



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." and beyond

### The Bunker Family: Coming to a Town Near You

#### Home Games

In 2002 I recounted in this space my then-recent transformation from "civilian with comic aspirations" to "bona fide working comedian" at the most famed comedy club in Chicago. The shorthand label for my essay might have been something Disneyesque like, "A dream comes true." However, as I noted at the time, there was also a good chance that I had been wishing upon a dark star, for I was nervously aware that this dream possessed the latent power to destroy me, given the unshriven sins of my past, which consisted primarily of having squandered time and talent raising a family and earning a living.

By the time I hit the stage for the first time I was 34 years old, an advanced age for anyone still hoping to wring laughs from the rollicking hilarities of the human digestive and reproductive systems. Combined, too, with my ever-expanding posse of children, whose ceaseless and compulsive needs for food, shelter and clothing I had lately come to view as pathological, I felt that my prospect for advancement was now entirely limited, and that my prior success, however meager, would come to stand as a frozen, mocking monument to the hubris of ambition.

At the time of my first break at Zanies-- the legendary club in the Old Town section of Chicago-- my wife had just given birth to our first child, a girl. Despite the tall odds her arrival now presented against my ever becoming a full-time standup (I was going to need that Christmas bonus from work now more than ever), a tantalizing fancy took flight inside me that first night at Zanies that, in no time, evolved into an ironclad personal vow: to launch myself wantonly along a career path famously pocked and rutted with pitfalls, and the tolls upon which-- bad pay, tubercular work environments, and travel conditions one wouldn't impose upon the Joad family-- surely promised to bankrupt once and for all either my dreams of success or my kid's hope for college.

I'm happy to report, in this serial dispatch from the front lines of impractical labors, that mine has been a lesson in persistence. Has it paid off? Unless Johnny Carson reaches down to tap me on the shoulder and say, "May your only son grow up to be just like his mother," I believe it's too early to tell. One thing, though, is certain: After nearly six years of steady, if incrementally slow, progress, I can honestly tell you that, whereas I was once 34, I am now 40.

And for that I am not ungrateful.

No one wants to get old. And were I as prolific at comedy as I am at impregnating my wife I would today have my own talk show. I brace myself, though, against the ineluctable modality of time (I don't brace for just anything) with the consoling thought that fathering three kids in six years is a significant achievement, and one not likely to be eclipsed by any talk show host I know of, until, I suppose, the NBA's Shawn Kemp gets the Tonight Show.

The challenge of raising children is considerable, and remains perhaps the ultimate test of one's mastery of time management. My kids, for example, by virtue of their demon midget alchemy, have transmuted my once carefree hours of Hefnerian leisure into a black Stephen Hawking hole of feeding, changing, bathing and butt-wiping oblivion. There is now scant time to delegate these tasks to their mother let alone write new standup material. That I have managed to work and grow as a comedian during this time, taking steps, however small, to ensure that the motley flame does not get snuffed out, feels semi-miraculous.

My progress toward this end has come primarily through the beneficence of the good people at Zanies, who have seen fit to present me, time and again, with the chance to live this dream. Three or four weeks a year I am invited to hang up my Gerber-stained apron and immerse myself not only in onstage comedy, but in the comic life offstage as well: late nights, heavy partying, torrid encounters with the female members of the waitstaff, and, of course, lying about torrid encounters with the female members of the waitstaff.

In the years that I have led this double life, I have known great personal triumphs. Finding myself at the helm of a comedy show headlined by some of the best performers in the country is a thrill I could have hardly imagined, even in the days when that's all I knew how to do. And this thrill has only become more satisfying with time, in much the same way that a student of physics might marvel at the perfection of Newtonian logic, only to comprehend the full scope of this admiration later, when the safe lands on his head.

The mere sensation of stage fright was the first thrill. Followed quickly thereon by the euphoria of hearing both patellas crack. But as I have put more stage time behind me, fear has given way to a more enlightened state of performance being, one that allows me to take the best parts of an adrenaline rush and combine it with a hard-won, Zen-like serenity, and to channel them both into illuminating jokes about beer and leaf blowers. In a word, "success."

Even at the pinnacle of such triumph, however, I had felt that something was missing. Sure, I was killing, I reasoned, but upon the same stage that I've occupied every time out. To grow, and to truly succeed, it became increasingly evident to me that I would need to test myself elsewhere. The phenomenon of the home field advantage is real, and I didn't want to become the Colorado Rockies of comedians.

#### Away Games

If family responsibilities restricted my ability to work on the road like other comics, it occurred to me that I was simply going to have to take my family with me. All I had to do, I figured, was arrange guest sets in cities I'd be traveling to anyway-- for Thanksgiving, Christmas, spring break-- times when I'd otherwise be expecting another rote family function or a stiffly formal weekend with the in-laws I began to anticipate as barnstorming swings through America's most exciting cities and hottest club venues. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of this before. Vistas opened up and opportunity expanded exponentially. I felt like the Beatles on their first flight to America, or the protagonist of a Penthouse letter. I couldn't wait for the next bank holiday to pile the clan into our commodious Dodge Caravan and hit the open road, and immediately began angling for references from anybody who I thought might help persuade a club owner to book me a gig.

I approached a headliner acquaintance from Zanies, whom I had recently overheard whispering privately that he was headed from Chicago to Cleveland to headline at Hilarities. My mind was racing. I could already see this working to perfection: my wife's from Cleveland; I could suggest that we go visit her parents; and on the drive down I could let slip that I have a gig and won't be able to spend Saturday night with her mother...

I collared the headliner: Could he put in a referral for me, I queried, perhaps a bit overanxiously? He looked down at me, pausing- not too long-- and relented. Maybe he liked me; more likely he was impatient for me to get off his foot. But he said he would, and that's all I needed.

Four months later I followed up with an e-mail. I have no way of knowing how puzzled he may have looked trying to remember just when he made this promise, but ultimately true to his word (and the comedic fraternity), he made the call and I was in: two days before Christmas I would do a ten-minute set at Hilarities.

Driving three hundred miles in a blizzard turned out to be a blessing, of sorts. Despite the psychic weight of the impending gig, the difficulty of squinting for five hours through a whiteout was sufficient to keep me from dwelling too much upon what could go wrong that night, or my wife from being too upset with me for ditching her with her parents. Sure, I was confident in my material, but leaving the comfort of home now raised some unsettling questions: What, for example, if funny in Illinois is unfunny in Ohio? And just exactly how do people in the Buckeye State react to unfunny?

The scene at Hilarities was at once foreign and completely familiar. The club itself was everything Zanies is not, namely new, with multiple levels of seating. It's a 21st-century operation, built to the specs of a standup performance. While the club staff coordinated the seating ritual via wireless headsets, my wife and her newly adventurous mother were informed that if they needed another drink all they need do is use the pager on their table to call the waitress. I held off the jitters backstage by wondering which of them would be drinking more that night.

Despite the weather, the crowd was large. Even in pre-show mode it buzzed with that familiar energy of high anticipation, which I found comforting. I was further eased meeting the other comics-the headliner being a terrific ventriloquist who distinguished herself from me instantly by displaying a quantifiable talent-as we fell into that immediate rapport that comes to strangers working toward a common purpose.

Upon being introduced to the stage it all fell away-- the strange as well as the familiar-- and I entered a world of my own making. It's a place I'm growing comfortable in. I did well that night, ultimately, getting more laughs than I had let myself imagine I might, and recalled again that success is measured only by what takes place inside that elevated square footage at the front of the room.

Emboldened, I plotted my next move. In February I was due to visit St.Louis, my old hometown, for some toasted ravioli. Hmm, I thought, scanning my Rolodex, here's a comic I've opened for at Zanies, and he's headlining a college gig at Wash U. Did he need an opener? I asked him. He paused-- not too long-- and agreed. A college gig struck me as a unique challenge: what could a roomful of twenty-year-olds possibly want to hear from a father of three with jokes about Teletubbies? I prepared for a slaughter, imagining a stage sluiced with ravioli sauce.

The student center at Washington University is nothing like a comedy club (although the kids did wear wireless headsets), and the stage turned out to be a portable job with a single microphone and a swatch of heavily worn oriental rug to stand on. But, as with the stage in Cleveland, the confines of that rug were all that mattered. I killed. Teletubbies notwithstanding.

Come spring, my Rolodex was running thin (I pretty much max out at two acquaintances). My family and I were set to vacation in Florida, though, and I could conjure no connection between McCurdy's Comedy Theater in Sarasota and my skyrocketing ambition. My streak, while hardly Ripkenesque, was in jeopardy. Thus, I took a direct approach; I called the club and laid out my proposition. They bought it. Was it possible that I was getting better at passing myself off as a comedian than I was at actually being one?

Standing last March in a suburban strip mall before of three hundred South Floridians and coming to the end of my ten-minute set on Friday night's second show-over a thousand miles

from where I had woken up that morning--represented a new personal milestone. I was pleased that I had pushed myself this far, and gratified to know that, comedy-wise, I could go no further east without booking passage on a Cunard line. I closed strong with the bit about my misadventures in home brewing. As I hit the last line I sensed a collective pause-- not too long-- then laughter. And for the first time, I felt like a road comic. Two miles away, in room 311 of the Sarasota Comfort Inn, my family slept.

Checking the calendar, I am set to visit my parents over the Labor Day. Anybody know any good clubs in Cincinnati? Preferably one with a nursery.

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