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Laugh business tough for Christian

Religion, comedy mix on stage

United Press International
HOUSTON — One of the toughest jobs in the world, as any stand-up comic can attest, is to step out onto a stage all by yourself and try to get a laugh from a nightclub audience determined to make you earn it. Depending on any number of variables — many in liquid form, measured by the jigger — the mood can range from indifference to good humor to open hostility. But if that weren't enough, Mikel Williams makes it even tougher on himself. He openly acknowledges right off the top that he, and his comedy, are

Christian. No bathroom humor to fall back on if things don't happen to be clicking tonight. The material either stands on its own, or it fizzles. "It can be pretty tough," says the bearded Houston native. "I get up there, and in about five minutes I can tell if it's going to work. If it's not working, I say 'OK, pick up your Bibles, and we'll read from the preface all the way through to Revelation.'"

Williams, 35, says he got into Christian comedy about three years ago after talking it over with a close friend, the late comedian Grady Nutt. "We'd been friends about 15 years, and he told me, 'If you're really serious about it, you'll just about starve to death in the first year and a half, but then things will start to get better once people know your name,'" Williams said.

Nutt, who starred on the TV series Hee-Haw, was killed in the crash of a light plane in November. Williams says the tragedy made him resolve to show his faith even more strongly than before through his comedy and his everyday life.

As Nutt predicted, Williams went through a couple of lean years but now gets "between 12 and 19" bookings per month. He also works part time at a Houston religious book store.

Williams says he's been a comedian most of his life, but it was of the impromptu variety: Classroom antics and the like. It was fun, but it didn't put money in

his pockets.

To pay the bills, he spent 15 years as a minister of youth at churches in Orlando, Fla., and at White Oak Baptist Church in Houston and South Avenue Baptist in Pasadena.

He has a bachelor's degree

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— Mikel Williams, Christian comedian

from Houston Baptist University and a master's in religious education from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

But after consulting with Nutt in 1980, he finally decided to take the proverbial plunge and find out if he could hack it professionally. Most of Williams' bookings are at banquets or as the opening act for Christian concerts.

"I do anything but sing," he says. "I don't even sing in the shower, or I'd scare the lather off the soap. I've got a friend

who says my singing is like asthma set to music."

Williams works all over the United States and last year spent a week providing comedy relief during a revival in Nigeria. Thanks to the language barrier and the difference in cultures, his humor may have suffered a bit in the translation.

"It was a different experience, to say the least. I learned a lot," he says. "Things that may be funny here aren't necessarily funny over there. Like slapstick humor: To us, a person falling down may be funny, but to them it's serious."

Much of Williams' humor could be tactfully described as self-deprecating: He considers himself less than handsome. When he was a child, he says, his mother pushed his face into the dough to make "gorilla cookies." He concedes that he still has hair "wherever the Lord allows me to grow it," but compares it to a Brillo pad.

Williams occasionally takes a booking in clubs such as Houston's Comedy Workshop Annex, but he has shied away from most of these so far because the audiences tend to want something he isn't offering.

"I just didn't feel comfortable in those surroundings. I was probably the only sober person in the house."

But he adds that he does see a special ministry in doing his routines before such crowds. He says he gradually wants to take more bookings with audiences that just want to see a funny

man, regardless of his beliefs. At the end of his show, he says, he knows that any ability he has to make you laugh comes from the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Williams says he recently did his "religious propaganda" TV talk show host Johnnie Carson, David Letterman and M. Douglas, hoping to interest them in his type of humor. There's been no response so far. It was Douglas who gave Nutt his first major TV appearance, he says.

While most people don't associate religion with high-wire grins, Williams believes comedy has its place in the church, because he suspects that Jesus himself was a keen humorist.

"With all the things he had to teach the disciples during the years, he must have had a sense of humor," he says. "He has the best of everything else, so why shouldn't he have the best of humor? I just can't see a man never laughing or never smiling on his face."

One of the familiar Bible stories Williams weaves into his routine is the parable of the Prodigal Son. One of the parables refers to the main character sinking so low that "he was feeding pigs, and that's even a job in Arkansas."

"I did that one at the University of Arkansas (where the mascot is the Razorback hog), and they thought it was funny. It came at me with chains and later, but they thought it was funny at the time."



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'Rockabilly' rolls big again

United Press International
DALLAS — The twangy sound of rockabilly gaining popularity is music to Sid King's ears. He was one of the first musicians to record the style — almost 30 years ago.

King was a teenage musician Buddy Holly went to for advice on how to become a star. Now King is trying to remember all that advice himself.

By day a Dallas barbershop owner named Sid Erwin, the soft-spoken singer is also a recording artist with a new album he hopes will hit the charts.

"Everything comes back around," he says. "What they call rockabilly got real hot over in England last year, and now the Stray Cats are playing it and doing well in the states. We use to call it be-bop, but it's the same music."

Erwin's original band, Sid King and the Five Strings, was formed when he and his brother Billy were in Denton High School, with King doing vocals and Billy playing lead guitar.

No stranger to controversy, King's first hit was banned on some radio stations. "Who Put the Turtle in Myrtle's Girdle" was a little spicy for 1953.

The group was recording for Columbia by 1955 and toured the nation in a brand-new Ford Victoria station wagon with the band's name and Columbia painted on the door.

"Buddy Holly used to come to

listen to us when we were in Lubbock. We played a Wichita Falls place one time and when Buddy came and spent the night with us in Denton later on we invited him to get on the show with us the next week," King said.

"It turned out the Wichita Falls manager never sent us our money, so we didn't go back. When Buddy showed up there, the manager said he could play in our place."

"But he made a mistake because he said he wanted to make the same thing Sid King had made. The manager said he could, and sure enough, he got nothing, just like we did."

One of Holly's guitarists and co-writers on many of his hits was Bob Montgomery, now a Nashville producer and publisher.

Montgomery himself played in the band that rose to the top of be-bop, but he's uncertain about the strength of the current rockabilly trend.

"It's new to today's kids, and

they seem to be relating to it," said. "But there's no way of knowing what's going to happen in the recording industry."

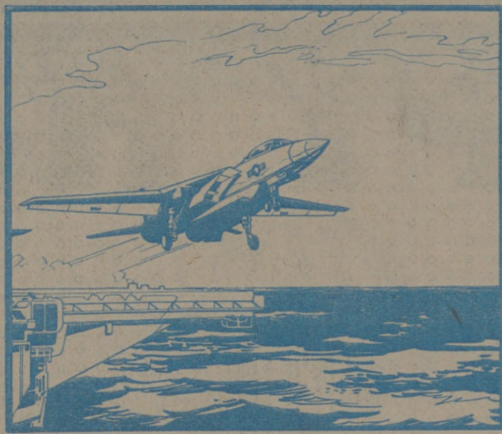
King's records are collected items in London, where they sell for up to \$100.

"It started as a cult thing over there," says King, "and they couldn't get my records, so somebody started bootlegging counterfeits. Columbia finally released a collection of our hits, and it went to No. 2 on the rockabilly charts."

On King's latest cuts, smooth baritone vocal with Texas twang is backed up by top studio group, including brother on lead guitar and several members of the Juke Jesters, a popular Dallas rockabilly group.

Out of the old Five Strings only two are not on the new album. The 12 cuts are a mix of old rhythm and blues standards and new material King has written.

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