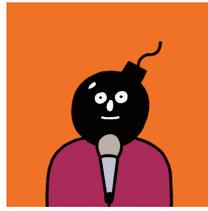


TRANSLATION



Pun for your life! Punsters are rocking New York's comedy clubs

They are the most reviled form of joke, but puns turn out to be comedy dynamite

Joe Berkowitz, Sun 23 Jul 2017

<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2017/jul/23/pun-for-your-life-punsters-are-rocking-new-yorks-comedy-clubs>

When I was 17 years old, my classmate Jill O'Doyle asked whether I'd seen *Titanic* yet. It was the beginning of third period, the movie had just opened and I had opinions about its star.

"*Titanic*?" I said, my lips curling into the fat-kid equivalent of a Billy Idol snarl. "You mean with Leonardo DiCaprio?" Jill looked about 1,000 detentions exhausted by this response but, to her credit, she ignored what I'd said. Our chat was over. As far as I can remember, this was my introduction to how puns generally go over out in the world.

Back at home, though, things were different. My dad had always been fond of pejorative twists on celebrity names. He would say "John *Revolta*" a lot, especially in the latter years of the *Look Who's Talking* franchise, but no famous person was safe. Politicians, basketball players, lead singers of bands I'd never heard of – they were all fair game. There just isn't all that much you can say to a pun – even when it's not arbitrarily bashing the dreamiest movie star on the planet. The best reactions I got in the years to come were nods, groans and other minor acknowledgements that wordplay had just occurred. More often what I'd get were bone-chilling silences and heavy Twitter unfollowings. So I caved in and absorbed what I thought was the conventional wisdom: that puns are comedy kryptonite.

Until I set foot in my first pun competition, I had no idea just how many people disregard the conventional wisdom. In Brooklyn alone, it's at least 400 a month. Punderdome began as an ephemeral whim in the spring of 2011, when rising comedian Jo Firestone heard about one of Austin, Texas's weirder annual traditions, the O Henry Pun-Off World Championships. She was shocked and delighted to find out such a thing existed.

She booked a venue in Park Slope to stage her own version and over the course of 60 shows and counting, Punderdome has evolved into a pop culture powerhouse. It's spawned two television pilots and a licensed card game. *GQ* magazine called it one of the funniest nights in America in 2015. It's also built a thriving community of dedicated champions who have fans and – believe it or not – groupies.

When I first heard about pun competitions, there was no ministerial calling. I received no message from either deep within or high above about devoting my life to thinking up words that sound like other words on stage in front of a crowd. In fact, at the time, I could barely think in front of a crowd at all.

I went to Punderdome for the first time in late summer 2015. When my friend Tim invited me to watch him compete, I responded with the same question everybody would later ask me when I mentioned pun competitions: "What's a pun competition?"

"Well," he said between bites of báhn mì. "A bunch of us go on stage, we're given a topic, and then we see who can come up with the best puns on it in 90 seconds."

"What kind of puns?" I asked. "Like, um," he said, looking up at the ceiling for a second before meeting my eyes again and hoisting his sandwich. "I hope they don't báhn mì from the pun competition for not thinking of a better pun right now."

Fair enough. The whole thing sounded suspiciously like spoken-word fight club, but I agreed to go and root for Tim. Later, inside the venue, dozens of radically pale New Yorkers are sprawled out in each direction. Every other face has glasses perched on its nose and is talking animatedly over one of those upbeat songs by the Cure that sound alike.

Jo announces that the topic is fine art and for the next 90 seconds everyone scribbles furiously. Tim is up first. "I came up with a lot of fine art puns," he says, "but I don't know how to frame them." If I had an hour to meditate on puns for this topic, I'd never come up with a better opener. Tim had 90 seconds.

The next category is "sources of light". A woman in a pool table-green dress and thick black glasses wins the crowd over with her knowingly meek delivery. "Watts going on?" she says, getting a laugh right away. "I hope I win tonight," she says. "I don't want any *constellation* prizes." The whole place erupts, and it goes on like that for the rest of the show.

I wouldn't have predicted hearing such massive, overwhelming crowd love – or that so much of it would come from me. Some of these puns are legitimately clever, some irresistibly bad. The audience seemed just as happy groaning as laughing. It's a revelation. As a person whose default setting was anxiety, I could only envy these performers' ability to spontaneously craft the most reviled form of joke in front of 500 people.

A few weeks later I'm back and this time I've decided to pun-ticipate. When my name is called, I slither through the crowd in a daze and float on to the stage. Jo announces the category: medicine. I'm relieved at first. Such a broad topic! Then I'm outraged when puns fail to magically appear in my brain. My frenzied mental Rolodex scroll goes like this: "medicine", "sickness", "doctor". Doctor? That sounds like "docked her". That's... something. What's next? "Injection". What's funny or interesting about "injection"? Nothing. Let's move on. How about "polio"? I can turn that into poly, yo. But what does that even mean? Maybe "roly poly, yo"? Jesus, time is almost up already. I walk over to the mic and force myself to look out into the crowd. Shadowy, faceless figures loom like something from a nightmare, except the haziness is comforting since it seems to represent fewer people.

"This is going to be... so quick, you guys," I say, and the crowd laughs. Praise Yahweh! "I kind of lipo-suck at puns." The audience suddenly feels less like an enemy. "I had to get that surgery because I was too roly poly, yo." This time, the laugh is even bigger. I'm on a roll!

"But the surgeon kind of messed up, so they docked her pay." The audience groan-laugh, but it's a laugh nonetheless. The nervous energy drains from my body all at once, like piñata candy. That could've gone much worse.

After that day, I decide to go to the next Punderdome, and probably the one after that. The contestants had reminded me of all the snappy comebacks I'd never made, all the TV dialogue too sparkling to be real, the promise of being perpetually unstuck, a wellspring of spontaneity. I would experience it all for myself and document it. I'd become Punter S Thompson.

A guide to puns

Homophonic pun: words that sound the same, but have different meanings ('Walking in light rain is a *mist* opportunity')

Homographic pun: words that are spelled the same, but sound different ('Of the two types of anaesthesia on offer, I'd prefer the *number one*')

Homonymic pun: words that are spelled and sound the same ('I felt unsettled inside so I had an *evening* out')