

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

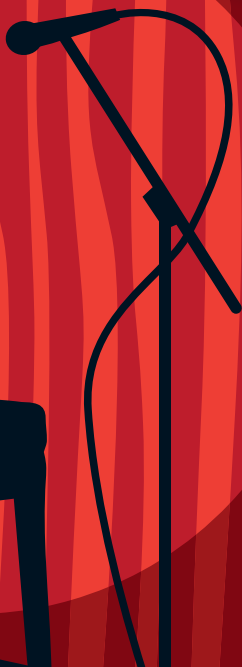
STAND-UP COMEDY

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'An indispensable guide from a man who has lived and breathed stand-up comedy for longer than most stand-up comedians.'

SIMON PEGG



NEW TITLE

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

STAND-UP
COMEDY



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In 2008 researchers concluded that the oldest joke they had found dated from 2000 BC and was a proverb told by the smutty Sumerians of southern Mesopotamia.

A CAVEMAN WALKS INTO A CAVE...

A veritable plethora of archaeologists and archivists have argued for years about the origins of stand-up comedy. Where did it start? What purpose did it serve? Why did it catch on? Some speculate that the ancient Greeks were the first people to stand on a stage and tell jokes. Others have suggested that, between conquering Europe and Asia Minor, the Romans entertained each other with pithy anecdotes about dissolute emperors making their horses consuls, why their roads had no corner shops, and how the queen of Egypt was such an enthusiastic fellatrix that she once pleased 100 Roman soldiers in a single session.*

Humour probably goes back to the dawn of civilisation. No sooner had one Neanderthal brought home a dead animal than he was standing around the fire saying something to the effect of ‘Don’t you just hate it when you go out to hunt a red deer and you get halfway into the forest and can’t remember what you went there for?’ The others laughed so much that he returned the following week to tell the same story. A month later he had an agent negotiating a tour of nearby caves.

*See *The Bluffer’s Guide to Sex* for confirmation.

In 2008 researchers at the University of Wolverhampton (that's not an oxymoron) concluded that the oldest joke they had found dated from 2000 BC and was a proverb told by the smutty Sumerians of southern Mesopotamia: 'Something which has never occurred since time immemorial; a young woman did not fart in her husband's lap.'

The oldest-known recorded English joke dates from Anglo-Saxon times and was found in the *Codex Exoniensis*, a tenth-century book of poetry held at Exeter Cathedral: 'What hangs at a man's thigh and wants to poke the hole that it's often poked before?' Answer: 'A key'. Somewhere in a pub in South London, somebody is probably telling a similar joke as you read this. Innuendo has always been essential to successful stand-up comedy.

This guide will fill in the history of stand-up comedy and furnish you with all the essential facts you need to convince your friends that you know your comedy onions. It may not turn you into an arena-filling comedian, but it will reveal what it takes to be one, and simultaneously demonstrate that there is in fact much more to modern stand-up comedy than innuendo. By the end of the book you will be able to hold your own in any conversation about comedy, and therefore minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. But be careful not to hold your own in public or you may be arrested.

TURNING A TRICK

In many respects stand-up comedy has hardly changed in the last thousand years. A man – and, sorry, it has generally been a man, although that is now changing as you will later see – attempts to make a group of people laugh with an infectious cocktail of wit, wisdom, and maybe some wordplay and charisma. He might even wear a funny hat and fall over. Some people will laugh at anything.

Money may well change hands at some stage – usually at the start of the evening. It has been noted that there is an interesting similarity between stand-up comedy gigs and prostitution. In both cases the ‘punter’ pays to have an emotional response in the company of someone they may not know personally and may never see again.

ROOTS AND RITES

Long before comedy became a part of show business, it was already part of our culture. Modern comedy has its roots in ancient pagan rites that some experts believe even predate Liverpoolian legend Ken Dodd telling his first gag about the Inland Revenue. It is remarkable how societies all over

the world developed their own brand of humour which was both different and at the same time strikingly similar.

Native Americans, for example, believed in a comedic fertility character known as Kokopelli, a hunchbacked figure with a huge erection carrying a bag of seeds. Kokopelli would go around playing pranks on villagers, who would laugh so much that they would not notice him ravishing their women before moving on to another village the following night and doing the same thing. Maybe he was an ancestor of Russell Brand.

SEND IN THE CLOWNS

The clown has always had tacit permission to defy or simply ignore convention. In the Middle Ages jesters were able to speak their mind in the monarch's court. They were society's safety valve, a controlled way of expressing discontent. From Pueblo Indians mocking sacred ceremonies to a modern circus clown squirting water at the audience, comedy breaks down barriers. Stand-up Stewart Lee would start his 2005 show *'90s Comedian* by drawing a chalk circle on the stage to stand in. This, he explained, was what medieval clowns used to do outside churches to protect themselves from being persecuted for heresy.

By the 1800s a career in comedy was an established way of earning a living. The first great modern clown was Joseph Grimaldi, who was the Michael McIntyre of his day – careful not to offend, adored by the public, envied by his rivals. In *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi*, author Andrew McConnell Stott recalls how one contemporary

tried to besmirch Grimaldi's reputation for reliability by billing him in the line-up of a London show when he knew he was working in Birmingham. The clown got wind of the plot and after a breathless 100-mile, 19-hour journey by stagecoach made it onstage just in time.

Yet the strain of staying at the top took its toll, as it would do to many after him. Grimaldi suffered from depression and died in poverty and pain due to the damage caused to his body by his slapstick acrobatics. His legacy is the idea of the 'sad clown' who makes everyone laugh but goes home alone and cries himself to sleep. One should adopt an air of gravitas when talking of Grimaldi's fate, as a reminder that making people laugh is a serious business. Indeed, you might quote the great actor Edmund Kean who, on his deathbed, said: 'Dying is easy, comedy is hard.' Perhaps you might conceal an onion about your person and wipe away a convenient tear at this juncture.

MUSIC HALLS AND VAUDEVILLE

But this is comedy, and the bluffer should not dwell on the more morbid aspects of the profession. In the Victorian era, comedians were superstars, packing out music halls. You should demonstrate your inside knowledge by referring to Little Tich by his real name, Harry Relph. Tich was only four feet six inches tall and had six fingers on each hand. He was famous for his 'big-foot' dance in which he cavorted around in shoes that were two feet long. Tich would balance on them, strut around on them and even hide behind them. The bluffer must also mention Dan Leno, a man who entertained

Queen Victoria in her dotage and was given a diamond tiepin by King Edward and nicknamed the 'King's Jester'.

In the twentieth century vaudeville thrived. Cinema helped to make icons of the likes of Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy who had cut their teeth onstage. Later, George Formby was a household name, thanks to his gormless grin and suggestive songs such as 'With My Little Stick Of Blackpool Rock'. (Eat your heart out, Miley Cyrus.)

MAX MILLER

The first recognisably modern British comedian, however, was Max Miller. The Brighton-born entertainer was what was known as a 'front-of-cloth' comedian. He would stand in the footlights and fire out fusillades of jokes and stories while the curtain was down and the set rearranged for the next variety act. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Miller was a hugely popular household name, dominating live comedy. His outfits certainly made this stand-up stand out. Multicoloured brogues, plus fours (more usually seen on the golf course), kipper ties, trim silk jackets and tight-fitting trilbies made him look part travelling salesman, part circus clown. Miller was much loved by the public; if he was appearing in London and the show ran late, the guards at Victoria Station would hold the Brighton Express for him.

From the moment he strutted onstage, he was in full flow: 'Thank you very much, I expected more but I'm satisfied...' He would get plenty of material out of his outfits, running his hands over his hips and thighs: 'I've got new ones on tonight, all rubber. Do you wear them, lady? You do

look funny when you take them off; you look like a golf ball.' Gradually he would build to a bawdy climax while discussing his recent hunt for seaside lodgings. 'I went to Blackpool and I went round looking for rooms... An old lady came to the door... I said could you accommodate me; she says I'm awfully sorry I'm full up. I said surely you could squeeze me in the little back room, couldn't you? She said I could but I haven't got time now.'



If Grimaldi created the 'sad-clown' legend, Miller added 'short arms, long pockets' to the modern comedian's psychological CV.

This 'saloon bar Priapus', as he was dubbed by playwright John Osborne, never actually swore. Everything was left to his audience's imagination. There was something delightfully conspiratorial about his act. In his most famous rapid-fire riff, he would pull out two joke books – one white book, one blue – and ask the audience which one they wanted: the clean white one or the dirty blue one. They invariably went for the blue book, knowing full well that that was where the rudest innuendos were. 'I don't care what I say, do I?'

If Grimaldi created the 'sad-clown' legend, Miller added 'short arms, long pockets' to the modern comedian's psychological CV. Miller had a reputation for being somewhat

tight-fisted. Contemporaries joked that he was so mean that late in his career he was said to still have the first shilling he had ever earned. He was a past master at avoiding paying up when he lost a wager and was known to rush out of theatres straight after the curtain had come down without offering the band their traditional tip.

But as TV grew in popularity, Miller's days at the top were numbered. There was something about his Cheeky Chappie persona that did not translate to the new medium. The camera did not embrace him the way audiences did, or the way it would embrace Morecambe and Wise a decade later. It is hard to say exactly why Miller did not cross over onto the small screen. It was nothing to do with his act having to be tamed for TV, as some have suggested. Like Jimmy Carr or Frank Skinner today, Miller could be just as quick-witted without resorting to his 'blue book'.

Maybe he was just slightly too old. By the time TV came along as a major force, he was already in his fifties. Music hall was dying and he had nowhere else to go. He was keenly aware that he was the last of a certain breed: 'When I'm dead and gone, the game's finished,' he once said. And as far as music hall went, he was right. In 1958 he suffered a heart attack and, though he continued to perform, he took life more easily before going to the great gig in the sky in 1963.

STAGE TO SCREEN

Yet Miller paved the way for a generation of comedians who would become stars on TV as well as stage. Make sure you mention the lesser-known Arthur Haynes, who went from

stage to screen, finding fame with his tramp character (his sidekick for a while was one of comedy's longest-serving straight men, Nicholas Parsons). Tony Hancock also went from live shows to sitcom fame, but everyone knows his tragic tale; Haynes will score you more points.

Light entertainment soon ruled the airwaves: Morecambe and Wise, Bob Monkhouse (who as a Dulwich College schoolboy would hang around by the stage door and try to sell jokes to Miller), Frankie Howerd and Tommy Cooper. And, lest we forget, there was also radio, with Spike Milligan and The Goons showing that comedy could be every bit as surreal as a Salvador Dali painting.

A generation made the leap from stage to screen. TV did not kill off stand-up; it brought it to a whole new audience. Comedy was a truly international phenomenon, from Lenny Bruce and Milton Berle in the USA to *Beyond The Fringe* in the UK featuring Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett and Jonathan Miller.

1960s SATIRE

Comedy in the 1960s had a new confidence and irreverence. Old values were replaced. At Peter Cook's Establishment Club in Soho, jokes were made about royalty and prime minister Harold Macmillan, who was portrayed as a doddering old fool. Outrageous! Cook, who remains to this day the *sine qua non* of brilliant satirists, was his own toughest act to follow. A dashing, handsome, sharp-witted superstar in the 1960s, he never lost his wit and ability. However, in the early 1970s he lost his direction, hosting a BBC chat

show, *Where Do I Sit?*, which was so derided it was taken off the air mid-series and replaced by a new chat show hosted by a young journalist called Michael Parkinson. Whatever became of him?

THE ADVENT OF MODERN STAND-UP

But by the second half of the 1970s, comedy was in need of a revamp. *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, once so radical, had gone from being a late-night cult sketch show to a prime-time success, with John Cleese having an even greater hit with *Fawlty Towers*. And stand-up comedy was anything but cutting-edge. It was personified by the mother-in-law gags of the frilly-shirted, bow-tied brigade led by the likes of Bernard Manning, Frank Carson and Mike 'Wallop' Reid on Granada Television's quick-fire series *The Comedians*. The programme was cannily edited, fast with rapid cuts from gag to gag, so that viewers would not realise how wince-inducingly corny the acts really were in anything but the smallest of doses.

At the end of the decade, a change was in the air. A new stand-up revolution was brewing in the back streets of London's Soho. Truly modern comedy was about to be born. And it would have two fathers and no mother. How's that for modern?

WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

A life insurance salesman and a man who once opened for Cliff Richard walk into a bar... It doesn't sound like the start of a great gag, but Peter Rosengard and old-school comedian Don Ward are the two names you need to be *au fait* with when talking about the alternative comedy boom of the early 1980s. Without them, comedians would not be filling arenas and our TV screens today.

It was on a trip to Los Angeles in 1978 that Rosengard heard about a club called the Comedy Store. He had been looking at a house to buy in the Hollywood Hills and his real estate broker said he had to hurry away to do a stand-up gig. Fate, as it has an endearing habit of doing, had stepped in to change history.

Rosengard writes in his autobiography, *Talking to Strangers: The Adventures of a Life Insurance Salesman*, that he was intrigued and went to the small club himself where he laughed so much his family nearly had to cash in his own life policy. These were not stale old comedy hacks onstage but sharp, ambitious young gagmen doing tight 10-minute routines. Back in London, he decided to go to a similar

comedy club but realised that there wasn't one. So he set one up himself. Looking around central London for a suitable property, he met Ward, who had a lease on an establishment called the Nell Gwynne Club in Soho.

This was a well-known striptease venue with a room going spare at weekends called the Gargoyle Club that had a fair bit of history. It had a mural by Matisse on the wall and the Prince of Wales – the future King Edward VIII – had been an occasional patron. It was here that Ward and Rosengard opened the Comedy Store on 19 April 1979. The posters advertising the club encapsulated the high-stakes thrills of stand-up: 'What's the difference between skydiving and appearing at the Comedy Store? Answer: In skydiving you can only die once.'

It is said that comedy is all about timing. Less than three weeks after the Store opened, Margaret Thatcher led the Conservative Party to victory in the general election. So not only was there a new 'alternative' comedy venue, now there was something for performers in the club to make jokes about. This was not the satire boom of the 1960s revisited. It was something much more visceral and angry that owed more to the recent punk-rock revolution than it did to Monty Python. There were few rules, other than Rosengard's insistence that the comedy should be non-racist and non-sexist.

ON THE BILL

All that was needed now were some comedians. Rosengard found a compère, Alexei Sayle, a furious surrealist-Marxist Liverpoolian who responded to an advertisement he placed

in *Private Eye*. Slowly, a scene of sorts started to coalesce. Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmondson arrived from Manchester University as a comedy group called 20th Century Coyote (later to become the manic slapstick duo called The Dangerous Brothers). A famous early routine deconstructed the old gag: 'What's green and hairy and goes up and down? A gooseberry in a lift.' 'How did the gooseberry get in the lift?' they wanted to know (loudly).



'What's the difference between skydiving
and appearing at the Comedy Store?
In skydiving you can only die once.'

Nigel Planer and Peter Richardson, contemporaries at drama college, also pitched up as The Outer Limits. In the mid-1970s they created a show mixing rock and comedy called Rank, about a rock festival raid by the police, in which Planer played a hippy called Neil. If you want to bluff about your in-depth knowledge of stand-up, you will need to know facts like this. Why? Read on.

It was right place, right time. Soho was starting to become fashionable, with the New Romantic movement setting risible and instantly forgettable sartorial trends. Walking down Old Compton Street, you might bump into Steve Strange dressed as a pirate at one end and Alexei Sayle in a tight-fitting mod suit and pork-pie hat at the other.

Sayle was paid £5 a night to link the acts and rant about Jean-Paul Sartre, Ford Cortinas and Lenin. A gong at the side of the stage was hit when acts had overstayed their welcome; one of the team couldn't find a flashing light to tell the acts when their time was up so picked up a small J Arthur Rank gong instead. Some acts were so dreadful that it was said even the bouncers heckled.

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

There were some notable precedents for what quickly became known as 'alternative comedy'. Two notable acts had swung open the door, and in any discussion about the birth of the genre, the bluffer should definitely name-drop Billy Connolly and Jasper Carrott, two natural storytellers who found their way into comedy in the mid-1970s via the folk-music circuit. But if you suggest that the absolute godfather of alternative comedy is Birmingham-born John Dowie, who did angry observational material before it became *de rigueur*, you will be on safe ground.

You should also mention a winner of the ATV talent show *New Faces* named Victoria Wood, who in 1978 took part in a topical revue called *In At The Death* at the Bush Theatre in West London. This was where the 25-year-old *ingénue* first had the opportunity to work with Julie Walters. Wood was never really part of the alternative comedy movement but, similarly disaffected with mainstream comedy, she was definitely moving in the same direction.

Another early bright spark was Keith Allen. He already had some showbiz experience – having been a stagehand

at the Victoria Theatre and once strutting onstage naked while middle-of-the-road entertainer Max Bygraves was performing. The future father of chanteuse Lily Allen would go on to become a successful actor, author, singer-songwriter, TV presenter, artist, confrontational studio guest, and a few other things.

A NEW WAVE OF WAGS

Among the other unlikely acts who performed in the very early days was a young lawyer called Clive Anderson (who got into memorable trouble when the Bee Gees walked out of the chat show he was hosting) and a Denmark-born comedian called Sandi Toksvig. Simon McBurney, who went on to form arty-farty stage group Theatre De Complicite, also pitched up. Another class act from the very early days was Arnold Brown. He was a Scottish accountant but dreamed of being Finchley Road's answer to Woody Allen. 'I'm Scottish and Jewish – two racial stereotypes for the price of one.'

A growing number of women were also getting in on the act. Many, such as Jenny Lecoat, added a feminist agenda to their irreverent political humour. Pauline Melville used to satirise post-hippy cults: 'You know zen buddhists? The thin ones with anorexia nirvana...'

The Comedy Store did not exist in a vacuum, though. When displaying your extensive knowledge of alternative comedy's origins, be sure to mention other venues that offered a platform to this new wave of wags. Those who wish to appear well-versed in the history of alternative

comedy must give other locations their due. The Elgin pub near Ladbrooke Grove used to play host to cabaret events organised by subversive writer/comedian Tony Allen, who proved that anarchists can still organise things. Among his cadre of performers was Andy de la Tour, the brother of *Rising Damp's* Frances de la Tour. Meanwhile over in South London, the Woolwich Tramshed – based in, who would have thought it, a former tramshed – used to run Foundation, featuring soon-to-be mainstream TV double act Hale and Pace. At one point Mayall and Edmondson worked on their act at the venue, too.

In Archway, North London, there was the Earth Exchange, which attracted a right-on audience and even some vegans if they had the energy to walk up the hill towards the entrance. You didn't have to wear jackets made out of muesli to be allowed in, but if you did you probably got a discount. Paul Merton, Harry Enfield, Rory Bremner and Jo Brand all played early gigs there before going on to TV. A couple of years after the Falklands War, there was an act called the Port Stanley Amateur Dramatic Society which was banned from the club because the routine involved throwing corned beef sandwiches into the audience.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO COMEDY?

As for the actual title of 'alternative comedy', Tony Allen has staked his claim to the term, having believed that his gigs were an 'alternative cabaret' and thus the comedians involved were 'alternative comedians'. According to his autobiography, *I Stole Freddie Mercury's Birthday Cake*, writer, comedian

and South Londoner Malcolm Hardee appeared at gigs at the Ferry Inn, Salcombe, billed as 'Alternative Cabaret' in 1978 to differentiate them from the mainstream shows at the nearby yacht club. Maybe great minds think alike. Or perhaps it was something in the air. Most likely of all, maybe it was just a coincidence.

But the Comedy Store was the epicentre of the movement and Sayle was at the centre of the epicentre. Gradually, the Store evolved from something chaotic and unpredictable into something one might venture to call marketable. Performers were no longer ranting polemicists; they were also entertainers. Veteran comedian and host of TV's *Bullseye* Jim Bowen was not impressed. He sniffily dismissed alternative comedy an 'alternative to comedy'.

BOOM BOOM

So obviously Jim didn't agree that it was 'super, smashing, great', which was the closest he got to having a catchphrase. In those days, if you didn't have a catchphrase, you were at a serious professional disadvantage. Just ask Jim 'Nick Nick' Davidson or Jimmy 'Boom Boom' Tarbuck.

Yet the Comedy Store might have fizzled out. Except that one night, a young BBC producer named Paul Jackson was in the audience and liked what he saw. He persuaded his boss to let him make a programme showcasing this new generation. *Boom Boom... Out Go The Lights* was recorded on 16 May 1980 and featured Sayle, Keith Allen, Tony Allen, Mayall and Planer. The programme went out that October and had a very low audience appreciation index of 46 out of

100. But it was the point when the underground started to go overground.

Some of the acts decided to move on. In 1980, Peter Richardson opened the Comic Strip at the 200-seater Boulevard Theatre above another strip club, the Raymond Revue Bar in Walker's Court, a few streets away from the Store. The pick of the Store's young acts, most notably Sayle and 20th Century Coyote, and the not-so-young Arnold Brown, went with him.

MAGNET FOR MISFITS

They were joined by a new female double act. Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders met on a teaching course at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Their performances were largely staged for friends until Richardson pointed out that they might be able to make some money out of this comedy lark and they started to take things a little more seriously – or even frivolously.

But the Comedy Store remained a magnet for misfits who couldn't get a break elsewhere. Ben Elton was a nerdy, aspiring playwright who had known Mayall at Manchester University. Elton took a while to find his voice. Eventually he did, though some cynics said he sounded as if he had actually found Alexei Sayle's voice when he took over as compère in 1981. But there were differences. Sayle's rage had a surreal edge; Elton's anger was more grounded in mundane observational reality, trying to find the funny side of life's irritations, such as stepping in dog turds or trying to keep a double seat to oneself on the train. Critics might deride Elton

today, but the bluffer should stand his or her ground and say that Elton was very much the Michael McIntyre (with attitude) of his day, touching a 'we've-all-been-there' nerve in his audience. His most recent sitcom *The Wright Way*, however, was widely and deservedly panned. While sticking up steadfastly for his early oeuvre, which included co-writing *Blackadder* with Richard Curtis, the bluffer should mention Elton's later output with a sorrowful shake of the head.

By the end of 1981 Ward was running the Comedy Store on his own. The original venue closed in December 1982 but the name lived on in various other Central London locations, eventually finding a home in a cosy basement in Oxendon Street between Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus. It is still there today. You don't have to squeeze past strippers to get in.

ON THE BOX

Meanwhile, the early pioneers moved into TV and gradually became household names. It has been said that the rise of right-on alternative comedy prompted Thames Television to stop working with Benny Hill. The big breakthrough for the 'movement' came in 1982, when the BBC commissioned a series of *The Young Ones*. Mayall played fascist-hating student Rick; Edmondson reconfigured his stage character Adrian Dangerous, now called Vyvyan, with a Mohican and studded forehead; Planer played lentil-mental hippy Neil; and Richardson should have played Mike but dropped out and Christopher Ryan dropped in. The first series started on 9 November 1982.

While the others honed their comic personas on *The Young Ones*, Richardson, with time on his hands, met Jeremy Isaacs, the head of Channel 4 which was due to launch that autumn. This resulted in the *Comic Strip Presents* series, which pipped *The Young Ones* by starting on the night Channel 4 started, 2 November, with their spiffingly splendid Enid Blyton spoof, *Five Go Mad in Dorset*.

Rik Mayall died suddenly on 9 June 2014. The surviving core members (Richardson, Edmondson, French and Saunders) don't do much in the way of stand-up comedy any more but, 30 years on, some of the team still reconvenes between other projects to make *Comic Strip* films. Their logo – a cartoon atom bomb dropping on a patchwork quilt of English fields – effectively sums up the impact that their brand of alternative comedy had on the genre.