

Interrogation: Bill Santiago

by Alessandra Pimsletier

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San Francisco's unofficial cutup laureate spills all he knows about spiritual bloodlust, what news anchors have in common with lap dances, and being the most impersonated person you may have never heard of.

After Bill Santiago gets off stage, up next is Bill Santiago. Actually, this time it's the club MC, indulging in what has become a new staple of the San Francisco comedy scene, the Bill Santiago impression. Comics all over this city are paying similar tribute.

To be sure, his style lends itself to caricature. Start with the emphatic elasticity of his enunciation, to say nothing of his morphable mug. Of the phenomenon, Santiago says, "Hey, I just want to make it big enough to make anyone who does a really good impression of me really rich."

Yet if, and some aficionados would say when, this wise-cracking, salsa-dancing, iconoclastic flirt of a standup ever ushers in a lucrative business for his impersonators, credit not only his style but the content of his act, the mind candy he distributes plentifully at every performance.

Santiago's writing is tight, lean and well served by his I-could-read-a-telephone-book-and-make-you-laugh delivery. He doesn't do physical comedy, per se. But he possesses a magnetic physicality, cajoling us to laugh before he even opens his mouth.

His sets are seductively kinetic, bouncing between precision zingers, observational flybys, anecdotal asides and fully wrought bits involving near poetic twists of logic and language.

Logging over 300 shows nationwide last year, he gigged at top clubs, theaters, coffeehouses, country western bars, Mexican restaurants, hotels and the occasional Laundromat. Back at his studio, the evidence is in the décor.

Santiago makes a habit of scotch-taping Xeroxed copies of all his paychecks to the walls of his apartment in the city's Tenderloin District. And in a gesture of positive visualization, he likes to add zeros in pencil after the actual amount on the checks to help summon bigger money days ahead, which may be right around the corner.



Comedian Bill Santiago serves up mind candy

Not only does he make his national television debut in a few weeks with an appearance on Comedy Central's "Premium Blend." But just as notably, at a time when the arts-funding spigot has been choked to nary a drip, he has been awarded \$20,000 in grants from the San Francisco Arts Commission, The National Performance Network and Theater Bay Area to produce a new solo show. The project will be directed by Amy Mueller ("Let My Enemy Live Long," Berkeley Repertory Theater).

Given all the hubbub, we thought it would be a good time to catch up with the Santiago juggernaut. So Interrogator sent contributing editor **Lindsey Morgan** (who last interrogated Grammy-winner Gwen Steffani) up to San Francisco to talk with the infectiously animated funnyman and find out what it takes for Santiago to imitate Santiago. Here is her report:

"Bill wanted to know why he should submit to the interrogation at this stage of his career. And wouldn't it be more fun to wait until he had peaked and faded into a trivial pursuit question or some game-show curiosity?"

"I told him we wanted to profile him before he becomes a household name. 'Like Tilex?' he asked, over our second round of get-acquainted martinis at Mementos, a shamelessly gentrified kitsch bar a few blocks up from his studio. He had come straight from a swim at the YMCA and his dark curly hair, scented with chlorine, was streaked with highlights from the overly treated pool water. He hadn't shaved.

"He lives in a cramped 'no-bedroom' loaded with books. Jeanette Winterson, Somerset Maugham, PJ O'Rourke, Chomsky, Ayn Rand, David Sedaris, Bukowski, Arundhati Roy and Tom Wolfe, are among his favorite writers. But the library also includes Tom Clancy. There are piles of audio and video recordings of his performances, waiting to be catalogued and scrutinized. In the tiny kitchen, a filing cabinet, stuffed with newspaper clippings and scribbled ideas for his material, stands three times as tall as his knee-high refrigerator.

"We managed to get most of the interviewing done during a marathon weekend, taking time out to eat homemade *arroz con gandules* (his abuelita's recipe) and to see the movie 'Adaptation' (he liked it till the alligator thing at the end). But we didn't finish until a month later, when he was in LA showcasing at the Improv.

"He answered all my questions with that same confident vulnerability that makes him so disarming on stage. The guy is articulate, mercurial, opinionated, obsessive, candid yet at times curiously evasive.

"As I jotted these observations down in my reporter's notebook, he hovered over me, saying, 'Put that I'm height and weight proportionate and that I'm self-assured without being arrogant, and have a job, and I'm creative but stable, own a car and a yoga mat, don't mind a woman with kids, like cats and am 420-friendly. That I'm cynical but without being hardened or bitter. That I'm spiritual but not dogmatic. Little rough around the edges but clean up well. Your pic gets mine.'"

INT. Let's start with the obvious. What's your reaction to the sudden proliferation of Bill Santiago impressions by other comics? How does it feel to have everyone doing you, your mannerisms, your voice, your persona?

SANTIAGO: I remember when I was the only one doing Bill Santiago. It wasn't so cool then. Kind of puts me at a disadvantage now because it's the only impression I do and there's lots of competition.

INT: You're about to make your first Premium Blend appearance coming up on Comedy Central. How big an opportunity is that for you?

SANTIAGO: It could be very lucrative if I remember to mention Big Daddy's Limousine Service.

INT: To what do you attribute your comedic tendencies? Is humor hereditary?

SANTIAGO: Um, not in my case. My parents are hilarious but not particularly on purpose.

INT: Where does your ability to make people laugh come from then?

SANTIAGO: Learning Annex. Six weeks. Forty bucks.

INT: Did you used to make your friends laugh before you decided to do it on stage?

SANTIAGO: Yes, but thinking that you can do standup because you make your friends laugh is a little like thinking you can swim the English Channel because you don't drown in the bath tub. One is not a reliable indicator of success in the other.

INT: OK, but why did you decide to do it professionally?

SANTIAGO: Because I'm uncomfortable talking in front of groups of people unless they're staring at me in a semicircle.

INT: So you moved to San Francisco five years ago to launch your standup career.

SANTIAGO: Yes, that, and because I love the smell of a burning clutch.

INT: But what made San Francisco a good place for honing your comedy chops?

SANTIAGO. You don't have to keep it simple for San Francisco. You don't have to dumb it down. You don't have to be vulgar to win over an audience here. Also, it's like an oasis where the thinking goes against the grain and that makes, I think, for the best comedy. After 911 there was a huge banner up over the City Lights Book Store, that said, "Dissent is Not Un-American," underscoring for me the sense that this city is kind of immunized against the contagion of lockstep mentality that so much of the country seems to be afflicted by. In other words, any city that offers its employees free sex change operations has got to be a great place to develop as a comedian.

INT: How much of what you do depends on the audience?

SANTIAGO: Slightly more than what a bullfighter does depends on the bull. At least the bull is always paying attention. I mean there are nights when the audience is so with you, that you can't do wrong and you're floating on this very ephemeral but tangible bubble of total joy, love and acceptance called everybody's having a good time. And then sometimes, it's out of sync for some reason and neither you nor the crowd is enjoying it and it just sort of ends with a simultaneous anti-climax. And you go home thinking, I can't believe how much fun that wasn't.

INT: When it doesn't click, when it sucks, do you beat yourself up over it or do you chalk it up to a lame crowd?

INT: You have to assume responsibility. You were the entertainer on the watch at the time of the disaster and must be accountable. But audiences do fluctuate in quality.

INT: How do audiences differ town to town, gig to gig?

SANTIAGO: Well, as a rule of thumb, if you're playing in a town where your cell phone isn't getting a signal, the crowd isn't going to be getting the jokes.

INT: How bad do crowds get?

SANTIAGO: Retarded is probably too strong a word. But some crowds are excruciatingly slow witted, don't get sarcasm, irony, anything requiring even a residual education. You can tell they don't read. It's like they've somehow avoided any brain stimulation their entire lives and suddenly decide to show up at a comedy show as a group, all handicapped by the same smooth atrophied gray matter sloshing around inside their skulls.

INT: What's been the worst crowd?

SANTIAGO: Modesto, California. Last week. It's the kind of town that makes you appreciate people who are only half-stupid. On the menu at the sports-bar restaurant where the gig was, I swear, they had a "Heckler's Burger." They had a burger named after a comic's natural enemy. Which kind of lets you know right away whose side the management is on.

INT: How do you handle hecklers?

SANTIAGO: I've tried every possible way and have found that crying almost never works.

INT: Is there anything in particular that makes some audiences better than others?

SANTIAGO: Estrogen. I do better when there are women in the audience.

INT: Because you're in touch with your female side?

SANTIAGO: Because I'd rather be touching a female.

INT: There is a sexual energy about you on stage. Is that something you put out there deliberately?

SANTIAGO: No more than Cristina Aguilera. But, it's true that a good standup performance is comparable to sex. I mean you are connecting with people in a very intimate way, and there's a power thing, a seduction involved.

INT: Which is better, sex or being on stage making people laugh?

SANTIAGO: Well, if you could get applause after sex that makes people laugh, then maybe sex would be better. But that's only happened to me once. Twice.

INT: Why do you think audiences respond to you?

SANTIAGO: I'd like to think it's the writing, the thinking.

INT: It's bright stuff.

SANTIAGO: It's funny, though, you spend all this time writing, I mean writing and re-writing and polishing and obsessing about the phrasing and wording and cadence and the consistency of logic. Then after the show everyone goes, "Hey, great facial expressions."

INT: They don't mention the writing?

SANTIAGO: Mostly, they say I give good face.

INT: What's more important to you, as a comedian, the jokes or the persona you have on stage?

SANTIAGO: The personality is innate and the jokes amplify that. I pay attention to the writing and let everything else fall into place.

INT: Where's your favorite place to write?

SANTIAGO: I can't write at home. I need to be in a café, around people. I need to be distracted so I can stay focused.

INT: What distracts you the most?

SANTIAGO: Focusing is very distracting to me. That's what got me through college.

INT: Where did you go?

SANTIAGO: NYU.

INT: What did you study?

SANTIAGO: Film and procrastination. In fact I keep doing standup now just to avoid actually having to make a movie.

INT: Before standup, you worked as a journalist. Why did you give that up?

SANTIAGO: Because I was much more interested in holding a live audience hostage and subjecting them to my personal take on reality.

INT: What's the difference between journalism and standup?

SANTIAGO: In journalism there is the pretense of objectivity and accuracy, and in standup there's the pretense of actually reading the newspaper.

INT: Any thoughts on the recent scandal about the reporter who was totally making stories up for years at the venerable New York Times?

SANTIAGO: I could never take The New York Times as seriously as it takes itself. And now, nobody can. The only hope they have of restoring their credibility is running a permanent correction on the front page: "All the news that's fit to print -- in the National Enquirer." It kills me though. I leave journalism for standup, and now journalism is a joke.

INT: You wrote for newspapers including the New York Times, The Washington Post and The Miami Herald. You also worked in Puerto Rico at the San Juan Star. But where did you start as a reporter?

SANTIAGO: Small town paper called the Rockland Journal News.

INT: How small town?

SANTIAGO: If the word raccoon appears in the headline more than 17 times a year, you're probably not talking about a major metropolitan daily. I was actually offered the raccoon beat, but I couldn't see myself staked out in a garbage can all night waiting to be tipped over for the big scoop.

INT: What other jobs have you had?

SANTIAGO: I've worked as a waiter, of course, a telemarketer, a tropical rain forest tour guide, a biotech consultant, a dog walker, a cat-sitter, a burger flipper, a burger flopper, movie usher, receptionist, a personal trainer, strip-club MC, tons of jobs.

INT: What strip club?

SANTIAGO: A place called St. Tropez, in Puerto Rico. I'd introduce the girls in Spanish. "*Aplauso fuerte para nuestra proxima belleza, que la pobrecita se acaba de divorciar y se siente muy sola...*" It taught me how to be perfectly at ease around lots of naked women.

INT: Is that a very marketable skill?

SANTIAGO: No, but I put it on my resume anyway.

INT: Not a lot of comedians can say they used to work in a strip club and a newsroom.

SANTIAGO: I'd work in the strip club at night and then go to my job back in the newsroom in the morning. And it was always a little jarring to suddenly see everybody walking around in their clothes and I always found it amusing that both occupations, stripper and journalist, are brought to you by the first amendment.

INT: Never thought of it that way.

SANTIAGO: For the right price, you could get Tom Brokaw all to yourself in the champagne room.

INT: The first amendment also gives you the right as a comedian to say whatever you want. But what about saying something too controversial and suffering the consequences, like the Dixie Chicks?

SANTIAGO: Well, actually, I wrote that line for them. So, rightfully, I should have been the one banned from country radio.

INT: But do you think entertainers should take that kind of thing as a warning?

SANTIAGO: I'll admit, just to be safe, I've stopped calling Bush an idiot and now refer to him as the patron saint of functional idiots.

INT: You're censoring yourself.

SANTIAGO: Well, it's not just me. Madonna pulled her own video off the air because she was afraid it would be interpreted as anti-war. Madonna, the whore of pop, afraid of offending that

vast Christian, right-wing, conservative fan base she's spent decades cultivating with that wholesome family-values music of hers.

INT: Is the climate of backlash against dissenting views the reason you said recently that you felt the country isn't a true democracy?

SANTIAGO: Correction. What I said was that, as a democracy, The United States hasn't lived up to its promise yet. But, as a hypocrisy, this country exceeds all expectations every day. We truly are the world's greatest hypocrisy ever.

INT: Are you a hypocrite?

SANTIAGO: As a good American, yes, of course.

INT: What about?

SANTIAGO: I'll give you one example. I think we waste billions of dollars on defense that would be much better spent on education. But I love fighter planes, which cost 50 million a pop. I love watching them so much that when I see one, for that split-second, I don't care if another little kid ever learns to read again.

INT: Didn't you once fly in an F-16?

SANTIAGO: Yep, for a story I was writing. Oh my God, I couldn't believe I actually got to do that. Afterwards, I was jealous of myself.

INT: Did you throw up?

SANTIAGO: A little, but it was worth it. I flew with the Puerto Rico Air National Guard squadron leader, for over an hour over the island, did mid-air refueling, dropped ordinance over the bombing range, broke the sound barrier and he let me actually fly the plane for little bit. Gave me control of the stick!

INT: You?

SANTIAGO: Why not? I pitched in for gas.

INT: You're Puerto Rican, right?

SANTIAGO: Yes.

INT: Born in Puerto Rico?

SANTIAGO: No, I was born in New York, like most Puerto Ricans.

INT: What was it like growing up?

SANTIAGO: Loud. My mother only had one decibel setting. Like a car horn.

INT: You mention in your act that your mom and dad had a rocky marriage?

SANTIAGO: I was deeply traumatized by my parents divorce. Because they never got one.

INT. They stuck it out?

SANTIAGO: God knows why, or how. But they eventually called a truce and my mother actually tells me all the time now, "Marriage is a beautiful thing, Billy. If you can get through the first 30 years, the rest is easy."

INT: Did you grow up in a Puerto Rican neighborhood?

SANTIAGO: We were always the only Puerto Rican family in the neighborhood, wherever we lived. And we were not raised as Orthodox Welfare Ricans, either. We were more upper class Ricans. We ate welfare cheese. But on Ritz Crackers.

INT: Why so privileged?

SANTIAGO: Because my father was a lawyer. He worked in the Bronx in the Puerto Rican community and a lot of times his clients would pay him for his services with blocks of welfare cheese. Five blocks for a divorce, seven for a real estate deal, three for an eviction case, etc. It was an accepted medium of exchange, sort of like a Puerto Rican wampum.

INT: Did you have a religious upbringing?

SANTIAGO: We didn't go to church. My parents felt that by subjecting us to their marriage, we'd see what hell was like and figure out the rest.

INT: At a recent show, you opened with a line about God and Velcro and something about how if we had invented Velcro before God, we'd all feel a lot less guilty about crucifixion.

SANTIAGO: Well, you totally mangled that joke. But I understand that as a journalist, it's your job to misquote me.

INT: Sorry. I just remember really loving that bit.

SANTIAGO: Me too. It's not a blockbuster joke. It's more of a word of mouth joke, that'll slowly find its own audience over time. Eventually it may even build a cult following. It has all the makings of a cult joke.

INT: A cult joke about how hard it is to get rid of religion.

SANTIAGO: Proving my point.

INT: What's your problem with religion?

SANT: All the harm that comes from twisted, unquestioning faith. Look at all the killing that's been done and all the war waged in the name of God. I mean I would think that any truly benevolent god wouldn't want to be associated with any of it. I'd think he would denounce any connection whatsoever with all that carnage. You know, the inquisition, the crusades, the conquests of the new world, the holocaust, the lynch mobs in the south, burning witches in Salem, the current holy war, all conducted in the name of God. On the other hand, there's been a lot of genocide committed by communist atheists, too, who totally reject God. But I don't recall very much killing done by people who are sort of ambiguously fence sitting on the question of whether or not there is a higher all-knowing omnipotent being. Agnostics are the people with the best human rights record.

INT: Do you believe in God?

SANTIAGO: I do. But I wouldn't be surprised if God were an agnostic. It would just be more in line with his values.

INT: Does your material always have to have a point?

SANTIAGO: I have no problem with a dick joke as long as it subverts, challenges and illuminates.

INT: You get compared to Carlin a lot, especially because of your use of language.

SANTIAGO: You mean because we both speak English?

INT: Because you both have a way of mining humor from the language itself.

SANTIAGO: Well, I believe that language is the infrastructure of identity. We are what we speak. And because any variation from our own usage sounds funny to our ears, it makes for very rewarding comedic exploration.

INT: Hence the title of your next one-man show: "Spanglish 101: A Total Immersion Comedic Excursion Into Latino USA."

SANTIAGO: It's going to be a great HBO special.

INT: How far off is HBO for you?

SANTIAGO: It's on my to-do list.

INT: And you're working with a director for the first time. Amy Mueller. How's that work, for a standup?

SANTIAGO: I get together with Amy and I riff on ideas I've been working out for the show. She's really good at making thematic connections and guiding me with questions into the heart of what I want to get at with the material. I tape all the sessions. Transcribe the tapes. Edit. Add. Re-write. Try the stuff out on stage in clubs, workshop it front of small groups in theaters, then recycle whatever seems to be working in more sessions with her, take it back on stage and it evolves. It's very nurturing on her part, very needy on my part. Like all my relationships.

INT: What's the difference between your regular standup club act, and a one-man show?

SANTIAGO: In a one-man show there's a theme, all the jokes and all the laughs are built around that theme. In a standup comedy club, there's no need for a theme because of the two-drink minimum. The theme is selling alcohol.

INT: Do you feel that you have to be funny all the time?

SANTIAGO: No. Off stage, socially, I'm perfectly happy to keep quiet and let other people entertain me. I'm a big laugher. In fact that's how I really got started in the business.

INT: How?

SANTIAGO: I won this laugh contest they were having on the radio in New York City. I called, laughed on cue, won best laugher and they played my recorded laugh all day long on a loop, over and over. Friends were coming up to me, "Hey, Bill, did I just hear you laughing on the radio?" And what I won was tickets to see my first real standup show, at Caroline's Comedy Club. One of the comics on the bill that night was Seinfeld, before he was famous.

INT: Do you want to be famous?

SANTIAGO: As long as it's not posthumous. Whatever fame I've got coming to me, please make it pre-humous. That's all I ask.

INT: What's your definition of success?

SANTIAGO: Artistically, I want to achieve the comedic equivalent of Coltrane's "A Love Supreme." Materialistically, all I want is a small subsistence plot of land where I can grow some legumes.

INT: Any political aspirations?

SANTIAGO: Other than carrying on inappropriately with an intern, no.

INT: The Premium Blend show will be taped in New York, your hometown. Does that add to the excitement?

SANTIAGO: I'm psyched that my parents will be there, because they've never watched me perform. And it'll be good for them to finally see why law school's not going to happen.

INT: How do you psyche yourself up to make people laugh night after night?

SANTIAGO: Before going out on stage, I close my eyes and remember the joke must be laughed at before it is told.

INT: Do you have an all time favorite joke?

SANTIAGO: Yes, and I wish it were mine.

INT: What's it like to try a new joke, a new bit of yours, on stage for the very first time?

SANTIAGO: The best. You get the absolute greatest thrill from the new material the first time you do it, if it works. Because it's a surprise for you as well as the audience and that's a very special kind of one-time-only electricity. You don't know where the laughs are going to come. You don't know where the beats are yet, where to wait for laughter, so you are not manipulating the audience into a preconceived response pattern. You are not going, oh, the audience last night laughed harder there, or not as much at that. It's more genuine and taking the risk rejuvenates your entire act. Keeps it alive. And as often as possible I will open with an entirely new line.

INT: Jerry Seinfeld, in his movie "Comedian," said that a comic shouldn't ever open with a brand new bit.

SANTIAGO: He'll never get anywhere with that kind of attitude.

INT: What's the biggest laugh you ever got?

SANTIAGO: Asking to be paid what I thought I was worth.