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Stand-Up Winner, Hands

Johnny Steele tops
a strong field in
comedy competition

By Mick LaSalle
Chronicle Staff Critic

Not since Dexter Madison's star-is-born performance in 1969 has the San Francisco International Stand-Up Comedy Competition produced so convincing a winner as Johnny Steele, who took the prize in the 17th staging of the annual event, Sunday at the Warfield theater.

Steele — born in Pittsburg, Ca., and based in San Francisco — won against this year's particularly strong group of competitors, with a terrific set that mixed social commentary with well-observed character monologues. That usual comedy-competition tension in the air, of watching someone with a lot at stake, who is being judged, whose career is coming down to these 20 minutes, wasn't present during Steele's set. He appeared loose, completely relaxed and ready to give the audience a good time.

His ease, the sophistication of his material, and the detail with which he assumes his characters set Steele apart and place him well ahead of the pack. "In Dallas, you can go and stand in the very spot where the assassin stood and killed the President of the United States ... And you can also go to where Oswald stood ..."

This led into a monologue performed in the character of a Dallas policeman in 1963, explaining the path of the bullet that killed Kennedy. It's a long, beautifully timed bit. "... And then the bullet ... what's the word? ... hovered in the air for several hours" before finally shooting straight across the country to "a toll booth in New York, where it killed reputed mob-

Down

ster Sonny Corleone."

Painter's Cap

Steele, a big guy who performed in a painter's cap turned around backwards, segued in and out of monologues with great freedom, never forcing it, just keeping it conversational, keeping up the steady flow of funny remarks: "In the '70s, the guy who wasn't vomiting was the designated driver."

He talked about how lazy Americans are: "We invented the drive-by shooting. Instead of beating someone to death, like God intended, we shoot at them and don't even get out of the car."

But his monologues, the character pieces, are the heart of his act. In one, he imagines a future with mankind living under the surface of the earth, and old folks justifying their destruction of the ozone layer to their grandchildren: "Hey! You ever try strawberry

short-cake without Redi-Whip?"

Ngao (pronounced Un-GUY-o) Bealum finished second. He's an energetic young comic who seemed to be the crowd favorite Saturday night. He talked about growing up in a militant black family. "I'm not even black anymore. I'm African American. Next, I'll be 'alternatively hued.' And white people will be 'melanin impaired.'"

Confident and Engaging

His delivery is confident and engaging, and he gets off some good lines, though his subjects are on the pedestrian side: TV sitcoms, getting stoned. He mentioned that the Declaration of Independence was written on hemp, which inevitably led into a bit in which he imagined the founding fathers doing bong hits: "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Write that down!"

Bealum, who performed last on Sunday, took a chance by incorporating references to the other comedians' sets in his own. (For example, he imagined himself assassinating President David Duke — and echoed Steele by talking about

the path of the bullet.) The tactic went over well at first, though by the third or fourth reference the audience began to get a little uncomfortable.

Italian Flavor

Maria Falzone, a comic from Boston, came in third. She's likable and brassy, and goes on about sex in an explicit way, which some people might consider feminist because a woman is doing it and not a man. She talks about cunnilingus and relates this to her Sicilian heritage: "Mangia, mangia."

I really don't believe that women are as obsessed with their menstrual cycles as some female comics would have you believe. The constant jokes you hear about PMS — Falzone does her share of them — seem more like an accepted convention, something that's supposed to signal "funny." Falzone is best when she gets off this beaten path and talks about her family in Boston.

Her bit about her Sicilian father's dealing with the family cat — kicking it across the room by day and being nice to it at two in the morning when they're in the

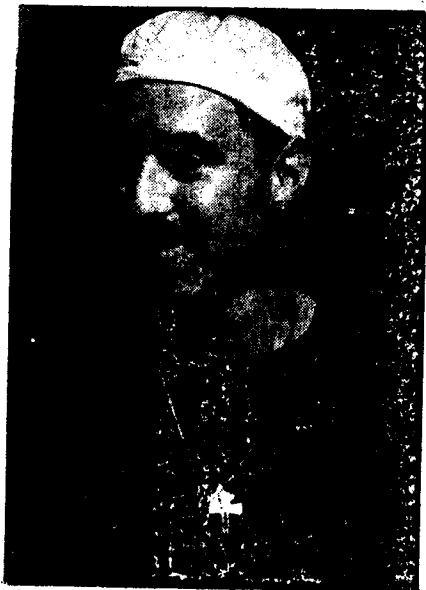
kitchen together ("You're lucky I like you, I'd cut your heart out") — is just wonderful stuff — loving, true and unsentimental.

Fourth place went to Barry Weintraub, a political comedian. Weintraub is another one who took a chance Sunday, introducing jokes that were so up-to-the-minute, they couldn't have been tested — and should have been: "First Bush was trying to run as Harry Truman. Now he's trying to run as Santa Claus." His other material was stronger. Referring to the Panama invasion, he said: "They called it Operation Just Cause ... Just Cause We're Bigger Than They Are."

T. Marni Vos came in fifth, with a sly, delicately timed set that contrasted with her more fast-paced competitors. She talked about getting into an accident while fumbling with the cassette deck in her car. "I saw the bridge ... I mean, close-up ... It was on my dash." Later she said, "Now I have this Honda ... Accordion for sale." Vos is an original, someone to watch.

At the end of the five sets, while the votes were being tabulated, last year's winner, Don McMillan, performed. He came out in a cape and paper crown, in a satire of the traditional final walk of the reigning Miss America.

Will Durst, the winner of the 1983 competition, emceed the event, and opened the evening with a 20-minute political set that got the crowd charged up — and ready to emigrate. "The good news is that there are only 58 more days to the election. The bad news is that one of these sleaze bags has to win." You get the feeling that the 1992 campaign has been especially fertile ground for Durst, because this time around he gave it just as hard to the Democrats as the Republicans: "Talk about slimy. Bob Guccione met Clinton, and afterwards said, 'Euh, I think I need a bath, now.'"



PHOTOS BY BRYAN MOSS/THE CHRONICLE

Johnny Steele (left) performed his winning routine at the S.F. International Comedy Competition, finishing ahead of Maria Falzone (above) and Ngao Bealum (below), in the third and second spots, respectively

