

## Laugh your way to the voting booth with Bill Santiago

By Andrew Gilbert

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On the eve of a gubernatorial election that leaves most voters, according to recent polls, gnashing their teeth and shedding tears of despair, it seems like an ideal time for the "No-Holds-Barred Election Day Political Comedy Blowout."

Some of the Bay Area's most incisive stand-up comics are gathering at Cobb's Comedy Club tonight to apply their powers of observation and wit to the deplorable state of the union. Indeed, with a malaprop-prone president maneuvering the country toward war, an ongoing parade of shameless corporate leaders facing indictment, and regular alerts from the government that al Qaeda is sure to strike soon, laughter may be all we have left to preserve our sanity.



"Contrary to what was often said after the 9/11 attacks, it was not the end of humor," says Bill Santiago, the comedian who organized the event. "The truth is that it has sparked the comedy scene in an amazing way, because people need to laugh more than ever, because of the tragedy, the continued threat, the economy, the scary exploitation of the situation by the administration."

Like George Carlin in his prime, Santiago is expert at homing in on the way language reveals society's bizarre fixations. An extended riff on President Bush's celebration of shopping after 9/11 ends with Santiago declaring, "You hear those cash registers? That's the sound of freedom ringing!"

For the "Election Day Political Comedy Blowout," Santiago has recruited a top-flight lineup of Bay Area comics, including Aundre "The Wonderwoman" Herron, Robert Duchaine, Joe Klocek, Johnny Steele, Brian Copland and Randy Harken, who credits his stint in the Marines with giving him life skills "like shining boots and scrubbing toilets."

"A lot of comics have been doing a lot of political stuff, and I notice who has the best material," Santiago says. "But there hasn't been a real showcase where people know that's what you're going to get. You'd think that would be a standard of the entertainment scene."

There was a time when the U.S. was awash in political humor. In the late '50s and early '60s, comics such as Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl and Dick Gregory were cutting-edge social

commentators and masterly comedians. Carlin picked up the mantle later, but in the '70s something seemed to break. As Tom Lehrer famously quipped, political satire was impossible after Henry Kissinger won the Nobel Peace Prize.

"It's one of the most difficult forms of comedy to do," says Tom Sawyer, who has run Cobb's for the past two decades. "Jay Leno does topical humor and thinks it's political. It's hard to break in that way. Younger audiences are usually bored out of their socks. You have a narrow market. It's generally for a more sophisticated audience, looking for mind candy. That's the audience we go after."

The tremendous success of lefty performance artist Reno during her two long runs at Brava Theater indicate that the Bay Area is fertile ground for political humor, so maybe Santiago is on to something. Long before he devoted himself to comedy, he was mastering the art of conveying anecdotes and closely following the news.

Born and raised in New York, Santiago grew up with a group of show-business-minded friends, one of whom used to write for "Politically Incorrect." He attended film school at New York University and dabbled in stand-up, but a job at the San Juan Star, an English-language daily, brought him to Puerto Rico. Unable to suppress his zingy one-liners, he made the move to stand-up after winning a prestigious national award for feature writing.

While Santiago is a captivating performer -- his handsome, boyish face registers lightning-quick emotional leaps -- he sees his writing as his key to success. As he's honed his comedic talent, Santiago has taken to dissecting classic routines by comics such as Carlin and Woody Allen, much the way jazz musicians transcribe solos by Charlie Parker and Lester Young.

"I identify with Carlin's fascination for language, the way he can take one idea and unravel it into a piece that's enduring," Santiago says. "Above everything else he's a brilliant writer. Seinfeld is the same thing, but he does it with a little bit more of a microscope and he takes out the edge. There's no politics. It's one of the reasons for his success."

Now Santiago is hoping that politics will be the key to his success. Judging from the appreciative responses of audiences in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and Palo Alto, he may be just what San Francisco needs to get through a time when it feels like there's not much to laugh about.

The No-Holds-Barred Election Day Political Comedy Blowout a political-humor showcase featuring Brian Copeland, Johnny Steele, Joe Klocek and Robert Duchaine, Bill Santiago and others. The show begins at 8 p.m. today at Cobb's Comedy Club, 2801 Leavenworth St. (in The Cannery), San Francisco. Tickets are \$10. Call (415) 928-4320.