

# "A Funny Woman Walks into a Bar..."



Jessimae Peluso's set contains jokes about farts, orgasms, waxing, and Jamaican cruises (only vacation "a broke bitch" can afford).

**Female comics get little respect — and few gigs — in the local and national club scene. So why do they bother trying?**

By Melissa Savignano

**S**tereotypes about women in comedy — they're not funny, all they talk about is tampons, they need to be pretty, they can't be pretty — remain in the back of Anna Phillips' mind every time she steps on stage. But she doesn't see them as a reason to put down the mic.

The 31-year-old Syracuse comedian's jokes take dead aim at herself, on a trifecta of touchy topics: race, weight, and — the show-stopper — gender. During an April 6 show at Jazz Central, Phillips jokes about everything from evading student loans to race relations with her white roommate: "My current roommate is my first white roommate ever. I like that I can pretend to like all her stuff. I'll be like 'Take your Taylor Swift CD and *Dawson's Creek* DVDs... out of my room.'" She then jokes she can get her white boss to get her coffee: "I like my coffee with cream, sugar, and a little bit of white guilt."

The crowd, of mostly middle-aged locals, both black and white, erupts in guffaws. While the responses she receives remain generally positive, she knows gender will always play a role in her career. "Being a woman in comedy is basically like being a woman in the world. You still feel slightly marginalized at times," she says. "But when you're good, you're good." ☺

And when you're good, regardless of your sex, you either give up or work harder. The problem, say a number of local comedians, female and male, is that Syracuse isn't exactly comedy central. "Upstate New York comedy is tough. It isn't New York City," says Kelly "KD the Comic" Doane, who started his performing career in Syracuse and now lives in Richmond, Va. "It's a lot of comedians striving to get to a better place but there isn't anywhere that will give you a chance."

When he first started in Syracuse, he would go straight to club and bar owners and ask to perform instead of waiting for them to make the first move. He eventually left town when his ex-wife moved to Virginia, and he's found more comedy opportunities there.

The War Memorial at OnCenter, The Landmark Theater, and Syracuse University occasionally bring in big-name comedy acts such as Aziz Ansari and Daniel Tosh. Other venues like Funk 'n Waffles near campus and Sharkey's in Liverpool offer weekly or occasional open mics, but they aren't geared toward funny business.

The only true open mic comedy club around is Wise Guys. Many comics don't see it as a huge launching pad, but still a place for local amateurs to do what they love. The club hires local talent to MC or open shows for bigger names. It offers about 16 slots a week to performers, with an instructional class beforehand, and local comedians perform on Wednesdays during open mic nights for just five minutes, says owner David Wheeler. There are no restrictions to who can step on stage, but preference is given to loyal and consistent acts.

At Wise Guys, about 30 percent of the performers are women, Wheeler says. The club currently features six regular female performers. On one particular night in March, the club featured 14 male comedians and just one female act. To Doane, that's a sure sign of what's going on. He believes the lack of famous and respected female comedians make the game harder for the fairer sex. "It's tough for everyone, but tougher for females," he says. "You're either Ellen or Kathy Griffin. That's it."



Being banned from Wise Guys didn't make it any easier for Phillips. In late 2010, she planned to perform at the Labrador Mountain ski lodge in Truxton. Back then, Phillips was a weekly staple at Wise Guys. A day before the show, a Wise Guys employee told her if she wanted to continue performing at the club, she couldn't perform in other venues close enough to Syracuse to be considered a competitor. If she did, she wouldn't be allowed back. "It wasn't even a rule I knew I was breaking," Phillips says, who told the "Jokepranos" (her nickname for them) at Wise Guys goodbye and never returned. "I simply said, 'See ya. I'll miss the garlic wings.'"

Phillips thought she might quit the comedy game. What's the use, she thought, if there's no place to perform locally? But she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. "I had already become addicted to it," says Phillips. "It forced me to broaden my horizons. I had to prove a point."

She started driving to Rochester and Albany because of their larger comedy scenes. Phillips says Rochester has a more open, entrepreneurial comedy scene with The Comedy Club in Webster, a town just east of the city, hosting local comics every weekend. "They also have what you might call a grassroots comedy scene," she says. "Com-

## You have to ask: 'Do you want to go out to eat or do you just want to get inside my Vagina Monologue?'" — Jessimae Peluso

ics who organize their own shows and have their own production companies." According to Phillips, Albany also has a local comedy radio show, "Alternative to Sleeping," as well as a large comedy club and various open mics throughout the week, not just one day.

Travel comes with the territory. Working comedians in the Syracuse area frequently hit the road or just move away to make a

run at a career in comedy. Comedians like Phillips' mentor, Jessimae Peluso. The Syracuse native moved to Boston in 2001 with a boyfriend and picked up comedy there. In Boston, open mic nights are happening at bars, restaurants, and clubs almost every night of the week. Peluso, 29, started doing sketches at various venues with "The Tribe," a Boston improv troupe. "I didn't know it was something I could do until I went to Boston and someone said I was funny," she says. "It's not a jab on Syracuse. It's just not built to be a big cultural market."

Peluso plays an annual, self-funded show at The Palace Theater in Syracuse, which she started when she visits home. After a few years in Boston, she moved to NYC in 2005. She's still there now, on the verge.

Despite the laughs she gets, backstage it's like a frat house. Peluso sometimes feels that bookers and agents focus solely on her looks and don't appreciate her comedic chops. She also has had to constantly deal with sleazy male comics and bookers. During what Peluso considers one of her best auditions, a few years ago in New York City, a booker had only one comment: "Well, you're pretty good to look at but you did nothing else for me." She left the audition fuming. Peluso quickly learned to carry a "don't fuck with me" attitude. "Male comics will ask me to dinner after shows and it's so obvious they don't want to talk and help me out," she says. "You have to ask 'Do you want to go out to eat or do you just want to get inside my Vagina Monologue?'"

Still, she keeps at it. At the April 6 Jazz Central show, Peluso's routine relied heavily on gender. Her sexuality, acne, boyfriends, manicures, and "being a broke bitch" all get



Anna Phillips performs during "The C Word" at Jazz Central on E. Washington Street.





Tina Nabatachi, member of Kathy's Fur Coat improv troupe, performs with Paul Hirsch at The Bank on S. Warren Street

played for laughs; but she also adds a few fart jokes and physical comedy bits. Peluso, a dead ringer for Christina Applegate with her slender look and blonde hair, comes out with a beer in hand and performs a manic, varied, and self-proclaimed "ADD" set. One time she jokes about Occupy Wall Street and ventures quickly into her sex life: "The protesters all yell 'Fuck the police.' Yea totally. I actually have fucked a few police." Being a woman works to her advantage on stage.

At her annual show, she breaks out her strictly local material, drawing on her favorite memories of growing up in Syracuse: The Great New York State Fair butter sculptures, making human chains at Green Lakes Park, or stealing from the Carousel Mall as a teenager. She plans and advertises for the show on her own because The Palace doesn't offer much for up and comers. She does her own promotions and booking.

In other words, Peluso survives by carving out her own place in the business. That can

add up: spending more time advertising than working on new material, traveling constantly, and approaching venues to ask for that coveted chance on stage. For Phillips, who

**My first thought was 'He's either a feminist or he just wants someone to sleep with.' — Anna Phillips**

has a full time job as a security supervisor at SU, the prospect is nerve-racking. "I can only take so many days off of work. There's a balance," she says. "For some people, it's

motherhood. For me it's work. Eventually I'm going to have to make a decision."

In the meantime, she drives. Lately, Phillips has landed gigs all over the state, including New York City and a 2011 opening gig for comedian Tom Green in Rochester. "I was told I was picked for Tom's show because he demanded a female comic for his opening act," Phillips says. "My first thought was 'He's either a feminist or he just wants someone to sleep with'" She adds that he ended up being one of the nicest people she ever met in the business.

Like the perk of comics wanting diversity, being a woman has its benefits. Last March, Phillips participated in the 2012 Women in Comedy Festival in Boston, performing among such known comedians as Wendy Liebman and Peluso. The festival, which featured 225 female and male comedians, was a steppingstone for Phillips. "It's a little bit more competitive than just signing up and going on stage," she says.



If standup fails her, there's always another option. Women who want or need to stay in Syracuse might find better luck in one of Syracuse's five improv troupes. Some, like Don't Feed the Actors, have been around since 2008. Most troupes have a handful of women. Some have none. But women add concrete diversity to troupes that make performing easier. Tina Nabatachi, a performer in Kathy's Fur Coat, says viewers warm up to female performers pretty quickly. They perform at places like The Redhouse and The Bank on South Warren Street to crowds of people ranging from early 20s to middle age. Like Phillips and Peluso, Nabatachi tries to use her female perspective to her advantage. "The best things in improv come from a place of truth. I am a woman. Let me tell you what it's like to have big boobs," Nabatachi says. "I can draw on it, so making fun of marriage-obsessed women comes from a place of truth."

Nabatachi, a professor of public administration and international affairs at SU, first tried her hand at improv to get better at

Photos courtesy of Syracuse Improv Collective

## "Here's Lookin' at You, Kid"

Discover some of the woman blazing the funny trail through history.

### 1963

*Improvisation for the Theater* by Viola Spolin becomes the improv bible. Her work influenced the creation of legend Los Angeles comedy breeding area The Groundings

### 1970

Sept. 19: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* debuts, leading the way for the funny, working women characters of the future: Murphy Brown, Liz Lemon, Leslie Knope.

### 1975

Nov. 8: Candice Bergen is the first woman to host *Saturday Night Live*, four episodes into the inaugural season. Lily Tomlin would follow suit two weeks later.

### 1985

Jan. 11: While male comics dominate in America, Victoria Wood breaks through in the United Kingdom with the sketch show *Victoria Wood: As Seen On TV*.

### 1989

July 5: Being the odd woman out pays off for Julia-Louis Dreyfuss as *Seinfeld* premieres. With lackluster careers and racist rants nowplaguing the men, she seems poised to be the sole victor over the post-show curse.

### 1994

March 21: Whoopi Goldberg is the first woman and African American to host the Oscars. Her eyebrows forget to attend.

### 1997

April 6: Telling *Time* magazine she doesn't have to be "fearful," comedian Ellen DeGeneres says she's a lesbian. Her TV alter ego Ellen Morgan (on *Ellen*) would come out in an episode at the end of the month.

entertaining her students and reacting to any question or circumstance. She eventually got hooked — in part because she enjoyed adding a female perspective to the mainly male troupes. Gender plays a big part in what gets the biggest laughs. “I remember we got our best reactions from a man imitating Dolly Parton and giving birth on stage,” she says.

Women need to learn to be raunchy and outgoing quickly, Nabatachi says, in order to succeed in comedy. “I feel woman aren’t used to putting themselves out there, which is big in comedy. We’re not taught to be risk takers. Growing up, in elementary school, the goof-off is always a guy. But women are

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funny.” She later says getting the funny side out is just like getting a few drinks in them.

Men in improv encourage women to join troupes and come out to workshops, as it helps add variety to sketches. Dustin Crazny, the artistic director of Don’t Feed the Actors, performs with his wife in the troupe and noticed the audience’s positive responses to the female performers. “Sometimes the audience is shocked the women can bring it just as good as the guys,” he says. “We like to have a good stock of female talent because we think it brings a different aspect to the comedy.”

While improv troupes see the benefit of adding women, some comedy clubs don’t need the female perspective to sell tickets.

## Comedic Surroundings

Need a funny night out? Try these local(ish) joints.

**Wise Guys Comedy Club**  
201 S. Salina St.  
Syracuse, N.Y.  
wiseGuyssyracuse.com

**The Comedy Club**  
2235 Empire Blvd.  
Webster, N.Y.  
theComedyclub.us

**Lake Ontario Playhouse**  
103 West Main St.  
Sackets Harbor, N.Y.  
playhousecomedy.com

**The Comedy Works**  
200 Wolf Road  
Albany, N.Y.  
thecomedyworks.com

Improv is generally a group of people, so women aren’t isolated by themselves on stage, as well. For female comedians who straight up want to do stand up, like Phillips, the playing field hasn’t quite evened out yet. The “Un-funny female” expectation still lingers. The path will always be uphill.



Peluso realizes she will continue to come across comics and bookers who treat her unfairly, and who can’t get past the way she looks. But she knows she has a foothold outside of the Central New York comedy bubble, and doesn’t want to be held back. “At the end of the day, they don’t dictate my career,” she says. “I do.” With perseverance and probably a little bit of luck, she keeps focused on what matters: her work. “You have enough problems, with always being broke, always traveling,” she says. “The moment you make it the reason you’re not succeeding is just another excuse.”

Peluso continues to bartend on top of performing to help pay rent. She claims she’s

been offered everything from hotdogs and Bed, Bath, and Beyond coupons, to Post-It notes saying “I owe you.” Very few shows, if any, make a profit for up and coming comics. Phillips says when she produces and puts together her own shows, she doesn’t make money off of it, after expenses. When she’s just performing, she gets paid about \$100, but those times are rare. “Other pro comics tell me it takes years to make money off of this,” she says.

Phillips continues to joke about her gender and her looks, but now adds a variety to her shows. She’s currently working on show in NYC titled *Dream Big Comedy Show: NYC Invasion*. While she can continue to joke about people saying she looks like the movie character Precious or Jennifer Hudson before *Weight Watchers*, she now incorporates her older poetry work and everyday experiences into her routines. Like Peluso, gender becomes part of her routine, but not all of it.

In the mean time, Phillips continues at her day job. And on the weekend, she logs some serious time with I-90. 🗺️



Audience members watch the Oregon Fail improv troupe at The Bank on S. Warren Street

# 2000

May: Kathy Griffin is featured in Eminem’s “The Real Slim Shady” music video. All she needed was a Snoop Dogg referral.

# 2006

March 11: London magazine *The Observer* calls Sarah Silverman both the hottest and the most controversial comedian around. We guess it’s flattering.

# 2001

Wanda Sykes wins the American Comedy Award for Funniest Female Stand Up Comic. In 2003, her short-lived sitcom *Wanda At Large* premieres. At least Fox can’t cancel her career.

# 2008

Sept. 13: Tina Fey debuts her Sarah Palin impression on *SNL*. Russia’s still wondering how it got dragged into this.

# 2007

July 17: Chelsea Handler’s late night show *Chelsea Lately* debuts. Her sardonic take on celebrity culture helps her remain the reigning lady of late night.

# 2011

May 13: *Bridesmaids*, a comedy starring a predominantly female cast, opens. It goes on to make \$169.1 million at the box office. All the award nominations weren’t originally on the registry.

# 2010

March 7: Monique wins an Oscar for a very unfunny performance in *Precious*. Her most memorable red carpet look? Her unshaved legs.