

THE RETURN OF THE COMEDIAN

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN LEWIS by courtney nash



Fort Dodge native and stand-up comedian John Lewis has a lot on his mind. He needs to review the jokes he's recently written and decide if they're ready for his act, he needs to plan a big city move that supports him both financially and artistically, and on top of all that he needs to find someone to watch his dog.

John started doing comedy in June of 2003 while a student at the University of Iowa when he auditioned for a one-night show in Iowa City at a bar called The Summit. Each week the Summit featured different comics from across the nation as well as a local comedian who acted as the weekly master of ceremonies. When the current MC moved to Chicago, John auditioned and earned the job. After honing his skills as a live performer in Iowa City he started working the road as a comedian in clubs across the Midwest, including Fort Dodge, and began his own production company working with other performers like himself. The St. Edmond graduate recently returned to Fort Dodge with another cast of comedians to the Fort Dodge Events Center located downtown.

I spoke with John through e-mail and over the phone from his home in Minneapolis about his future plans, why he thinks bringing comedy to Fort Dodge is important, and why he doesn't take a restaurant like Sports Page for granted.

Twist & Shout: *What made you want to start doing stand-up?*

John Lewis: Stand-up was something that I always wanted to do. I saw it on TV as a kid and wanted to do it. It was kind of like my dream job growing up but I never thought I would get a chance. Growing up in Iowa, there's just not much opportunity to get started as a comic, being as there's only a handful of clubs across the state. I got lucky, had the opportunity, and went with it. It's a drastic difference from thinking I was going to be a lawyer when I left for college.

T&S: *How often do you write new jokes for your act?*

JL: I write new material about 1/4 as much as I should. When I started I was writing a ton and now that has slowed down but I do think that when I write now, the jokes are much better from the beginning, as opposed to writing junk and then spending weeks trying to get a laugh out of it.

T&S: *What's your writing process like?*

JL: Basically, it consists of carrying around a notebook, writing down ideas when they come up, then forgetting about them for about 3 weeks until 30 minutes before showtime, then trying to make something out of it on short notice. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. I would like to spend about 4-5 hours every day writing like *Seinfeld*, but my girlfriend and puppy don't really allow that.

T&S: *Have you been able to support yourself as a performer?*

JL: I still keep a day job with Cingular Wireless in Minneapolis, for the periods when I'm not working on the road. Right now, I can't afford to go 3 weeks or so without income. For example, I spent the majority of June, July, and August on the road, which was fortunate because summer is usually slow for live entertainment. But now, my September is pretty empty.

T&S: *So you aren't starving for your art?*

JL: It's been easy to balance everything.

T&S: *Minneapolis doesn't seem like the obvious choice for stand-up comedy. What took you there?*

JL: When I was leaving Iowa City to try to do this for a living I had to pick somewhere I could make an impact and grow as a comic. I had narrowed it down to four cities - Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, and Minneapolis. LA and New York were instantly out because I just wasn't ready for that yet. If you go out there too early you'll get eaten alive. You've got to build some type of momentum and gain experience before you make that move. I feel like Chicago is a lot better city for improv and comedy writing than actual stand-up performance so I ended up in Minneapolis. It's actually a very good city for a comic to start out in. The business is very competitive and in a lot of cases, that prevents comics from helping each other out.

T&S: *How much time do you spend on the road?*

JL: I've been working on the road since May of 2005, so I'm still kind of a baby when it comes to that. How much I'm working on the road has changed drastically in that year or so. At the beginning, it was very sporadic. I seem to fill up at least 2 weeks of every month, sometimes at late notice. You get a reputation for being professional and doing a good job and your workload really starts to increase. Hopefully, I can make the transition to a headliner soon.

T&S: *With that semi-permanent vacation do you ever have trouble getting motivated to expand on what you've started?*

JL: I like just about everything about the lifestyle. I think I was fortunate to do my partying when I was in college and get it out of my system. Rarely do I do much after shows on the road. I'm pretty low-key. Right now I work just about the whole Midwest and go out as far as Montana and Colorado to the West and Pennsylvania to the East.

T&S: *You recently started your own production company, Mongolian Landmine Productions, with another former Fort Dodger Justin Wade. What has it been like running your own company?*

JL: How the company breaks down is that Justin handles everything on the client end (logistics, booking hotels) and I handle everything on the performer end (getting the comics). I definitely don't like dealing with the headaches of making sure the show is successful financially. That's his job. I need to focus more on becoming a better comic and improving.

T&S: *How long had bringing a comedy show to Fort Dodge been on your mind?*

JL: I was back in town for the St. Ed's Alumni Basketball Tournament in early April and we were all hanging out at Third Base (downtown). We started talking to some people, and they (the owners of the Fort Dodge Events Center) were thinking about doing recurring comedy shows. It kind of worked itself out from there. It (the first show) was a killer show and we've been building since then. It will catch on and be packed every month, I think. They've been good to work with and I think they'll be really happy when we get a little following in the area.

T&S: *Do you think a market like Fort Dodge can support your show?*

JL: The primary reason we decided to do a comedy show in Fort Dodge was because there's nothing like it in the area. People would have to go to Des Moines or Minneapolis to see a live comedy show of this caliber. I feel like it will be a good thing for the city of Fort Dodge if it continues and is successful.

T&S: *While you're back in town for the shows do you have the chance to visit any places which were favorites when you lived here?*

JL: I usually take the comics to Sports Page for a steak sandwich. It's just one of those things that I like that I can show them. Usually, on the road we're eating fast food and junk from gas stations. It's nice to eat good food that's not all that expensive. I also take the comics that golf out to Lakeside and we play a little.

John Lewis and Mongolian Landmine Productions return to the Fort Dodge Events Center in October with fresh comedy shows, and the shows are all intended for mature audiences. For more information on John and his comedy career as well as links to stand-up comedy in the area check out John's website at www.johnlewiscomedy.com.

