

I Was Gonged By The IRS

"I hate television as much as I hate peanuts, but I can't stop eating peanuts" - Orson Welles

Sitting on the floor of my garage is an award for *"Best Male Club Comic" - 1989*.^{*} It holds the side door open when I'm down there working out. Jerry Seinfeld won it the year before I did and Jeff Foxworthy the year after. So that's me, sandwiched between multi-millionaires and cultural (or in the audience for Foxworthy's case – "lack of culture") icons. Something comparable can be found in baseball's yearly list of winners for the American League MVP. In 1965 Zoilo Versalles, Twins shortstop was the MVP, bookended in 1964 and 1966 by first-ballot Hall of Famers Brooks and Frank Robinson. You may rightly ask, Who was Zoilo Versalles? ***I am Zoilo Versalles!***

^{*}A few years later the brilliant Bill Hicks was also up for the same award and lost out to Carrot Top. I think savage social commentary losing out to prop comedy and my use of the award as a doorstop to help with ventilation and prevent mold are perfect examples of why most of these dumb award shows should not be taken too seriously.

The award, a Greek mask of comedy in Lucite ([loo-sahyt] > A transparent acrylic resin or plastic used as a substitute for glass. **See American Comedy Award** > a transparent award sometimes used as a substitute for an authentic, legitimate trophy) was presented to me live on ABC's nationally televised American Comedy Awards by the late, great Steve Allen. When I stood to accept the trophy, instead of hugging or kissing my wife Teddie, I leaned over and kissed Steve Allen's wife Jayne Meadows sitting a few seats away from us. Then I walked up to the podium and kissed Steve. He sent me a note later that said, *"Next time you decide to kiss me on national television I expect dinner first."* At that point I had been married less than a year and although I was very much in love with my wife (and she had recently given birth to our beautiful daughter Natasha), in my brief acceptance speech I saw absolutely no reason to thank her for an award that she had nothing to do with whatsoever. (Well, except for the fact that most of my act is about her, my daughter and my

marriage. Minor detail. Don't even know why I brought it up...) I did thank both her *and* Natasha years later on my first cd, Raging Bully, for their *"love, support and inspiration. As well as their nagging, ball-busting and whining"* - and meant every word of it.**

**I also neglected to thank God for all *his* help, which is something most black athletes and Grammy winners never seem to forget. Looking back, this could be why I've never won a Lombardi Trophy, a Grammy, or an Oscar, Emmy, Tony, Obie, or even a W.C. Handy Award from the Blues Foundation. God may work in mysterious ways but he sure ain't workin' for me. Which is a blues song title if I ever heard one, so I may just be on my way to that Blues Music Award I've always wanted. See you in Memphis.

Now don't get me wrong, I would be lying if I didn't say that an Emmy or Oscar wouldn't be a nice thing to have occupying a shelf in my office, sitting there above and behind my desk waiting for the slightest aftershock to have Emmy's pointed wings swoop down and embed themselves in my skull. To glance over while taking a quick breather from Internet porn and find solace in the fact that I left a small mark in show biz would be at the very least, a bit reassuring. It would also be quite comforting to know that if nothing else, I've left my daughter something to hock on eBay when I'm gone. But the most impressive reason for me to boast an important Hollywood award is that it can be prominently displayed in my home beside the statue I'm most proud of - the trophy that I won on *The Gong Show*.

By 1978 I'd been doing stand-up for about a year but it would still be three or four more years before I considered myself a true *professional*, meaning, at least to me, that showbiz was my sole form of income (Or, to paraphrase a phrase, *Showbiz was my life!*). The stock heckler line that people would scream out in a club if they didn't find you funny - "Don't *quit your day job!*" - hopefully wouldn't pertain to me in the very near future. *But at the time I had a day job*, working at Banana Records in downtown San Francisco's financial district. Although the pay was nothing great, it was, as menial soul-numbing McJobs go, *almost* fun. For a guy with no real plans in life besides becoming a better comic, it was an amusing, tolerable way (since I did fancy myself somewhat of a minor league musicologist *and* did killer window displays***) to plow through a day, pay rent, and still keep eating. I quickly learned - *and so did management* - that I'd just

as soon act like a wiseass and make fun of the customers than actually try to help them. The comedy seed that had been germinating since I'd started out as the sarcastic voice of a walking, talking robot entertaining sales people at trade shows and conventions (Yes, *that story is* in the book!) was starting to poke it's way through the ground. Whenever a customer asked me where Beethoven or Mozart was, I'd always answer, "*I'd imagine in their graves.*" And if they weren't sure where to find Elvis, I'd simply say, "*you could probably find him in Vegas stuffing his fat face.*" Sometimes the customers found it funny, and sometimes they didn't. I remember getting particularly nasty when people would ask for the latest, abominable, disco release. *God, I hated that shit!*

"I didn't live in the world of disco or the world of the Eagles." - George Thorogood

***For a straight guy in San Francisco, that is. With limited resources and nary a gay bone in my body, (although the use of "*nary*" is very Oscar Wilde) I certainly couldn't compete with the lush windows displayed by the big downtown department stores. But with some scissors, a bit of rubber cement and construction paper, I won praise from the local record company reps that translated to free tickets, t-shirts and albums. The store manager also pretty much left me alone to spin whatever music I wanted on the turntable. I lost the job after about a year when one of the regional managers came in - *undercover* - and found me haranguing two gay guys for buying the new Streisand and Donna Summer records instead of the new Stones and Lou Reed.

And now for a brief historical interlude -

Back in the 1950s and early 1960s in San Francisco the Hungry i and the Purple Onion in San Francisco presided over a new age of stand-up by providing stage time for such Hall of Fame game-changers as Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Bill Cosby, the Smothers Brothers, Woody Allen, Phyllis Diller, Bob Newhart and Jonathan Winters. Nothing compares to that Golden Age but return with us now to the thrilling days of not-so yesteryear...

So now we're in San Francisco in the mid 1970s and there's a club out in the Richmond district called the Holy City Zoo that seemed to

have been put together by the same spatially-challenged architects who did the Winchester Mystery House. In just a few hundred square feet of "club" there was a stage so small it would have had a hard time fitting both Laurel *and* Hardy; and a primitive sound system that sometimes felt completely superfluous since the place was so small that the sound of toilets flushing drowned out most of your punchlines anyway. But it was home *and at least the toilets flushed*; so there I was, along with many others, performing our primitive stand-up, trying out our comedic personas and working out our personal shit on the crowd that, for the most part, was in on the joke. The Zoo was tiny but its impact was lasting and huge because from the mid 1970s through the early 1980s the Holy City Zoo unleashed upon America and the world the force of nature that is Robin Williams; the elastic, fantastic, *"isn't he special"* Dana Carvey; the man of 1,000 Christopher Walkens, Kevin Pollak; *and yours truly*. Among others.

Almost nightly, the Zoo gave us all five minutes to fail, which is what every comic needs to learn the craft and craft what we've learned into the act. On my first night ever at the Zoo I remember doing some material that touched on what I thought was important to me at the time – the 3 Stooges, Mothra, and Chinese food (That was over 30 years ago. My priorities have now changed to The Marx Brothers, Godzilla, and Asian hookers). Some laughs, some applause, certainly enough to keep me going. My next five minutes on stage was more eventful. That night I met David Castro - *another New York Jew with an attitude problem* - doing *his first* five-minute set. David had great original material but even after being on stage only one time more than him I knew that performing was not his golden ticket; writing was. *"You've got great material, Castro, but you shouldn't be doing it"*. Beat. *"I should."* And the rest, as they say, is this book.

"A man's got to take a lot of punishment to write a really funny book." - Ernest Hemingway

David would frequently meet me at Banana Records after work and we would saunter through the city trying to make each other laugh while roaming Chinatown or the Mission district searching out

pork buns, burritos, and people to make fun of. Or we'd sit for hours on the benches at Market Street - a giant outdoor outpatient clinic teeming with a parade of deranged lunatics - like a constant casting call for *Cuckoo's Nest*. And we would write jokes. Or at least *try* to write jokes. Since we were both Bronx Jews around the same age we shared a similar mentality and passion for all things important - *Mickey Mantle, Groucho Marx, Robert Klein and pizza. Real pizza.* And we both thought it would be great to be comedians.

It was around this time NBC launched the legendary Gong Show. While there had been numerous amateur talent shows on TV in the past, The Gong Show was the first one that gave any lunatic with delusional dreams and a bit of fortitude the possibility of a showbiz career with a chance to maybe hit the big-time without even a glimmer of any discernible talent to do so. Thirty years before all the human catastrophes you see on reality television today, Chuck Barris gave the deranged, often clueless minions of America the chance to show the real world the *imaginary talent* they had - or *didn't have*. Andy Warhol might have said, "*In the future everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.*" The Gong Show gave you *one*.

Up to this point neither David nor I were even close to having a tight five minutes of stand-up to perform on television. It was another ten years before I finally made my first and only appearance on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. But The Gong Show was a program that seemed tailor made for us. It was funny, it didn't take itself seriously and it was truly idiotic. Along with the self-sacrificing train wrecks that made the show what it was, there were also performers who utilized it to showcase their talents. Before "performance art" the Gong Show had *performance artists*. Before American Idol the Gong Show had *legitimate, talented unknown singers*. It was all so brilliant in its simplicity and execution but much of the viewing audience didn't really get it. Some of the judges didn't even get it. Nobody called in to vote. Nobody came back for a second chance. You had one minute to strut your stuff and if the judges didn't like you, they could "gong" you after a few seconds. There were some pretty funny and outrageous performers on the show, but even if they made it through their sixty seconds without getting gonged,

they usually lost to some syrupy bland singer doing a crappy rendition of some shitty Barry Manilow type tune or some histrionic scale-climbing but not really singing, second-rate Motown. It was karaoke night at the Airport Hilton in Manilla - with television cameras instead of sing-alongs in Tagalog. (And I may be beating a dead horse here but wasn't karaoke night at the Airport Hilton in Manila where Journey found their new lead singer? And c'mon, a dead horse is already dead. My beating it changes nothing.)

Since neither David nor I could sing - *nor would we ever want to* - and our stand-up chops certainly were not going to be welcome in that type of environment (besides, how much stand-up could you actually *do* in a minute?) we decided to put together a *real* Gong Show performance. But we wanted to come up with something *funny that was not going to get us Goned*. And we wanted to win.

"Just like Faust, this man is tempted by the devil. And his compromise, his sellout, must end in eternal damnation." - Jack Buchanan (Henry Cordova) The Band Wagon (1953)

What we came up with was brilliant and perfectly suited for The Gong Show (which is a good thing because it couldn't have been of much use anywhere else). As a matter of fact, it probably would have gotten us condemned as witches and stoned to death in parts of the Middle East and possibly some small southern towns here in the U.S.

We came out on stage wearing identical cowboy outfits. At that time experimental human embryo cloning was the latest controversial scientific breakthrough and some story pertaining to it was in the newspapers on a regular basis. There were also numerous one-man shows popping up on Broadway, off-Broadway, and in dinner theaters around the country so we presented ourselves as the first *"two-man - one-man show."*

Barris introduced us as the *Bronx Bombers* and as the William Tell Overture played we galloped out on wooden hobby horses, wearing cowboy hats and masks, called ourselves "The Lone and Clone Ranger" and announced - *"We have many heroes and many idols and we'd like to show you FORTY of them in a minute."* Calling out

each impression as we did them David got on his knees with his right arm on his chest and became Napoleon. I dropped to my knees with my *left* arm on my chest and became "Napoleon looking in a mirror." He blew bubbles - I was Guy Lombardo holding a champagne flute. He scat-sang a few high notes as Ella Fitzgerald, I smashed the champagne flute on the ground. There were another thirty-seven to go and we got them all out in under a minute. We referenced history and pop culture and each impression was twinned. It was only a Gong Show act... but it had cultural and historical significance. Fuck, it had *resonance*. (Unlike the next 30 years of my career.) Chuck Barris and the studio audience were howling. The three judges gave us ten points each – 30 points, the most you could possibly score, Gong Show perfection. (we would have fit in perfectly with those mental patients on Market Street).

But there were still more performers waiting to go on. If there was a tie - and it happened quite often - the audience made the final decision with a round of applause for their favorite act. And wouldn't you know it - the final act was some Linda Ronstadt wannabe doing her rendition of some lame-ass top forty AM radio MOR pop song and she also earned the top score of thirty. At the end of the program the young lady received a nice polite round of applause but me and Castro took home the trophy and a check for whatever the going television union rate was at the time, a little more than \$700.00. We cashed the check and drove back to San Francisco with our trophy, a pocketful of cash and the prizes.

Oh yeah - the prizes. We each received a fairly expensive rug shampooer that I had absolutely no use for since I had hardwood floors in my tiny apartment and didn't own anything resembling a rug. I don't even think I had a bathroom mat. So I gave it away. We also received a couple of cases of Turtle Wax for our cars that I gave to David since I didn't own a car. The last prize was a certificate for one hundred dollars worth of frozen shrimp that I could redeem at any local supermarket that carried that particular brand of crustacean. Unfortunately, they were nowhere to be found in the Bay Area - the distributor only sold them on the east coast, so I sent the coupon to my mother in New York. Jewish mothers love coupons! *Even if the*

product isn't kosher!

The total value of my *prizes* was approximately four hundred dollars. The network sent me a form a few days later that I was supposed to fill out and send to the IRS along with a check for the tax I had to pay on the "gifts." That's what people watching game shows aren't really privy to. When someone wins a car or new kitchen on TV, not *only* must you pay the retail tax on the item as if you bought it in the store, but also some kind of additional prize/gift tax bullshit which makes it impossible for some folks to even accept the prizes. So they need to either sell them or even settle for a much lower cash payment. My reasoning at the time was - fuck it - the prizes sucked, I didn't keep them, I'm not paying any fucking tax on this crap.

"The hardest thing in the world to understand is the income tax." - Albert Einstein

Three or four years later I got a bill from the IRS with a hefty penalty amounting to almost five hundred dollars for my unpaid, undeclared tax. I was being hounded by my own government for frozen shrimp I never even got to defrost, much less eat. So my biggest prize was a five hundred dollar tax bill for four hundred dollars worth of useless crap that I never got to use. The good news was that by the time I got the bill, I had given up my day job was eking out a living and paying my bills with stand-up. I now had a car *and* a rug. I wondered if I could still get my prizes back...

"The Gong Show provided me with five years of the happiest times of my life, but that's it. And to be known as the guy who gave the world The Gong Show - listen, my Uncle George isn't known as anything. So I guess it isn't so bad in that context." - Chuck Barris