

Front Line of Comedy

Ex-Nashville comic Keith Alberstadt joins the War on Terror and 'Weekend Update'

By Julie Seabaugh

We were in a bunker in Kevlar, helmets and goggles. One of the mortars had hit our ammunition depot, and it caught on fire. They evacuate the area, but there were these massive explosions, concussion blasts that you could feel from hundreds of yards away. It was pretty scary.... There's an opening in the bunker and a soldier is running by, head-to-toe armor, he's got a gun. He stops, looks in, and he goes, "Hey, you guys are the comics, right? That was a great show! All right, see ya later!" And he keeps running. I'm like, "Holy shit, did that just happen?" Stuff's exploding, and he stopped long enough to say he was grateful. It sounds cheesy, but I look back at that as one of those moments that was kind of cool.

The Iraqi war zone Keith Alberstadt was touring then with Comics on Duty, entertaining U.S. troops overseas, is a long way from Nashville. But Alberstadt has handled tougher crowds as a burgeoning comedian. A few mortar shells can't scare off a guy who braved the Southeast stand-up circuit, moved to comedy-glutted New York and managed to snag a plum entry-level writing gig at *Saturday Night Live*.

A Tennessee native and Vanderbilt grad who returns this week to Zanies, Alberstadt enjoyed a dysfunction-free upbringing before stepping onstage at 18. "I definitely ate my dick," he says of his early years. "I ate it for a long time. But I just kept at it. It was like a drug. I was like a meth addict for the stage. Without the teeth grinding. And I didn't sell any of my family's possessions."

At 25, Alberstadt got serious about his craft. He hit the open-mic circuit before graduating to regional gigs in Birmingham, Memphis and Louisville. He left behind his day job in corporate sales and marketing for the Nashville Sounds to go pro at 28. "It's not like it was prophetic or anything," he says, "but in, like, February of 2001, I said, 'September 11, 2001, that's going to be my last office job date.' It was pretty ominous."

Alberstadt's material, a smart, topical, less aggressive alternative to socio-political hectoring, has taken him far. Since moving to New York in April 2006, he has accrued resume boosters at the likes of Sirius, XM Radio, VH1 and CNN, as well as a gig penning sports jokes for *National Lampoon*.

But his headiest shot to date came this past September. Following the encouragement of SNL alum Victoria Jackson, Alberstadt was brought on board as a freelancer for *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update."

Each week, one of the head writers emails five or six pages of newsworthy setups. It is Alberstadt's job to slap punchlines on whatever 10 items most

capture his interest.

"I tend to navigate towards the more obscure stories, sports, entertainment," he explains. "It's not because I can't write political; I'm just playin' the percentages. There are so many people writing Obama jokes or McCain jokes, I feel like I increase my chances if I went a different direction."

Eight weeks into the gig, Alberstadt hasn't gotten anything on the air just yet, but he's not discouraged. Far from it. "I would love anchoring," he enthuses. "I'd go the Colin Quinn avenue, just do 'Weekend Update.' But that's not the end goal in terms of dismissing everything else. I've got a pretty Zen attitude about this path. I'm just going to do what I do the best way I can do it, and whatever happens, happens."

Nevertheless, with SNL making front-page news and posting huge ratings through the election season, Alberstadt admits to feeling like part of something special, even as he's quick to note that "Weekend Update" isn't relegated to simply politics.

"To be part of that, I'm still honored," Alberstadt says, "even if my humor is all across the board, not just political." His All-American look, skyrocketing eyebrows and permanent half-grin have reminded some of the highly respected Brian Regan—a comparison that plainly pleases him.

"I have my own voice, but [Regan's] sense of humor is certainly right up my alley," the *Bob and Tom* favorite says. "It's kind of cathartic in a way, because I can be very neurotic and I can also take myself seriously, just like the people I'm makin' fun of take themselves too seriously. So when I talk about people or certain situations, I'm talking about me as well."

Alberstadt continues to tour with Comics on Duty to far-flung locales such as Djibouti, Bahrain, Iraq, Qatar and Afghanistan, where he faced a car wreck with all the characteristics of an ambush. "It's not just about doing a show, but meeting and greeting the soldiers, hanging out and being a part of their everyday lives," he says. "That's without a doubt the greatest thing I've ever done."

Despite ongoing warfare and economic downturn closer to home, Alberstadt, who performed at a New Orleans comedy festival the week of 9/11, is a firm believer in the uplifting power of laughter. "People who come to shows want to take their minds off of it,"

he says. "They are going to come and laugh regardless."

As for his upcoming run at Zanies, Alberstadt concedes that the stint itself will provide a bit of personal uplift.

"It's one of the best clubs in the country," he gushes. "I'm, of course, biased, but when I'm onstage, it's like an athlete playing sports again.

There's a homefield advantage." ■

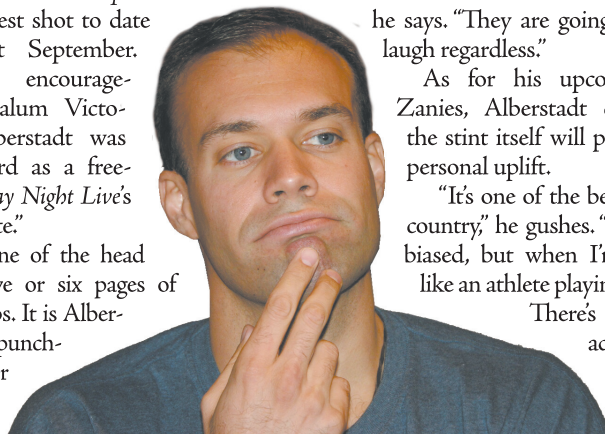


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