

COMEDY TALENT



Brian Copeland Will Make You Laugh, Right After He Makes You Cry

Story by Jennifer Elks; photos by Jennifer Elks and Ben Kasman

Despite endless research and advances in the field of psychology, it took a comedian to find an effective way to overcome childhood trauma: Turn your painful memories into a comedy show.

If you live in the Bay Area and haven't seen Brian Copeland's *Not a Genuine Black Man*, you're probably in the minority. The longest-running solo show in San Francisco history celebrated the one-year anniversary of its run at the Marsh theatre on April 1, and has been extended once again to run through August (as of press time).

Copeland says he's floored at the response he gets from people after his performance, which tells the story of his childhood in San Leandro. "I've been doing standup since I was 18, and I've gotten standing ovations before," he says. "But not like this. People come up and cry and, you know, 'Can I hug you?' I've had people come up and tell me personal, intimate things that they've never told anybody. That's pretty heavy."

Though the unexpected success of the show has resulted in a lot of exposure for Copeland - a segment on KQED's "Spark," and both a TV series and a book based on the show are in the works - he says he's most excited about how it's benefited the Marsh, enabling them to build a second theater and a cafe.

"[They're getting] all of this press and attention from people who've lived in San Francisco forever, and had no idea [about the Marsh]," he says.

The comedian became a television personality in 1992, as the host of KQED's short-lived late night arts and entertainment series, "Q." Shortly afterwards, he began a five-year stint as co-host of KTVU's "Mornings on 2."

"I dig a hole, and right before you get to China, I pull you out of it."

- Brian Copeland

His biting social commentary segment, "Copeland's Corner," appeared daily on KTVU's News at Noon, while he continued touring the country as opening act for performers such as Ray Charles, Gladys Knight, James Brown and Dana Carvey. "The Brian Copeland Show" debuted on KQED in 1995.

"I'd been working as Smokey Robinson's opening act, but now I couldn't go on the road because I had to make lunches and I was being Mr. Mom and pulling my hair out of my head," Copeland explains. "I'd wanted to do a one-man show for a long time, so to save my sanity, I started writing a show."

Some advice from a comedy legend gave impetus to the idea for *Not a Genuine Black Man*.

"Carl Reiner has been a frequent guest [on "The Brian Copeland Show"] - he's one of my heroes in terms of comedy writing - and I asked him for advice on how to write this show. He said, 'Find the piece of ground that you alone stand on and write from there. My piece of ground was, I was a married comedy writer living in New Rochelle with my wife and kid, writing for a show in New York - that became 'Dick Van Dyke.'"

"My piece of ground is that we were one of the first black families in [San Leandro] when it was the most racist suburb in America," Copeland says. "So I'd take the kids to school, then just sit and write down every story I could remember, and I filled up 800 pages of notes."

Shortly after the show opened, Copeland received a call from an old friend interested in taking the play

KGO radio in 1995; the top-rated program can be heard on Sunday mornings at 9. to another level.

But when he was awarded custody of his three children after a messy divorce, Copeland found it necessary to take his career in a different direction.



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Brian Copeland, con't.

"Amy Rennert was one of my producers from KQED - I hadn't talked to [her] in ten years! Well, she now has the Amy Rennert Agency, which is one of the biggest literary agencies in the Bay Area. So Amy says, 'I just read the review of your show and I want to represent you to do a book.'

"She helped me put together a book proposal and it sold in three days! So now I've got a manuscript due in July for release sometime next year. It encompasses the show, but [includes] all the other stuff I wasn't able to put in, research that I've [done] since ... It's about the evolution of the city as well as my evolution, and how the issue of race wears on people."

"Stories like Brian's really appeal to me," Rennert later told me. "It's memoir, but it's also social commentary. I hadn't seen the show before Brian and I talked but I felt from reading the script, and then seeing it, that it was going to make a fantastic book. It's beautifully detailed, it's funny, it's loving, it's honest, and Brian has great wit. And it's a great, little-known story, or was before Brian began his one-year performance."

"It's wonderful because the book will have the opportunity to reach many more people than the play could," she continues. "It's a fascinating story and only Brian can tell it, and I think it will be just as winning on the page as it is in performance."

When *Genuine* continued to receive rave reviews, Reiner requested a tape of the show.

"[Carl] calls me like the next week, and he goes, 'This is incredible, I think Robby needs to see this!' And I thought, 'Robby? ... Oh, wow!' " the comic exclaims. "So, three days later I get a call: 'Rob Reiner's office calling. We'd like to know if you'd come to Beverly Hills for a meeting this week.' And I go, 'Let me see ... yes!'

"It was amazing, he totally got what I was trying to do," Copeland says with a smile. "While I was writing the script [for *Genuine*] and putting it into play form - as a model for the rhythm I wanted, I got the first two seasons of 'All in the Family' on DVD. This was before I knew I'd have anything to do with Rob. I used to watch those shows when I was a kid, all the great Norman Lear sitcoms - 'Good Times,' 'Maude' and all of those [shows] - where you'd have something really funny happen, and then way out of left field some tragedy would happen and you'd go, where did this come from? And then they'd pull you out of it with something else funny. So that was the rhythm that I used: I dig a hole, and right before you get to China, I pull you out of it."

"So I said [to Rob], if Norman Lear were doing shows today and had the freedom of cable, that's what I'd like to do," he said. "And we were totally in sync."



"When I saw the tape of his show, I thought immediately that this could make a wonderful television series," the younger Reiner said during a segment on KGO radio documenting *Genuine*'s one-year anniversary. "I was totally blown away by it - it was so moving and so funny and so real, it had all the elements of great theater. Any time you can make people laugh and think and feel, that to me is the ultimate theatrical experience, and I felt it even watching it on the video tape."

Copeland's obviously got another busy year ahead, with both a manuscript and a television script in progress, but he seems to be thriving on it, even looking ahead to other media he wants to conquer.

"I'd love to do film," he says, enthusiastically. "If they told me right now that I could do anything I wanted to do, I would want to be the Bay Area's Kevin Smith or Woody Allen and do these little movies for two or three million dollars that I write myself, that I direct myself, that get national distribution, [where] I don't have a studio up my butt, that I can cast who I want and do what I want with."

If the past year is any indication, Copeland's not going to be just a local success story for long. When asked how it feels to be 'on the verge,' he laughs.

"I always say my entire career is a fluke," he says with a smile. "My plan was, the show was going to have a six-week run and if we were lucky, maybe we'd get extended for another four weeks, and then I would go on to something else. I had no idea that this was going to happen, none. And this was never the plan, but ... sometimes the stars just line up."

Not a Genuine Black Man will be published by Hyperion Books in 2006. Catch the play at the Marsh, 1062 Valencia St., SF, Thursday and Friday nights at 8:30 p.m. and Saturdays at 5 p.m., until further notice. For more on what Brian's up to, visit www.briancopeland.com.

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