

Interview: Comedian Robert Klein Gets a Leg Up on Latest HBO Special

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on June 9, 2010 - 3:10pm

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CHICAGO – “I can’t stop my leg” is the lyric to Robert Klein’s most famous comedy song, and the venerable stand-up comedian still keeps the laughs coming with his brand of observational hilarity. With a career spanning over 45 years, Klein still knocks ‘em dead on his latest HBO Special, “Unfair and Unbalanced.”

Klein’s roots in comedy are right here in Chicago, having spent a year with The Second City improv troupe in 1965 (he auditioned with Fred Willard). On returning to his native New York City, he started doing stand-up, which led him to his big break on a 1970 summer replacement TV show called “Comedy Tonight.”



Symphony for the Comic: Robert Klein in the HBO Special, ‘Unfair and Unbalanced’

Photo credit: Kevin Mazur for HBO

He then had several successful comedy albums, including “Child of the Fifties” [1972] and “Mind Over Matter” [1974], which skewed the escalating Watergate scandal of the time. Both albums had Klein’s trademark comedy songs and observational stand-up.

Klein has also appeared on Broadway [“They’re Playing Our Song”] and movies [“Primary Colors”] and continues with his long relationship with HBO, after doing the first stand-up special in their history in 1975. That same year he was the fifth host on the first season of Saturday Night Live.

HollywoodChicago got the privilege to speak to Robert Klein via telephone, and talked about his long career and his hilarious perspective in the latest HBO Stand-up Special, Unfair and Unbalanced.

HollywoodChicago.com: Now you have specific Chicago roots and memories, when is the last time you were here?

Robert Klein: Is my old apartment at 2128 N. Sedgwick still there? Yes, I'm very much up on the city, having delivered the commencement address at Columbia College Chicago this year.

HollywoodChicago.com: What were your words of advice to the graduates there?

Klein: I told them you've heard that things are awful, irreparable, there are no jobs, terrorists are taking over...and they're right. And then the orchestra came in [singing]..."just whistle a happy tune..."

Sheldon Patinkin, who was my original director at Second City, presented me for the doctorate and it was lovely. This is a no nonsense school, I never heard of it when I was here in 1965, and now it's a major school of communications, arts and solves the problem of 'Columbia! Are you Ivy League?' 'No, Columbia in [affecting a Chicago accent] Chic-cau-go.'

HollywoodChicago.com: [Laughs] You start out 'Unfair and Unbalanced' with a faux-poignant song. What are the roots of using music in your act? Did it come from the tradition of improvisation?

Klein: No, I advanced it at my true education at Second City, because I was always musical. My parents claim I could hum a tune when I was seven months old, way before I could talk I had musical talent. And since Second City was the beginning of my career, I certainly developed some of that compositional stuff which began as improvisation.

From the first HBO Special that anyone ever did, which was me in 1975, and my albums like Child of the Fifties, there is always music. My theory is that if music is to be used comedically I feel that the best approach is to make the music good. When I do a blues, when I do a 'doo-wop,' I always want to make the music good. And Bob Klein, my collaborator for the last 25 years, and I like to do what we call a 'symphony act.' I'm one of the very few comedian that gets hired by symphony orchestras for their 'pops' shows. They are afraid of comedians cursing. [laughs]

HBO loved that idea, which meant we had to do all new music. And the only way we could do it affordably, since we couldn't hire the New York Philharmonic, we did it with a great music school.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is your ninth HBO stand-up special, after launching the format on the network back in 1975. You mentioned the ability to swear which was radical for those days, what do you think your comic influence Lenny Bruce would have thought of the current stand-up atmosphere where anything goes?

Klein: He would have loved it, but I think he would have separated the good ones from the bad ones. He had no champions in his day, and actually I think the pendulum has swung too much the other way now, but I'm not for any legal censorship. George Carlin was a brilliant performer, but in his posthumous Mark Twain Award Show I saw honoring him, everyone was talking about 'the cursing you allowed to say...' I say use the cursing, but be funnier. Lenny Bruce's stuff is elegant, if you listen to it now.

I wrote in my book that going from the 1950s to the 1960s was like going from the 19th Century to the 20th. So much happened and fomented, that by the time Carlin was arrested in Milwaukee [1972], nobody would prosecute anymore. They realized if you don't want to hear that, change the channel or don't pay to see him.



Robert Klein (top row center) at The Second City

Photo credit: The Second City

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the atmosphere of Chicago when you spent a year here in 1965 at The Second City? Did you feel the vibrations in the city that would later become the explosions during the 1968 convention?

Klein: I was in Chicago for the '68 convention. I was at Second City from March of '65 through May of '66. But in '68 I was doing an alumni show at Ravinia [a suburban venue] with of course my mate Fred Willard and Peter Boyle, which began a lifelong friendship. We were all tear gassed together. We were walking to dinner and you couldn't breathe, even though we were well north of the main action. A girl I knew later showed me her bruises, the cops just went crazy.

I will always have tremendous affection for Chicago. I'm a really down-and-dirty New Yorker, and Chicago has its own grit and maturity, just

on a smaller scale. That's where I started, and it was magical to me in those days. We were early anti-Vietnam War, Dick Gregory would stop by, there were always various characters, intellectuals, Studs Terkel. I sound like Ernest Hemingway in 'A Moveable Feast.'

HollywoodChicago.com: You made a name with your political stand-up during the Watergate era. What do you think this country hasn't learned from the Watergate scandal that keeps perpetuating itself in politics and the relationship with American people?

Klein: Illinois and New York have special problems, state-wise. I don't understand why a great place like Illinois have governors who keep going to jail. All I know is that American pre-eminence is not guaranteed, and we're in big trouble because I think we're dumbing down big time, with video games replacing the knowledge of what direction Peru is, for example. Reading is going out of style, the heft of a book in one's hand and the well-lit place to read it. It's not pretty, there is a lot of sh*t happening that is not pleasant. But, the oil spill can be a parable for us all, we need to understand the consequences of a luxurious life.

HollywoodChicago.com: You hosted Episode 5 of the very first season of Saturday Night Live. What backstage politics were manifesting itself at that point, and at the time did you have any inkling that it might become classic now?

Klein: It was brilliant, of course with the Second City kids that came about five years after me. I thought it was too dangerous to do live, but I was wrong. There were a lot of drugs, but most people survived. And it was wonderful, that was the greatest cast they ever had.

HollywoodChicago.com: [After an indication for the interview wrap-up] Thank you sir, I'm a great admirer, and I didn't even get to ask about 'They're Playing Our Song.'

Klein: It was a big hit. I'll put it this way, I never got to see myself, because every time I ran into the audience, I wasn't on stage. That was a problem.

"Unfair and Unbalanced," a Robert Klein HBO Stand-up Special, premieres June 12th at 10pm/9pm Central. Check local listings for network location.



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [15]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [14]

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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 25 2024 - 12:17pm):

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