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**OPERATION IRIS: How Commercialisation Has
Impacted Creativity Within British Stand-Up Comedy**

By
Ashley Steven Wassell

Submitted in fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts

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University of Kent

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I ended my undergraduate research project's acknowledgements by thanking my then-girlfriend for her continued love and support. Nearly two years of marriage have passed, she is still as loving, supportive, and now six months pregnant. Thanks Miss. I wouldn't want to do life with anyone else.

¹ The West Midlands spelling, rather than the American version.

Abstract

In December 1993, Rob Newman and David Baddiel became the first comedy act to perform at Wembley Arena as part of a live tour. In response to the perceived glamour of this event and the adulation that several artists received during this time, journalists declared that comedy had become 'the new rock 'n' roll'. However, below the surface something had changed within stand-up comedy and over time, management companies took a firmer grip of the industry, controlling the careers of their artists and the stand-up output of mainstream broadcasters.

An increase in the television exposure that high-profile artists now receive has created a pressure to remain fresh with new material for each appearance. As a consequence, many performers use third-party writers. What is now a common and accepted practice, is at odds with the ethos that alternative comedy stood for, where the artist was the writer, performer and director.

Through research that encompasses newspaper articles, autobiography and private interviews, this thesis asks: How has commercialisation impacted creativity within British stand-up? After establishing how the impact is felt by artists on the lowest rungs of the 'career ladder', I present a manifesto, outlining the principles that should be adhered to if stand-up is to become exciting once more.

Who's who?

Throughout this thesis, I refer to private interviews with the practitioners listed below. For others who may only appear in one or two quotes, I shall explain why I have chosen to gather their thoughts in the text.

Richard Herring: Stand-up, writer, podcaster, star of the self-playing Snooker circuit. Herring rose to fame as one half of *Lee and Herring*, writing and performing in several series of *Fist of Fun* and *This Morning With Richard Not Judy* during the 1990s, before writing two series of *Time Gentlemen Please* with Al Murray.

Stewart Lee: Stand-up, writer, director and the other half of *Lee and Herring*, Lee was listed by *The Times* as the 'greatest living stand-up' in 2018 and continues to fill theatres throughout the UK. He is arguably the highest-profile stand-up to operate outside of the big management companies within the industry.

Richard Marsh: Marsh's debut play *The Big Night In* has been performed by theatre groups as far away as India, whilst *The Road To Nowhere* was published in 2020. When he isn't writing, he is usually recording one of his podcasts: *Review To A Kill* and *SDFF Presents...*

Will Preston: Will has been performing stand-up since 2016 across the U.K and U.S. He is a regular at the top comedy clubs on the London scene. Will is also the host of the podcast *Gaming For Laughs* and founder of Comedy Cabin Comedy Club.

Graham Rice: 'Have puns, will travel' has been the motto of Rice since his first stand-up performance in 2017. After serving-up a barrage of one-liners across the south coast, Rice has recently relocated to Scotland. His *Emergency Mixtape Podcast* creates a playlist with a guest to cover a random eventuality.

Drew Taylor: Drew is building a reputation performing at some of the biggest clubs in Britain such as Hot Water, Frog and Bucket and Glee Club. In addition to stand-up comedy, Drew is also an experienced MC/Ring Announcer for MMA, Boxing and other sporting events.

Aaron White: A Silent comedy performer, stand-up comedian and expert on Edwardian antiques, White currently lives in Japan whilst writing for a menswear magazine.

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Chapter One: What If There Were No Punchlines?

'Before the show commences, I politely ask that you please turn off all mobile phones... I less politely ask that you turn off your fucking phones and fucking keep them turned off'.

Ben Elton, Sunday 15th September 2019
The Lights – Andover.

The announcement above² was not how I expected a performance by a major figure in my own comedy upbringing to begin, but this was no ordinary performance. Fifteen years had passed since his last stand-up tour and following a career that has seen him become an actor; television host; author; director and playwright, the opportunity to see Ben Elton in a venue that seats less than 250 was too good to miss.

The show was a work in progress (WIP) performance, preparation for what would become his *'Live 2019'* tour, taking him to almost 50 venues across the UK and Ireland. The evening in question came four days prior to my enrolment in a postgraduate programme of research, where I planned to look into further questions raised by my undergraduate dissertation *'The New Rock 'n' Roll'*. In that essay, I analysed changes in the stand-up comedy industry from 1990 to 1993 when Rob Newman and David Baddiel became the first act to include the 12,500 capacity Wembley Arena on their tour itinerary. The maximum word count of 10,000 proved problematic as each line of enquiry opened another, interviewees Stewart Lee and Richard Herring suggested areas of research that I'd not considered and providing sufficient historical context for that time period could have multiplied the maximum word count several times over.

² I must stress that all quotes used from this performance were jotted down by me once I was back in my car. There may be words missing or in an incorrect order, but they are as close to verbatim as possible, given the unrecorded nature of the material.

As I left the venue, topics for my research project came to mind and before turning the key in the ignition, I searched my car to find a means of writing down the opening line of the show. A quick search of my pockets revealed that the only paper I had was the 'what's on' guide for the venue and I noticed something very odd: All of the upcoming comedy events were promoted using the headline 'As seen on...' followed by a list of television credits ranging from the well-established *Live at the Apollo* (2004-) and *Mock The Week* (2005-) to obscurer choices like Comedy Central's *The Chris Ramsay Show* (2017-2018). Even veteran stand-up Mark Watson's marketing team used: 'Cluster-bombed with yoghurt on Taskmaster, half-killed on Bear Grylls' Celebrity Island, Watson returns to what he's best at: being indoors' (Bristol Old Vic, 2019), as opening line of the press release promoting his tour *The Infinite Show*.

Later that night, I came across an online advertisement for Ed Byrne's 2019-2021 tour '*If I'm Honest...*'. Above his name were the words 'AS SEEN ON LIVE AT THE APOLLO, MOCK THE WEEK & TOP GEAR'. Whilst I understood the use of 'supporting evidence' to generate interest in an act who is not a household name, Byrne was almost 25 years into his career, nominated for the *Perrier*³ in 1998, has released multiple live DVDs and voiced radio and television commercials. I began to wonder the extent to which televised comedy now influences the tastes and expectations of live audiences and what that means for more niche acts.

'Unsuccessful beyond our wildest dreams...'

This came as I was questioning my own creative process, approximately 70 gigs into life as a stand-up. For much of my twenties, I toured as the singer and guitarist of a band and through a combination of hard work, talent and dedication we became unsuccessful beyond our wildest

³ I discuss the Perrier comedy award in chapter three.

dreams. I'd felt increasingly limited by the collaborative process within a group and the autonomy and immediacy of stand-up appealed greatly.

I felt liberated by the prospect of not worrying about bandmates, merchandise sales and promoters who could never understand why so few turned up to a gig that they had told nobody about. In a final act of bravery⁴ we launched our new CD⁵ in front of roughly 3000 people in the natural amphitheatre of Southsea's⁶ Bandstand. During the opening act, I noticed that the DJs broadcasting the show live on radio had been instructed to talk between songs, eliminating the possibility of obscenities making the airwaves.

We played 4 songs from a set list of 9, talking between each song for longer every time. With seemingly little to think, let alone say, the DJs admitted defeat in their quest to fill time and began promoting upcoming events in the city. The idea that the audience at home felt confused and the looks I received from the DJs only encouraged the anarchist within me. We didn't sell 3000 CDs that afternoon and we didn't become the next Killers, or even the next Boy Kill Boy.⁷ I longed for an artform that welcomed innovation, enabled me to take risks, be an individual and also embraced spontaneity. As I walked to the dressing room,⁸ I knew that music was no longer my motivation to be on stage.

Having already performed to audiences ranging in numbers from three⁹ to thousands,¹⁰ I entered stand-up without some of the concerns or difficulties that others may have. Booking stage-time

⁴ *Stupidity.

⁵ Small polycarbonate reminders of a time when artists could monetise their creativity.

⁶ You'll find it between Portsmouth and the Solent.

⁷ Overlooked by history during that glut of British guitar/indie thing that happened in the mid 00's. I definitely recommend checking them out.

⁸ A badly erected marquee with coned off areas for each band and a table of August-temperature cans of Carling in the middle.

⁹ Dublin Castle, Camden. One of whom was my Dad, another was an elderly Rastafarian man who chose what we felt was our best song, to fell asleep by the sound-desk. The third? Soundman.

¹⁰ They weren't there to see us, who the ticket called: 'Plus Special Guests'.

wasn't an issue and being on stage wasn't a problem either, I just needed material, gigs, and the learning process could begin.

My stand-up persona has evolved dramatically since my first ten-minute spot. Initially I wrote observational comedy, trying to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. I found little fulfilment in 'sharing' the joke with the audience, every act on the bill appeared to be doing the same thing and I felt like an entertainer in a holiday camp. I began constructing a persona that was a caricature of myself at my most unfulfilled, working in one of the many temporary call centre jobs¹¹ that funded my next money losing venture in music.

This act developed well, though I couldn't help noticing that when on a bill with five or six other open spots, most or all would perform gentle material about a limited range of subjects. As a result, my presence was jarring, audiences struggled to adapt to confrontation rather than conversation. I even considered introducing an element of burlesque into the act to soften the abrasive nature of the material, walking on stage as if I'd just entered my flat after work, gradually taking off my suit and getting changed as I performed. The incongruity of someone 'stripping', only to get dressed again appealed to me.

I then chose to encompass the anger and frustration of an embittered musician, who believed he should have become a lot more famous than he was. I added comedy songs, demonstrating why I didn't make the big time with unsuitable subject matter performed as up-tempo pop songs. This persona received mixed reactions from the audience, those who 'got it', completely loved it, but those who didn't, barely raised a smile.

¹¹ Only I considered them to be temporary, as each disciplinary hearing uncovered.

I concluded that the act felt too 'written' and although I have around 25 different 'scripts' that could fill anywhere from five to twenty minutes, I decided to resort to these only when completely necessary. I instantly felt more comfortable going on stage and telling a story about the last time I was in that town/city or finding an object/picture/poster at the venue and seeing where it took me, inevitably coming back to why I hadn't become a rock star and ending with whichever song I felt that the audience would enjoy most.

I had assumed that the freedom of stand-up would allow the space to improvise and see where the limits to my material were. I became disillusioned when fellow stand-ups were appearing at new material nights, doing the same, very tight ten-minute routine that they had performed 18 months earlier when we had shared a stage elsewhere. Why would they do this? Was it only to impress a promoter to get a paid slot? If so, this meant that there were some who viewed stand-up as a purely commercial venture.

Transcripts of my own stand-up performances are included between chapters and in chronological order. This is informed by Norman K. Denzin's 'Personal Experience Narratives' in *Interpretive Biography* (1989:43), an approach that lies somewhere between 'Ethnographic Realist' and 'Cultural Phenomenologist' in Denzin's *Interpretive Ethnography* (1997:201). The transcripts demonstrate changes in my own creative process, persona and attitude, in line with the information presented in each chapter. These changes pre-empt the message of chapter six. Influenced by Stewart Lee's writing, I have added footnotes to my own material to offer context; discuss how the material evolved; or explain how the material is related to the chapter it precedes or follows.

For a number of years, there had been rumours about the extent to which third party writers were being used by artists. Merging my reflections following the Ben Elton live show and my own experiences as a performer, I decided that my research should tackle a very important issue: **How**

has commercialisation impacted creativity within British stand-up comedy? In finding answers to that question, I should also offer a solution: **What should stand-up strive to be?**

‘The show you’re watching could only ever have happened here and now...’

To understand why creativity could be impacted by commercialisation, it is important to explain both the theory behind humour (what makes something ‘funny’) and also the type of commercialisation that has stand-up has been a victim/beneficiary of - after all, a gig featuring five unknown stand-ups with a £2.00 ticket price is an example of commercialisation.

Although comedy itself has been theorised upon for millennia,¹² stand-up is in the relatively early stages of being theorised upon. As a result, throughout this thesis I will refer to traditional comic theory and introduce modern theories on stand-up. Whilst the role and function of a stand-up comedian is discussed throughout this thesis, it is important to consider comedy theory that is applicable to stand-up. Mary Douglas explains the role of the ‘joker’: ‘He appears to be a privileged person who can say certain things in a certain way which confers immunity’ (1975:107). When discussing the nature of humour, Noel Carroll describes comic amusement as an emotional state: ‘Emotions are appraisals directed at particular objects that are assessed in the light of certain criteria of appropriateness and which cause certain phenomenological and/or physiological states in the subject undergoing emotion’ (2014:5).

Carroll explains: ‘The leading theories of that which engenders comic amusement are the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, the release theory, the play theory and the dispositional theory’ (2014:8). Whilst it could be argued that all comedy can be interpreted using one or more these theories, commercialisation will impact some more than others. The influence of superiority and

¹² Plato and Aristotle both theorised on Superiority Theory over 2000 years ago. What is Superiority Theory? Read on...

release theories are largely unaffected in the current climate, as many stand-ups offer examples of both. In their simplest form, superiority theory informs humour that is at the expense of a target and release theory explains humour as an energy which builds up and is resolved at the point that a punchline or catchphrase is delivered.

The influence of play, incongruity and dispositional theories are heavily impacted by the commercialised nature of stand-up. As I will refer to these throughout later chapters, it is important to offer a brief overview, related to stand-up specific examples.

Incongruity Theory

Carroll writes: 'Incongruity is a comparative notion. It presupposes that something is discordant with something else. With respect to comic amusement, that something else is how the world is or should be' (2014:18). This suggests that amusement is created by the deviation from an expected outcome. Whilst it can be argued that all jokes contain an element of incongruity or suspension of belief, there are artists whose material ventures towards the incongruity of surrealism, a good example of the theory in practice.

Philosopher George Santayana believed that incongruity alone could not be enjoyed: 'The comic accident falsifies the nature between us, starts a wrong analogy in the mind, a suggestion that cannot be carried out' (1896:248). In stand-up, incongruity is evident in the material of performers such as Bill Bailey, who during *Cosmic Jam* (1996) explained the influence of cockney music¹³ on classical music. That alone is an incongruous notion (the incorrect chronology), Bailey then lifts the lid on his piano adding to the incongruity as it rises in two sections, resembling the wings of a

¹³ Cockney music, or 'Rockney' was a style of music made famous by artists such as Chas and Dave, merging ragtime, rock n roll and the cockney accent. Whilst I'm on the subject, 'Aint No Pleasing You' being kept off the number one spot by Bucks Fizz's 'My Camera Never Lies' proves that not everyone should be given the vote...

spaceship. It is also important to note that incongruity is not limited to material, as incongruous 'happenings' during a performance can also cause humour, as discussed in chapter six.

Play Theory

Carroll explains his greater focus on incongruity theory (2014:8) and in a similar vein, I have dedicated more space to discuss play theory. I believe play should be an integral part of the creative process, but its influence and application is under the greatest threat in a highly commercialised industry. It is difficult for artists to experiment with material and form in the highly prescriptive industry that currently exists, where performers are all working towards shows of similar length and style. There is a lack of freedom to 'fail', as aside from one or two very niche nights,¹⁴ new material gigs have increasingly become free to view, badly advertised and poorly attended gigs, where performers try out new material in front of the other acts on the bill and one or two people who were in the pub already. This is explored in detail during chapters four, five and six.

The correlation between humour and play is proven by exchanges between friends, colloquially referred to as 'banter', described by Carroll: 'Much, if not most, humour is indulged in moments of relaxation and leisure, indeed, riffing or joshing with one's friends, family, and associates is itself a form of relaxation'. (2014:42). Author Michael Rosen defines play as: 'trial and error with no fear of failure' (2019:14). The ability to take risks in general play is important, though it is vital within comedy. The effect of humour and play on the mental state was explored by Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* (Question 168) suggested play as a 'remedy':

The remedy for weariness of soul lies in slackening the tension of mental study and taking some pleasure... Those words and deeds in which nothing is sought beyond the soul's pleasure are called playful or humorous, and it is necessary to make use of them at times for solace of the soul. (2a2ae, Q. 168, Art. 2)

¹⁴ ACMS is discussed later...

Johan Huizinga makes an important distinction between authentic play, and play to 'order':

First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be a forcible imitation of it. By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of natural process. (1949:7)

In suggesting that play to order does not represent true play, Huizinga's comments could be interpreted that improvisation 'games' are not a true reflection of play theory in practice.

Author Michael Rosen defines play as: 'trial and error with no fear of failure' (2019:14). The ability to take risks in general play is important, though it is vital within comedy. Carroll believes that play can be used in conjunction with other theories of comedy: 'Perhaps elements of the play theory can be incorporated in broader theories of comic amusement along with elements of some of the other theories of humour' (2014:43). Whilst the act of play itself is not necessarily funny, within stand-up the freedom it creates can lead to comic ideas and situations.

Michael McIntyre attempted to merge his playful, improvising persona with his writing process, quite early on in his career: 'I was basically improvising and riffing [...] on my own, in front of my computer' (2011:331). Ross Noble acknowledges the reason that he allows his own playfulness to influence his live work:

I think what I try and do is do the show that I would want to see if I went to see somebody live. I like to keep it interesting for the audience, and I like to keep it interesting for myself. I'm naturally playful in the way I approach life, and that's what I try to bring to the show. (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2014)

As a performer, I would consider myself to be influenced heavily by play theory, and I understand the desire to explore where spontaneous suggestions or happenings take me. Something Tony Allen refers to as addressing the 'now' (2002:28), a vital role of the stand-up. This is evident in the reaction to jokes about a venue, an audience member or something unique to the gig. Material created in the moment is not necessarily 'funnier' than the planned material, but often generates a

greater response because the audience feels that the joke is just for them, a shared experience between performer and audience, that can only exist in that space and at that time.¹⁵

Dispositional Theory is that humour causes a reaction in people who want to laugh, or whose mindset prepares them for amusement. It is likely to be found working in conjunction with another theory as it is the only one of the five that focusses solely on the mindset of the audience, rather than actions of the performer. Carroll highlights this by stating: 'it does not [...] specify anything about the structure of the intentional object of comic amusement' (2014:45).

Whilst it doesn't necessarily influence material, this theory is vital in creating the right setting for comedy. For this reason, sitcoms and chat show recordings will often have 'warm-up' men/women whose role is to get the studio audience relaxed and in the habit of laughing, so that once the cameras are rolling, reactions are louder. Many big names from stand-up have filled this role including Peter Kay, who recalls: 'You need a court jester to alleviate the boredom because television can be deceptive, even a simple half-hour show can take up to three hours to record' (2006:97-98). This is an important point; the recording process of television shows is discussed in chapter four. Furthermore, the relationship between the role of compere/MC and dispositional theory is highlighted within chapter five.

Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America (2000) was an early example of writing on stand-up theory. Author John Limon explains the role of the audience: 'Audiences turn their (the performer's) jokes into jokes, as if the comedian had not quite thought or expressed a joke until the audience thinks or expresses it' (2000:13). In chapter six, my manifesto discusses the role of the audience further.

¹⁵ The theory will be explored in chapter six where I discuss the need for material to be generated through play, experimentation, or as Ross Noble suggests, by 'smashing ideas together' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2014).

Sigmund Freud discusses how a child's development and increasing awareness of social conformity often results in an unwillingness to engage in 'liberated nonsense':

The power of criticism has increased so greatly in the later part of childhood and in the period of learning which extends over puberty that the pleasure in "liberated nonsense" only seldom dares to show itself directly. One does not venture to say anything absurd. But the characteristic tendency of boys to do absurd or silly things seems to me to be directly derived from the pleasure in nonsense [...] Nor, later on, does the University student cease these demonstrations against the compulsion of logic and reality, the dominance of which, however, he feels growing ever more intolerant and unrestricted. A large amount of students "rags" are a part of this reaction [...] the student tries to rescue his pleasure in freedom of thinking, of which he is being more and more deprived by the schooling of academic instruction.' (1976:175-76)

At face-value this appears to be an example of play or incongruity theory, using terms such as 'freedom of thinking' and 'absurd or silly things'. However, this is an example of play, incongruity and dispositional theories working in conjunction with each other. 'Demonstrations against the compulsion of logic and reality' offers a succinct description of incongruity. Playful acts and childish humour are deemed too risky by the adolescent, fearing they may draw criticism. This highlights that in order for humour to occur, the correct environment and mindset must be prepared, as per dispositional theory. John Cleese spoke of a similar concept to Freud when recently interviewed by LBC: 'All kids know how to play and as we get older, it tends to get educated out of us' (Cleese, 2020).

'Headed for a climax...'

Whilst broader comedy theory can be applied to stand-up, very few stand-ups have discussed the theory behind their practice in depth. Stewart Lee's *How I Escaped My Certain Fate* (2010) contains footnotes to critique and contextualise his own live performances. Steve Martin also analyses the theory behind his practice in *Born Standing Up* (2007). In discussing their work they offer stand-up specific examples of theory in practice, such as Lee's description of the release of energy when his audience 'got' the joke: 'the laugh would come like a great wave of relief as people in the room

realised I was working towards some kind of point, rather than being gratuitously offensive’ (2010i:50).

Martin explains his own exploration of release theory and to what extent he could control a room with tension:

What if there were no punch lines? What if there were no indicators? What if I created tension and never released it? What if I headed for a climax, but all I delivered was an anti-climax? What would the audience do with all that tension? Theoretically it would have to come sometime. (2007:111)

During the past twenty years, a number of ‘how to...’ guides have been published, aimed at giving a reader the tools to become a stand-up, such as Logan Murray’s *Be A Great Stand-Up* (2007). It could be argued that by discussing persona, writing material and performing techniques, these offer (though somewhat informal) theories on stand-up. Chris Head’s *A Directors Guide To The Art Of Stand-Up* (2018) is an example of the artform being examined at depth, though it is important to note the publication date of that title, demonstrating the infancy of this research area relative to other sectors of the arts. A positive aspect of this, is that active performers are creating the language that is used to discuss the artform, something Stewart Lee highlighted, when claiming that his own books ‘gave broadsheet newspaper critics who write about stand-up some tools that they hadn’t previously got’ (Lee, 2013ii). If Lee is correct and comedy critics didn’t have the vocabulary required to discuss stand-up until his release in 2010, this demonstrates the early stage of research in this field.

With that in mind, it is important to note that the language used when referring to comedy may have a different meaning to its everyday use. Throughout this thesis, a stand-up comedian may be referred to as a/an: ‘act’; ‘artist’; ‘comic’; ‘performer’; ‘practitioner’; ‘stand-up’. A performance may be referred to as a: ‘gig’; ‘set’; ‘show’; ‘spot’. In the case of spot, it is common for the length of the performance to precede the word, for example a ten-spot would denote a ten-minute performance.

Those performing at the same event will be appearing in the same 'line-up' or on the same 'night' or 'bill'. The 'circuit' or 'scene' are terms used to describe the broader, collective of stand-up comedians. In the event of other industry-specific jargon, I shall offer an explanation within the footnotes.

My use of footnotes throughout this thesis is inspired by Stewart Lee's *How I Escaped My Certain Fate* and *Sunshine On Putty* (2004) by Ben Thompson. Both use footnotes to offer further analysis, include anecdotal evidence, or allow the writer to make a joke or comment outside of the text¹⁶.

Throughout this thesis there is a heavy reliance on material from Stewart Lee who is the most prominent artist to speak out about the use of third-party writers. Lee is certainly the highest profile stand-up in Britain today, outside of those signed to one of the large management companies.¹⁷

Onstage, he is critical of the performances and content of mainstream acts, whilst off stage he has been vocal about the use of writers within the industry and attempts to hide this practice.

Another conscious decision made for this research was the use of print and online media. Given my goal of challenging thinking amongst practitioners and audiences, it is necessary to demonstrate the issues by showing how they are reported and reflected upon within the media most often consumed by those parties. There may be a small critique of the publication or writer to preface a quotation, but in an industry where artists are keen to use carefully selected quotations from written reviews within their publicity material, it would be an error to not treat those sources with the same respect as I would an academic journal.

The use of autobiography is sporadic, due to many stand-up's reluctance to give a 'warts and all' account of their careers, as is common in fields such as sport or music. This disparity may be borne

¹⁶ Although In the case of this thesis, just expect pointless trivia that I seem to have retained on the off chance that I am one day called upon to save mankind with my knowledge of Aston Villa Football Club, James Bond or Crowded House.

¹⁷ Much more on those later.

out of the fact that typically, sports stars will write autobiographies once they have retired from active competition whereas stand-ups will continue to tour and make TV appearances after a book is published. As such, any fallout from the tales that sport stars write will not have an impact on their playing careers.¹⁸

‘Laughing at the smaller performers...’

The relationship between comedy/light entertainment and the commercial world is discussed later in this thesis, as the 1970s and 1980s saw the endorsement of entertainers become highly prized by marketing teams looking to grow their brand. A central theme of this thesis is the impact of commercialisation on British stand-up, and it is important to highlight what is meant by this. Commercialisation is best described as: ‘The organisation of something in a way intended to make a profit’ (dictionary.cambridge.org). The commercialisation of goods and services creates jobs, funds research and development and should offer a solution to a problem faced by the end-user.

Commercialisation in its purest sense should not be a ‘dirty’ word in relation to art - artists who do not have financial support or savings to rely on, inevitably need to monetise their art to some extent, in order to survive financially and be in a position to fully focus on their craft. It is the manner in which British stand-up has been commercialised that is integral to this research project. Within stand-up, the influence of management and production companies is explored in chapter three, and it is the strategies of these organisations that led to a very aggressive form of commercialisation, where artists were frequently hit the road on tours lasting 40 dates, merchandise (mainly t-shirts and VHS cassettes) was sold in concert hall foyers and ticket prices rose as the venues became larger. In chapter three, Stewart Lee discusses the rise of Avalon and how the income generated didn’t necessarily find its way to the performers.

¹⁸ Former Aston Villa and Republic of Ireland striker Tony Cascarino’s *Full Time* (2000) revealed that after an international career spanning more than a decade, he was never actually eligible to represent the country.

The impact of this type of commercialisation is well evidenced by the Edinburgh Fringe, as Liam Gould found when he performed at the iconic festival in 2018 and observed: 'What is clear is that we stand on the edge of the festival's future. Eventually, there will have to be a level of financial commitment to either side; continue to make it more expensive for commercial expansion, or give in to the demands of those that push for creativity' (Gould, 2019). Gould goes on to explain the impact on stand-ups who aren't part of the commercial establishment:

Within five minutes, your hands are filled with flyers for countless shows. Improv, stand-up, dance, theatre, student acts... It felt like a place that was championing new, fresh creativity and self-expression... But, bearing down over the city from above was a message far different. The almost omniscient posters that were stuck all over the city, the ones that covered buildings and lamp-posts, were of the faces of the same ten or so acts... all big name comedians or shows that were charging minimum of £20 for entry, glaring down – seemingly laughing at the smaller performers flyering themselves. This year, more than 3 million tickets were issued at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, with more individuals than ever attending the arts festival. With its continual increase in popularity comes its continual potential for people to use that popularity to make money... The festival was founded upon the idea that any unknown artist could perform, experiment and entertain on a platform designed to search for new talent. What's worrying is the current outcry from current amateur arts performers looking to go to the festival. It is undeniable that Fringe has become an unbelievably expensive venture. The result is that new artists are left in a staggering amount of debt in order to perform their show, or are even not able to afford going altogether. Fringe currently remains one of the most important places for performers to take creative risks without the luxury of having a big-budget. Yet, when performers are left on the fringe of the Fringe, and replaced by big-name, high-budget shows, this space is rapidly shrinking. When commercialism overrides creativity, the arts suffer as a consequence. (Gould, 2019)

It is this kind of commercialisation that I refer to when I discuss how commercialisation has impacted upon creativity, as Gould suggests in the final sentence above.

‘A one-off event...’

To give structure to my thesis and avoid repetition,¹⁹ I will divide my research into the following chapters:

So far, I have described the events leading up to this research project and discussed my own creative process, offering a context for the opinions contained within this thesis. I have also explained the tone of the paper and my use of footnotes. I have given an overview of comic theory in relation to stand-up, which will be referred to throughout. Most importantly, I have explained why I feel this area of research is vital to every stakeholder within the industry, be they practitioner, promoter or audience member and set out the question that I am answering: How has commercialisation impacted upon creativity within British stand-up comedy?

Chapter two gives a brief overview of a particular period in British culture, including the movement within comedy dubbed ‘Alternative’. I am including this information for two reasons: Firstly, I believe that it is important to offer a historical context, including accounts from artists who were there at the time. Secondly, to give greater insight to where my own comic sensibilities and principles were formed. All kinds of unusual acts could be found on the alternative circuit, but they were united in being innovative; taking risks; being individual and giving the live audience the sense that stand-up was a spontaneous, one-off event.

Chapter three provides an analysis of the early 1990s including Newman and Baddiel’s *Live and in Pieces* (1993) tour, which culminated with a London date at Wembley Arena. This event was a catalyst for comedy being referred to by the media as ‘the new rock ‘n’ roll’ and I will explore the significance of this one event to the commercialisation of stand-up comedy. As a consequence,

¹⁹ More information on *Just A Minute* can found in Chapter 4

performers at this time were in high demand and the exposure that many received through television, radio and print media was unprecedented within stand-up.

Chapter four analyses the increase in television opportunities for high profile²⁰ stand-ups, outside of stand-up based shows. I discuss the impact that this increase has had on the creative process of artists, including the use of third-party writers, something that is often hidden from the audience. I analyse 'The Lost Talk', where Stewart Lee discussed the widespread use of third-party writers within stand-up, particularly amongst household names.

Chapter five focusses on how factors discussed in chapter four impact the circuit for up and coming performers in 2020. I have interviewed artists from many different 'levels' of the career ladder within stand-up, spoken to promoters and reflected on my own experiences as a performer to determine the effect that this kind of commercialisation has had on the industry, creating a circuit where some see stand-up as a career choice rather than art.

Chapter six will offer a solution to the lack of creativity within stand-up, as I present a manifesto for IRIS, an acronym of the four principles that I believe stand-up should aspire to at all times. These are: Innovation, Risk, Individuality and Spontaneity. I have chosen the medium of a manifesto due to the history of manifestos within the arts, particularly in the early 1900s. By setting out my views in this format will allow for me to use language that may otherwise appear out of place in a piece of academic writing.

²⁰ See also 'well represented'.

Live Performance: Open Mic Night, Aldershot. February 25th 2015. Act 3 of 7.

'It's really important to be prepared for Christmas,²¹ but I didn't realise that part of this was playing games that never see the light of day for the other 51 weeks of the year. Whilst everyone is settling down to a Bond film on Christmas Eve, I'm up a ladder. "Have you seen Ash?" "He's in the loft, getting the dust off the Cluedo box". (mutters whilst miming a hammer and chisel) [laughs]²² "I'll bloody get you lot, say goodbye to Professor Plum" (puts card in back pocket) [laughs]²³

Charades, there's another one. When else is it socially acceptable to finish dinner and say "That was a cracking meal love... (after a pause, I mime 'film') [laughs].²⁴ If I did that in any other month, people would think I was mad. I'd be cast outside with the dog. (mimes 'film' points to dog) (In 'dog' voice) "Beethoven?" [laughs]²⁵ "No mate, Marley and Me" I used to say Turner and Hooch on that bit until I did a gig in a student union three days ago and they are still waiting for the punchline [laughs].²⁶

The sport on TV over Christmas is no better. Somewhere, in a meeting room, somebody has come up with the idea for The World's Strongest Man Grand Final, there's these boulders...and they've got arms, legs [laughs],²⁷ and blood pressure like a cricket score²⁸ who lift and move things not one of us has a grasp of. How many people can honestly say that they have any concept of the weight of a lorry? Sure, he's pulling it, when I would have called the AA²⁹, but your average man in the street can hardly say "yeah, its bloody hard that. Me and Terry³⁰ usually do it together, with him steering" [laughs].

They should set 'The World's Strongest Man Grand Final' competition in reality. Events like the Atlas stones could have been replaced with carrying the shopping from the car to the house [laughs], pulling the lorry should be replaced with jump starting next doors knackered Ford Focus [laughs],³¹ and the tyre flipping needs to be replaced with mattress turning [laughs]. Basically, all the jobs us blokes try to avoid. "Can you give me a hand with this shopping?" "Sorry love, I'm on the loo". The one excuse we have that cannot be challenged, it's our one place of safety. "I could put the bins out, but I'll sit here inhaling back into my body, everything it has worked so hard to expel" [laughs]

Actually, I might risk piles³² next Christmas...'

²¹ This started life as a routine about wrapping paper and is a fair indicator of my mindset going into stand-up. Having noted what style of stand-up was commercially successful, I attempted to script an inoffensive observational piece. It was only when I came to perform it that I realised the script itself was hard to stick to as I felt disingenuous performing what was essentially a monologue.

²² For future performances, the physical element to this joke got better responses the more I contorted my body, to replicate being stuck in a loft.

²³ These could have been converted from polite to actual laughs, had I performed with more conviction. Dialogue within the material had become a common trope for mainstream acts, and it made me feel 'needy'.

²⁴ This worked better reversing the other of words. By introducing Charades first, I'd given away the physical punchline. By starting the sentence: 'After dinner, when has it ever been socially acceptable...' renders the 'film' mime an incongruous event. I opened my set with this a few weeks later and it got a far bigger reaction than I had anticipated.

²⁵ In a very scripted performance, the 'dog-voice' was a rare moment of play. I would often give the dog a different voice, tilting my head to the side etc. to make it more obvious I was playing the dog role.

²⁶ This didn't happen, sadly. But I felt it was better to pretend that I had performed before just to offer give myself some credibility.

²⁷ This achieved bigger laughs when I mimed that I was carrying a big rock.

²⁸ The laughs from the 'boulders... with arms and legs' was bigger than I expected. I went into the next line one second too early and the set up for the lorry joke was missed by some. For future performances I would extend the mime beyond what would be deemed acceptable and feign continuing my sentence before going back to the mime. This was predominantly for my own pleasure and came out of me trying to work out how a performer such as Stewart Lee would approach such generic subject matter.

²⁹ This is far more suited to an average-sized performer. Its less effective when said by me at 6'9 and around 19 stones, demonstrating material must suit the performer and persona.

³⁰ I changed this name as it seemed unlikely that someone in their thirties would have a friend called 'Terry'. Again, this demonstrates how material must fit the attitude and persona.

³¹ I experimented with car makes and models. The more obscure and precise the car reference, the better the reaction: Ford Mondeo Ghia in Machine Silver, Peugeot 207 Sport in Agean Blue, for example.

³² I did try placing Haemorrhoids here, but it wasn't as funny to say at it is to spell.

Chapter Two: An Alternative To Comedy

'So as you raise a glass to the Eighties tomorrow night, drink with me to the awakening of Britain. If it is to be a dynamic decade for us all, these will be difficult and dangerous years. But we are drinking to a country with a future'

Margaret Thatcher's New Year's Message – December 30th 1979.

In this chapter I will highlight the changes within stand-up comedy during this era, as it was led out of working men's clubs by the alternative comedy movement, into new and exciting performance spaces and styles. By offering a brief overview of the social and political landscape of Britain, I identify a pattern where commercialisation of art had happened in other forms of popular performance, a symptom of changes within the UK economy and society as a whole.

'It wasn't a cool thing...'

As the new Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher stood outside 10 Downing Street in May 1979 and addressed the media with words attributed to St Francis of Assisi,³³ it was clear that the British public had voted for change. In Thatcher, they had elected one of the most polarising figures in British history, political or otherwise. The UK was still recovering from a period of recession and the early 1980s were tough on many, though journalist Alwyn W. Turner regards the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer³⁴ as 'perhaps, the one big exception' (2010:76) to the lack of cheer.

Britain's sporting achievements during this time were also giving the natives a reason to smile: Seb Coe and Steve Ovett battled for gold medals in the 1980 and 1984 Olympics; England's cricketers

³³ 'Where there is discord, may we bring harmony...'

³⁴ One of the great joys of Turner's writing is that on the same page as he discusses King Juan Carlos' opposition to their honeymoon stay in Gibraltar, he also includes Ted Nugent's thoughts on the new Princess: 'I'd drag my dick through a mile of broken glass just to wank off in her shadow' (2010:77)

regained the Ashes in 1981 and English teams were dominating football's most prestigious club competition, the European Cup, winning four of the first five finals of the decade.³⁵

During the 1970s, celebrity appearances in television commercials were predominantly the domain of actors, Leonard Rossiter starring alongside Joan Collins to advertise Cinzano being a particular highlight³⁶. Ben Walsh of the *Independent* writes: 'John Cleese has flogged his Basil Fawlty persona to [a dead parrot] death promoting a plethora of unfunny ads: Compaq computers, Sainsburys's, Intel, Schweppes, Titleist, Intel Centrino, Accurist, Magnavox TVs, and, worst of all, the recent AA ads' (Walsh, 2011). Of those ads listed by Walsh, most surprising is the 1978 Accurist campaign as it was launched between series one and two of *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979), a period that it could be argued was Cleese's peak in terms of mainstream exposure and commercial success. This demonstrates the relaxed attitude towards advertisements and endorsements within the acting profession at this time.

The changing attitudes towards artists embracing commercial opportunities in the 1980s is best characterised by Madness, who were asked to appear in an advert for a major car manufacturer in 1983. A bizarre choice, given that the band were seen as 'working-class lads made good' and contributors to Red Wedge³⁷. Frontman Suggs (Graham McPherson) acknowledges that commercial endorsements were uncommon for a band: 'It was odd because making commercials was kind of frowned upon, certainly in England. It wasn't a cool thing for a rock 'n' roll band to do' (2013:188). 2-Tone, a fusion of traditional ska and punk rock, had its origins firmly in working class Britain, meaning 'The Nutty Boys'³⁸ working with a global brand on a marketing campaign would have

³⁵ The most important of all being 1982, of course...

³⁶ Although Stanley Baxter starring in every role of a Birds Eye advert is well worth a You Tube search

³⁷ A collective of musicians and comedians who put on gigs in support of Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock's General Election campaign in 1987

³⁸ The nickname given by the press to Madness, not Chris Thompson and Lee Foreman's early 1990s project following the breakup of the band.

undoubtedly raised eyebrows. Concern was possibly outweighed by financial compensation as months later a reworked version of their hit 'Baggy Trousers' was used for Colgate's 'Blue Minty Gel' ad campaign.

Commercial endorsements have been theorised as the 'halo effect', explained by Adrian Palmer:

The closer the perceived link between the 'personality' and the product, the stronger the halo effect... we have a tendency to impute to the endorsed products the qualities that we have come to like about our favourite celebrity characters... To be effective, the celebrity must be carefully chosen to match the aspirations of the product's target market. (2004:404)

This explains the choice of a renowned comedy writer (Cleeve) to advertise a computer capable of word processing, or Madness' busy lives being linked to a car designed for city life. At the dawning of the 1990s this commercialisation of entertainment extended to the comedy industry, as smaller venues and stand-up tours became sought after by potential sponsors, as discussed in chapter three.

The glamour and global success enjoyed by British music artists offered a beacon of hope to the growing numbers of young, unemployed people back home. In his autobiography *Set The Boy Free* (2016), The Smiths guitarist and co-songwriter Johnny Marr describes the importance of his band and their peers to the youth of Britain:

As Margaret Thatcher carried out her systematic and ruthless dismantling of the country's industries and communities, it gave the new generation of artists a common enemy to unite against. Such was the discontent among the young, it was a given that you were in opposition to the government. (2016:212)

Marr's referral to Thatcher as a 'common enemy' wasn't limited to recording artists, as stand-ups also rallied against the PM.

'Deaf aids for trendies'

Historically the arts have given society a voice in times of struggle. Wilmut and Rosengard note:

'Early music hall had a strong tradition of social satire; it portrayed, often with considerable

sharpness, the real lives of ordinary people' (1989:xiii) and the 1980's were no exception. D.Keith Peacock declares: 'The election of the Thatcher government affected not only political and economic discourse but also cultural discourse, and had a clear influence on the drama and theatre of the 1980's' (1999:7).

Spending cuts hit the arts sector hard, explained by Thatcher, years later: 'It could be argued that no artist had a right to a living from his work and that the market should be left to operate as with any other activity' (1993:632). This principle is correct in many commercial industries but judging the importance of art based purely on turnover is dangerous, highlighting how political change may have influenced British stand-up becoming a very commercialised industry. The idea that quality can be judged by profitability is discussed later in this thesis, as the involvement of large management agencies has led to this as a measure of success being implemented.

In many cities, comedy nights with a socialist leaning began in the wake of the 1979 General Election. Opening its doors at midnight on 19th May 1979, The Comedy Store was a success story of the 80's comedy scene, both commercially and in the role that it played to increase the stature of alternative comedy. Alexei Sayle recalls: 'Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister on the 3rd of May 1979 and the Comedy Store opened a few days later, which must have meant something' (2016:187).

It was at this venue that Sayle first met Tony Allen and Alternative Cabaret was born. Joined shortly after by Jim Barclay, Andy de la Tour and Pauline Melville, this was an early example of what became known as 'alternative comedy'. Launched at The Elgin in August 1979, Alternative Cabaret echoed what was happening in fringe theatre, where politically motivated musicians, poets and performers presented radical work. Much like the Futurist Manifesto of 1909, 'alternative' was a force for change within its art. Whereas Futurism has a published set of 'rules' that practitioners would

adhere to, alternative comedy had a less formal 'manifesto' though the expectation that no material would be racist or sexist was clearly a reaction to the acts who dominated the stand-up scene during the 1970s.

Journalist Andy Beckett offers this explanation of the term 'alternative': 'In Britain in the early 1980s 'alternative' was a loaded word. It was widely taken to mean left wing, counter-cultural, rebellious, separate from the mainstream – sometimes smugly so' (2016:331). It is often assumed that alternative comedy was a reaction to the newly elected Conservative government, placing Thatcher as a target for much of the humour. Logan Murray comments: 'That particular Conservative government gave us a massive target to attack' (2010:247), citing sleaze and corruption as two elements outside of policy that made the young comedians of the time angry. William Cook agrees:

Thatcherism gave alternative comics a focal point, a sense of common purpose, and The Comedy Store vented its collective spleen against Thatcherite values in a way that neither Rosengard, nor Ward, both successful, fairly conventional careerists, could ever have conceived' (2001:13).

Oliver Double describes the early years of The Comedy Store as having acts who 'threw aside the stolen Pakistani jokes of their predecessors and instead lashed out at the mood of the times, attacking wine bars and Sony Walkmans ('deaf aids for trendies' – Alexei Sayle) with as much venom as they did the newly elected Thatcher government' (1997:164-165).

These claims however are not backed up by Allen or Sayle. Allen notes 'Thatcher never became important until the Falklands war in 1982' (2002:110), an opinion echoed by Sayle:

At first, her grip on power seemed quite weak... so she didn't at first figure that much in the routines of even the left-wing Alternative Cabaret comics... It was only as it slowly dawned on us that the old consensus was never coming back and we were now living in a more polarised world that she crept more and more into our routines. (2016:187)

Whilst government subsidies and Arts Council grants were available, Sayle explains how neither he nor Allen wanted financial help from the state:

In some ways Alternative Cabaret could be quite Thatcherite. As a reaction to the self-indulgence and irrelevance of a lot of the subsidised theatre, me and Tony agreed that we were not interested in getting an Arts Council grant or any form of state handout. We both felt that the only thing that made sense was if people paid to see us – that them buying tickets was what would ensure that we remained relevant. (2016:188)

The Comedy Store and Alternative Cabaret attracted their own unique audiences whose expectations were such that material was different in each venue. Allen notes that there was a comfort in having likeminded artists on a line-up: 'Both Alexei and I knew that the one thing the Store needed was a large input of radical acts' (2002:98). Allen goes on to describe these acts as 'allies', particularly in an environment where he may be on a bill with more traditional stand-ups.

Unintentionally, Margaret Thatcher helped shape a movement within comedy that went far beyond the majority of satire from previous decades. There was however one historical example that may lay claim to going beyond alternative comedy. During the 1960s, the reaction to Peter Cook³⁹ impersonating then Prime Minister Harold MacMillan⁴⁰ had sent shockwaves throughout comedy, as Simon Kuper of *Financial Times* explains:

You didn't mock the British prime minister...But Peter Cook played Harold Macmillan as a bumbling old buffer, who was bravely pretending against all evidence that the UK still led the world. (Kuper, 2011)

This episode set something of an unwritten precedent amongst broadcasters that ridicule of a sitting Prime Minister was not acceptable content and would potentially not have been permitted had *Beyond The Fringe* (1964) been a BBC-owned show. Following this incident, satire often targeted the establishment as a whole or celebrities through playful material. This changed during 1980s, with

³⁹ Along with many other Peter Cook projects, the master recording was widely believed to be deleted to make recording space for non-comedy output. It was found in 2005.

⁴⁰ MacMillan was present for this performance

television shows such as *Spitting Image* 1984-1996 and many artists within the alternative movement using Thatcher as the primary target for their vitriol and punchlines.

‘Sticking a firework up his bum...’

Though the roots of stand-up can be found in the Music Hall and Variety tradition, by the 1970s stand-up as we would recognise it today was very popular in working men’s clubs in the north of England. Television programmes during the seventies such as *The Comedians* (1971-1993) and *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club* (1974-1977) gave a flavour of the working-men’s club circuit. Notable figures from these programmes were Jim Bowen, who became host of *Bullseye* (1981-1995) and Bernard Manning.

In contrast to those audiences, Stewart Lee describes alternative comedy crowds as: ‘Like the people who were onstage. They were left wing, liberal, Guardian readers, probably social workers or teachers’ (Lee, 2017). In an attempt to find his way around the late 1980s London comedy scene, Lee went to local alternative comedy nights. He recalls his first experience of the circuit:

In the Kings Head, Acton, there was the Acton Banana. The first one I went to was in September ‘89. The bill was: Bob Boyton, who I think had a job with the union in the daytime. His party piece was to take out his false teeth, whilst talking about politics. The Singing Firemen, who were a double act of blokes dressed up like firemen who sang funny songs about putting out fires, which was less funny when I found out that they weren’t firemen. Cathy Dunning, who was only a stand-up because she was agoraphobic, and her therapist had told her to do the thing that she was most nervous about. All of those acts were really inspiring. (Lee, 2017)

The line-up described by Lee was fairly typical of the time, alternative comedy had created a vibrant circuit filled with innovative artists who weren’t necessarily performing straight stand-up. Simon Day discusses how Malcom Hardee ‘pushed the following acts into the spotlight’ (2011:222) at his Up The Creek night:

Mr Methane (a farting man in a catsuit); Eddie Shit (a man who sang pop songs and replaced key words with ‘shit’); Rockin’ Gorby (a Gorbachev lookalike who sang); Chris Luby (and ex-

army depressive who made aircraft and marching band noises); and the Bastard Son of Tommy Cooper (a tiny Welsh self-harmer and contortionist). (2011:223)

Richard Herring joined university friend Stewart Lee in London, exposing himself to some unusual live acts taking huge risks on stage: 'Chris Lynam was sticking a firework up his bum. There was definitely a woman doing a project where you had to watch her lip-synching something with her vagina. I was too confused and upset to watch it!' (Herring, 2018). The diversity of disciplines was matched by diversity in the characters that could be found on the scene at the time as Lee highlights:

The circuit then was much more socially diverse because now for someone to come to a big city and try to be a comic or musician, they tend to be more middle-class people who have got family help... It's more diverse now in terms of race or gender, but back then there were ex-squaddies doing it, and you met all kinds of people (Lee, 2017).

In addition to The Comedy Store and The Elgin, comedy specific nights in pubs and other venues were growing in popularity. Lee describes: 'There were loads springing up everywhere, in really mad places' (Lee, 2017). William Cook lists just a few of the clubs that were operating at this time: 'That plush Jongleurs flagship... Up The Creek in South-east London; the local intimacy of The Banana in affable Balham; Downstairs At The Kings Head' (2001:3). Stewart Lee believes this created a very clear career path for a stand-up: 'In London there were about thirty clubs and they would give you a try out spot, and if they liked it, they would give you a half spot, in about a year's time with half money, and about a year after that you might get a full gig' (Lee, 2017).⁴¹

Many stand-ups started running and compering their own shows. Becoming a compere guaranteed regular stage time, something which cannot be underestimated in the development of a stand-up. Eddie Izzard compared getting gigs as a stand-up compared to spots as an MC: 'Once I'd got a few

⁴¹ In 2020, progression does not follow the same route, something I examine in chapter five.

bookings going I said, I'll do compering and they said, "Oh you will? Well, have three [spots] then"" (Believe, 2010).

'An alternative to comedy...'

A backlash to alternative comedy came from those acts who had spent the 1970s dominating television. Jim Bowen came from a tradition where performers were generally working from the same pool of jokes. Stewart Lee claims that this happened to such an extent that 'they had to put a blackboard up offstage where an assistant would have to cross off the jokes as somebody told them, for the benefit of acts further up the bill' (2013ii).

Logan Murray describes most acts on this circuit as: 'middle-aged men in frilly shirts and bow ties, recycling old jokes, most of which had some very dubious racist, misogynist or homophobic undertones' (2010:235). At the core of alternative comedy was the notion that the artist was the writer and performer. When asked his views on alternative comedy, Bowen dismissed it. Critic Bruce Dessau reports the *Bullseye*⁴² host called it an 'alternative to comedy' (2014:21). Several stars of the 1970s scene were became marginalised and mainstream opportunities dwindled. Stu Francis believes that the 'variety' shows he had starred in 'became a dirty word as far as television was concerned and entertainment moved on' (*Manchester Evening News*, 2004).

By the end of the 1980s, only a handful of stand-ups who were successful during the previous decade, were still regularly on television. Jim Bowen was giving speedboats to couples from Walsall on *Bullseye*, Tom O'Conner had replaced Barry Cryer as host of *Crosswits* (1985-1998) and Jim Davidson landed a primetime role fronting *Big Break* (1991-2002). To his surprise, Davidson also had a stand-up performance broadcast by ITV: 'The blue stand-up routine was unheard of for

⁴² It's worth looking for Bowen's sidekick Tony Green in his *Newman and Baddiel In Pieces* appearance (S1 ep1)

mainstream TV' (1993:224). Many of the remaining acts who found fame in the 1970s, could now be found working on cruise ships or appearing in pantomime.

It is important to note that there were exceptions within 1970s stand-up who weren't part of the 'frilly-shirted, bow-tied brigade' (2014:14), as Dessau describes Manning and co. Having avoided association with their contemporaries and arriving in stand-up via the folk-music scene, Billy Connolly and Jasper Carrott continued to enjoy successful live shows and TV appearances. Dave Allen was also hard to pigeonhole as being from one school of comic or another. All three of these were never seen as a part of one particular movement and new generations of fans continue to discover their work.

'It was still innocent...'

There was also a backlash within the alternative scene towards acts who were judged to have had a privileged upbringing or received any extra help along the way. Stewart Lee recalls the level of opposition:

Students who had come up through writing for the radio were disliked professionally and politically by the circuit acts. I won Hackney Empire's new act of the year in 1990 and afterwards, the head of the judges, John Connor, said "we need more people like you doing the circuit, we need to teach these students and Oxbridge cunts like David Baddiel and Rob Newman a lesson". I said to him "I went to Oxford" and he looked so disappointed. It tells you a lot about people's prejudices, because I didn't look or sound like what he thought an ex-student would be like (Lee, 2017).

Richard Herring, had a similar experience, at the Edinburgh Fringe:

The year that I did the Oxford Revue we came to Edinburgh, we got heckled by all the proper stand-up comedians and quite badly bullied. Because of the history, they interpreted us as being privileged as there was that idea that Oxbridge people got straight onto T.V. That influenced me to be suspicious of the stand-up circuit and feel like they all hated us (Herring, 2018).

Wilmot and Rosengard explain this mindset when discussing the unique individuality of performers who were drawn to the alternative scene:

Though widely divergent in style, approach and indeed quality, they shared a rejection of most of what had gone before – not only the sexist and racist element...but also the erudite middle-class approach of the university wits. (1989:xiv)

The rejection of ‘university wits’ supports both Stewart Lee’s memory of Hackney Empire and Richard Herring’s treatment at Edinburgh Fringe. Lee’s belief that acts moving to London to launch a stand-up career tend to be middle class and in receipt of financial help from their family demonstrates how commercialisation has changed the stand-up industry to the point that in the modern age, class is not a barrier but an advantage.

Politically, socially and culturally Britain had undergone huge changes during the 1980s. Comedy was a growth industry, not only did the acts have a wealth of targets for material, but the public needed to find things to laugh about more than ever. Despite her being the focus of so much material at the time, it could be argued that Margaret Thatcher’s vision for Britain as ‘an enterprise economy’ (1993:668) is embodied by the stand-up; Self-employed, job-creating and wealth generating. This supports the notion that a stand-up is the auteur: They are Managing Director, majority shareholder and product.

Commercial opportunities within stand-up were growing as fast as the industry was changing, causing Stewart Lee to describe himself as ‘lucky to get in at the point where it was still innocent’ (Lee, 2017). Management companies were enjoying success as more artists signed to their rosters, but one of these companies had a very ambitious plan for their hottest commercial property, the result of which came to fruition on a December night in 1993 ensuring that live comedy would never be the same again.

Live Performance: The Loft, Portsmouth. 11th May 2017. Opening act.

There's an old adage in comedy: The more you perform live, the better you understand... the lack of consistency amongst McDonalds branches⁴³ [laughs]. On the way back from a gig, I'll have to get my tea⁴⁴ because its long drive home. The reason I'm telling you this is because I'm yet to find the bastard who follows me around breaking every McMilkshake machine within a 5 mile radius of my location⁴⁵ [laughs].

It's true, forget the McClown⁴⁶ and the thousands of teenagers behind each McCounter, I've realised that McDonalds have appointed someone specifically to ruin my life [laughs]. The only way I can get my own back is to order the one thing on the McMenu that McStaff dread... The McFillet-O-Fish [laughs]⁴⁷. It is a concept so bizarre that nobody orders one, so when you do, there's the five-minute wait whilst an acne-ridden 17 year old gets the Mc-Cookbook[laughs]⁴⁸ down from the highest shelf to remind themselves how it's constructed. They look at you, almost pleading "Please order something else, I'll pay".⁴⁹

For those of you who haven't had the McFillet-O-Fish, let me deconstruct it for you. A lot like Southbound Sutton Scotney Services on the A34 do when they throw it into the box [laughs].⁵⁰ Anyway, the McFillet-O-Fish starts off with lukewarm bread [laughs],⁵¹ then a perfectly square bit of fish, from the... Square fish? [laughs]. I wouldn't know, the only thing you'd catch in the water where I grew up is a skin disease [laughs].⁵² Then there's some cheese. Because, fish...goes with... cheese? [laughs]⁵³ In the chippy, the conversation has never gone "salt and vinegar? (mimes application) Ketchup? (shakes head) Bit of cheese?"(Looks disgusted) [laughs]. Then it's finished with a gloopy white liquid that they claim to be tartare sauce [laughs] and then topped off with some more tepid bread.

But when you order, the most ridiculous question comes next doesn't it? "Is that a meal?"⁵⁴ Is that a meal?⁵⁵ A meal?

It's twenty past ten on a Tuesday night. I'm six foot nine, best part of twenty stone, a meal for me is an event, a chance to converse, I'd have several wine options, the music must be perfect, the heads of the animals we feast upon will be on display throughout the entire...

Oh, you mean, well yeah, obviously I want chips [laughs] I get drink as well? Ah nice. McShake please. Chocolate.

I'm sorry, the machine is what?⁵⁶

⁴³ To this point my material had been very observational/conversational, but I wanted to position myself as an outsider. By opening this section with that line, I was telling the audience 'you wouldn't understand this', challenging them to work harder to relate to me and the subject matter throughout the routine. This was (I believe) influenced by Alexei Sayle's stand-up clips during his TV shows. As a child, I loved how he would treat the mundane as it had far greater significance (I remember a routine he did about how drug dealers had bought garden centres because there is more money in gardening).

⁴⁴ Evening meal. It's a regional thing.

⁴⁵ The first 'draft' of this material is nearly 20 years old, when I would moan long and loudly about how whenever I wanted a McShake, the machine was broken. My friends laughed, but I didn't think of it again until I started stand-up.

⁴⁶ Do those characters from the 80s exist in their marketing these days? Maybe it's all on an app for toddlers...

⁴⁷ Pronounced throughout as: McFILL-IT. OH. FISH. If the pronunciation got a big enough laugh, I would often say the name of the burger more often throughout the routine.

⁴⁸ I didn't expect to get laughs at the McCookbook, I was emphasising the ludicrous trend in the restaurants by adding 'Mc' to everything I could.

⁴⁹ I was still uncomfortable with dialogue between two characters, and this was one of the last routines I performed that included a conversation between two people, rather than the onstage version of me discussing a conversation through his eyes and thought process.

⁵⁰ Possibly not true, I've never visited as an adult. We stopped there in August 1994 when house-hunting to move from the West Midlands to Hampshire but there was something I liked about the alliteration. It's almost as fun to say as 'Leigh Delamere'.

⁵¹ I'm still not sure what that bun is.

⁵² I just enjoyed the play on catching fish/catching an illness, but the audience reaction was far louder than I anticipated. I almost broke character to thank them, such was my surprise.

⁵³ This was me thinking out loud and wasn't in the written version I'd taken to the gig, including the trip to the chippy. It stayed in the routine. I think the laughs here were because in a clearly scripted routine, the audience could tell from the change in my tone of voice that I was going off on a tangent just for them.

⁵⁴ In real life, I'll usually answer 'No, just a snack'.

⁵⁵ Increasing disbelief with each repetition.

⁵⁶ I was so proud of this ending at the time, though listening back it sounds telegraphed. If I ever had a desire to perform this material again, I would look to come up with a less obvious ending.

Chapter Three: A Stick Figure On A Stage

'Fourteen-year-old girlies can say they're going to a Baddiel and Newman gig because they fancy Dave or Rob, but in reality they're hoping to meet a 16-year-old boy who looks a bit like them.'

Caitlin Moran, *The Times* – July 24th 1993

In this chapter, I shall offer context on the stand-up scene during the early 1990s, leading to *Live And In Pieces*. This was the first instance of a stand-up act performing at a UK Arena as part of their tour, heralded as the moment that comedy became 'the new rock 'n' roll'. I shall present reactions from various publications during winter '93/'94 and comments from the years that followed. This live show was an attempt to achieve something that hadn't been done before and it would be another decade before a British stand-up did a full arena tour. In playing Wembley Arena, Newman & Baddiel launched comedy into new prominence within the public consciousness, a place where comedians were gracing magazine covers and occupying newspaper pages outside of the 'TV Guide'.

'Fivers and tenners and twenties and drugs and weed'

Culturally, live stand-up comedy had reached a new level of prominence. Eddie Izzard, who ran his own 'Raging Bull' club and compered the 'Screaming Blue Murder' comedy nights, describes the London scene in the early 1990s:

It became the biggest thing in the world... People were gigging at least twice a night and at the weekends four times a night. It was all cash in hand, pockets stuffed with fivers and tenners and twenties and drugs and weed... everyone was doing it, gigging and drinking like idiots, and none of us were known. (*Believe*, 2010)

Television comedy was reflecting the excesses of the live circuit, as proved when Jonathan Ross's production company Channel X created *Saturday Zoo* (1993) and paid the show's roster of comedians, whether they appeared or not, as Simon Day explains: 'All the comics were paid £1000 regardless...some performers who [were not featured] gave up after a while and took the money'

(2011:246). Comedians being comfortable taking the weekly payment but not getting airtime is at odds with the alternative movement and may be a sign that the commercialised nature of the industry was changing both the attitudes of the artists and possibly the type of performer being drawn to the industry. It is hard to imagine an artist such as Tony Allen taking payment but getting no stage time.

Corporate Sponsorship was explored by management and production companies, the extra revenue minimised the financial risks of touring. Frank Skinner was offered the support slot on Steve Coogan's 1990 Edinburgh show: 'He wanted me to be his support act... there would be a national tour to follow, sponsored by Cutty Sark whisky' (2001:265). The highest profile sponsorship within stand-up during this era was the award for the best show at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, known as 'The Perrier Award', sponsored by the French mineral water brand from its inception in 1981 until 2005. Whilst it is difficult to conceive a large brand aligning itself with alternative acts, during the late 1980s this began to change. Ade Edmonson appeared as 'Bank Account Man' to advertise Nat West and Rik Mayall was the face of Super Nintendo commercials in the early 1990s.

When looking for clues regarding the commercialisation of the stand-up comedy industry, three sources that are used throughout this thesis provide some insight into how attitudes towards branding changed. In 1989, Roger Wilmut and Peter Rosengard's *Didn't You Kill My Mother-In-Law* gave an overview of the Alternative Comedy movement. Its front cover looks like the page of a comedy scrapbook, featuring live performance images of Alexei Sayle, Ben Elton, French and Saunders and Nigel Planer, as well as still photographs of Rik Mayall and Ade Edmondson, taken from *The Young Ones* (1982-1984).

By contrast, William Cook's *Ha Bloody Ha* (1994) has a very uniform grid of postage stamp-sized publicity headshots for twelve stand-ups and only three that appear to be taken from a live

performance. The rough edges to the photographs coupled with bold red and yellow text on *Didn't You Kill...* suggests a hazardous substance, or a warning. Cook's title uses a far more subtle approach to the text with a muted shade of yellow compared to *Didn't You Kill...* along with a very clear font, without any zigzagging borders.

Cook's *The Comedy Store* (2001), offers compelling evidence of a changing attitude towards the marketing and consumption of comedy. Although over 300 pages long, the cover looks like a 'What's On' leaflet, publicising upcoming shows at the venue rather than the biography of a business. It is worth highlighting that this book covers a similar time period and artists as *Didn't You Kill...*

If a writer is being given 'access all areas' permission by a company, there will often be strings attached, or at least final approval required before any footage or findings are released. The book was on sale in the venue along with a host of licensed merchandise (t-shirts, mugs etc.), questioning its impartiality. What cannot be questioned is how the covers of those three titles show stand-up developing from an exciting, chaotic artform, into something very orderly and slick.

'A stick figure, on a stage...'

During the early 1980s, tours by stand-ups were few and far between. Stewart Lee grew up in Birmingham and recalls: 'There wasn't a comedy gig. The first stand-up I saw were people opening for bands' (Lee, 2017). Lee remembers a theatre show by Alexei Sayle and Rik Mayall as the first stand-up tour to come to the city, though by the early 1990s this had changed.

Founded in 1989, Avalon specialised in artist management and television production. They built a roster of performers with a view to establishing new circuits, something they asked Stewart Lee to be a part of at the point they had 'invented the idea that you could sell this to students' (Lee, 2017):

At the end of '89 they had this plan that they were going to set up, like rock promoters did in the seventies, weekly comedy nights in universities and polytechnics all around the country. This would create a regular thirty gigs a year circuit at £150 a time (Lee, 2017).

The three-act 'package' was common in the music industry but represented new territory within stand-up. Rob Aslett, Director of Production at Avalon, demonstrated the concept to universities by drawing 'a stick figure, on a stage with a microphone and lights shining towards him' (Lee, 2017). Avalon were looking to expand the reach of stand-up comedy and in creating this circuit, generate a new, young audience. Stand-up Ivor Dembina offered similar packages: 'Students were seen as a fertile source of income – the universities had money and they didn't have direct contact with comedians, so they'd pay someone – an agency – to put together and package a show. (So It Goes, 2014). Dembina attributes the success of this to laziness: When given the choice of contacting acts and agents or paying a third party to bring a complete show, they would choose the latter: 'The student union person thought: "Blimey. This is alright. I only have to put a poster up"' (So It Goes, 2014).

The £150 per gig that Lee recalled didn't change hugely, as Michael McIntyre explains. His gigs in the early 2000s with comedy club chain Jongleurs paid similar: 'Jongleurs was open on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. So each week I would be in a different city and pulling in around £500 a week' (2011:293). It is unclear if the £500 was before or after his manager's percentage was deducted but potentially over a decade after Avalon's package tour concept, the fees involved hadn't changed with inflation.⁵⁷

The venues accommodating stand-up tours were becoming larger, though not all acts were selling them out, as Stewart Lee highlighted: 'When we toured, we would get twenty or thirty people in a 500 seater theatre. We didn't capture the mood in the same way that Newman and Baddiel did'

⁵⁷ Rough example - Pint of bitter in 1990: £1. Pint of bitter in 2005: £2.30

(Lee, 2017). Rob Newman and David Baddiel had a fan base that transcended the conventional comedy audience, as Lee explains: 'Part of the reason they could do that gig (Wembley Arena) was that thousands of teenage girls liked them, they looked like popstars' (Lee, 2017). The armies of girls screaming their name had meant that the duo had already started to play venues that weren't necessarily a regular stop for a comedy tour:

I saw Newman and Baddiel in 1990 or possibly 1991 at the Cochrane Theatre and there was about 400 people and I thought, this has gone, it's too much, this is insane. This many people coming to an alternative comedy gig is ludicrous. It's got too big (Lee, 2017).

'This next gag is from my last album...'

It is widely quoted that television presenter Janet Street-Porter had been first to use the phrase 'the new rock n roll' in relation to comedy: 'Janet Street-Porter saw a picture of [Newman and Baddiel] in *The Face* and declared 'comedy is the new rock and roll' (2010:20) writes Stewart Lee, Frank Skinner comments: 'It was them (Newman and Baddiel) who inspired Janet Street-Porter to say 'comedy is the new rock 'n' roll' (2001:301).

Dave Cohen has a different version of events, his idea was to perform stand-up as if it were a rock gig: 'this next gag was from my last album' (2013:104) he would tell his audience, before pointing out: 'I'm being asked to perform at venues where I used to see bands. Comedy is the new rock 'n' roll' (2013:107). On the evening he tested this material for the first time, a reviewer from *City Limits*, a 'quite Marxist' (Lee, 2017) publication, was in attendance. According to Cohen: 'the article began 'Now that comedy is the new rock 'n' roll...''(2013:107). He highlights how Street-Porter used the phrase on television weeks later, describing the instance as: 'the set-up of a joke... repeated in a left-wing magazine with a tiny circulation, then appropriated by a journalist on a fourth-rate chat show...I laid no claim, she was welcome to it' (2013:107).

Cohen believes his punchline ‘received further cred when performers like Billy Connolly and Harry Enfield were seen on TV at Wembley Stadium introducing bands’ (2013:105). The phrase had found itself in common use, with variations on the theme used by journalists. Cook recalls The Comedy Store being labelled ‘the comic equivalent of The Cavern Club’ (2001:11). Newspaper journalists began using the phrase at an increased rate in the build-up to *Live And In Pieces*, including Giles Smith of *Independent*: ‘Some have looked at this new way of creating laughter, with its 15-man crew, its flashy lights and smoke effects and its fixated audience, and declared comedy the new rock’n’roll’ (Smith, 1993).

Contrary to Cohen’s tongue in cheek comparison of comedy gigs to rock concerts, Peter Kay points out a fundamental difference between the two art forms:

If you go to see a band like U2⁵⁸ or Del Amitri⁵⁹, you want them to do their hits and usually head to the bar when they announce ‘This is off our new album’ (or not in Del Amitri’s case). But it’s the complete opposite for a comedian. You wouldn’t dream of repeating your old material, which is just as well because all the audience want to hear is the new stuff. (2009:352)

Whilst the above statement is largely correct, Kay has built a large fan base who go to his live gigs in the hope that they hear him say ‘Garlic bread’ or ‘It’s spitting’. This raises the issue of whether the audience are laughing at these words at face value, or if the laugh is rooted in nostalgia as they revisit the feeling when they first heard those catchphrases in the early 2000s. Kay typically references these during the first few minutes of a live show, evidence of dispositional theory in practice, which may be informed by Kay’s time as a warm-up act for television. The nostalgia may serve as a reminder that they are in safe hands and demonstrates the ‘conversational lubricant’ (2014:48) Carroll describes in practice.

⁵⁸ No explanation should be required.

⁵⁹ Possible explanation required: Scottish guitar pop act 1980 – present. Best known for singles: ‘Nothing Ever Happens’ and ‘Roll to Me’. They also wrote the greatest football song of all time ‘Don’t Come Home Too Soon’, a sentiment that fans of any underachieving football team can relate to and still gives me chills 22 years later. I do realise that Kay’s joke is based on ‘The Del-Boys’ being compared to a 170 million album selling, stadium filling, global phenomenon, but I know who I enjoyed more when I saw them live...

'I know that bloke!'

As with many iconic events, those claiming to have been in attendance for *Live and in Pieces* grows as the years pass. *The Guardian* was hopeful that the event would be a sell-out, based on the pairs previous tour and merchandise sales: 'Last year they sold out Hammersmith Apollo – capacity 3,500 – four nights running. Their latest video and book both sold over 100,000 copies' (*Guardian*, 1993).

The reality was different, though there are conflicting accounts regarding audience numbers for that night with some assuming that *Newman and Baddiel* became: 'the first double act to sell out British arenas' (Parkin, 2018). Frank Skinner recalls that the duo: 'sold out Wembley Arena' (2001:301).

Richard Herring was in attendance that night, he states: 'There was a lot of hype around that gig, but it didn't sell out' (Herring, 2018). Herring's attendance is corroborated by his late arrival during Baddiel's early stand-up segment, an issue addressed from the stage: 'David Baddiel saw me approaching, was about to take the piss and said, "I know that bloke!"' (Herring, 2018). Mark Wareham reviewed the gig for the *Independent*, also commenting on the attendance not coming close to a sell-out:

Outside Wembley Arena, the touts sought in vain to offload wads of tickets at knockdown prices. 'How much you got then?' said one to a group of youths. 'Forget it,' they replied. 'We're off down the dogs. (Wareham, 1993)

The media hype surrounding this event was in part aided by a desire to get an exclusive story regarding the relationship between Newman and Baddiel. Interviewed mid-tour by Giles Smith, both would lay out their professional situation in very clear terms:

Every night on their current, 25-date national tour, Newman and Baddiel leave their separate dressing rooms, comfortable in the knowledge that for much of the evening they will be on the stage individually. 'Me and Rob don't have a cosy relationship as a double act,' Baddiel had said, sitting in his hotel in Glasgow, three hours before the show. 'Wembley Arena is the last thing we'll do together,' Newman would say, much later that night, sitting in his hotel, 13 miles away. (Smith, 1993)

Smith goes on to suggest: 'Some argue that it is easier for them to sell out Wembley Arena because this is the only south-eastern date on their tour' (Smith, 1993). This tactic was commonly used within the music industry to generate hype around an act when establishing them in a foreign market. A high-profile example was Australian band *INXS*, who during their *Summer XS* (1991)⁶⁰ tour played to nearly 80,000 people at Wembley Stadium⁶¹. It was also the only date their manager Chris Murphy booked in England that year, in an attempt to be taken seriously by the British music press, as Anthony Bozza explains: 'The critics insisted that the band had no English fans and their UK shows were full of Australian expatriates'. (2005:181).

William Cook offers concise analysis of the drawbacks of arena comedy learned on the night 'New Comedy finally lost its virginity' (Cook, 1993):

They didn't fill it. It was full-ish – but one end was curtained off, the empty spaces acted like fire breaks in a forest, and although it often crackled, it never quite caught fire' (Cook, 1993).

Cook's standing as a reviewer of comedy came up during my discussion with Stewart Lee, who explained how the coverage of stand-up in newspapers changed during the early 1990s:

When I started, comedy wasn't viewed as important enough to write about. When it was Edinburgh, newspapers would just send the bloke who does the cookery section. William Cook was the first person to realise that someone should probably write about stand-up properly with actual terms and realise somebody should review this and not just say "yeah it's funny". (Lee, 2017)

The show itself was met with mixed reviews, the spectacle of stand-up in an arena was tempered by the reality that Newman and Baddiel were less a double-act, and more two performers appearing on the same bill. As part of *The Mary Whitehouse Experience* (1990-1992) along with Steven Punt and Hugh Dennis, they had become known to millions for their 'History Today' sketches. By 1993, the pair had split from their previous collaborators and were on the verge of splitting themselves.

⁶⁰ Whilst *Kick* remains their most successful album, I would recommend *Shabooah Shoobah* (1982), *Listen Like Thieves* (1985), or my personal favourite *Welcome To Wherever You Are* (1992) as good starting points for a band who seem to have been overlooked by history.

⁶¹ A gig that barely broke even thanks to covering the costs of the support acts (Debbie Harry, Jesus Jones, Roachford, Hothouse Flowers and Jellyfish), as well as the costs of filming the show for a documentary and live VHS/CD *Live Baby Live* (1991).

Writing for *The Sunday Times*, Emma Forrest offered a damning verdict on the duo's later output:

The truth is that Newman and Baddiel gained a constituency because they were funny... The second TV series and the Wembley gig were very patchy because not enough work went into them. Not enough work went into them because Rob and Dave can no longer stand working together. Tension between writing partners is good. Disliking each other intensely is not. (Forrest, 1993)

Forrest also admits that 'the idea that comedy is the new rock 'n' roll is getting out of hand' (Forrest, 1993). Feelings towards the phrase were largely negative from those who were forging careers at the time. Richard Herring 'thought it was pathetic' (Herring 2018), an opinion shared by William Cook, calling it 'a brief but frantic press frenzy', referring to the phrase as a 'cliché' (Cook, 2003i). Stewart Lee believes that the only similarity to rock 'n' roll was: 'there was a lot of money flowing around, but it didn't necessarily find its way to you' (Lee, 2017).

'The post-punk shadows...'

Not everyone entering stand-up was familiar with its heritage, only associating the role with the glamour of prime-time television and arenas of adoring fans. Stewart Lee remembers: 'you started getting people wanting to be stand-ups, they thought you can be famous and rich' (Lee, 2017).

Where comedy crowds had previously been a reflection of the artists onstage, stand-up becoming more mainstream led to a different type of audience, according to Lee:

Football fans and so-called 'new lads' began to feel welcome at once 'alternative' comedy venues, in their Ben Sherman shirts, and within five years the comedy counter-culture which our illustrious eighties stand-up comedy forebears shed blood to build, in the post-punk shadows of fat working men's club comics and elitist Oxbridge satirists, was destroyed. (2010:70)

Agents and managers were also getting into the industry from backgrounds that were less than conventional, something Frank Skinner was a beneficiary of. Whilst working as a college lecturer, Skinner struck up a friendship with its Head of Drama, Malcolm Bailey. Sensing an opportunity,

Skinner notes that Bailey represented: 'Tim Clark a regular compere at Jongleurs, Alan Davies... and Caroline Aherne' (2001:272).

Much like the music industry during the 1960s and 1970s, agents were taking control away from the performers and making key decisions for them. Simon Day recalls his reaction to Malcolm Hardee's request to represent him: 'Malcolm approached me and began to mutter some sort of comedy CV at me, claiming to have managed Rik Mayall, Harry Enfield and Alexei Sayle... without a second thought I agreed' (2011:221).

Management companies having greater control of their artists coincided with the production wings of their businesses gaining a firmer grip on televised comedy. The increase in television opportunities for stand-ups was bound to create some commercial success stories, but what effect would it have on the creative process of performers?

Live Performance: The Stage Door, Southampton. 10th May 2017. Act 8 of 9⁶²

'Phones⁶³ have never needed to be charged every three hours until now. My first mobile had a battery that would last for 10 days, 7 if you played Snake during every Maths⁶⁴ lesson [laughs]. But that is where we are, and when you reach the end of your patience, you book an appointment at your local Apple store. How's that for customer service?⁶⁵ Not only have you paid them four times the true worth for the product, you now can't complain about it until a week on Thursday at ten past eleven [laughs].⁶⁶

If you make it to Thursday at ten past eleven, the store itself explains why your phone is shit. Not only did they forget to design a battery to cope with life in 2017, but they also forgot to install any tills in their shop [laughs]. It's the opposite of Argos, stock everywhere, no bastard to pay [laughs].⁶⁷

And these stores are so busy, aren't they? But next time, look closely. How many people have gone in there with something under their arm or in their hand that doesn't work? EVERYONE [laughs]. But now it's time to meet your genius. Genius. HE ISN'T A GENIUS, HE IS A SHOP ASSISTANT [laughs].⁶⁸ He tells you there is nothing wrong with your device, but your threadbare charger that gives you an electric shock every single time you turn over in bed, needs to be replaced.

And this is the point that you realise just what a shop without tills can do to a person. You hold your would-be purchase in one hand, and a £20 note in the other and perform the 'Apple Tango'⁶⁹ (dances around, looking for someone to pay whilst holding imaginary items) [laughs]. Just dancing up to strangers who have a beard and chinos [laughs], or just chinos, or even just a lanyard, anything [laughs]. I gave up in the end. (Takes new charger box out of pocket) [laughs] So I just left [laughs continue]⁷⁰

I've done that a lot actually, just walked out. My flat's starting to look like one of their stores, so much so that to avoid confusion, I've installed a till in my hallway.⁷¹ [laughs]⁷²

⁶² This was my first performance whilst wearing a suit, aiming to create the image of a 9-5 office worker.

⁶³ Mobile phones had got an easy ride in stand-up since becoming an accepted part of life.

⁶⁴ Sorry Miss Willis.

⁶⁵ This was the first routine I had written without constructing 'jokes' per se. I felt that this was the first clear step towards my 'attitude' by writing with the purpose of venting frustration. I decided that if I was true to that element of my personality, then humour would follow.

⁶⁶ I've subsequently experimented with the appointment slot and found that there are times that are funnier than others. 'Ten to Three' gets a better laugh than 'Half Twelve'. I'm none the wiser as to why.

⁶⁷ 'Bastard' got a better reaction than 'fucker', 'wanker' or 'bugger'. The line became 'No twat to take my money', I believe this garnered a better reaction in part due to the alliteration, and also in the second 'T' of 'Twat' accented by my West Midlands accent.

⁶⁸ Another gig in Southampton had a 'genius' sat in the front row. Sadly, he only told me this after the gig, otherwise I could have quizzed him on a subject of my choosing.

⁶⁹ I thought this was in 'dad-joke' territory, but it gets bigger laughs than it should. I also can't think of anything better.

⁷⁰ This eventually became a story about buying an iPod Shuffle whilst they have you held hostage to your appointment. The iPod I use as a prop is real and has my Dad's gym playlist on it (from before he got Bluetooth headphones). In fact, the iPod Shuffle should be the new name for the dance.

⁷¹ I originally wrote this as 'I've installed a till in my hallway to avoid confusion', but the punchline was buried, mid-sentence.

⁷² The first performance of this routine was at a gig where I was asked what walk-on music I wanted. I chose 'Too Much Information' by Duran Duran, thinking the lyrics would set the tone for this new attitude. What it actually sounded like on the night was an episode of *Live at the Apollo*, had it been around in 1994.

Chapter Four: The Lost Talk

'I've done panel shows where there have been other [comics] on as guests, and I've found out after that they've had four or five writers. That's not a level playing field, is it? They're using performance-enhancing writers. At home, people are thinking 'they're funnier than that Frank Skinner'. In fact, it's five or six to one.'

Frank Skinner, *The Guardian* 29th January 2013

Although appearing on TV marks a huge step in a stand-up career, it could be argued that this comes at a cost. In this chapter I will discuss how the increased prominence of stand-up in mainstream media has impacted upon the creative process of performers. With an increase in the rate at which a performer uses their material,⁷³ external writers are hired in order keep certain acts in the public eye with fresh material for each appearance.

Stewart Lee is the highest profile artist to speak out against the practice of hiring writers and I will discuss his 'lost talk' from 2013 where he revealed the widespread use of third-party writers amongst acts appearing on television. This chapter is the first where I refer to the comic theory discussed during chapter one with some regularity, asking: How prevalent is the use of writers and how has this affected creativity?

'Miming to someone else's jokes...'

If readers have come to expect a humorous or poignant quote to introduce each chapter, Frank Skinner's comments should come as a departure, as he accuses stand-ups who use writers of cheating.

⁷³ Known in the industry as 'burn-rate'.

The opening quote was taken from Skinner's *Absolute Radio* show, where he mostly made light of the situation. It is entirely possible that this was to remain in keeping with his comic persona, as much of Skinner's stand-up material is about awkward situations and his own failures, often around sex and relationships. This persona must be tricky to navigate given his renaissance as a radio host, *Sky Arts* presenter and current role hosting *Hat Trick Productions'* long-running *Room 101* (1994-). Logan notes: 'Skinner's comments – made, of course, in jest – add to mounting discontent within comedy at the glibness and hyper competitiveness of TV panel shows' (Logan, 2013).

Skinner's closing on-air statement was cutting: 'Effectively, these comics are miming to someone else's jokes. Comedians should start returning their awards if they've been on shows that use writers' (Logan, 2013). Despite the direct nature of his words, there is a little irony that he felt driven to slam the practice, as Skinner himself is signed to Avalon - who led the way with the model of artist management, TV production, tour management and distribution all under one roof. In his own autobiography, Skinner discusses the dissenting attitudes within the industry towards Avalon, particularly when he was looking for new management in 1991, stating that 'everyone on the comedy circuit told me they were the evil empire' (2001:277). Seamus Cassidy, Channel Four's Head of Comedy told him: 'if I signed with Avalon, he wouldn't want to work with me again' (2001:278). Furthermore, several Avalon-produced shows use additional writers who are not credited as such.

This chapter almost began with the opening line of the same article, where Brian Logan asks: 'Lance Armstrong has been stripped of his Tour de France titles for using performance-enhancing-drugs- so should standups lose their comedy awards if they use writers?' (Logan, 2013). Armstrong's PED usage was major news at this time,⁷⁴ in addition to his admission of doping, a federal lawsuit had

⁷⁴ As was the fact Armstrong lost a reported \$75 million of sponsorship and endorsement deals within a 24 hour period.

been brought against him for defrauding the US government. This context adds greater weight to the allegations being made regarding comedy awards.

‘Television is like a great big key...’

It is important to highlight the rise of the comedy panel show format which has become a key factor in the marketing of new acts and part of the promotional campaign trail for established artists. Chat shows such as *Parkinson* and *Des O’Connor Tonight* (1977-1982) were broadcast by the BBC, reaching millions of viewers. Scottish stand-up Billy Connolly notes: “Parkinson was a huge deal in those days, going out to ten million people on BBC 1 live on a Saturday evening” (2018:170).

Journalist Ben Thompson believes these appearances to be vital in giving artists the means to impress the wider public. When discussing Alan Davies’ 1995 debut as a guest on ITV’s *Des O’Connor Tonight* (1983-1999) he writes: ‘If there is a comedy equivalent – in terms of constituency broadening – to a band’s first appearance on *Top of the Pops*, initiation to the fraternity of Des’ sofa is probably it’ (2004:40). The sofa of one chat show being viewed as a huge milestone and marketing opportunity speaks volumes for the importance of the format. *Top of the Pops* (1964-2006) had consistently drawn up to 15 million viewers during the 1970s. According to Suggs, it was ‘every schoolboy’s dream, like playing in the FA Cup final [...] it showed all the up-and-coming bands, and everyone would talk about it the following day at school’ (2013:175). Johnny Marr described the show as ‘the holy grail of music television’ (2016:186).

Graham Norton revealed that having a comedian on *The Graham Norton Show* (2007-) is something of a safety net: “If I’m getting nothing (from a dull guest)... then you turn to someone else, or I might be lucky to have a comic...” (Bagwell, 2019).

Norton’s opinion is shared by Chris Harvey of *The Telegraph*: ‘It takes confidence to be funny, and

funny always works on TV' (Harvey, 2010). Harvey's use of word 'always' indicates that like Norton, he sees the comedian on a TV show as someone able to deal with most situations, lifting the mood when necessary. Despite the potentially hostile connotations of the term 'taken over' in Harvey's article *Why stand-up comedians have taken over TV...* he discusses how stand-up comedy has reached a point of such prominence, highlighting that the rising stock of stand-ups is partly due to increased exposure in peak television time slots. He explains how stand-up vehicles are cheap to make, and unlike inviting bands onto television shows, stand-ups are low-maintenance from a technical point of view, requiring just a microphone and an area to perform: 'No set building or costumes; arrive on time and bring your own jokes. Simple' (Harvey, 2010).

It should be noted that the landscape of televised live comedy had changed shortly before Harvey's article, with BBC's *Live at the Apollo* (2004-) moving in 2008 from its Monday evening slot to fill the void left on Friday nights following Jonathan Ross's 'obscene telephone messages for Andrew Sachs [...] the incident that led to his (Ross') 12-week suspension' (Gadher, 2008) during an ill-advised practical joke on Radio 2. In 2009, the BBC launched *Michael McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow* (2009-2011), *Russell Howard's Good News* (2009–2015) and *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (2009-2016) across its various channels. Once it became clear that there was a market for televised stand-up, Channel 4 attempted to capitalise, broadcasting: *Stand Up for the Week* (2010-2013) and *10 O'Clock Live* (2011-2013). The sense that stand-up was 'taking over' would further build as episodes from early series of *Live at the Apollo* were broadcast on digital channel Dave around time of this article in 2010.

Harvey was by no means the first to raise this, although his opening line 'Has anyone noticed how stand-up comedians took over TV?' suggests he believes so. James Rampton of the *Independent* highlighted a similar trend fifteen years earlier in February 1995, questioning the increasing number of comedians fronting television programmes: 'Michael Palin has a lot to answer for. Thanks to him,

comedians are the flavour of the month, nay the decade with documentary makers' (Rampton, 1995).

Chris Pye (then Head of Independent Production at the BBC) gives a potential clue to the commissioning strategy regarding documentaries hosted by comedians:

Robbie Coltrane is a fanatic about America, Paul Merton is a fanatic about the comedy of his childhood. In each case, there's an interest, a warmth, an obsession. If Angus Deayton is fascinated by train spotting, let him do a series. (Rampton, 1995)

Was this final sentence was a light-hearted remark, or indicative of the 'green light'⁷⁵ attitude towards vehicles for big names within comedy? The early TV career of Frank Skinner suggests it may be the latter. When recalling his own initial forays into television during 1993, Skinner says: 'I managed to fit in another couple of TV series, this time for BBC1. Like my three Channel Four efforts, they bombed' (2001:299). It is difficult in 2020 to imagine a stand-up being given continuous vehicles on BBC1 and Channel 4 without achieving commercial success.

The general consensus at the time was that television appearances were the sure route in marketing an act. William Cook believed that 'TV is king' (1994:248), going on to state:

Jack Dee, Julian Clary, Reeves and Mortimer and Newman and Baddiel are household names – not because they've played 3000-seater barns across the country year after year, but because they've done their own TV series. (1994:248)

Bruce Morton, winner of the inaugural *So You Think You're Funny* (1988), explained the importance of TV to Cook:

Television is like a great big key that opens a big door. Not only does it open a door of opportunity for you to go into a room and meet people who can further your career, but it also opens another door so that a lot of people out there can come into your room (1994:249)

⁷⁵ A term used in commissioning to give a project or script the go-ahead.

Morton's view that television is the key to letting influential people into your career and the audience at home into 'your room' reinforces the phrase used by Ben Thompson regarding an artist appearing on *Des O'Connor Tonight*: 'constituency broadening'. I will again reference Morton's words in chapter five, as they hold a 'great big key' to how commercialisation has altered the comedy industry.

'Well, it's never happened before...'

Traditionally, panel shows on British television were variations of 'parlour games', a form of entertainment that became widespread during the 19th century. Whilst the games were predominantly played by the middle and upper classes, the working classes would also participate, where their limited free time allowed. The name originates from the location of the games, which were typically played in the parlour.

The roots of the panel show in the UK can be traced back to *Twenty Questions* (1947-1972) though its application as a comedy format began life on radio with shows such as *Just a Minute* (1967-) and *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue* (1972-). Panel-based programming on television during these years would often involve journalists, actors and other light entertainment personalities of the time and typically, shows such as *Give Us a Clue* (1979-1997) and *Call My Bluff* (1965-2004) were in the daytime schedules. During the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, many panel shows were devised and marketed solely towards a comedy audience.

The arrival of *Whose Line Is It Anyway* (1988) in its radio format was welcomed by David Wade of *The Times* in January 1988 with the bold claim: 'There may be hope in one sector of the comedy front: a kind of panel game, Whose Line Is It Anyway...I believe this show just might develop to equal the *News Quiz* or *I'm Sorry, I haven't [sic] A Clue*' (Wade, 1988). The prediction was correct as Channel 4 broadcast the first episode of the television incarnation on 23rd September that year.

The format was made up of several games that were typical of live improvised comedy, with the addition of a central figure to act as 'judge' awarding points to each contestant for their performance. Early series relied on participation from members of The Comedy Store Players, whose live shows had enjoyed several years of success. Wilmut and Rosengard believe that this was in part, due to the spontaneous nature of the humour:

The routines are based on the sort of 'actors' games' taught in drama schools, but are genuinely improvised within the given framework... Much of the humour is funny largely because of the 'buzz' of being improvised on the spot, but there is a good deal of real wit brought into play. (1989:218)

This summary demonstrates humour created in line with play theory. Even if the same games were played on a nightly basis, a suggestion from the audience or a change in personnel should result in games never played the same way twice. That said, there are clear boundaries set out in the 'play' as the games have rules and will begin and end in a similar fashion. Michael Rosen believes that play 'can create a new order' (2019:20), highlighting that it operates within boundaries, but also shifts them: 'Order is structure, organisation, pattern, a classification. It's the opposite of chaos' (2019:20).

Whose Line... was followed closely by *Have I Got News For You* (1990-). Commissioned for broadcast on BBC2, Ian Hislop and Paul Merton were the team captains and joined often by a comedian and a journalist or politician. Much like the coveted spots on Des O'Connor's sofa or a chair next to Michael Parkinson, featuring on either of these two shows was seen as a major step in broadening the reach of a performer. Frank Skinner remembers:

I got asked to do 'Have I Got News For You?' which was at the very peak of its popularity. The show was made by Hat-Trick Productions, at the time, the Man United of independent television companies, certainly as far as comedy was concerned... [the appearance] went really well, so much so that I was the first guest to appear twice on the same series. These two appearances were very important for me. (2001:282-283)⁷⁶

⁷⁶ At the time of Skinner's writing, Manchester United had won the Champions League, a few Premier League titles and a couple of domestic cups all within 3 years. The reference to Hat-Trick Productions being the 'Man United' of production companies was a compliment in 2001...

At the time of Skinner's first appearance on *HIGNFY* in November 1992, Hat-Trick Productions had already enjoyed success with *Drop The Dead Donkey* (1990-1998), *Harry Enfield's Television Programme* (1990-1992) and *Whose Line...* demonstrating why this production company would be held in such high regard. Skinner revealed several years later: 'My first appearance [...] probably did more for my profile than winning the Perrier Award' (2009:292).

Jeremy Clarkson wrote about the inner workings of *HIGNFY* in his *Sunday Times* column from December 2002 after he became the seventh guest host following long-time anchor Angus Deayton's departure:

Like pretty well everyone, I knew how the show was put together. Throughout the week, a room full of the brightest writers in the land would crank out jokes and then on studio day the presenters would hone and perm them to perfection. (Clarkson, 2002)

Before going on to reveal how the experience worked in reality, it is worth reflecting on Clarkson's expectation. At the time of this column, Clarkson had been involved in television broadcasting for almost 15 years and had appeared as either a host or guest on major TV shows. I would assume he has a good grasp of standard practice within television and had set his expectations accordingly. I also highlight the 'studio day', suggesting it is accepted that performers will spend the day of recording getting to grips with scripts written by others.

Breaking news on the day of recording was deemed newsworthy enough to cull 'Half the script' (Clarkson, 2002). Merton and Hislop were not involved in any part of this process, and 'didn't breeze in till six' (Clarkson, 2002). The reality of the evening's recording shocked the then *Top Gear* host:

They had not seen a script; they didn't even know who the guests were. All they see before the tape players start to turn, are the photographs to which they are asked to come up with captions and the four people in the odd-one-out round. They had the same amount of preparation as the guests. (Clarkson, 2002)

Once the cameras were rolling, Clarkson was even more impressed:

God they're quick. I would ask a question that I know they had never seen or heard before and they'd be off, with a top-of-the-head banter that left me breathless. I wish you could have seen the full one hour and 40 minutes that they recorded. (Clarkson, 2002)

The presence of Hislop and Merton sets *HIGNFY* aside from many comedy panel shows during the 1990s, due to Hislop's career as a satirist and Merton's background as an improv performer. Whilst the presenter operates with an autocue, there is far greater freedom for the two teams. This explains why journalists and politicians often fare as well as stand-ups appearing on the show: The key to being a 'good' guest is wit, rather than planned material.

Based on Clarkson's account, whilst the presenter operates with an autocue delivering their script, the majority of panellist material within an episode is generated in line with play theory. The comic personas of the two captains lends themselves to this, Merton's incongruous flights of surreal fancy are scythed through by the razor-sharp wit of Hislop. This dynamic could only have the longevity that *HIGNFY* has enjoyed by allowing its performers the freedom to explore the situation they find themselves in, demonstrating play theory in practice.

Paul Merton was the first guest-host following Deayton's sudden departure from the show. He offers an account of the writing process in his own autobiography, which lends further credibility to Clarkson's claims: 'In some respects, my job would be easier – with a team of five writers putting together the autocue script, for once I wouldn't be attempting to conjure up comedy out of thin air' (2014:291). Another of Clarkson's claims supported by Merton is the discussion about the host's script before the show: 'The day before the recording, as was the custom, the host met up with the producers to work on the presenter's script, which the writers were working on in another room' (2014:291). Merton invited himself to meet the team in the writer's room, and was surprised to learn that this was far from customary:

I properly said 'hello and good morning' and that 'there were a lot of good gags in the script'. One of the writers said, slightly mystified, 'This has never happened before!' 'What, face to face communication with the person you're writing for?' thinking he was joking.
'Yes', he said.
I've since learnt that this is standard practice. Television hosts rarely mingle with the writers. (2014:292)

It is significant that the idea of a host interacting with those writing their autocue could be such an alien concept. Merton suggests that this isn't restricted to *HIGNFY*, though it is possible that he wouldn't have considered how the writing process works for the show due to the expectation that he will 'conjure up comedy out of thin air' each week. With a background in improvised comedy, as well as his regular appearances on *Just a Minute* and *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*, it would be natural for Merton to assume that every show has input from the performer and much of what makes the broadcast occurs spontaneously.

The information presented makes *HIGNFY* an interesting case study, given the amount of material that is generated by riffing and improvising. The show's reliance on 'top-of-the-head banter' is what separates *HIGNFY* with many of the comedy panel shows that followed, making it an anomaly. I would argue that *HIGNFY* should not be compared to the panel shows that came later at all, as it is informed by radio panel shows which were not strictly comedy vehicles, but improvisational games where 'play' would generate humorous situations. All of which is firmly in keeping with Clarkson's account of his hosting gig.

'Someone had the idea of filming dogs fighting...'

Sketch comedy was still produced during the 1990s although panel shows were consistently drawing large viewing figures whilst being far cheaper to make, as Priya Elan explains: 'It (sketch comedy) has been largely replaced by the topical news panel show – a rigidly formatted, aggressively male preserve that provided instant gratification for a relatively small outlay' (Elan, 2014).

Inside three years, the BBC added *Shooting Stars* (1993-2011); *Room 101* (1994-); *They Think It's All Over* (1995-2006) and *Never Mind The Buzzcocks* (1996-2015) to their schedule. This increase in stand-ups appearing on TV whilst not strictly performing stand-up comedy, certainly confirms the validity Rampton's article questioning the rising number of comedians on television.

The panel show continues to be a hit in the ratings (by modern standards), although questions have been raised for some years about how much longer this format can continue before running out of steam. Rachel Aroesti wrote of panel's survival when discussing Harry Enfield and Paul Whitehouse's parody sketch that formed part of their *Story of the Twos* (2014):

When that sketch aired, it felt cathartic. At that point, the TV panel show – which had been ubiquitous, wildly popular and, frequently, a joy – was starting to seem stale. Fast forward two-and-a-half years, and the genre has truly fallen from grace: *Never Mind The Buzzcocks* has been axed, Stephen Fry has left *QI*, *8 Out Of 10 Cats* has moved to More4 after its last Channel 4 series barely scraped a million viewers, while the past five years have seen *Mock The Week's* ratings halve. Only the Father of the trend, *Have I Got News For You*, continues to hold the fort, a sometimes relevant but hardly essential shadow of its former self. (Aroesti, 2016)

Aroesti concludes that the decline of the panel show is partly due to the new generation of comedians who are conversational rather than cutting, citing that the panel shows of the past decade are now outdated in a more empathetic society.

Milton Jones supports Aroesti's view that comedians who are less cutting will not feel at home on *Mock The Week*, comparing the show to dog-fighting:

The whole contest thing is all nonsense. And we know even down to the pictures coming behind us what will happen... And it's a three-hour record for a half hour show. So it's quite easy for the performers to zone in and zone out. You've got to try and be on for the whole time, so it's definitely not an easy one. Someone had the idea of filming dogs fighting – and it's sort of good television as long as you're nothing to do with the comedy business. Because it looks like, you know, everyone's trying hard and having a good time but if you look at their eyes closely, they're all hating it. (Jones, 2012)

I previously alluded to *Mock The Week* as a show influenced by *HIGNFY* though Jones raises an important difference between the two. In giving the panellists the questions beforehand, *Mock The Week* is giving its performers the opportunity to write jokes before the show begins. Rather than each round featuring moments of individuality and spontaneity, there is a sense that each performer is waiting for an opportunity to do their 'bit' that has been written in advance. Clarkson noted that Hislop and Merton only get the pictures used in the caption competition and the odd-one-out round in advance, whereas *Mock The Week* contestants will get the details of each round in advance. Alan Davies spoke of how prepared its guests were: 'I haven't been on *Mock the Week*, but I know that they prepare material and jokes' (Jefferies, 2013)

It is also worth highlighting the recording time, Jones mentions that three hours of recording is made into a half hour episode, whereas Clarkson had wanted the 1 hour 40 minutes recorded for *HIGNFY* to be broadcast in full. Tara DeFabrizio is a comedy fan who has attended multiple recordings of prominent shows such as *Mock The Week*, *8 Out of 10 Cats* (2005-) and *HIGNFY*. She revealed that there are several reasons for the long recording time on *Mock The Week*:

They record a lot of material that never makes it into the show and that accounts for a good third of the extra time. They do loads of introductions and record the audience reacting in different ways (clapping, cheering, laughing) so that they can cut to the audience in the edit. (DiFabrizio, 2020)

Those who have attended recordings for *Mock The Week* report that there are several occasions where recording is halted so that a joke can be re-written and delivered again, leaving the process feeling quite mechanical, something DiFabrizio confirms: 'They'll make changes if something doesn't land, or just re-record them in different way. They'll include stuff that didn't work on the night but cut to the audience laughing' (DiFabrizio, 2020). *HIGNFY* tapings are much more organic, with lines being delivered again only in the event of a technical glitch or other malfunction, though DiFabrizio does highlight: 'You'll see someone run up to the desk of the presenter and say something, likely a

new joke. The audience can't hear the conversation, but the panellists can, so Paul (Merton) or Ian (Hislop) will weigh in right away!' (DiFabriziano, 2020).

Further to Skinner's comments which open this chapter, in *Frank Skinner On The Road* (2009) he discusses a less than successful appearance on a panel show called *The Big Anniversary Quiz* (2007) a one-off broadcast to celebrate 25 years of Channel 4:

If you're funny, panel shows are very straightforward: you just blast away and have a laugh. Having said all that, I hadn't actually done one for a while [...] Still, being onstage virtually every night for the last two months had to count for something. I was certainly match fit. But not for this match. It was a fucking disaster. The recording lasted till 11.35 – four hours and twenty minutes in total – and I don't recall getting a single laugh. At one point I actually became convinced that my mic wasn't on. The four new guys, Jimmy (Carr), Alan (Carr), Richard (Ayode) and David (Mitchell) totally stormed it; the crowd seemed to love them as much as they hated me. (2009:292-293)

Skinner's account of the recording process confirms Jones and DeFabrizio's accounts of panel show recording times. *The Big Anniversary Quiz* recorded four hours and twenty minutes of material for the one hour and forty minutes broadcast, but Skinner's surprise at his fellow panellists getting a much better reaction from the audience is of particular interest. Six years later, Skinner would claim that panel show contestants who use writers are cheats. Could this have been the reason for this particular appearance in 2007 being a 'disaster'? Aside from Jimmy Carr (who was in the role of host), writing credits for this show are given to Jim Pullin, Shaun Pye and Fraser Steele, with additional material contributed by Dominic English and Peter Sinclair. All of these writers have a long history of writing for panel shows, Sinclair has also worked extensively on several Jack Dee projects (Dee was a panellist in this show).

Given this information, it is highly likely that the 'performance enhancing writers' were in use by 2007. Having taken time out of stand-up prior to this appearance, it is possible that Skinner was not as aware as he would become, regarding this change in practice and fell victim to the manner in which commercialisation had impacted upon creativity in television appearances.

If Milton Jones is correct and the performers are 'hating it', then it is worth asking: How have they found themselves in this position? Stewart Lee was signed to Avalon during the 1990s and he believes that comedy became the new rock 'n' roll once management companies had gained greater control over their acts, similar to how management in the music industry had. This was achieved through keeping the artist in constant debt, to the point that saying 'yes' to bookings became a performer's only option:

The scam is to keep you in debt. That's what happened when comedy became the new rock and roll, loads of people were kept in debt so they had to work off the debt to the promoter who, surprise-surprise, has suddenly set up a production company. 'Oh, here are some shows you might want to write for to pay off your debt', or 'here are some gigs you can do around the country to work off your debt that's has been run up for you by me'. That was the most rock and roll thing, not the beer in the dressing room and some people had funny hair. Now it's like Uber or Amazon, where you have three big agencies. They have a promotional wing, they have an agency that represents comics and they make programmes so they can put the same acts on each other's programmes and they drive the other ones out of business. (Lee, 2017)

Whilst I did not ask Lee for clarification, it is sensible to assume that two of the three 'big agencies' he refers to are Avalon and Off The Kerb (who own Open Mike Productions). The most likely third company is Phil McIntyre Entertainments whose TV output is often branded as Ovation Entertainment Limited, which was home to *Phoenix Nights* (2001-2002) and *Early Doors* (2003-2004) as well as countless live stand-up DVD releases.

If, as Lee suggests, these companies are exchanging their rostered talent for each other's TV shows, therefore controlling the industry to such an extent that they can bring about the demise of other agencies, then it is plausible that the third-party writers being commonly used are also controlled by the same companies.

Consider the interests of a production company, it would make sound commercial sense to employ a contractor that you represent, on the TV show you produce, writing for an artist you also represent. In a creative industry the effects will be more noticeable, as the same writers being used across the company's output will remove unique voices and ideas from each show. I believe it is this model of commercialisation that has created a homogenised industry where mainstream comedy offers little differentiation from one show or vehicle to another. The lack of individuality amongst stand-ups is even more worrying, as the prevalence of third-party writers has taken away the comic's unique voice, replacing it with material that could theoretically be suitable for several different acts. This is at the heart of how creativity has been impacted by the commercialisation of the industry.

The approach of saturating the market and getting an act exposed via as many channels as possible is explained by marketing guru David Meerman Scott: 'Great PR includes programmes to reach buyers directly' (2007:11). Scott's views on PR translate to management companies in stand-up. Gone are the days where management would rely on reviews and newspaper or magazine adverts to sell a tour, they are now in a position to place their acts in front of millions of viewers as a guest or panellist, showing the audience first-hand what to expect if they part with their hard-earned cash. It is important to understand how this behind the scenes information is linked to the play theory of comedy.

Keith Johnstone notes:

'No two people are exactly alike, and the more obvious an improviser is, the more himself he appears. If he wants to impress us with his originality, then he'll search out ideas that are actually commoner and less interesting... People trying to be original always arrive at the same boring answers. Ask people to give you an original idea and see the chaos it throws them into. If they said the first thing that came into their head, there'd be no problem. (1981:88)

In order to achieve the creative mindset that Johnstone suggests, a performer must be free to be themselves; react spontaneously; and say the first thing that comes to mind. Given the

commercialised nature of the British stand-up industry, it is reasonable to assume that some performers stick to their 'script' rather than develop an idea that occurs in the moment. An appearance on television is seen by management companies as an important way to promote a tour or DVD and the pressure to 'do well' is intense.

'The dead hand of rehearsal'

Less than a month after Frank Skinner's 'performance enhancing writers' comments, Stewart Lee spoke at Oxford University about the issue of writers in comedy, a talk which went unreported. Lee then gave the same talk in July of the same year, referring to his February speech as 'the lost talk', explaining: 'there may be a reason why it was lost' (Lee, 2013 ii). Given the subject matter – uncredited writers providing material for high profile stand-ups – it is not unreasonable to assume that there were certain parties interested in keeping Lee's views out of the public domain.

Two months before the second airing of the 'lost talk', Lee appeared at Oxford Brookes University and singled out particular stand-ups for criticism, comparing stand-up in a packed arena to a Nuremberg Rally. Lee was particularly scathing when discussing the material of Frankie Boyle and Jimmy Carr:

They start with a punchline and work back to a set up. The reason there isn't a coherent position is because it's all about getting the laugh rather than having a point of view. Their acts aren't informed by a personality or a worldview. That means they cut down really well into short spots on telly... You could argue that's the job of a professional comedian. Weirdly if your act's informed by a point of view it's much harder to snip it up into things, because the stuff doesn't exist in isolation. (Lee:2013 i)

If a performer uses material supplied by third-party writers, it stands to reason that there would not be a coherent position – there are two or possibly more personalities and worldviews informing the material. In addition to this, if whoever writing the jokes is starting with a punchline in order to fit the persona or attitude of the performer, this renders the writing process a mechanical act of getting from point A to point B. As a result of this, the influence of play theory is removed from stand-up.

My experiences when attempting to put together a short video of my own act, led me to share Lee's view regarding the difficulty of cutting an act into snippets. Promoters often request video clips if they haven't seen you perform, and I found it difficult to find clips that could convey my worldview, persona and also demonstrate that there were jokes, all within the standard two or three minutes. I found that it was much easier to do this with my early performances where I had attempted to be conversational, positioning myself as a friend of the audience, though that was a long way from what my act had become.

A 90 minute show where a performer isn't changing character or persona but changing their worldview in each joke should confuse an audience, though if they are now conditioned to seeing stand-ups in the panel shows environment where 'soundbite' material works well, this would be less of a concern to all but the purists. Perhaps this also explains Carr's demeanour on stage, his rigid delivery can appear emotionless. If material is so carefully constructed and delivered without warmth, attitude or personality, then this asks a bigger question of the place that play theory now has in stand-up.

Lee also suggests: 'If the writing process is at all noticeable in stand-up, then it may be assumed that the comedian has in some way failed' (Lee, 2013 ii). Again, this suggests that material should appear to be organic and part of a dialogue between the artist and the audience, in a similar vein to Tony Allen's description of the now: 'The 'Now' agenda defines stand-up comedy. To deal with the 'Now' and assist with just about everything else' (2002:28).

In *The Naked Jape* (2006) Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves explain the 'reluctance to identify stand-up with "jokes" usually seems to be something to do with wanting to be taken seriously as an artist, and feeling that "just telling jokes" isn't quite art' (2006:120). From watching Stewart Lee and Jimmy Carr's live performances, it is clear that they are poles apart: Carr aims to elicit repeated laughter

with quickfire punchlines, whereas Lee seeks a reaction from his audience, beginning a thought process where they find their own laughs, and not necessarily at the same time as the rest of the room. As a part of his act, Lee will regularly explain to his audience that they need to 'up their game', referring jokes being like a triangle, he is happy to supply the lines from point A to B and B to C, but the audience need to be able to fill the void between C and A.⁷⁷ Sophie Quirk explains, using Koestler's theory of bisociation:

Diagrammatically, he [Koestler] expresses this idea with a line representing a concept (M1) crossing an incompatible concept (M2), creating a joke (L) at the point where those lines cross. Lee's joke works on a subversion of this incongruity theory: M1 is given, but the audience must discern M2 from the hints that litter the surrounding context, and then follow the concepts through for themselves to point L. (2015:102)

Lee happily admits that the rapid-fire gag approach would be of little use to him: 'I don't know how they remember a hundred one-line jokes' (Lee, 2013 i).

Stewart Lee and Richard Herring achieved a cult following during the 1990s, with *Fist Of Fun* (1995-1996) and *This Morning With Richard Not Judy* (1998-1999) (*TMWRNJ*⁷⁸) broadcast on BBC television. When recalling the creative process of the latter, Lee recalls:

It was a thing that was thrown together. You had to write loads every week it was very good for me to think like that... Because it was filmed live it made all the difference because something new, that you had been working on that week still had that (freshness). The stuff that worked well was because it was really happening in real time and it was still being assembled at the point where it was filmed. One of the problems you have with comedy for telly is that it has the dead hand of rehearsal on it which can help it but can also take the edge off it. Lots of things were a result of accidents, the fact that the show went out live and was put together in a hurry it forced you to run with things that would perhaps, if you had more time, you would have abandoned, but because of that they became good things in their own right (*RHLSTP*, 2014)

This statement not only highlights the risks that were taken by the pair, but also supports Keith Johnstone's observation that when a performer over-thinks their response, they lose their uniqueness. Johnstone believes that those who excel at improvisation and play do not fear being

⁷⁷ Not the clothing retailer, though that void was filled by Primark who took on C&A's 11 largest UK sites when the retailer opted to focus on their European operation.

⁷⁸ As it's known to the cool kids.

‘obvious’, claiming that the speed of response far outweighs the need to be consciously unique, he writes: ‘An artist who is inspired is being *obvious*. He’s not making any decisions, he’s not weighing one idea against another. He’s accepting his first thoughts’ (1981:88). Again, this shows play theory having a direct impact on the outcome of a project. The idea that material and sketches were being assembled at the point they were filmed is at odds with the formulaic nature of television comedy now, but over two decades ago, this resulted in television that lives on in the memory of an audience who were teenagers at the time.⁷⁹

Using Johnstone’s opinion on the matter, an act not being able to deal with the situation in hand in the way their instincts suggest, could lead to material being less interesting and most importantly conventional and devoid of the individuality that stand-ups should be free to exercise at all times. In the case of *TMWRNJ*, material that would have been cut, had it not been for the time pressures influencing the creative process, proved to be some of the duo’s most endearing and enduring work.

Knowing exactly what an act will say and when they will say it makes the job of a television production crew that much easier. Performers whose written and rehearsed material can be chopped up into short soundbites will naturally thrive in this model of television production which provides a warning that the freedom associated with stand-up is not compatible with the current industry.

From my own experience as a stand-up, I struggled to understand how material I had worked on for weeks or even months would get less of a reaction than something improvised on the night, be it about the room, town or the audience. I was not alone in recognising the trend, this ‘triumph of intimacy over formality’ (1975:98) that Mary Douglas describes. Improv performer Martin Hulf believes that this is caused by a sense that an improvised performance can only happen once:

⁷⁹ Whilst looking back on music and TV from childhood with fondness is regarded as a psychological phenomenon called the ‘Reminiscence Bump’, in the case of *TMWRNJ* my ex bandmate Stevie Smith (a fellow Lee and Herring fan) concluded: ‘Because it was on Sunday morning TV, it was the closest I got to seeing alternative comedy that wasn’t past my bedtime. It was like a whole new world.’ (Smith, 2020)

My favourite bit of watching an improv show is that you are watching a piece of material that is being created there and then and never to be repeated [...] the 'I was there when...' moments in every show you go to (Hulf, 2016)

I concluded that the material which I created spontaneously gave the audience a live experience that was a one-off event. My approach thereafter was to leave much of my 10 or 15 minutes on-stage unwritten, whilst having the safety net of written material.

As a method of informing material (consciously or otherwise), I believe that play is now relegated to being relevant to a very small niche of stand-ups on the open spot circuit, a reflection of what is seen at the top end of the industry. Televised comedy featuring stand-ups is largely a product of this new method of working: performers able to work with third-party writers in advance for 'games' that will be part of their television appearance. To those in control of how stand-up is represented on our screens,⁸⁰ play and improvisation could be viewed as the enemy of comedy being commercial and marketable, a readily available source of cheap content to fill hours of television schedules each week. In addition to this, heavily scripted live touring shows are beneficial for lighting cues, to the sound desk and even the merchandise vendors in the foyer, particularly when occupying a different building for each night of a tour.

In chapter two I noted the danger of judging art based on its commercial success and Thatcher's attitude that art should be left to operate as any other commercial activity. In reference to Stewart Lee's 'joke triangle', it was tempting to leave the reader to form the line between C and A following the previous two sentences. If a heavily commercialised stand-up industry judges the quality of an artist on their revenue, then we will lose those who take risks, leaving stand-up comedy as a homogenous collective of performers working to a prescriptive format.

⁸⁰ In chapter five I discuss who controls the 'inner sanctum'.

‘The Lost Talk...’

Lee’s talk which sparked such reaction in the media was on the subject of ‘not writing’, and whilst the majority of newspapers built their articles around Lee’s revelation that some of the most prominent acts use uncredited writers, Lee introduced the topic by pointing out that ‘the idea of a stand-up as a writer, as an auteur, is already on the way out’ (Lee, 2013 ii). I will present the part of the speech which sparked the controversy in full, aside from edits where Lee gives an aside:

People like Jack Whitehall, Andi Osho, Frankie Boyle and Michael McIntyre all use writers. They don’t often admit to it, sometimes they do. Sometimes there are these strange credits you’ll see, something called programme associate - blah blah - which is television language for ‘there is a writer but we are going to give him this name because we want to preserve the idea that the comedian is hermetically sealed, that you are getting this person’s individual vision’.

You can see that it’s there, that writers are being used in the shift of tone you get with these acts where there are often mutually incompatible observations or the point of view seems to shift and doesn’t add up. You also notice the case because no one could fill the amount of space they occupy without assistance.

I like to think that stand-up comedians who rely heavily on writers will one day be stripped of whatever artistic awards or financial awards that they received during their careers, like disgraced, drug taking, Tour de France cyclists. The marketplace has changed what my generation and the generation of comics before thought was a given of stand-up comedy, that it was partly a writer’s game. It was, or aspired to be in the 80s, that was what caught my generation’s attention.

Just as The Beatles gave bands of the 60s and 70s the idea that they had to be performer/creators too rather than manufactured singing groups performing material provided by tin pan alley songwriters, this is an assumption that has disappeared from popular music as surely as it’s disappearing from stand-up. (Lee, 2013 ii)

If there was one reason for the original talk being – as Lee claims - lost, I would anticipate that it could be found above. I will analyse as I have formatted, paragraph by paragraph.

‘They don’t often admit to it...’

Jay Sankey argues: ‘To be a stand-up comic is to be an actor, a writer, and a director’ (1998:xv), but as Lee is suggesting, certain acts are merely performers, delivering jokes written by others. It is important to carry out a fact check on the opening paragraph and investigate the use of

Writer/Programme Associate credits. Taking *Michael McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow* (2009) as an example, Ged Parsons is credited with providing additional material.

During a lengthy career, Parsons has been involved with a number of high-profile panel shows and his early work included writing for *Spitting Image* and episodes of *The Big Breakfast* (1992-2002). Parson's IMBD credits make for fascinating reading, as the number of episodes where Parsons is credited as writer are far outweighed by the number as Programme Associate. This is skewed by his involvement on *HIGNFY* for over 300 episodes from 1999 to the present day, but the role of Programme Associate appears on Parsons' CV throughout a whole host of high profile TV panel shows, including the aforementioned *HIGNFY* as well as *Would I Lie To You* and *Mock The Week* (197 episodes between 2005 and 2019). Parsons is regarded by many predominantly as a writer and the press release for London Screenwriters Festival 2020 (where he was due to be a guest speaker) states: 'He currently writes for *Have I Got News For You* and *Mock The Week*' (www.londonscreenwritersfestival.com, 2020). This example supports Lee's claim that: "there is a writer, but we are going to give him this name.' (Lee, 2013 ii)

Lee names Jack Whitehall, Andi Osho, Frankie Boyle and Michael McIntyre as comedians who use writers. Whilst some may consider it unfair to single out four acts as examples of an industry-wide problem, it is vital in this opening paragraph to determine Lee's credibility as a 'witness' in this case. Having established McIntyre's links to an additional writer, Whitehall, Osho and Boyle must be researched.

In 2013, the origins of some of Whitehall's material became apparent when his co-writer (and university friend) Freddy Syborn released a book titled *A Good Bullet* (2013). Much of what appeared in the press regarding the release would mention that Syborn was Whitehall's writer. When faced with Lee's comments about stand-ups that use writers being cheats, Syborn replied: 'I know some

people get very steamed up about writing for comedians. As I see it, Jack and I write together. It's not really a big thing' (Jones, 2013). Syborn's casual response would no doubt anger purists, who much like Skinner and Lee would believe the use of writers to lie somewhere between disingenuous and cheating.

Osho's mainstream exposure came in the form of *Tonightly* (2008) and *Stand Up For The Week* (2010-2013); both shows employed many established writers, and whilst it is not possible to say if the writing teams had written Osho's parts of the show, it is certainly possible.

Lastly, Lee named Frankie Boyle as another performer to use writers. Lee referred to Boyle during his Oxford Brookes discussion where he pointed out: 'The reason there isn't a coherent position is because it's all about getting the laugh rather than having a point of view' (Lee, 2013 i). The use of writers would certainly explain the lack of coherence, which is best evidenced in Boyle's live work, making a joke about Jimmy Savile's 'paedophilic range', before making political points about human rights violations committed by American troops in Afghanistan (*Hurt Like You've Never Been Loved*, 2016). One of Boyle's successful television vehicles is *Frankie Boyle's New World Order* (2017-).

Alongside Boyle, there are a team of writers credited across all episodes. It is worth highlighting that those credited as writers during series two and three are listed in the 'Programme Associate' role for series one, which begs the question: Did their role change between those series?

This evidence demonstrates that the accusation is correct for the examples given, with the exception of Osho. Her TV credits have been as a panellist or on shows with multiple acts, all of which credit several writers or 'Programme Associates'. Whilst it is most likely that she falls into the same category of stand-ups who use writers, there is no conclusive proof.

Another factor that may have facilitated the use of what Lee describes as ‘strange credits’ is the fairly recent phenomenon of the ‘credit squeeze’. Historically credits run at the end of the broadcast⁸¹ but credit squeeze is the term given to the recent trend of windowing the credits anywhere from an 8th to a 16th of the screen size, whilst the bulk of the screen is taken up with a trailer for upcoming shows or more information connected to the programme in question. Writing for *The Guardian*, Ben Dowell raised this in 2013: ‘Broadcasters are capable of responding to the views of their audience on most things, But when it comes to this squeezing of a show’s end credits, logic and understanding seem to have gone out of the window’ (Dowell, 2013).

Acting union Equity first raised concerns over the BBC’s use of the credit squeeze as early as 2004 and in 2012 found that 89% of viewers surveyed were ‘very annoyed’ by squeezed credits (BBC, 2012). The BBC are not alone in this act and it could be argued that squeezed credits make good business sense for commercial broadcasters, who can promote their shows during credits and save a valuable ad slot during the break to sell to an advertiser. Dowell points out: ‘Channel 4 argues that it does not squeeze end credits but ensures they remain the same size by dividing the screen into two panels. For viewers, of course, that still means credits have to compete with marketing for other shows’ (Dowell, 2013).

Because credits are now reduced to a minor feature of the overall screen, it gives production companies licence to credit extra writers and new job titles without alerting the viewer. Without inside information being leaked, it is not possible to determine if this is something acted on consciously by production companies. One thing that cannot be denied is that credits now mean very little due to the ‘squeeze’.

⁸¹ Please tell me I’m not alone in learning Roman Numerals in this way.

‘Doesn’t add up...’

During the second paragraph of the extract Lee mentions the shift in tone of material, stating that it would be impossible to have fresh material for each appearance, given the number of appearances stand-ups can make in a short time period. Eddie Izzard gave the same reason for his lack of TV appearances: ‘You can do a whole tour with one act but if you do it on TV you can’t use that material again because millions of people have already heard it’ (Pukas, 2013)

In the two years preceding Lee’s talk, Michael McIntyre appeared as a guest on countless chat shows/daytime tv; served as a judge on *Britain’s Got Talent*⁸² (2007-); presented *Britain’s Got More Talent* (2007-); appeared on awards shows, documentaries and took his *Comedy Roadshow* out for another series. He then toured his *Showtime* (2012) live show for 71 dates including ten at London’s O2 Arena.

Jack Whitehall had similar commitments during this period with countless chat show appearances, 8 *Out of 10 Cats* (2005-), *Mock The Week* and many more panel shows, presenting awards, and taking part in quizzes. He also released his first live DVD, which interestingly only notes Whitehall as the writer although credits ‘Special Thanks’ to Freddy Syborn and several others. Given Syborn’s admission that he was a co-writer of Whitehall’s, could it be that one or more of the other names listed are also contributors?

Historically, it wasn’t uncommon for a stand-up to take the same 20-minute routine around the circuit for months or longer as Izzard stated. The examples above evidence that the demand for fresh material impacts artists who appear on television regularly.

⁸² Although given that a dog won it in 2012, I’m unsure as to how much talent it has left.

‘Stripped of whatever artistic awards or financial awards that they received’

When Lee refers to those who are guilty of using additional writers as comparable to disgraced cyclists, it is worth noting that he was reading his February 2013 talk. The cycling comparison would have been only weeks after Frank Skinner’s outburst on his radio show and whilst it could be considered that Lee was using Skinner’s material, I would disagree with this being the case for two reasons. Firstly, it is conceivable that two artists undertaking a thought process covering the same subject would arrive at the same outcome, particularly given the magnitude of the Lance Armstrong story. Secondly, Stewart Lee is very keen to highlight a point of view he shares with an unlikely figure; his own website has ‘Plagiarists Corner’ a collection of his jokes that other comedians have copied or stolen, and the opposite, where an act has done something that Lee has taken, knowingly or otherwise. For this reason, I believe that Lee would feel compelled to comment on the fact that he made the same joke as a stand-up who became synonymous with the ‘lad-culture’ that became dominant in the 1990s.

‘It’s disappearing from stand-up...’

In the final section of this extract, Lee compares the impact The Beatles had on music to that of alternative comedy. By suggesting that the writer/performer ethos that disappeared from pop music, is now disappearing from stand-up, Lee is using a widely accepted notion to demonstrate the seriousness of his claims. Much has been discussed about the state of pop music during the last 20 years, with many in the music industry placing the blame at talent shows, streaming and quality of output. At the time of this talk, there were some rumblings of dissatisfaction regarding stand-up on television within the press, as demonstrated in this thesis so far.

The increased number of options that can form the marketing plan of an artist's management company has resulted in an increased burn-rate of material. Multiple radio interviews, magazine/newspaper pieces, chat show appearances and panel show slots in a concentrated period of time require fresh material on a regular basis. When the reality of the situation is considered, it is understandable that artists need a little bit of help, otherwise they would take longer to prepare for these appearances. It is for this reason that a large portion of the blame for this pressure must be laid at the feet of management companies who are saturating the market with their acts.

I have discussed how these activities have influenced audience expectations and behaviours regarding the upper levels of the stand-up industry, but how has the circuit been impacted for those further down the career ladder?

Live Performance: The Town House,⁸³ Petersfield. May 10th 2018.⁸⁴ Act 7 of 9.

(After being announced by the compere, there is a 40 second period laughter from around the room as I feign a struggle to extend the mic stand,⁸⁵ before addressing the compere)

'I'd just assumed you were really far away [laughs]. Is this... (carry on struggling with the mic stand) [more laughter]

So,⁸⁶ I used to try and start a gig with a joke, but there's not really time for that now [laughs].⁸⁷ I'm from just outside of Birmingham, and for those of you who haven't been, Birmingham is one of the most incredible, multicultural hubs of activity.⁸⁸ Walk down one street and hear reggae, see vibrant colours everywhere, smell goat curry wafting out of kitchen windows. Walk down another and hear sitars, smell the greatest Punjabi cuisine you'll experience in the UK. But where I come from, everything still runs predominantly on coal [laughs], and the smell of faggots⁸⁹ boiling away in onion gravy hangs in the air [laughs].⁹⁰

I spent a lot of my twenties⁹¹ in a band. I say band, I spent most of my time in a van. Dressed like a shit estate agent [laughs]. And we had this van that smelled like farts [laughs], they weren't ours [laughs]. You'd open the door, WHOOSH, there's a fart [laughs]. You'd open the glovebox, WHOOSH, there's a fart [laughs]. You'd turn on the radio [laughs], WHOOSH, there's Maroon 5 [laughs]. Every time [laughs]. Turns out it was a CD [laughs].⁹²

But being in a band taught me far more than school ever could, it taught me about determination, about commitment and that if you put your all into something, every last drop of blood, sweat and tears, then eventually, you achieve... Nothing [laughs]. Because that's all life is really. An endless string of disappointments [laughs] until one day, the specialist tells us there's nothing more that can be done [wincing and some laughter]. And then finally it's all over. For this reason, I've decided that I will live a childless life and that wasn't easy to tell people. My parents were shocked, but nobody is more devastated than Harvey, my eight year old son [laughs]⁹³

Anyway, I checked my iTunes royalties today for the first time since 2015 and there is 8p in there,⁹⁴ so things are looking up. Although that does mean that someone has bought one and a half songs [laughs]. I'll play one now, I've got the guitar here⁹⁵ [laughs], if you hadn't spotted it [laughs].

I wanted to write a song about love, and that wonderful feeling you get when you feel like you are falling head over heels for someone and so this song is called Jade, about a girl, called Jade [laughs].

She's married now. Not to me'.

(Plays an entirely inappropriate song. Called 'Jade')⁹⁶

⁸³ The room is above a busy pub, with long wooden benches running the width of the room. It seats around 40, but on this night, was busy enough to have the acts stood at the back, audience sat on bar stools that they had found in a cupboard, and some people stood at the top of the stairs, peering around the entrance. I would estimate that including acts, there was a crowd of 65. The cramped conditions made it one of the easiest rooms to control. Moments shared with one particular part of the audience still travelled outwards and others felt as though they were close enough to join in.

⁸⁴ I'm unsure whether any records were set, but this was an incredibly hot evening.

⁸⁵ I had never considered myself a physical comedy performer, though after watching a video of myself try something similar, I cannot deny that there is something immensely enjoyable about watching a giant (medically factual term) struggle with a mic stand. Compared to my body, the stand looks insignificant, and the humour comes from that incongruity that something so small can bamboozle a beast.

⁸⁶ This is 1:51 on from the point at which the compere said my name.

⁸⁷ It's a common piece of advice that you see: 'make sure you open with a great joke'. But I've never felt comfortable with that. I tried opening with 'Can you see me at the back' for a while and that got a polite smile, but it certainly wouldn't make sense with my current persona to walk on stage and seek approval.

⁸⁸ I often feel as though I'm flying the flag for 'home' when I'm performing. I've seen performers making jokes about Birmingham as somewhere they were pleased to move away from, but I passionately feel that our roots shape our art.

⁸⁹ I find that the material/references that is very Midlands-centric is good to establish me as an outsider to the audience.

⁹⁰ This was written on my drive to the gig. I enjoyed playing with the juxtaposition of two exotic cultures that are present in the city, with a snapshot of 1970s life in the Black Country. I'm sure that could have been better constructed, but my creative process by this point was to have a rough plan of where I would get to (the song, in this case), and decide how to get there whilst on stage, working out the material as it was due to be spoken. I would estimate that my thought process is approximately 20 seconds ahead of my mouth during what I would deem a successful gig.

⁹¹ I try to give a clue to my age to help audiences understand why my persona is as jaded with life as it is. Annoyingly, I apparently look younger than I am, although the grey is getting harder to cover.

⁹² This 'fart' material was devised during an exercise a couple of months earlier, where I had to talk for five minutes about something that annoyed me. I chose the subject of my band's fictional manager, who appears in many stories about that time in my life. In reality, any shortcomings that this 'manager' figure has, are my own.

⁹³ This was one of the few 'jokes' that I included, another was: 'When I die, I'd love to go like my Nan. She just sat in the chair, put her head back, and slipped away. And the dentist shit himself.'

⁹⁴ I like to make sure people are aware of just how little artists earn from a play on Spotify or a download from iTunes. I'm sure it's less concerning for artists being listened to millions of times per week, but for those trying to build a career outside of the highly commercialised side of the music industry, it is very hard.

⁹⁵ It's been 'on' me for the whole performance.

⁹⁶ As much as I would love to transcribe the full lyrics, it isn't needed. The song has a call and response part with the audience that has them singing some completely inappropriate things in the chorus. I wrote this song to try and win favour at gigs where audiences weren't comfortable with my style of stand-up. Unfortunately, I still get told how funny Lee Evans and Michael McIntyre are, when I'm stood at the bar after a gig.

Chapter Five: Can You Get Someone Off The Telly?

'Twenty minutes is all right, you know, but then I wish they'd bring on the spoon-bender or the dancers or do something else and make a variety show of it. But going and seeing a comic for an hour, then going for a drink, then going and watching him for another hour? You think: Christ, will this never end?'

Ade Edmondson – *The Guardian*, 19th October 2014

The commercialisation of stand-up has not only impacted artists trying to establish themselves, but it has also changed the tastes and expectations of the audience. Much of this thesis has used high-profile examples of performers and television shows, though this chapter discusses the current career path for a stand-up who is operating outside of the management companies and packed arenas.

I have opted to carry out qualitative research, described by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (2008):

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts (sic); cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (2008:4).

Of the methods listed, I have predominantly used case study; personal experience; introspection and interview. The 'who's who' guide on page three was written with chapters five and six in mind, due to the extensive use of my own interview material from active stand-ups, some of whom a reader may not have seen perform live. I have chosen to interview acts and promoters at the open spot/paid gigs level, the majority of whom I have met through performing on the same bill. This was important to me, as the impact of activity at the top end of the industry filters down to the lower levels, and those interviewed deal with the effects on a regular basis.

I used social media to make my network of friends aware that I was looking for people to discuss their creative processes and the career path of a stand-up. I was surprised to learn that the theme discouraged some, whilst others requested to contribute anonymously. Interviews would have been conducted face to face where possible, but as a result of logistics and lockdowns, many were carried out via Facetime, Skype or Facebook messenger, all recorded via a microphone positioned closely to the speakers in my home studio. I had discussions ranging from 30 minutes to two hours and I made the interviews as conversational as possible. I asked each performer to reflect on their creative processes, frustrations and their experiences climbing the ladder in an industry where the gulf between the open spot and TV work has never felt wider.

‘Within five years...’

‘Few deny TV has provided the fuel for our skyrocketing comedy (scene)’ (Logan, 2010) writes Brian Logan, a claim supported by Mick Perrin who explains: ‘If I have someone on TV on the Saturday, the Monday sales quadruple. It’s phenomenal’ (Logan, 2010). It therefore isn’t a huge leap from television as a key marketing tool, to comedy on television as the major factor in informing the tastes and expectations of the general public, something Brian Logan discussed with Mark Linsey (then BBC Head of Entertainment Commissioning) and *Chortle’s* Steve Bennett:

Could the clamour to get comedy on TV have a homogenising effect? Somewhat ominously, Linsey says: “Comedians are seeing the value of wanting to do more mainstream material.” Chortle’s Bennett highlights the notion of careerism: “Now you get professional comedians like you get professional politicians, who’ve never engaged with the real world.” Some even enrol on academic comedy courses. “And Jack Whitehall is suddenly everywhere,” says Bennett. “You think, you could be good, but at the moment you’re speaking in that received, this-is-the-point-of-view-I-should-have voice” (Logan, 2010)

The ‘homogenising’ that Logan suggested in 2010 was ultimately the catalyst for my choice of stand-up as an area of research. The commercialised nature of the industry has created a very narrow profile for what works on TV and therefore what receives maximum exposure, creating a product that I had fallen out of love with, both as a performer and ultimately as a fan.

Since the first arena tour by a stand-up (Eddie Izzard's *Sexie*) in 2003, it has become increasingly common for venues such as the O2 Arena in London to host as many comedy performances as live music events, with the face value of tickets now exceeding £100 for the best seats. This growth in the UK was rapid, as Robert Epstein of the *Independent* highlights: 'Fewer than 100,000 arena comedy tickets were sold in 2004; within five years that figure had breached a million' (Epstein, 2012).

With so many performers signed to the rosters of management companies, live comedy is a competitive marketplace. In order to understand why and how the problem is affecting the development of new artists, I must firstly explain the stand-up 'career ladder'. There has been little published to explain the many layers that exist in the career path of a stand-up, prompting me to create the image on the following page. This represents what I believe to be the career ladder, starting with the five-minute spot at an open mic night through to performing in sold-out arenas. There will of course be a spectrum within each level, but in broad terms, I believe that the 'ladder' is as follows:

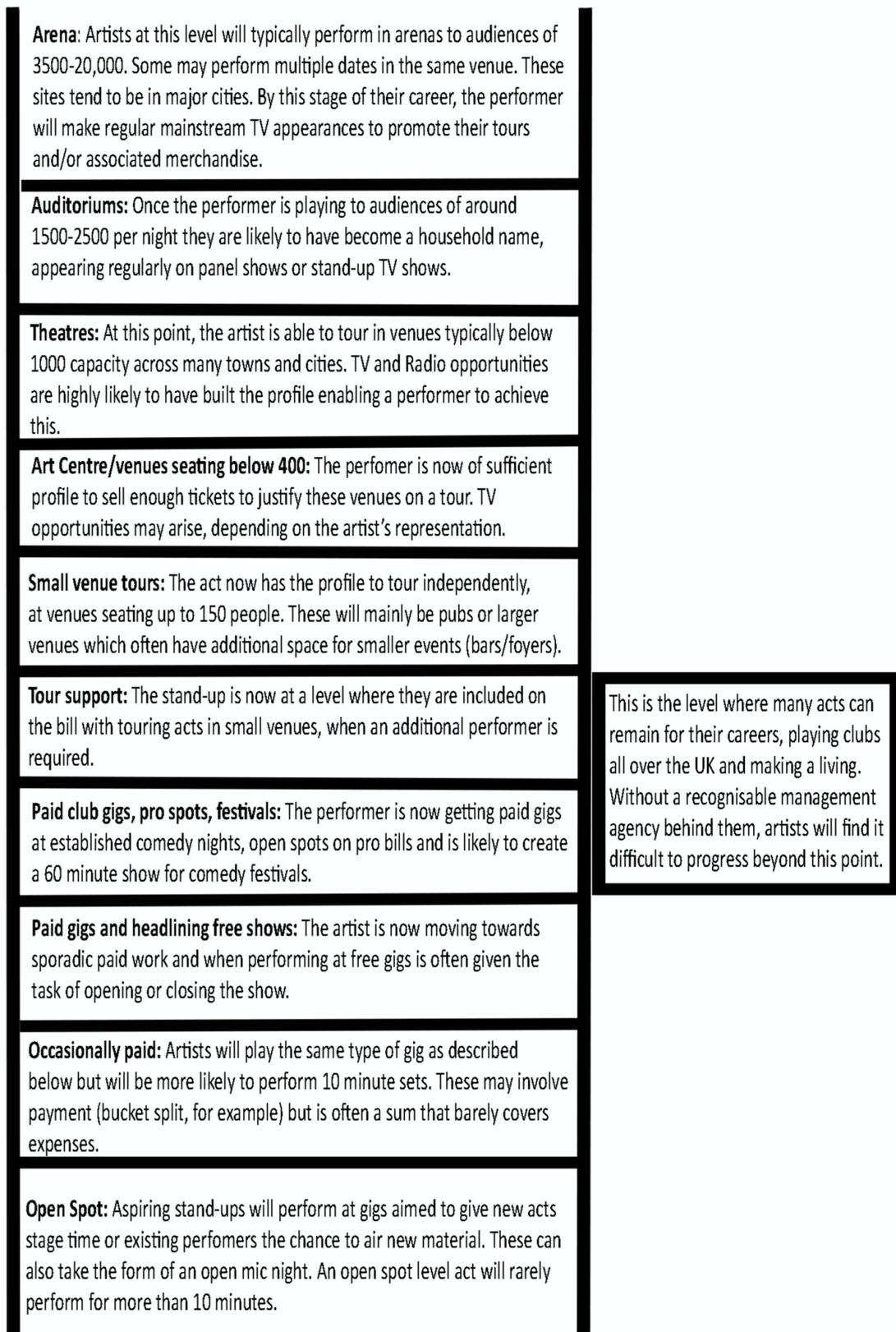


Fig. 1 'Career Ladder'

As of 2020, examples of venues and those operating within the different rungs are as follows:

Arena: 3500 – 20,000 capacity venues, often in major cities, such as London’s O2 Arena and Manchester Arena will feature performances by acts such as Michael McIntyre and John Bishop.

Auditoriums: 1500-2500 capacity venues found in large towns and cities, some will often have one or more venues of this size. For example, despite having the NEC Arena and National Indoor Arena⁹⁷ (both holding just under 16,000), Birmingham also has the Symphony Hall (capacity 2262) and Birmingham Hippodrome (capacity 1850). Artists performing at these venues include Jimmy Carr and Sarah Millican.

Theatres: Typically, these will hold below 1000 but can have capacities between 500-1500 and are found in most UK towns. Venues such as New Theatre Royal in Portsmouth (capacity 667) and Oxford Playhouse (capacity 663) play host to acts such as Stewart Lee, Ross Noble and David Baddiel.

Art Centre/venues seating below 400: These will be standalone venues such as Kent’s The Gulbenkian (capacity 340), or the Leicester Square Theatre (capacity 400). Artists that commonly tour these types of venue are Richard Herring, Mark Thomas and Robert Newman.

Small Venue Tours: It is rare that an artist would commit to a large number of dates in venues of this size, though acts such as Nick Helm and Tim Key have done so during the past decade. Venues will either be standalone sites, rooms above pubs or rooms within another venue. For example, in addition to its main auditorium, Portsmouth Guildhall has Guildhall Studio – a performance space suited to talks, interviews and stand-up comedy, seating 150-200 people. Also falling within this

⁹⁷ I’ll ignore the several sponsorship-led name changes over the last 20 years...

category are comedy clubs such as Chippenham Comedy Club (based in a building behind a pub), and Just The Tonic Comedy Club, Nottingham (capacity 100).

As the ladder demonstrates, there are many stages to the career of a stand-up and individual career paths may stall at one level or skip several entirely. In the experience of the performers I have spoken to, the step from paid club gigs to full tours and television exposure is beyond their control. Progression to paid club gigs and occasional tour support slots requires determination, ability, or a combination of both. To achieve a profile where touring is an option requires the work and influence of a management company to open doors within TV and Radio.

‘I ended up owing £30...’

In order to illustrate the career ladder diagram with a real-world example of a performer who has climbed from the bottom rung to the top within a decade, I shall now briefly analyse the career of Michael McIntyre.

Stewart Lee explained to me that many acts in the modern age are ‘more middle-class people who have got family help’ (Lee, 2017), a point I shall revisit in chapter six, though McIntyre fits his description perfectly. Born to professional Canadian comic Ray Cameron (writer and producer of several series made by Kenny Everett) and with a wealthy maternal Grandmother whose fortune he refers to as ‘millions’ (2011:278), McIntyre was certainly born into a seemingly advantageous position.

His autobiography *Life & Laughing* (2011) offers very little in the way of dates but is more descriptive than most regarding financial arrangements and interactions with management companies. I have had to bridge the gap between his first TV credit as a ‘comedian’ in 2001’s *I Love 1996* and his appearances on *That’s So Last Week* (2005), a topical panel show, as well as use other sources to

help place certain events at certain times. I will present the information using confirmed dates, or the level at which he is operating, as per the career ladder diagram.

5th July 1998: He attends Jerry Seinfeld's London Palladium show, his second experience of live stand-up in a short period after visiting The Comedy Store. Thereafter he attends The Comedy Café and is blown away by the performance of its compere, Daniel Kitson. Fortunately for McIntyre, he had a link to the person running the open mic night at the venue:

‘The booker for the club, Hannah Chambers, went to Westminster School and we had friends in common. So despite there being a long wait for a slot, she booked me in the following week for my first gig. (2011:248)

Open Spot: The first gig went well enough that McIntyre wasn't deterred: ‘After my Comedy Café debut, I had about five further gigs and still hadn't added to my tally of one laugh’ (2011:253). No venues are referred to, although McIntyre does talk about his aim of performing at The Comedy Store, which happened sooner than he bargained for. Having booked himself a slot a year in advance, he was called straight back to ask if could step in to cover a drop out that night: ‘I wanted six months to prepare, I thought I had a year, now I had an afternoon’ (2011:256). It was at this gig in 1999 that Don Ward was sufficiently impressed to book McIntyre for a fortnight later, a gig which didn't go well:

It's one thing dying on a bill of ‘open spots’ because most of them are having a similar experience. But at the Comedy Store, where the standard is so high, it's horrific. It was just as painful for the audience as it was for me (2011:264)

Following his ‘death’ onstage, McIntyre booked a try-out spot for Jongleurs in Camden before registering with several competitions aimed at new or unsigned acts:

I entered four competitions, the Hackney Empire ‘New Act of the Year’, the *Daily Telegraph* ‘New Act Of The Year’, the BBC ‘New Comedian of the Year’ and ‘So You Think You're Funny?’ run by Channel 4...To give you an idea of the standard of comedy I was producing at this time, I was knocked out in the first round of the Hackney one, the *Telegraph* one and the BBC one. (2011:265-266)

As mentioned previously, McIntyre does not supply dates, though it is highly likely that these were in the year 2000. Having not yet received payment for his work, this was about to change.

Occasionally Paid: McIntyre reached this level by getting his first paid spot at Laughing Club in Liverpool for £100:

The fee didn't include accommodation. We found a B&B in Liverpool for £30, and the petrol there and back cost £80. The £100 is of course taxed at about 20 per cent. So after my first paid gig, I ended up owing £30. (2011:287-288)

McIntyre was asked by the promoter if he had any interest in compering at their Twickenham venue's Saturday night show. McIntyre doesn't divulge many details about this, other than to say that he accepted the offer and used it as an opportunity to hone his crowd-work. Once the Jongleurs booking came around, he encountered an agent by the name of Paul Dudderidge who: 'Thrust a card in my direction' (2011:291). It was at this point that McIntyre moved up to another level on the ladder diagram.

Paid Club Gigs, pro spots, festivals: With the help of Dudderidge, McIntyre joined the roster of acts that would spend their weekends touring the many Jongleurs venues that had sprung up in most major cities across the UK. The idea of performing on a bill of three artists, on a Thursday, Friday and Saturday for £500 per week appealed to McIntyre, who was featured on his first TV show around this time: *I Love the 90s* (2001).

By 2003, he had fallen out of love with the regular Jongleurs gigs: 'Not only was I trapped in Jongleurs, but I was also making no progress within it' (2011:302). He was sent to Edinburgh by Dudderidge and after a slow start, found himself nominated for 'Best Newcomer' at the Perrier Awards before coming back home to realise that 'Edinburgh had cost about £4000' (2011:321). In the introduction to this paper, I quoted Liam Gould who had claimed that '...new artists are left in a

staggering amount of debt in order to perform their show, or are even not able to afford going altogether' (Gould, 2019). This sum that McIntyre had been left in debt was eased as his Mother, and other family members had been able to lend him money to clear these debts (2011:322). This provides a clear example of the 'family help' that Stewart Lee had mentioned in our interview.

For the next 12 months, McIntyre's career didn't particularly progress. He was still performing each weekend for Jongleurs and picking up odd circuit gigs, before going back to Edinburgh the following year with a show that was longlisted by the Perrier panel but didn't make the shortlist.

McIntyre was in debt and in 2005 realised that his career was not going to progress under Dudderidge. This level is documented to the right of the ladder as it deserves acknowledgement. There are many great performers who are dependable stand-ups and can make a living doing the weekend round of club gigs without aspiration of becoming known for their panel show appearances. I asked Welsh stand-up Drew Taylor about this: 'It's the role of the professional circuit comic that is almost a separate career choice, the perennial *Glee Club* headliner' (Taylor, 2020). What would take an artist down this path? Taylor explains: 'Getting to the position of a top pro is a bit of a sticking point that some can't move away from, for others, it was their intended destination all along' (Taylor, 2020).

If performers are content to remain at this level, what would be the driving force behind this? Taylor feels that similar to his own reasons for doing very little outside of paid gigs, there may be an element of comfort for these acts to remain at the same level: 'playing clubs every weekend almost replicates a fixed wage, there is a security in staying there' (Taylor, 2020). McIntyre's choice to contact Off The Kerb asking for an 'audition', suggests that there may be another blockage to an artist moving on from the sticking point labelled on the diagram.

Arts Centre/Venues seating below 400: Once McIntyre became an Off The Kerb act, his career trajectory changed dramatically: 'Rather than playing to pissed partygoers, I was performing in arts centres and small theatres to people who were there primarily for the comedy' (2011:343). In his autobiography, he discusses how busy his diary became due to his new management, though doesn't reference the lucrative corporate circuit that he found himself on at this time. For example, shortly after his television debut on *The Charlotte Church Show* (2006-2008) he hosted 2006's 'Henries', an annual awards night in the greetings card industry. In his role as Sales Director for one of the companies nominated, Steve Wassell recalls the host's performance that night:

He performed a short set of observational material in which he referenced the industry brands and companies within it. He presented each award with a comic slant on the recipient's names or organisation they represented. His performance was extremely confident, perfect for a black-tie event. He soon became a regular fixture on TV and I heard much of the same material that caught my attention at The Henries, albeit with changes to place names etc. (Wassell, 2020)

McIntyre continued gigging, including a performance in front of 1800 at the Brighton Dome as part of Brighton Comedy Festival, unaware that Off The Kerb founder Addison Cresswell had an ambitious plan: 'He thought that if I could reproduce my Brighton performance in front of Royalty and on BBC1, I could be fast-tracked to success' (2011:349). Cresswell secured his newest project a slot on 2006's Royal Variety Performance, marking the start of an aggressive marketing campaign. Between 2007 and 2008, McIntyre appeared on numerous episodes of *HIGNFY*; *Mock The Week*; *8 Out of 10 Cats* and released his first live DVD *Live & Laughing* (2008).

Arena: Such was the rise of McIntyre's stock, by 2009 he was performing at Wembley Arena, the site of Newman and Baddiel's iconic moment. From this point on, McIntyre's tours were typically in arenas throughout the UK, with exceptions being WIP gigs or new material spots, though these are rare.

What has been learned from this?

Given my comments on autobiographies in chapter one, McIntyre's is a curious read. He discusses his childhood at length, as is standard practice, but discloses more details about his career than many others, particularly where finances are concerned. What becomes obvious, is that without the raised profile that Addison Cresswell gave his artists, it is unlikely that McIntyre would have moved beyond the Jongleurs gigs that were bringing him little pleasure. I have highlighted this area of the diagram as the point at which many careers plateau, identifying a worrying trend within the industry where a select few hold the key to an artist moving beyond paid club gigs, and towards becoming a household name, something I will expand upon later in this chapter.

I presented this case study to several stand-ups, not referenced within this thesis, as I was eager to record their reaction. Interestingly, when it came to comments about management companies, there was a reluctance for names to be attributed to their quotes. I have therefore given anonymity to all. Comments included: 'He's the perfect example of the 'gatekeeper' role that Avalon and Off The Kerb play'. Another stated: 'It's an extreme example, but others do get that help. Suddenly they are on my TV more often than dust'. Lastly: 'I personally think he is great at what he does. There is a litany of mediocre acts that get forced down the public's throat until something sticks. The worrying thing for us is that the audience at home then assume that this is what stand-up is'.

This final statement stayed with me. If audience tastes are controlled by those who control the artists and television, what impact does this have on new stand-ups joining the circuit?

‘Can you get someone off the telly?’

The number of artists on tour means that audiences often have one or more options of live stand-up within a reasonable distance on most nights of the week.⁹⁸ For acts who aren’t boosted by having TV credits, the scene has become complicated, particularly outside of London. Portsmouth-based promoter Dan Churchley deals with this issue on a weekly basis:

Unless you make it really big, there is no middle ground, there aren’t enough nights between famous acts and open spots. I’d love to put professional shows on with really good unknown acts but once you get to that stage, clients will always ask “can you get someone off the telly?”. That’s what sells tickets. (Churchley, 2020)

The experience of Churchley, who has promoted nearly 150 events during the past three years fits an established pattern where television not only informs the tastes of audiences, but also validates the quality of an artist, as discussed during chapter one where I highlighted the use of television credits in promotional material and tour posters. The impact of televised stand-up on audiences has been addressed previously by Sophie Quirk in her interviews with Mark Thomas and Stewart Lee (2015:155-156)

In chapter four, I referenced Stewart Lee’s comments regarding how certain styles of stand-up work better on television, something promoter Mick Perrin expands upon: ‘The comics who are more surrealist, abstract or edgy – that’s never going to work on Live at the Apollo’ (Logan, 2010). If there was a feeling within the industry that only a certain type of stand-up was catered for by television in 2010, why was this not rectified in the decade since? Could this be a sign that maintaining the status quo is in the interests of management companies?

The impact on new acts is noticed through crowd reactions, as audiences are more comfortable with a performer on stage who resembles their idea of what stand-up is. The recognition brings with it a

⁹⁸ Admittedly not at the time of writing, several months into Covid-19 lockdown...

feeling of safety, though also causes a problem. Scottish-based stand-up Graham Rice believes that audience expectations could turn novice performers off comedy all together:

I think the public expect the quality to be on a par with what they've seen on TV, which can be lethal at an open-mic night. If your average punter goes into 'The Shitsbury Arms' on a Thursday evening expecting Live at the Apollo, they're going to be disappointed. This could turn them off comedy or worse still, make them turn on the performer. An open-micer with a shaky ten probably hasn't cut their teeth enough to deal with that kind of abuse, arguably turning them off performing again too. The heckles are often along the lines of 'this is shit', which leads me to assume that it is a matter of audience expectations. (Rice, 2020)

The plethora of acts on the first three rungs of the ladder, aiming for mainstream success has led to many uncomfortable situations: I have seen innovative artists given the thankless task of performing to an audience unsure how to react to stand-up that isn't in a style that they are familiar with. This tends to be amplified where the artist does not fit Perrin's template of what 'works' on *Live At The Apollo*. Long-term, this leaves a question mark over the career path and eventual progression of artists who do not fit the recognised profile of television acts.

One such comic is Aaron White, who performs a character act, drawing heavily on silent comedy influences. He believes that audience expectations have been shaped by televised comedy:

The repertoire of performers has narrowed substantially, and stand-up is largely regarded as standing in front of a live audience and monologuing. The majority of big acts on TV today just look like your neighbour or a mate down the pub, they look normal. As do the acts trying to climb the ladder. It's as though the idea is to just be normal, to relate to you and talk about your life. It's disingenuous. (White, 2020)

When defining a stand-up, Oliver Double claimed it was 'a single performer standing in front of an audience, talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh' (1997:4). Double's definition echoes White's opinion that stand up is largely viewed as a person on a stage delivering a monologue. Taking into account the age of Double's explanation, this suggests that it has been the prevalent view since the 1990s. To have impacted so heavily on the accepted view of what stand-up 'looks like' is a remarkable achievement given that at the time, alternative comedy was a very recent memory.

This explanation later proved to be too simplistic for Double:

I say 'a single performer', but couldn't what Morecambe and Wise did... be described as stand-up? And aren't there other performers who fit this description, who are not stand-up comedians? What about comic poets? Circus clowns? Storytellers? (2005:19).

Unfortunately for White, his opinion of relatability being disingenuous is at odds with the common belief that audiences should feel warmth towards the artist, as John Gordillo told Chris Head: 'We're not going to laugh at your jokes, and we're not going to care about your story unless we like and connect with you' (2018:11). Whilst researching the relevance of a performer being 'likeable', it came to my attention that a high proportion of acts will use that word in their short biographies online, or within quotes for marketing purposes. It is also in wide use by newspaper critics when describing a performer, so where does that leave acts who don't conform to this trend of being a 'friend' of the audience?

When Peter Cook offered him a slot at The Establishment⁹⁹ in 1962, Frankie Howerd relaunched his career by adopting the persona of an 'outsider' to the venue and audience, as Oliver Double explains:

Defining himself as being outside the community of the audience allows him to be cheeky, catty and cutting, sometimes at their expense, sometimes at his own. There's no real antagonism or hostility, and you can feel the affection of a younger generation rediscovering the talent of an older star fallen on hard times. (2005:145)

The concept of an outsider goes against the advice of stand-up coaches, how-to guides and the style of performers often seen on television, as White himself points out when stating the need to be 'relatable' permeating through the material of most high-profile acts.

⁹⁹ Keith Allen attempted a reboot of The Establishment Club in 2017 for the Russian state-controlled TV channel 'RT'. No, honestly...

White believes that playing the role of ‘outsider’ was a large factor in his struggle get gigs as promoters would often tell him that he wasn’t right for that particular line-up. When he did perform, he felt out of place and audiences didn’t know what to make of him:

My style of comedy was slapstick with props, but it didn’t seem to fit in with the modern idea of stand-up comedy. “You’re about 60 years too late”, I remember being told. It’s not that my jokes were old, it was more the concept of someone with a silly voice and a silly costume doing something other than a monologue. All the other comedians turned up to the gigs in t-shirts and jeans, whereas my striped jacket, boater hat and monocle were simply not ‘relatable’, but I didn’t want to be relatable. I wanted to be the clown. (White, 2020)

Dan Churchley explained to me the importance of finding the right gig for the right act:

There are the right acts for the right gig, that will never change. If you were to put Eddie Izzard on the bill for a military gig, they wouldn’t be happy. If you put Jim Davidson on, they would love him. It’s not massively different in comedy venues. The whole point of running open mic nights is to give people somewhere to perform, but you still have to be careful with who you put where. (Churchley, 2020)

‘The host of someone else’s party...’

The explanation that White received from promoters falls down slightly in that the ‘right gig’ didn’t materialise. It became easier to get gigs in a more theatrical setting, playing to audiences familiar with the influences employed:

I served as a compere for a night of what is best described as ‘performance’. We had a burlesque troupe; a flautist in tights; a magician and someone painting it all at the side of the stage. It only happened once, but the audience really loved my playful and silly stuff amongst the more, ‘arty’ acts. (White, 2020).

The lack of any discernible scene outside London for performers such as White is not a new problem, Oliver Double noted in 1997 that: ‘The idea of pub-based alternative cabaret is less well-established outside London’ (1997:15). As with many issues raised in this thesis, there are challenges that niche performers face that have been publicly questioned yet never resolved.

Within the capital there has been a greater tradition of experimental comedy nights, though they too are few in number. Simon Munnery started *Cluub Zarathustra* in 1994 which ran until 1997 and

despite an unsuccessful television pilot in '96, went on to form the basis of *Attention Scum* (2001) on BBC 2. Robin Ince's *The Book Club* started out as a night of readings from random second hand books and became a full tour in 2006, Josie Long's *The Lost Treasures of the Black Heart* ran from 2011 to 2017 where performers were given a theme for that night and could present their findings on that subject in any way they choose.¹⁰⁰

Sophie Quirk described a typical *TLTOTBH* show:

Long is the compere, and fellow comedian Nathaniel Metcalfe is the clubs only regular act. The rest of the bill is unpredictable, unless you happen to have caught some hints on Twitter: there will be stand-up comedians, but there may also be writers, poets or musicians... others will perform established routines or work-in-progress. (2017:223)

Along similar lines to *TLTOTBH*, *Alternative Comedy Memorial Society* (ACMS) serves as an environment that encourages experimentation. Quirk describes the pre-show warning given to audiences which sets the tone for what is to follow:

The audience must understand that this is a club that embraces experiment, and which therefore permits and supports the comedic failure that is made so much more likely when acts offer new, unrehearsed material, often working out of their comfort zones and subverting expectations. (2018:76-77)

In chapter six, I present my 'solution' for how best stand-up can combat the impact of commercialisation. ACMS is an example of the kind of live show that I propose, though its location (London) points to a greater problem for artists. The number events in a similar vein to ACMS is minimal compared to the number of stand-up gigs that can be found on any given evening, but for those plying their trade outside of London and operating at the 'paid gigs and headlining free shows' level of the ladder, compering gigs is the closest they come to experiencing the freedom to embrace spontaneity onstage.

¹⁰⁰ Long's website still has downloadable recordings of a dozen or so shows. Worth further investigation.

Drew Taylor believes compering spots to be a pressure free environment: 'I can be creative, say what I want, do what I want. It's far less rigid. If the room needs lifting, I can do material that I know works. If the room is already buzzing, I can just see where it takes me' (Taylor, 2020). Will Preston has promoted and compered many gigs, and though he agrees with Taylor regarding the opportunity to be creative, he explains how it can be an unsatisfying experience:

Although it's good to have your own gigs to MC and try new material, after a while you feel like the host of a house-party who's only putting them on so that he can feel great. It's better to go and be the host of someone else's party. To promote and MC can be too much. (Preston, 2020)

The position of compere/MC comes with its own drawbacks as audiences don't always realise that the compere is also a comedian, as Eddie Izzard found: 'The host seems a lower status thing. People would say, "you're quite good, you should be one of the acts". I am one of the acts!' (Believe, 2010). Drew Taylor experiences this often, though he enjoys the reaction: 'People say to me after a gig "you were funny as well, have you ever fancied having a go?". Some people get offended by that, but I see it as a massive compliment' (Taylor, 2020).

The compere role is informed by the dispositional theory discussed in chapter one, as its primary function is to create an environment where laughter is possible. Dan Churchley describes it as a customer service role:

A good MC has to be likeable and able to talk to people. It isn't about being 'funny', though they should be humorous. It's the ultimate customer service role, you have to greet people and make them feel comfortable and welcome. Once the MC starts picking on people it becomes harder for the acts. Some of the best comedians aren't able to MC, and some are better MCs than they are acts. (Churchley, 2020)

In describing the role of compere, Churchley has unwittingly stumbled on a key difference in post-commercialisation stand-up. Historically, artists would take compere gigs just for extra money or stage time, using them as a chance to develop new material. Frank Skinner, Alexei Sayle and even Mark Thomas have all compered successfully whilst maintaining their edgy or confrontational personas.

If, as Churchley suggests, the role of MC is now to purely 'serve' the public and be nice in the process, this goes some way to suggesting the extent to which audience expectations have changed. Where stand-up on television is largely dominated by fairly inoffensive acts, audiences attending live gigs would be out of their comfort zone if an artist was offering something other than 'customer service'.

Despite my concerns regarding an artist being relegated to the role of 'meet and greet', Churchley demonstrates his unconscious use of dispositional theory in creating what he feels is the right environment for comedy. He explained: 'People don't always walk into a comedy venue ready to laugh. Friday nights can be the worst, people haven't unwound from work yet' (Churchley, 2020). Having performed at shows where Churchley serves as compere, I have observed his practice first-hand and whilst there is evidence of theory at work, he confirmed during our interview that these were new concepts to him.

'It's free? Must be shit then...'

There is an expectation that performers will hone their craft at one of the countless open-mic gigs that take place mostly on weekday evenings, particularly those at the 'open spot' and 'occasionally paid' levels. Typically these events are free although some promoters insist on passing a bucket around for the audience to put in some coins towards the performer's fuel expenses.¹⁰¹ Shows with low/zero costs for audience members created other issues, as Will Preston explains: 'If it's a load of people in a pub and it's free, nobody is invested and a performer isn't going to do well. The audience has to be invested' (Preston, 2020). Like Preston, Drew Taylor believes that getting the audience invested in a free comedy show is a difficult task due to the stigma of a show without an entry fee:

¹⁰¹ Although it's more often used to buy a tepid cheeseburger and some limp chips from the first drive-thru I find on my way out of the town. TOP TIP: Always order a fish-based item as it's highly likely that it will have to be cooked fresh...

There's an attitude of "it's free? Must be shit then". They think it's free because it's rubbish. It doesn't have the same validity as a paid gig in the eyes of the public, so they tend to arrive expecting each act to be of poor quality. (Taylor, 2020)

Ultimately, if audiences aren't invested in open mic shows as both Taylor and Preston suggest, how useful are these gigs to a stand-up? Taylor believes: 'Open mics are typically very poorly attended, so you lose the effectiveness of finding out what an audience thinks of your work' (Taylor, 2020), something Mark Watson highlighted when recalling his own comedic journey in *The Guardian*: 'One of the problems of open mic sessions can be the lack of any audience apart from the other stand-ups' (Watson, 2007). However, Taylor does point out: 'Occasionally you'll get a really clued up comedy fan who goes to any gig possible, but that is very rare outside of the bigger cities' (Taylor, 2020).

Whilst Drew Taylor felt that audiences expected a free gig to be of a poor standard, Rice's experience contradicts this, as he discusses that the public arrive expecting a professional standard of acts. There may be several reasons for this contradiction, one may be geographical/demographic differences, due to the different types of comedy nights that are hosted around the country.

An example of a predominantly London-based practice is the advent of the 'bringer' gig, a practice whereby an act can get stage time on the proviso that they bring a drink-buying friend (or sometimes two). Marc Burrows reported a similar picture as Watson when highlighting the rise of the 'bringer':

The last few years have seen a huge leap in the popularity of standup [sic], with more people attempting comedy than ever before. Unlike, say, musicians, comedians cannot learn their craft in a bedroom: real audiences are essential to development, and new acts cram as many shows as possible into every week. The increased demand for stage time has resulted in more and more new gigs springing up, at least three or four on any given night, and though some established clubs pull reliable crowds, most struggle to find an audience, often resulting in 20 would-be comedians playing to each other and the bar staff. It creates a strong community of performers, but provides little in the way of career progression. (Burrows, 2015)

Wil Hodgson points out: 'An audience full of other acts and their mates isn't one you learn anything from' (Burrows, 2015). Hodgson goes on to attack the practice further:

You should get gigs on merit, not because you can bring enough friends. It means a bad act with loads of mates can get a gig, when a good one who's not as popular, or whose friends are bored of seeing their set, can't. It's making the act do the promoter's work for them. Any act that does Bringers is being treated like a mug and any promoter running one should be ashamed of themselves. (Burrows, 2015)

Hodgson also promotes his own shows in the South West and having gigged for him on a handful of occasions, I fully understand his views on the subject. His shows are well-attended, and he has a number of 'regulars' who come to most events he promotes. This renders Hodgson's gigs quite different from much that exists on the circuit. They occupy a space close to what Churchley described as the 'middle ground' between famous acts and open spots, as he will often book a very strong headliner who is most likely at the 'Paid gig, pro spots, festivals' rung of the ladder (often with minor tv/radio credits), charge a moderate ticket price, and complete the bill with three or four strong 'ten spots' with himself serving as MC.

This approach is seldom found elsewhere, where commonly a minimum of 8 acts will take to the stage. Will Preston explains how difficult it is to get the right line-up for a free gig:

It's obviously hard to get pro acts on a free night. I knew that there were lots of open spots on the circuit who were just as good as the pro acts, so I decided I'd get the very best open spots, who were verging on doing pro gigs. For free gigs you must get the 'biting point' just right, you need to book acts that are free but also heading towards the next level. (Preston, 2020)

It is quite possible that the biting point Preston mentions would be a fluid concept and could change week by week based on many external factors he is unable to control (what else is on in town, disposable income for drinks).

'I might not get booked again...'

Will Preston manages to combine paid and open spots and he uses them for very different purposes:

If I'm being paid or doing a longer spot, I will bring material, but there are times when I will go to do a 5 or 10 spot and just start riffing with the crowd, bringing material in wherever. That's a great feeling of freedom. It's about trying new material and if it doesn't work, take it out and keep doing that until the new stuff becomes reliable and keeps growing. Before you know it, you have a lot of solid material. With that comes a confidence of knowing the material so well that you don't need to rehearse. (Preston, 2020)

Preston's location plays a major role in his luxury of choice. Based in London, gigs are happening in multiple locations each night and the chances of getting a five or ten spot to try new material are far greater than Drew Taylor faces in Wales. Though he travels for paid work, the scene for new material nights is far smaller outside of London. Whilst there are some excellent promoters dotted across the UK, the options are limited by comparison and typically, an artist will try out new material during an open-mic night, though according to Drew Taylor's comments above, the poor attendances result in this not being an effective way of discerning the quality of new material.

Dan Churchley hosts a number of free/bucket split gigs and he sees open mic nights as a necessity:

The whole point of open mic is that it's a place to practice. It's a bitchy industry but if promoters, audiences or acts start making the learning process for a performer harder because they struggled on a night, then they aren't contributing to the community. (Churchley, 2020)

If it is the case, as Churchley hints, that some promoters will make the learning process harder for some acts, that must increase pressure on performers to take less risks and stick to their 'script', something which intensifies as paid gigs are offered. Tony Allen touched on the pressure that performers face once paid gigs come along:

They perform five and ten minute open spots in front of audiences of seldom more than a few dozen. This is an appropriate chance to experiment and it may be their last. As soon as they get their first 'paid ten' in an established room, their opportunities to take risks and make the inevitable mistakes start to decrease. The pressure to conform and succeed is obvious and the impetus to cut the clever stuff and stitch together a 'tight twenty' as good as the next guy's is almost overwhelming; but it's also soul destroying. (2002:35)

Drew Taylor's career is currently at the level Allen mentions, getting regular, paid, 15 and 20 minute spots. He confirms Allen's claim, describing his position as a trap:

You get caught in a trap of "there's a big audience, I'd better not try that new bit" or you turn up and it's a small audience and you think "I'd better not try that new bit". It's my own fault for not doing as many open mics to try new stuff, but I only have so much time I can dedicate to gigging so I will prioritise the paid work. (Taylor, 2020)

Whilst not explicitly stating the need to be 'as good as the next guy', Taylor subscribes to the Allen's belief that there is a pressure to 'conform and succeed'. Taylor's reasoning regarding time constraints points to another reason that progression may be limited for some.

In Taylor's life, stand-up is juggled with a full-time job and made geographically harder by living in Wales, where a gig in London would result in a near 300 mile round trip by car or six hours on a train. The 'real-world' pressures that he faces result in stand-up being a lucrative hobby. For the acts that Stewart Lee spoke of in chapter two who 'tend to be more middle-class people who have got family help' (Lee 2017), stand-up is not competing for their time in the same way, as they possibly live close-to, or in London already and don't need to hold down a job. This example demonstrates what Lee referred to when discussing the late 1980s: 'The circuit then was much more socially diverse' (Lee, 2017). This has played a role in the homogenisation of stand-up, leading to the dissenting voices I reference in chapter six.

Despite wanting to be more experimental with his shows, Taylor sums up his concerns: 'I better not try that new bit out because if it doesn't go well, I might not get booked again' (Taylor 2020). If acts without the profile of TV names are feeling as though they cannot take risks with new material, where does that leave their creative process? Taylor admits that the impact on his own methodology has been negative:

I don't want to be "that guy who always does the same set" but it's hard to move away from what you know works. Because I can do 20 or 30 minutes in a club that will usually go well, I

tend to stick to that. It's as if the necessity to write new material has gone. If I've gigged the same town I do wonder if anyone in the audience was here previously. (Taylor, 2020)

This mindset is another example of why I felt the need to highlight the level at which many careers plateau. Rather than being down to a lack of representation by one of the big agencies, it may also just be the level of fame, finance, or workload at which an artist is comfortable as Taylor suggests.

'Can I quote that...'

The success and excess of the early 1990s attracted new people to stand-up, drawn in by the idea of appearing in 'lad's mags' and on chat shows. Prior to *Live and In Pieces* there was no proven market for arena comedy but by the mid 2000s, high-profile acts were regularly performing to thousands. Even in 2002, Maria Kempinska of Jongleurs noted that acts 'used to turn up on a bus or a bike; now they turn up in their BMWs' (Flanagan, 2002).

A number of people who see stand-up as an opportunity to make money focus heavily on their online presence. It may be symptomatic of a wider issue in society, where validity and achievement are measured by some in 'retweets' or 'likes'. During the 1980s a new artist would take a list of promoter's phone numbers to the local phonebox¹⁰² (a story Stewart Lee told me about his own early days in London) and spend an hour on the public telephone. Open spots will now spend that time posting across various social media platforms, hoping to become the next thing that goes 'viral'.¹⁰³

Dan Churchley acknowledges that there are stand-ups who prefer the idea of being a comedian to the reality, noticing periods where the number of acts who cancel their spot or just not turn up to perform will rise:

¹⁰² I promise, they were a thing.

¹⁰³ Gets shared. A lot. No, me neither.

The serial drop-outs come and go. I'll often hear about someone that has dropped out of other gigs, or not turned up. There are people who message me looking for a spot that I'll politely say no to. (Churchley, 2020)

The existence of online guides to using social media to 'become' a comedian (*Backstage* 2020, Spector 2017) should sound alarm bells, though more concerning is the importance placed on looking like a professional act that can sell out arenas before getting that first gig. This influence will contribute in steering performers down one particular path that is proving problematic.

Performers will use social media to try and gain 'followers'¹⁰⁴ regardless of their standing within the career ladder. I personally know of performers who are one or two open mic nights into their stand-up careers do the following: Pay hundreds of pounds for a professional photoshoot in order to get industry standard headshots; talk about a their gig online as though it was in packed theatre, rather than to just the other seven acts who were also performing; create a Facebook page/Instagram account solely to document their stand-up exploits; and online networking, in a smoke and mirrors marketing campaign.

Whilst it is common for television credits to be listed on a tour poster, acts who are still performing at open spot level will often use quotes from other performers or promoters in their biographies or any online marketing for their gigs. This is now an accepted practice, something that I was told to do during a stand-up workshop and others have mentioned being told to do on several other stand-up courses. Stewart Lee discussed the issues with this approach:

People think there's a shortcut by doing something on social media. If I do a circuit gig and another act comes offstage, I'll say "that was good". Whether it was or not is irrelevant, it's just something you say. They'll reply "Can I quote that on my Twitter feed?" and I think "what?". Then I see them marketing themselves as 'has opened for Stewart Lee', it's just someone I was on a bill with once. There's Daniel Simonsen. About five or six years ago I started getting emails asking to write a piece about my favourite new comedian, this Daniel person, and I'm thinking "what? I've never heard of him". Then they say "well we've got a press release that says you told him to move from Paris to London to further his comedy career". And do you know what it was? There's this English language gig in Paris and about

¹⁰⁴ The fact that it sounds like a cult explains my reluctance to engage with that aspect of the modern world

ten years ago I was doing it when a guy working behind the bar said to me “I really enjoyed that, I’ve never seen stand-up before. What would I do if I wanted to be a stand-up?” And I said “move to London, that’s where most of the gigs are”. And that was him. (Lee, 2017)

Following Lee’s claim, I felt it prudent to check back over Simonsen’s press coverage. In 2012, Jay Richardson of *The List* reported how he came to stand-up comedy: ‘Simonsen was advised by Stewart Lee that the UK, and London especially, was a Mecca for stand-up’ (Richardson, 2012). This version of events is in keeping with Lee’s description of their meeting, though in the same year the press release put out by Simonsen’s management told a different story: ‘Daniel made his debut in 2007 having been encouraged to try his hand at comedy by Stewart Lee and Jason Rouse whilst working at a British comedy club in Paris’ (*British Comedy Guide*, 2012). I cannot find any mention of Simonsen by Rouse, though would be interested to know the nature of their conversation.

It is telling that after the time where Lee was receiving calls about a bartender he had little memory of, the press release for Simonsen’s 2013 Edinburgh show played down the ‘advice’, stating: ‘Daniel made his comedy debut in the UK in 2007 after a chance meeting with Stewart Lee at a comedy club in Paris’ (*British Comedy Guide*, 2013). Though not indicating the encouragement mentioned in his press release of the previous year, the wording is still ambiguous: What was the meeting? Was Lee there to specifically watch Simonsen perform? Those answers are left for the reader to decide.

These examples offer a brief insight into the ways that artists are now promoted. Across entertainment as a whole, it has long been the case that management and marketing teams will make achievements sound far greater than they are, though the internet and social media have enabled stand-ups of any level to create an illusion of success or progress where there is little.

‘Have your picture taken with Beyonce...’

Graham Rice was drawn to writing and performing as a stand-up due to a perception of meritocracy:

‘It’s an industry with a low level of entry, accessible to almost any social status. But it’s also a meritocracy, this element always appealed to me’ (Rice, 2020). Contrary to Rice’s view, Stewart Lee feels that the natural progression of the stand-up has been altered significantly from the meritocracy of the circuit he progressed through:

People thought that if they did gigs and kept getting better, then eventually they’d make a living or be known for stand-up. I don’t think people believe that anymore. I think people just want to network or have a Twitter presence, a gimmick or win something, have your picture taken with Beyonce or someone. It was always the case that you kept writing and gigged loads. If you couldn’t get gigs you set one up and booked yourself. Back then, if you did loads of gigs and didn’t get anywhere then you probably weren’t any good. Now, I don’t think people have the faith in that and they are right not to because access to the inner sanctum of comedy is controlled by about three companies. You either sell your soul or you make it very hard for yourself, like Daniel Kitson. (Lee, 2017)

It is telling that again Lee refers to the three companies that control comedy. He believes that the general consensus is that the industry isn’t something that an artist can make their mark on without selling their soul. Once performers reach the level of ‘Paid gigs and headlining free shows’ they are typically looking for ways to be ‘seen’ by those working for one of the three management companies in question, or have made the conscious choice to step sideways, as shown in the career ladder diagram. In choosing the latter, they are resigned to not progressing beyond that level. Lee’s comment that an artist is making it hard for themselves isn’t relevant to these performers, but to those who aspire to become household names.

The industry has undergone major changes since the alternative movement and these have clearly been steered by the management and production companies that Lee refers to, but beneath that level, why is there such a limited scene for paid opportunities and progression? Dan Churchley feels that ‘It’s very divorced from the entertainment industry as a whole’ (Churchley, 2020), his opinion is informed by the business of booking and promoting gigs, typically dealing with artists up to the ‘paid spot and free headliner’ level on the career ladder diagram. He continued: ‘outside of the very top

level, it doesn't have much of a "structure", I'd love to see stand-up taken more seriously as an entertainment. I don't think it's worked out what it is yet' (Churchley 2020).

Stand-up being divorced from other forms of entertainment is not a new problem, as an unnamed agent told Ben Flanagan of *The Guardian* in 2002: 'Comics and clubs have become less discerning, not separating the good from the bad... and new acts are suffering. It's more difficult to break in' (Flanagan, 2002). Another indication on stand-up's status as being removed from other forms of art can also be found in its coverage within newspapers as Stewart Lee explained:

There was twenty years of quite good comedy critics but now there aren't. Newspaper budget cuts mean they don't have a designated person to go to gigs. Clive Davis for The Times never goes to see anything, Dominic Maxwell was good but he got moved sideways and Dominic Cavendish at The Telegraph has to make things up to fit the newspaper's political agenda. (Lee, 2017)

Sam Friedman believes that critics hold a large amount of power in shaping audience expectations:

Critics are therefore not only important in placing individual artists in the cultural hierarchy, they are also pivotal generators of the discourse that surrounds art forms. In particular, they have the power to decide which aesthetic criteria are considered legitimate, and go on to act as 'gatekeepers' for the prestige of this aesthetic canon... Furthermore, critical discourse not only affects aesthetic judgments, it also spreads beyond the printed word into everyday conversations about art. (2017:159-160)

In chapter four I referred to Bruce Morton's claim that television was 'like a great big key that opens a big door' (1994:249), I believe that this represents the clearest signal of how the commercialisation of the industry has altered the career path. Morton believed that TV appearances helped you meet people who could further your career, though if Stewart Lee is correct, management and production companies now act as gatekeepers to this inner sanctum. This means that artist has to find a way to get onto the roster of Avalon or similar before they stand a chance of reaching the large audiences that come with television spots.

The impact upon creativity is a lack of innovation, less risks being taken and a reduction of unique voices. This has resulted in an industry where a small number of practitioners, signed to a small

number of management companies are covered by a small number of writers as they vie for a spot on a small number of television shows. Thus creating the 'inner sanctum' that Lee describes.

'An admiring doormat...'

In chapter two I drew a comparison between alternative comedy and the Futurists, both intended to disrupt the mainstream with their own sets of rules. The Futurists worked in line with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Manifeste du futurism*¹⁰⁵ published in 1909, containing eleven points that Futurist art would adhere to. Alternative comedy had a looser set of guidelines, with artists working towards a common goal. As senior curator of the *British Film Institute* Mark Duguid explained: 'The alternative comics hoped to displace the bloated light entertainment hierarchy, and in particular the casual racism and sexism that characterised much mainstream comedy'. (Duguid, *BFI*). Given the link that I have established between commercialism and commercial pressures on artists, parallels can be drawn between the industry today, and the one Duguid describes.

Reflecting on the issues raised within this research project, I feel that I must offer a solution and have identified what I believe to be the four principles that stand-up should adhere to in order to become fresh, exciting and relevant once more.¹⁰⁶ These are: Innovation; Risk; Individuality; and finally, Spontaneity. I fully understand that my conclusions are influenced by the alternative artists that had such a profound impact on both my formative years and my own practice in the present day. In keeping with the style of alternative comedy and wider traditions within art, I will present this solution in the form of a manifesto.

Post-war, manifestos are most likely to contain policies and promises that may or may not be adhered to by a political party seeking our votes, though there has been a tradition of manifestos in

¹⁰⁵ No A Level in Italian is necessary to translate this, I hope...

¹⁰⁶ I could really do with some music at this stage to build the tension, though it doesn't appear to be that common for a postgraduate thesis to come with a soundtrack CD.

the arts dating back to Gustave Courbet's Realist Manifesto of 1855. Manifestos have given theatre makers and artists a platform to argue for the kind of theatre or conventions that they believe in, often presenting radical ideas in the form of poetry or using polemical language.

My manifesto is presented in the style of great manifestos of a century or more ago, though contains serious points and suggestions for the future of stand-up. I shall include academic references in the footnotes, to ensure the correct tone of a manifesto is maintained in the body of the text. The language and tone are influenced by Marinetti, Settimello and Corra's *The Futurist Synthetic Theatre* (1915) and Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double* (1938). There are concepts in the manifesto such as immediacy and variety which are aligned to John McGrath's *A Good Night Out* (1981), and also Group Hangman's relationship between artist and audience: 'Western art has been stupefying its audience into taking the position of an admiring doormat' (*Stuckism*, 1997). That said, my primary focus is to ensure that artists and audiences understand that we all have an important role in changing stand-up.

Live Performance:¹⁰⁷ Lechlade Music Festival,¹⁰⁸ May 25th 2018. **Headline spot.**¹⁰⁹

*'I had this big opening planned, but you've ruined it now.'*¹¹⁰ [laughs] *What are you looking at Facebook for? I could have told you loads of interesting things about me. [laughs] Easily, right now I could think of*¹¹¹ *seven things [laughs], and not one of them would have been "I'm on Facebook" [laughs].*¹¹² *I'm not going to go on about it, it's done now. So anyway, who here has ever...*¹¹³ *What I don't get right [laughs], is you couldn't even get an up to date post. [laughs]*¹¹⁴ *You used my memory from 2014. No, I'm not going to mention it again, but it's just... [laughs]*

*So, my Nan right... I had this whole thing sorted, it was two minutes about waiting for a bus, followed by seven minutes of funny things my Nan says and then for the last minute it all changes and you realise she died at some point this year.*¹¹⁵ *But this has taken a lot longer than I expected, I'm behind on time now and that's his fault*¹¹⁶ *(points to compere)[laughs]. I'll have to run over on time and then we're all stuck in a field in total darkness. Don't call for help, the band's too loud [laughs].*¹¹⁷

*It was Domagoj Vida the Croatian centre half and the picture of him was the Panini sticker for the 2014 World Cup. The reason I captioned it 'Get back in the painting' is because he is a dead ringer for Vigo the Carpathian from Ghostbusters 2, [slight laugh and a bigger cheer for the film reference] played by Wilhelm Von Homburg,*¹¹⁸ *who was also in the first Die Hard. He's dead now. [laughs]*

(A middle-aged couple enter the back of the tent, nervously looking for somewhere to sit as they realise all seats are taken apart from a table directly in front of stage)

*No, it's fine, you're here now, you might as well stay [laughs].*¹¹⁹ *There's seats here, come on [laughs].*

(I look at my watch) [laughs]

I haven't really started yet [laughs].

(The couple look even more nervous)

I realise there is this big thing about not sitting in the front row at a comedy gig, but honesty, I don't give a shit about your life [laughs].

(The couple sit down)

*I might as well do a song so we can all put tonight behind us [laughs]*¹²⁰

¹⁰⁷ On reflection, this gig was a significant point in my development as a stand-up. since playing the same festival in 2017, I had gigged regularly and was now a very different act. I'd stopped writing 'material' and just wrote songs that suited my persona. This gives me the opportunity to develop material on the way to the gig, once I'm at the venue, or just start riffing with the crowd and see where it takes me.

¹⁰⁸ To set the scene, the actual comedy tent (a gazebo with a PA, as my wife described it) had a power cut, so the evening acts were moved into a much larger tent with a raised stage, wedge monitors, a sound man and full lighting rig. On stage, it was easy to forget you were in a field on the edge of the Cotswolds.

¹⁰⁹ Last on, but given my discussion of smoke and mirrors, it felt right to adopt the mindset: 'if you can't beat them...'

¹¹⁰ This was in reference to the MC, Paul Avery (who I had known since playing the same show in 2017) introduced each act by discussing the last thing they posted on Facebook. My introduction was 'He wants someone to get back in the painting...', a reference that will become clear as the routine unfolds/unravels. Stood in the wings, I suddenly thought, what if an act had been angry that their private Facebook posts were being read out to a room of strangers? What if it threw them off their 'game-plan'? Could they annoy the audience and win them back over? I made the decision to see how the room could be played with.

¹¹¹ I looked into middle distance and mimed the act of counting in my head.

¹¹² Already I knew this was 'my' audience. My persona works well in a room of thirtysomethings who are jaded and cynical in equal measures. They understood that this wasn't genuine anger, and therefore could relax. There were big laughs for words being made up on the spot.

¹¹³ I also shifted tone and body language for the two fake attempts to get back to 'material'. In my mind, I'm calculating the point at which the joke will wear out, to determine how long I can drag out this frustration for.

¹¹⁴ The number of laughs are not exaggerated. This was one of those nights where everything was perfect. Interestingly, I managed to see a handful of acts on before me, all with very slick, clearly well written observational material. Dispositional theory actually caused me to dread my ten minutes on stage, as I worried they were primed for something very different to what I offered. As it turned out, I might have been so different that it added to the sense that this was an 'event'.

¹¹⁵ I had recently been discussing 'sad-comedy' (mentioned in next chapter) with my Dad, so it was clearly on my mind as I embraced the first thoughts that would have made Keith Johnstone proud

¹¹⁶ A large number of the compere's friends were in the audience and they were laughing harder than most as I took him to task.

¹¹⁷ They were, though the year before, I'd been on stage at the same time as 'Modraphenia', armed with a PA that was next to useless.

¹¹⁸ I felt a moment of dread as I wondered if I had just made that name up.

¹¹⁹ I very rarely address audience members individually, but as the gig seemed effortless and I felt in complete control of the audience, I wanted to test how much control I had over new people. Potentially these were 'outsiders' to our private moment and I felt that this exchange would be their 'initiation', as well as asserting my dominance over the evening.

¹²⁰ In the process of transcribing this set, I've questioned why I performed less frequently from this point. This was 'my night', everything went as planned, or more to the point, as unplanned. But rather than a sense of ending on a high, I genuinely believe that this gig was a rare glimpse into what can happen when artist and audience enter into a state of play and allow events to unfold. I'd love to say that I was writing new bits in my head as the gig went on, but I wasn't. I knew I wanted to get to the song but everything else just happened. I was hearing it for the first time along with the audience. It's how I imagine a lot more stand-up was during the alternative era, and upon reflection, I wouldn't want this show to be repeated. It was something special that we all shared on that Bank Holiday Weekend. If there was one thing I would change about stand-up currently, it is that every gig would be fundamentally different to the next. If all artists embraced Innovation, Risk, Individuality and Spontaneity, then it may just happen...

Chapter Six: There's A Punk Revolution Brewing

How did things get so nasty, Logan asks. One could just as easily inquire, "Why has comedy got so nice?" "Why is comedy dumbing down?" "Why is comedy getting so damn intellectual?" Or, more vainly, "When did comedy get so balding?"¹²¹

Brendon Burns responding to criticism from Brian Logan – *The Guardian*, 31st July 2009

Artists. Audiences. Our industry is broken. Welcome to Year Zero.

EMBRACE THE IRIS

The IRIS is **INNOVATION**

The IRIS is **RISK**

The IRIS is **INDIVIDUALITY**

The IRIS is **SPONTANEITY**

THE IRIS IS AT THE CORE OF OUR ART.

Art does not simply entertain the masses. THE IRIS is place where creativity and urgency collide, where sparks fly in all directions forcing artists and audiences to catch them before they land.

OUR DECLARATION IS SIMPLE

The gatekeepers to the inner sanctum are not interested in preserving the principles that produced an artform where the stand-up was an auteur. We proclaim that the big agencies and commercial vultures who came knocking, have reduced our artform to a prescriptive wreckage, a comedic purgatory where so many of us are writing material about the same subjects to fill the same number of minutes, in a bid to either be likeable, or easily comparable to a more famous stand-up. Stand-up became showbusiness and to those in control, the business now means far more than the show. We know we must plot a new course, together, as performers and audience. We have allowed so much to be wrestled from us.

But this is not the end. There is a better way. A place where we create an alternative inner sanctum. But this will not be easy. WE MUST DO MORE.

¹²¹ Also: How did comedy get so formulaic?

Television has been taken over by the management companies at the top of the tree, whilst we have allowed **bringers and unpaid performances** to become the norm at the bottom. As artists, our role is to **create exciting work, not be in debt to management or ourselves**. There must be new approaches to the **live performance**, one where everyone is **paid**. Foolish management and greedy promoters are not welcome in this better place, 2020 has seen some shocking accounts of promoter's behaviour towards **female acts**, and to clean up our industry, we must start afresh. Within THE IRIS, this conduct is **dealt with** swiftly. Corporate sponsorship is banned, for we will not be driven by the desires, **opinions** or influence of other agendas. We will **keep fighting** for what we know is right.

WE MUST CREATE A NEW CIRCUIT.
WE MUST EMBRACE THE IRIS.

The IRIS is **INNOVATION**

It has been over 40 years since alternative comedy began and in order for stand-up to innovate once more, a new movement and attitude is needed.¹²² In an artform with a history of pushing boundaries, why is innovation currently lacking in stand-up?

The answer may lie in the restrictions that artists face. Some see the best way to take the 'next step' in their career is taking a show to one of the many comedy festivals across the UK, though Edinburgh¹²³ is still viewed by many as a milestone.¹²⁴ Festivals such as Edinburgh Fringe have fuelled the belief that an artist is working towards a 60 minute performance. If stand-ups are looking to get

¹²² Mick Perrin has promoted countless stand-up arena tours and believed that change was imminent a decade ago: 'Perrin thinks there will be a reaction against the TV-slick professionalisation of comedy. "If comedy is the new rock'n'roll," he says, "then we're now in the glam rock era. And there's a punk revolution brewing".' (Logan, 2010)

The glam rock era is believed to have been 1971-1975 before punk arrived in 1976.¹²² Given the date of this article, the 'glam rock era' Perrin refers to has lasted at least double the time it did in music, with no sign of things changing in the near future.

¹²³ The economics of performing at Edinburgh is worthy of its own research project (and several have done so), though Michael McIntyre described his own experience: Edinburgh, however, is a gamble. For all the success stories aforementioned, there are many more whose dreams were not realized, leaving them in massive debt. The Edinburgh Festival is very expensive, costing between £5000 and £10,000 to put on a show. It takes a lot of soul-destroying Jongleurs gigs to pay that back. But it was a gamble worth taking, a gamble all aspiring comedians had to take. (2011:306)

¹²⁴ Sam Friedman explains what a successful Edinburgh can result in: 'In August 2010 a little-known comedy magic duo (Barry & Stuart) were spotted by an enthusiastic BBC TV producer at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Within months the duo were hosting a BBC 1 primetime show and within a year had sold out a national tour. The story is a familiar one at the Edinburgh Fringe, where scores of comedians are 'discovered' every year by talent scouts and launched into lucrative and high-profile careers'. (2017:180)

to Edinburgh, then this raises concerns over their development. The festival show ‘template’ has had a devastating impact upon creative practices within stand-up.¹²⁵

Much has been written about how humans deal with adversity, grief and anger,¹²⁶ and the first wave of stand-up shows with a narrative arc and poignant moments were innovative.¹²⁷ These represented new approaches to devising material, allowing stand-ups to become their own dramaturgs, and use the performance space in new ways.¹²⁸

But ‘Sad comedy’ has become a clichéd genre, with some artists now making ‘the sad part’ subject matter for material.¹²⁹ The fact that the topic is a point of reference that artists expect their

¹²⁵ Speaking to Chris Head, stand-up comedian and director Kate Smurthwaite discussed what she considers to be the difference in planning for a longer show:

If you’re just doing twenty minutes, or less in some clubs, you don’t need to give people a break. People can laugh continuously for twenty minutes. But you can’t expect people to laugh continuously for a whole hour, which is why a *show* needs some kind of shape. There has to be a sad bit or a weird bit or a sing-along bit. Something has to happen that isn’t just punchline, punchline, punchline... Sometimes it’s nice to have a moment of poignancy or honesty. (2018:119-120)

Quite rightly, Smurthwaite highlights that a longer show needs some kind of shape. Whilst weird or sing-along bits sound interesting, her suggestion of a ‘sad bit’ has become too common a trope, leading to a large number of hour-long shows about death, trauma, disability and other personal issues and events.

¹²⁶ Gauri Chauhan commented on this in *Stories of Comedy and Tragedy in Therapy* (2016):

Humour and death are vast topics, with their branches reaching into the realms of cinema, music, psychology, science, television, and many more. At the time of writing, a Google search of ‘death and humour’ elicited 27,400,000 results. These included articles on ‘gallows humour’, websites listing humorous death quotes, funny epitaphs and obituaries. (2016:11)

¹²⁷ Sean Hughes won the Perrier award and earned his own series on Channel 4 for his *A One Night Stand* (1990).

¹²⁸ Writing about the increase in these shows, Oliver Double offers a brief overview of early examples from the 2000s :

More recently, there has been a marked increase in comedians tackling difficult subjects, particularly in hour-long themed shows at the Edinburgh Fringe. Serious illness is an important theme, from Andre Vincent’s *Andre Vincent is Unwell* (2002) – about having cancer – to Scott Agnew’s 2016 show *I’ve Snapped My Banjo String*, about being diagnosed with HIV. That year also saw Richard Gadd win the Edinburgh Comedy Award for his show *Monkey See Monkey Do*, which tackled the difficulties he experienced overcoming a sexual assault. A number of comedians have created shows about the death of a father, such as Smug Roberts’s *Me Dad’s Dead* (2006) and Jason Cook’s *Joy* (2008). (Double, 2017)

I noticed this trend around the same time as Double’s article in my own practice. It is common for free or bucket split gigs to feature a handful of ten-minute open spots topped off with a more established headliner performing 30 minutes of their hour-long show. When I was performing on these bills, the vast majority of shows discussed similar themes. I found it bizarre that so many artists were working to the same formula.

¹²⁹ *Carpet Remnant World* (2011-2012) tour, where he explains:

‘The shows that are winning awards now are sad stand-up shows: “My dad’s dead”, “I’ve had chemotherapy”, “I’ve got divorced”, “I’m adopted”[laughs]... Then at the end a bit of sad music comes in... and the comedian goes “but despite everything, I learned that life’s like...’

Russell Kane’s done one. You’ve heard of him, he’s on the telly a lot. He’s done one about his dad dying. He’s done a sad, award winning stand-up show about his dad dying. His dad dies, then he goes a bit mad, then he becomes famous and he ends up getting off with loads glamour models. It’s about how awful that was for him [laughs]

My wife saw it and she said it was great. She said what was brilliant about it, was you weren’t expecting it because it was a comedy but at the end, she said it was actually very moving and she was crying. I said to her “you were crying at the end of a stand-up show?” She said “yeah” I said “well, it’s not any good then is it” [laughs].

What I am impressed by is that he managed to not resolve his grief for long enough to tour it commercially [laughs]’. (Lee, 2012)

audience to understand,¹³⁰ demonstrates how many of these ‘sad’ stand-up shows have been and continue to be created.¹³¹ **What began as invention has now become the convention.**

I accept that this genre of stand-up made the artform accessible to audiences who would have felt uncertain about attending a live comedy show, but ‘sad comedy’ has become a cliché, no different to the mother-in-law jokes being told in the 1970s, due to the multitude of introspective shows that offer little variation on a well-worn theme.

This lack of innovation is an urgent issue¹³² and it is for this reason that I feel the trend for sad comedy has long since outstayed its welcome. **Had artists like Marinetti, Artaud, or Alexei Sayle and Tony Allen not sought to break new ground, there would have been no Futurism, no Theatre of Cruelty, and more applicable to stand-up,¹³³ no alternative comedy.**

Without the vehicles to showcase alternative acts,¹³⁴ where will the next generation of artists falling outside of the contrived, TV-friendly style of stand-up, gain mainstream exposure?¹³⁵ Televised comedy in the modern age is geared towards light entertainers and panel shows that suit stand-ups whose material works in 10 or 20 second soundbites. The making of television comedy is largely outsourced to production companies owned by one of the big management agencies.¹³⁶

Commissioners must be brave and allow more unusual or experimental work on TV, rather than taking the safest and easiest option of letting the industry ‘gatekeepers’ produce their output.

¹³⁰ According to Paul Fleckney of *The Guardian*: ‘So common is the sad bit now that not only is it a cliché in comedy circles, it’s also become a cliché for standups [sic] to knowingly point it out with, “OK, here’s the sad bit of the show now”’. (Fleckney, 2018)

¹³¹ For this reason, I find it puzzling that Smurthwaite believed ‘sad comedy’ to be of creative relevance at the time of *A Directors Guide...* six years after *Carpet Remnant World* and three years after Brian Logan had declared: ‘The ‘dead dad’ comedy show is now much mocked: it’s seen as a cliché, and a cheap way to give your Edinburgh show emotional ballast’ (Logan, 2015).

¹³² Best explained by Tony Allen: ‘He who follows the innovator does exactly the opposite of what the innovator does’ (in Wilmot and Rosengard 1989:272)

¹³³ And my own practice

¹³⁴ such as *Saturday Live/Friday Night Live* (1985-1988) which showcased alternative comedians in the 1980s

¹³⁵ The television formats during the alternative boom allowed for the broad range of genres that existed within stand-up at that time.

¹³⁶ Throughout the thesis, Stewart Lee refers to them as controlling the industry.

Our audience must also work to break away from this conditioning. Their expectations have been informed by the short pieces of stand-up that currently dominate TV.¹³⁷ Because of this, there is a reluctance to broadcast content that challenges ever decreasing attention spans.¹³⁸

Consider if you will, the diverse projects that those of the alternative movement went on to be a part of: Would these have been possible without spending their formative years in an environment where innovation was embraced? During the early stages of their comedy careers, performers like Rik and Ade, Ben Elton and Alexei Sayle were afforded the time to explore and grow as artists, as was the ethos of alternative comedy, despite being on a national stage. Those listed went on to write novels, musicals, theatre and films and as they get older, will become 'National Treasures'.

Ask yourself, would they have gone on to achieve all of this had they been expected to operate within the restrictions and expectations that artists face today? In addition to that, would the performers from the alternative scene have created such lasting impressions had the bulk of their career involved appearances on panel shows being supplied jokes by a third party?¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Following recent news that the new director-general of the BBC Tim Davie wants more diverse opinions to form the broadcaster's comedy output, a fellow stand-up posted this comment on Facebook:

If the BBC really want to improve their stand-up output, instead of dropping "left-wing" comics, they should try dropping the children of their BBC colleagues. They could try dropping people who are better looking than they are funny. They could try hiring acts from more than one talent agency. They could stop commissioning people who have been doing the same routine for thirty years. They could stop paying old comics to go on holiday with film crews and calling it content. They could give writing credits to the club comics who warm up the audiences and write the 'spontaneous' banter on panel shows. They could stop putting canned laughter over dying acts on Live at the Apollo (Anon, 2020).

¹³⁸ Explained by William Burdett-Coutts who runs the Assembly Rooms at the Edinburgh Fringe. When speaking to Brian Logan about the public's desire to see stand-ups they have seen on television, he said: 'Audiences these days don't have the appetite to explore difficult work. They want things that are easier' (Logan, 2010).

¹³⁹ This question could be answered by how Alexei Sayle described panel shows in 2012: 'He meditates on the role of comedy today, the legacy of which amounts to little more than the panel show, which, as Sayle puts it, simply serves to rehabilitate the careers of disgraced public figures: "If Joseph Goebbels were alive today, he'd be hosting Have I Got News For You".' (Parry, 2012)
That'll be a no then

We see the same subject matter, same prescriptive formats, and those who dare venture from the norm die a thousand deaths. We can no longer stand by and watch our art become the narrow field that the gatekeepers insist on making it.

In its current form, the audience are merely observers, reducing stand-up to a theatrical monologue. THE IRIS will find new ways for the audience to be an integral part of every performance. Our live work will be impacted by the attendance or non-attendance of a particular audience member. It is therefore imperative that our audience takes this journey with us, providing us with the courage to create THE IRIS.

We must reject stagnant subject matter and dead formats.

WE MUST EMBRACE INNOVATION

The IRIS is RISK

Risk has long been associated with stand-up and whilst trying something new for the first time or whilst it is still being constructed will always carry an element of risk, the risk is diminished when an artist is performing tried and tested material night after night. For audiences, there is a joy in seeing a performer take an idea to its limit,¹⁴⁰ not only is the artist taking a risk, but they are letting the audience join them on that journey.¹⁴¹ **A truly engaging performance is one that can only happen in that particular room, on that particular evening.**

As with the need to innovate, we should be thinking outside of the conventions that now exist within the industry.¹⁴² Artists have been drawn into writing to a formula and perhaps the biggest and most necessary risk of all would be breaking away from that entirely. It may also be that subject matter has reached its optimum level of risk by virtue of emotional pain¹⁴³ becoming a clichéd trope of stand-up.¹⁴⁴ There are other subject matters that could now be viewed as carrying significant risk if tackled. Privately, artists often reveal that they are particularly nervous about material or

¹⁴⁰ The importance of risk to an audience is described by stand-up and author Sally Holloway when discussing Eddie Izzard's early work, where he would often push his material to its limits:

He had a way of working the fact that he was going into the unknown into his act. He simply used to tell audience that he'd reached the end of the road with an idea by standing on stage staring into the distance saying, "No, no there's nothing more there". Usually the audience would clap... not because there was nothing more there but because of the joy of watching a performer take an idea to the limit in front of them... All people who write comedy do this to some extent in their own home. Izzard made the most mundane thing seem magical because he was creating right in front of them rather than relying solely on written material. (Holloway, 2011)

¹⁴¹ This has a strong link to play theory, something that author Michael Rosen describes when discussing the role of play: 'Being in play, being in the state of mind that says, "I wonder what might happen if I tried this" and then not worrying or being afraid about the outcome, is a state of mind that can cope with the unexpected' (2019:20). Rosen linking the act of play with mental resilience is a further example of how play can inform risk.

¹⁴² As Paul Fleckney explains when discussing the 60-minute format:

What it produces is a certain number of shows each year that feel like a similar overall experience (allowing for the natural repetition you would get from 1,000 comedy shows). They appear to spring from a conscious attempt to write an 'Edinburgh show', to fill the allotted time, and it's often strong comedians selling themselves short. (Fleckney, 2018)

¹⁴³ When writing *The Naked Jape* (2006) Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves discuss taboo subjects, citing 'race and terror and emotional pain' (2006:188) as 'unacceptable taboos' (2006:188).

I accept that at their time of writing, artists building a 60 minute show around personal trauma hadn't yet become cliché, though I would argue with that point regardless, as emotional pain has long been a subject matter for stand-up.

¹⁴⁴ Oliver Double points out:

In the 1960s Lenny Bruce got a lot of material out of his long-term legal difficulties, although by the time he started reading out actual court transcripts he suffered from diminishing returns in terms of audience laughter. Richard Pryor was much more successful, mining comedy gold throughout his career from various kinds of suffering he experienced, notably such health issues as a heart attack, severe burns inflicted while freebasing cocaine, and multiple sclerosis. (2017:143)

discussion involving sexuality, gender identity or religion. If subject matter is deemed too dangerous to take risks, it may be that artists must look for risks that can be taken elsewhere in the performance space, staging or environment.

There has always been a risk in performing new material though the danger that it is now more likely to be documented, represents a change in artist's methodology. Previously, a faux pas during a performance would have likely been anecdotal¹⁴⁵ or 'just a bad gig', whereas it is now likely that any outbursts or moments of chaos would be filmed on one or many smartphones and uploaded to social media or YouTube.¹⁴⁶

Within The IRIS, 'Risk' is defined as freedom to perform without fear of being judged retrospectively. Furthermore, it is important to state that a lack of freedom has led to a lack of risks being taken mid-performance. Many artists trying out new material now worry that the presence of smartphones will result in their newest routines being in the public domain¹⁴⁷ before being properly constructed.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ As Billy Connolly discovered in September 2004, when he referenced the ongoing hostage situation involving British engineer Ken Bigley. In fulfilling his role addressing the now, Connolly questioned why the captors hadn't executed their hostage already.

Stewart Lee offered a damning critique of those feigning outrage at Connolly's material in the *Glasgow Herald*:

There are jokes to be made about the Ken Bigley situation. The sickest, stupidest and most inexcusable ones are already being made by you, the public, privately, to each other, drunk, in bars, or via emails at work, whilst you simultaneously maintain a high moral tone in judging a professional comic's attempt to cover the same ground in a more intelligent and responsible fashion. And you know it. Cast the first stone, I dare you. (Lee, 2004)

Stephanie Merritt of *The Guardian* wrote: 'Some of the articles and profiles that followed the report couldn't have been more bilious if Connolly had kidnapped Bigley himself' (Merritt, 2004). *Chortle* editor Steve Bennett confirmed: 'It was reported as if he'd been actively wishing harm to Ken Bigley, but at the time it came across as him being very honest, confessing to thoughts he knew he shouldn't have had and examining them' (Merritt, 2004)

¹⁴⁶ Home to thousands of poorly shot, illegally filmed performances by acts across the arts. High profile examples of this can be found, ranging from grainy camera-phone footage of *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) actor Michael Richards' racist tirade following the late arrival of audience members, to the multitude of videos on YouTube showing a comedian's response to a heckler. Some of the comedians in question respond with relative ease and put the challenger in their place, while others struggle, and the heckler gets the upper hand. The outcome of the exchange is irrelevant to the issue of risk, as the fact that someone in the audience took this incident as their cue to retrieve their mobile phone and hit 'record' creates an atmosphere where a comedian is having to censor themselves in an environment where they should be free to explore the situation.

¹⁴⁷ Stewart Lee describes: 'If you do a gig and you are trying to work out new stuff, you're kinda worried in a little club somewhere that it'll be filmed and then it's out there' (*RHLSTP*, 2013).

¹⁴⁸ Or they can monetise it.

Out of fear of losing reputations, it is plausible that artists will attempt to stick to their ‘script’ more than ever,¹⁴⁹ losing the immediacy and intimacy of stand-up.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Lending further weight to this argument, Stewart Lee explains how the environment of performance has changed in a world where the majority of the audience are armed with a camera:

If you went badly in a room, that was the end of it and you could get your confidence back. Now, it’s straight on the internet, which is part of the problem. You get people who don’t know how to deal with hecklers and they might say something racist or lose their temper. It’s not in a contained environment anymore and suddenly you’re in a Twitter storm.
(Lee, 2017)

¹⁵⁰ Described by Fleckney as: ‘The most naked, exhilarating artform going’ (Fleckney, 2018).

Our artists must have the freedom to take risks, in an environment free of self-censorship. To embrace THE IRIS is to perform without fear of being judged retrospectively and commit to addressing the now.

WE MUST EMBRACE RISK

The IRIS is INDIVIDUALITY

The homogenisation of artists at the upper end of the ladder¹⁵¹ demonstrates the extent to which individuality has been impacted. This is indicative of a culture that has been allowed to grow within stand-up, reducing art to merely a 'service-industry'.¹⁵² Rather than devising new ways to present material or experiment with persona, many performers at all levels, feel pressured towards fitting neatly within a sub-genre of stand-up, matching the preconceived expectations of an audience, whilst simplifying the job of the promoter.¹⁵³

Meanwhile, open spots are working to emulate the style of acts that are dominating the rosters of the big three management companies. **More must be done to preserve stand-up as art before it spirals further into the realms of light-entertainment.**

Throughout the industry, there is an acceptance that performers are working towards the same goal of a 60-minute festival show. It is my belief that this has contributed to the growing sense that there is now a large number of artists creating similar work, discussing the same themes, for the same duration and in the same style.

¹⁵¹ Promotional material for a local gig recently gave the headliner a short biography: 'Ben Morgan has been performing comedy for 2 years, breaking new comedic ground with material on dating, moving to London and becoming an adult' (The Railway, 2019). Given the overly explored nature of those topics, how would an artist break any new ground with such clichéd subject matter?

¹⁵² Tony Allen explains:

Given the competitive service-industry environment, it's not difficult to understand why so many contemporary comedians have such a limited range of attitude and mostly conform to a narrow range of generic types. (2002:35)

I would love to know how many 'generic types' Allen refers to, as content about comic archetypes is common fare in many 'how to become a stand-up' type of books, as well as many courses and workshops aimed at novices through to seasoned performers.

¹⁵³ I first experienced this when I saw a Facebook 'event' for a show I was performing on, where the promoter had tried to give the audience a clue to the kind of artists that would be appearing: Artist A was prefaced with 'Strap in for some impactful observations'; Artist B was described as '3rd place in South coast Comedian of the Year'; whilst I was given the description: 'not for the faint of heart'.¹⁵³ I found this to be odd as it conjured up images that would have been more common in the 1970s, a frilly shirt and bow-tie, working out whether to offend women, homosexuals or a random ethnic minority, through a fog of Rothman's Royals, whilst clutching a pint of mild. I questioned a friend about this, who suggested: 'you don't do material do you. Most people do bits about Tinder or things their Nan says' (Anon, 2018). I asked the promoter of the event what he meant by the comment:

In some venues I have to be careful and warn the audience if a performer is going to be a bit different to what they are used to. I'd seen you before and when I thought about you playing there, I could imagine the audience thinking "Ooo, he's a bit dark". I'm glad you took it in good humour! (Churchley, 2020)

The prescriptive nature of stand-up has impacted upon the individuality of performers, which has led to an industry dominated by what are better described as entertainers, not artists.¹⁵⁴

It is time for us to reclaim the 'Edinburgh show'. As artists, we must dictate content,¹⁵⁵ running times and banish all conventions.¹⁵⁶ 60-minute festival slots benefit everyone, except the performers.¹⁵⁷

This time limit has created the 'festival show' template which has enabled sad-comedy to flourish, to the extent that it has become clichéd. Mick Perrin may have believed in 2010 that comedy was in its glam-rock era, though recent developments suggest that comedy is working to a different timeline.¹⁵⁸ My belief is that comedy in its 'Hit Factory' era, replicating Stock, Aitken and Waterman's domination of the music charts in the late 1980s with songs of similar length,¹⁵⁹ tempo,¹⁶⁰ and structure,¹⁶¹ performed by their roster of twenty-something 'projects'.

The rise of the one-day workshop has been noticeable¹⁶² and the growing popularity of these courses suggests that further research is needed in the subject, as there is the possibility that

¹⁵⁴ in line with Tony Allen's suggestion that 'The entertainer gives the audience what it wants. The artist gives the audience what it didn't know it wanted' (2002:131).

¹⁵⁵ There have been several Paul Fleckney quotes used throughout this manifesto, all taken from an article looking for alternatives to the 'Edinburgh Show' concept:

I feel a little shakeup may be in order. Not because of any shortage of ingenuity or good shows – it's been a strong year. Rather, because this notion of the "Edinburgh Show" is, I think, stifling creativity and individuality. Comics have perfected the art, so it's possible that what comes next is diminishing returns. (Fleckney, 2018)

¹⁵⁶ In 2003 William Cook raised several issues with how the Fringe was evolving:

An hour may not sound like a lot of laughs for your festival buck, but it's still a lot more than most comedians can manage. It's no coincidence that virtually every comedy club limits all but the very best acts to 20 minutes each. For the most creative comics, an hour in Edinburgh is a useful incentive to try something completely different. But for most stand-ups, that's at least half-an-hour too long. Club bookers have to give the public what they want the whole year round to make a living, and they all learned long ago that half-an-hour is more than enough of most comedians' company. No shame in that - some of the greatest trad acts only had half-an-hour in them - but it's not the way Edinburgh works. Some of the best Edinburgh shows I've seen were double bills but nowadays they're a rarity, and the reason is marketing. Two comics may be twice the fun but it's twice as hard to sell. But at least these Edinburgh shows are one-off gigs you can't see anywhere else, right? Wrong again. Nowadays you can see the best Edinburgh shows almost anywhere, at almost any time of year (Cook, 2003ii)

¹⁵⁷ As Fleckney highlights:

The one-hour format is obviously convenient for festival organisers and punters, but how about loosening the reins? Surely one of the worst things an industry can do to its creative health is be prescriptive, and what could be more prescriptive than setting a time limit? Imagine all albums having to be 45 minutes, all films 120- it would fundamentally change the relationship the artist has to what they are creating. And yet comics have this time limit, fixing minds early and funnelling them into the same creative pathways. (Fleckney 2018)

¹⁵⁸ See Fleckney's comments regarding album and film length

¹⁵⁹ 3:30 ish

¹⁶⁰ 125-135 bpm

¹⁶¹ Intro-verse 1-chorus-verse 2-middle 8th-chorus-fade.

¹⁶² Some last for longer: Solent University offered undergraduate degrees in comedy writing and performance in 2006, University of Winchester, University of Kent, Bath Spa and Salford have all offered undergraduate programmes since. Stand-up groups on Facebook

students will receive the same advice, potentially explaining the current lack of individuality,¹⁶³ innovation and attitude¹⁶⁴ seen in artists.¹⁶⁵

If performers are restricted to a particular archetype, they will struggle to be individual.¹⁶⁶ In an attempt to stand out, there are many acts taking the artform nowhere new,¹⁶⁷ instead, all arriving at a similar position.

Individuality and the desire to be different should be a given, though the pressure of conformity placed upon artists means that this is no longer the case. The current 'rules' regarding time slots are for the convenience of organisers and audience, therefore **all stakeholders must now acknowledge the problems and work together in finding the solution.**

(they essentially serve as a place to get gigs) will often be home to countless posts advertising day long courses are run by circuit acts, often with TV writing credits rather than performance credits (Jeff Innocent, Logan Murray, Mike Gunn for example).

¹⁶³ Chris Head states: 'The identity, style and personality of the individual on stage is fundamental in stand-up' (2018:4), emphasising the uniqueness of the act as being pivotal. If this is the case, then why are performers using such a limited palette of personas and archetype?

¹⁶⁴ Tony Allen sees the attitude of the individual as being more important than the material as 'attitude informs material' (2002:38)

¹⁶⁵ In Allen's use of the word 'attitude', he is suggesting that the individual's worldview is the key to generating material on any subject:

Performers can access a wealth of material by simply applying attitude to any chosen subject matter: observing the world around them, relating their own experience, letting their imagination run riot, expressing their opinions, imparting familiar information or simply playing with whatever comes up (2002:38).

The last point is crucial. In referring to the individual 'playing with whatever comes up', Allen is expressing how important it is for performers to be free to explore and interpret situations through their own individuality. This echoes Keith Johnstone's feelings on first thoughts: 'People trying to be original always arrive at the same boring answers' (1981:88).

¹⁶⁶ Or in the playful state Carroll describes as 'playful relaxation' (2014:42).

Keith Johnstone uses a wonderful phrase when discussing the unique nature of Mozart's work: 'Suppose Mozart *had* tried to be original? It would have been like a man at the North Pole trying to walk north' (1981:88).

¹⁶⁷ Johnstone: 'Striving after originality takes you far away from your true self, and makes your work mediocre' (1981:88).

To embrace THE IRIS is to accept we are all equal, but different. We must work together towards one goal. The gatekeepers have ensured that those with money will find it far easier to move upwards on the current ladder. By removing financial barriers to entry, THE IRIS will tell a wide range of stories from diverse range of voices. It shall be accessible to everyone and anyone.

WE MUST EMBRACE INDIVIDUALITY

The IRIS is SPONTANEITY

Throughout the past decade, a minority of performers have suggested that the boom in stand-up may be coming to an end, highlighting improvisation as the best lifeboat to head towards.¹⁶⁸

Contrary to this, the presence of improv has barely grown within London, let alone influence television commissioners. So why does spontaneity remain an important principle to aspire to?

The relationship between the stand-up and their audience should be built on immediacy, demonstrated by audience reactions to impromptu material created in the moment.¹⁶⁹ This approach is at odds with the overriding sentiment amongst many performers, who feel that they must work on their material until it becomes the finished article, or worse still, write it to ensure the audience feel as though it isn't rehearsed.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ In 2012 Gareth Morinan optimistically wrote for *Chortle* 'Why improv is better than stand-up'. The points raised by Morinan were in keeping with many articles from 2010-2014 that are referenced throughout this thesis, questioning the over-saturation of stand-ups on TV.

¹⁶⁹ Stewart Lee addresses the importance of spontaneity:

Nobody laughs at anyone they feel is trying too hard to entertain them. The key to stand-up for me is that it should feel as though it hasn't been written. Often the best way to make a piece of writing sound as though it hasn't been written is to not write it at all. (Lee, 2013ii)

Will Preston also believes that audiences want to feel as though what they are watching isn't part of a choreographed performance, though suggests it is enough to make a gig only *feel* spontaneous:

If you're reading from a script, a comedy crowd can always tell. You have to make it as less obvious as possible, they might not laugh because it's like they are watching something rather than engaging with it. You have to make it feel spontaneous. (Preston, 2020)

If part of the creative process is to make material *sound* spontaneous, then would it not be far easier to just be spontaneous? Rather than be free to explore ideas and their material, what Preston suggests would surely bring an added pressure to ensure that the delivery and performance *feels* spontaneous. Would there be a rehearsal process? In working out how to deliver the material it is likely that the 'dead hand of rehearsal' that Stewart Lee spoke of will take away the joy and excitement¹⁶⁹ that being truly spontaneous brings.

¹⁷⁰ Some stand-ups have commented that dropping their written material to improvise has been the making of them, as was the case with Michael McIntyre:

I ditched most of my mediocre material and just played with the audience. I improvised and enjoyed myself. I wasn't trying to be funny, I was just having fun... for the first time I was myself onstage, the best of me... That night I learned for myself that I could do it, I wasn't wasting my time. (2011:313)

McIntyre referring to his 'play' with the audience is curious, given that in chapter four it was established that he was one of the high-profile acts with material written for his numerous television appearances. If McIntyre was so excited by this development where ditching material and improvising his way through routine made him feel that he was being himself, why alter the approach? Again, it is in line with Keith Johnstone's thoughts on being unique that McIntyre would finally feel like he was being himself once the prepared material gave way to in the moment observations and improvisation. It is also a clear indicator of the role that play theory has within stand-up: McIntyre felt that he could 'do it' when he just used the audience in front of him to provide his starting points and just riffed off of what came forward.

The fact that artists are creating work that gives the illusion of spontaneity, demonstrates their acknowledgement of its importance.

The four principles of IRIS demand that performers are granted freedom, in a risk-free environment, and the opportunity to relax fully and play. Spontaneity is perhaps the one principle above all others that requires these conditions, after all, there should be no filters or distractions when an artist is constructing material in front of their audience.¹⁷¹

Ross Noble is the highest profile stand-up whose performance is informed by the principle of spontaneity. The concept of sitting down to carefully construct a new live show appears the antithesis of Noble's approach,¹⁷² demonstrated through the immediacy of his work.¹⁷³ Furthermore Noble's practice is closely aligned to the IRIS concept. His live shows are often chaotic, with audience interactions launching him into complex stories.¹⁷⁴ He skilfully moves through these sections in a manner that results in an audience observing a tangent is only happening for them on that particular night,¹⁷⁵ a fundamental aspect of the IRIS concept.

¹⁷¹ Oliver Double describes the required state of mind when dealing with heckles:

When I'm totally relaxed and my comedy is in full flow, I can swat away a heckler without even thinking about it. The right thing to say pops into my head unbidden and without a second thought it trips straight off my tongue (1997:135)

¹⁷² Noble described his approach to a new live show and highlights a key point of IRIS – Stand-up can be anything you want it to be:

Comedians will sit down and come up with a show and when it is written they will tour with it. I come up with ideas and they collide together and then someone will say something in the audience and I go off on a tangent. It is like a particle accelerator. I smash things together and see where it takes me. That is the fun of stand-up. It can be what you want it to be. (Noble, 2019)

¹⁷³ Steve Bennett noted:

The trend in comedy is towards the carefully authored show, tightly structured with resonating themes and neatly resolved plot points. Needless to say the digressive, easily-distracted style of [Ross Noble](#) is the antithesis of this, with the comic launching off on wild tangents and generating as much from the audience as he can, to create the feeling that the show you're watching could only ever have happened here and now. (Bennett, 2018)

¹⁷⁴ As an example, his *Non Sensory Overload* (2012) live DVD opens with an interaction with a tattooed audience member named Daniel that leads to several minutes of improvised material that leads to theories on time travel, cheating at pub quizzes and a plan for the whole audience to greet the occupants of the four empty seats near to the audience member in question. As his set continues, Noble goes back to the same audience member intermittently to ask more questions to continue his improvised subject matter.

¹⁷⁵ I enquired further about these, as I'd been wary of assuming they were entirely spontaneous after seeing Al Murray as the Pub Landlord go through clearly tried and tested material when a member of the audience has a particular job or name: Julian Hall of the *Independent* noted: 'Murray's act does need some refurbishment before being further exposed, with plenty of room for new ideas, new formulas and more imaginative and spontaneous banter with the punters' (Hall, 2006). Playwright Richard Marsh discusses spontaneity of his live work:

It always feels like he's making it up as he goes along, because large chunks are. He gets the front couple of rows involved early on and builds the night around them, referring back to them as other subjects come up. (Marsh, 2020)

With regard to material created in this manner, audiences find a different pleasure in joining the artist on that journey¹⁷⁶ and from my experience on, and off stage, I believe this creates a deeper, more rewarding pleasure.¹⁷⁷

It is for these reasons that spontaneity is integral to not only stand-up but the live experience across many areas of popular performance.¹⁷⁸ **In stand-up, to be spontaneous is to acknowledge that this performance is a one-off event, made possible by the audience as much as the artist.** As timeslots and subject matter become ever more restrictive and prescriptive, being truly spontaneous will enable stand-up to become exciting once more.

¹⁷⁶ This also echoes Holloway's take on Eddie Izzard's improvising on stage, making 'the most mundane thing seem magical' (Chortle, 2011) It could also be said that dispositional theory plays a large role in spontaneous situations like those described. The audience are being manipulated in both examples to be in the frame of mind that anything could happen and to be accepting of the play that may happen throughout the show. In the case of Izzard, the theory is educating the audience that if the artist does go off on a tangent, it is safe to go with him and could be a rewarding process.

¹⁷⁷ I first experienced the need to be spontaneous onstage during a time that I had committed to rewriting entire routines after each gig. Before long I was left with material that I'd lost interest in, performed without the conviction it once had. After a few performances, the more trusted jokes were not getting the reactions I was used to and listening back to recordings showed that the delivery sounded un-organic. In searching for answers to this, I was reminded of my days playing music.

We would often rehearse a few times per week in the run up to important shows and we were very polished, perhaps too polished. The moments of true joy and connection between ourselves and audience would be less likely to occur during the songs that we had played repeatedly and rehearsed multiple times, but most likely during a wrong note that led to an impromptu jam through whatever song I would start singing. Our only rule in those moments was 'never the same song twice'. Some would take on a life of their own and last 5 minutes or more, others would stumble to a painful halt after 20 seconds as we each played a different note going into a chorus. One night, I'd be Dolly Parton, singing 'Islands in the Stream', the next, I was Dizzee Rascal, Neil Diamond or Katy Perry.¹⁷⁷

From this, I learned that the moments that were most popular and provided talking points were not those where I wanted the crowd to sit back and admire me, but the ones where the whole performance was hanging together by a thread as four men metaphorically walked a tightrope right in front of a room of people. The audience felt that they were taking that 'walk' with us and when we then got back into our own song, there was always a separate cheer, acknowledging that the happening they had just witnessed was something that could only happen in that moment, on that night. It is this feeling that inspired several points of the manifesto, particularly that the audience must have a material impact on the show.

¹⁷⁸ In September 2020, John Cleese discussed the relationship between creativity and risk:

There are so many things you mustn't say [...] it's a mine field. If you're watching what you say all the time, then you'll never be creative because real creativity comes out of spontaneity. And spontaneity is what happens when you play (Cleese, 2020)

The concept of an artist being a writer, director and performer will be the defining feature of THE IRIS. Third party writers will not be tolerated, nor will acts performing the same material twice. Every performance must be a one off, it can only happen in that space, at that time.

WE MUST EMBRACE SPONTANEITY.

WE MUST EMBRACE INNOVATION.

WE MUST EMBRACE RISK.

WE MUST EMBRACE INDIVIDUALITY.

WE MUST EMBRACE SPONTANEITY.

WE MUST EMBRACE IRIS.

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