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Patton Oswalt: “A Nerd Gone Wild Gives Voice to His Inner Rat”

By Joe Rhodes

Patton Oswalt, moderately drunk, was on stage in one of his favorite haunts, Largo, a small cabaret on Fairfax Avenue in West Hollywood, unleashing one of the elaborate tirades that have become

his comedy trademark, describing the aesthetic horrors of entering the orange furniture/fluorescent light nightmare that is Yoshinoya Beef Bowl, a Japanese fast food restaurant chain he is convinced must be a front for some sort of international crime syndicate.

“Everything about it is psychologically designed to repel you” he proclaimed, to the tiny in-the-know Friday-night audience, barely 80 people who’d come to watch him open for and then mercilessly heckle his friend, singer-songwriter Michael Penn, in an intimate, unrehearsed, barely-advertised show. He imagined how the Yoshinoya proprietors must have purposefully created dishes that resembled “boiled shoelaces in air conditioning water” and permeated their restaurants with a smell that would cause unsuspecting patrons to ask, “Who put out the garbage fire with asparagus pee?”

So, that’s one endorsement deal he won’t be getting. Nor is he likely to be hearing from the folks at KFC (at least not in a good way) after appearing on “Late Night with Conan O’Brien” and describing their popular “Famous Bowl” chicken-mashed potato-gravy combo as “a failure pile in a sadness bowl” and “a wet mound of starch that I can eat with a spoon like I’m a death-row prisoner on suicide watch.

Mr. Oswalt, 38 years old, small, pasty and avocado-shaped, has made a fine living with rants like these for most of the last 15 years, free-flowing and frequently self-deprecating streams of exasperation

and disdain for the inanity and self-importance he seems to encounter everywhere he turns. He's a nerd gone wild, an unrepentant lover of comic books and pulp fiction, food, porn and role-play video games, a guy who likes guns and yoga, hates hippies and George Bush and is capable of spewing out ornate, passionate, profanity-laden screeds on just about anything.

"I spend a lot of time pointing out what I think is moronic in the world," he had said in an interview a few weeks earlier, before taking off on another round of touring, "but then I point out that the reason I'm so attuned to this hypocrisy and moronic behavior is that I'm twice as guilty of it as most people.

"I'm not the kind of comedian that presents themselves as once removed from the stupidity and banality of the world so I can just comment on it. No, I'm commenting on it because I'm in the process of doing the exact same things. Advertising works on me. I over eat. I love to drink. I'm horny all the time. I have very base, petty vengeful thoughts. I'm not just saying 'Here's what's wrong with the world', I'm saying, 'Here's what's wrong with me.'"

It's an approach that has made him one of the driving forces of the alternative stand-up comedy scene – a taboo-flaunting generation of post-Seinfeld comedians such as Sarah Silverman and David Cross whose non-traditional posture, as much about point of view as punchlines, was personified by the 2006 "Comedians of Comedy" tour,

Showtime series and DVD, created and spearheaded by Mr. Oswalt with fellow travelers Brian Posehn, Maria Bamford and Zach Galafianakis.

It's also, weirdly enough, the attitude that landed him the lead role in what is likely to be the summer's biggest G-rated animated film, Pixar's "Ratatouille", directed by Brad Bird and opening this Friday. Mr. Oswalt provides the voice for "Remy" a talking rat who dreams of being a gourmet chef.

"I heard his routine about steak," Mr. Bird, who won an Academy Award for his last Pixar film, "The Incredibles" recalled when asked why he'd made such an unlikely casting choice, citing a bit of Mr. Oswalt's where he describes the menu at Black Angus as "a gauntlet of angry food . . . a 55-ounce he-man steak slab, served with a deep-fried punkin, stuffed with buttered scallops, 53 of our potato-bacon balls and then, bend over Abigail May, here comes the gravy pipe."

"There was so much passion and volatility in his voice and when I heard it I felt like, 'That's Remy!'" Mr. Bird said. "The character is a small guy with a very big personality. And I feel like Patton is that guy."

Whatever mainstream opportunities may come from projects like "Ratatouille" and his long run as a secondary cast member on the recently-ended CBS sitcom "King of Queens" may represent, Mr. Oswalt is adamant about not abandoning his alterna-comedy base. He will be releasing his second definitely-not-for-kids stand-up

comedy CD, “Werewolves and Lollipops” on July 10 and keeps up a heavy schedule of club gigs and impromptu appearances at places like Largo, sometimes going on stage 5 or 6 nights a week.

“I think it depends on what you do with your success,” he said, asked if he worries about losing his anti-establishment aura or, worse yet, being accused of selling out. “I’m not doing comedy so I can get out of comedy. I’m doing movies and tv shows and writing screenplays so I can have freedom to do MORE comedy. And now I have the money to produce my own tours and showcase other comedians.

“So, I don’t look at it as being a sellout. I think “King of Queens” was a really funny show. And as long as I’m out there doing stand-up, what difference does it make what else I do? That’s like someone saying they can’t listen to Richard Pryor’s old albums ever since they saw “Superman III. Really? Well, you’re an idiot then. Cause those albums are amazing.”

Mr. Oswalt, who grew up in the suburbs of northern Virginia and was an English major at The College of William & Mary, started doing stand-up around Washington D.C. in 1988, moved to San Francisco in 1992 and Los Angeles in 1995, when he was hired as a writer for Fox’s sketch comedy series, MAD-TV. By then, he’d already abandoned much of his self-proclaimed “hacky road act” in favor of a less structured, more heartfelt, confessional style.

“In San Francisco, all these people were going up and experimenting on stage, and we started up our own nights in coffee shops and bookstores and, literally, laundromats, anyplace that would let us plug in a microphone. Sometimes not even a microphone.”

It became, he says, like an indy music scene, a cluster of like-minded comedians who, although they probably wouldn’t have turned it down, weren’t focused on getting noticed by sitcom producers or scoring lucrative road work in two-drink minimum comedy clubs.

“The model for success as a comedian had always been that you spent your entire career focusing on putting together one killer five-minute act, you go on “The Tonight Show, get called over to Johnny Carson’s desk and get a sitcom. That was it. That’s how you made it. So I’d started down that path.

“And then Johnny quit and that entire model was shattered, which I thought was great. Because instead of performing for an invisible talent scout that wasn’t there, we started doing comedy for ourselves, because we just loved doing stand-up. Instead of waiting for this one five minute shot that decides your whole life, comedy went back to what it was supposed to be, just going on stage and venting and spewing and having fun.

“Also we realized that there’s 6 billion people on the planet. We can’t make all of them laugh. But we can have our own little niche thing and still do fine.”

Besides his near-evangelical zeal for the “Comedians of Comedy,” which he put together with Atlanta music promoter and writer Henry Owings in 2004, Mr. Oswalt often assembles showcases of undiscovered comedians for producers such as Frank Smiley from “Late Night,” who says, Mr. Oswalt “knows everyone who’s good and he’s truly a fan of the form. He’s also stayed true to what he finds funny. He doesn’t pander. Comics love him for that.”

“I don’t understand people who get to a certain level of success and then slam the door behind them,” Mr. Oswalt says. “I’d rather have more people like me doing this. Then the whole field gets better and we all have a lot more fun. I want to be surrounded by creative, quirky original people. And I’m funnier when I hang out with people that are funnier than me.”

“The first show I did with Patton in Atlanta in 2002, there were 50 people in the audience and Patton performed for almost 3 hours, I’m not exaggerating,” said Mr. Owings, who describes Mr. Oswalt’s comedy as “a form of perverted poetry.” “He gets off stage and has a wine ring around his mouth from dinking so much and says, ‘That was the most fun I ever had in my life.’ He said, ‘Henry, getting paid to do that is like getting paid to eat chocolate cake.’”

“I remember early in my career watching Blaine Capatch (now one of his closest comedy friends) on

stage, making references to Harlan Ellison and William S. Burroughs and all kinds of weird, obscure bands,” Mr. Oswalt said, “and I was like, ‘What? You mean you can go up there and just say what you want?’ Comedy was the first job I had where, instead of feeling like I had to do it, it was something I was getting to do. And I think when that happens, that should be your career.