Cracking Up

Comedian Steve Moore confronts AIDS with laughter

February 1, 1995 By Ed Karvoski

Ordering breakfast at a coffee shop in Studio City, California, Steve Moore automatically incorporates the animated facial expressions and razor-sharp timing that have served him well for his 15 years as a stand-up comic. He orders eggs and a beef patty. “It’s a T-cell booster!” he explains to a bewildered waiter.

Moore enjoyed a flood of attention after his appearance on Comedy Central’s *Out There* in December 1993, when he announced to a national TV audience that he’s HIV positive.

Featured on *Entertainment Tonight*, he joked, “Imagine my parents when I had to explain to them that we’re Haitian!”

On Fox’s *The Mo Show*, he shared, “People are always saying, ’I can’t believe you’ve been exposed to the AIDS virus. You’ve never looked better.’ I figure, hell, pretty soon I’ll be drop-dead gorgeous.”

And he managed to perform his shtick on *Rolonda* after the talk-show host introduced him as “death-defying.”

“I could have played it safe for the rest of my career and continued doing my perky act -- I’ve always worked,” says the 40-year-old comic, who has opened for numerous superstars, including Roseanne and Dolly Parton. “But what I’m doing now really means something to the audience -- whether they want to hear it or not. I play for straight crowds and I sneak in, ’A funny thing about AIDS...!’ It gets so quiet you can hear crickets in Egypt,” he says, taking a breath and a gulp of eggs.

“And sometimes gay crowds don’t want to hear it either,” says Moore, who is openly gay. “They’re on a date, they haven’t talked with each other about HIV or safe[r] sex, and I’m right in their face about it. So it makes gay people uncomfortable, too. I’m a hard act to book.”

Yet Moore works constantly -- *gratis*, at AIDS benefits. “I can show other people who are positive that I’ve known my status for years and I’m still out there working and educating. People who are HIV positive love my sickest jokes!”

Some people tell Moore it’s not just his jokes that are sick. "People say to me, ’You’re always joking about your situation. You’re in denial.’ Well, you don’t *have* to laugh, but for me it’s usually a good option."

While expressing himself through humor comes naturally to Moore, he has his share of somber times, too. "There are those times when I sit there and watch *Longtime Companion*, *And The Band Played On* and *Philadelphia* and then close with *An Early Frost*! It’s not like I don’t go there."

He went “there” recently. Bills were overdue, gigs were scarce and it was time for his routine checkup. “My T-cells plummeted 260 points within six months and I was totally broke. I had to question everything.”

Indeed, trying to make a living by exploring the funny side of HIV and AIDS has its pros and cons. “Since coming out publicly as being HIV positive, I’ve never felt more free. I have so little fear,” Moore says. He does, however, admit to one related anxiety: “That I’ll die and someone will do this big documentary about me: ’He was the first. Wasn’t he brave?’ Well, I could use some cash now!”

Suddenly, a young woman, no more than 20 years old, peers over from the next booth. She’s holding a book: Louise Hay’s *You Can Heal Your Life*. The young woman confesses that she was eavesdropping. “My Dad just had a quadruple bypass,” she tells Moore. “Listening to your story was very comforting.” She thanks him and returns to her book.

“That’s an angel telling me that this is all worthwhile,” Moore whispers. “Life is good,” says the suddenly reflective comic, fiddling with his breakfast. “But my hash browns are cold!”

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