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Abstract

This piece investigates the perception and representation of female comics on the stand-up circuit and their audiences. It begins with a review of various theories of humour examining three major strands of thought: theories on repression, release and incongruity.

It goes on to give an historical overview of British stand-up comedy, covering the Music Hall/Variety tradition, the Working Men's Club tradition and the Alternative Comedy tradition examining the cultural attitudes of the time alongside these various stages of British comedy and the place women found within them.

Concluding with a case study on Bridget Christie and her success at navigating the patriarchal world of comedy, an investigation of current panel show figures and their representation of female comics and interview responses from current women stand-ups on the circuit. Illustrating that audiences may no longer perpetuate these long held stereotypes, but instead the industry 'gatekeepers', the bookers, promoters and producers within the comedy business are limiting aspiring female comedians from garnering mass exposure.

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Introduction

Women have been prominent in show business long before feminist and gender equality movements. However, in contrast to all other areas of entertainment – women are still very much in the minority within stand-up comedy. Why is this so? Is it to do with the patriarchal nature of the industry? Or is it that women just aren't funny? I aim to argue that it is not by choice or accident that few female comics succeed within the industry but more to do with the hurdles and boundaries they have to cross that their male counterparts do not by overcoming engrained stereotyping. I will give a detailed and yet broad cultural and historical context on the gender roles within stand up comedy. I plan to examine the extent gender-roles define a women's place in stand-up and the effects the feminist movement has had on the stereotypes of comedien-nes. I will also attempt to illuminate the social, political, and cultural implications of gender and power within popular entertainment, analysing the means by which we construct, contest and negotiate female comics performing their gender on stage. With case studies including *Mock The Week* (2005), the stand-up comic Bridget Christie and interviews with female stand-ups currently on the open-mic circuit.

The importance of asking this question is highlighted by Barreca (1988) who maintains: 'Feminist criticism has generally avoided the discussion of comedy, perhaps in order to be accepted by conservative critics who found feminist theory comic in and of itself'. Scholars like Gilbert (1962) have recently begun to point out that 'female comic performance provides a unique and compelling template upon which to explore the relationship between gender and power in contemporary culture.' This investigation aims to illuminate some of these