

LEDGER DISPATCH

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Comedian Bill Santiago Quips About Life with a Latino Beat

By Rowena Coetsee

SAN FRANCISCO -After examining the serious side of life, Bill Santiago knew he just had to get silly.

The 31-year-old San Francisco comedian toiled in the trenches of daily journalism long enough to know lie wasn't destined for a conventional career.

The son of Puerto Rican immigrants, Santiago instead has become an entertainer, doing parodies of Latino life that bridge the cultural divide.

The Manhattan-born Santiago's earliest memories include watching Johnny Carson's monologues, an entertainer he still admires for the seemingly effortless way "The Tonight Show" host delivered his lines.

But it never occurred to Santiago that stand-up comedy was a career option for him, too, until friends in the business encouraged him.

After graduating from New York University's film school, Santiago took a job with a suburban newspaper while looking for a way to continue pursuing what he realized by then was his real passion.



"The next thing I know, I'm in Puerto Rico," says Santiago, who accepted an offer from The San Juan Star and spent the next five years as a reporter for the English-language daily.

He originally had thought the island was close enough to the mainland that he could fly to Miami for weekend gigs.

But it wasn't, and he abandoned his plan. "I actually thought I could try not to do it," he said, "(but) every time I turned around people would say, 'Oh, that's so funny!' and it would rip my heart out."

"It was through the deprivation that I realized it was a calling," Santiago said. And so he returned to the mainland and moved to San Francisco, where he began working the comedy clubs.

Until recently, Santiago got his laughs from observations he'd make about life in general. His bill on semantics:

"I have no problems. No one has problems anymore, everyone has issues.

"We've done away with problems overnight. What was wrong with problems? I miss problems. You could fix a problem. You can't fix an issue. You can compromise on an issue. Come to terms with an issue, cope with an issue, but you can't fix one. Not without risking, causing, a problem. And if there's one issue people with issues have an issue with, it's problems."

When Santiago first performed his ethnic material before an all-Latino audience 2 ½ years ago, however, the response was electric.

Santiago now mines his roots for material, poking good-natured fun at everything from Anglo-dominated salsa clubs ("Dancing with non-Latinos is like driving a car without power steering," he observes) to tiny chirping tree frogs, a beloved national symbol to Puerto Ricans but in Hawaii considered a noisy pest that must be eradicated.

The Taco Bell Chihuahua, West Side Story, and El Nino are additional fodder for jokes. So are Latin American politics and U.S. foreign policy, the Spanish-American War, Panama invasion and green card marriages.

It's non-derisive, equal-opportunity humor, says Santiago, who insists that audiences of all colors and cultures can appreciate it.

He takes time to provide the historical background listeners need to understand a joke. "You can't just jump into it," Santiago said. "The average audience is not coming to hear that. They're coming ... to enjoy a beer and some laughs."

All the quips are original, adds Santiago, who spends hours collecting news clippings about Latin America and jotting down ideas as the synapses begin to crackle.

Now he's looking for a way to perform his south-of-the border material regularly, and hopes eventually to take the show on the road.

From there, it's on to off Broadway theater and HBO, says Santiago, who's determined to share his freewheeling associations and bull's-eye commentary on life's absurdities.

"It's just personality - it's how you see the world," Santiago said. "You take information the world is telling you, and I'm saying that's not it! You have to be lobotomized to accept the world as it's given to you. 'Why are you lying to me? This is the way it is!'"

And what way is that? Santiago bursts out laughing. "How do you set up existence in a sentence or two?"

SANTIAGO, ON ICE CREAM

Before Castro, only the rich got to eat ice cream in Cuba. Castro changed that. I picture him and Ché Guevara sweating it out in the jungles of the Sierra Maestra.

"Ché, I don't know what else I can do to motivate the people. Equality, literacy and progress don't seem to be enough. What else do they want?"

"I don't know, Fidel, but I could sure go for some ice cream."

"Next speech, Castro's going, 'All right, listen up - here's the deal. If you people get behind me on this, when I get in, ICE CREAM for everybody!' And now there are government owned ice cream parlors all over the island. Castro and Ché are the Ben & Jerry of Latin American communism. It's the first revolution to come in so many flavors: El Comandante Coconut Crunch; Chunky Monkey Ché; Sierra Maestra Strawberry; Guevara Guava; Moscow Mango Mania' "