

use

Why have an open mic manifesto

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A good goal

For a comedian to have is to always be aiming to build up to your Hour, that is your quality solo one-hour-long stand-up show.

If that's not what you want but just want to have a solid 10 minutes, drop into a show once in a while and never build from that, hey, you do you.

Otherwise, it begs the question: How to get to one full Hour? Well, you'll have to write some jokes. Oh, that's easy then, all you have to do is write 60 minutes worth of jokes, right?

Wrong.

80% of what you write is crap

Of what any artist does. Sounds like a lot. Art is hard. You are not a genius, hardly anything you touch turns to gold, this is true of the legends, and it's true of you.

20% of all you do is good enough.

Good jokes are the ones that make most of an audience laugh 80% of the time, and that you might still be performing 5 years in the future, in other words, material that might make it onto your Hour.

I'll just write a ton of material then

Good, however...

Stand-up comedy, unlike others, is an art form that requires the feedback from the audience in order to mature. This is in contrast to, for instance, painting: you can paint at home alone for months and improve your painting. Or music: you can rehearse at home for months and improve your song..

You cannot rehearse stand-up comedy alone, it needs an audience.

However, it is possible to practice painting and music on your own for years and not realize you're not improving due to the lack of feedback. Not so with stand-up. It is painfully obvious (to most) after standing on stage in humiliating silence after your jokes bomb that your jokes aren't good enough. But that is also the good part. People may fake clap for your crappy song or crappy poem but they will not, cannot, fake laugh. So if they do laugh you may have a good joke on your hands, but you have to dig, and you have to experiment, because you will be surprised how much you don't know what people find funny.

Sometimes a joke you think is bad does amazing, sometimes a joke you think is amazing has no reaction. You can never be truly sure what's funny at a certain point in spacetime. Luckily the audience is there to tell you.

Can I get better by just doing shows?

As a beginning comedian you can expect to get 5 minutes of stage time. You have no experience, so you have to test jokes. Since 80% of your material is crap, you're likely to not do great. If you don't do great, you are unlikely to be invited again. You're not ready for a show.

You should go and test things at an open mic.

What is an open mic?

Most entertainers of any type, say, musicians, poets, comedians, are not very good, let's say 80% of them, so no venue is going to be interested in having a performer annoy their patrons with their horrible music, poetry or comedy, when silence or background music would do a better job.

So venues tend to book performers who have proven themselves likely to entertain patrons.

However, it's important to find new talent, so venues sometimes do an open mic night, perhaps once a week where anyone can come and perform.

Why is it called an open mic?

"Open mic" is an expression that gets thrown around a lot incorrectly, probably because it sounds cool and is fun to say, like "redemption arc" or "deep dive".

"Open mic" refers to the fact that the microphone is open for anyone to perform, as opposed to a "closed mic".

A "closed mic" is usually called a "line-up show", where the performers are chosen beforehand. If a show is calling itself an "open mic" but is not really open to everyone, or the performers are "curated" then it's not really an open mic.

Often there are some people booked to perform at an open mic in advance, that is to make sure there are enough performers for an event, but if there's no allowance for performers unknown to the showrunner to perform, or if people aren't allowed to perform if they show up on the day even though there is time available, then it's not really an open mic.

A comedian who is just starting and isn't getting invited to be paid to perform in a line-up show is sometimes called an "open mic'er", they are not an "open mic".

What happens if there's no open mic

That means that every "show" is a half-open mic.

This is inefficient. Here's why:

If you're new, you can be expected to get 5 minutes of stage time, and you're expected to perform well enough so they call you back, so that eventually you're trusted enough to get more time, or be a headliner. In order for that to happen though, you're expected to have a strong 2 minutes to open, and a strong 2 minutes to close. That leaves you with 1 minute to test. If you do this once every single week, that gives you maybe 40 minutes of testing time per year, but because only 20% of that will be good, that will leave you with maybe 8 minutes of good material a year. If you want to have an hour you will need to do that for around 8 years to build it up to 60 minutes. That is too long.

This of course also affects the actual shows, since the performers are either repeating stagnating bits over and over, or not doing the best set they could because they're juggling giving a good performance while at the same time testing material.

If there is an open mic, all the testing, research and fine-tuning is done on it, allowing the performers to go on to shows and do their very best.

Why do you need an open mic?

If you don't have the freedom to keep trying new stuff in order to sift through your 80% garbage material in order to find the gold, you'll be stuck doing the same crappy material you first found and was sort of got some laughs, and then you'll be polishing of those bits until they're slightly better. But you can only polish a rock so much and it will still remain a rock, whereas somewhere out there there is gold to be found.

Worse still, you might get so used to the repetition that you'll gain a fear of experimenting and trying new things, and be stuck doing the same stagnating bits month after month, year after year. And fear is not funny.

But the open mic has also a function for the more experienced comedians as well. These have a reputation to uphold, when they are put on a show they are expected to do well, they are after all getting paid, so they will do their best, most tested set, they literally can't afford to test there.

So they do their testing on the open mics as well. If there is no open mic to test they'll be forced to test at shows, or worse, simply not test, and therefore stagnate.

Additionally, several famous comedians commented that they went into comedy because they saw how bad people were at an open mic and thought they could do better. If they had only seen great shows they would have thought it was the norm and maybe wouldn't have started.

Seeing experienced comedians at an open mic testing material is also inspiring because it breaks the mystique around thinking that established comedians are “simply funny” and shows them as craftsmen who got there through work, which means you can do it too.

Alternatively you can just keep repeating the same material every time, material that is mostly “rock” and not “gold”.

No one wants to organize an open mic

Everyone wants a show. Performers want audience. Audiences want to be entertained. Venues want to sell drinks. Organizers want to make money. Why would they want an open mic? If everyone is testing, then 80% of it will be terrible. So what happens in a scene is there are only shows and no open mics, so there is no place to test because you're expected to do well. So comedians tend to repeat their average material that kind of worked that one time, instead of digging to find the 20%.

Conclusion

A scene needs an actual open mic.

Someone has to organize it, knowing it'll probably be at a financial loss, will require sizable time and energy, and is likely not to entertain the audience.

And yet it is the best and most efficient way, in this author's opinion, of increasing the average quality of all the performers in a scene.

There is no such thing as a free lunch.

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