

Poor old Rodney gets some respect

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"Last week, I broke up with my psychiatrist. He told me I was going crazy. I said to him, 'If you don't mind, I'd like a second opinion.' He said, 'All right, you're ugly, too.'"

"I was in a bar the other day and they kicked me out. They wanted to start Happy Hour."

— Rodney Dangerfield

By RICK WARNER

Staff Writer

For a guy who gets absolutely no respect, Rodney Dangerfield's career has taken a strange turn.

Once told he was the sap in his family tree, the man with the too-tight collar and machine-gun delivery is suddenly the star of a major movie, a new comedy album and a popular series of television commercials.

Once booed by a peeping tom, he's now sought after by national magazines, television networks and hip college students who consider him a cult hero.

You can call him crazy or you can call him ugly, but any way you slice it, Rodney Dangerfield is one of the hottest acts in show business.

So what's the story Rodney?

"I don't know," said the bug-eyed comedian, trying to explain his recent success. "Maybe people feel sorry for me."

No overnight success

If they did, you couldn't blame them. At 58, Dangerfield is anything but an overnight success. The product of a broken home, he's gone through two name changes, a 12-year hiatus as a paint salesman and a busted marriage to get where he is today. "I dropped out of show business once," he said, "but nobody noticed."

So, while he's enjoying the fruits of stardom ("prunes, mostly"), he isn't about to let it go to his head.

"I'm too old to get shaken up," he said in a recent telephone interview from his New York apartment, located just a couple of subway stops away from his popular nightclub, Dangerfield's.

"I guess the most exciting thing is the youth mar-

ket. Young people are my biggest fans. I just played three college dates in the Midwest and sold them all out. I guess they think I'm a character. It's like their grandfather is up there telling jokes."

Dangerfield recently returned from a nationwide tour to promote his movie, "Caddyshack," and his album, "No Respect," the cover of which shows a dog mistaking him for a fire hydrant.

In the movie, which co-stars "Saturday Night Live" veterans Chevy Chase and Bill Murray, Dangerfield plays an obnoxious real estate developer who outrages the country club set with his crude behavior. Critics, though generally unexcited by the movie, have singled out his performance as one of the highlights.

Despite the acclaim, Dangerfield has no desire to become a full-time movie or television star.

"It's too much work, especially television," he said. "I've been offered all kinds of series, but I've turned them all down. Working in a series is slave work. You're on the set 15 hours a day, six or seven days a week. To me, it's just not worth it. I'm not interested in seeing how much money I can die with."

Still, television is the medium that has made him a star. All the years of nightclub work may have honed his skills as a standup comic, but it's been his 64 appearances on "The Tonight Show" and his beer commercials that have made him a household name.

"There's no doubt that the 'Tonight Show' has been a big help in my career," he said. "Johnny Carson is the Ziegfeld of today. He can make you or break you. Another host can say you're good and it doesn't mean anything. But if Johnny likes you, it means a lot."

Born Jacob Cohen in Babylon, N.Y., on Long Is-



land, Dangerfield started writing jokes when he was 15, "mainly because I was depressed." At 19, using the stage name Jack Roy, he launched his professional career as a singing waiter at a Brooklyn nightclub for \$5 a night.

For the next 10 years Dangerfield learned his trade the hard way, playing small clubs and "joints" up and down the East Coast.

"I played one club, it was so far out my act was reviewed in 'Field and Stream,'" he said.

was one of the people Dustin Hoffman consulted in researching his role for the movie "Lenny."

"Lenny was really a misunderstood guy," Dangerfield said. "He was a very nice person. He was wild and he had his personal problems, but he was never the type to hurt anybody. We always got along well. He was fun to be around."

Show business got to be a grind, though. Married and tired of traveling, Dangerfield chucked his performing career for domestic life and started selling paint. But the marriage fell apart and he ended up raising two kids by himself.

"I'm really a very romantic person," he said. "I was looking for the American Dream, the whole thing — the house, the picket fence, the two kids and the dog. But you know, the best-laid plans...

"Rough joints, too. Real rough. I mean, how many places you know where they serve broken leg of lamb?"

Back in the early days, a lot of comics hung out at a small luncheonette in Manhattan called Hanson's. There, Dangerfield got to know a young impressionist named Lenny Bruce. Years later, after Bruce had died and become a legend, Dangerfield

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At 40, Dangerfield got the showbiz bug again. He changed his name for a second time ("I was desperate"), came up with the "no respect" routine and started from scratch. His big break came in 1967 when he talked his way into an audition for "The Ed Sullivan Show" and cracked up old Stoneface himself. One break led to another and soon he opened up his nightclub, entertaining the likes of Bob Hope, Joe Namath and several members of Led Zeppe-
lin.

Though his own comedic roots were planted in the '30s, Dangerfield feels more at home with younger comics.

"I hang out with a young crowd — Steve Martin, Andy Kaufman, Steve Landesberg, Robert Klein. They're looser than the older guys.

"A lot of the older comedians are extremely jealous. They love you as long as they're doing better than you. Some very well-known people stole my material when I was really struggling and I haven't forgotten it."

Everybody, it seems, wants a piece of Dangerfield these days. He's got a television special in the works and plans to write and star in his own movie.

"People relate to my character," he said. "Every day, people get no respect. Their boss yells at them, their girlfriend leaves them, they get stuck in a traffic jam. They look at me and say, 'Hey, I'm not alone. This guy's worse off than I am.'"