
STAND-UP COMEDY AND OPEN MIKE NIGHTS

By Steve North, the Comedy Coach

If you're trying to get going in standup comedy, open mike nights can be the only early option. Navigating them and doing what works can be tricky, depressing, or sometimes exhilarating and a learning experience.

But let's start with a truth here. Stand up comedy is about the only skill that people jump up on stage to "give it a try" or to "learn." If you were learning to play the piano, would you go to bars, jump up in front of audiences and start banging on the piano in front of them? Probably not. So first thing, get yourself trained somehow. Not all classes are good, and many teachers don't know how to teach too well, but you're still better off learning in a safer environment.

Unfortunately, doing an open mike night can be like test driving a racing car on a rutted cracked unmarked race track – many techniques that work in an open mike night would bomb in a real comedy club environment.

That said, many will go to open mikes anyway, so here are the goods, bads, and some tips:

BAD.

So many open mikers use blue words and material so often that the audience becomes desensitized, and it makes material that would normally work fine just seem like a boy-scout in a sex club. Women's material seems to revolve around their vaginas and periods, and it's hard to find an open miker male who doesn't use his dick in almost every piece of comedy material.

SO ...

Try to go on early, before the audience has heard the first thousand crotch references, you still have a chance. Be who you are. Don't try to fit in by blue-ing your way into the audience favor, especially if it doesn't fit you. IF the only way you can get a laugh is drop in a blue word, then the material isn't ready. Comment – but don't attack -- on the amount of blue material, and tell the audience who you are. Start in your own space, try to erase the "blackboard", and then start fresh. Don't just jump into your material like a script.

GOOD –

Very few entertainment arts, other than Kareoke, offer a performing outlet with an audience while you are learning.

SO ...

Use it to learn how to connect with an audience as your authentic self. Talk to the audience first, don't just go into your material like a script. Use material that will work in a real comedy club by not letting the f-words draw you into that. You might survive the night, but in the end, you will not be growing.

BAD –

The open mikers will give you advice – they will tell you what works in stand up comedy, and what type of material you should do, and what to do with an audience, and what not to do, and maybe even why that unique thing you did that worked “isn’t really standup comedy.”

SO – Understand that most open-mikers have been open mikers for years, and have never progressed beyond open mikes for a good reason. They’re not consistently funny, they don’t understand their own persona, and many have “laugh ears” – they think they did way better with the audience than they really did. Listening to their advice is much like listening to 15 year old boys tell you all about girls.

GOOD –

You can learn so much about what not to do in comedy watching these open-mikers.

SO ... Notice they try to copy all other standup comedians in the way they do observational comedy. Notice they get a grudging laugh on some dirty reference and think they went over. Notice how many don’t converse with the audience, but rather throw their jokes at them like baseballs. Notice how many of their pieces go 30 seconds, 50 seconds, a minute and a half before they get to the laugh. Audiences don’t care what color the car was, or if “this really happened”, etc. Once you’re into the body of the material, you need to get a laugh every 10 seconds if you’re doing it right. (That doesn’t mean a bunch of short setup punchline jokes, it means minimize the information in your setups, and “roll on laughs” by adding beats, punches, funny phrases, etc.) Conversely, notice they are afraid to really bring up a topic and tell the audience why they passionately care about it before hitting the setups and punchlines.

BAD – Many open mikes become “Bringer Rooms.” If you bring a certain amount of people, they will ask you back, or even let you perform.

SO ... There’s only one word for this ... dead end. You will use up your friends favors, and when you really need them to come to an important show, they won’t come. Many of these places rip off your friends with a cover and drink minimum. Honestly, just don’t bring anyone, and if they don’t want you back, oh well.

GOOD – You will meet other comedians, learn about other rooms that are better, and get plugged in your area.

SO ... Ask lots of questions, make friends, find out about more legit showcase clubs.

BAD – Open mikes can be brutal, they can hurt your confidence, and make you give up.

SO ... Only do enough to keep you going, if you’re doing more (say 2 or 3 times a week), and losing more and more confidence, do less of these shows. Again, find your way to better environments, more supportive showcase rooms, or rooms started by other comedians in different environments. Again, classes with performing always a good idea.

BOTTOM LINE – Open mikes are a necessary evil ...

SO ... Tread carefully as some open mikes are better than others, get trained, know your limitations, move on to other showcase clubs as soon as possible. Good luck.

