

BY BEN FONG-TORRES

**D**R. GONZO, the comedian, is a fraud.

First, there's the matter of the beer bottles, six six-packs of them displayed prominently on his front porch like some sort of advertisement. Which makes some sense, since Gonzo is known for his rock-and-roll party image. But ask him about the bottles and he'll fess up: He didn't empty them; some friends did. Sure, he still drinks, but not nearly as much as he did in college.

Then there's his monicker, which, thanks to Hunter S. Thompson and his "gonzo journalism," has come to mean madness of some sort: full-bore, take-no-prisoners craziness in the pursuit of a story. Dr. Gonzo, the comedian, however, is in fact John Means, a lean, 27-year-old from Mason City, Iowa, with an aw-shucks face, a friendly manner, and a good nose for business.

In less than five years in San Francisco, he's become one of the town's busiest and best-paid comics, headlining in nightclubs and working as an opening act at rock concerts. In fact, he's so busy that he feels a little bad about not hanging out as much as he used to with the other comics.

Now, what kind of gonzooid is that?

But, as Means explains, the name was pretty much foisted onto him by a college buddy, and he used it after school when he fronted a group called Dr. Gonzo's Bonzo Band. Before he ever thought of comedy, he was a musician, playing country blues in Des Moines bars, "lulling people into drunksville. We sold drinks, and the shows became comedy."

That bit of show-biz experience has served Means well: as the guitar-slinging "Doc of Comedy Rock," he can work in front of rock concert audiences, usually poison to standup comedians. Opening for the Jefferson Starship, he performed

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in front of 9000 at the Greek Theater, and he's faced thousands more at shows headlining Greg Kihn, Marty Balin and Missing Persons, among others. And, being the businessman he is, he's learned to please the rock audience.

In fact, he's most often criticized for going after cheap laughs with low-level jokes.

At the Old Waldorf recently, he told about a new Stevie Wonder video game: "Stevie tries to find the piano." As the crowd hissed, Gonzo laughed. "Poor taste: I love it," he said. And, strapping on a guitar, he proved it: He did the first riffs of "Sweet Home Alabama" by Lynyrd Skynyrd, three of whose members died in an airplane crash in 1977, and

Dr. Gonzo will be at the Punch Line Wednesday through Saturday, 444 Battery Street.



PHOTO BY SUSAN GILBERT

Dr. Gonzo: John Means, a lean, 27-year-old from Mason City, Iowa

## Pretty Ambitious For a Gonzo

switched, in mid-riff, to a sound effect of a plane crash. Other familiar tunes were used for simplistic lines about VD, BM's, Moonies and mucus. The group Heart's "Barracuda" became "Can of Tuna." The opening line of "House of the Rising Sun" was "There is a House of Pancakes," at which point both the song and the idea dissipated.

"Well," said Means, the one-liners are just fillers, throwaways to move from one segment of the act to the next. As for poor taste, it's business: "I go with what the crowd wants. Sometimes they won't listen to you, and that's how you get their attention. The heavy-rock crowds are hostile to anybody that's not the band they came to see. So I have to get it across that I'll only be on a short time, that if I wasn't working, I'd be out there partying with them. I get them on my side." Even if it takes sick or sophomoric humor, "it's survival."

But Gonzo's humor is flexible, depending on his audience. Headlining at the Old Waldorf, he had a comedy crowd, and between the rock stuff, uncorked some gems.

The subject was — what else? — getting drunk at a party and then getting lost driving home. Gonzo had some advice: "If you're ever so lost and buzzed that the trees start looking like giant broccoli sprouts, do what I do: turn on a Spanish station. Pretend like you're in Spain. You've never been there, you don't know what it's like." Gonzo broke into some pseudo-Spanish programming, lulling us into his imaginary car. "Oh," he said, now the tourist, "they've even got a Denny's here!... Then you find your

exit, and later your friends ask where you've been, and you say: 'Madrid!'"

Gonzo also displayed ample potential for expanding beyond standup comedy. The Old Waldorf show served to unveil a new idea: the blending of comedy with a multi-image visual backdrop, with 27 slide projectors (run by the Office of the Irishmen) achieving something close to animation. Gonzo played off the images and a pre-recorded sound track, roamed the width of the stage, wandered into the audience to do his sendup of a lounge act. "I liked the idea of the visuals," he says, "because it was theatrical. The idea is to make it bigger than life. From doing the rock shows I've been trying to figure out how I could be as big as a rock band by myself."

John Means was first inspired to perform when he was eight, after successfully nagging his mother into buying him a \$15 Sears Roebuck guitar to take to "show and tell" at school. When he was razed for neglecting to learn how to play something on it, he took lessons, learned to play by ear, and emulated TV heroes Roy Rogers and Ricky Nelson.

In high school, "I was a runt. But in my senior year, I grew like seven inches, became a smartass and started hanging out with the right cliques. I got into a school play. And I had a rock and roll fantasy; I'd sit in front of a mirror rocking out." At parties, he was a regular James Taylor, performing between band sets. "Sometimes three or four girls would stay. I felt like Ricky Nelson. That was heaven."

He graduated from Drake University in Des Moines in 1977, stayed a year to

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play with Dr. Gonzo's Bonzo Band, then joined a friend who wanted to produce a play in San Francisco. When they failed to get the project financed, Means took on "temp jobs: physical labor, stuff in warehouses."

By night he hung out at the bar at the old Boarding House on Bush Street, got to know comics Michael Pritchard, Jane Dornacker and Bobby Slayton. Thinking about getting a singing gig, he asked Slayton about open mikes; Slayton assumed Means was talking comedy and steered him to the Holy City Zoo. Means knew something was amiss when MC Tony DePaul introduced the first performer: "She's not funny, but she's got cancer; let's hear it for her!"

Too late to back out, Means, under the name "Dr. Gonzo," and wearing a raincoat and a baseball cap, stepped onstage, slowly took his guitar out of its case, and faced the crowd. "I said, 'I'm from Des Moines,' and the place went nuts. Everybody cracked up. I thought, 'This is easy. I can tell them a lot of things!'" And Gonzo was on his way.

By 1981, he was popping up on radio shows, won fifth place in the local Stand-Up Comedy Competition, and appeared on Showtime cable TV.

Off stage, John Means is an unabashed businessman. Last year, by his count, he worked almost 200 nights a year, and, by doubling up many nights, got paid for some 300 shows for a total of \$30,000.

"I'm not into big money," he said. But since college, he's minded his business. "And that divides me from the other comics. We were all like a group of guys hanging out, and now I'm making a living off it and it's 'Get out.' There're a lot of hard feelings; it's so competitive." So now "instead of hanging out in comedy clubs, I go and see music shows now... I end up making more friends in the music business, and they're not competing with me."

At home — a humorously decorated house in Diamond Heights — he hangs out with his roommates, consisting of his co-managers, Lester and Rusty Poehner (friends from college days), their baby Danny, and Gonzo's girlfriend, Julie, 22, a hospital records clerk.

As for more public stages, Gonzo still wants to fulfill his rock and roll fantasy "and do the big shows," to have success like Robin Williams' and Steve Martin's. He'd like to write and appear in films. "I want to be the ultimate entertainer."

Pretty ambitious for a gonzo. He says, "I've always done my time. I've never wimped out on a job, never cancelled a paid show, and I've only fallen short of my time by a couple of minutes."

Not particularly authentic gonzo. But it's good business. ■