

Raging Bull

"So give me a stage where this bull here can rage, and although I can fight, I'd much rather hear myself recite, That's Entertainment." - Robert De Niro (Jake LaMotta), Raging Bull (1980)

I've been called an attack comic, a blue comic, and *not for the faint of heart*. Reviews have warned people about sitting in the front row, getting up to use the bathroom, and if you're on a first date, to maybe reconsider attending altogether. I have nicknames like *Yid Vicious*, *The Mouth That Roared*, and *The Pitbull of Comedy*. The only thing I'm concerned with when I'm up on that stage is getting a laugh. I'm not concerned about the crowd's feelings, views or opinions but I'm also not looking to make them walk out upset. *Unless of course they ask for it*. Bachelorette parties have left my shows in tears - hating my very existence. *"Hey! You're getting married you dumb pinhead, save the animosity for your husband. You'll need it."* (And by the way, just for the record - while you and your other fat partying friends are at my show - your fiancee is probably at a strip club eating cookies out of an overpriced pussy). Although I'm referred to as a Pitbull, I'm not this unfeeling, unthinking monster up there trying to tear the audience apart. It's more of a *tough love* program that might make you think or squirm a little and in retrospect might not have been the best show to take your mid-west parents to while they're in town visiting for a few days. When I'm on stage and a bottle of vodka and full moon comes out, the snarling attack dog living inside me wakes up, reminding audiences how wrong their lives are and how right they would be if they'd just listen to what I'm saying. *I say what they'd all love to say but are just too damned chickenshit to say*. Yid Vicious is a good nickname for me. But I like to think of myself more as *"Id Vicious"*. Adds a touch of gravitas and self-importance.

"Even the man who is pure in heart, and says his prayers by night, may become a wolf when the wolfsbane blooms, and the moon is pure and bright." - Maria Ouspenskaya (Maleva), The Wolf Man (1941)

My stand-up style wasn't always a pre-emptive strike on the audience. It was never my intention to structure my little performance as a pre-

meditated Kamikaze attack taking the crowd down with me. I wanted to be on tv just like all the other comedians and avoiding a day job at all possible costs. I wanted to do my clean, tv friendly bits on Mike Douglas and Johnny Carson hoping that it might get me on a television series or even better, land me my *own* series. Which of course would lead to the even bigger picture which was making a lot of money and getting a lot of pussy - although after 25 years of marriage I'm happy with a good meal and a good nights sleep. *Not that the money/pussy dream isn't constantly haunting me.*

I cringe when I hear some of the material I was doing back then. I was trying to write for the television mass audience and there's nothing wrong with that. But "Mass" is an early Sunday morning thing and I'm a late-night Saturday evening kinda guy. Mass audience is not who I am. That wasn't my voice. Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor were brilliant on tv but the material they did on the air didn't hold a candle to what they *didn't do on tv*. A lot of my stuff back then wouldn't cut it today on one of those shitty half-hour "Specials" that Comedy Central hands out to hack comics like candy on Halloween night. It kills me to even bring it up, but on my first national television appearance in 1978 on *Norm Crosby's Comedy Shop* I had "zingers" like *"My girlfriend drives a Volkswagen Rabbit. Had to bring it into the shop the other day - it was leaking little pellets."* Ouch. Fuck. Shit. And thanks to the lovely folks at Amazon and YouTube I'm pretty sure those clips are still available. I'd almost rather be caught with kiddie porn. *Almost.*

"Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some absurdities and blunders no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

After a couple of years doing crappy one-nighters in bars full of drunks, headlining in shitty comedy clubs in the deep south, and sometimes sucking ass opening up for rock bands, the act started getting tighter, faster, meaner, and I like to think - *much funnier*. The bigger and drunker the crowd was, the more I had to dig in my heels, bare my fangs and go for the jugular. One night back in the early 80's at the San Francisco Civic Auditorium I had to face the biggest, drunkest, toughest, loudest, crowd I ever had to deal with up to that point. Five thousand screaming rock fans.

And none of them were there to see *me*. It wasn't *only* the longest *show* of my life, *it was the longest night of my life*. That coulda been the turning point when the puppy actually turned into the Pitbull. *And there was no turning back.*

I did a lot of shows opening for music acts. Some of them were good, and some not so good. (I'll save some of those fucking nightmare stories for the next chapter.) The great Albert Brooks did a bit years ago about opening for Richie Havens - *proof that in the 70's a toothless guy looking like he was straight from a hobo jungle could be a rock star*. Brooks was *unbilled, of course* - and since nobody in the crowd knew he was coming on first, the crowd had timed their drugs for the headliner. But then Albert walks on. Drugs. Alcohol. Rock concert. Comedian. **What could possibly go wrong here?** Talk about killing the messenger. At a rock concert the comic is always the messenger! In 1982 I was asked to host the 5th annual Bammie Awards Show, San Francisco's home-grown version of The Grammy's. There were dozens of musicians, music critics and record company people in the good seats and behind them in the cheap seats were thousands of fans that couldn't have cared less about the awards or speeches. They wanted to drink, smoke, hear music... *oh, and kill me.*

"Well, there are some things a man just can't walk away from." - John Wayne (Ringo Kid), Stagecoach (1939)

Five minutes into hosting this nightmare and things were not going well and according to the schedule and line-up, I had at least three more hours to go - and with maybe fifteen minutes of material written for the show - I was already heading into panic mode. Where was Albert Brooks when I needed him? At least The Skipper had Gilligan to assist him on their *three hour tour*, but I was up there by myself and the dark clouds from the impending shitstorm were moving in quickly. Dante had nine levels of Hell in his inferno. Obviously he never hosted a three hour music awards shows or he would have realized there were ten.

The reason I was even asked to host the BAMMIES was probably because I had opened for so many music acts in the past few years and a lot of the Bay Area musicians were friends of mine. Hadn't I opened for the proto-punk *Stranglers* on their first American tour AND SURVIVED?!

I was a big fan of almost all the bands, nominees, and performers that were on the stage that night - Jefferson Airplane (pre-Starship, "We Built This City" bullshit), Santana (before he could walk on water), Bay Area cult heroes, The Tubes (The first band I opened for and *much like myself* - unknown and ignored *outside* the Bay Area), The Doobie Brothers (Before Michael McDonald tried to become black), Eddie Money (Former NYC cop who now sold tickets instead of handing them out), and probably a dozen more, including platinum dipped assholes - Journey. I was friends with many of them, but *not* Journey, worked with some of them, but *not* Journey, and I listened to them all, **But not Journey**. To make matters worse, Journey was probably the most successful band in attendance. They'd released their breakthrough album, *Infinity* back in '78 and in the US alone they had sold more than 15 million albums. That's pretty impressive. Fifteen million Journey albums.

And I hated every single one of them.

Looking back, I guess doing a couple of Journey jokes early on in the evening was a pretty stupid fucking idea. Looking back a little bit more I realize the night wasn't about me bringing presenters and bands on and off the stage. It was about **me!** I had jokes planned and as far as I was concerned my taste in music was better and smarter than those idiots that paid money to get into the show. Was I supposed to give a rat's ass that BAM Magazine readers and writers voted in Journey as one of the greatest bands in the last five years? **I decided they weren't and I was hosting the show.** I knew it was my job to teach these assholes a thing or two about comedy and music. ***And I had the mic.***

"Maybe all one can do is hope to end up with the right regrets." - Arthur Miller

The Dick Bright Orchestra opened the show and was onstage all night to back up the musicians and help me by playing on the winners and presenters. The orchestra was led by my buddy Dick Bright, child violin prodigy and adult musical genius. The DBO was (and still is) a fixture in the Bay Area music scene and every bit of a Bay Area icon as Jerry or Grace,

by people who get it. If this were a just world Dick would have Journey's gold and gold albums. But the world sucks and so does Journey.

The entire show was simulcast live on the radio and this was in the days before the seven-second delay, so EVERYTHING went out *LIVE*. So besides the rowdy, drunken fans in the audience, there were probably another 50,000 at home or in their cars tuning in. Now the comedy clubs I started out in were tiny. The Holy City Zoo maybe sat about forty people uncomfortably. The Other Cafe maybe a hundred. And the big new club The Punchline, maybe 200, and only if the Fire Marshall wasn't nearby. So I was expecting this show to be good for me, maybe raise my fee and get me more exposure. All good. But if you ever watch those outdoors and exploration shows on tv then you know people *can die of exposure*. With the drunken, angry, human hurricane building momentum in the upper sections, things were not looking very encouraging.

"In view of the fact that God limited the intelligence of man, it seems unfair that he did not also limit his stupidity." - Konrad Adenauer, West German Chancellor (1949-1963)

I opened up with a pretty benign joke about Joan Baez, a very nice lady and legendary peace activist who happens to have a very good sense of humor about herself. All I said was that she *"couldn't make it tonight because she was doing a benefit for the Gay, Feminist, Cambodian Whales."* The joke got some laughs, and had Joan been there she would have laughed also. But no laughs from the table right up in front of me that was filled with the female staff of Olivia Records, the brainchild of some Berkley lesbians whose goal was to promote *"women's music"* whatever the fuck that is - I'm still not sure what *" women's music"* is, but I do know whatever the fuck it is - I don't like it. And *they* didn't like me dissing Joan Baez. (Of course I hadn't *"dissed"* Joan. But obviously they weren't really listening. Of course they weren't fucking listening. They were lesbians and I had a penis.)

A little trade secret - at my shows I don't really give a flying fuck if somebody is listening or not - they can be sleeping for all I care. As long as they're quiet and I can continue uninterrupted. But the dykes started hissing. *And I hate hissing.* Disrupting a comic's performance and yelling

shit out always sucks, but at least the heckler is letting you know how much they hate you *by using words*. To which I, using *my* words can respond. But hissing is just fucking lazy. Lesbians hiss a lot which is funny and ironic to me because snakes hiss. Snakes have always symbolized and represented the male genitalia and most lesbians are so anti-cock that you'd think they'd make that connection and stop fucking hissing like snakes and just throw punches like the men they are.

Looking back, the more the crowd turned on me, the stronger I became because as far as I was concerned, the *right people were laughing*. I remember Paul Kantner and Grace Slick from The Jefferson Airplane (they were The Starship by then, but it kills me to say that or *even write it*) were backstage encouraging me, and probably like a lot of artists, pretty sick of the political correctness infecting the Bay Area. I know that a lot of people that night appreciated my jokes. *Just not enough of the people*. I wouldn't say that my stand-up was a breath of fresh air in San Francisco, just a little fresher than the air we were breathing those days. When I saw Journey also sitting up front, not really paying much attention, drinking Dom Perignon and waiting for their umpteenth BAMMIE award, all I said was "*Should Journey really be up for 'Best Blues, Black or Ethnic Group?' That doesn't seem fair.*" Of course the fucktards at the Journey table took that as a slam and *also* started booing. (You think they woulda *hissed*.) And as much as I thought Journey sucked ass, I'd never met them and really had no issue with the band, I just wasn't a fan (in case I haven't made that clear so far). I was all about The Ramones and Stones and Elvis Costello. Journey to me was the musical equivalent of that mushy faux-artist (fartist?) Thomas Kinkade with his cheesy paintings of creepy Hansel and Gretel cottages and cobblestone paths. The fact that Kinkade *and* Journey were loved by the same huddled masses that thrive on that phony sentimentality in art *and* music made me hate them even more. (Cue up "Don't Stop Believin" for the billionth time!)

"There is always a heavy demand for fresh mediocrity. In every generation the least cultivated has the largest appetite." - Paul Gaugin

Once Journey started in on me - these famous, pompous, rich rock stars - busting my chops - *giving me shit over nothing* - it was time for that shit to hit the fan. When a champagne cork came flying my way from the Journey

table I announced, *"Journey's lead singer Steve Perry is to rock 'n roll what Jim Nabors is to opera."* The assholes up in the rafters started booing so loudly it sounded like they were screaming for Springsteen. It didn't help the situation much - *or maybe it did* - that backstage I was being egged on by the still sexy Grace Slick and lead singer Fee Waybill from The Tubes who didn't seem to be Journey fans either. Another shot of Stoli and a quick line of coke and I was back out in the ring for the next round.*

*As much as I love the Bay Area and started my comedy career in the Bay Area, my heart *and what little soul I have* always belonged to New York. In the 60's when I smoked pot I loved the San Francisco sound as much as any true hippy. The Dead, Airplane and Santana were a constant on my turntable. But the 70's hit and those days were gone and replaced by Lou Reed, The New York Dolls and The Dictators. Even though I grew up in the suburbs I was born in NYC, my parents were born in NYC, and I spent the first few formative years of my life in NYC. Social scientists know that environment and geography shapes you and stays with you on so many levels. They know that people of African descent, no matter where they live, have a higher tolerance to heat where people from cold climates have a higher tolerance to cold. I'm from New York. **We basically tolerate nothing.**

"Hard pressed on my right. My center is yielding. Impossible to maneuver. Situation excellent. Now I attack." - Marshall Ferdinand Foch (Taking command of the French Ninth Army in 1914 as it retreated before The Germans.)

I introduced Super Bowl Champion MVP Joe Montana from The Forty Fuckin' Niners and figured the hometown fans would come back around and welcome their hometown hero. And they did. *Until he started to speak. Then the shit-faced monkeys started booing him!* Montana had just brought San Francisco its first Lombardi Trophy, its first Super Bowl championship and they were booing him?? Are you kidding me?? Now it was personal. I liked Joe Montana and I loved The Forty Niners. Now I knew it wasn't just me. Mostly me, *maybe*, but not just me. All these scumbags wanted was music. Not talking. Not awards. And certainly not comedy. Any material I did seemed to piss somebody off. But to my reptilian attack brain, at least *pissed off* was a reaction. Maybe *not* the reaction I was looking for, but if they weren't gonna laugh and all these cretins were going to do was boo and hiss and get *even more pissed off* *every time I walked out there*, then I was going to go out of my way to piss

them off even more. I went out of my way to do gay jokes to piss off the dykes and was relentless with the Journey jokes to piss off everyone else. I felt like Roger Maris going for Babe Ruth's home run record. There were a lot of people that didn't want to see it happen - but I was a proud warrior put on this earth to fight and that's exactly what I was going to do. It was like being caught in a torrential rainstorm and getting totally soaked with another couple of miles to go. No sense in hurrying. Couldn't really get any wetter.

When I brought out my friend and one of my personal heroes, legendary rock promoter Bill Graham and the crowd booed him almost as much as they booed me, **THAT WAS IT.** That's when I dug in my heels even further, took off the dog collar and let it fly. Hide your children and nail the plywood up over the windows, assholes - *Hurricane Bobby just hit town!*

Another shot of vodka and a bit more coke and I went back out there not even thinking about salvaging the situation but instead trying to shoot my way out like a botched bank robbery only using insults to injure instead of actual bullets. I tried to keep the show moving to the best of my abilities and it certainly didn't help with more backstage encouragement from Huey Lewis and Eddie Money. Dick Bright's band was also cracking up which is not always a good sign.*

*When the band is laughing this means one of three things - Number one - you're up there killing and everyone is laughing. Number two - you're up there dying because your stuff is too hip for the room but not for the band and they're the only ones laughing. **Or** number three - you are dying up there because the audience hates you and the band is getting off on that, happy it's you and not *them*. I'd like to I think in my case, I hit the trifecta. It was all three.

At this point the show had been running almost 90 minutes longer than a Bob Hope Special with no sign of USO poster girl and Dean Martin escapee and professional dingbat Joey Heatherton to save the day. I'd done more coke than James Brown's horn section and enough vodka to make a Russian mobster wobble. Like De Niro in *Raging Bull*, I kept retreating to my corner only to come back out angrier and more determined to get through all fifteen rounds. Next to me offstage, Carlos Santana was standing behind the curtain waiting to go on. He cupped his hands in prayer and said to me peacefully and quietly, "*Be nice, Bobby, be nice.*" A little late

for that now Carlos. I mean, I love the guy, but we come from two totally different worlds. He was a meditating Mexican looking for peace, and I was a medicated Jew looking for trouble.

"Of course you know, this means war!" - Daffy Duck

It was just about then, right before intermission, that Journey's fat fuck manager, Herbie Herbert came backstage absolutely furious. His face was sweaty and beet red. He looked like an embarrassed Porky Pig in one of those Warner Brothers cartoons when Porky gets caught with his pants down. Herbie got right in my face (or as close as his fat fuck belly would allow, and I know I'm being redundant with "fat fuck" but we're talking about a fat fuck with the redundant name of Herbie Herbert) and proceeded to rip me a new asshole, getting all medieval on me like dead but still angry Yankee manager Billy Martin having an aneurysm over a bad call. Except Herbie was trying to get *me* thrown out of the game. He couldn't believe I would dare tease and ridicule *"the most beloved and adored band in the Bay Area."* I told him, *"Yeah, beloved and adored - much like the people of Berlin loved Hitler."* We were separated by Bill Graham and his security guys which was a good thing because I think Herbie was about to eat me.

"You never got me down Ray! You hear me? You never got me down!" - Jake LaMotta

The producers huddled at halftime trying to decide if it was a good idea to let me go back out there, which woulda been like sending out *more* white cops during the Rodney King riots suited up in the *"I HATE NIGGERS"* sandwich boards that Bruce Willis wore so well in *Die Hard 3*. My pal Dick Bright, fully armed with his violin and eleven-piece orchestra fiddled away while I fumed and Rome burned. Possibly to deflect some of the anger towards him to help out his old buddy - *or maybe he was just out of songs* - Dick and the band started playing the theme from *The Love Boat*. Bright told me later that he was just trying to lighten the tone in the room and trying to get the crowd back. Hey, it worked with *Springtime For Hitler*, why couldn't it work here? At this point the producers decided to cut their losses, walk away from the table, and just let Dick and the boys finish out the rest of the evening. I'd been benched.

"Maybe it is a rotten world, but a cause isn't lost as long as someone is willing to go on fighting." - Lauren Bacall (Nora Temple), Key Largo (1948)

A few hours later the BAMMIE debacle was over and the presenters, performers, nominees, *and me* lined up backstage to take press photos. While Journey was off to the side waiting their turn - *and still busting my balls with boozed-up catcalls like the pussies they were* - the photographer snapped a photo of me and Bill Graham while I was giving the finger to Journey. A month later a beautifully framed picture of me and Bill arrived in the mail from Graham's office inscribed, *"Nobody ever said it was gonna be easy. That's what makes it what it is - Cheers, Bill."* For a guy who doesn't wallow in sentimentality, it makes me tear up just writing this.

So now it's thirty years later and I've become a much better comic and don't even think about Journey anymore until I have to do one of those shitty 80's *Rock Morning Zoo* radio shows. But I also still miss Bill very, very, much. The photo hangs proudly in my office and if my house ever catches fire, that's the first thing I would grab, after my dog. *I love my wife, but she is so on her own.* When Bill was killed almost ten years later in a helicopter crash, returning from a Huey Lewis concert I was back in the Bay Area working at his comedy club, The Punchline. I had to do three shows that night which is tough enough under normal circumstances, but Bill's death made it excruciating. It made the BAMMIES seem like a day at Disneyland which really was never that much fun either - way too many Goddamn kids. And as much as I like Huey Lewis and had some great times opening up for his band, I'm sure Bill would much rather have been killed coming back from a Stones show. But the bright side - *At least it wasn't Journey.**

* I was recently doing a show in Tampa at the same time The Republican National Convention was in town. Journey was hired to perform at a private show for the GOP and I was offered a ticket. Let's play a game for a minute - *"Which Would You Rather"* - Go to The Journey show and have to stay through the encore, standing in the middle of thousands of fat, soulless Republicans *OR* get fist-fucked in a Gay Cowboy bar by a big burly leatherboy in chaps while riding the mechanical *man*? Let me think for a moment... Does the fist-fucking at least come with a few free drinks? *Hmm...* I'll get back to you.

But back to that night - or rather the next morning at home - I barely slept, wired and fired up, bracing myself for the "wonderful" reviews from

the Bay Area papers. Chronicle music critic Joel Selvin, who'd been backstage during much of the fiasco and promised to go gentle, empathized with my situation during the show and I thought I might come out slightly unscathed. Nope. Let the scathing begin!

"...lengthy, awkward set changes and a disastrous hosting job by comedian Bobby Slayton, in over his head with the raucous crowd, left the show's pacing in shambles."

I have to admit that really bothered me at the time, but if it happened now, I don't think it would. After all, the guy was right. (Or WAS he?? Selvin also wrote a book about Sammy Hagar. Really? Sammy Fucking Hagar? All his musical objectivity is OUT the window.)

Mr. San Francisco himself, columnist Herb Caen sold me down river by saying:

"Bobby was stuck on his own shtick - hurling ethnic jokes, anti-gay cracks and epithets at kids who only wanted to hear hard rockers and not one-liners."

I gotta admit, he also had a point. But I must say, some of my jokes were pretty damn good. *AND Mr. San Francisco - those ethnic epithets and homo jokes bought my house!*

Only Bill Mandel in The San Francisco Examiner gave me an *almost* positive write-up when he referred to the audience as:

"... the New Barbarians who respect nothing but their own infantile need to get off by shouting and pushing their way to the front."

Only now when I read it, maybe he was talking about me. It sure sounds like me. I cut out all the reviews and put them away for future reference. I took a swig from a bottle of Champagne that I found still sitting on Journey's table which I felt I certainly deserved. *I'd earned it.* The one bottle they hadn't popped open to throw the cork at me. I settled back on my couch thinking about all the jokes I never got to the night before and thought, *"I'm almost 27 years old, I'm getting too old for this shit."*

