

**Andrew Clark:** So today is our last Primetime of 2011, and we have...

**Audience member:** Woo!

**AC:** Woo? (*laughter*) Anyway, we're gonna be continuing with these in the new year when we have some pretty interesting speakers lined up. Some agents...

**Mark Breslin:** Including me!

**AC:** I'm saying, following in the standard you're setting today. (*laughter*)

**MB:** It didn't sound like that, Andrew!

**AC:** I think I feel an energy here, a double act happening. Anyway, it's become an annual thing for us to have someone who you've all studied and seen around the Yuk-Yuk's clubs and listened to on radio and television come and kind of disagree with everything I've said about how comedy's developed and give you the real truth, but also just set off, and I would like to say, for the first years here, give yourselves a round of applause please, seriously. (*applause*) It's hack of me to do that, but it's a tough semester, that first semester, and you've all gotten through it, so congratulations. To follow in that vein, we have with us today the man responsible in many ways for us all being here, because without him there's no way in my opinion that standup comedy would ever have flourished here in Canada as it has. He's someone I've known my entire career, and

grown to appreciate the longer I've been in the business, the more I've appreciated him and come to respect what he's done for comedy and with comedy. So please, give a huge Humber round of applause for Mark Breslin. (*applause*)

**MB:** Thank you! Andrew was wrong. There would've been comedy without me. There would've been lots of comedy without me. It just wouldn't have been done exactly in the same kind of way. I like to think that the way I did it was the best way to do it, and I'd like to think that the way that I did it protected the muse of comedy in this country. And I think that's an important way to think about it. Because you can do things in a lot of different ways, you know. But I think I did it in a way that respected the essential, eternal truths of what it means to be funny, and why we are funny. I'm gonna talk for a bit, and then we're gonna open it up to questions, because I think that's really what you want. But I'm gonna start with something. This is a book, an audio book, I put out two years ago with Harper Collins, and it was a bestseller, which was great. It's *The Yuk-Yuk's Guide to Canadian Standup*, and in it, I took about fifty performance tapes from people who are pretty well known. I've got, let's see, who's on this, Don Harron, Dave Broadfoot, David Steinberg, Jim Carrey, Howie Mandel, Norm MacDonald, Harland Williams, and then some people that people don't really know all that well. And I introduced every cut with an appreciation.

It's a very positive book, and I'm usually a very critical character, but in this book, I wanted to be very positive about what I'd spent the last thirty-five years of my life doing, and I basically convinced myself that it was worth doing. That's why I did the book, and it did so well that they actually commissioned a sequel, which just came out,

which is called *Rarities and Road Warriors*, where I go deeper into the catalogue of Canadian standup, and again I talk about why these people are important, and what the issues are. The first book talks mostly about issues of race, gender and class in comedy in Canada, and the second one deals a lot with the issues of geography and fame. So, I'd like to just play you the initial cut from the first audio book, which I think will set up some of the things we're gonna talk about today. Mark, press play!

*(Audio clip begins)*

This is what it's like. You stand on a stage, alone, with only a microphone and your ideas. The stage is small, and there are four strong lights in your eyes. You can barely see the audience, which might be a good thing. The room has a few hundred seats. The audience paid to see some comedy, but not necessarily to see you. Your first time onstage, you were on an amateur night, one level up from a wet T-shirt contest. The audience shows up to watch you fail, or "bomb" as it's called, and you do. The humiliation is excruciating. It's the longest five minutes of your life, and you can't wait to do it again. And you do it again. And again. And again. A few years pass, and you learn what makes them laugh, and you get a good five minutes together. Now you're having fun. A few more years, and you've got a solid twenty minutes that almost always works. You go on the road. You drive two hundred miles to make fifty bucks. You stay in gruesome hotels and eat nothing but fried carbs. Your friends think you're an idiot. Your friends are jealous of you. Soon, the only friends you have are other comics.

It starts to get better. You do some TV. You get a writing job. The hotels now have a pool and free wi-fi. And five nights a week, 200 strangers think you're a genius. The women want to sleep with you. The guys want to be you. You only work an hour a day, leaving lots of time for lots of sex and parties. And all you have to do is come up with more great jokes. You are a standup comic. You are probably male, but not necessarily. You are probably Jewish, or black, or gay, but not necessarily. *(laughter)* You were probably bad as a kid, or too thin, or ignored, or got too much attention, or not enough love, or some unique combination of all of the above. You were probably unhappy, or at least bored and liked that sound of laughter. Soon it became oxygen, and you couldn't live without it.

You are a standup comic. You may not be educated, but you're smart. All comics are smart, and skeptical. If you're a comic, chances are you mistrust institutions like religion, government, and marriage, just to name a few. You don't like authority, but you're too alienated to believe in revolution or political change. You don't like fair fights. You've always lost those. Better to be a sniper with the stage as your high ground, a microphone your gun, and clever lines your bullets. That's how comics talk. The metaphors are always violent. "I killed!" "I destroyed!" "I murdered 'em with my punchlines!" And this from some of the most physically unremarkable people on the planet. *(laughter)* But if you're a standup, there's no bigger thrill. Better than sex? Well, maybe a close second. A lot like sex, too. You create tension and release it with laughter. The audience is

seduced, and then abandoned at the end of the show. You sweat, sometimes talk dirty, and make them think that you care. Oh, yes, it's a lot like sex. And if you're one of those individuals with a grievance, a set of opinions, a strong point of view, you welcome the opportunity to look for converts on a nightly basis. You can be like a drunk at the bar, except that the audience is captive, and you're getting paid.

And in a way, you *are* changing the world, if only a little, because your job is to diagnose, not to cure. I think it's the best job in the world. I thank and curse the day I discovered standup. It redeemed me, and cured me, and gave me confidence and overconfidence, and what I thought might be a summer fling turned into a thirty-year marriage. I didn't grow up around standup comedy. I barely knew it existed. Standup is not a Canadian tradition. It's an American one. The Brits do it too, but until recently, they told third-party jokes. There were no confessionals and no opinions. The standup I knew about as a teenager was from the warty, uncomfortable Jews I would see on *Ed Sullivan*, and from the records of Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Bill Cosby and Woody Allen. But all these comics came from a world far away, across the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel and beyond.

**AC:** OK, Marc.

**MB:** OK, well. Thanks for the applause. (*applause, laughter*) I really worked hard on that thing, you know! (*laughter*) I didn't just throw that together. There was at least one

rewrite involved. Anyway, so let's go back to the beginning, shall we? I think the beginning is 1974. I think that's ground zero for me. It's kind of ground zero for the comedy business. In 1974, I was 22 years old. How many people here are older than 22? Oh, quite a few of you. OK. I was 22 years old, and I had just graduated with a degree in English literature from York University. But when I looked in the paper, there were very few job openings for people who were experts in Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and I knew I would probably have to go to graduate school to do something with it, and although all of my friends were doing that, I wasn't really enthusiastic. See, here's one difference between my generation and your generation. When I speak to people your age now, in 2011, everybody has a fear. And that fear is, you're gonna graduate, and you won't have a job. When I was in your position, we had a fear. We feared that we would graduate, and we would have to get a job. Nobody wanted to work in the 70's. Everybody wanted to play. It was one of the most wonderful, wonderful times you can imagine. Nobody expected anything of anybody. Everything was completely open.

So while all of my friends were going to graduate school, which was another way of not working, frankly, I thought I needed to do something different, and I got very lucky. I got a summer job at Harbourfront, the first year it opened. They took 24 people who had just graduated, and they dressed us up in powder-blue leisure suits and let us give pamphlets out on the site. They had some programming going on organized by some guys who were all in their fifties and sixties from a PR company. But I was a guy who went out and did everything. That's one thing I always did, and something I urge you to do, which is to consume culture as much as possible. It doesn't just mean turning on the TV set and watching things. It means going out to every play, going out to see every

band, every kind of performance you can possibly get your hands on, because it all comes together. All these different forms all cross-fertilize each other, and you gotta admit, there's a lot happening, as an example, in the independent comedy scene that's not all that different from the ethos and the aesthetic happening in the independent music scene. So you can learn from everything you see. You go watch a play, watch a serious performer. You'll still learn something about stagecraft by watching that performer.

And this is what I was doing every single night, and had been doing every single night since I started university. I would take that long trek from York University all the way downtown and go to the Toronto Free Theatre and see some play by Martin Kinch or Larry Fineberg, and it was glorious, and I did this every single night. I knew a lot about what was happening in terms of performance in Toronto that these people who were supposedly experts didn't really know. They weren't part of any grassroots movement. So they would ask me every morning about what I thought about the band they had the last night, and of course I was very outspoken. I've always been an outspoken guy. That's why I always used to get beat up in high school. And I *did* get beat up in high school, a lot. So they asked me what I thought, and I'd say, "Oh, they were crap! That's a crap band! Why would you book *that* band? You should book the Whatever's." And they would go, "Oh, OK," and they would book The Whatever's. And The Whatever's would turn out to be really good. So at the end of the summer, not knowing what I was going to do, they offered me a job in the programming department, which I took gladly. I was still living at home with my parents, who hated every single thing I did, and probably hated everything I did since the time I turned 13. They hated every decision I made, every book I read, every friend I had. And I was a good kid! I never did drugs, I never drank, I never

stayed out late. I never had a date, why would I stay out late? (*laughter*) But by those standards then, and their Depression-era values, I was a bad guy because I wasn't in law school or med school, or at least graduate school like the rest of my friends. So everything was a bit dicey for me.

I loved this job. And one of the jobs I got doing this job was running an open mic. And guess what happened on the open mic? Comics started to show up. Now an interesting thing happened in '74. This was the first generation of Canadian comics, or wannabe comics, that was raised on American television. Figure it out, figure out the numbers. Everybody was 20. Everybody was 20, which meant they were all watching Johnny Carson when they were 12, going, "Wow! That guy's really funny, this George Carlin guy! I'd love to do that!" It was the first time that had ever happened, because as I alluded to in the audio book portion, standup's not a Canadian tradition. Sketch comedy is, but not standup. And by the way, just as an aside, I love sketch comedy too. I'm just a lousy actor, which is why I never got into it. But I love watching really good sketch took. But standup is the thing that I liked the best, and the thing I think I could talk about with the most expertise.

Anyway, I met all these new comics, and these comics were coming from a totally different place than anybody else had before. I'd never seen anything like it. I'd heard records by American comics doing something similar, but I'd never seen Canadian guys. One of the guys, by the way, was your very own Larry Horowitz. Now, what Larry Horowitz does today may not seem revolutionary, but at the time, talking about himself? Criticizing advertising? That was considered seditious. Cops would show up at the back

of the room when I started Yuk-Yuk's to see if there was something going on here that was kind of revolutionary, and maybe somebody could be arrested. That's how outrageous it was at the time. Not now, but that's how outrageous it was at the time.

So I got this job, I was hosting this show, I'd never been an actor, I'd never trained as an actor, I'd never taken theater courses except for academic-style theatre courses, but I was always a public speaker. I loved debating. I was on debating teams all the time. So I could always talk. So it wasn't that much of a leap for me to go from talking to people on a stage seriously to talking on a stage and throwing in a joke here and there. I was a host, I was always the host. Even when I was doing standup for twenty years, I always performed as the host. I rationalized, having watched all those shows and the variety shows in the 60's and 70's, like *Sonny and Cher*, that the host was the most important person on the show. So it sounded good. "I'll take that role, thank you." It was also really important to be the host, and by the way this is a little bit of a pitch to all of you not to ever turn down the job of hosting a show or MC'ing a show, because although it is more work for less money, it gives you an amazing amount of freedom. If you try out new material and it isn't working, you just introduce the next guy. It's really good. Plus, if you have a number of pieces in your act that don't quite fit together, bringing somebody on and then coming back as a kind of vaguely different person with a different sort of viewpoint is kind of OK, because they forgot what you did ten minutes before. So you can do things like that. I had a prop set. I had a political set. I had a personal, sad-sack set, and I had an insult set. Well, if I tried to jam them all together, it would just not work. But because I divided them up into four different places, it was all fine. Every time

I came on, I was kind of a different person, and that allowed me to do all the material I ever wanted to do.

But I'm digressing here, because digression is the greatest thing on earth.

*(laughter)* Digression is what makes us human. Anyway, so, this was all going great. I was running not only that night, but also the comedy night. The comedy night was big. Nobody had ever been doing anything like this before at Harbourfront, 300 seats every Sunday night. I was in heaven, and then they fired me. Don't feel bad. They fired everybody. They lost their funding. Now all the comics came to me and said, "What do I do? What do we do, Mark?" I was always the guy in charge. I was the sober one at the orgy. I was the designated driver, because that's me. And I said, "I don't know, but my friend is running a coffee house in the basement of a community center. Let me go see if I can get you some spots there." So I asked him, and he said, "Yeah, sure, they can go on in between the folkies. Sounds really great." But the folkies hated the comics, and the comics hated the folkies. Why? Well, if you've ever seen folk music, and the folk music crowd, you know that they like things in earth tones, and they're very positive, and they're really interested in peace and love and harmony, and the comics would sit there biting their fingers to the quick, chain-smoking cigarettes, wearing cheap black clothes, and swearing every other word because they're filled with anger. It didn't work. So that ended. But then I had an insight. Every once in a while, you'll have four or five insights, very important things that you do that change your life. For instance, taking this course. Deciding to take this course is one of them.

So I went to the board of the community center, and I said, "I'd like to do a comedy show here. How's Wednesday night?" They went, "OK, fine, but we gotta

charge you for the room.” “Oh. How much?” “38 dollars.” “38 dollars? Where am I gonna get that kind of money?” Remember, I’m broke, I’m on UIC, I have nothing. I’m still living with my parents. And I realized I could charge a dollar. I could get people to pay to see this thing. If I just charged a dollar, I’d have enough to pay the 38 bucks. I’d have enough to hire one of the comedians, give them a piece of the take, and I would rotate the comedians. That was another insight I had, by the way. Rather than give everybody four dollars, I thought it was wiser to rotate it and give somebody a fifty-dollar bill at the end of the night once every ten weeks, because they’d appreciate it more, because you’d have the fifty to do something with. The four bucks you’d blow. Anyway, that was just something I thought was kind of clever. And I went, “OK.” I called it Yuk-Yuk’s. I mimeographed, (*laughs*) do they even have mimeograph machines anymore? Probably not. You run it off like that, by hand, and...do they have Letraset anymore? No, it’s a thing, a stencil, where you sit there and painstakingly rub letters that transfer onto a piece of paper, and it said, “YUK-YUKS: GOOD FOR A LAUGH. ONE DOLLAR.” And for the first nine weeks, it kind of inched on. And then I got a call from the guy who ran *The Globe and Mail* arts department. And he said, “I heard a lot about what you’re doing, and I’d like to come down and see it.” So I said, “Sure!” So he comes down, sees a Wednesday night, it’s a good night, pretty packed, kind of crazy. He said, “I’m gonna put this in the *Saturday Star*.” That Saturday, I’m all excited to see some little blurb. And it’s a full page, the front page of the entertainment section. And the next day, I didn’t have a hundred people trying to get in. I had 900 people trying to get in. And it never changed after that.

So this was really, in some ways, Toronto's first comedy open mic, although there were other places that were doing it. There was a place called Gene Taylor's Improv, and Gene Taylor was a piece of work. Gene Taylor never gets the credit he deserves, but he was a real piece of work. He was this toothy guy, he was all grin, in a very sharp kind of Rat Pack suit, and he was a DJ in Detroit, and he'd come in every night and he would do this show, but you couldn't swear, you couldn't talk about yourself, you couldn't run down the government, you couldn't attack a corporation. There was a whole list of couldn'ts. Well, guess what? We did everything completely differently. You have to understand how this movement, this comedy movement, this revolution, was kind of based in other things that were going on, just as I spoke about ten minutes ago. We were punks. We loved punk. We couldn't get enough of punk. In fact, on Wednesday nights, after we were finished the Yuk-Yuk's show in the basement of the community center, we would all quickly get into a car and pile up to a place called the Crash and Burn, which was on Duncan Street, which was sort of punk central, and the only place you could hear punk music, the reason being it was completely unlicensed, and no licensed establishment would dare book people who would slit themselves with razor blades. They'd lose their liquor license. This place had nothing to lose. It was like a loft. And we loved it, because the way we thought, we were doing the same things the punks were doing. The punks were slitting themselves physically, but we were slitting ourselves emotionally and letting our guts spill out onto the floor. It was personal, it was confrontational, and people loved it. We'd hit a nerve. It's called a paradigm shift, anybody heard that term? Yeah. It was a paradigm shift.

The same thing was happening in comedy in Canada as it happened in the music business maybe ten years before, where people wouldn't stop singing other people's songs. They had to do their own songs. It had to be authentic. Authenticity was the key word. Key word: authenticity. Authenticity to me is the most important thing you can do. Truth, honesty: the most important thing that you can do in comedy, or in any art. And I want to really get you excited about the idea today that what you're doing is valid artistically. I want you to be able to hold your head up if you're sitting beside Don McKellar on the subway, and know, "Hey, I'm doing what he's doing." "Hello, Margaret Atwood. I'm a fellow artist. Nice to meet you. Yes, I do comedy." Now, the world doesn't necessarily think that. But I want you to think that, because I think that. I did these books because I thought that the people who are doing these routines are, in their own way, Hemingways and Fitzgeralds. I see standup comedy, and all comedy, as a literary tradition, one that has to be taken really seriously. Each and every one of you holds a key to a sacred flame, and a sacred tradition, that goes back to the Greeks and before. Probably the cavemen slipped on banana peels and laughed. And you're holding on to this. And when you graduate from here, you're gonna take what you learned and you're gonna take it out into the world. There's a Jewish word called "tikkun," which means, "Heal the world." Healing: that's what you're here for. You're here to heal the world. You're as important as any doctor, as any lawyer—more important than any lawyer, that's for sure. (*laughter*)

You're as important as any doctor, and what you do is actually kind of medical. It has medical benefits. It's actually been tested. There've been studies done. You are releasing the tension of the world. The world is like this, have you noticed? Now if you

just press the right spot, and you press it in exactly the right amount of pressure, that releases, and that's what you're doing with your comedy. And that's what comedy is. Setup, punchline, laughter. It's the breath of life. It is the breath of life. It is life itself. You know? I compared it to sex. Tumescence, detumescence, birth, rebirth. OK, do I sound like I've gone too far? Do I sound like I've gotten kind of New Agey and wooly? *(laughter)* Maybe. But I'd rather overstate my case than understage it, to make you understand. You ever ask this question: why do people go to comedy? I think I know why we do it, but why do people go to it? Why do people get up in the morning, decide to hire a babysitter, drive in from Scarborough or some other godforsaken place *(laughter)*, and then come down, park, pay for parking, pay a cover charge, sit in a room, and laugh with other strangers that they'll never see again? Why do they do it? What could possibly make them want to do that? Give me your reason. Tell me why.

**Audience member:** Because it feels good to laugh.

**MB:** Sure, it feels good to laugh, but it feels good to have sex. Feels good to eat chocolate. It feels good to do a lot of things, but what is comedy specifically doing? Why do they need it?

**Audience member:** *(INAUDIBLE)*

**MB:** Yes...well, to say the obvious, thank you, to speak the obvious. They can't do it for themselves. That's why. You're doing it for them. That's a really important insight to

keep in mind as you develop your stagecraft and your act and whatever else you want to do. You're doing stuff that they can't do, which in a real world, you should be redundant. You should be unnecessary. People should be able to laugh on their own. People should be able to make others laugh on their own. We shouldn't need to go to professionals to have people laugh, and yet we do, because we live in a world that is so dishonest and so full of bullshit in every possible way, in every possible place, that we actually have to pay others to get us to laugh. So, you're pretty important. You're pretty important, and that is why people who can do what we do really, really well get paid vast sums of money. And people who can do it only moderately well can make a living at it. How wonderful! How wonderful! Somebody had their hand up at the back.

**Audience member:** *(unintelligible)*

**MB:** Yeah, I believe that. I mean, certainly provides...if you're a neo-Marxist critic, you might think that, you might observe, that laughter provides a mechanism to defuse revolution. Right? That's what the Marxist critics would say. One of the things I did was study Marxist literary criticism. Am I doing something wrong?

**AC:** No, not at all. We're gonna trade (mics), and we'll be able to mic their questions.

**MB:** Sure, OK, sounds good. Thank you. Sorry, let's get back to what you were saying.

What were you saying? *(laughter)*

**Audience member:** I was just saying that, you were talking about why people come to see comedy, and they'd probably snap and do something crazy if they weren't having that relief in their lives.

**MB:** You need the release. They need the release. They also need the honesty. There's an honesty that comes with standup. You go to a club and what do you hear? "I hate my boss, my girlfriend won't sleep with me, blah blah blah, I'm this, I'm that." OK, these are the concerns that everybody has, but you certainly can't go around and talk about them at work, or at school. This school is a little bit different, but in most schools, certainly in the banking business... *(laughter)* Certainly in the banking business, people can't say what they really mean. They can't say what they really feel. And that's just one business. So you're absolutely right. That's one of the reasons why we need it. We need it desperately, in fact. And if you've noticed, the comedy business has ballooned over the last forty years. What else has ballooned over the last forty years? War, tension. Tension. It's a really difficult world to live in. And you're making it easier for people, at the same time as being authentic to yourself.

Let me talk to you a bit about my supposed authenticity. I come from a background where I am quite an outsider. Now, I know you're looking at me and you're saying, "Cashmere jacket, white skin, how much of an outsider can this guy be?"

*(laughter)* But if we go far enough back into my past, I had a very unusual upbringing, which I think reinforced the fact that I was a bit of an outsider. My parents had me very late in their lives. My mother was 42, my father was 53, and I have two older sisters who were 20 and 25 years older than me. So right away, I've got my nose pressed against the

glass. I'm a bit of an oddball. I was a child prodigy, I could read a newspaper before I was three. I was the genius, I was the genius, I was the genius, that's all I heard. And you know what? The genius just didn't like the pressure, frankly. So the genius rebelled at a very early age as well. Then, we moved to a very fancy school. We moved to a very fancy district. My sister got very sick, my younger sister. She got MS. And what we did was, we moved into her mini-mansion in Forest Hill, which was great, but now I became the poorest kid in the richest school. That was also a bit alienating. And then did I mention I'm five foot two? And I'm really glad I'm standing on this stage, because now I'm like normal height. *(laughter)* Now, I don't care now that I'm five foot two, but when you're 14 years old, and you want to dance with somebody at a school dance, it's not good. It's not good, not good at all. So I didn't excel at sports. I didn't have a date until I was 24 years old. But I made up for lost time. *(laughter)* I advise you all to go into show business, and I see that you have. Smart move sexually, trust me. It's fine, I don't care. They can sleep with my fame. My body's still in the room. *(laughter)*

But all of these things combined, and the times, the tenor of the times, I've explained the late sixties, the early seventies, and I should also mention I was a teenage communist. Oh, I might have left that out! Occupy Toronto? Come on! *(laughter)* I was trying to figure out how to finance the bombings of the Litton plant, all right? Kid stuff, they're kids! Stop it. Get in all the way or get out! So all these things combined to create a kind of personal stew of anguish and alienation and resentment and desperation, which can only be answered in one way: whenever you find yourself in that position, you have to write your way out of it. You have to write your way out of it. I don't know you yet. I'm gonna meet with each and every one of you in the next semester, those of you who

are in second year, and we're gonna have some one-on-ones, and you're gonna tell me about your lives, and I'm gonna share more about mine personally.

But I'm going to bet that most of the people in here, in this room, have some problem. You have some real, real problem. And I have to convince you that your problem is your biggest asset. The Hopi Indians have an interesting theory. They say that wisdom enters at the site of the wound. Which means, whatever hurts you the most, that's your rocket fuel. That's gonna take you places that your friends who became bankers will never get to, will never understand. So you know, it could be something, you could be gay, you could be black, you could be short, you could be fat, you could just be a kid who wasn't paid attention to by your parents. Whatever it is, whatever that hurt is, bless that hurt. Fall in love with that hurt. That hurt is you, and it is going to save your life if you know how to flip it. It saved mine.

So I have 17 nightclubs. They stretch coast to coast. I have an agency which represents the comics who work those nightclubs, about 158 people I'm responsible for, putting food in their mouths. I have direct management of Aaron Berg, who I work with very intensely; his off-Broadway show's about to open in New York in March. I write a column every week for *Metro*; I don't know if you've seen it. It's a film column, because there's only one thing I might like as much as comedy, and that's movies. I don't think there's a movie I haven't seen since 1970. Literally! I see 300, 350 movies a year. Now that I have a little baby boy, that has become a bit of a challenge, so I watch a little more on DVD. But I write a column every week, and I write a monthly column on comedy in a thing called *The Village Post*, which is a giveaway magazine. I don't know if anybody knows it, but it goes to the wealthiest homes in the center of the city. There are six

different versions of it. But it's the oldest, longest-running comedy column in the country. I'm almost at my hundredth column, which means nine and a half years, and I never missed a column. I always have the same thing every month. It's not writing the column. Writing the column's easy. Coming up with the idea of what the column's gonna be, that's the hard part. Once I figure out what the column is, I can dash it off in an hour and a half. It's coming up with the idea. I think that's true for all art. Coming up with the idea's the hardest part. Getting it down once you have the fuel, that's not so bad.

I write books sometimes. This is my fifth book, my second audio book, but I've written three other books besides. Television producer, I moonlight as an occasional television producer, a producer for hire, which is not very in vogue these days. Producers now unfortunately have to create their own projects, and I just don't have that kind of time, but over the years, I've produced 50 hours of standup Yuk-Yuk's programming on TV, I've produced *The Joan Rivers Show* in Los Angeles in 1986-87, which is probably my biggest TV credit. I produced the Ralph Benmergui abortion on CBC for the second season. I'm an associate producer on (*Kenny vs. Spenny*). I also act a little bit, but I'm not a good actor, as I've told you. But I had a really good part, and Marc, did you set the video up or no? OK. Anyway, take out a movie called *Confessions of a Porn Addict*. I play Bob, it's the second lead, and it was a wonderful stretch for me, but I think I came off well in it, because I was able to write my own part. I had a director who just said, "Go and just create it. Don't worry about us, we'll work around you." And the same thing was true even when it came to hitting my marks. I would say, "Where do you want me to go?" And he'd say, "Don't worry. We'll follow you. It's a handheld shoot." It was great, and I

didn't have to worry about getting the profile exactly right. I just had to worry about getting the truth of the lines out right, and I think it came out well because of that.

So I do a lot, is what I'm saying. I do a lot. And I want to do more. I'm turning 60 this year. I just had a baby. My first baby. *(applause)* Yeah, you can applaud for my sperm. I don't blame you. *(laughter)* He's a beautiful baby, but you must admit, at a time when everybody else is walking away from the tables of life, I'm doubling down, because that's what I do, and that's how I live, and that's how I want you to live. I want you to live a high-risk life with a high return. Because any economist will tell you—well, John Maynard Keynes will tell you—that all return is risk-related. The bigger risks you take, the more money you make. He meant it in financial terms, but I mean it more in spiritual terms. The bigger risks you take, the greater the goal, the greater the payoff. Anybody have any questions? It's a good question time, I think. *(pause)* Oh, come on, now! Don't disappoint me! *(pause)* You already asked one. And we'll get to you. No, I know, I know. Yeah.

**Audience member:** When you were here last year, I recall you speaking at mild length about how you had an idea or an impression that it was ridiculously hard to make it as a comedian in Canada, and that to make money, if that's what you were in it for, you needed to go to England or the U.S. As someone who is obviously from England, and thinking about the fact that it's just over double the people in England, but the comedy system seems to work quite well for performers over there, we have hundreds of people who make a very good living, thousands maybe, do you think it's a problem of scale in

terms of how many people in Canada, or a systemic issue? Do you think if tomorrow there were 70 million people within a hundred miles of the U.S. border...

**MB:** Great question. I've asked myself that question, and in fact that question is something I deal with in the new audio book, because I talk a lot about comics who are Canadian who've gone to the U.K., which had never happened before. This is really new, Canadians going to the U.K. So I think you're right on both points. I think it's systemic, and it's a matter of a critical mass of population. So let's go through what happens in the U.K. that doesn't happen here. One, you have a pub culture. You have people who think nothing, even if they have kids, of going to the pub at night. They're used to going out all the time. Canadians, you get a little bit of money, you buy a house and you hide. And you're never heard from again. Believe me, I have all my friends, it takes forever just to get them to a coffee. So I think that's one big difference between the U.K. and in Canada.

The second thing is also an issue of critical mass. I think there's a huge difference. The doubling of the population does make a difference, in terms of a tipping point. You know how Malcolm Gladwell talks about a tipping point? It's a tipping point for an industry, in creating a viable economic industry. The third thing I think is different about England is that it's physically small, so these cities, which have double the population, are only a short train ride from each other. Try to go to Calgary. It's a long...what did Greil Marcus say, "days between stations." I've done it, a number of times. It makes it economically difficult and spiritually exhausting to go from Toronto, say, to Calgary, or to Newfoundland. But then there's the systemic issues. The systemic

issues are, you have a number of television companies in the U.K., which are completely supportive and need comedy programming, and know it. How long have you been here?

**Audience member:** Since last September.

**MB:** OK. So can you sort of quantify for me, how many television shows, how many television series on the BBC would you say at any given time are comedy shows? Take a stab.

**Audience member:** I would say at least thirty percent, maybe as much as forty, fifty.

**MB:** Wow. So in a number, how many? Ten, fifteen, twenty? Fifty?

**Audience member:** Fifty at least.

**MB:** OK, fifty. Fifty shows! Now, start doing the math. Fifty shows means those fifty shows each have to hire how many comics?

**Audience member:** Um, a number?

**MB:** Yeah, just play the game with me.

**Audience member:** Well, usually there's a different writing system, so usually two or three.

**MB:** Two or three. And how many writers would be associated with that, comedy writers to write for the two or three?

**Audience member:** Like six...

**MB:** Yeah, thank you. And how many comedy producers who probably started off as comedy writers? There's a multiplying effect. So each show would probably hire twenty people who are considered talent. Twenty times fifty is what? A thousand people working in comedy because they're making comedy shows! Duh! OK, now let's take a look at Canada. The Comedy Network. How many shows are currently being produced by The Comedy Network? How many series? Anybody take a guess? *(pause)* You weren't giving me the finger, were you? You were saying, Andrew, one show, *Picnicface*, right? One show, *Picnicface*, which would mean about ten people would have jobs, maybe fifteen. That's it. And you want to know about an infrastructure. And you want to know about systemic problems. Well, there it is right there. CBC, not much better. Global, ha ha. *(laughter)* Do they have anything? Yeah, they have the news. That is a big, big problem. There's no infrastructure or vertically integrated system of a comic going from here to there. You can go from here to *there*, and then you tap out, unless you're one of the people that gets extremely lucky. There's a bit of a net, and I'd say...I also play this game. Comedy millionaires.

Let's play the comedy millionaire game. We'll use the U.S. as the other example here, because it works better for my theory. How many comedy millionaires do you think there are in the United States? People who've made a living who you could call millionaires? *(Pause)* Who said "hundreds"? Yeah. Hundreds, and I would say probably even thousands. You wouldn't believe how much money is out there. I knew a guy, the name doesn't matter, but I knew a guy who, when I'd go down to the New York clubs in the 70's, he was a guy who was kind of funny. He wrote really good lines, but he was no Jerry Seinfeld, and he looked kind of schleppy. And I would see him just slogging it out every night, slogging it out every night, slogging it out every night. He'd get laughs, big laughs, but no one was ever hiring him for anything, believe me. And then he faded from view, and I never saw him again. And I always wondered what happened to him. And then I was watching TV one day, and I saw the credits roll by on some big show, and there he was, head writer. So the poor guy was making a couple of million bucks a year. And this happens again and again and again and again. All right? So whoever said hundreds, you may have even been underestimating how many people. Basically, anybody who touches... Louis C.K., for all his, "Oh, I'm such a loser, I'm this, I'm that," he just bought a private plane. And he's on the worst cable company imaginable. He's on FX. But even if you get on anything there, you make a lot of money. OK, comedy millionaires in Canada, how many? Anybody?

**Audience member:** Brent Butt?

**MB:** Brent Butt? Only probably because he has a piece of real estate. But not multi-millionaire, but yes, OK, we'll include Brent Butt, we'll include Rick Mercer, I think Mike Bullard if his alimony didn't clean him out, he probably still has money.

**Audience member:** You? *(laughter)*

**MB:** All right, maybe, if I sold my company, yes.

**Audience member:** *(unintelligible)*

**MB:** Yes, but I consider him an American. I'm talking about resident Canadians.

**Audience member:** *(unintelligible)*

**MB:** I'm talking resident Canadians. He's not a resident. Mary Walsh, no. I don't think Mary Walsh has a million bucks, no. Sandra Shamas probably does. All right, so we can debate about who's on the list and who's not on the list, but if you had more than twelve, I'd be really shocked. That's why people leave, that's why people go, that's why people drain out to the United States and also to the U.K., where you don't become rich, but you become comfortable if you're any good at what you do. Why are you here? Why did you come this way?

**Audience member:** Love.

**MB:** Ah. That's a good reason. It fades, though. *(laughter)* Yes. But, you know, true love does not fade. True love stays in your heart forever. Like a sickness. Like radiation poisoning or something. *(laughter)* But it's good you believe in it, and I would always support that. *(laughter)* I mean it. OK.

**Audience member:** *(in French-Canadian accent)* I don't know how much you know about this...

**MB:** Nothing. *(laughter)*

**Audience member:** But I was wondering...

**MB:** Whenever anybody starts with that question, you know you know nothing. You know that little café on Lakeshore Boulevard, you know, the one with the checkered tablecloths? OK, sorry, go ahead.

**Audience member:** What? *(laughter)*

**MB:** No, go ahead, go ahead. I was fantasizing about something I did not know about, that you were gonna ask me.

**Audience member:** OK. Is the industry in Quebec different from the one in the rest of Canada?

**MB:** Completely. Good point. Yes, absolutely, completely.

**Audience member:** Is it easier to make it there than in Canada?

**MB:** Yes, but here's the problem: you have to speak French.

**Audience member:** Oh, well I...

**MB:** I know, I know. *(laughter)* OK, I'm gonna do another course on irony, *(laughter)* later on. See, when I lean forward and I lower my voice, that's a clue that what I am about to say is not exactly what I am saying.

**Audience member:** Really?

**MB:** Yeeees. *(laughter)* But I get *your* irony. OK. Yes, you're right. You have to speak French, obviously, but they have a whole star system of people we've never even heard of that are selling out twelve nights at Place des Arts, and nobody's ever heard of them. Why? There's a systemic issue, there's an infrastructure that is supportive in Quebec, of education, the media, CBC Radio, Radio Canada, and all kinds of things that actually help. As well, the Quebecois feel kind of isolated and protective about their own culture,

so they will do everything they can to support it. But interestingly enough, these comics don't usually work in France. They just don't work in France. The comedy doesn't work in France. It's very specific to Quebec. One of the most interesting things that's happening lately in Quebec is that these stars, people like Mike Ward and there are a couple of other guys I've seen, they're starting to do their acts in English, so they can do their act in English and in French, because they realize as well as they're doing, it's a geographic ghetto in that shape, and they know they can only go this far, and now everybody wants to take on the world.

Look at what Russell Peters has done. Whether you think Russell Peters is really funny, or if you think he's actually not so funny, and he's got just two tricks, as some people think he does, you've gotta give him credit for two things: one, reinvigorating the issue of race in comedy, and two, understanding that the world does not stop at English-speaking countries, or what is generally thought of as English-speaking countries. It's brilliant. Brilliant. He's a bigger star in Indonesia than he is in New York. But he's still a star in New York. But he's a real star in places that nobody had ever thought of doing comedy in before. It's brilliant. It's a global brand, the first time ever. And I think that comes from one of the good things that have come out of Canada, which is our official policy of multiculturalism. It supported him and his way of looking at the world. In the United States, all they really care about is what happens to the border. They don't really care about anything that happens outside that border. And only recently have they even cared about what happens in Canada. Canada's considered a down market. You try to buy an American act from an American agent, for instance, to play in Canada, you get the lowest level agent, the kid who's just out of the mailroom, because that's how

unimportant that marketplace is to them. But for Russell, Russell had a different idea. He felt that those other marketplaces were just as important, as not more important, because there are more people there. Add up the numbers. Very smart.

**Audience member:** What role have international standup comedians that came to Canada had in both the Yuk-Yuk's fabric and in standup comedy in Canada in general?

**MB:** Well, not so much now, but in the 70's and early 80's, there were a lot of American comics who found it difficult to work in the States, and had a better reception here in Canada because of the kind of material that they did. So Yuk-Yuk's actually broke people like, and when I say "broke" that doesn't mean we *broke* them or broke their spirit, that comes later. (*laughter*) It means we broke them economically and culturally. People like Steven Wright, Sam Kinison, Dice, Seinfeld. All of them were people who were considered very edgy for their times, but Canadians had no problem accepting them whatsoever. Kinison, interestingly enough, anybody here like Kinison? Yeah, to me he was the greatest of all of the guys out of that generation, and I'd say his untimely death was tragic, really tragic. We were good friends. I used to go to the States, to L.A., and look at comics. I'd look at their inventory, I'd go to the Comedy Store, which is their big comedy club there, and the manager would put on a dozen acts, and say, "These are our best guys, pick some and let's hire them and send them to Canada."

So I was there once, I guess it was about the early 80's, and I did, and I watched everybody, and everybody was really good, really competent. I can't remember who was on. I'm sure there were people who eventually got sitcoms and stuff. And then the

manager came over to me and said, “OK, the showcase is over, we just put this last guy on to clear the room while the waitresses give out the checks. Is that OK?” “Sure, I’ll stay.” And then this guy gets on, and he breaks a chair. The first thing he did, was he broke the chair onstage. And he starts ranting and raving about his ex-wife, and about marriage, and screaming that scream that looks like it’s out of the Munch painting. And I thought, “That’s the guy.” So when the manager came over to me at the end of the evening and asked, “Anyone you want to buy?” I said, “Yeah, I’ll take the last guy.” “The *last* guy?! The *last* guy? Are you kidding me?” I said, “No, I want the last guy.” The last guy came in, and was shocked that I would hire him, shocked that anybody would hire him. And I hired him too early. He wasn’t ready to headline at Yuk-Yuk’s. And he bombed. I don’t mean he just *bombed*, I mean the worst bomb you’ve ever seen in your life. On the third night, the features went from Tuesday to Saturday I think in those days, and on the Thursday night, he bombed so badly that he cleared everyone out of the house. *Everyone*. There wasn’t a single person left, and there must’ve been 150 people in the room. *Everybody* gone. That’s unheard of. Somebody’s just fallen asleep, usually, or they shat themselves, they don’t wanna walk out, I don’t know, whatever. *(laughter)* There’s always somebody. But no, no stragglers, not one.

So I go backstage, and I pull a hundred-dollar bill out of my wallet, and Sam thinks, “OK, he’s gonna give me a hundred bucks and say, ‘Get out, you’re finished for the week.’” But I gave him a hundred dollars, and I said, “Sam, this is your bonus tonight for walking absolutely everybody in the room.” *(laughter)* I said, “If you walk everybody tomorrow night, you’ll get another hundred dollars, and a hundred dollars after that, but you have to walk every single person from the room.” *(laughter)* “Otherwise, you don’t

get your bonus.” (*laughter*) And we were very tight friends after that. (*laughter*) Because I knew, or I hoped, and I’ve been wrong about others, but I knew that when you make a change in art, it sounds awful at the beginning, because people aren’t used to it. And then people embrace it later on, and it becomes beautiful. An example of that is the first production, the first time they ever played *The Rites of Spring*, the Stravinsky piece in 1913 at the Paris Opera. There was even a movie done about this. There were riots, riots at the Paris Opera, because of the atonal chord structure. I love the fact that people could riot over opera a hundred years ago. I think that’s fantastic. You can just imagine people at the Four Seasons Center now *rioting* over opera! It would just never happen. But that’s how seriously people took opera. And then, what happened? Somewhere along the way, people realized it was actually something wonderful and beautiful, and now it’s on every single repertory of every classical orchestra. Nobody would question it.

Well, the same thing was true with Kinison. The first time he did clear the house, and I got a lot of flak from my partners and other comics for hiring this guy, and if you want real flak, imagine what I had to go through when I hired him again, (*laughter*) eight months later. But something had happened in those eight months, something that I was hoping for. When he came back eight months later, he didn’t get booed off the stage. In fact, they liked him. They liked him a lot. And six months after that, when he came back again, there were standing ovations, because he’d found just the way to adjust it, to take it from something that was kind of ugly and didn’t work to something that was magical and fantastic. It’s something for you to remember when you’re doing your own work. Don’t be discouraged. It’s really lousy until it’s really great. And there’s rarely an in-between if you’re doing something really new. Harland Williams was the same way. Everybody

called him “Breslin’s Folly.” I championed him right from the beginning, even when he was taking that stupid doll and putting it head-first in the bucket of peanut butter. I saw something. I saw something in him. And sure enough, after a while, all of the sudden, again, all of the sudden, he kind of just figured out how to put those last pieces together, and everybody went, “The guy’s a genius.” So remember that when you’re doing your own work. Don’t give up.

**Audience member:** Hi, so clearly you’ve stated you were bullied when you were a kid, you got beat up in high school a lot, I’m sure...

**MB:** I was locked in a locker and left for a weekend. (*shocked gasps*) Luckily, the custodial staff was working, and they heard the plaintive banging on the side of the door.

**Audience member:** I just want to cry right now. I’m not sure I can finish my question.

**MB:** The people who did it were expelled from the school.

**Audience member:** Oh, OK, OK...

**MB:** Oh OK, that makes it good, OK... (*laughter*)

**Audience member:** No, it just ties into my question...

**MB:** “Well, you had the last laugh, that’s fine.” OK, next question please. (*laughter*)

**Audience member:** No, I’ve been...

**MB:** Thanks for your concern and compassion, by the way.

**Audience member:** If you’ve been watching the news and following it, the government wants to implement laws to help prevent bullying and things like that. I just wanted to know what your take on that was, because I’m not for bullying, that’s not what I meant...

**MB:** I don’t think laws will help, I think it begins at home. I really do. I think it begins at home, and you can bet that I will always encourage my beautiful little boy to pursue peace in every possible way, and I believe in peace in many ways. Sometimes you find yourself in a position, in a situation where there’s confrontation, and wherever you can—and I haven’t done this all my life, this is something I’ve learned, this is wisdom, not knowledge, this is not the way I would’ve answered this question thirty years ago, or twenty years ago—but wherever you can, you try to dial down the anger—in your own life, and in others’, wherever possible. But then there comes a time when you just gotta punch somebody in the nose. (*laughter*) Man, do they fuckin’ deserve it. (*laughter*) Did that answer your question?

**Audience member:** Yes. (*inaudible*)

**MB:** Well, actually, there were so many other things I alluded to in my life that probably, even if I hadn't been bullied, I probably still would be here today. There were a lot of other issues. We moved to a different school, a very fancy school, where nobody bullied you at all. They just ignored you and shut you out and shunned you if they didn't like you. But I'll take shunning every day over fists in the face, trust me.

**Audience member:** How do you feel about comedians putting their material up on the internet for people to see for free? Rick Reilly wrote an interesting article about how journalists shouldn't have blogs because you're giving away your product, and people feel similarly for comedians. How do you feel about people who put up their stuff on vlogs or Youtube?

**MB:** Well, a very good question, one I've wrestled with a lot, and especially when it first starting happening, and I think the conclusion I came to is, you don't give it *all* away, you only give away a tease. You give away enough that creates interest, and then people have to buy the rest of the product. Why anybody would put up all their material on Youtube, or why journalists would put up current stuff on the internet, is beyond me. I let any of my old columns go up on the internet as much as possible, because they're useless. Somebody already paid for them, and I'm not gonna make any money from them anymore, but they'll create interest, maybe, in people hiring me to write something else, or going to the current thing I write for, for the two papers I write for, or my books. You've gotta be careful. You know what it's sort of like? It's kind of like when, and I'm dating myself here, kind of like when musicians would put out albums, remember? And

they would release a single, and you'd listen to the single, and they'd play it ad infinitum, ad nauseum on the radio, but it would get you to go out and buy the album with the other eleven cuts that you don't hear. So you have to think about it. "What am I gonna release as a tease to get people interested so that they can then buy my product, go see my shows," that kind of thing.

**Audience member:** Part of the reason I asked my question is because you mentioned how comedy parallels how the music industry goes in some ways, and major record labels are no longer producing CD's. They said that in a year or so there would only be digital material...

**MB:** I know, I read that.

**Audience member:** Doyou think comedy's gonna go in that kind of direction, in that it'll just be consumed differently?

**MB:** Well, I do fear that what this new internet world is creating may be a whole new generation of hobbyists, where no one can make much of a living out of it. On the other hand, that's what democracy is all about. People have been screaming for a hundred years that the entertainment business should become more democratized. Well, that's exactly what's happened. But the flip side of that is, it means we all make the same amount of money regardless of whether we're super-talented or not. But I want to refer you to a book you might want to read if you're interested in this subject called *Free: The Future*

*of a Radical Price*. It's written by the guy who was the editor of *Wired*, and he deals with exactly this issue, and gives you all kinds of examples, from non-show-business models, of how it can work, like giving away...I got a good example, I think. It's like video games. You get the free version, which is really limited, but it wets your appetite. You think, "This is a cool game. I got it for free, but I want the full game with all the bells and whistles, all the levels. I'll spend the \$2.99 and put it on my handset." So that's an example of it. But he's got all kinds of stuff. Read the book, it's great, it's a great book.

*Free.*

**Audience member:** Thank you.

**MB:** I think it's out in paperback now. *(to another audience member)* Yeah.

**Audience member:** I feel like, for the women, I should ask some questions about how you've noticed the most successful women in standup, and how sex plays a role, because I know that for some of us, we're wondering if you can be too sexy or not sexy enough, and how that affects how the audience views women comics, because men don't have to deal with that whole sex thing...

**MB:** Except for Dane Cook. *(laughter)* He's so sexy! *(laughter)* The way he takes material that's not his is so sexy... *(laughter)* Because you know, *To Catch a Thief*, Cary Grant, he's very sexy! I guess that was his thought. OK, but I'll go with you on what you're saying, of course. I would say that, the Nicole Arbour situation, are you familiar

with Nicole Arbour? Nicole Arbour is a Canadian standup who now lives in the States, and her whole thing is “The Sexiest Comic.” Well, first of all, you should never call yourself sexy. That’s kind of icky, no matter what. Let others call you sexy, but you should never call yourself sexy. But we’ll let that go for a minute. I think that you should never distract from your material. So you should be attractive enough to look at, but not so attractive that people are going, “Nice knees.” (*laughter*) Because you’re trying to listen to what somebody has to say. Sarah Silverman has it right. She’s kind of sexy-cute, in the right way. She’s not trying to deny her attractiveness, but it’s not the subject matter of her being onstage.

But interestingly, you want to talk about women comics, this is so much the age of feminine comedy. Look, was *Bridesmaids* not the best comedy of the year? And I’m so glad Kristen Wiig just brought what she could bring, because I’ve been saying for years that Kristen Wiig is the Carol Burnett of our generation, or your generation. And she didn’t just do a good movie, she hit a home run with that thing. And Tina Fey? Is Tina Fey not great? And Amy Poehler, creating *Parks and Recreation*? And Sarah Silverman I think is the most interesting standup working today, even more interesting than Louis C.K. So it’s a good era for women comics. There are more now than ever before, just working comics. But something you have to be aware of—what is your name?

**Audience member:** Katherine.

**MB:** Katherine. OK. When you graduate, do you wanna be a standup, or a sketch comic?  
Have you figured it out yet?

**Audience member:** I haven't figured it out yet.

**MB:** OK. But let's say you wanted to be a standup comic. It is still tough for a woman to be a standup comic today, not because the audiences sit there and say, in their minds, "Take off your clothes," or because the audiences won't accept jokes from a woman. It's just really a lonely life to be a standup, and women are not socialized towards loneliness in the way that men are. I grew up with this kind of romanticizing the loner anti-hero misfit kind of thing, this whole kind of Jack Kerouac guy on the road, pedal to the metal, "I'm alone." And it's very romantic, but women, they're not socialized that way, and in fact I defy you to find one woman writer who writes about how wonderful that is. Now, as a sketch comic, it's different. You're in a community, and women, I think, are socialized towards community. Now, all of these sociological observations, they always break down, because there are always people who are vanguardists. I worked with one of the greatest vanguardists ever in female comedy, and that of course is Joan Rivers. She wrote the book, she published the book, she distributed the book. She was a real pioneer in every way, even then. You can only imagine, if it's hard now, how hard it was for her then. But it is a lonely life, to be a standup, and that's even tougher for a woman. *(to audience member)* Yeah.

**Audience member:** *(inaudible)*

**MB:** That's an impossible question, because it's like asking me what kind of music I like, and it depends on what mood I'm in. I have a panoply. I have a list of people that I love and adore, and have since childhood, that goes anywhere to Chaplin to Jack Benny, right through to Louis C.K. right now, a bunch of Canadian comics I adore. But if I had to pick one person who I think is the most important person for me in standup, and my development in comedy, it's Woody Allen. Period. End of story, no argument, no one comes close. Chaplin in the first half of the twentieth century, Woody Allen in the second half. No argument, no one comes close. No one mastered all the different forms of comedy. He did standup, he did television comedy, he certainly did movies. And he brought an intellectual credibility to his comedy for the masses. Now, Mort Sahl did the same thing, but Mort Sahl was always a refined taste. Only a few people really got Mort Sahl, intellectuals, but you don't have to be an intellectual to appreciate Woody Allen's Freud jokes in his work. Yeah, Woody Allen, the best. Did you see, PBS did a three-and-a-half hour, two-part documentary on Woody Allen. If you didn't see it, it'll probably be released on DVD soon. Make sure you see it, it's fantastic. A wonderful time capsule, and he says a lot of important and interesting things about comedy. Now we're going, now we're getting going, just when we have to end.

**Audience member:** Uh, first thing, I saw you reviewed your own audio book in *Metro*, I thought that was pretty funny. *(laughter)*

**MB:** And you know why it happened? Because they have so few writers. *(laughter)* The editor, who used to work here at Humber, said, “Mark, I want to help push your book, but I don’t have anybody to assign it to. Could you review your own book?” And I said, “Yeah, OK, I’ll try to turn that into something funny.”

**Audience member:** Also, you were saying how there were policemen at the back of Yuk-Yuk’s, making sure there wasn’t anything too revolutionary being done. What was the most memorable situation of that happening?

**MB:** Chas Lawther smoked a joint onstage in 1979, and described it as it was happening. Everybody thought it was oregano, but he passed it around, and they realized it wasn’t. *(laughter)* The punchline of it was, which he had no idea where he was going with it, was that he got so stoned he couldn’t do his act, *(laughter)* which I think kind of sums up my position on drugs onstage. Not really helpful.

**Audience member:** Did you try it?

**MB:** I tried everything when I was performing, like a scientist, like James, what was the name...Joe, help me out here, the guy who wrote all about... it wasn’t Henry James, it was the other James, his brother...yes, it was William James, who, in the Victorian era, would do laudanum or opium and then sit down and write about it. I did the same thing with every drug onstage to see what would happen, and in no case did any of them make me any better. In fact, it usually made me worse, because what drugs often do is take

stuff from the subconscious and bring it to the conscious, and so you find out you're saying, "Hey, how's everybody tonight? I don't care, I don't even care about how they are. Hey look, that girl's wearing green, I like green, green's the colour of..." It just ruins the timing, the flow, so if you get tempted, like, "Hey man, let's get high and do a set," I think you'll find it isn't funny to anybody but you. That's not my, "Don't do drugs, kids" rap. I'm speaking as a scientist there, (*laughter*), not as a moralist.

**Audience member:** You were saying you like seeing acts that do really different and interesting stuff. Do you see a lot of that stuff in the Toronto local scene right now, and if so, by who?

**MB:** Yeah, sure. I hate naming names because then the names I don't name will think, "Oh, Mark doesn't think much of my act." But you know, we have a development program. I prefer to answer it this way. In our development program, there are all these amateurs floating around the scene, floating around the city, right? Hundreds of them. And Yuk-Yuk's doesn't have the ability to choose everybody. So there are about eight or nine that we put on what we call a development program. And I'd like to think that each of those eight or nine people who we have on that program right now are people who might push the envelope, not revolutionize necessarily, but just push it a little bit in terms of what can you say onstage, what should you say onstage, what is being said onstage.

Guys, I gotta tell you, sometimes I come down to the Humber nights, and I get really bored of listening to you talk about how you got drunk the night before, and you think that's so funny. I hate to tell you this, but others have been there. They got there

before you. There's not really much new to say about that. You are all as individual as your fingerprint. And what you should be doing is finding out, and this takes a certain kind of self-knowledge and a certain amount of narcissism, I guess, to know what that special thing is. That's what you should be talking about. The jokes that last are jokes that no one else could do but you. No one else could do but you. I'm not putting anybody down for trying easy stuff out in the beginning stages of your work. Of course, we all do that. But at some point, you gotta break away from "I got so drunk last night" stories, because they're just not that interesting.

**Audience member:** Um...

**MB:** Better be good! It's the last question.

**Audience member:** OK, I was just wondering, because when you were talking about how on amateur night, the kids, a lot of the time, will just talk about getting drunk, because a lot of us in the program, not me, I'm very old and wise, (*laughter*) but a lot of people who come into the program are fresh out of high school, and an argument I've had with a lot of people about this program is that they think, like a lot of my friends think, that people shouldn't be allowed into the program until they're older and have had some life experience so that they have more to talk about onstage. Do you think that's important and relevant to our standup material?

**MB:** I think life (experience) is absolutely crucial. I think life experience is really crucial in terms of standup, but I don't think that just because you're 18 years old, it means you can't have life experiences. When I was 18, I'd already been to Europe, I'd had a failed relationship with a countess. I'd already been arrested twice for political activity in the 60's. Come on. You're not children. Stop acting like children. You don't have to be a child if you don't want to be. You can be as old as you want to be. When I was four, I tried to seduce a seventeen year old girl. *(laughter)* And I got pretty close. *(laughter)* I got pretty close. Rita Kernerman. I still remember her name. She was beautiful. She was beautiful, but she rejected me. You know why? Because I was four. *(laughter)* She was just a fuckin' ageist, in the end. *(laughter)* You know that? OK, well thanks very much. *(applause)*

**AC:** Thanks very much, Mark.

**MB:** Next semester...how many people are in second year? I will be meeting with anybody who wants to meet with me in second year on Monday afternoons. We'll spend a nice 45 minutes together. It's not life we're gonna get to know each other intimately, but at least it's a start. I love people, I wouldn't be in this business if I didn't love people. I love comics, I love the struggle, I love the creative arc, and I love to be part of it, and I want to help you whatever way I can. OK, thanks! *(applause)*

