

# Stealing jokes isn't funny, unless your audience doesn't care

BY JOHN ST. GODARD, THE GAZETTE JULY 22, 2011

Nowhere is the drive for originality more valued than in the world of stand-up comedy. You won't hear talent scouts applauding young comics for performing another comic's material. "Loved your George Carlin routine, but it was a bit pitchy, dawg."

In comedy this is stealing. Unless, of course, you ain't from around here.

"In France, 'doing Cosby' in stand-up is no different than performing Molière or Shakespeare on stage," said Mike Ward, Montreal's funniest (and filthiest) francophone comic.

Ward, who performs in English 'as a hobby,' holds an impressive list of distractions, including a headlining gig at Los Angeles's Comedy Store and a spot in this year's coveted Nasty Show at Just for Laughs.

With regard to stand-ups in France, Ward added: "The younger generation there understands comedy as a craft now. They're embarrassed by the older generation."

Here in the land of Just for Laughs, originality implies that comics perform and write their own stuff. It's a big part of being yourself, a cliché that clever minds unpack and revive night after night in clubs across the continent. That it's difficult to be yourself seems ironic. After all, one might think, who else could I be?

Try everybody. Including other comics, who, unlike songwriters, aren't flattered by their material being, um, covered. And if imitation is suicide for an artist, it's also cause for ridicule. In Cultural Amnesia, Clive James tells the story of American poet Robert Lowell, who once cornered Sigmund Freud to tell him that when he, Lowell, got depressed, he imagined he was Adolf Hitler. To which Freud muttered, "I'll bet Hitler spends very little time imagining he's Robert Lowell."

We're all swayed by the pack. Perhaps more so stand-ups, who live (and die) by their own material, with no writers to fall back on and a minutes-long time frame for laughs. Could the fact that many comics perform better than they write be cause for compromise? After all, writing is hard. Laughter is addictive. And sometimes, cheaters do prosper.

Whatever the reasons, the list of joke thieves, some alleged more than others, is as exhaustive as it is puzzling. How to explain Bill Cosby, America's favourite TV dad, who, during an appearance on Letterman in 2009, nonchalantly dropped that he stole not a joke, but an entire routine from George Carlin. And to big laughs. "I stole one of his routines ... and I didn't tell him about it. And I think he recognized it, because he stopped talking to me after a while." (See the clip on YouTube: Bill Cosby's Race Against George Carlin - June 1, 2009.)

Of course, the admission didn't hurt Cosby's career. The man's a legend. And the Letterman audience loved it. Which raises the question, do audiences care? Letterman's audience is comprised mainly of carefree tourists. But Montreal comedy audiences, as the banter goes, are said to be among the savviest.

It's a Saturday evening and the early show at Montreal's Comedy Nest is sold out. When the show ends, throngs of twenty and thirtysomethings exit the club into the AMC Forum, heading back to their buses, back home to the suburbs.

"See these guys?" club manager Gordie Mills says, all but high-fiving them on their way out. "They're from the pot bus. The other bus is more rowdy. Pot and beer."

Mills, a jazz and comedy club man since the '70s, bats away my questions about local audience demand for quality material and original acts.

"Come on," he says, incredulous. "Eighty-five per cent of them don't give a damn, as long as they laugh. As for savvy, do you mean savvy as in knowledge of comedy? Or do you mean, 'I go to two shows a year: a hundred-dollar fundraiser and a gala.' "

Questions aside - although I meant savvy as smart - it's hard to disagree with him. Club audiences just want to laugh. And why not? The other extreme, come to think of it, is not so much savvy as it is pretentious. As if to say: "Wife jokes bore me, darling. But I so enjoyed Emo Philip's bit on the ancient Babylonians." So then, let there be dumb jokes, right?

Just for Laughs COO Bruce Hills considered Montreal audiences from a comic's perspective, and in the context of the international festival.

"Brits want to make their debut here in front of a bilingual audience, especially if they're a little 'out there.' They see Montreal audiences as open-minded, smart, and ahead of the curve in endorsing the next comedy giant."

He referred to Irish comic Tommy Tiernan's success in Montreal and Bill Maher's upcoming show at Théâtre St. Denis.

In terms of the weekend club clientele, Hills said: "There's a certain clientele that comes to the Comedy Nest, Comedyworks, or to the festival, but they're all part of it. In general, Montreal audiences do their homework and are knowledgeable."

What about comics who are "out there" with other comics' material? What is Just for Laughs' position on joke thieves?

"That's a tough one. It would sour our view," Hills said. "And it's doubtful we would book them. We want original comics. Sometimes you know absolutely, but for others it's a hard call - it's just a premise."

That certain premises are as universal as they are worn-out - guys don't ask for directions, airplane food is bad, and lately, Charlie Sheen is crazy - leaves fewer possibilities for all but the most original comics. And so be it. But when it comes to actual joke thieves, as Hills said, sometimes you know absolutely.

"And once it's on TV, it's gone. The originator has to let it go, because the audience will say 'I've seen it before'. The more famous the joke thief," said Hills, "the worse it is. Someone famous does your material and it's good night, goodbye."

If Robin Williams's presence in a comedy club thrills an audience, it's cause for comedians to pack up their jokes and head for the hills. Mike Ward headlined at L.A.'s Comedy Store in 2010.

"What's weird about Robin Williams," he said, "is that among comics, no one respects him. I heard that when Williams goes into clubs, comics leave the stage, or they do their 'B' material."

Diehard Williams's fans will no doubt dismiss Ward's criticism, but it's worth noting he's far from the first comic to do so. Williams's contemporary, David Brenner, allegedly called Williams's agent and threatened to break the comic's leg if he didn't stop stealing his material. LA-based comic Joe Rogan, loved and loathed for his honest pit-bulllike personality, has also spoken out against Williams.

The most infamous joke thief is probably Milton Berle, of whom Bob Hope once quipped, "He never heard a joke he didn't steal." Being a joke thief became a large part of Berle's persona and it didn't hurt his career, either.

A well-known spat between the late Bill Hicks and Boston comic Denis Leary still gets media attention. Leary's 1993 HBO special *No Cure for Cancer* contains much of Bill Hicks's 1990 album, *Dangerous*. (See for yourself on YouTube: Exhibit A: Denis Leary Vs Bill Hicks - August 5, 2007.) Hicks and Leary apparently went to fisticuffs over this one.

But the most sensational case of late has to be Joe Rogan and Carlos Mencia, sparked when Rogan introduced Mencia to L.A.'s Comedy Store audience as "Carlos Men-Stealia." (Also on YouTube, with well over 3 million views: Joe Rogan and Carlos Mencia Fight - February 15, 2007.)

As far as Leary-Hicks, the best last word goes to comedian and former Toronto Star columnist Sabrina Jalees, who admits "... whether he deliberately stole or not, I liked Denis Leary a lot more before I found out who Bill Hicks was." As for Rogan: "Before you google a picture of Rogan, decide what a douche he is on TV and dismiss any opinions he may have, please re-google the names of the alleged thieves. He's not the only one playing detective."

Here in Montreal, the Comedy Nest's Jake Lawrence recently heard an audience member shout at a comic: "I read that joke in my email this morning!" Other local variations include francophone comics performing other francophone comics' jokes, but in English. The possibilities are endless.

But wait a minute, says Just for Laughs's director of programming, Robbie Praw: "Not everyone's a villain here." Well, Hallelujah. (I stole that from the Bible. No, Leonard Cohen. K.D. Lang?)

Agreed, most comics don't steal. Look at Dave Attell, Todd Barry, Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, all hilarious, all original. The list goes on. As for Robin Williams, Praw said, simply: "He'll just blurt something out he heard someone else say."

And there is such a thing as being inadvertently derivative. Ask Mike Ward. After having performed and then recorded a Sam Kinison bit on his first French DVD, *Haïssable*, Ward realized what he'd done. With the help of a few fans. "What pissed me off is that I didn't even realize that I was stealing a joke. I felt like crap for a couple of months," said Ward, nominated for four Olivier awards this year, including best writer. "Now when I write, I'm in a bubble. I don't see any stand-up for over a year."

Part of the challenge for original acts, for comics who are a bit more edgy or experimental, is that club audiences aren't necessarily comedy connoisseurs. They're out for a few beers and a laugh. Then there's the club owner's bottom line. They don't care, necessarily, how clever or original you are, but how many customers you bring to the club. And how much they drink. This makes perfect business sense, and illustrates a classic artist-entrepreneur conflict of interest.

Ottawa comic and Just for Laughs vet Martha Chavez weighed in on the topic of originality.

"We used to hear industry people pontificating about not being a Big Mac, but rather trying to be a filet mignon made out of komodo dragon. But now you see a lot of comedians being rewarded for being Big Macs: accessible to everybody and their dog."

In terms of outright theft, though, comics seem to have little legal recourse. While college students face permanent expulsion for plagiarism, and songwriters get their day in court, comics are more likely to take matters into their own hands.

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