

Satire at its Finest

Mark Russell Delivers Political Snickers, Songs

When you make people laugh for a living, it doesn't hurt to look in the mirror for one of your targets. Mark Russell is probably as well known for his piano as the political comedy routines that he delivers to audiences nationwide and on PBS television specials each year.

Despite early music lessons and the desire for a career as a jazz piano player, Russell says, "Music is less than half of what I do. I'll just lean against the piano for 10, 15 minutes at a time. I figure I'm giving the audience a break."

A famous Hoosier political figure once employed the same philosophy. After what Russell terms an "awful rough start," Dan Quayle adopted "Rule 101 of Comedy 101" and began using the jokes against himself. He wound up doing the same jokes (Jay) Leno and (David) Letterman did about him."

After Quayle left Washington, Russell says the former vice president once asked him if he was missed in the comedic circles. The answer was, "No, because you were too easy. The same with (President) Clinton. We're not proud of those (jokes). They were all too easy."

Sources from all over

Russell claims to have 535 comedy writers – 100 in the Senate and 435 in the House of Representatives. Among his leading sources was former Wyoming senator Alan Simpson. Quotes such as "this legislation has more loose ends than a \$10 hairpiece" and Simpson's book, *Right in the Old Gazoo: A Lifetime of Scrapping With the Press*, set up new material from Russell.

Texas Gov. Ann Richards and her "silver foot in the mouth" reference to George H. Bush during the 1988 Democratic National Convention was a Russell favorite. And back to the Clintons, this time New York's current junior senator, who Russell contends is rooting for a second term for the current President Bush. That scenario, he adds, could set her up as the favorite in an open 2008 race.

Russell began his career in Washington, D.C. bars and eventually found himself working where members of Congress and their staffs came to unwind. With the piano at hand, he simply took songs he knew and substituted in words related to the events of the day.

He is now in his 27th year of the PBS specials. His CDs, tapes and videos are sold across the country, and he writes a nationally syndicated column. He has cut back slightly from a year 2000 schedule that saw him traveling to 100 cities in addition to Washington performances.

Back home again

Russell is no stranger to Indiana. In a previous visit, he notes the question of "What is a Hoosier?" came up. He says he looked in the dictionary and found a reference to the MCI (RCA) Dome. He also promises to resurrect a hilarious story involving Justice Anthony Scalia and a Supreme Court ruling on an obscenity law case in South Bend. No more clues, however, until the October 23 show.

On a rare serious note, Russell says Richard Lugar, Indiana's senior senator, "is very respected. I've never heard even a Democrat put Lugar down."

Back to show form and what he says reveals his age, Russell laments that Vance Hartke, a former Evansville mayor and three-term Indiana senator, passed away the same day as entertainment legend Bob Hope.

"It's not as if Katie Couric was going to come on the *Today* show and say, 'Two great legends



By Tom Schuman



Mark Russell uses his piano to entertain audiences in Washington and across the country.

passed away yesterday,' ” he quips, adding that he respected Hartke during his time in Washington.

Timing is everything in the world of comedy. As far as location, Russell took his talents to England, Ireland, France and Italy as part of the PBS specials. He even performed outdoors in Alaska atop the Mendenhall Glacier.

Asked if there were any locations or venues he aspired to visit, Russell deadpanned, “It’s not like I’m going to be doing Mark Russell’s Cambodia. Really, I couldn’t think of any other countries that I could be funny about.”

In regard to favorite audiences, “It’s not so much where they are, but who they are and what they do. You get into a theatre, you’ve got the piano and there they are. It’s not a focus on north, south, east or west.”

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14th Annual Awards Dinner
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Recent Indiana Chamber Annual Dinner special guests include futurist Alvin Toffler, left; comedian Al Franken, above; financial advisors The Motley Fool, top right; and members of the entertainment group the Capitol Steps, right.

