Of American Comedy

Appendix 1

Postscript on Britain

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July 25, 2026

The trouble with Freud is that he never had to play second house at the Glasgow Empire on a Saturday night.

—Ken Dodd

In the third week of December, in a town with one theatre, a man in a wig the size of a hedge stands at the front of a stage with his back to a painted forest. Behind him, entering from the wings under a green light, is the villain. In the seats are four hundred children and the adults who brought them. Nobody has

rehearsed the audience. Nobody has needed to. And with a volume that would carry to the back of a far larger building, four hundred people deliver a line: *he's behind you*.

The man turns. The villain sidesteps. The man reports that there is nobody there, and four hundred people inform him that there is, and he denies it, and they insist, and the exchange runs its cycles—oh no he isn't, oh yes he is—until it has gone on one beat past where it ought to stop, which is the moment it stops being for the children and becomes funny to their parents.

This is pantomime, and it is a native form. It runs every winter in every town of any size; it is, in most years, the largest commercial event in the British theatrical calendar; and it is built around the fact that the audience has lines. Not permission to react—lines. Known in advance, delivered on cue, the same ones every year, learned at five and taught to one's own children in turn. There is nothing like it in American comedy at any scale. And the American grammar—album, special, set, routine, bit, joke, setup, punchline, tag—has nowhere to put it, because that grammar was built for a person alone with a microphone, and it assumes throughout that a joke has an owner.

It mostly does. But not entirely. The exception is small, and precisely locatable, and a whole tradition has been built on it.

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Take the three components of the joke in turn and ask, of each, whether it could be supplied by somebody other than the comic.

The setup cannot. A setup is a load, and only the person who packed it knows what it is carrying. Hand it to a stranger and he will fire it in the wrong direction, because the direction was never in the words. The punchline cannot either, for the same reason arriving from the other end: it has to answer that particular load, and the answer is not recoverable from the setup by anyone who was not present at the packing. Setup and punchline are welded. They are one act with two motions, and the tradition that treats them as the whole of the joke is right to treat the comic as sole proprietor.

The tag is different, and the difference is contained in its own definition: a tag lives off the structure the punchline has just built and needs no fresh setup of its own. It spends capital the punchline deposited. Now notice where that deposit sits. It does not sit with the comic. It sits in the room. At the instant the laugh lands, ev-

ery person present is holding the same structure—the premise, the turn, the newly minted rule of this small world—and holding it not as something they have been told but as something they have just demonstrably understood, since otherwise they would not have laughed. The capital is public at the moment of its creation. That is what makes the tag the one component of a joke that anybody in the room can spend.

The weight belongs on *anybody*. A setup can in fact be handed over, but only to a collaborator—to somebody who was standing there when the load was packed and knows what it is carrying. The tag can be taken by a man who walked in halfway through the sentence. That is the strong form of the property and the one that matters: the tag is not merely divisible, it is divisible with a stranger.

Call it the commons. It is the only part of a joke that is not private property.

A prediction follows, and a strong one. Any comedy culture organized around more than one person in the room will drift toward tag-dominance, because the tag is the only thing a second person can contribute without stealing. And a culture organized around the single voice will treat the tag as ornament, because a comic working alone can always simply write another

joke, and has no structural need for a mechanism of participation.

The second is a description of the American tradition. The first is a description of Britain.

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The British have a word for the man who makes deposits he does not intend to spend. He is the *feed*.

The American term is the straight man, which names him by what he withholds—he does not joke, he stays straight—and the naming is faintly pitying, as though the job were an absence. The British term names him by what he does, and does so in the vocabulary of supply. He feeds. The lines go out from him and are converted by somebody else. It is the more accurate word by a distance, and the fact that the two traditions reached for opposite metaphors is not an accident of idiom. In a tradition where the joke has one owner, the second man is defined by his restraint. In a tradition where the deposit is common, he is defined by his production.

Morecambe and Wise is the canonical instance, and the canonical sketch is the one with André Previn—booked as a distinguished conductor, introduced throughout as *Mr Andrew Preview*—in which Eric Morecambe performs Grieg's piano concerto with

a violence and inaccuracy that eventually stops the orchestra. Previn objects that he is playing the wrong notes. Morecambe takes him by the lapels: *I'm playing all the right notes—but not necessarily in the right order.*

Consider what has to be true for that line to land. Somebody must have said the thing about wrong notes, in earnest, in the voice of a man who conducts orchestras for a living, without a flicker of performance. Previn is doing the feed's work, and doing it as a civilian, and the sketch is engineered so that the biggest laugh in it is unavailable to the man who is unquestionably the funnier of the two people on stage. Ernie Wise spent thirty years constructing that condition on purpose, in front of audiences who mostly could not have said what he contributed, which is the professional situation of the feed everywhere and always: his craft is invisible when it succeeds, because when it succeeds the attention is on the other man.

The form admits variations that clarify the position. In Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, the feed is the writer and refuses to break, while the comic corpses helplessly—in the audition sketch, Cook's casting director, entirely serious, informs a one-legged applicant for the role of Tarzan that his right leg is not in question: *I've got nothing against your right leg. The trouble is—*

neither have you. Moore is the funnier presence and Cook holds the room, and the two facts are not in tension; they are the division of labour. In French and Saunders the roles rotate within a single sketch, which demonstrates that the feed is a position and not a person, and that the position must be occupied at any given moment by somebody. In the Two Ronnies, Ronnie Barker frequently feeds himself—the hardware shop sketch is one man requesting fork handles and another understanding four candles, an entire structure of sustained misunderstanding in which each man is alternately loading and firing.

What none of these arrangements can avoid, and what the solo hour never has to confront, is that the setup and the punchline end up with different authors. The grammar of the solo hour is silent on the question because in an American hour it cannot arise. The double act is the form in which the ownership of a joke is genuinely, and permanently, distributed.

But it is distributed among people who were at the packing. The feed is not a stranger; he is a co-packer, and the load was assembled jointly even when only one man is seen to fire it. Wise could hand Morecambe a setup because Wise had helped build it, over years, in rooms nobody has a recording of. Previn, who gen-

uinely was a stranger, was not trusted with one—he was scripted, which is what a tradition does with an outsider whose deposit it needs and cannot afford to have misdirected. The double act divides the delivery of a joke. It does not divide the packing. For that, a larger machine is required.

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If the commons can be occupied by two people it can be occupied by five—and, decisively, by five who were nowhere near the packing. The panel show is what happens when somebody notices this and builds a factory.

The format is British to a degree that is difficult to overstate. *Have I Got News for You* has run since 1990; *QI*, *Mock the Week*, *8 Out of 10 Cats*, *Would I Lie to You* and a dozen others occupy the schedule continuously, and the underlying machine in every case is identical. A host poses something that is not really a question. Somebody lands. Three other people tag it, in sequence, each of them living off capital they did not deposit, until the structure is exhausted and the host poses the next non-question. The programme is an engine for manufacturing deposits and permitting several people to spend them, none of whom had anything to do with assembling the load, and its true product is not the jokes

but the rate. This is the proof the double act cannot furnish: the tag survives transfer to a stranger.

The fighter's vocabulary needs one amendment to cover it. A combination, there, is a flurry thrown by one fighter off a single opening. Here the combination is thrown by four fighters off one opening, and the pleasure for the viewer is partly a pleasure in the relay—in watching the structure survive being handed along, and in the small competitive fact that whoever spends last must spend best, because the capital is depleting with every strike.

The formal limit of this is a radio programme first broadcast in 1967 and running still. In *Just a Minute* a player is given a subject and must speak on it for sixty seconds without hesitation, repetition or deviation, while the other players listen for a violation and press a buzzer the moment they hear one. The interruption is not tolerated by the format. The interruption is the scoring mechanism. A player earns points by successfully stopping another player, and the challenge must be justified aloud, which means the challenge itself has to be funny, which means the game is won by whoever tags best.

That is the tag promoted from ornament to constitutive rule, and it is worth pausing on how strange it is.

A whole entertainment has been constructed in which nobody is permitted to complete a joke and everybody is rewarded for interrupting one. Nicholas Parsons chaired it for more than half a century. It is the limit case and not merely an extreme one, because the person spending your deposit here is not a partner who helped you build it but an opponent trying to take it off you. The furthest a joke's capital can travel from its origin is into the hands of somebody who wants you to stop talking. It is, structurally, the furthest possible point from a man alone on a stage in a theatre with an hour he has spent two years writing, and it has been running for nearly sixty years on the national broadcaster, in the middle of the afternoon.

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There is a unit in British comedy that the American tree has no branch for, and it is not a marginal one. It is the sketch.

A sketch is not a bit: a bit is a comic premise developed in the comic's own voice, and a sketch has characters who are not the author. It is not a routine: a routine is a territory worked by one person for a while. It is not a joke, since it may contain many or almost none. It is a written scene, performed by an ensemble,

and its authority lives in the writing while its delivery lives in bodies that did not do the writing. Under the old formula, the writer is the comic and the cast are the comedians, and in a sketch tradition these are routinely different people, which is a state of affairs the American taxonomy is not built to describe because in stand-up it almost never obtains.

The sketch also produced the single most radical structural move in the tradition, which is Monty Python's abolition of the ending.

The punchline is the atom: the one mandatory production in the entire grammar, the floor the whole apparatus exists to deliver you to. Python declined it, not occasionally but as policy. Sketches stop. They are interrupted by a military officer who declares them too silly to continue. They dissolve into an animation which carries the viewer somewhere else entirely, the animation functioning as tissue at the level of the programme rather than the joke—connective speech between the jokes, promoted to the status of a limb. They end because the cast has run out of the idea, and the running-out is left visible, and the failure to land is itself the landing.

This is the ambient joke, a Russian temperament and located in America only in the person of Norm Mac-

donald, arriving as the organizing principle of the most exported British comedy that has ever existed. The Goon Show had established the taste a generation earlier on radio, where Spike Milligan spent the nineteen-fifties building programmes whose logic collapsed on purpose; Python inherited it and put it on television with a laughing audience in the room, which is a much harder trick, because a live audience wants its release and has to be persuaded, week after week, to accept the withholding of it as the joke.

Note what this does to the distinction between comic and comedian. Python's authority is overwhelmingly in the writing, which makes them comics; but the writing is a machine for refusing structural payoff, which is the one thing writing is normally for. They wrote their way out of the punchline. It is the only tradition that has managed it at scale, and it managed it because the sketch, unlike the joke, can end by simply being over.

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The largest container in the American taxonomy is the album, and its children are the special and the podcast. That is a complete list for a tradition whose fundamental unit is a solo performer publishing an hour. It is not

a complete list for Britain, where the largest container is the series.

The series is bounded, and bounded severely. *Fawlty Towers* consists of twelve episodes and there will never be more. *The Office* ran to two series of six and a Christmas coda. *Blackadder* is four series of six, each in a different century. The Anglo-American difference here is not one of budget or appetite; it is that the British series is conceived as a release with edges—bounded as a publication, exactly as an album is—rather than as a franchise that continues until the audience stops arriving.

And a bounded container permits a kind of comedy that an unbounded one cannot hold, which is the comedy of entrapment. The characters do not grow. They cannot grow, because growth would dissolve the premise and because there is not enough room to accommodate it. Tony Hancock remains in Railway Cuttings. Harold Steptoe never gets out. Basil Fawlty learns nothing across twelve episodes and would learn nothing across two hundred. Alan Partridge is returned, by each new format, to the same distance from the thing he wants. The American sitcom's long arc of improvement—the workplace that becomes a family, the misfit who finds his people—has no real equivalent,

because the container is too short for an arc and the joke was never that anybody might escape.

This also explains something that looks from outside like a national failure of taste, which is the catchphrase.

The definition of the callback is exact and can simply be applied. A callback lives inside its set and reaches back across minutes; let it reach across the whole body of work, so that it lands because the audience knows the performer rather than because they were present earlier tonight, and it has become a catchphrase. Now ask what reach is available to a comic whose container is a returning series rather than a touring hour. Within the episode there are twenty-eight minutes, which is not enough to seed and detonate. Across episodes there is a week, and a week is not minutes, it is the scale at which callbacks become catchphrases by the definition. So the form generates them, necessarily, as its native mode of self-reference.

The Fast Show is the pure case: sketches reduced to nothing but the delivery vehicle for a phrase the audience is already waiting for, the setup compressed to the vanishing point because the audience supplies it themselves out of memory. Catherine Tate's schoolgirl, Little Britain, Harry Enfield's gallery of the recurring—all of them are the callback adapted to broadcast, which

is to say adapted to a container the medium provided rather than one the comic chose. That the same device is disreputable in American stand-up follows from the symmetrical fact: there the hour is the unit, the callback has minutes to work with and does not need to leave the set, and a comic who reaches past it is understood to be coasting on a thing that already worked.

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The clinch described earlier—the comic who stays close on one premise and refuses the audience the breath it needs to recover its composure—has a world champion, and the tradition that produced him is not incidental to the technique.

Stewart Lee will take a premise and work it for twenty minutes, repeating with small variations, returning to the same phrase until the phrase has been drained of content and refilled by the repetition itself, so that the laugh at minute fifteen is coming off the relentlessness and not off any line that could be extracted and quoted. That much is the grapple as defined. What he adds is a second manoeuvre which the American grammar has no name for: he makes the room's own response the material. He will observe aloud that a section is not working. He will divide the audience against itself, con-

gratulating one part of it on understanding and characterizing the rest as having wandered in from a different show. He will explain a joke that has just died in a tone of weary professional diagnosis, and the explanation is funnier than the joke, and the explanation is only available because the joke died.

That is the grapple and the pragmatic joke in one act. The payload is not internal to the material at all; it is the relation between the room and the material, and the room's failure is designed in the way the anekdot designs in the listener's bafflement. It is sustainable for an hour only because the audience has been trained by a tradition in which the response is part of the performance.

Ken Dodd represents the elder version of the same technique and the opposite of its temperament: not the clinch of hostility but the clinch of endurance, sets running four and five hours, an audience kept past the last train and laughing partly at the fact of still being there. He worked the halls for sixty years and outlasted every account anyone gave of what he was doing.

Every theory of comedy is answerable to a room in Glasgow on a Saturday, and none of them survives the encounter intact, and it is not clear that this is a defect in the theories so much as a fact about the object.

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The pragmatic joke—the joke whose charge lives in the relation between the listener and the material rather than inside any structural release, the joke that sorts its audience by comprehension and designs the bafflement in—is not a Russian curiosity but a whole continent. Here is the continent's English province.

Since the late nineteen-seventies, the radio programme *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*—billed by its long-serving chairman Humphrey Lyttelton as the antidote to panel games—has periodically played a game called Mornington Crescent. Players name stations of the London Underground in turn. Play proceeds under an elaborate apparatus of rules, variations and named strategies, invoked with great gravity; a player may be cautioned for attempting a move under one set of conventions while the table is operating under another; the game ends when somebody successfully reaches Mornington Crescent, at which point there is applause.

There are no rules. There have never been any rules. The entire apparatus is invented in the moment, and the joke is constituted entirely by the listener's relation to that fact. If you do not know, you are baffled and being baffled is the experience the programme intends

you to have. If you do know, the joke is watching a table of professionals discuss a nonexistent ruleset with total seriousness while somebody at home is being baffled. Comprehension is membership. Incomprehension is designed in, not a failure of the telling. It is the anekdot, on the national broadcaster, weekly, for the better part of fifty years.

The music hall had got there first, and more aggressively. Max Miller worked with two joke books, a white one and a blue one, and would invite the audience to choose; they chose the blue one, always, and the choosing was the first move. His characteristic device was a rhyme left unfinished—a couplet set up so that the missing word is forced by the metre and is obscene, and then not supplied. The audience supplies it, silently, in four hundred heads at once, and laughs at having done so, and Miller then rebukes them for it. *You're the ones that are filthy*, he would say, *not me.*

The punchline is delivered by the room, and the room is then indicted for delivering it. That is the commons at its most predatory: the comic has not merely permitted the audience to hold capital, he has manoeuvred them into spending it on something incriminating and photographed the transaction.

Frankie Howerd made a career of a milder version, the perpetual aside—breaking from the material to complain to the audience about the material, the musicians, the script, the audience. *No, don't laugh. Titter ye not.* The effect is to recruit the room as co-conspirators against the writers, so that what is being enjoyed is not the script but a shared attitude toward the script, which is again a charge located in the relation rather than in the object.

And underneath all of it sits a prior that an outsider will not hear and cannot supply. Class is installed in British phonology. A vowel is a setup. Before a performer has finished a sentence the audience has been told, with precision, where he is from and what that is supposed to mean, and a premise is already running that nobody uttered. This is the bell, in the terms used earlier: the joke rings it, but the joke did not put it there, and it will not ring for a listener who was not raised within earshot. A very large amount of the tradition therefore sorts its audience exactly as the anekdot does, and standing slightly outside it is not a failure of the comedy. For anyone who was not there, it is the intended experience.

The two traditions do meet, in one city, for one month a year, under a prize.

The Edinburgh Fringe rewards the constructed hour, and the award attached to it—for years the Perrier, latterly the Edinburgh Comedy Award—has been won repeatedly by hours that are architected in exactly the architected sense: early material planted as seed, a final ten minutes that detonates everything laid down in the first, the whole resolving as one structure rather than a sequence of them. Daniel Kitson's hours are built this way. Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, which won there in 2017, is built this way to the point of being about being built this way, since its argument is that the shape of a joke can be a lie about the life it is drawn from.

Unfortunately, you did win.

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