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## Comedian Bill Santiago Has the Last Laugh



By Macarena Hernandez  
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Have you heard the one about the Puerto Rican comedian?

Not many have.

With the exception of Freddie Prinze, star of the 70s sitcom, "Chico and the Man," stand-up comic Paul Rodriguez and John Leguizamo, successful Latino comedians are few. But Bill Santiago, who was raised in New York and now resides in San Francisco, knows that it's just a matter of time before it's his turn.

Two and a half years ago Santiago decided to pursue his passion for performance full force. He left a promising journalism career

in Puerto Rico to move to San Francisco, a hub for aspiring comedians.

During a recent performance of his show, "On the Verge of a Latin Meltdown," a tightly-packed, predominantly Latino audience laughed heartily at his jokes, which take a skeptical look at the recent Latino cultural explosion.

My God, that was like a moon landing for us," said Santiago. "One small syncopated step for Puerto Rico, one giant leap for La Raza." He adds: "Now everybody wants to be Latino -- even Latinos."

Not that Santiago himself wants to be pigeonholed as a comedian who only does Latino-themed comedy. His recent show was his first focus ever on Latino themes.

On stage, Santiago glides in and out of topics dealing with everything from relationships to the Taco Bell Chihuahua. But regardless of the topic, he relies on his writing skills and powers of perception rather than cheap shots and shock-value to earn laughs.

Those who have been following his career, like Norita Gonzalez, agree.

"It's so easy to rely on vulgarity as the basis of your joke, which is something that Bill doesn't do, and that in itself sets him apart," said Gonzalez, who produced and directed "Viernes Literarios," a showcase of Latino talent that featured Santiago.

In Santiago's latest show, his hour-long routine is followed by the performance of Roberto Borrell's Orquesta la Moderna Tradicion, an Afro-Cuban music group.

After the show, audience members are invited backstage to feast on family-style servings of *tostones*, *pernil* and *arroz con pollo*. And for anyone who fills out the little information cards he passes out at each show, Santiago will make sure they receive emails and postcards notifying them of every show and interview he is doing. They'll probably even receive a Christmas card.

Before he began producing his own shows, Santiago went through the usual paying-of-the-dues-routine. While he was a college student at New York University, he performed at countless open mic nights. He spent numerous

hours at all-night diners, pizza joints and coffee shops discussing comedy writing and onstage delivery tactics with fellow aspiring comedians like Jose Arroyo, now a writer for the Dennis Miller Show.

"I've seen his show, there has been a huge evolution," said Arroyo. "He always had twice as much energy as I did. His voice was always louder, more varied, more expressive -- a lot of pacing and stomping. He has figured something out that I never did about how to deal with audiences and how to just arrest their attention."

After college, Santiago got an offer to work for the San Juan Star in Puerto Rico, his parent's homeland. During the next five years, he went on to freelance for the Washington Post, Philadelphia Inquirer and the Miami Herald.

But while he toiled as a journalist, others reminded him of his *true* calling. "Even at the San Juan Star, the receptionist would say, 'You should be on TV, you should be doing stand-up,'" said Santiago. "I would just smile because they didn't realize that's what I really wanted to do. It was like, 'What the hell are you doing here?'"

So he left the sun-drenched beaches for fogshrouded ones.

As an unknown in the City By the Bay, he performed at open mics up to five times a week. He began with 10-minute performances and worked his way up to one-hour shows. He also studies other comedians he admires: Bill Cosby's story-telling techniques, Woody Allen's attention to detail and George Carlin's masterful manipulation of language. He carries with him at all times notebooks filled with daily entries about conversations, anecdotes, news stories and other material he can massage into a routine.

Santiago's work has just begun. He has ambitious projects in mind and movie ideas he says he needs to discuss with director Gregory Nava (he claims he can make both of them LOTS of money. Mr. Nava, are you listening?).

"Latinos haven't broken in [to the business] the way African Americans have," said Arroyo. "I think Bill could be the one to break through. He is very Latino, but he is also very universal."

Returning to the whole Latin craze, Santiago expressed his amazement at "the sudden change of attitude in this country

toward Latinos. Ricky Martin gives that performance at the Grammys, steals the show. Next day, the President is releasing political prisoners. I don't think they realize exactly how much they owe their freedom to Ricky," he said. "But they should really sit down and write him a nice thank you note..."