**The origin of the term ‘stand-up comedy’ – update**

In a recent edition of *Comedy Studies* (VOL. 8, NO. 1, 106-09), I traced the origin of the term ‘stand-up comedy’, and the related terms ‘stand-up comic’ and ‘stand-up comedian’. My earliest positive identification of the term *stand-up* in relation to a particular form of comic performance was found in a review of a show at Slapsy Maxie’s in Los Angeles, in a copy of *Variety* dated 23 June 1948, which described Lou Holtz as a ‘stand-up comic’.

However, I also cited a much earlier usage in a review of a concert in London in 1911, which described Miss Nellie Perrier rendering ‘“stand up” comic ditties in a *chic* and charming manner’ (*Stage* 1911). Clearly, Perrier was not performing stand-up comedy as we would recognise it, but as I pointed out, the use of inverted commas around the term ‘stand up’ gives a tantalising hint that it might have referred to a particular mode of performing the comic songs rather than just indicating that she sang them standing up. Nonetheless, the ambiguity involved in this earlier usage meant that the 1948 reference to Lou Holtz was the earliest use of the term *stand-up* in the sense we would understand it.

At the end of the article, I challenged readers to find earlier usages, and a couple of months ago my friend Duncan Law – who is not an academic – managed to find one which predates the 1948 *Variety* review by an impressive margin. In the ‘Stage Gossip’ column of the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, dated 10 November 1917, there is an item about a performer called Finlay Dunn, who was presenting an act made up of comic songs at the piano at the Leeds Hippodrome that week. The article reveals that Dunn had only recently started playing variety theatres, having previously come from ‘the pierrot and concert party school’. Indeed, it invites readers to recall Dunn’s appearances ‘with the Adeler and Sutton parties at Southport or New Brighton’, in the same company as notable comic performers like Whit Cunliffe and Malcolm Scott.

Crucially, the article states that Dunn ‘made his way, in former times, otherwise than as a rattler of “the dominoes.”’ In other words, he did not appear in concert parties as a pianist. Instead, ‘He played, in those days, simply as what he calls “a stand-up comedian,” though he must have been a useful deputy for the piano.’ Here, then, we have a usage of the term stand-up in relations to comic performance, which predates the *Variety* review by over 30 years. Moreover, it is much more convincing than the 1911 review of Nellie Perrier, because it specifically refers to comic performance which does not involve a piano. Even more surprising is the fact that while the article was published in 1917, the term refers to an earlier phase of Dunn’s career, implying that it might well have been in use much earlier.

A search of digital newspaper and magazine archives reveals more about Finlay Dunn. A *Stage* article from 1956 reports his death on 12 March, at the age of 80, and notes that after years in concert party, he toured in variety from 1913 to 1928. He performed his comedy piano act for the vast majority of his career, and it involved parodies of various styles of pianist: ‘His descriptive music to a moving picture is very funny, as is also his burlesque of a classical reciter, and there is something more than mere cleverness about his imitation of a mechanical piano’ (*The Stage* 1916). The cartoon illustrations of Dunn in a full-page advert for his act published in *The Stage* in 1919 show this bald, round man cavorting around in an improbably athletic dance, and another strand of the act was joking about his physical largeness. A 1920 review notes that ‘he makes much comic capital at the expense of his bulk as an incidental to an attractive presentation of humorous items at and away from the piano’ (*The Stage* 1920). A much later article recalls that his slogan was: ‘Sole requirement, one piano and a strong chair’ (*The Stage* 1954). This kind of comic comment on the inherent physical properties of the performer are very much part of today’s stand-up comedy, with Jo Brand’s act being just one example.

The archives also suggest that Finlay Dunn’s time as a ‘stand-up comedian’ significantly predates the 1917 article. Certainly, a review of a ‘children’s dance and entertainment for the New Year’ at the Criterion in January 1904 mentions his ‘piano sketch’, suggesting that he was already presenting his comedy piano act at that point. Remember, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* article makes it clear that his ‘stand-up comedian’ act was not based on the piano. He must, then, have been doing the earlier ‘stand-up’ act before 1904, implying that he might have been describing himself as a ‘stand-up comedian’ in the very first years of the twentieth century, or possibly even the last years of the nineteenth. That said, it may be that Dunn only used the term retrospectively, when recalling his earlier career to the *Yorkshire Evening Post* journalist in 1917.

Frustratingly, the 1917 article gives no real indication exactly what Dunn’s earlier act entailed. There is a reference to ‘good buffoonery in evening dress, with no accessories whatever’, but it is not entirely clear whether this refers to his current or earlier act. When he described himself as a ‘stand-up comedian’, he could be referring to a singer of comic songs, as seen in the music halls of that time, or a teller of spoken gags more akin to the modern stand-up style. It is impossible to know.

Nonetheless, Dunn’s use of the term is much less ambiguous than the usage in the 1911 review of Nellie Perrier, and is arguably as positive an identification of the term ‘stand-up’ in relation to comic performance as the *Variety* review of Lou Holtz from 1948. This is somewhat puzzling, because it puts significant distances of time and geography between Dunn’s usage and the next earliest usage. After that sole reference to a ‘stand-up comedian’ in 1917, the term seems to disappear for over thirty years, and reappear on the other side of the Atlantic. Because it is unclear exactly what Finlay Dunn meant when he recalled playing ‘a stand-up comedian’ in concert parties, it does not tell us much about the emergence of stand-up comedy as an art form, and yet the fact that he used it at all so much earlier than it became a common term is remarkable in itself.

*Once again, I challenge readers to add to this debate, either by finding usages that predate 1917, or by finding examples of comic performance being described as ‘stand-up’ between 1917 and 1948.*

**References**

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