

Gnawing through the straps will be totally worth it

Emo Philips at Wiley's Comedy Club

By JENNIFER HANAUER LUMPKIN

Emo Philips has performed more than 6,000 times since the beginning of his comedy career in 1976 in Chicago. During that time, he has produced award-winning comedy albums including *E=MC²*, made multiple cable appearances, notably an hour-long HBO special, acted in numerous film and television roles such as *UHF* and *Miami Vice* and lent his voice to several animated shows such as *Home Movies* and *Adventure Time*.

Without the ability to be in Emo's presence during our interview, I was merely able to imagine his trademark medieval page-boy hairdo and paroxysmal movements. Even without the visual, I was helpless but to laugh, cover, contemplate where my holes are, and truly—albeit briefly—reconsider living in Los Angeles.

What's changed for you in 40+ years of comedy? How have the audiences changed? How, if at all, has that affected how you develop your material?

Emo Philips: I'll answer all three questions at once, by telling you of the one big changes I've witnessed in the comedy scene: the cataclysm that killed the dinosaurs and ushered in the mammals.

When I started in Chicago in 1976, 19-year-olds seeking a cheap, fun and somewhat sophisticated evening out could go to a comedy showcase and share a bucket of beer. The show ran from 9 p.m. until after midnight, but as an audience member, you would not be held to those times; you would have the option of arriving and leaving whenever you liked. When you did show up, you would be seated while a comedian (or juggler, or ventriloquist, or comic magician or mime) was already on stage, doing his or her five to fifteen minutes; the comedic cavalcade was continuous. It was, for comedians, the perfect environment for learning (I did a thousand shows the first two years) and for encouraging innovation (because we comedians would watch each other night after night after night).

Then, in 1980, Illinois raised the drinking age to 21, lopping two years off the fresh end. And the comedy scene suddenly had to grow up as well.

When people leave your show, they are different than when they went in—better humans with improved attitudes that reflect a markedly evolved quality of life.

EP: If what you say is true—that comedy makes us better humans, with improved attitudes that reflect a markedly evolved quality of life—then we've been entertaining the wrong troops.

Aside from uproarious laughter, the other physical response I have when watching your comedy is a kind of building volcano in my lower bowels.

EP: Oh no! I was aiming at the pancreas.

It's nerves! You make me nervous! You present a number of uncomfortable situations, kind of "there but for the grace of God" scenarios, and you present them from the perspective of a sort of detached character, just "here are the facts." How did you discover that that works?

EP: I once read of an insect species with dozens of sub-species, each with its own call; we had no idea how they learned them. Then we found out they didn't have to: each species, in its anatomy, had uniquely-spaced holes; all the insect had to do was shoot air through them by thumping its wings. That's the best answer I can give as to how I came up with what I do. There was no plan. It's just where my holes were.

Is any part of your process painful? What is the most joyous part of how you make a living?

EP: Back in '86, when I taped my one-hour HBO special, I did three shows, and the director had me do my jokes in the exact same order each time. As I had well over a hundred jokes, with no logical reason for the majority of them anywhere particular, I found that one aspect of the process surprisingly torturous. (We wound up using just one show anyway.)

The most joyous part? When I'm able to improvise a gag onstage. I'm not talking a talking-with-an-audience-member gag (which are heartbreakingly one-timey) but a gag that thenceforth will sure-fire any time I want.

Your subject matter is never super topical, but I'm incredibly interested in what someone of your intelligence and insight thinks about this coming presidential race.

EP: Someone of my "intelligence and insight" knows not to divulge political views.

What do you enjoy about the Los Angeles area?

EP: I love L.A. for several reasons. I'm in an



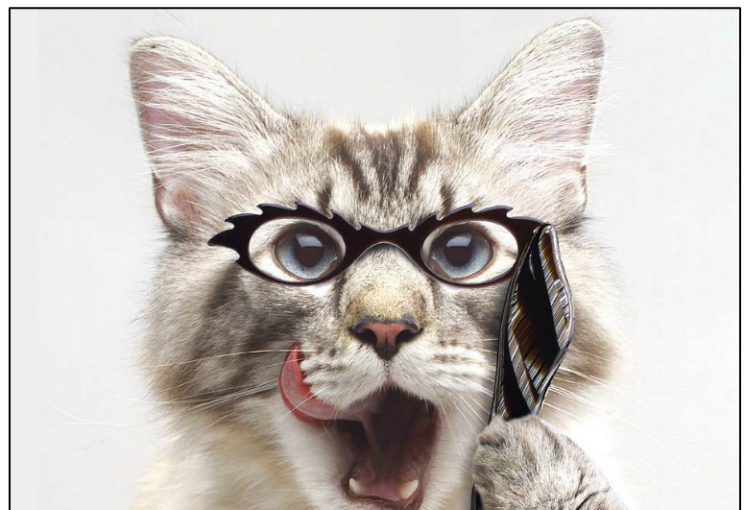
Comedian Emo Philips will perform at Wiley's Comedy Club Sept. 24-26; photo: Guy Viau

area with immigrants from all over the globe, which has had a wondrous effect on my creativity as a driver. Plus I love the weather. I can walk out of the house any time of the year without remembering my pants and not die; I'm certain that will save my life someday. Plus the wildlife! Every now and then a coyote afternoon naps in my backyard. He sleeps on the hot tub cover, which is rubbery, and looks comfortable. The hot tub has been broken since I moved in, so I'm glad someone's getting some use out of it.

Tickets may be purchased at wileyscomedy.com. For more about Emo (or to check out his extraordinarily compelling recipe for coleslaw), visit emophilps.com.



Reach DCP freelance writer Jennifer Hanauer Lumpkin at JenniferHanauerLumpkin@DaytonCityPaper.com. To read more from Jennifer Hanauer Lumpkin, visit her website at jennertumpkin.com.



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