

# Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile

By Greg Tate

Oh yes, the Negro has got jokes. Furthermore, *dem N\*g\*as over there* got jokes too. If anyone but a Negro or a N\*g\*a had written those words, they would be considered outright offensive. Since one did, they can be described as outrageously cheeky, reliably colloquial and obviously vernacular. Given the topic at hand, these are all acceptable rhetorical strategies and conceits for brother-man to begin an essay on all things dark and comical.

As the luck of the Irish would have it, we've been asked by our family members at Tate to write about Black humour in the context of modernity. Truly a fool's bargain this, since writing about humour is never quite all it's cracked up to be. First because humour derives from a Greek word meant to identify the vital juices thought to give folk the capacity to laugh. Secondly, because while laughter is indeed good medicine for the soul and all that, and a Negro not only have jokes but know how to laugh at them, there's a problem with simply writing about laughter. Namely that any fool or group of fools can be found who will laugh at just about anything. So why not make a slight shift then; why not take on Black Comedy instead? There unfortunately we run into more semantic confusion. Signifyin' on "Black Comedy" in a high art domain such as this one could lead to confusion in some readers' minds about whether the matter at hand was going to be on the firm of Foxx, Pryor, Cosby, Rock and Chappelle, or that of Messrs Beckett, Barthelme, Vonnegut and Pynchon.

Even once we've sorted all that out, other problems abound. The main problem with riffing on stand-up comedy is that you have somehow to translate the verbal and physical comedic genius of a Richard Pryor or a Dave Chappelle to the page, and then likely provide a host of very boring, very bloodless, unfunny and academic reasons why the work is both sharp and hilarious – a fool's task indeed, and never a "good look" from where we sit.

It can never be said enough that great comedy is all about timing, but great comedians not only say those funny things at exactly the right moment, the very way they say things is funny too. Meaning the Pryors, Rocks and Chappelles of this world are people who can provoke guffaws from the moment they saunter, swagger and shuffle (often all at once) on stage before nary a punchline has been produced. Great comedians tend to be world-class clowns whose entertainment arsenal is

overstocked with funnyass faces, funnyass minds, funnyass bodies, funnyass tongues and, of course, funnybones. They are also rhythmic and musical artists in their own way, who know, as jazz giant Miles Davis knew (no stranger to the brutal delivery of one-liners himself), that the most important notes are the ones you don't play. So add deadly comedic pauses to their wicked storehouse of weaponry too.

Rendering all that on the page for the casual reader without becoming a lethal knave is damn near impossible. (In our humble opinion even Zadie Smith, one of the most drop-dead funny satirists of our time, couldn't write about comedy without getting a bit maudlin.) That's why in no shape or form will any analysis of Black Comedy as an art form be our bailiwick. So what will the nature of our dysfunction here be regarding things that make you go bananas (or, as you chaps say, "bonkers")? To wit, dear friends, we are going to expound upon the subject of Wit – the Wit of the American Negro to be exact.

Now the beauty of essaying on Wit as opposed to Comedy is that you can actually measure Wit by an almost scientific standard and not be under much burden of transatlantic comedic translation. No one has to laugh at your wit; they just have to be convinced you're not a twit or a wit by half. This, you see, is because examples of Wit don't labour under the necessity of proving they're as funny on the page as they were on the stage. Wit can be visual or it can be verbal, but all you have to prove when proclaiming Wit Found Here is that your examples are occasionally clever, mildly poignant and not even profound, a touch barbed and, most of all, well-aimed. (It further helps that Wit needn't always have a decent target. Should Wit come cruelly lancing its intended victims, they need not be appropriate or even especially opprobrious. They need only be punctured with accuracy, aplomb, verve and a wink and a nod of venom.)

Fortunately for this writer, the best examples of Negro Wit in Black Modernity can be readily found in the lyrics of the many hip-hop songs he has spent far too many hours memorising since those ancient times, the 1980s. Who here remembers the two-woman stand-up hip-hop team Salt-N-Pepa? Or that they once made a delirious track titled *Never Trust A Big Butt And A Smile*? Many of us then found great wit in the spicy duo being women in possession of both attributes in such voluptuary abundance that many a man of our acquaintance would have risked betrayal by their grinning posteriors without a second thought. One also thinks of the late great lyricist Biggie Smalls, who made a small art form out of describing acts of pure thuggery in the most shameless but witty terms possible. My own number one favourite example from Big's felony-assault oeuvre would have to be "I been robbing motherfuckers since the slave ships" – primarily because that lyric violates every politically correct ancestor-worshipping bone in my pro-Black Pan-Afrikanist Socialist body and dares me not to love the prickly sensation. In this genre of malice towards all and offence for everyone, there are also the witticisms of Ice Cube to consider, a guy whose idea of fun was first laid bare in the song *Fuck Tha Police* when he was in the band with the wittiest name in the history of hip-hop, N.W.A., short for Niggers With Attitude (as if any without attitude would be arrogant enough to

presume success in American pop culture would naturally follow calling themselves the N word!). Biggie and Ice Cube are hip-hop's premiere representatives of that branch of wit we tend to describe as mordant, the sort of wits who charm and delight us while mocking the faces of death.

Some rappers are too serious-minded to deal in the sort of deadly low-comedy favoured by Big and Cube, but the best of them don't lack for gut-busting punchlines either. One thinks of Public Enemy's Chuck D, who ingeniously injected several lines of sly and witty wordplay into a rather melodramatic song about a prison riot – most notably: “My plan said I had to get out and break North/ just like Oliver's neck I had to get off.” (You may need to Wiki “The North Star” and “Oliver North” to apprehend just how witty that line seemed in 1988, and also take an African American history class with special emphasis on the Underground Railroad.) Some fellow scholars of hip-hop verse find even more clever the militant nonchalance of the song's opening lines: “I got a letter from the government the other day/I opened and read it/It said they were ‘Suckers’./ They wanted me for their Army or Whatever/Picture me giving a damn/I said ‘Never’.” We, on the other hand, find ourselves more partial to the grace under pressure and dry wit Chuck displays in his followup lines: “I wasn't with it / But just that very minute / It occurred to me / The Suckers had Authority.” (Harvard's Professor Henry Louis Gates and Barack Obama might now concur.)

Hip-hop is also where one is most likely in Black Modernity to find examples of that style of wit known as absurdist. The lyricist known as MF Doom is perhaps our most uncanny contemporary purveyor of Afro-absurdism. Not only because he struts about onstage and off wearing a metal mask obviously modelled after that of the Marvel Comics villain Dr Doom, but because he also sends younger, thinner and even whiter-looking acolytes onstage to lip sync his songs – a gambit which has brought no shortage of ire and consternation from paying fans who demand the “real” Doom be brought before them, not quite getting the conceptual postmodernist joke that's on them. Doom's pointed send-up of current rap's rather dull devotion to theatrical naturalism or “realness”, as we say here in the surreal 'hood of Harlem, is surely doomed to be lost on the witless. (Doom, it should be noted, also deploys not just his own gruff speaking voice to tell his tall tales, but also does neat impersonations of mousy cartoon characters, cornball office plebes, mentally challenged persons, super heroic talk show hosts.) His sort of absurdism piles on so many silly in-jokes and obscure references that you may at first feel fanboy smart for catching all of them, until you realise you're this surrealist's idea of a punchline. Being able to footnote Doom's roll-call of cultural waste products marks your cranium where signs of intelligent life are dubious: “How they gave his own show to Tad Ghostal /Any given second he could go mad postal / Stay wavin that power band space cannon/And have the nerve to jump in the face of Race Bannon./Since when the Way-Outs included Zorak/Way back when he used to rub his thorax in Borax.” (*Space Hoes*, from the album *DangerDoom*.) As with *Monty Python*, only a genius could have transformed that post-McCluhan compost heap into a verbal joyride; likewise, pity those among Doom's admirers out to build a cult around this anti-Kanye – an iron-masked rapper in pursuit of virtual invisibility.

The history of Wit in Black Modernity didn't begin with hip-hop of course. Where we find first evidence that African Americans were going to confront the collective's tragedy with a comic twist was found in that uberbody of Black literature known as the *Slave Narratives*. There one finds letters such as the following written by our long deceased brother Jourdon Anderson. Some would say ex-slave; we being more PC say "a self-liberated person of African descent". This missive was composed and mailed to his former concentration camp warden, one Colonel PH Anderson of Big Spring Tennessee, on 22 August 1865. Anderson's letter was apparently written in response to one from the Colonel asking if Jourdon and his family would consider returning to their former confinement facility. The record shows no evidence the Colonel ever replied:

*Sir:*

*I got your letter and was glad to find you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this for harbouring the Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Col. Martin's to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again and see Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Allen, Esther, Green, and Lee. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this. I would have gone back to see you all when I was working in the Nashville hospital, but one of the neighbours told me Henry intended to shoot me if he ever got a chance.*

*...Now, if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again. Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you are sincerely disposed to treat us justly and kindly - and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for thirty-two years and Mandy twenty years. At \$25 a month for me, and \$2 a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to \$11,680. Add to this the interest for the time our wages has been kept back and deduct what you paid for our clothing and three doctor's visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. Please send the money by Adams Express, in care of V. Winters, esq, Dayton, Ohio.*

*We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. Here I draw my wages every Saturday night, but in Tennessee there was never any pay day for the Negroes any more than for the horses and cows...*

*P. S. - Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me.*

*From your old servant,  
Jourdon Anderson*

Hiphop has also globally popularised that branch of Black Comedic thought known as “the dozens”, more commonly described as “Yo Mama” jokes. As in “Yo Mama so fat that she went floating in the ocean and Spain claimed her for the New World”. As in “Yo Mama so poor she went to McDonald’s and put a milkshake on layaway”, and so forth. Because the best ripostes from the realm of the dozens are spontaneously invented and tossed about in rapid-fire street corner contests, it’s easy to see how the practice has evolved into those fractious battles of Wit we in hiphop know as The Freestyle Contest – hoi polloi colloquiums where contenders wittily volley insults at one another and nimbly do so on the beat. In the most exacting of these rituals one is not even allowed to use obscenities or profanities, and the contestant’s gifts for imaginative insult are truly put to an extreme sporting test.

When one moves to the arena of the Professional Black Comedian, the Mount Olympus of Comedic Black Modernity, that realm where the deities of African funny-men and funnywomen dwell (the Pryors, Rock, Sykes, Mableys, Chappelles, Katt Williams *et al*) here is where you’ll find living fusillades of bebop fluency who combine all manner of comedic form into a seamless, eloquent and fluid stream of nonsense and common sense where nothing is sacred and no remorseless transgression of social norms will ever come begging forgiveness.

All that said, we can think of no greater homage to the depths and shallows of Black Comedic form and tradition than transcribing a story once told by Black Comedy’s paramount master of narrative, the late Richard Pryor. The story in question “stars” Pryor’s elderly Southern raconteur Mudbone. In it two Negroes reputed to have the largest penises in the world go out in the world to measure up, as it were, to finally decide in fact, and not brag, which of them indeed has been gifted with the “biggest dick”:

“They were trying to find a place where they could have they contest, see? And they wasn’t no freaks – didn’t want *everybody* looking – so they walking around, looking for a secret place. So they walking across the Golden Gate Bridge and Nigga seen that water and made ’em want to piss, see?

“One say, ‘Man I got to take a leak’. So he pulled his thing out, took a piss, other Nigga pulled his thing out, took a piss. One Nigga said ‘Goddamn! This water’s *Cold.*’ Other Nigga say, ‘Yeah, and it’s *Deep* too.’”\*

At the end of the day finding humour where others might find shame, terror and horror is at the heart of the witty Negroes project and after Pryor, a wise man would know to take his bow.\*

*\*Not to be drearily professorial, but upon further consideration we’ve come to believe that fully apprehending Pryor’s use of ellipsis and one-upmanship in his routine’s punchline may not require unpacking the assonances and resonances which form the ecology of his conclusions nor involve disinterring the double entendres of “cold” and “deep” found in standard African American slang – particularly as such researches seem quite terribly boffish and twee an enterprise given the*

*unabashedly ribald buffoonery and chicanery (not to mention chi-coon-ery) found in his good man Sir Mudbone's bawdy phallocentric spiel.*

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