

Funny Business â€¦ so it goes

by Jason_Love

What is the shelf life of a shelf? Why is there boxing at the Goodwill Games? Does the remote control go inside the dinner knife or outside the soup spoon?

You will learn the answer to these and other pressing questions at Keith Dionâ€™s comedy club. The room was born in 1983 and has been a dictatorship since 1997. Keith doesnâ€™t take days off. He works 12-18 hours per day and has missed only three weekends in the past seven years. He may never see Disney World.

We found Keith covered in dry wall, nails between his teeth, renovating the place without help. Keith shook my hand, tickling my palm with his pinky the way you did in third grade. He stood only five-foot-seven, but his voice commanded the room like a Shakespearean player. Keith had dreamt of acting professionally since he was a punky teen. He discovered comedy only while dining at Hornblowers and hearing that laughter pour from the clubâ€™his club.

Keith handles every chunk of the business: booking, bouncing, accounting, carpentry, and oh yes, performing. Itâ€™s like a marathon, he says, but instead of being handed water, you occasionally get hit by a two-by-four. So it goes.

Keith left for some water and returned 15 minutes later apologizing. He was having trouble sobering up. Ha! Comedy. No, he had been accosted by paperwork in the hallway. It would seem, to a sane person, that the clubâ€™s revenues would never stand a chance against its expenses. Fortunately, Keith is not a sane person.

“All in a day’s work,” he said, lighting his cigarette with a clown-like trembling hand. On one dark day, Paulie Shore pulled out of his dates, the city called with bad news, and finally Keith had a computer crash. By that I mean he threw his monitor to the ground. “I’m an even-tempered guy,” he said, “but once every five years or so, something snaps.”

The computer is fine, but Keith’s mouse is still a little jumpy.

So what do you do when your happy place drives you to drink? You tell jokes, of course. Before every show, while lighting the table candles, Keith giggles at inside jokes with his long-time girlfriend Casie Palilla and his right-hand man Eric Crispin. You’d think that Keith would be stuffed with humor, as in “if I hear one more witty remark, I’m going to vomit on the spot.” Not so.

“Humor keeps me healthy,” says Keith. “That’s why I smoke” to balance it out.

Comedy Night

For the sake of research, I crashed a Saturday show to ask the comics what they thought of Keith's whining. Ha again! Don Friesen, winner of the San Francisco International Comedy Competition, doted on Keith and not just because Keith signs his paycheck.

"I've known Keith since he MC'd under old ownership," said Don. "We bounced jokes off each other and had a great time. I consider him more of a friend than a booker."

Danny Villalpando is another headliner who feels at home in the club.

"I've been coming here five years," he said. "Keith runs a tight show, and the locals are always quick to laugh."

A third comedian, Bob Perkell, chimed in because that is his nature. Bob is friendly like a Labrador retriever. His act involves a lot of singing, skipping, and "ahem" gesturing.

Rubbing his own shiny head, Bob said, "Keith works hard. Too hard. He's like the Godfather of comedy."

Keith is, in fact, the one who gave yours truly a shot at standup all those moons ago. I did five minutes about how Iâ€™m not gay (he doth protest too much?). The audience didnâ€™t throw things, but they should have.

Before I went on that night, I confessed to Keith that I had stage fright.

â€œThe stage wonâ€™t hurt,â€• he said. â€œWhat you should really be afraid of is all those people judging you.â€•

Then he rubbed my shoulders and said, â€œJust have a good time up there. This is supposed to be fun. And, oh yeah, donâ€™t bomb.â€•

For old timeâ€™s sake, I performed for a friendly and intelligent crowd whom I want to thank now for its laughter. Iâ€™ve heard my jokes; theyâ€™re not that funny. Bob and Danny knocked 'em out with a one-two punch, and everyone left with aching jaws.

After the show I bothered Karen Bateman, a bubbly woman celebrating her birthday. She would not, even under torture, give her age.

“It was either comedy or dancing,” she said. “I think we made the right choice.”

Thirty-four-year-old Blake Bowman was flush with laughter when I flagged him down.

“Man, that was fun,” he said. “I especially enjoyed the dirty stuff.”

In the business they call it “blue humor,” bold references to race, religion, and parts of the body where your bathing suit covers. Keith’s acts are typically light blue—the F-word is used artistically. And if you don’t like it, you can BLEEPEDY BLEEP the BLEEPing BLEEP.

At one point during the show, a party of ten grew noisy and lost its concept of Other. Alcohol will do that. After two warnings, Casie had to dismiss them. She was refunding their money even as Keith joked onstage about their finances.

“Can you believe that I actually put \$5 of gas in my car? It was just enough to get me to the next station.”

As always, Keith caters first to the art and then to the books. “You have to remember,” he said, “that there 80 other people who paid to hear the comedians.”

It ain’t easy keeping people pleased. Keith forever walks the line between boring the 21-year-olds and offending the 51-year-olds. So he mixes it up. On any given night he might have one Latino act, one relationship act, and then someone who always hits the mark like the author of this column. Ha ha HA!

“Comedy is like music,” says Keith. “Not everyone likes rap or country or techno, but if you play a good variety, people leave happy. At least they don’t hit you with two-by-fours.”

And that may be the point: By the time you and I get to the club, the candles are lit, music is playing, and our biggest concern is Michelob versus Corona. We don’t see Keith checking reservations, fiddling with the sound board, briefing comedians, or finally rushing over to introduce the show at which point he’d better be funny!

The Future

Keith's stage is still incomplete. Weeknights he is covered in dry wall biting his nails. Instead of, say, throwing his monitor to the ground, Keith takes a moment during his act to look up at his own unfinished ceiling and say, "One of these days I'll have enough money to finish my stage." Then, as we stare at his balding head, "and maybe get some hair plugs."

A little truth and a lot of laughter.

Having renamed the club and practically almost nearly remodeled it, Keith plans to add comedy traffic school, Celebrity Sundays, and a Thursday night Hollywood showcase where five comedians do ten minutes each.

Keith tends a roster of 400 comics who all carry twinkling credits "The Tonight Show, Letterman, Comedy Central. Alonzo Boden from Last Comic Standing paid a visit, and Paulie Shore will no doubt change his mind once the Godfather sends his boys over to "reason" with him.

No one can say what drives Keith to carry the club on his shoulders. Maybe he senses the transforming power of laughter. Maybe he is guarding an undervalued art form. Maybe he is insane. But no matter how hard our lives become, how smoggy the commute or strained our relationships, we can rest assured that Keith is down the street cracking jokes, tickling palms, and continuing against all odds to light our candles.

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