



By Bill Bunker

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## My Double Life as a Standup

Standup comics who have been doing standup comedy for any length of time tend to forget what it was like those first few months or years when they were first starting out. The curious mix of emotions (elation, dread, hope), the inexplicable drive that keeps us pursuing the comedy thing even through the bad experiences. Chicagoan Bill Bunker manages to capture those early feelings as he writes about his evolution from new dad to comedy student to reluctant star of "Bill Bunker Night."

I approached the editors of this online publication at an after-party during the recent Chicago Comedy Festival. A big fan of SHECKYmagazine.com, I recognized them immediately and was thrilled to talk, of all things, about standup comedy. It turns out they had just returned from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and had some funny stories to tell about U. P. audiences and road stories in general.

When they turned to me I had to confess I had no such stories to share, because, regrettably, I did not consider myself a standup comic. I explained that standup was something I was new to, and, further, since I had two young children depending on me for things like food, clothing and shelter (you know-- the little things), I'd lately limited most of my energy to that popular variant of comedy, commercial banking.

But, even though I wasn't working fulltime as a comic, I had recently been getting booked as an emcee here in Chicago, in legitimate, paid gigs. What I've found most interesting about my evolution as a standup-- however regionally limited-- was the way in which this new persona had altered my everyday life completely. In short, I'd come to feel like a celebrity around the workplace and I'd gained an unprecedented level of attention from people in many facets of my life.

Of the several attributes that define me as a person, it seems that being a standup comic-- even in my current limited capacity-- has become my defining personal characteristic.

## Opener

Chicago's at last been hit by its first snowstorm of the year-- it's January 3. I climb down the stairs from the elevated train platform into a puddle of slush. I'm presently on my way to a standup comedy class, making good on an ancient resolution for self-improvement. Standup's been my idea for self-improvement for over a decade. Much time has passed since first being afflicted with this thought. I now feel my resolve ebbing. Still flush with good intentions for the New Year, I suck it up and detour from my workday commute to my home (and to my pregnant wife) up Wells Street, tramping through fresh piles of snow. I pause in front of the famed Zanies Comedy Club. Inside is Dobie Maxwell, veteran comic and workshop instructor. "Go home," he says. Class is cancelled due to the snowstorm.

## The Standup

The easiest way to stand out in any group, I've discovered, is to be the only member of that group. Originally, there were twelve of us in Dobie's class, each determined to do his five minutes for the graduation show. On four successive Mondays we gathered at Zanies, Chicago's premier comedy venue, conceiving, writing and practicing mostly uninspired jokes for one another. The class quickly gained a panicked momentum all its own, though, and any concern over the quality of the material quickly gave way to our mounting stage fright. It threatened to cripple us long before the first joke could be told. This debilitating fear, we decided, was not going to prevent us from saying that, for at least one five-minute period of our lives, we had been comics in a bona fide nightclub.

On the night of our graduation (five days after I became a father for the first time!), I was the only one of the twelve students that showed up. So much for resolutions. Commie bastards!

I had briefly contemplated creating a show-canceling diversion-- fire, flood, blackout-- so as not to have to go through with my set. But apart from perhaps their baroque marquee out front, Zanies is otherwise as impervious as a bomb shelter, and I couldn't be sure that I could do any meaningful damage.

I waited. Five agonizing minutes went by until I recognized a face. It was Dobie Maxwell's. I was impressed with the way had run the four-week class-- like the patient rabbi of twelve woebegone disciples. (Eleven of whom had just betrayed him!) His solution was to improvise. He abandoned the idea of "bringing me along slowly."

"If no one shows up, you'll just go up and do your thing before the feature act,"

he said.

*Do my thing? What's a feature act? Was he suggesting I just "do my thing" as part of the show? The show?!*

He was. Further, and this came as the biggest shock, the club was open for business and people were paying a \$15 cover to get in. It was one thing to cajole some friends into watching a class full of amateurs, but quite another to be two spots removed from the headliner at the city's biggest comedy club. I must have looked visibly shaken because Dobie told me not to worry. "I won't let anyone heckle you," he said. *Hecklers!* I hadn't even considered hecklers! My nervous system nearly shut down.

In fifteen minutes it was over. From what I remember, Dobie introduced me to the audience (warning them not to heckle), and I somehow climbed the three steps to the microphone and rambled through my act. People actually laughed at my high school wrestling bit ("I was so small, I was the only guy who weighed in on a postal scale."), and, for a moment, I relaxed and had fun.

It was over fast. I swooped down off the stage with a raging thirst and veered to the back bar. I ordered a Heineken and drained it. Then a truly funny thing happened. As if to carry this fever dream into my waking world, the pager I had on loan from the hospital maternity ward, which I'd been wearing for months without ever once going off, did just that. I remained calm, adroitly recalling that my wife had delivered our baby the week before. When I returned the page she was in hysterics. Our newborn daughter had slipped from my wife's lap-- albeit into a mound of pillows-- and landed, at least partially, on her head. Forced to surrender the afterglow of my debut, to say nothing of another Heineken, I rushed home to find the poor thing crying her head off. My daughter, on the other hand, seemed glad to see me.

## **The Build-Up**

For days I chuffed around as though I'd reached the top of Mount Everest, split the atom and scored the winning touchdown at the Rose Bowl all in one stroke. But as time went by the sensation wore off and my life faded back into the ordinary. More nettlesome than my vanishing celebrity, though, was a feeling of regret. I thought the joke I told about being so unloved as a child that I was traded away for infielder Cookie Rojas would have been better with a different ending. Damn! What was I to do? Since I could not go back in time I began to toy with the idea of finding a way back to the stage.

I pursued comedy in feeble steps, writing a joke here, casing an open mike there. I superstitiously feared that some indelicate leap on my part might bring the entire tenuous fantasy to a quick end. I would occasionally drop by Zanies to

show my face, hoping the doorman might recognize me. My strategy was to commit to non-commitment. I retained the right to tell myself was that I was not a comic, that I was in fact the father of a small child with a bump on her head, and someone who therefore required a safe job in the corporate world. Yet this approach made me anxious. I watched other comics perform, feeling I could succeed as well as they. I started looking for new opportunities. Dobie, out of guilt or concern for my mental state following our ill-fated graduation, let me fall in with a couple of his later classes, groups whose drive was apparently more resolute than my cohort. These early opportunities did a couple of things for me. I began to gain confidence about being on stage and I started to make valuable contacts within the club. These contacts led to further guest spots and shots at different clubs. My steps were getting bigger.

I began to work more and experience the ups and downs of the particular highwire act of standup comedy. Some nights I killed (or felt I killed). However, there was one night which will be with me forever. I stood in front of a crowd that sat in deep, catatonic silence that intensified with each new joke. I had never experienced such profound fear in my life and I told myself it was time to quit.

A year passed. I landed a new day job-I was now vice president of marketing for one of the country's largest commercial banks and my wife was expecting our second child. Things were going well, but I was plagued by the thought that somewhere down the road lay standup perfection. One Saturday I found a message on my answering machine. It was the booker for Zanies wanting me to MC at the club for an entire week. Oh, and the gig paid \$300. The significance of this call did not escape me. After all, he didn't call everyone who ever did a guest spot at his club. I was proud of myself for getting to this moment; it was a watershed occasion. I had moved, however deliberately, from student comic to someone whom the club felt was worthy to share the stage with the most seasoned acts. My name would be in the paper and my 8x10 glossy would hang in the window on Wells street (I would need to get a glossy). I wondered if this meant I could now refer to myself as "a comic."

## **The Throw-Up**

I prepared deliberately; the preparation being as much psychological as anything. The guest spots and open mikes heretofore had been, by comparison, experiments in testing my nerves-- how close could I come to throwing up before turning that energy into a controlled, performance? As part of this self-devised regimen of behavioral therapy, I told no one about what I'd been doing these nights, for fear someone might talk me out of it. The stakes were now decidedly raised and it was my own fault.

One adjustment I needed to make was this: if I was to be a paid comic I needed to act like one. But I had no idea how to pull it off. I once asked one of the funniest

comics there is, Brian Regan, what he did when he got his first chance as a scheduled performer. (Incidentally, one of the immediate benefits of being a club-affiliated comic is that you can strike up conversations with guys like Brian Regan). He told me that to help the idea sink in he immediately went out and bought a leather-bound day planner and a red magic marker, blocking out that week on his calendar in big bold strokes. Now, if someone asked if he was free that week (mindful of his liberty during the other 51), he could whip out proof that his performance schedule left him all tied up. Heeding this advice, I bought a day planner. I copped a magic marker from work. The next step was harder. I had to start admitting to people-- including myself-- that I was in fact a standup comic with a gig.

This admission, though seemingly sudden and surreal, had one foot back in high school. When most were out drinking beer and cranking tunes in parking lots, I was home in my basement listening to Woody Allen's double album, which was long overdue from the public library. Socially pathetic, yes, but time with that album made me confident I was paving the way for a career in comedy by learning timing and joke structure. Or at least shielding my ears from the sound of REO Speedwagon.

But as with not a few of my adolescent dreams, I came to recognize that becoming a comic could not be reconciled with what I viewed as my real responsibilities: finishing college and getting a job. These ultimately weighed more heavily upon my mind than show business glory so I pursued them instead. What I could not have understood about this decision, and the irony I could not have prepared for, is the way in which my business life began to propel my standup life.

## **Better You Than Me**

When I told my boss I had a job as a standup he immediately sent out a company-wide email declaring Thursday at Zanies "Bill Bunker Night": following work, any and all office personnel were to go out to dinner and then to Zanies to watch me perform. It was the first outing of its kind in company history. In the weeks leading up to "Bill Bunker Night," I made scores of new acquaintances in the office. People who'd had only a marginal awareness of my existence were suddenly popping into my cube wishing me good luck, wanting to know where I got my material and inevitably offering up jokes of their own for the taking. In one truly bizarre incident, the president of our company dropped in from the East Coast and made a special trip by my desk to greet me, not as one of the firm's employees, but as the comic. "Good luck," he said, followed by a firm handshake. He seemed simultaneously proud that I worked for him and relieved he didn't have to talk about work.

Curiosity about my Zanies gig quickly spread beyond the workplace. Old friends,

new friends, acquaintances, my doctor, my dentist, even my financial planner designing my kids' college fund took an interest. Meanwhile, my own college, to whom I still owe money, posted a special invitation on its website to see their alumnus on stage. Reaction was overwhelming, as if to suggest that there are many who carry a deep-seated desire to be a standup comic, or at least to know one. I can think of nothing I might have told people that would have produced a similar reaction. Comics seem instantly to elicit a blend of admiration, envy and pity. Perhaps because comedy is measured unambiguously: one either succeeds or fails operatically. It's Darwin indivisible. What could be more intriguing? More frightening? "Good luck," people say, with a look on their faces that suggests you've been drafted. "We wish you well, and hope to see you on the other side."

## **No Geezer In The Sand**

So at last I've begun to (metaphorically) walk the walk of a real-life comic (I still have my bank job). But the booking at Zanies changed me. As a comic now of some modest repute, I carry not only my own expectations to the stage but those of everyone around me. In this sense what I'm doing can no longer be considered merely a hobby, like stamp collecting or waving a metal detector across the beach. It seems to me a hobby is pursued privately, in satisfaction of strictly personal imbalances. As a standup comic I could not be more in the public square, available to praise or pillory, hauling to the stage the covert message of the people, and, with their favor, delivering it right back to them.

## **Epilogue**

It's a warm summer Thursday in Chicago, 8:20 p.m. I pace the floor of the greenroom at Zanies, a dormitory-sized space on the second floor of the club, done over in late-70s decor. I can sense the house is full downstairs and I fear most are here to see me: friends, acquaintances, Bunker Nighters, all drinking and laughing with high expectations. I'm trying to focus, to think of what I'll say first, visualizing what things will look and feel like and sending subconscious messages to my knees not to lock up. The chanting rises up through the damned floor. It's my co-workers, either enthused or intoxicated, now breaking into a raucous and repetitive, "Bunker! Bunker! Bunker!" There's less than five minutes before the show starts. I'm numb. I eye the back exit to the club, but give in to the reality of the moment: I've worked hard to get here and I'll make the most of it. I go down the flight of steps into the club just as the lights go down and the announcer takes the microphone. The crowd, though large, is now quiet. In this silence, time stops. I gaze through the darkness at these people who've come to hear me be funny, and I'm energized. The nerves, the worries, all wash away and I momentarily reflect on the steps that brought me here. Youthful ambition. Pragmatic decisions. Comedy classes and open mikes. I'm farther along on this

journey than I could have imagined when I first set foot in this club on that snowy January night, with each new step, each new gig, having taken me someplace further from my cubicle at the bank. I snap to reality in time to hear the announcer say, "Please welcome to the stage your host and first comic of the evening..." And I'm off.

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