

Take These Jokes... Please!

BY JAYSON Q. WECHTER

Thirty-eight people in one room vying for laughs is either a class of fifth graders whose teacher has stepped out, or the Third Annual San Francisco International Open Stand-Up Comedy Competition. Held this September, it drew professional and amateur comedians from as far away—450 miles—as Anaheim, California. Just as in the classroom, some of their jokes had folks gagging on laughter, while others sank like teamster officials in wet cement.

The contestants included a fellow who stripped from construction-worker garb down to stockings and garter belts and stuffed piles of candy into his mouth; a wheelchair-bound comedian who made jokes about his affliction; an ecological comic who combined one-liners with pollution warnings; and a young man who demonstrated the many inventive things you can do with a lamp.

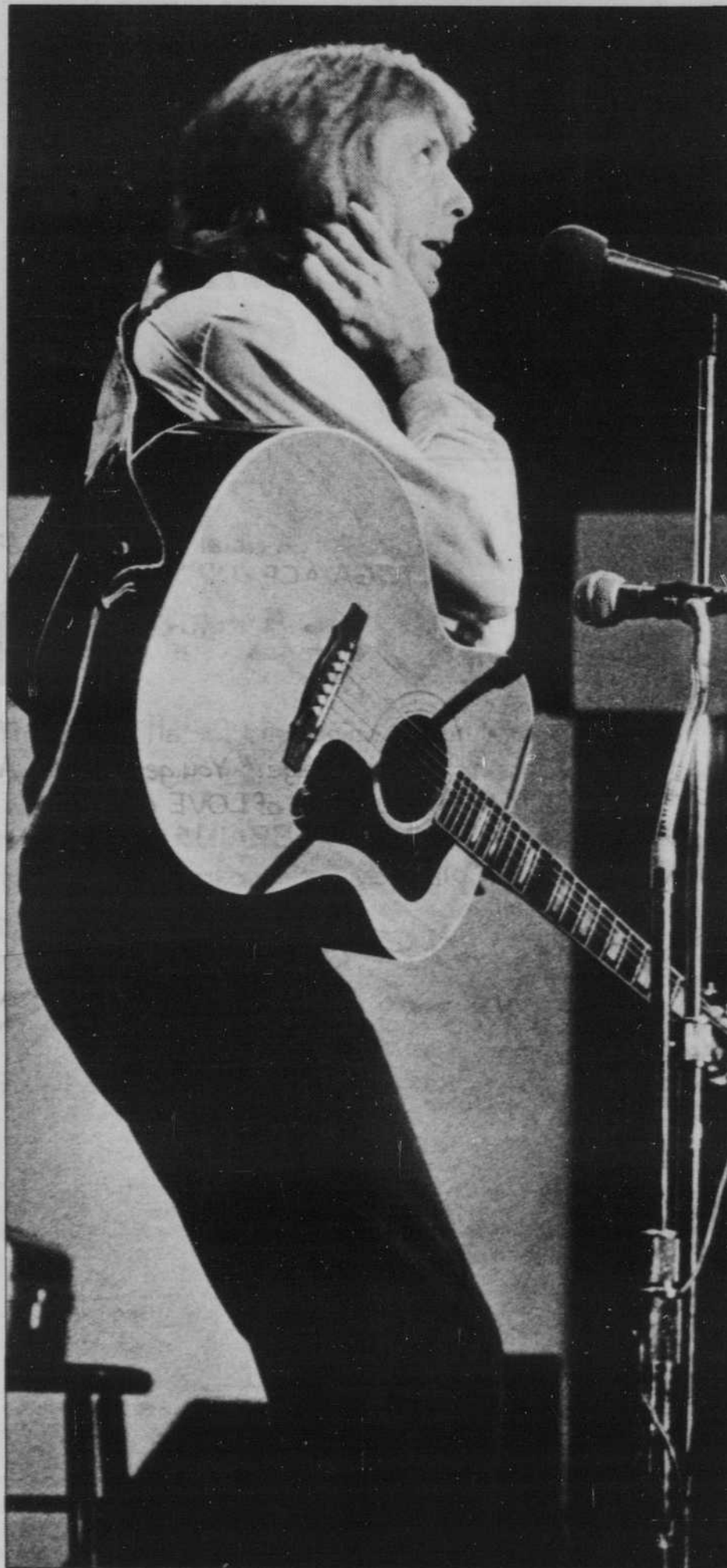
Their efforts were directed at a very unfunny \$3,000 in prize money, with judges like comedians George Carlin and Jay Leno rating their routines. And, of course, there was the exposure, which is as valuable to a comedian as bottled water from the fountain of youth.

The contest included five weeks of preliminary and semi-final rounds at seven different Bay Area clubs, plus a finals night at The Old Waldorf which sold out three weeks in advance.

The audience was suspecting—and rightfully so—that they might catch someone as hot as Robin Williams, star of the ABC comedy series *Mork & Mindy*, who got his comic start in San Francisco and placed second in the comedy competition two years ago, when television scouts raided its corps of local talent to recruit Williams and Jim Giovanni, Bill Rafferty and Nancy Bleiweiss for *Laugh-In* and Lou Felder for *Fernwood 2Night*. Contenders in this year's competition hoped that some of them might also be drafted for network duty. In fact, one night's performance started late to accommodate the talent scout from *The Tonight Show* who'd flown up from L.A. for the occasion.

The finals night, emceed by actor and comedian Dick Shawn, featured guest appearances by Robin Williams and Jay Leno. Leno served on the judge's panel along with George Carlin, actress Debralee Scott of *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, actor Jack Riley of *The Bob Newhart Show* and several local columnists. They rated comedians on stage presence, technique, delivery, response, rapport and material.

When the results were tallied the first prize of \$1,000 went to Mark McCollum, a native San Franciscan who'd been performing in local clubs and coffeehouses for two years. His twenty-minute blend of musical comedy and impressions—covering everyone from Elmer Fudd to the Bee Gees—was polished in the style of true cabaret entertainment, and his impersonations were so on target they might as well have been Memorex. He told how he hadn't seen *Saturday Night Fever* 'til it played in Chinatown, then lapsed into a hilarious pidgin-Chinese rendition of "Staying Alive." He talked about the opposition his father had to his career: "He was so negative, he could jump-start a Mack truck just by opening the



Mark McCollum: from Elmer Fudd to Chinese disco

hood and saying 'Son of a bitch.' He revamped the Who's "Pinball Wizard" into a story of his job as a supermarket checker, and finished his act with a perfect mimicking of Popeye and Olive Oyl in the sack—accomplished chiefly through the use of sound effects. His obvious skill and professionalism overshadowed any doubts about whether he was really a "stand-up comic," and the twenty-seven year old McCollum won out over Marty Cohen and Jack Marion, both sharp, funny, L.A.-based comedians with more conventional Las Vegas-style routines, who placed second and third, respectively.

Other contestants included Sid Rosenbloom, a polio-stricken comedian whose routine consisted largely of wheelchair jokes ("What do people in wheelchairs do when they're alone in a room together? Get up and stretch"), and Daryl Henriques, heard regularly on KSAN-FM as "The Swami from Miami" and "Joe Carcinogeni—The Purple Poisoner, recommending the poison that's right for you."

Few of the contestants make their living with comedy; Mitch Krug, who placed fourth, claimed to have started in the business as "an industrial comedian" telling jokes to factory workers and getting "a piecework rate of five cents a laugh."

Most make the rounds of a half-dozen small local clubs like The Other Cafe and the Holy City Zoo, which feature regular comedy nights as well as open mikes for neophyte comedians to gain practice. Frank Kidder, a local comedian who ran a comedy night in the basement of a church coffeehouse for several years, started the Comedy Competition in 1976 to increase the visibility of comedians in the Bay Area and draw bigger audiences. Comedy, he said, has always "come up big" after wars and national disasters (like Watergate), and the overwhelming success of comics like Steve Martin and shows like *Saturday Night Live* is natural, since audiences are looking for a sense of comic relief.

The young comedians' material, for the most part, is cleaner and less intellectual than that of their predecessors a decade or two ago. Routines about politics, marriage, human relationships and social problems have given way to material focused on TV shows and commercials, new age lifestyles, and, of course, drugs. The tone of the humor is sillier, with flippant, almost burlesque-like characterizations, rather than more detailed sketches dealing with character-types of the sort Mike Nichols and Elaine May made famous.

But their jokes are still funny, and they work as hard as ever to get the laughs.

"The laughs are at the heart of it," remarked one comedian. "The contest is fine, but in the end it's the laughs that count. They're what this business is all about." &

GREGG MANCUSO

Jayson Wechter is an ex-cabdriver from New York who now lives in San Francisco and writes for magazines including *Cracked*, *Sick* and *New West*. He's working on a musical comedy about the Alaska Pipeline, "sort of like Oklahoma, only with polar bears." Gregg Mancuso attended the University of Massachusetts and Syracuse University, attaining his degree in journalism, before moving to San Francisco and enjoying the life of a free-lance photog.