

Black man, white town, pure gold
Brian Copeland's youth grist for hit show
By Rebecca Rosen Lum
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When an East Bay reporter was assigned to interview the brains behind a comic-book convention some years ago, he called the man to arrange an interview, then showed up at his San Leandro home.

"I said, 'Hi, I'm here to speak to Brian Copeland,'" recalls the Times' Pat Craig. "He said, 'I am Brian Copeland.'" He was very personable, very self-possessed, Craig said, but he didn't look like he was more than 12.

In fact, Copeland, now well-known in the Bay Area for his spots on TV's "Mornings on 2," his work as a stand-up comic and his smash theater piece, "Not a Genuine Black Man," wasn't much older.

Clearly, Copeland's been a man with a plan for a long, long time.

And he is so personable, and so self-possessed, that "Not a Genuine Black Man," just out in hardback, came as a shock to many who knew him.

The long-running solo show caught fire at San Francisco's the Marsh, and he took it to New York for a successful run. For those who know Copeland's largely topical comedy routine or his good-natured bits on TV and radio, the show offered plenty of surprises. The book reveals still more.

It cuts quick with the kind of edgy humor that characterizes his stand-up comedy, but is also a gut-wrenching story of growing up black in a town that was all-white -- by design.

His mother moved her brood to the East Bay suburb in 1972. The book chronologizes a series of battering events, and some triumphs, that followed.

There was the time his mother urged him to take his bat and find some other little boys to play with at the park. With a cry of "Let's kick his (expletive)," the other boys tore after him, and Brian ran right into the arms of a police officer who grilled him, patted him down and locked him in the back of the patrol car, without asking for a description of his tormentors. He was 8 years old.

In a typical aside, Copeland writes: "Black readers: 'Uh-huh.' White readers: 'What? You mean that the policeman isn't going to help the little Negro boy?'"

The indignities -- and the trenchant asides -- pile on: There's harassment by a landlord who tells the Copelands they have too many people in their unit and must leave (Copeland's mother foils this by pointing out other, larger families). There's bullying at school and in the neighborhood.

Then was the time his grandmother couldn't find a barber willing to cut his hair: She finally wound up at a familiar barber shop in Oakland, where a heady mix of smells, sounds and chattering voices greeted him -- a welcome relief after the accumulating tension that marks life in San Leandro.

Copeland endured tragedy and trauma, including the death of his mother when he was only 14, and grew up to carve turf for himself in San Leandro. He became student body vice president in his junior year and class president in his senior year. He also developed a career for himself as a performer, a radio personality, a columnist and a stand-up comic.

One day, years later, the slights and the brutalities exploded into the forefront of his mind. In naked detail, Copeland describes in his book the depression that led him to try to take his life, as well as his minute-by-minute rehabilitation.

A few years later, Copeland had recovered, but was floating in the

doldrums careerwise. That's when he began sketching the play.

He got the idea from comedian Carl Reiner, who told him that "the secret is to find the piece of ground that you alone stand on, and write from there."

It was around then that Copeland received a scorching letter from someone who had watched him on TV, and charged, "You are not a genuine black man."

Soon Copeland became a fixture at Sabino's Coffee Shop in San Leandro, where he would scribble into his marble composition books every morning.

"I'd walk my kids to school, and sit in that corner and write every story I could remember," he said. "Every indignity."

Then he hit the public library and began researching the real estate history of San Leandro. Among his discoveries: A documentary called "The Suburban Wall" that detailed efforts to keep blacks and minorities out of the city. It included testimony before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

"I said, 'Oh my God,'" Copeland said. "I had no idea it was an organized plot, much less a nationally recognized organized plot."

The city was 99.99 percent white when his family moved here, but by 2000, it had become the fourth most diverse city in the nation, Copeland learned in researching his book, which includes chilling passages on segregation and the orchestration of white flight by real estate brokers.

Much of his research could not fit into the play. But both contain what he calls "the rant": his response to a letter writer who challenged his ethnicity.

"Why is it if I were in prison, if I was standing on a street corner selling crack, if I fathered 10 children with 10 different women, you might say other things about me, but you wouldn't say I'm not a genuine black man?"

Some black audience members have reacted angrily to his rant.

"A black woman from the BBC was all over me," he said. "She said, 'Why did you put this in there?' Some people really don't get it. Some people say, 'Are you saying all black men are bad? You're feeding into stereotypes.' They've missed the point entirely."

Copeland said no one knew what to expect when they first saw the play. "There's a learning curve for the audience," he said. "Black people come because the word 'black' is in it. It's a story about being an outsider. People say they can relate because they were the only Asian, the only Latino, the only boy, the only girl, the only fat person."

And he has no regrets about detailing his crisis with depression. He says he's heard from too many people who also suffered from emotional illnesses and kept it a secret -- or who read his story and were prompted to seek help.

"I'd never done anything personal," he said. "My stand-up was topical, political. Depression is like a scarlet letter. I've known so many people who dealt with depression or had the problem and haven't dealt with it. For those reasons, it's been a good thing."

Copeland is nothing if not energetic. But, while he spins quips, old show-biz stories and righteous outrage at a whipping pace, his eyes are steady, always taking in, always analyzing. He can read a reporter's shorthand upside down and talk built-in winders with a professional photographer.

If life has lashed him, it has brought some mighty sweet moments, too.

He began doing celebrity interviews in his early teens. He met Tom Hanks while Hanks performed in "Charley's Aunt" at Chabot College. He met Arthur Lake, the actor who played Dagwood Bumstead -- and who would later fly to one of Copeland's comic-book conventions to perform on his own dime. And Jack Kelly, the actor who played Bart Maverick, taught him cards.

"Three of the coolest things that happened to me were that I played poker with Bart Maverick, I learned how to call 'Blondieeee' from Arthur Lake and I learned how to juggle from Tom Hanks," he said with a grin.

And perhaps the sweetest thing was when Copeland was drinking with buddy and San Francisco political figure Dick Hongisto at Lefty O'Doul's when he was smitten by a young singer.

"She was singing Cole Porter," Copeland remembers rhapsodically. "I said, 'I'm going to marry her.' Dick said, 'No, you're not.'"

He did marry Susan Taylor, and today, while "we're not exactly the Barrymores," the Copelands are all taking flight in "the family business." His son is a comic and actor in Berkeley Rep's summer program. His daughter is a writer and actress. He has no intentions of dissuading them.

He won't say much about his next project -- call it performers' superstition -- although he said it will touch on similar themes, and dig even deeper personally. He is bringing "Not a Genuine Black Man" back to the Marsh for a month. He is also developing a cable TV series based on the play.

But one thing he will say is that despite the ravaging years, Copeland plans to stay in San Leandro. He explained this while relaxing one morning at Sabino's, with locals calling out to him "Good to see you" and "Welcome back."

"It's a different time," he said. "A lot of those people have died. It's a different world now. And because my mother fought too goddamned hard for us to be here. She felt nobody should be able to tell you where you can and cannot live."

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Seeing Brian

Here are some public events featuring Brian Copeland, author of "Not a Genuine Black Man: Or, How I Claimed My Piece of Ground in the Lily-White Suburbs."

- 6 P.M. TUESDAY, at the Commonwealth Club of California, 595 Market Street, San Francisco. Talk and booksigning, in conversation with Mike Sugerman.
- 7 P.M. SEPT. 12, Borders Books and Music, 5903 Shellmound St., Emeryville. Talk and booksigning. 510-654-1633.
- 7 P.M. SEPT. 13, Book Passage, 51 Tamal Vista in Corte Madera. Talk and booksigning. 415-927-0960.
- 7:30 P.M. SEPT. 18, Black Oak Books, 1491 Shattuck Ave., in Berkeley. Talk and booksigning. 510-486-0698.
- SEPT. 21 THROUGH OCT. 21, Copeland will perform his one-man show, "Not a Genuine Black Man," at the Marsh, 1062 Valencia St., S.F. 800-838-3006 or www.brownpapertickets.com.
- 7 P.M. OCT. 26, San Leandro Main Library, 300 Estudillo Ave. 510-577-3970.
- TO VIEW "THE SUBURBAN WALL," the 1971 documentary about San Leandro, and "The Invisible Wall," its 1981 follow-up, or find out what's new with Brian Copeland, visit www.briancopeland.com.

• FOR MORE INFORMATION or audio clips from Copeland's book, visit www.briancopeland.com.