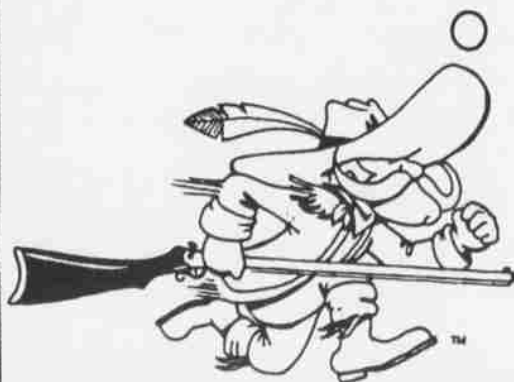


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Rich Little: Dead presidents and chocolate pizza

Exclusive Special to Variety
First of two parts

BY JIM WILSON
STAFF WRITER

Rich Little has become an American treasure.

Little began, so the story goes, impersonating high school teachers, and in his own words, "...giving them the wrong answers in their voices."

It was this "gift" that took Little to Hollywood, "The Judy Garland Show," and subsequent appearances on "The Ed Sullivan Show," "Truth or Consequences," and later, "Hollywood Squares." His battery of voices grew as quickly as his fame, and he counts among his best friends some of his best impersonations: Jimmy Stewart, George Burns, and until his death, Paul Lynde.

Currently appearing at the Sahara in Las Vegas six nights a week, his schedule easily matches some of the hardest working acts around.

With a contract at that venue that is termed "indefinite," Little doesn't appear to be planning retirement soon.

Though his primary obligation would seem to be on the Strip, Little is currently working on other projects, including re-working his earlier version of *A Christmas Carol* and writing what he calls "an almost one-man show" for Broadway.

Rich Little may be the hardest working 200 people in show business.

Prior to his appearance as the headline act at the Cal McKinley Memorial Scholarship Concert last Sunday, Little spoke candidly about his beginnings and the state of comedy today. Bruce Mickelson, currently with "Forbidden Vegas," and also on the bill Sunday, occasionally wandered over to lend his thoughts. The two comedians freely availed themselves of the gratis champagne and cheese, and appeared loose and relaxed.

J: You were born in Canada.

am I correct, in '38?

RL: (pause) Yeah, '38.

J: Do I understand that you've just recently become a Las Vegas resident?

RL: No, I've lived here for about, oh, three years.

Bruce Mickelson: This spread looks great!

RL: And with this champagne, the more you drink, the looser the presentation. (laughs)

BM: I love this.

J: You have to try the wine out front, too.

BM: Wine's in front, huh? I think I will. (walks away)

J: Rich, you've been a comedic figurehead a long time, and you can take that as a compliment. You've received a lot of honors and awards throughout the years, but when you look at your "I Love Me" wall, what's the most important item on it?

RL: I think the concert I did with Frank Sinatra in my hometown to raise money for the neonatal center. We raised a million dollars at that concert. It was at the Civic Center in Ottawa 10 years ago. That was a big event.

J: You do a lot of charity, don't you?

RL: I do a lot of charity, but that was the most prestigious thing that we've done. Getting Frank to come up there, giving his time, flying up to Ottawa, making that much money and then going back to the hospital where I was born, Civic Hospital, and seeing how that center has grown, and how it's saving a lot of lives, it was a wonderful, rewarding feeling.

So that was a standout in my career, and I have a lot of pictures and stuff on my wall from that.

J: You and Patrick Stewart have something in common: You both did one-man *Christmas Carols*.

RL: (smiles) Yeah.

J: Who's was better?

RL: Oh, I don't know. I've done that so many times, with so many variations. I keep changing it, re-writing it. I'm going to do it again this year in an even more simplified version. It's a great story, and it's perfect for impressions.

J: One of my favorites that you did was "First Family Rides Again." I loved that.

RL: (smiling) Really? Yeah, somebody came up to me

RL: No, you just do Henry Fonda, who was known as Lincoln.

J: Hal Holbrook.

RL: Or Hal Holbrook. I guess nobody knows what Lincoln sounds like, do they?

J: I suppose FDR is easy.

RL: FDR you can do.

J: Since you have the famous "r u b b a h" speech for reference.

RL: Sure, that's it.

J: A lot has been written about comedy, that it can be bro-



Rich Little still makes 'em laugh

"You can be an expert and still be wrong... you can have the funniest joke and the audience doesn't get it."

ken down into deconstructionist or observationalist categories and different styles of delivery. How do you know what "funny" is?

RL: You don't. You can be an expert and still be wrong. You really can. You can have the funniest joke, and can't wait to tell it; the funniest thing you ever heard, and the audience doesn't get it. It can be too complicated, you have to think too much. So you never really know. That's what makes comedy interesting.

Even Milton Berle and Bob Hope make mistakes. You may think you know it all, but that's what makes it interesting. Everybody has different tastes in comedy, just like music. You know, you see these comedy shows today on television, and people are screaming and laughing, and you wonder what they're laughing at. I find a lot of them very un-funny, but some people think it's funny. The comedy trend today is to talk about real life things, things that people do in everyday life; and exaggerate them.

J: Observationalist.

RL: Yeah, not just tell jokes. When I was growing up, with Bob

the other day and I said, "You gonna make any more albums?" And I said, "There are no albums a n y m o r e. Where have you been?" (laughs)

J: Wal-Mart still sells record players.

RL: Do they really?

J: They

don't sell albums, though, I don't think.

RL: No, you can't find albums. There are young people who don't even know what they are.

J: Ask someone what a forty-five is.

RL: That's a chocolate pizza with a hole in it. (laughs) Yeah, it's all CDs, video, and audiotape.

J: Speaking of recording, how do you impersonate a dead president, like Lincoln, who really wasn't audiotaped a lot?

Hope, Milton Berle, Red Buttons, Pat Cooper, Henny Youngman, it was jokes. Today it's not. Today, it's stories and things that people do that others can relate to.

J: America laughed at Archie Bunker but it was made obvious he was ignorant. Now there's a major sit-com airing with a family next-door to a neighbor they call "Crazy George." George is mentally retarded in the storyline. Where's the line you shouldn't cross? Is there one?

RL: There is no line. There isn't any today. You do what you like today. When I hosted "The Tonight Show" in the '60s and seventies, I couldn't say "damn" or "hell." I was always getting things either blipped or changed. Today, you watch commercial television and it's astounding how far we've come in ten years. They can do humor on anything. Anything.

And the language - there's no restrictions today. It's just totally different. The shock value seems to appeal to a lot of people, too. If you're using a lot of four-letter words and talking about subjects that are kind of taboo, a lot of young people think that's very funny.

J: Turning to what you do specifically, the first time I saw you was on "Truth or Consequences" with Bob Barker.

RL: Well, good. (smiles)

J: You said the range of your voice, your "musicality" allows you to do what you do. A lot of people don't realize you are a very good singer.

RL: Well, the singing is interesting because you've got the tune going for you. If people recognize the tune, and like the tune, they'll applaud. So you've got the tune working for you. If you do Sinatra doing "New York, New York," or Willie Nelson doing "On the Road Again," or Neil Diamond singing "I Am, I Said" - If they like the tune, and recognize the tune, than that will help the impression.

So the singing is actually more impressive to the audience than the talking. Most people think it's more difficult but it isn't. It's easier to do the singing.

See Rich Little pg. 10

Local gang members put on play?

VAEDRA ROSEMAN-SOWERBY
STAFF WRITER

Straight from the Hood is not just another production about gun-wielding inner-city youths terrorizing

citizens and turning the high schools into dangerous battlefields. It isn't just a true account of the real problems that face young adults on a daily basis. The actors in this play are actual ex-gang members and ex-drug abusers who have been rehabilitated by an organization

called Victory Outreach.

According to Victory Outreach's public relations representative and graduate of the rehabilitation program Howard Fortson, their goal is "to reach the people that no one else tries to reach," namely, drug addicts and

gang members. Victory Outreach is boastful of the fact that, as opposed to other rehab programs that have only a 25 percent success rate on average, they "graduate" 65 percent of those involved.

"Graduates" are reinstated into society as "nor-

mal" people who can hold down jobs and function as positive citizens in the community.

An important aspect of the program is church involvement. Most of Victory Outreach's work is centered around their church located at 810 East Lake Mead Boulevard in North Las Vegas. see Gangsters gy pg.8