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The Origin of the term ‘Stand-Up Comedy’

As I have noted in both editions of my book *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy*, the origins of the term ‘stand-up comedy’ (as well as the related terms ‘stand-up comic’ and ‘stand-up comedian’) are somewhat obscure. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is still citing the earliest usage of ‘*stand-up comic* (also *comedian*)’ from an article published in *The Listener* on 11 August 1966. I first became aware of the comparative lateness of the term in 2000, when I read John Limon’s book *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, which states, ‘There was stand-up comedy before 1966, but that is when the term came into existence’, giving the OED as one of the sources for this (2000: 7).

Instantly, the claim range false. If 11 August 1966 really was the first use, that would put it eight days after the death of Lenny Bruce, meaning that this icon of stand-up comedy would never have used the term himself. I quickly discovered an earlier use in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, published in 1961, which gives a definition of the adjective ‘stand-up’ as: ‘[P]erformed in or requiring a standing erect position <*stand-up* lunch> <*stand-up* bar> <*stand-up* comedy act> <*stand-up* boxing stance>’. Since then, I have started to look for earlier uses, and I am clearly not the only one doing so. The OED has published draft additions for ‘Stand-up’ (as a standalone term referring to ‘Stand-up comedy as a genre’ or ‘a piece of stand-up comedy’), ‘A stand-up comedian’ and ‘**stand-up comedy** *n.*’, giving the earliest usages as 1956, 1958, and 1952 respectively.

Recently, I have been scouring the Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive and have managed to find some earlier usages. The earliest term seems to be *stand-up comic* – in a review of a show at Slapsy Maxie’s in Los Angeles, dating from 23 June 1948: ‘When not at his trade of stand-up comic, [Lou] Holtz is ringmaster of the floor show.’ (*Variety* 1948) *Stand-up comedian* is slightly younger, not occurring until 12 April 1950: ‘Male talent getting the Columbia buildup include Steve Allen, a so-called “standup” comedian who has been groomed for the big time on the Pacific Coast Network’ (*Variety* 1950).

The fact that this article contracts stand-up to ‘standup’ (just as it contracts build up to ‘buildup’) throws up the issue of variant forms. We already have *stand-up comic*, *comedian* and *comedy* to consider, but variant spellings throw further confusion into the mix. Thus we might encounter *stand-up*, *standup* or *stand up*, and any of these might or might not be encased in double inverted commas. In fact, the use of inverted commas in the quote above might suggest that the term “standup” comedian was comparatively new and novel, particular given that it is preceded by the words ‘so-called’, and that the contracted term buildup did not seem to require them.

The earliest non-contracted version of *stand up comedian* to be found in the Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive is from 10 January 1951, and again relates to Steve Allen: ‘One could have wished that, for the occasion, the “Talent Scout” format of bringing on the semi-pro performers could have been tossed out of the window to permit Allen greater latitude

as a “stand up” comedian in his own right.’ (*Variety* 1951) The hyphenated version does not appear until 1954: ‘Comic Dave Barry’s return after eight months is distinguished by his addition of new material, notably a routine titled “Amazing America” in which the stand-up comedian cleverly treats plebeian topics with refreshing humor.’ (*Variety* 1954)

As for *stand-up comedy*, I have not managed to better the earliest usage given in the draft additions to the *OED*, which quote an article from the *Cedar Rapids Tribune* dating from 27 March 1952: ‘Frank Fontaine has been signed for a new standup comedy series.’ However, I have managed to find an early use of the hyphenated form from the following May: ‘[Bob] Hope’s initial stand-up comedy session was one of his best this year.’ (*Variety* 1953)

What does become clear is that the term *stand-up* being used to define a style of comic performance seems to be of American origin. After its first occurrence in 1948, it was common in the American trade press throughout the 1950s. By contrast, it did not appear in the British trade press until the following decade. Before this point, what we would call stand-up comedians were known as *front cloth comics*, referring to the staging in variety theatres, in which performers like Max Miller would do their turns in front of the stage cloth hung closest to the front of the stage (Double 2012: 14, 24)

In the UK trade press, *stand-up comedian* appears first, in an article in *The Stage* dating from 16 March 1961: ‘Michael Roxy, in a solo spot, proved to be a quickfire stand-up comedian with a banjo solo, and was an excellent compère in the give-away audience participation spot.’ *Stand-up comic* followed three years later in 1964, in a review which perceptively noted that, ‘A slow audience is always a burden to a stand-up comic’ (*The Stage* 1964). *Stand-up comedy* does not occur until 1967 – 15 years after the term cropped up in the *Cedar Rapids Tribune* – in a review of a Tommy Cooper TV show: ‘It was an unusual mixture of sketches, stand-up comedy and an ample dose of magic’ (*The Stage* 1967). In each case, the contracted form *standup* comes later in the UK, whether applied to comic, comedian or comedy.

In both America and Britain, stand-up seems to appear in the trade press before being used in more general newspapers, perhaps suggesting that it originated as a jargon term within the entertainment industry and subsequently spread to more everyday parlance. A single issue of the *New York Times* gives us early occurrences of ‘stand-up comedy’ (1954a) and ‘stand-up comic’ (1954b). Less than a year later, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* uses the term “stand up” comedian’ (1955). Meanwhile in the UK, *The Guardian* was early to use the terms ‘stand-up comedy’ (1967) and ‘stand-up comic’ (1964), the latter being used in an article about the humour of John F Kennedy, describing it as ‘at times in the yarn-telling tradition of Lincoln, and at times in the modern tradition of the stand-up comic’. If referring to stand-up as ‘modern’ suggests that the form was seen as a recent invention, *The Times*’ early use of ‘stand up comedian’ (1963) suggests otherwise, describing Pat Henry as ‘a relaxed, rather old-fashioned stand up comedian from America’.

Tantalisingly, I have managed to find a usage of the term *stand up* in relation to comic performance that is significantly earlier than any other, on either side of the Atlantic. A review of a concert at the Horse Shoe Hotel, published by *The Stage* as early as April 1911, raves about the talents of Miss Nellie Perrier: ‘Not only did she render “stand up” comic ditties in a *chic* and charming manner, but she also proved herself to be a capable pianist whilst singing several songs to her own accompaniment.’

Clearly, Perrier was performing comic song rather than the comic speech that we associate with stand-up comedy, but it should be noted that today’s comedians evolved from the comic singers of music hall and vaudeville (Double 2014: 23-48). It may be that the term ‘stand up’ is being used here merely to distinguish songs sung standing up, as opposed to those sung seated at the piano, but the inverted commas perhaps hint that the term *stand up* was being used more widely to denote a different way of performing songs – just as the same style of punctuation was used to welcome in the comparatively new term “stand up” comedian in America in the early 1950s. If so, the “‘stand up” comic ditties’ of early Twentieth Century Britain might just be the ancestors of the routines performed by ‘stand-up comic’ Lou Holtz at Slapsy Maxie’s in 1948, thus give us the earliest origin of the term.

You may consider this short article a challenge. I will be delighted if others manage to find earlier usages.

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New York Times (1954a), ‘News and Notes from the Television and radio Studios’, 18 April: X9.

New York Times (1954b), ‘TV’s No. 1 Second Comedian’, 18 April: SM19.

The Guardian (1964), ‘The once and future President’, 25 November: 20.

The Guardian (1967), ‘Briefing: A sad and laughing life’, 19 March: 23.

The Stage (1911), ‘Concert and Entertainment Notes’, 6 April: 17.

The Stage (1961), ‘Hadleigh Kingsway’, 16 March: 5.

The Stage (1964), ‘Bold as Brass’, 9 April: 12.

The Stage (1967), ‘Excellent – the right mixture for Tommy’, 5 January: 20.

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Variety (1948), ‘Night Club Reviews’, 23 June: 38.

Variety (1950), 'CBS Boosting Its Comedy Talent With Summer Buildup of Lesser Names', 12 April: 27.

Variety (1951), 'Treat Him Right', 10 January: 29.

Variety (1953), 'Television Followup Comment', 27 May: 26.

Variety (1954), 'Dave Barry', 8 May: 11.