

The New York Times

A Nerd Gone Wild Gives Voice to His Inner Rat

By JOE RHODES
Published: June 24, 2007

PATTON OSWALT, claiming to be moderately drunk, was onstage at one of his favorite haunts, Largo, a small cabaret on Fairfax Avenue in West Hollywood, unleashing one of the elaborate tirades that have become his comedy trademark, describing the aesthetic horrors of entering the orange-furniture, fluorescent-light nightmare that is Yoshinoya Beef Bowl, a Japanese fast-food chain he says must be a front for some sort of international crime syndicate.

"Everything about it is psychologically designed to repel you," he proclaimed to the tiny in-the-know Friday night audience, barely 80 people who had come to watch him open for and then mercilessly heckle his friend, the singer-songwriter Michael Penn, in an intimate, unrehearsed, barely advertised show. He imagined how the Yoshinoya proprietors must have purposefully created dishes that resembled "boiled shoelaces in air-conditioning water."

So that's one endorsement deal he won't be getting. Nor is he likely to be hearing from the folks at KFC (at least not in a good way) after appearing on "Late Night With Conan O'Brien" and describing its popular Famous Bowl combo of chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy as "a failure pile in a sadness bowl" and "a wet mound of starch that I can eat with a spoon like I'm a death-row prisoner on suicide watch."

Mr. Oswalt, 38, small, pasty and avocado-shaped, has made a fine living with free-flowing rants like these for most of the last 15 years. (He also just recently ended a long run as a secondary cast member on the now-departed CBS sitcom "King of Queens.")

He's a nerd gone wild, an unrepentant lover of comic books and pulp fiction, food, pornography and role-play video games, a guy who likes guns and yoga, hates hippies and President Bush and is capable of spewing out ornate, passionate, profanity-laden screeds on just about anything.

"I spend a lot of time pointing out what I think is moronic in the world," Mr. Oswalt said in an interview a few weeks earlier, before taking off on another round of touring. "But then I point out that the reason I'm so attuned to this hypocrisy and moronic behavior is that I'm twice as guilty of it as most people."

"Advertising works on me," he continued. "I overeat. I love to drink. I have very base, petty, vengeful thoughts. I'm not just saying, 'Here's what's wrong with the world.' I'm saying, 'Here's what's wrong with me.'"

It's an approach that has made him a driving force in the so-called alternative stand-up comedy scene, a taboo-flouting generation of post-Seinfeld comedians like Sarah Silverman, David Cross and Mr. Oswalt's colleagues on the "Comedians of Comedy" tour, the subject of a 2006 movie and cable series: Brian Posehn, Maria Bamford and Zach Galifianakis. For performers like these, comedy is as much about point of view as it is about punch lines.

It's also, weirdly enough, an approach that landed him the lead role in what is likely to be the summer's biggest G-rated animated film, Pixar's "Ratatouille," which opens Friday. Mr. Oswalt provides the voice for Remy, a rat who dreams of being a gourmet chef.

"I heard his routine about steak," said the film's director, Brad Bird, when asked why he had made such an unlikely casting choice. In the bit he was citing, Mr. Oswald describes the menu at Black Angus as a gantlet of "angry food": "a 55-ounce he-man steak slab, served with a deep-fried punkin, stuffed with buttered scallops, 53 of our potato-bacon balls," and then "here comes the gravy pipe."

Mr. Bird, who won an Oscar for his last Pixar film, "The Incredibles," said: "There was so much passion and volatility in his voice, and when I heard it I felt like, 'That's Remy.' The character is a small guy with a very big personality. And I feel like Patton is that guy."

Whatever mainstream opportunities may come from projects like "Ratatouille," Mr. Oswald is adamant about not abandoning his alterna-comedy base. Next month he will release his second definitely-not-for-kids stand-up CD, "Werewolves and Lolipops," and he keeps up a heavy schedule of club gigs and impromptu appearances at places like Largo, sometimes going onstage five or six nights a week.

Asked whether he worries about losing his antiestablishment aura or, worse yet, being accused of selling out, he said: "I think it depends on what you do with your success. I'm not doing comedy so I can get out of comedy. I'm doing movies and TV shows and writing screenplays so I can have freedom to do more comedy. And now I have the money to produce my own tours and showcase other comedians.

"So I don't look at it as being a sellout," he continued. "I think 'King of Queens' was a really funny show. And as long as I'm out there doing stand-up, what difference does it make what else I do? That's like someone saying they can't listen to Richard Pryor's old albums ever since they saw 'Superman III.' Really? Well, you're an idiot then. 'Cause those albums are amazing."

Mr. Oswald, who grew up in suburban Virginia and was an English major at the College of William and Mary, started doing stand-up around Washington in 1988. In 1992 he moved to San Francisco; three years later he moved to Los Angeles, where he was hired as a writer for Fox's sketch-comedy series "Mad TV." By then he had already abandoned much of his self-proclaimed "hacky road act" in favor of a less structured, more confessional style.

"The model for success as a comedian had always been that you spent your entire career focusing on putting together one killer five-minute act, you go on 'The Tonight Show,' get called over to Johnny Carson's desk and get a sitcom," he said. "That's how you made it. So I'd started down that path.

"And then Johnny quit, and that entire model was shattered, which I thought was great. Because instead of performing for an invisible talent scout that wasn't there, we started doing comedy for ourselves, because we just loved doing stand-up. Instead of waiting for this one five-minute shot that decides your whole life, comedy went back to what it was supposed to be: just going onstage and venting and spewing and having fun."

Besides his near-evangelical zeal for the "Comedians of Comedy" tour, an occasional event he put together with the Atlanta music promoter and writer Henry Owings in 2004, Mr. Oswald often assembles showcases of undiscovered comedians for producers like Frank Smiley of "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," who says Mr. Oswald "knows everyone who's good" and is "truly a fan of the form."

"He's also stayed true to what he finds funny," Mr. Smiley said. "He doesn't pander. Comics love him for that."

Mr. Owings, who describes Mr. Oswald's comedy as "a form of perverted poetry," recalled the first time he presented him, in Atlanta in 2002. "There were 50 people in the audience," he said, "and Patton performed for almost three hours."

"I'm not exaggerating," Mr. Owings continued. "He gets offstage and has a wine ring around his mouth from drinking so much and says, 'That was the most fun I ever had in my life.' He said, 'Henry, getting paid to do that is like getting paid to eat chocolate cake.' "