



GOOD SMOKES, STIFF DRINKS & DIRTY JOKES

The simple pleasures with comedian Ron White → Evan Dashevsky

Ron White is one of those stand-up comedians who can be represented symbolically. Like Gallagher's giant fruit-slaying wooden mallet or Dice's over-compensating black leather jacket, Ron White will always be associated with two signature items: a bottle of Scotch and a cigar. And to dissuade the phony-hunting cynics, these are no trick props intended to feign legitimacy or sophistication—Scotch and cigars are pastimes Ron White actually uses to pass the time. They are also, of course, hobbies that the behavior police have engraved into their ever expanding no-no list. So how does a traveling comedian with a penchant for consumable vices work around the sometimes baffling patchwork of public health codes? As it turns out, the key is a delicate balance of white lies and civil disobedience. "Well, sometimes we

have to sell the cigar as a 'stage prop,' which it is in a way, but still it's kind of weird," comments White in his unmistakable sunbelt drawl when *Smoke* sat down with him at a recent stop in Las Vegas. "Sometimes they say I've gotta hire someone from the fire department to stand there and watch me smoke—like there's a chance this thing could get away from me and burn down a building. Like it matters if one person stands up there and smokes a cigar. Rules that don't make sense and I do not get along very well. And if a rule just doesn't make any sense, I have a tendency to just ignore it."

As for the Scotch—the several-tumblers-a-night worth of Scotch—that's real too (for the record, it's usually the top-shelf, 18-year-old Macallan). However, Ron is very adamant that the drinking never affects his performance.

photo: Mauricio Velez



photo: Dan Warner Photography

Sometimes [venues] say I've gotta hire someone from the fire department to stand there and watch me smoke—like there's a chance this thing could get away from me and burn down a building.

Too much. “Well, the *two*-show nights—there's the trick. I always take the first drink of the day on stage with me—I never go on the stage drunk. But at the end of that second show, if I'm pounding it, I can get a little 'light on the loafers'” (the word-conscious comedian looks off to the side as a mischievous smile creeps across his face). “But that means I'm gay. I'm not gay. But I can get a little drunk. Thankfully, my fans have a tendency to forgive me in advance for almost anything I do, but I've seen the late shows get a little sloppy—but never anything where I can't perform.”

White was first introduced to most people by his work on Jeff Foxworthy's Blue Collar Comedy Tour. The tour went on to become a monster hit, going on to spawn a number of TV specials, albums, and DVDs. He carved out his niche on the tour as the oft-inebriated, sometimes debaucherous, but always on-point story-telling machine. White's hilarious tales of depravity found him a place with Blue Collar's everyman fan base; but his flawless, pointed delivery launched his reputation well beyond those with blue collars, drawing comparisons to such “comedians' comedians” as Bill Hicks and George Carlin.

Many fans will be surprised to hear that the impeccable Ron White delivery is never planned out on paper beforehand—in fact, his vignettes are never heard by anybody until White hits the stage. “I've never owned a notebook. I've never written a joke down for work, never tried to work something out anywhere but on a stage,” he explains his craft of non-crafting. “When I'm in L.A., I'll do sometimes two or three sets a night, just bouncing around comedy clubs and dicking around with new stuff, so then I'm not afraid to try something new at a big show. But I have a pretty good gauge of what's gonna work and sometimes I'll be surprised, but not very often.”

While onstage, White's a smiling devil-may-care dirty joke teller, but behind all that is a seasoned professional who takes his work quite seriously (even when that serious work includes regaling an audience with a story about things coming in or coming out of the human body). “Usually jokes start off too long and then I'll shrink 'em down. I'm a word harvester—I pull all the words out,” he explains on the art of telling the perfect joke. “Somebody could tell me a joke and it'll be three minutes long, but if I were to tell it, it'll be 40 seconds long because I know what's not important in a joke—extra words.”

And this dedication to creating that perfect set has paid off. After Ron's run with the Blue Collar crew, he has gone on to success on his own, filling arenas around the world; selling over 10 million CDs and DVDs; and launching a film career including a part in this past summer's *Horrible Bosses* and even a small role in *Sex in The City 2* (that latter film's participation he expresses some embarrass-

ment in). However, White is more excited about his recent work in the upcoming “dark, dark comedy” *Jayne Mansfield's Car* which will premiere at next year's Cannes film festival. It was written and directed by Billy Bob Thornton and will feature White alongside Robert Duval, Kevin Bacon, and John Hurt.

That kind of rare success across various mediums will buy a person a lot of cool toys. When asked what kind of extravagant things this small town boy from Fritch, Texas has gotten for himself, he coyly answers “I've made a few purchases. I have a Westwind 1 private jet that my fans bought me—very sweet of them—it's the nicest gift I've ever been given. And also I've got a really nice tour bus I've had for six or seven years. But those two things aren't really extravagant, that's for business. If you're playing some of the smaller markets, you can't do it without having to catch two and three planes—you'll kill yourself doing that.”

So, while he hasn't gone too rap-star crazy with his newfound lifestyle, he has recently been bestowed a luxury awarded to a select few: a cigar made specifically for him. White has been tapped to the role as cigar ambassador for Davidoff of Geneva, a benefit which includes his own, specifically-blended (and banded) “Ron White Cigar” made just for him to smoke on his own or whenever on stage (next time you see him live, look for the golden band on his cigar). Very few people are fortunate to have one of the top manufacturers in the world design a cigar just for them, so how did that come about? “[Davidoff and I] started off talking about my preferences, they knew what I liked anyway 'cause they knew what I was smoking, so they sent me 10 blends that I smoked for about a month. They had 'RW1' and 'RW2' all the way through 10, so I kind of zeroed in on one of them that I really liked it's really not far way from the new [Zino] Z Class.



❖ Z-Class launch party at Angry Moon Cigars, Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.



◆ White with late E Street Band saxophonist Clarence Clemens at the Z-Class launch party at Angry Moon Cigars (above); Private jet “Tater Air,” one of the few extravagances White’s bought himself (below).

I can get a little drunk [on stage]. Thankfully, my fans have a tendency to forgive me in advance for almost anything I do, but I’ve seen the late shows get a little sloppy—but never anything where I can’t perform.

In fact, it is a Z Class but a slightly different blend.”

Even when not on stage, White takes time to enjoy a good cigar—of far higher quality now, of course, than when he first started smoking. “I lived in Mexico for a while—years ago—with no money and no budget,” he recalls how he first picked up the habit. “And in Mexico, I had access to Cuban cigars, but no budget for it. So there was a seven-dollar Mexican cigar I would smoke. But on my birthday or on New Years I would go get a Cuban or something. Back then, I used to smoke four packs of cigarettes a day, but I had to quit that for health so now I just only do cigars.”

White’s a long way from smoking seven-dollar Mexican stogies to having a brand made just for him. Careerwise, the decade has been very kind to Ron White. One reason may be that unlike many comedians who perform to a slender niche, White has been able to bridge the great demographic divides. When asked to explain who

makes up the Ron White fanbase he proudly states, “It’s really diverse. It’s blue collar, white collar, gay men love me, and that’s great news to hear about the lesbians [I had just explained the numerous lesbian friends from my native Brooklyn are avowed Ron White fans], ‘cause the jury was still out on that. I guess it’s ‘cause I’m butch—but yeah, it’s a very, very diverse crowd and I’m often surprised. It’s kind of municipal country club, that seems to be my crowd.” There’s just something universal that Ron White has linked into—it’s those small joys revered by people around the world: getting together with friends and loved ones to enjoy a few puffs from a quality cigar, a few sips from a stiff drink, and a good hearty laugh over the perfect joke. **S**

