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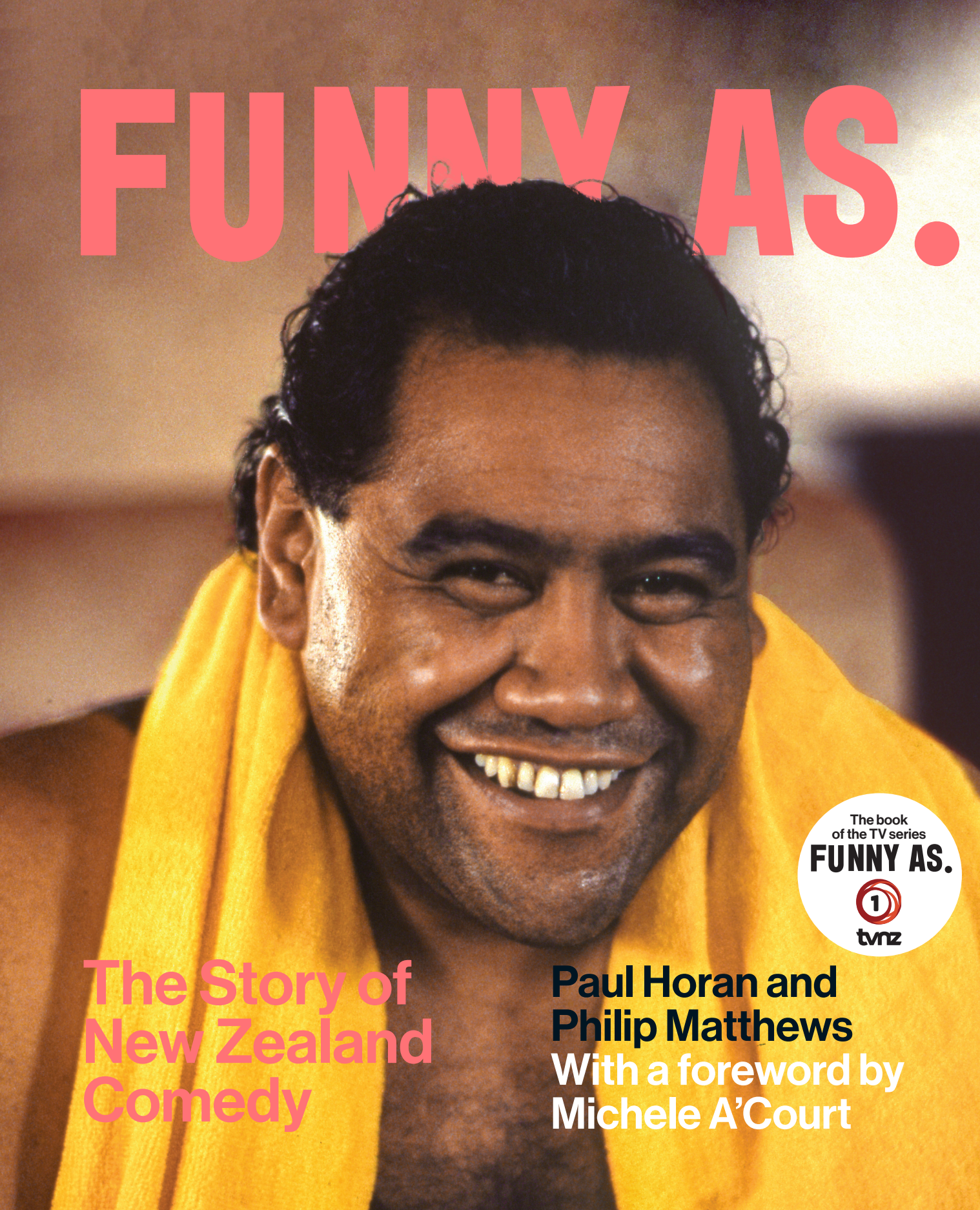

The book of the TV series FUNNY AS.

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The Story of New Zealand Comedy

Paul Horan and Philip Matthews
With a foreword by Michele A'Court

13 Live comedy in the 1980s and 1990s

LOOKING FOR A PLACE TO STAND (UP)

The story of comedy in the first part of the twentieth century had often been about venue managers searching for comedians to perform in their spaces. But by the 1980s, many venues had been demolished and the owners of those that survived lacked the budgets that the likes of J. C. Williamson or Fullers had in the 1920s. Television ruled and if you wanted to perform comedy, it was the only game in town. Or so it seemed. The development of a live comedy circuit over the two decades that followed is not just a story about performers becoming known to the public but a story of how they created their own structures and venues in which to do this. It distinguished live comedy from other performing arts – there were no traditional structures, educational traditions or established funders such as philanthropic donors or government grants. There were no forms to fill out. The live comedy industry that was built in New Zealand in the 1980s and endured into the twenty-first century was built by performers and a handful of specialist producers.

The history of live comedy, especially stand-up, is largely a history of the rooms comedians played in and the festivals they created. A venue becomes synonymous with a local comedy culture. The history of stand-up in London is dominated by The Comedy Store; in Los Angeles, it is The Improv. In Auckland, it eventually became The Classic.

Comedy clubs were making money all over the world at the beginning of the 1980s, but not in New Zealand. The problem was that stand-up comedy, which dominated the clubs, was a form of performing with little precedent in this country. But when local promoters saw Australian comedians such as Rodney Rude, Austen Tayshus and, notably, George 'I'm Tuff!' Smilovici tour off the backs of records and limited TV exposure, they began to wonder about what could be done. Graham J. Smith, owner of Auckland's Retro nightclub, opted to give it a shot in early 1984. A weekly competition was hosted by Chris Hegan, a comedian from a well-known family of performers and agents (his parents, Eddie and Elaine Hegan, launched Billy T. James). A weird assortment of acts bowled up to Retro on successive Wednesday nights before a group was put together by one of the heat winners, Willy De Wit, and his friend, fledgling promoter Scott Blanks. The group of De Wit, Hegan, Ian Harcourt, Dean Butler and Peter Murphy named themselves Funny Business.

Over the following six years, Funny Business developed a mix of sketches, character monologues, original songs and stand-up that heralded a new generation of comedy. Their two series for TVNZ owed something to the energy of alternative British cult hit *The Young Ones*. Unlike David McPhail and Jon Gadsby, who continued to dominate TV sketch comedy, Funny Business's shows were almost entirely free of political satire; they were filmed mostly on location rather than in a studio and featured a new song written for each episode. One of their best-remembered was

TOP Funny Business as The Hoons.

ABOVE LEFT The album released to coincide with the first series, 1988.

ABOVE RIGHT Funny Business pose as a Dunedin band for a sketch in the first series.

TOP LEFT Funny Business Tour Flyer 1989.

TOP RIGHT Lucy Lawless made her TV debut on *Funny Business*.

ABOVE During the shooting of the 'Norman the Mormon' sketch in the first series of *Funny Business*, 1988.

OPPOSITE (Left to right, from top) Facial DBX: Dave Horn, Paul Horan, Nigel Corbett; Jon Bridges, David Downs, Paul Yates; Jeremy Corbett.

LEFT (From left) Stephanie Millar, Alison Wall and Amanda Tollemache in the first series of *Funny Business*, 1988.

'Norman the Mormon', a song about celibacy, bicycles and door-knocking set to a Muddy Waters blues riff:

> *My name is Elder Norman*
> *I'm a-knock on your front door, man*
> *I'm a Mormon*
> *Norman the Mormon*

Produced by Tony Holden, previously a director on *A Week of It*, *Funny Business* was fast-paced and featured a line-up of long-overdue fresh faces. While roles for women were minor, strong performances from a cast that included Alison Wall and newcomer Lucy Lawless in her TV debut were an improvement over what had gone before. But it was live that Funny Business made their most lasting impact. After a handful of gigs at the Performance Café, they settled into a Wednesday-night residency at the Windsor Castle, a rock venue in Parnell. This was the making of the group. Not only could they try out and quickly discard material – they also taught an audience how to be a comedy audience, as Harcourt put it.

> *If they were coming to see Hello Sailor or a punk band, they knew what the rules were. They knew what the rules were if they were going to a theatre show. But people were self-conscious about being a comedy audience. Early on in those Windsor shows we set up this deliberately corny warm-up routine, which encouraged people to laugh out loud without thinking, 'People are going to think I'm an idiot if I laugh out loud'. That was the level of everyone just working out how this works. I think we succeeded.*[1]

With Blanks, who went on to co-found The Classic comedy club, taking on promotion and managing the finances, Funny Business became a going concern. They toured universities and rock

venues where many young audiences had their first experience of live comedy. Audiences grew after the first TV series and, as rock music was what the audiences knew, that was the attitude Funny Business started to adopt. For many students and others who saw Funny Business and the Front Lawn perform in the 1980s, doing live comedy and getting a bit famous suddenly seemed possible for the first time.

Funny Business tours through Palmerston North were particularly influential. A flourishing scene attached to Massey University had led to the formation of the group Facial DBX (see Chapter 3), who began to realise there was an appetite for touring comedy if performers were brave enough to try. A university touring circuit had been developed by the New Zealand Students' Arts Council, which operated from 1973 to 1992 and usually focused on music acts touring as a backdrop to drinking in Orientation week at the start of the first term. Facial DBX embarked on their first tour in 1987, which was followed in 1989 and 1990. It cemented an idea that comedy was something they could consider doing for a living.

Live comedy began to flourish in other ways. Theatresports originated in Canada and was an improvisation comedy format that exploded in the late 1980s in New Zealand. From the first workshops to the televising of the national final took just over one year. Through schools it became one of the most commonly taught forms of comedy, and even thirty years later it dominates the corporate comedy scene through such groups as The Improv Bandits, based in Auckland, and The Improvisors from Wellington.

But for stand-ups the 1980s was the time of the talent quest. This was a time-honoured format: performers work for free and if a prize is offered, there will always be someone prepared to try their luck. In the 1980s, it was a simple first step for promoters who had never originated shows and for audiences who were still adapting to live comedy. The idea was to flush out the stars of tomorrow and make careers overnight. But as this

Each episode of *Funny Business* featured a song. The alternative national anthem was an early hit.

MC Chris Hegan (front right) and Radio Hauraki's Kevin 'Blackie' Black (centre back) with the Comedy Store finalists, 1989.

was long before YouTube, there were few places to learn how to construct and shape a stand-up act other than listening carefully to comedy records on vinyl. It became clear to anyone who watched that the writing would take years to catch up with the ambitions of performers.

Paul Walker secured the New Zealand rights to the name The Comedy Store and mounted a competition in 1988, with several heats and a final. Hosted by Funny Business, it was held at the rock club The Powerstation with an atmosphere close to the combative style of Sydney's Comedy Store, which was infamous for resembling an arena more than a venue and featuring an abusive audience. But as it worked so well in Australia, there was a certain logic in assuming this was how it should be done in New Zealand. The Comedy Store pulled in game all-comers and made a feature of Alan Martinbus, billed as New Zealand's worst comedian. Also known in Auckland as the busker who played *Deutschland Über Alles* on the bagpipes, Martinbus loved the attention.

Vicki Walker had been working in theatre and doing shows at another of Paul Walker's comedy initiatives, Le Bom, on Monday nights at Auckland venue The Forge. She entered the first of these competitions.

> *When I started doing it, there wasn't anyone else to watch. There was Funny Business – the boys were doing it. When I entered the Gluepot stand-up comedy* [competition]*, I think I won one of the Auckland heats . . . but when I first went on stage, they wouldn't let me speak, the heckling was so loud. One guy yelled out, 'Hey, chickie baby, you on the pill?' I said, 'No, but it's a fucking shame your mother wasn't,' and the audience laughed. I said to them, 'I know this is different, but I do think I have a right to speak on stage. I'm going to go off, and I'm going to come back again.' When I came back, that was the first time they allowed me to try out some material on stage.*[2]

In 1989 The Comedy Store organised a national tour in an attempt to widen the talent pool, but this was to be the end of the line. In Palmerston North, the crowd pelted the performers with savouries.[3] The negative publicity and impact of The Comedy Store tours showed future comedy initiatives what to avoid. This was a spectacle, not the blueprint for an industry.

By 1990 a number of initiatives developing almost entirely independently of each other caused a scene to take root outside of Auckland. After a few attempts, the Wellington Fringe Festival became a genuine companion to the official Arts Festival, and has gone on to be the premier fringe in New Zealand and one of the capital's chief comedy incubators. While Wellington was packed with independent theatre initiatives, the publicity umbrella and centralised venue organisation that a Fringe Festival created made younger, riskier projects more viable. For comedy, this meant there was an opportunity to put on shows that theatre programmers had not usually been keen on. BATS Theatre had been open to comedy but had to balance a programme that incorporated all emerging work.

Just down the road at Circa Theatre, there was a different response to the rise of

comedy. In 1988 Kate Jason-Smith established *Hen's Teeth*, a line-up show featuring women performers. The group was remarkable for its inclusion of multiple generations of performers – Lee Hatherly, Kate Harcourt and Bub Bridger brought older character comedy and monologues to the stage, which was incredibly rare at the time (as the show's name might imply). *Hen's Teeth* also provided a stage for Carmel McGlone and Lorae Parry's characters Digger and Nudger and the impersonations of Pinky Agnew. A commitment to character comedy rather than stand-up is part of the reason *Hen's Teeth* has continued for more than thirty years.

In Christchurch, 1990 saw the debut of the improv format *Scared Scriptless*. As we have already seen, Theatresports exploded in the 1980s and smaller, more sustainable formats spun out of larger theatre seasons. Attached to The Court Theatre, *Scared Scriptless* was lean and fostered an ongoing ensemble through regular performance and workshopping. Founder Michael Robinson, working alongside Lori Dungey and Jim McLarty, brought a transformative Canadian influence into the early improv scene in New Zealand.

In Auckland there were fresh moves to make things happen for comedians, in response to the spectacular competitions that dominated the late 1980s. Competition veteran Vicki Walker and producer Ali Duffey created a place for women performers and writers. Titled *Girls Gotta Eat*, the shows were an immediate success, partly due to a unique approach in which a regular series of workshops ran in parallel with the monthly gigs. Walker and Duffey believed that great performances depended on fostering great writing. Another secret of their success was staging shows on Sunday afternoons, making them accessible to women with children or women who wanted to avoid dodgy venues at night.

The first two-hour-plus show, directed by Mari Wilson from Inside Out Theatre, featured a stellar line-up from all over the Auckland performing

ABOVE **Poster for the first *Girls Gotta Eat* show, 1990.**

OPPOSITE **Lee Hatherly performing in *Hen's Teeth.***

scene: Lynda Topp, Alison Wall, Fiona Edgar, Suzanne McAleer, Michele Hine, Celia Nicholson, Kathryn Burnett, Miranda Wilson, Juliet Monaghan and Brenda Kendall. Kendall had been doing stand-up and character comedy throughout the 1980s at intermittent alternative Auckland venues. *Girls Gotta Eat* consistently drew more than 500 punters per gig and Walker and Duffey soon began to think about a potential TV format. For nearly two years, the themed shows appeared and built a loyal following, but plans to take it further dissolved as performers moved on to other projects. Nevertheless, for the venues and festivals that followed, *Girls Gotta Eat* offered a valuable precedent – it showed that there was a need for something more than the competition model of the 1980s or the beer-soaked Orientation gig. The focus on writing also raised the standards of what could be achieved.

These initiatives all demonstrated the fundamental truth that underpinned comedy in New Zealand – there were no institutions or structures other than those that performers and producers made for themselves. The year 1990 was pivotal, when performers began to organise themselves and audiences started to think differently about local comedy.

Into the 1990s: 'nice boys, no sleaze'

It is hard to learn comedy without an audience. In Auckland in 1991, a number of comedians realised that the city needed a regular venue if there was to be any chance of a proper scene developing. Performers scoured pubs and hotels for suitable places. Comedy cabaret veteran Colin Parris, who had worked in both New Zealand and Australia since the 1970s, approached an inner-city tourist hotel and opened Abby's in 1991. Staging a low-key competition to attract comedians introduced him to Matt Elliott, who ended up helping him to run the night. Audiences fluctuated over the two years Abby's operated but it was an important proving ground for acts who had often got their earliest taste of live comedy during the competitions of the 1980s, and the venue became notable as the first weekly comedy gig. Abby's acts A. K. (Andrew Kovacevich), Mike Gray, Greg Johnson and Phil Parker went on to tour with Parris and Elliott as the Laughter Mafia.

Meanwhile Facial DBX had drifted to Auckland from Palmerston North. They had the same idea about starting a venue. As none of the group were Aucklanders it took a while to find their feet, but in 1992 they settled on the newly opened Irish bar Kitty O'Brien's. The square upstairs room seated about a hundred people and had the look and feel of overseas comedy venues. Best of all, it was cheap. The bar soon became a home for other comedians who had begun to come north in search of live work. Michele A'Court recalls:

> *Comedians seemed different from the touring musicians. They weren't trying to bed you – they were genuinely interested in encouraging your work. It felt collegial right from the start. Nice boys, no sleaze. Dusty theatre rather than grimy pub background. The community felt like a safe place for a woman to be.*[4]

TOP **Mike King and Andrew Clay on stage at Kitty O'Brien's, Auckland, mid-1990s.**

LEFT **Andrew Kovacevich on stage at Kitty O'Brien's, Auckland, mid-1990s.**

TOP LEFT Jeremy and Nigel Corbett in the stairwell/ dressingroom at Kitty O'Brien's, early 1990s.

TOP RIGHT Dean Butler on stage at Kitty O'Brien's, early 1990s.

ABOVE Nigel (left) and Jeremy Corbett with Mike King (centre), backstage at Kitty O'Brien's, mid-1990s.

RIGHT Jason Hoyte and Jonathan Brugh as Sugar and Spice at Kitty O'Brien's, mid-1990s.

OPPOSITE An early promo shot of Te Radar (right) and Brendhan Lovegrove, late 1990s.

The programme for the first Comedy Festival Gala at the Watershed Theatre, 1994.

‘I WANT TO DO FIVE MINUTES AND IF I DON’T MAKE ANYONE LAUGH, I’LL SHOUT THE BAR’

– Mike King

Poster for the show *Pulp Comedy,* from which the TV series got its name.

With its beer-crate stage and borrowed sound system, Kitty's also set expectations for future stand-up audiences. It could be rowdy at times, but heckling was not compulsory and comedians did their material instead of fighting the audience. While it was unmistakably male-dominated, it was not terrifyingly so. From the start it was more diverse and less initimidating than the Australian scene. Many comedians who became household names did early gigs there, including Jeremy Corbett, Kevin Smith, Ewen Gilmour, Te Radar, Brendhan Lovegrove and A'Court. Few of them knew much about structuring a stand-up routine other than Andrew Clay, who had returned after a few years on the tougher Sydney circuit. Clay's carefully constructed sets were watched eagerly by the performers, and none of them paid more attention than a chef from the suburbs named Mike King. Dave Horn of Facial DBX remembered King's first night.

> *He turned up and said, 'I want to do five minutes and if I don't make anyone laugh, I'll shout the bar.' That was how he was introduced. And I was sitting at the bar going 'wow'. The following night, Ben Elton was trying out his material. Mike King stood up on stage and he killed. He was hilarious. And I remember Ben Elton saying, 'Oh, this bloke's going to go far, ain't he?' . . . That was a pretty cool moment.*[5]

Within a year, Kitty O'Brien's had gone weekly and satellite gigs started at the Masonic in Devonport, the Horse and Trap in Mt Eden and The Outback Inn in Hamilton. Momentum was starting to build. The easing of liquor licensing rules meant other venues started to spring up. The Temple Café on Upper Queen Street added comedy and spoken word nights to its diet of live music.

TV also started to notice. Not only was TV keen to get in on the international trend for stand-up comedy – for many New Zealanders, the series *Seinfeld* was their first exposure when it debuted in the early 1990s – but a slumping economy made cheap formats more attractive. Stand-up shows, especially when run as competitions, could be made for a fraction of the cost of sitcoms or sketch shows. TVNZ put *A Bit After Ten* to air in 1993, hosted by Jeremy and Nigel Corbett. Australian producers and directors Michael Boughen and Wayne Cameron created a fast-paced, commercial format and despite a late slot, it was renewed for another season.

While looking for Kitty O'Brien's, Paul Horan from Facial DBX had met Margi Mellsop, an independent producer who was crucial in the formation of the Watershed Theatre – a series of venues surrounding the then run-down Viaduct Basin and Hobson Wharf. Not only was the Watershed open to featuring live comedy, it became the venue for the first New Zealand comedy festival in 1993. In that first year, the festival capitalised partly on the theatre having bookings for a studio space it had not yet built. The solution was to roll a number of bookings together and brand it as a festival, adding headliners Peter Rowsthorn and Wendy Harmer from Australia. Encouraged by the result, the Watershed mounted an expanded festival in 1994. By the end of that year, the theatre's originators were less involved and the pressure of running an independent theatre along with a fast-growing comedy festival became a problem. Mellsop and Horan broke away and ran the festival under its own trust. From there, the New Zealand Comedy International Festival grew fast.

An often-repeated piece of showbiz wisdom is that you can't learn comedy, you just have to do it. While this is largely true in stand-up, improv has been taught with great success in New Zealand schools since the late 1980s. The founding of the circus school at the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology was a tertiary initiative that taught many performers who went on to comedy careers. The Circo-Arts course was unique when it was set up in 1996 and by the time it was forced to close after the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, it had had a huge influence on the city's performance scene. Its most illustrious

alumni is Sam Wills, now known as Tape Face. Wills came to national prominence when he won best new face on TV's *Pulp Comedy* with a silent act that was a smart contemporary use of mime and circus skills. He shaped the act into a full-length show, *Boy With Tape on His Face*, that played at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival in 2008. In the same year he moved to London, where his career took off. He made the news back home with his turn on the Royal Variety Performance in 2011 and as a finalist in the eleventh season of *America's Got Talent* in 2016. He is now playing a residency in Las Vegas at the House of Tape, a specially adapted venue within Harrah's Casino.

The circus tradition also fed into the Christchurch World Buskers Festival – now called the Bread and Circus World Buskers Festival – that started in 1994. This has been New Zealand's best open-access arts event, where most performances are free and outdoors. By 2012, 300,000 people were attending, and it has become a vital outlet for buskers, burlesque and physical performers, as well as more traditional comedians.[6]

In 1995 the first independent stand-alone comedy festival in Auckland had been rebranded Laugh, and it was expanding steadily. In the same year, Comedyfest created a gig called *Pulp Comedy* and mounted it at The Powerstation. It was a meaningful return to a landmark Auckland venue by local comedy – the venue that had seen the competitions of the late 1980s. But the difference was that local comedians were doing their own assured routines in their own festival to a crowd that had grown with them. It was the gig that told everyone stand-up had arrived, at a place that comedians had created themselves.

Sam Wills in an early street performance, before he became known as Tape Face.

Kevin Black in the studio with Billy T. James, mid-1980s.

The legend of Blackie

Commercial radio has played an important supporting role in both producing and promoting New Zealand comedy. Early on, comedy was a way to distinguish commercial operators from the dour public broadcasters, especially during breakfast shows. The most famous was Kevin 'Blackie' Black (1943–2013), who was the highest-paid radio announcer in New Zealand at the peak of his career. His speciality on Radio Hauraki was the prank phone call. In a particularly notorious example, he rang the Ministry of Mines to claim that he had dug a 100-foot hole and found uranium. When the beleaguered official asked if he had any qualifications, Black replied, 'No, but I have an uncle who was a coal miner down in Westport.'

He released a stream of albums in the 1980s and 1990s that compiled the phone calls and parody songs that were a staple of his radio shows. Black's biggest success came in 1981, when he parodied Deane Waretini's song about racial harmony, 'The Bridge', as Kevin Blackatini and the Frigids singing 'The Fridge'. The proceeds went to the family of one of their workmates who had died in a car accident.

Live comedy mostly exists in a single moment in time – in that split second between punchline and laughter. Ask a happy punter the day after a live show which gag they liked best, or what the show was 'about', and it's a rare person who can re-create any moments, unless they were taking notes. Which would be weird. Each morning when you drive out of one town and head to the next, you understand you're not leaving anything tangible behind (apart from the odd phone charger or some cheese past its best). There's nothing anyone can point to and say, 'See that? There was a comedy show there just before.'

Which is why I am so pleased you are holding this book in your hands. Not because it has jokes in it (there are probably some jokes in it) but because it maps where comedy has been in New Zealand. My own road started with theatre, then children's TV, then sketch and character comedy, stand-up and storytelling. Other people's roads wind their way through music, radio, cartoons and plays. Regardless of the route any of us have taken, this book records the moments when an idea has made the journey from one mind to another at the speed of laughter. 'See there? That's where comedy has been, and look where it might be going next.'

– Michele A'Court

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