

people

Hail Mary, Full of Jokes

Fallen nun makes the transition from kneeling to standup
by Malka Geffen

If you didn't catch her at August's Hot Flash Beach Party, you might have heard the comedic stylings of Kelli Dunham on Sirius Satellite Radio. If not, you need to get her CD, go to her shows and become a stalking fan. This ex-nun dyke is hilarious.

A new transplant to Portland from Philadelphia, Dunham grew up near Hartford, Wis. "Originally all my comedy was about my childhood," she says. "I used to have a 15-minute piece just about my mother's cooking, which usually included alcohol." Dunham's joke about her mother's "Jell-O salad," which the rest of the world calls a Jell-O shot, appears on her debut comedy CD, *I'm NOT a 12 Year Old Boy*.

On the album she also discusses her nun years when she was surreptitiously known as Sister Mary Bulldyke. "Not a fair amount of people can relate to being a nun, but everyone can relate to making a bad choice," Dunham says. "People ask how you get from being a nun to a standup lesbian comic. Comedy is about bringing people together and creating community, and that's what being a nun is about." Dunham hastily adds, "But there's more sex and less praying in comedy."

Dunham, 38, says she always wanted to be a comic. Growing up in the rural Midwest, she used to tell jokes to cows on the way home from school. "That was a hard audience," she says, "but a lot of comedy is rejection."

According to her Web site, Dunham never considered performing or writing comedy professionally until she attended a seminar called "A Laugh a Page" at the 1998 Outwrite LGBT Writers' Convention. She recalls that lesbian comic "Kate Clinton said, 'My reason for wanting people to laugh is to subvert the dominant paradigm and knock it the hell over,' and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I never thought of comedy as something that could change the world."

Comedy definitely changed her world. Touring *I'm NOT a 12 Year Old Boy*, Dunham did more than 100 shows in 11 months. Unlike her comic influence, Eddie Izzard, she performed everywhere, from atop a ladder at a queer business expo to a livestock auction.

No matter where she's performing, Dunham revels in the comic life. "I love those moments onstage where you can joke about something really difficult—like an alcoholic family, illness or getting kicked out of your convent—and people let down their guard and laugh." In a very wise Master Po kind of way, Dunham explains that when you laugh, you breathe. "When you take a breath in, you take other stuff in, too."

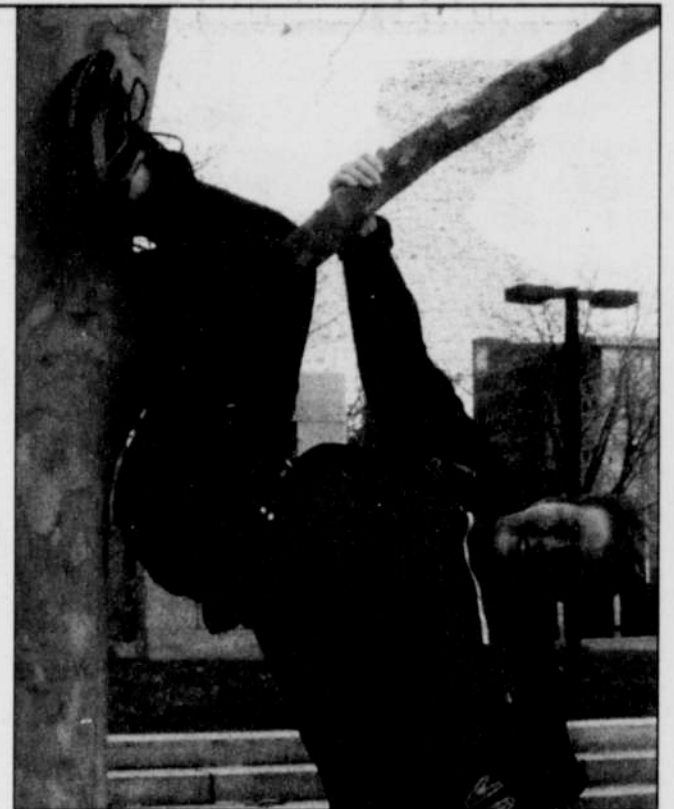
Dunham started performing every weekend about three years ago. As she did more shows at Pride events, she included more jokes about the queer community. "I call us on our foibles and idiosyncrasies, such as 'all lesbians have cats,'" says Dunham. "But I go further into it—the lengths we go to for our pets.

If I hear of a dog on dialysis, I know it belongs to a dyke."

Telling jokes to a straight audience isn't so different, according to Dunham. "I can't stand up and not just say, 'Hi, I'm a big huge dyke' since they will think I'm a pubescent male. I have to do some gay stuff so they relax a little." Dunham also points out that everyone can relate to having their body commented on and that gay people aren't the only ones to get kicked out of their families or have crazy parents.

Everyone can enjoy Dunham's comedy on *I'm NOT a 12 Year Old Boy*, which is available through her Web site and at her performances. Her next CD, *Almost Pretty*, will be recorded at a live show later this year or in early 2007. The title of the album comes from an encounter between Dunham and the woman she was giving her cats to in Philadelphia. "This professional cat sitter had never seen someone like me. She didn't know what to expect and said that I am almost pretty. Luckily, my cat didn't care if she's homophobic." ☺

KELLI DUNHAM performs during *Gayety*—a new night of spoken word, improv, standup and trivia with fabulous prizes—8 p.m. Nov. 18 at Haven Coffee, 3551 S.E. Division St. She will also be doing a few house concerts in the area. For more information visit www.kellidunham.com.



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—Kelli Dunham

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