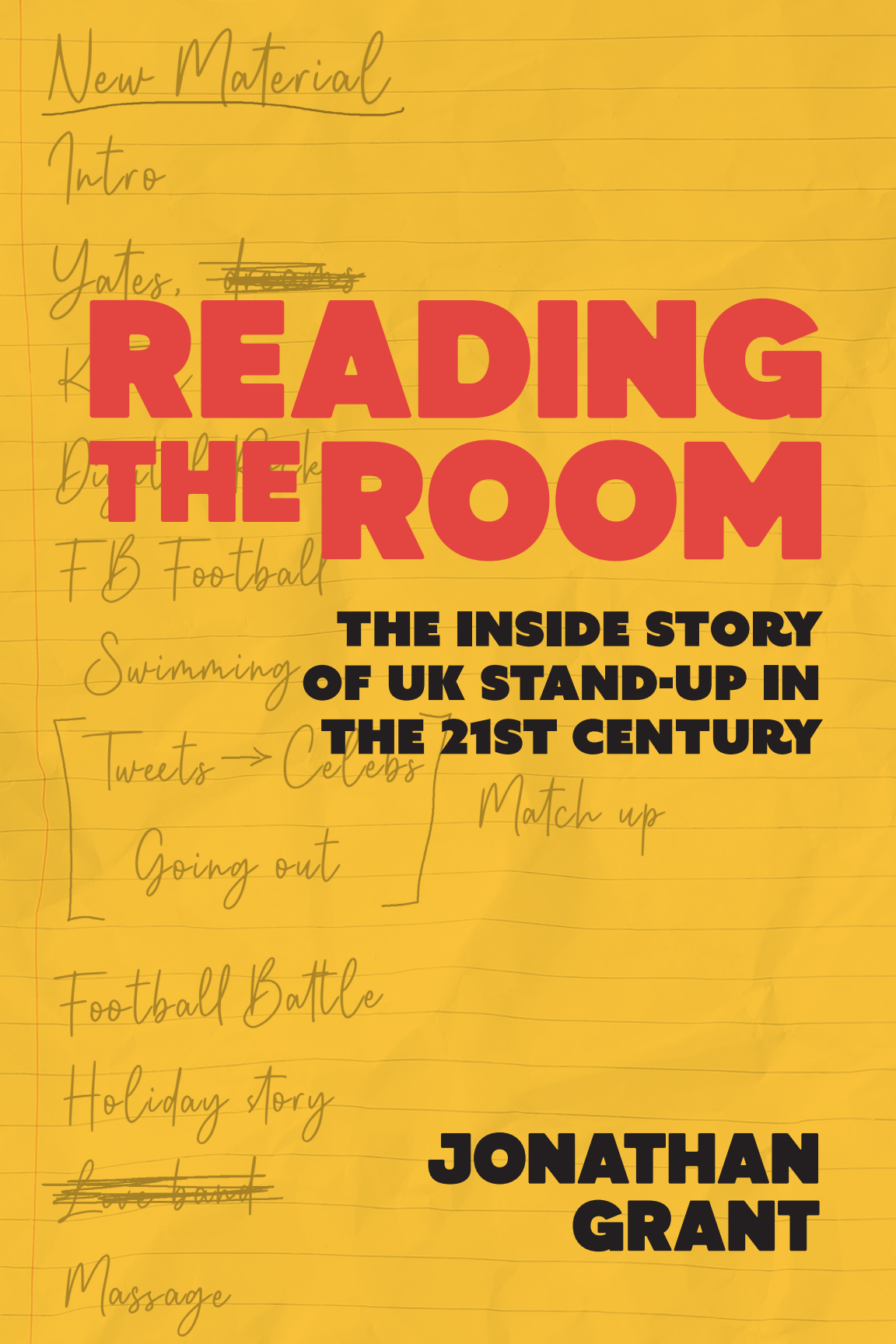

READING THE ROOM

THE INSIDE STORY OF UK STAND-UP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

JONATHAN GRANT

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Chapter 1
Circuit Training

Anyone that became a stand-up, you start off loving it as a fan. Seeing it and thinking, oh God, that is amazing and perhaps if you're lucky, you get the chance to do it. **—Phill Jupitus**

THE HEART OF *the modern stand-up world has always been the live circuit. This network of clubs and venues is where every stand-up who ever went on to world domination first cut their teeth. Since its inception it's been constantly evolving but for years the fundamentals remained the same. As a new act you would start off by doing an unpaid spot, known as an open spot. These are typically five minutes and give fledgling comedians a chance to show both promoter and audience what they can do. You'd perform your five minutes and if you did well, you'd be asked back, either to do another open spot or a paid spot, usually in the middle of the bill. Alternatively, if you died, you'd slink off and make a note to wait a couple of months before calling that particular club again. After a couple of successful middle spots, you might be offered the chance to move up and perform as the opening act. Smashing that on a regular basis would put you on course for the most coveted position of all, closing the night. You would almost certainly be at different levels in different clubs, as a relatively new act might be trusted to open in a small venue mid-week, while still doing middle spots at a bigger one on the weekend. But crucially there was always an established career path and progression that felt attainable, even inevitable.*

In the early 2000s those running clubs had come of age on the scene when it was very much the Wild West of comedy. It was still a time when the promoters were every bit as eccentric as the acts, the king of these being the late Malcolm Hardee. In the '80s he'd run the infamous Tunnel Club which took place in a desolate pub by the southern entrance to the Blackwall Tunnel. It was legendary for being an incredibly tough night to play, with a crowd of Southeast London natives that could do anything from vociferous heckling to physical violence; it's said that many nights ended with the audience literally fighting amongst themselves. The Tunnel closed in 1989 and in 1991 Malcolm opened Up The Creek in Greenwich. Seen as a slightly less terrifying iteration of his original club, it still attracted a partisan crowd, and the Sunday night shows left scars on the new acts who played them.

BEN NORRIS: It was one of those rites of passage and he'd have all these established, professional acts and then he'd put the open spots on at half past ten. At that time all the pubs around Greenwich had closed and people would come to Up The Creek for a late drink. So, it would suddenly fill up with all these ne'er-do-wells and pirates and all sorts of people that Malcolm loved being in there because he liked that dangerous atmosphere. And then he'd put you on and you were not experienced and not ready for this and they would go for you brutally.

Malcolm eventually sold his share in Up The Creek, although the club continues to this day. In 2001 he set up another club on a pub on a converted barge moored on the Thames near Surrey Quays. On January 31st, 2005, Malcolm was in a dingy making his way from the pub to the houseboat he lived on. It was dark and he'd had more than a few drinks, when sadly he fell into the river and drowned. His funeral was attended by over 700 people and eulogies from Jo Brand, Stewart Lee and Arthur Smith showed the influence he'd had on the comedy world. His passing felt like part of a broader trend, of those who ran comedy gradually becoming less chaotic. The rogues who'd done it on a wing and a prayer were increasingly being replaced by those with a business plan and an eye on the future rather than the bar.

IAN STONE: I think there's less mavericks on and off the comedy circuit, to be honest with you. You could talk about the homogenisation of society generally, every high street looks the same, all this sort of stuff. But in comedy, I think there were more chancers, essentially. I think now people see it as a career in a way that they might not have done in the past. Quite often in the past, the promoters, they just loved comedy, and they wanted to put a comedy night on, and they'd do it. And it suddenly became a thing that they were doing for twenty, thirty years. Whereas now, I think they might go into it thinking, 'I'll start off, maybe run a few clubs, and then maybe I'll take acts on tour and take him to Edinburgh.' I think the early promoters probably didn't think in that way.

At the dawn of the new millennium, it wasn't just the promoters who were becoming more careerist. With a large number of comedians having made the switch to TV in the late '90s, and more opportunities thanks to early digital channels (UK Play, anyone?) increasingly a new breed of stand-up saw the circuit as somewhere you passed through, rather than your final destination.

Despite this the circuit was still in rude health, with clubs opening, increasing audience numbers, and plenty of opportunities for acts to make money. This golden period continued well into the 2000s with little sign of slowing down. That was until the world abruptly learnt what sub-prime mortgages were and why they were really, really bad.

GEOFF WHITING: About 2005 that was the boom time, before 2008, where there was a crash. It was weird, it was like a drop in a song, you were going up towards the drop, 2006, 2007, there was actually almost a euphoric feeling that nothing could go wrong. In comedy, everybody was getting paid a lot of money, everybody was doing these £900 weekends, everybody was doing gigs for 200, 300 quid in cash. I remember sitting backstage with an act in about 2006 and I was talking to him about the fact I ran clubs. He said to me, 'I'll play your clubs, but the minimum is £250 to close.' And I remember saying, 'That's fair enough,' because in that market, it was. That same act is now gigging for me for £150. The best wages comedians ever earned, in my opinion, were just before the crash, end of 2007. I don't think

there's ever been a period where comedians have earned more money… and it's never recovered fully since then, it's gone up a bit, down a bit, but it's never come back to where it was.

Just as the income of circuit comics shrank post-financial crash, there was something else that started to play an increasingly large role in who got booked and who didn't. The huge popularity of shows like Live at the Apollo *and* Mock the Week *meant that increasingly clubs wanted acts with a TV profile. The logic of this is simple: these comedians are a known entity for the audience, and slapping* 'As seen on…' *on your poster was a surefire way to shift more tickets. What it meant for those who hadn't yet appeared on the big TV shows of the day was that they got fewer opportunities at the same clubs where they'd always played.*

ROBERT WHITE: There's one long running London club, that's totally changed because when I started out it was a gig in a small room. And they'd book you if you were funny, and I was funny, and I kept being funny, and they booked me a lot. And then I got to do loads. And there was a period when I was doing it quite a lot. And then there was a period where I was doing it less, and there were more TV acts. And then everyone who was pre-booked was on TV, and you'd get last minute replacement slots. And it got to the point where I was getting, probably over the last few years, none or one or two here and there. And it would just be in August, because all the TV acts are up in Edinburgh. So, all of a sudden, you're the person who's the fill in for the proper acts.

Getting your fifteen minutes of fame (two and half minutes after the edit) on a BBC2 panel show was tough enough if you'd been scouted but what chance do you have if geography is against you? Stand-up, as with most forms of entertainment, has always been London-centric and in many ways the further away you are from the capital, the harder it is to be noticed. This is because if you're working in W12 then it's a hell of lot easier to watch comedy in Islington than in Elgin, so for years the talent spotters only spotted talent in the places that allowed them to get the last tube home.

STUART MITCHELL: Being based in Scotland… you can gig up here for five years, and no one would see you, and you go down to London, and you do one spot, and there's someone in the audience that wants to take you to Dubai, or wants to put you in *The News Quiz*, or you go to Brighton Komedia, and they want to promote you in Edinburgh. So really in Scotland, it's very difficult to break through across the border… I lived in London for a while, that was all self-funded, and if you don't have the financial backing, it's very hard to give up a weekend of paid work to go down to London and do trial spots for free, that's where there's difficulty for people in Scotland that are breaking through.

Not only are your chances infinitely higher in London but there are also vastly more gigs. For years, in huge swathes of the UK, if you wanted to get onto the circuit, you couldn't simply go to your local club and try out because it didn't exist.

STEFFAN ALUN: We have one weekend comedy club in Wales, which is the Glee in Cardiff. We don't have a Comedy Store. We don't have a Komedia. We have theatre gigs and those are quite nice. But not everywhere even has those. Swansea doesn't have any weekend comedy. It's still bubbling under… And it's very, very hard. And I do think that even though the gap is smaller than it used to be, it is a long climb from an open mic night in Swansea to being someone that's known in the industry at large.

Difficult though it undoubtedly is to establish a foothold on the circuit, for the vast majority it has now become a means to an end. Working your way up the Jenga tower of clubs is one thing, but it's what that can lead to which is the real prize. In the last twenty-five years we've seen stand-ups enjoy success not just on TV but as best-selling authors, pop stars and Hollywood actors. But when you're truly immersed in the world of live comedy sometimes the next step is all that you can see.

JAVIER JARQUIN: The funny thing about doing the circuit for a long time is for ages, you think, oh, I just need to get into that club, and I need to get into that club. And once I get into that club, I'll get into that one, and it

never really ends. I think it's called the circuit because it just goes round and round and round and round. And ultimately, what I've realised is everyone on the circuit wants to be in a place where they can get off the circuit.

As the 2000s wore on, while many comics were trying to get off the circuit at the top end, even more were trying to get on at the bottom. Comedy had become a bona fide career, and more and more people wanted in. While the number of available spots swelled, for a time at least, this was nothing in proportion to the number of new acts desperate to prove themselves. This has led to the rise of entirely open-mic nights where none of the acts are paid; instead of three pro-comics on the bill and one aspiring amateur, you get up to twenty new acts all doing five minutes. Not only that, but at some of these nights just being allowed to perform is contingent on bringing someone with you to watch, or paying for the privilege. Now it seems new acts don't just have to be comedians, they have to be their own promoters and audience too.

BEN NORRIS: There's a whole open spot circuit, which is sadly, a lot of open spots just performing to each other. A lot of them, there isn't any progression… a lot of performers are stuck in a sort of loop. But it still feels like it's still a meritocracy. And if you're really good, you'll still break out of that. But it's much harder, I think, because it felt like there was about a hundred people in the early '90s trying to become comics in London. Might even have been less than that. And so, after a few months, you'd met them all. But now there's thousands. I mean, thousands.

Over time decreasing fees for pro-acts, and often only the opportunity to play to your peers for new acts, has meant that comedians are less likely to see the circuit as their only path to a career in comedy. And yet, there is undoubtedly something about putting in the hard yards that helps to shape you.

IVO GRAHAM: It's quite sad to see it shrivelling. Because even though it is great that you can do so much from home, and that benefits so many people who aren't able for various reasons to travel further afield… just

driving around the country doing not always, very glamorous gigs, but often having, very, very, very,rich and long shared experiences with the people I did them with, and a big range of people as well, that's really good. It also makes you a lot better at stand-up, because you just have to adapt to so many different situations.

While the circuit has continued to shrivel, the frequency of stadium gigs, for the select few who can fill them, has increased dramatically. Micheal McIntyre playing both Wembley (6 nights) and the O2 (4 nights) in 2009 set a precedent and from then on, it's all been about volume. In December 2023 Peter Kay became the first ever act, comedy or otherwise, to begin a monthly residency at the O2. At the time of writing, he has performed forty-eight shows. Assuming capacity crowds at each one, that means within that run he's played to almost one million people. Plus, he presumably now gets a really good rate at the Greenwich Holiday Inn Express, so it's double bubble.

PHILL JUPITUS: I've lived through the time when stand-up comedy has gone from the clubs into the arenas. It was surprising enough when it went into the theatres… The biggest act at the Hydro in Glasgow is one bloke with a microphone, Kevin Bridges. David Byrne did one night at the Hydro and might have been able to do two, Kevin did twenty-one nights.

JOE NORRIS: Whether or not the experience is better, that's quite subjective. Maybe the best shows you'll ever see are in low ceilings, 300, 400 seats. The art is to make a real connection with the audience. And you've got to be a special kind of person. And there are a few that can do it, Lee (Evans), Michael (McIntyre), that could actually make 10,000 people be intimate. But it's a real skill and it's really tough. If you have no empathy with your audience, the audience just disengage.

NATHAN CATON: *[On playing the O2 as part of the C4 Comedy Gala]* It was very different in terms of how I performed. I had to be a bit slower. I remember saying the punchlines and then waiting two, three seconds and then the laugh came. It was like you could see it row by row.

It's impossible to see the trend for comedy arena gigs coming to an end anytime soon. Audiences will pay a premium to see an act they love, with ready access to a massive TGI Fridays, and for the comedy superstars who can guarantee sales to a well-established and dedicated fanbase it makes perfect commercial sense. Meanwhile lower down the food chain there are now very different drivers that motivate an audience to part with their hard-earned cash at the local comedy club.

BARRY FERNS: If somebody's just been on *Live at the Apollo*, nobody's buying tickets for their shows. Or there aren't that many. Those who are selling tickets, are the people with 100,000 followers on Instagram.

For those promoting live comedy, the lure of acts who can do their own promotion has only become stronger in recent years. This is in no small part driven by the fact that the traditional methods which many promoters relied upon to bring in good numbers have now ceased to exist entirely. With the print media drastically reduced it's a case of fighting to be noticed in a digital space where the comedians are much more likely to gain traction than the events themselves.

ED CHAPPEL: The whole landscape has changed. *The Guardian Guide* doesn't really do anything anymore. *Time Out* doesn't do anything apart from a few bits sometimes if you're lucky. There's not even the Press Association for listings. You used to be able to upload your show to the Press Association and they'd then bosh it out to all the major people.

Just like the open spots who now have to bring along a reluctant friend in order to road-test their nascent material, acts who in times past would have built their following in the clubs are now more successful if they can import one from online. Given how rapid the shift has been, it's easy to imagine a world where a comic's follower count will matter as much if not more than their ratio of laughs per minute.

DARREN HARRIOTT: I think they're going to come up with a rule that says, for you to play my club, you need to have at least 50,000 plus

followers… once a comedy club starts struggling, they're just going to start booking in people with the big followings, and I think in a few years' time, every comic is going to have to have a certain amount of followers to play club gigs.

“An impressively thorough account of the challenges and opportunities in the modern-day UK stand-up scene, told by the people who are working there. Essential reading for all comedians and comedy fans.”

RICHARD HERRING

“A superbly researched deep dive into the history of UK live comedy.”

BRITISH COMEDY GUIDE

In twenty-five years, stand-up has moved from provincial clubs and panel shows to streaming platforms, social media and sold-out arena tours.

Reading the Room is the story of UK stand-up comedy in the 21st century. Drawing on conversations with more than fifty comedians, promoters and assorted industry insiders, it offers an honest and intimate look at this most adaptable of art forms.

Comics speak candidly about mental health, audiences, identity and what stand-up represents in an age of culture wars and viral clips. Their insights capture the highs and lows of a lifestyle that can be as much a compulsion as a career.

As befits its subject, the story is told with humour but never shies away from long-standing pressures, pitfalls and prejudices. It ultimately shows how stand-up keeps reinventing itself — and why it still matters in modern Britain.

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