

Laughter (Or Not) in the Dark

*It's hard to die.
But not as hard as comedy.*

– attributed to British actor Edmund Gwenn,
on his deathbed

By Philip Berroll

THERE ISN'T MUCH TO DISTINGUISH THE COMIC STRIP FROM THE OTHER SHOPS, bars, and restaurants on the block, Second Avenue between 81st and 82nd Streets on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. A long maroon canopy bearing the club's name protrudes onto the sidewalk; that's it. Look into the small, dark window and you can make out the end of a bar, no different from a dozen others in the neighborhood. Just another cramped watering hole, you assume, for the local yuppie contingent. That is, unless you've noticed a sandwich-board sign under the canopy – in the shape of a figure resembling Alfred E. Neuman, with tinted glasses – announcing that this is "NEW YORK'S TOP COMEDY CLUB."

Scott Blakeman walks into the place at about 8:30 on a chilly Wednesday night in November – as he has done on many such evenings, in many such buildings, for the better part of two and a half decades. Blakeman is in his late forties, but his trim frame, curly brown hair, and cherubic features make him look much younger. He says a quick hello to the husky young bartender, and to Marty, who seats the guests – "maitre d'" is too classy a term for this venue. On weekends, Marty seats no one without a reservation; during the week, he doesn't bother, for there is no danger of a sellout.

Blakeman strides toward the back of the room. On the wall opposite the bar is a long display of photographs; some of these are fairly recent, some go back to the Seventies. They are head shots, the flattering photos used by show-business hopefuls to attract attention and from there, work. A few of the men and women in the shots have worked as actors, but primarily, if not exclusively, they are professional comedians – in industry shorthand, comics.

The pictures aren't grouped in any particular order; not alphabetical, not chronological. Many of them are unrecognizable to anyone except comedy-business insiders, and they, too, might have trouble with some of the older, faded faces. But there are others whom even a civilian can easily place.

There's Eddie Murphy, flashing his wicked grin – Murphy, who first hit "The Strip" as a teenager a few years after its 1976 opening, posing with club co-owner Bob Wachs, who later became his manager. Murphy's is one of the few color photos on the wall; so is that of his former "Saturday Night Live" colleague, Joe Piscopo. There's a whole crowd from different eras of "SNL": Chris Rock, Ellen Cleghorne, Adam Sandler, Sarah Silverman, Jim Breuer. The young Jerry Seinfeld, a curly-haired, earnest-looking Jewish boy. Very old photos of Robert Klein, with hippie-length tresses, and Rodney Dangerfield, looking positively dapper. Ray Romano – he of the hit CBS sitcom, "Everybody Loves Raymond" – and Lisa Ann Walter and Larry Miller, co-stars of ABC's "Life's Work," which was resoundingly not a hit.

Famous or obscure, male or female, black or white, they all have a common status. Even if not famous to a mass audience, they are the upper echelon, the success stories. They can put "entertainer" on their tax forms; they no longer have to lie to their parents or their dates about what they do for a living. They are respected. They are *professionals*.

Blakeman's photo is up there with them. It's fairly recent, showing him posed with arms folded and head cocked downward at a jaunty angle.

He isn't a star, but he has been making a full-time living from comedy – which in this business is saying something – since 1981, when he left his job as a copywriter at Abraham & Straus ("Sale, young misses' jeans, \$9.95' – I wrote that"). He appears regularly at clubs up and down the Eastern seaboard. He's done commercials, cable TV, a stint hosting "Funny People" (a summer-replacement series on NBC) in 1988. His annual income varies from year to year, but it's generally in the neighborhood of \$30,000.

Now he walks down a short, narrow corridor, through swinging wooden doors, into the main room.

It's a medium-sized space, even darker than the bar. At its center is a small stage, in front of a wall; facing the stage are about fifteen round little tables with tacky, blue-and-white checkered tablecloths. The only lights in the room are the spotlight trained on the stage and the short, fat candles on the tables. The person on stage can see only the tables closest to him – everything else is a blur of sound (or worse, silence) from somewhere in the dark. From the doorway, Blakeman can count the turnout: 18 people, spread evenly around the room. Not great, not awful; slightly above average for midweek in a cold-weather month.

He's emceeding tonight for this, the second show of the evening. Five comics, doing ten minutes apiece. Blakeman will open the show with ten minutes of his own, then re-appear between each of the other acts. His appearance will be slightly briefer each time.

Blakeman mentally reviews the jokes he plans to use, and in what order, though he will mix it up if necessary. He isn't nervous – when you've done this sort of thing several thousand times, stage fright is not an issue. But there is always some degree of uncertainty. No two audiences are alike, and the nature of the crowd can't be gauged without hearing how they react to other comics. And Blakeman, as the opening performer, won't have that opportunity. He is, in effect, serving as the miners' canary for those who follow him.

From the glass-enclosed booth at the back of the room, the spotlight operator shouts, "Welcome to the world-famous Comic Strip. And now, let's give a big welcome to the host of tonight's show – Scaaaahhhht BLAKEMANNNN!"

He bounds onto the stage. "Thank you. I just got back from Montreal," he begins. "I was told there were only about 2000 Jewish families in the whole city... Around here, there are that many in my *apartment building*." The audience laughs politely.

Blakeman decides not to waste any more jokes before using the "Where you all from?" ploy. It's a quick way to get the audience into a "fun" mood, and he can usually spin their answers into a joke or two. (A slight variation is "Anybody here from ____?")

He discovers that the crowd has some variety – a group from South Africa, a married couple in their 50s. But there's also a bachelor party, which means that the level of taste will be lower than

usual. Most likely, the bride-to-be forbade her fiancé from renting a porn film or a stripper. So the boys have come here, their alcohol and testosterone levels still high.

“You guys work together? Where?”

“Morgan Stanley.”

Blakeman nods, quickly turning it over in his mind – *Wall Street... finance...* “I don’t have any money,” he says, “but I still watch CNBC.” A good laugh from the boys. *Now what?* Unable to think of a follow-up, he goes back to where-you-from. “So... is everybody here from the city?”

“Queens,” says a man.

“Queens?” *What can I do with this?*

“Originally from Russia.” Now, that’s promising. “The F train actually goes directly from St. Petersburg to Queens now... What part of Russia?”

“Georgia.”

“Uh huh.” Unlike some comics, Blakeman has a fairly broad knowledge of current events and recent history. “That’s where Shevardnadze is the leader?”

“Yeah.”

He nods. “I don’t have a joke about that. I just know the name.”

Comics, like baseball players, have strengths and weaknesses. Some players are prized for their hitting, others for their defense. Some comics have great timing – every line, even the pauses in between, are perfectly paced, with no hint of awkwardness or fumbling. Blakeman has never developed that skill. What he tries to do, instead, is make his clumsiness work for him. When he hits a dead end, when he can’t come up with a good segue into a new subject, he says so – aiming for a laugh, or at least some sympathy.

“So... uh...” *Tourists. First time in New York. Unfamiliar sights...* He does a bit about mass transit in New York, how people often make mistakes with the MetroCard transit pass. “Last week I saw this one guy, completely clueless –” He waves one arm in a frantic, spastic motion. “It was me, actually.” A good laugh all around; self-deprecating humor usually works, if you don’t overdo it.

“And every time I’m on the bus, there’s always somebody who gets on, sits in the back, gets on the cell phone... and in the loudest voice humanly possible, they’re like, ‘HI, I’M ON THE BUS.’ ‘I’m on the bus’ – that’s like the least impressive thing you can say in a conversation. Unless it’s ‘Hi, I’m in the sewer’... Or they review personal details. ‘I’M SORRY I DIDN’T CALL YOU. I HAVE INTIMACY ISSUES, I NEVER SEEM TO GET TO A SECOND DATE, THAT’S MY PROBLEM...’ I think if people are going to talk loudly on the cell phone, we should be allowed to listen in, and make comments. ‘You know what? I don’t think he’s gonna call. I’ve been thinking about it, and that’s my feeling. Because you’re kind of annoying.’”

He can feel it now – he’s passed the first hurdle, the one that must be cleared every time: getting them on his side. He can never assume that the audience comes in prepared to laugh. They have to be approached as if each member is a thorough skeptic with an attitude of “You say you’re funny? *Prove it.*” Now the power balance has shifted – they *want* him to be funny, enough to cut him slack for the occasional lame joke or botched segue. They like him.

But it's now time for the rest of the show. Hopefully, there’s a reservoir of good will for Blakeman to draw on when he comes back. “Okay! Now we want to bring up tonight’s first performer. A very funny guy... he comes to us from Canada... been here many times... let's hear it for...”

The Canadian is big, shaggy, sloppily dressed. He wastes no time engaging the audience. "I had an HIV test – anybody else?" One man raises his hand. "What's the matter – don't the rest of you fuck?"

A few titters. "Fuck, it's like pullin' teeth with you people." He takes a long pause, apparently collecting his thoughts, before he resumes: "I got no pubes, I tell you that?"

Blakeman frowns. Though he himself rarely does sex jokes, he is hardly a prude, and has no problem with other comics getting raunchy. But there's a way to talk about it. Like the great Lenny Bruce, mimicking an anxious couple in bed – “Didja come? Didja come *good?*” Or his personal idol, Klein, recalling life as a horny teenager who “planned, schemed... got *nothing.*” Do it with insight or subtlety; use a scalpel. The Canadian is employing a bludgeon.

But he goes on, mostly in the same vein. When he's finished, Blakeman returns, clapping, with forced enthusiasm – “Let's have a big hand for... Nice show!” – then comes back to the South Africans, with a line he often uses on tourists. “Are you going to the Thanksgiving Day parade?”

“Maybe,” says one of the group.

“Yeah, there are so many parades in this town, any time of the year...” He throws it out to the rest of the crowd. “What's your favorite parade? Anybody?”

A few people call out, “St. Patrick's.”

Perfect. “That's a little different. That's the one where they ban gay Irish from the parade – but they let IRA terrorists lead it.” A good laugh.

Somebody else shouts, “Puerto Rican Day.” Blakeman nods. “*Wonderful* parade. You get Jennifer Lopez, Chita Rivera. *My* parade is Salute to Israel. We get Dr. Ruth... And you know, in the Salute to Israel parade, they banned gay Jews from marching. Which is absurd. If there were no gay Jews, there'd be no musical theatre in this country.” It's one of his favorite lines – but it only works when the audience gets the reference. This time, there's barely a murmur.

Blakeman tries again – “There'd be only two people at the Tony Awards, Bernadette Peters and B.D. Wong” – before giving up. He has many such bits, jokes that work best with listeners of sophistication, those with a decent collective memory. It's why he is known not only as a “clean,” but also a “smart” comic. These days, that is no guarantee of success.

But there's no time to dwell on failure. “And the politicians love parades. Like our former mayor, Koch – he thinks he still *is* mayor...” This is one of his “classic” bits, dating back to when Koch actually held office, but it still works. “He used to insult all the ethnic groups in the

city... and then go to their parades. Like I remember seeing him at the Puerto Rican Day Parade and he's going" – he mimics Koch's high-pitched whine – "'Today, I'm a Puerto Rican.' And yeah, I always thought he was." Now he hears a healthy burst of laughter. *Still got 'em.*

Then Blakeman introduces a woman – blonde, perky, dressed in head-to-toe black. She's back from L.A., where she appears on a sitcom about a teenage girl with supernatural powers. It soon becomes evident that she's on the same page as the Canadian. Jokes about oral sex, orgies, etc.

Blakeman sighs. He can remember when women like Ellen DeGeneres or Brett Butler said what they wanted to say, with no compulsion to be one of the boys. There are still some female comics (that sexist term "comedienne" has been retired) who work that way; but plenty of others are in the style of the blonde. She's not as raw as some of the women Blakeman has encountered – the one who talked about "my big pussy," or the one with the thick Boston accent who thrust out her chest and crotch to make a point. But still.

"You know the thing about Latin men – they all say 'Mami!' during sex." A woman in the front laughs, nodding vigorously. "Don't worry," says the blonde, "I didn't sleep with your boyfriend – they all do it."

Blakeman comes out again, still hoping to control the direction of the show.

"So... Anybody ever been to any singles events?" No response, but a few nervous looks.

"I know – nobody ever admits it... Even people *at* a singles event won't admit that's why they're there. 'I never go to these things. I'm not even here right now.'" From a few people, he hears the guilty laughter of recognition.

"About relationships. When you broke up, what are some of the things your friends said to you to make you feel better?" Again, the uneasy silence. "Oh. Nobody here has ever broken up." A few chuckles, and he plows on. "You know what they tell me? 'Don't worry about it, there's plenty of fish in the sea.' Oh, I feel relieved now – I'm alone, but there's always the fish population. What does the availability of fish have to do with getting a date? And with me, the pool is already limited – because shellfish are out of the question."

He's beginning to sense a shifting of the crowd's mood. Whatever mellowness they were feeling earlier seems to have dissipated. They're still laughing, but it has an edge. The tone of the other comics – not just their material, but their bang-bang, in-your-face style – is starting to put a different vibe on the room. He's seen it before.

The next comic, pudgy and redheaded, comes on stage to announce that he has a new girlfriend – "which means I had to throw out my porno collection. I was without sex for so long, I forgot my masturbation fantasies." He mentions another woman who put metal studs in her tongue "to enhance oral sex. I don't know... when you're getting blown, do you really find yourself saying, 'Is this all there is?'"

Blakeman has seen enough. Now the show is what it is, and there's nothing he can do about it. From this point onward, he'll just be going through the motions. He ducks out to the bar, not to return until just before the end of the man's set. (There's a window in the wall next to the spotlight booth through which he can see both the stage and the red ceiling light that flashes when a comic's time is almost up.)

Comic #4 is tall, swarthy, mustachioed. He has a vaguely threatening air, as if ready to beat up anyone who doesn't laugh. He makes a stab at topicality with a sympathetic joke about the homeless; but then it's back to the program. "Fuckin' is great, man... but you gotta be careful with skinny girls, it's like breakin' and enterin'."

Now Blakeman has only the briefest of between-act comments – "We'll all go to a coffee shop afterwards." Several people are preparing to leave, and the atmosphere is both heating up, in anticipation of the last act, and winding down. It's the point where the waitresses bring out the checks, and Blakeman urges everyone to tip generously – "they really work hard."

At the absolute minimum, the bill will come to \$20 per person. \$10 is the cover charge or "admission," and the customers are required to buy at least two drinks, or a drink and a food order (generally something fried, or of the fast-food Chinese variety). The prices are absurdly inflated – \$5 for a domestic beer? – as they would be at a ball park, a theatre, a movie house. It's the economics of modern entertainment: the owners insist that they have to jack up the prices to retain some small profit after rent, salaries, operating costs, etc. If you were at home drinking a

reasonably priced brew, goes the argument, you'd be missing the unique experience of the live show.

Now for the final act. This man is the show's headliner, the most successful of tonight's lineup – barely into his thirties, he's been on "Tonight," "Conan O'Brien," a number of cable shows. Short and feisty in the manner of Michael J. Fox, he looks like a teamster on his coffee break, wearing old jeans, a t-shirt and a painter's cap. His act is a bit more sophisticated than the others, but at this point, it doesn't matter – his jokes barely register. The edge that Blakeman had sensed earlier has sharpened, as if the alcohol-lubricated crowd is no longer seeking entertainment; at this point, they want *provocation*.

From the back of the room comes a voice: "Dull!"

"Excuse me?" says Teamster.

It's one of the South Africans, a woman. "Dull. You're dull."

"And you're an idiot. Don't get me mad, I'll come to the trailer park and kick over your home."

That silences her, but only briefly. A few minutes later, she gives a loud, drawn-out snore.

Teamster glares at her. "Hey, I'm working here. When you're working, do I come over and knock the dicks out of your mouth?"

This is not an original line, but it cracks up the whole room, including the woman.

And that's it. When he finishes, Blakeman comes back, barks out his usual spiel – "Let's have another round of applause for tonight's performers... you've been a great audience... thanks for coming... hope to see you here again soon... g'night." Then he returns to the bar, where he gulps a ginger ale (he doesn't drink much of the hard stuff) and waits out the hour or so until the next show.

He tries not to feel depressed – this has been a particularly lousy night, worse than the norm. But when was the last time he had a really good one?

Of course, it's never been easy. Stand-up is not a profession for weak hearts or thin skins. Not for nothing is the comic's insider jargon filled with combat metaphors – if you succeed, you've "killed," if you fail, you've "bombed," and every joke ends with a punchline. When starting out, you should not expect to be a star in six months, or six years. Amusing your family is not the same as entertaining a paying crowd of half- (or fully) drunk clubgoers. Jokes that sounded hilarious in front of your mirror or your friends will fall flat. You must be prepared to go on at 2 a.m. for an audience of three or less, or to wait all evening for a potential spot that never materializes. Hecklers will shout insults; club owners will reject you because "I just don't think you're funny," with no elaboration. You are entering a field where success – laughter – must be achieved at half-minute intervals, or you have failed.

But there was a time when there were countless opportunities to chase that success. Blakeman sometimes speaks, almost wistfully, about the days when "you could do six spots a night, run around killing yourself." The Strip was hot in the early '80s – had been for several years – but there was plenty of competition. A few blocks away was Catch a Rising Star, where Rick Newman, a charming street kid from the Bronx, had showcased what seemed like an endless parade of comic talent: David Brenner, Billy Crystal, Andy Kaufman, Jay Leno, Richard Lewis, Steve Martin, Freddie Prinze, and the club's prince-of-darkness emcee, Richard Belzer. In midtown, there was the Improvisation – tough Budd Friedman had been around since the mid-'60s, giving an early boost to people like Klein, George Carlin, Lily Tomlin, and Richard Pryor, and reviving the career of the middle-aged Dangerfield, who went on to open his own club on the East Side. Out in Sheepshead Bay, there was Pip's, the farm team for the Manhattan clubs, under the aegis of George Schultz, an old pal of Rodney's from the '40s. And Caroline's, the Comedy Cellar, Stand-Up New York, Comedy U...

All across America, it was the same. By 1980, more than 100 comedy clubs had opened in the U.S.; by 1984, the number had doubled; by 1992, it would be up to 475. Every city of any size had at least one, from Anchorage, AS (P.J.'s Comedy Alley) to North Miami, FL (Coconuts Comedy Club). "The biggest boom in comedy since the heyday of Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd," was the word in *People*, in its August 1984 cover story. Later that same year, *The New York Times Magazine* solemnly declared, "Fast-mouthed and restless youngsters with a flair for the outrageous are revitalizing the comedy scene." That article mentioned established stars such as

Carlin, mid-level types like Belzer ("a comic with an angry, sometimes snarling, edge"), and up-and-comers like Blakeman ("a young fellow with a nice sense of the bizarre").

Sure, the pay was lousy – rates at one of the better New York clubs ran from \$10 for a weeknight prime time spot to \$75 for emceeding a Friday or Saturday night show. But by working several clubs, coupled with enough out-of-town gigs (where the pay could run to three, even four figures for a night's work), a comic could have something of a career. If he built enough of a rep in the clubs, he could find new opportunities on cable-TV shows like "Evening at the Improv" and "Caroline's Comedy Hour." And who could tell when there would be an agent or producer in the audience, looking for the next Robin Williams?

At the same time, though, a few cautionary voices were warning that it couldn't last. The business had become overextended, they said, and many of those involved were lacking in serious commitment – too many untalented jerks thought they were funny, too many club owners were trying to cash in on the latest fad after disco. (At one club, says comic Paula Poundstone, "I'd look up and there was a disco ball just out of sight, over my head.") Supply was beginning to exceed demand; at some point, the bubble had to burst.

Perhaps some comics, had they stopped to think about it, would have realized that it couldn't go on forever. But they were too busy to think about it... until it was too late.

"Catch" went bankrupt in August 1993, long after Newman had sold his interest in the club. "The Improv" went dark the following year; as of 1996, a scaled-back version was operating on the premises of an Italian restaurant. Since the early '90s, hundreds of other clubs around the country have met a similar fate. "It just sort of happened in stages," says Blakeman. "I never played the road extensively, so I didn't notice that much. But when local clubs started folding, I saw my options being reduced."

Those clubs that survived have had to be, well, imaginative – the Strip, like numerous other clubs, uses ticket giveaways to college students and other ploys to pad the house. And for the comics, the club scene, competitive in the best of times, has become Darwinian. In the words of Vanessa Hollingshead, a smart, edgy comic who looks like Shirley MacLaine and sounds like Joan Rivers, "It's creating a tension that I wish didn't exist, but does."

Some have welcomed the end of the boom. In their view, it's driven out the worst of the bunch – the no-talents, the dilettantes, the people who confused comedy with therapy. If you're still in the business, they insist, you have to be serious and hard-working, or those who are will quickly push you out. There is a good deal of truth to this; but those who remain have not only found themselves with fewer rooms to work, but with much less “room” to maneuver. For the club environment has also changed, profoundly.

As with other art forms, the history of stand-up – which began roughly in the waning days of the vaudeville era – has been marked by a series of coups and rebellions, one “school” overthrowing another before it, too, was supplanted. From the Twenties through the Fifties, Milton Berle and the “Borscht Belt” comics held sway. Their style – loud, fast, Jewish-inflected, and firmly eschewing any reference to politics, religion, or other topics that audiences might find off-putting – took root in urban nightclubs and burlesque houses, then went national through radio and later, TV. A few younger men like Alan King and Buddy Hackett bent the rules somewhat. But no one tried to smash them until a friend of Hackett, Lenny Bruce, arrived on the scene.

Bruce, with his jazz-influenced rhythms and taboo-shredding comments on race, sex and society, was of course a groundbreaker; but he had a number of allies – youngbloods like Mort Sahl, Bob Newhart, Jonathan Winters and Woody Allen, who drew humor from their observations rather than tired twists on take-my-wife and we-were-so-poor. For the first time, stand-up became relevant, cerebral, *hip*... and it remained that way through a second wave of rebels such as Richard Pryor, George Carlin and Robert Klein. Then the Seventies brought the school of anti-comedy, led by Steve Martin, Andy Kaufman, David Letterman and Albert Brooks – less political, more surreal, bringing Dada and deconstruction to bear on the clichés of stand-up, and of show business itself. (Think of Martin's pointless card tricks, or Kaufman's character Tony Clifton, the ultimate Vegas lounge singer/lizard.)

At the time that Blakeman was starting out, the early-80s boom years, eclecticism ruled; a comic was able to do virtually anything he (or increasingly, she) wanted on stage, in terms of both form and content. But by the end of the decade, the field had again narrowed. Two styles now dominated – embodied by two comics, similar in age and ethnicity but with absolutely nothing else in common.

One was Seinfeld, a “name” in the club world even before his TV success. A regular at the Strip, where Blakeman got to know him, he stood out both for his exceptional work ethic and the way he mined the trivial and transient for his subject matter – whimsical bits about hair on his soap or mismatched socks at the laundry. His admirers called it "observational" humor; his detractors found him soft, boring, a "sweater comic."

People had plenty of names for Andrew Clay Silverstein, a/k/a Andrew Dice Clay, but “soft” was not one of them. When he started out in New York, his entire act consisted of two imitations: Jerry Lewis in *The Nutty Professor*, followed by John Travolta in *Grease*. By the mid-Eighties, he had morphed into the Diceman, a sneering, snarling thug whose attacks on women and minorities (describing Asian immigrants as "urine-colored," leading the audience in a chant, "If you can't learn the language, get the fuck out of this country!") made him a *succés de scandale* for several years, until the novelty wore off and he went down in the wreckage of several failed TV and film projects.

But plenty of his disciples are still in the clubs. "They've all got 'attitude,'" says Blakeman. "They all come out smoking a cigarette, with that look..." Club owners encourage them – if Clay had packed them in, why tamper with a proven success? What they’ve failed to note is that only *certain types* of audiences (young, white, male, low on education, high on alcohol intake) had turned out for the Diceman’s brand of humor. By encouraging it at the expense of other styles, they have driven a large chunk of their customers away.

Seinfeld’s influence has been subtler, but equally pervasive. To be sure, there are a number of his imitators in the clubs, popping out softball jokes about commercials, airlines or "relationships." But comics of *every* stripe have been trying to replicate his TV-sitcom stardom.

In itself, this is nothing new – stand-ups have been doing sitcoms since Danny Thomas' “Make Room for Daddy” in 1953, and the success of “The Cosby Show” and “Roseanne” in the '80s gave jokesters a fresh appeal at the networks. But the frenzy with which today’s comics chase that small-screen dream is unprecedented. Everyone wants their own series... or at the very least, a development deal, one of those unique Hollywood arrangements in which a studio pays a performer while keeping him/her in creative limbo. "I have a deal (with Carsey-Werner,

producers of “Roseanne”) for \$200,000 for two years,” says Hollingshead. “One of the jokes I do out in California is 'Hi, it's really great to be here. It's a very exciting period of my life. I'm on my second season of "We're not going to do your show."'"

But pursuing the grail of TV stardom has caused many club comics to become lazy and cynical in their approach to performing. Having something original to say, or just being funny, is much less important than creating a sitcom-ready “character.” (College grad Jeff Foxworthy built his entire routine around a stereotyped-redneck persona, which he parlayed into two hit recordings and a series on ABC. Many comics seem not to have noticed that the show was cancelled after one season, then picked up by NBC, which also gave it the ax.)

Between the Seinfeld wannabes and the Clay clones, the middle ground has narrowed, almost to the point of nonexistence. It's almost as if we are back in the '50s, when anyone who ventured outside the standard joke-punchline-joke model was sneeringly dismissed as a “chi-chi” comic.

Which is especially tough on people like Blakeman. Unlike some of his peers, he isn't just in it for the money, or fame, or sex. For him, comedy is not only about being funny, but also getting people to *think*, to reconsider their assumptions about their world, their society, their lives. To be a stand-up satirist in the tradition of Bruce, or Carlin, or Klein. He'd much rather talk about the Pentagon budget than what his girlfriend said in bed – not that (as a good liberal) he objects to other comics doing raunch or Seinfeldisms, but why isn't there room for something deeper?

Because few people in the clubs want to hear it. The main audiences now are tourists, collegians, bridge-and-tunnelers – people who come to get drunk and make noise; the comedy itself is incidental. Club owners who want to stay in business have to cater to them. Manny Dworman of the Comedy Cellar put it bluntly to an interviewer: "There are people who might not be as good as other comics, but who are more predictable in terms of pleasing the audience, and that's what's more important to me." But that keeps the smarter audiences away, perpetuating the vicious cycle.

Still, there is hope. Every once in a while, a new kid comes in with all the essentials – talent, energy, originality – and the chops to stay in the business for the long haul. Some of them are working the “alternative comedy” circuit, a new development of the past few years. It's a strange

hybrid, mixing stand-up with straight acting and so-called performance art; it is controversial in some circles, and often doesn't work. But it is, at the very least, a much-needed transfusion of new ideas and energy.

Blakeman himself picks up a steady income by teaching a class at The New School for aspiring stand-ups. They deliver their material, he critiques it, and at the end of six weeks, their graduation ceremony is the chance to perform unpaid for one night at the Strip. Most of the students wind up going back to their day jobs, but Blakeman speaks fondly of a young man who took the class in the late '80s – a fellow named Jon Stewart Liebowitz, who later dropped “Liebowitz.”

The success of “The Daily Show” – not to mention Bill Maher’s “Politically Incorrect” and the breakout stardom of Chris Rock – is clear evidence that political humor is not dead. Certainly, it makes Blakeman feel less isolated. But he knows he is still in the minority.

As he prepares for the second show, uncertainty is the watchword of his existence. There is no way to predict what direction the business will take in the future – any more than he can foretell whether he'll wind up a middle-aged success, like Jackie Mason and Rodney Dangerfield, or an old hack playing bar mitzvahs and senior-living condos. "If I could predict anything for sure," Blakeman says with a shrug, "I could make a lot more money."

And he turns and walks down the hall toward the room, and the noise, and the darkness.

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