people loved him.

Larry Bernstein:

How much does a stand-up comic rely on his writers?

Wayne Federman:

Yeah, that still happens. When we got to Carlin, "Everything I'm saying on stage is something I wrote." The writer became the performer.

They were called gag- (laughs) gag writers. Radio hits and the vaudeville gag writer was in huge demand 'cause there was so much material you had to create every week for your radio show as opposed to vaudeville, where you could tour for years, maybe decades, on the same act, the same bulletproof 12 minutes.

Most comedians now write their own material, but other comedians help them workshop jokes.

I did a show in Aspen with Jerry Seinfeld. I was his opening act. And then, afterwards, I gave him a few, what they're called tags, which are extra jokes on part of a premise, and he ended up using one of 'em.

That happens all the time in standup. "Oh, you're missing this little nugget here that you didn't think of. It just hit me. Let me give you that."

Larry Bernstein:

Making fun of politicians is core to the stand-up act, why is Trump a bigger target than Biden?

Wayne Federman:

Trump was singularly interesting because there was a lot you could really mock. The cadence of his voice. But, they parody Joe Biden on SNL. There'll always be political comedy. The guy who started it on stage was Will Rogers.

Any comedian that you see that does political comedy, whether it's Trevor Noah, Stephen Colbert, or John Stewart or any of the SNL update guys. They all work in the shadow of Will Rogers.

Larry Bernstein:

Why should people care about the history of stand up?

Wayne Federman:

(laughs)

Larry Bernstein:

(laughs) Why did you write this book?

Wayne Federman:

Yeah, that's a great, great, you know, (laughs), the way you say it. It's like I'm being interviewed by Mike Wallace. What? Why would you write something like that?

Larry Bernstein:

Why would you do such a thing?

Wayne Federman:

(laughs)

Larry Bernstein:

(laughs) Does your mother know you did this?

Wayne Federman:

I love it. I love it. No one has really written the history of stand up before. I thought I was uniquely qualified to do it in a very breezy, easy to digest style.

No one has really boiled it down to like, this happened, then this happened, and that's how we got to today. That's how Will Rogers is connected to Samantha Bee. This is how Bob Hope is connected to John Mulaney. This is how the whole thing is all one big narrative. Even though the venues change, standing alone on-stage getting laughs remains the core job description.

Larry Bernstein:

What is the future for stand-up?

Wayne Federman:

There are people that don't do it on stage. They do it on the internet at home. There will be a new technology that will change the nature of stand up, the way it did with records, the microphone, television, **and** the internet.

There will be a new technology that I will not invent, that I will probably miss buying stock in the company and that will change the nature of stand up. How's that for an answer?

Larry Bernstein:

Better than I expected.

What do you make of Jerry Seinfeld's decision to stop performing on college campuses out of fear?

Wayne Federman:

I teach on a college campus. I profess (laughs) on these campuses.

The student body is very sensitive about anything that might be offensive, even the most benign jokes.

There is definitely a virtue signaling from the audience of I don't appreciate you, making that kind of generality about women or children.

I did hundreds of colleges when I was starting out and at the end, I started getting topics you're not allowed to talk about.

We have a lot of free speech in stand up. Unfortunately, there's a little area around the edges where the walls are coming back in. Kind of like in Star Wars when they're in that garbage dump and the walls keep coming in.

When I was a kid, the walls kept expanding.

When Carlin came along, we could speak about anything that was the freedom even if sometimes you might get offended.

I produced an HBO documentary about him that'll be out in May. He used to say, the obligation of the stand-up is to find the line and then deliberately go over it.

I want a world where comedians find the line and go over it. That's where we get Sam Kennisons and Lenny Bruces.

Larry Bernstein:

For the first time in my life, I hear my friends consistently say that they cannot express their opinion in public on a whole host of topics.

Wayne Federman:

Most comedians understand that societal norms change over time. There used to be a bunch of jokes about hitting your wife. The Honeymooners. One of the big running gags on that show was, "One of these days, Alice, I'm going to hit you so hard you're going to go to the moon." There would never be a sitcom today with that.

Mainstream shows like Seinfeld or Friends, go to the internet and type in Seinfeld problematic. Those two words. And there's article after article about why these shows are offensive, why they're homophobic, why they're fat shaming.

I'm not even talking about an edgy comedian (laughs) in a nightclub. I'm talking mainstream, prime time television from the 90s is now considered problematic by people who are easily offended.

And personal behavior on and off the stage can be viewed as problematic.

Larry Bernstein:

Once a comedian is cancelled, can he make a comeback?

Wayne Federman:

Louis C.K. is still touring and he had problematic off stage behavior.

Larry Bernstein

What about Michael Richards who played Kramer on Seinfeld, can he ever return to stand-up?

Wayne Federman:

That's a hard one, 'cause that is a bit of the third rail.

Of like, (laughs) just that he's screaming the N-word on stage at somebody in anger, that's very tough to come back from in today's climate.

I bring this up with my class, we talk about Bill Cosby, and Woody Allen. But they don't really know them. All my students are born after the year 2000.

But they do know J.K. Rowlings who wrote Harry Potter.

Larry Bernstein:

Rowlings said publicly in a tweet that "I love trans people but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives."

Wayne Federman:

The class, most of them avoid getting money into her pocket. 25th anniversary of Harry Potter that she was disinvited from that event, they were all thrilled about that. A social cancellation because she said gender is a fact.

Larry Bernstein:

Why are there so many Jewish stand-up comedians and gag writers?

Wayne Federman:

In the late 1800s from Eastern Europe, Jews that started coming to the United States.

Show business was very much open. The primary focus of these comedians was to assimilate. Some of them got nose jobs. Milton Berle, I'm looking at you. But most of them changed their names. Milton Berle was Mendel Berlinger. Jerome Levitch, became Jerry Lewis. Leonard Schneider became Lenny Bruce.

They de-Jewed their names to get into mainstream Goyim society.

A Talmudic tradition of questioning and looking at things from a different way. Stand-up comedy is that. I'll give you a perfect example. The sign, no swimming allowed. You can look at it and go, "No swimming allowed." Or you can look at that sign and go, "No. Swimming allowed." (laughter)

And Jews have been debating this stupid Torah for thousands of years. It's ridiculous. And they're still doing this.

Larry Bernstein:

With little progress.

Wayne Federman:

Yeah, little progress. (laughter) Going over the minutiae. If you think about Jerry Seinfeld's bit about cotton balls. He is breaking down the minutiae, who makes them? Why do they exist? Looking at the world with a slightly different comedic lens. That's really all standup is.

Larry Bernstein:

How did Chris Rock become a superstar?

Wayne Federman:

He did something that was phenomenal, which was his big HBO special in 1996. He wrote some material that was so incendiary, so edgy. I would say almost overnight became a legend. That act lands him on the cover of Rolling Stone. He gets his own HBO series, relaunches his film career.

I've known him since he was stacking chairs at The Comic Strip hoping to get on late at night. Chris, off stage, he *is* a quiet, almost nerdy little skinny kid. But on stage, it's like a panther, pacing back and forth, doing incredibly forceful standup comedy.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you break down your jokes to understand why they succeed? Do you work on how to improve them to get more laughs? Humor is an art but it doesn't mean that there isn't some science.

Wayne Federman:

The basis of comedy is surprise. "Oh, I didn't think of that." That no swimming allowed is "I didn't think of that. It was right there in front of me."

But when it comes to the writing, I will give you this for free, and all your listeners, to what I call the CBS: clarity, brevity, and specificity. There **are** no extra words. It's very specific of what they're talking about. And it's a hundred percent clear what the joke is. It can't be ambiguous. Clarity, brevity, and specific. You just saved 6,000 dollars in tuition from USC to take my course.

Larry Bernstein:

What about bringing an aspect of a previous joke to a later one?

Wayne Federman:

I think audiences are onto that. There's actually a word for it, a call back.

Comedy dies when you dissect comedy, it dies on the operating table. So, let's do it. Let's kill some comedy right now.

Larry Bernstein:

Why does comedy die on the operating table? Why can't we treat it like an artistic work? When we look at Monet's waterlilies, we know it's a painting, and the more we learn about how Monet created the work, the more we can enjoy it and appreciate the artisan's craft.

Wayne Federman:

You absolutely can. And my class, I have them take a routine and transcribe it word for word.

Bill Maher when he first heard Robert Klein's album, Child of the 50's, he wrote down every word so he could see how many jokes, where the laughs were, how long the setups were.

I did that for the class. And they found it very informative. It wasn't particularly funny, but it's like a science. I definitely turn a standup comedy from a performance art into prose.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Wayne Federman:

Everything. Standup comedy notwithstanding. The human condition continues to improve remarkably throughout the world. And I can't wait to see artificial intelligence, hopefully it won't be a Terminator situation where the machines take over.

I can't wait to see what we do next. People in 50 years who are listening to this podcast will have a much healthier life than we do right now.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks Wayne.