

COOP COMEDIANS LET LOOSE

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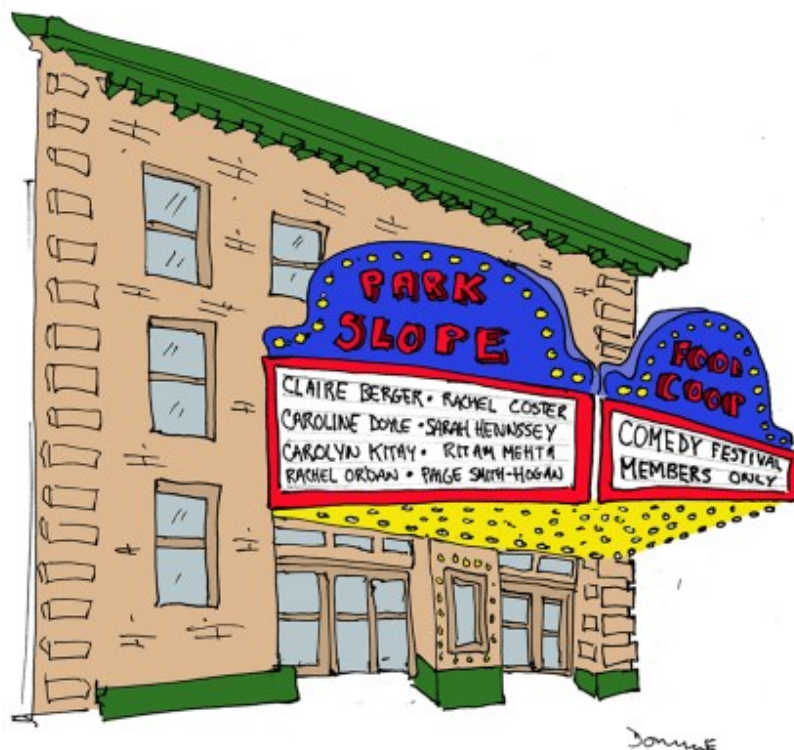


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

By Zach Schiffman

“Is anyone a member at the Park Slope Food Coop? I am. It’s like larping a grocery store.” That’s how comedian Paige Smith-Hogan’s stand-up bit about the Coop starts, referring to Live Action Role Playing. Normally people cheer when she asks. Coop members are proud, and Smith-Hogan, host of the long-running show “Sounds Great,” says most members will even come up to her after the show to chat. “The Coop has a really wide reach. It’s normally at least one person per audience,” she says. Maybe that’s also why there are so many Coop members who are comedians, as well.

COOP ANNOUNCEMENTS—INSTANT LAUGHS

“The way you communicate at the Coop is over intercoms. If you want to talk on an intercom, it should immediately disqualify you from talking on an intercom,” Smith-Hogan’s joke continues. “So I ask you. Could you get that at Safeway?” Smith-Hogan’s

matter-of-fact rhetorical delivery crushes every time. “It really gets people animated. I think the Coop has a lot of mystique around it,” she says. All members have heard Coop announcements that range from obscure, to totally OCD, to almost as ridiculous as slapstick.



The Coop’s intercom is ripe for comedy. It is a microphone, after all. Performer Carolyn Kitay, who premiered her new show, “Fuck the Minutae,” at Don’t Tell Mama this summer, buys a specific kind of probiotic—but asking if it’s out of stock over the intercom gives her pause. “I am kind of gutsy, but I thought, maybe no one wants to hear about my vaginal care probiotic over the speakers.” Kitay does feel the urge at times to say something hilarious over the loudspeakers—for example, “I’d like a lobotomy in stock”—but she holds back.

COOP ANNOUNCEMENTS ARE RIPE WITH COMEDY. IT’S A MICROPHONE, AFTER ALL.

Comedian Caroline Doyle, who co-hosts the popular dating podcast, “Ok, Stupid,” and “*Walker Upper*,” a home-improvement mockumentary, recalls that early in the pandemic, she saw a member pull down their mask and lick their fingers to get a plastic bag in the produce section.

“There was a rush to the front desk to complain, but no one talked to the guy directly,” Doyle says. Instead, she remembers a page over the loudspeakers, telling people not to remove their masks to lick their fingers. “I thought it was funny, how indirect people were, in communication with each other.”

CBD COMEDY

The intimacy of the Coop lends itself to funny interactions wherever you go. “I think the CBD lockup is pretty comical,” says Claire Berger, a former warm-up comic for shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, “Because the minute that unlocks, every head in the Coop swivels in the direction of that case, to see.”

COMICS COMMENTING

A handful of comedians I spoke with found themselves almost immediately suspended from the Coop. Sara Hennessey—whose third comedy album, *Huge Bitch*, is available on all streaming platforms—says joining earlier this year made her feel like an “upstanding member of society,” but that she was served an “overnight reality check,” when she was suspended, less than a month into her membership. For Rachel Ordan, writer of a satirical newsletter, *Pillowtown*, joining the Coop was like “unlocking the keys to a new level of the Park Slope video game.”

ONE COMIC SAID SHE HAS LIVED IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD FOR THIRTY YEARS, BUT RESISTED JOINING FOR TWENTY YEARS BECAUSE SHE THOUGHT “IT WAS A CULT.”

Carolyn Kitay has lived in the neighborhood for thirty years, but resisted joining the

Coop for most of that time, because she thought “it was a cult.” Since non-members can’t go inside, even for a tour, she says she assumed members were doing some sort of strange ritual. Eventually, she came around—“I was just being judgmental and immature”—and is now “obsessed with the Coop.” Doyle is similarly obsessed, but she hasn’t evangelized about the Coop as much. “I actually feel pretty protective of having my privacy at the Coop, because it’s such a peaceful place to me,” she says. “I try to avoid letting other people know I’m a member.”

The Coop’s proximity to some of Brooklyn’s premier comedy venues—Union Hall, Littlefield, and The Bell House—can give comedians an attractive reason for joining. Stand-up comedian Rachel Coster says, “I love being able to run in and get my freaky gluten-free crackers, before a show.”

But for others, proximity to the workplace might be a deterrent for joining. Tessa Belle is not a member of the Coop, but she does live directly between the Coop and Union Hall. “I feel like I can’t take my trash out, because if I look to my left, I will run into a comedian leaving the Coop, and if I look to my right, I’ll run into someone going to Union Hall.”

While some members might shy away from the public-facing shifts, comedians are drawn to them. Berger is a regular face at the entrance desk and loves to haze new members. “I’ll say things like, ‘Don’t forget to enjoy the live band at the end of the cheese section,’ or I’ll look at someone I’ve never met and go, ‘Thank god, you’re finally here!’” She also offers members “seven-minute therapy sessions,” when she does cart return shifts. “I know a lot about a lot of our members now.” She reassures reluctant participants that it’s just “comedy therapy”—and she won’t “solve any of your problems.” But if you ever have Berger—whose interactive memoir titled, *How Much Is Enough?*, comes out next year—pushing your cart as a walker, “you’re going to do some self-examining.”

THE COOP IS INDEED A GREAT PLACE FOR COMIC INSPIRATION.

Ritam Mehta, a writer and improv comedian, takes a different approach. A regular early morning stocker, he says, “No one wants to be the funny guy on the 7a.m. stocking shift.” He keeps a low profile, and while he has run into many comedians (including many interviewed for this story), he likes to keep quiet while shopping. This is a good time to insert my disclaimer—I am also a local comedian—and getting recognized at the Coop can be a harrowing experience. It’s happened a few times at check-out, and I’ve felt the most vulnerable I have ever felt about my comedy. But, like Paige, I find that the Coop is indeed a great place for comic inspiration.

Mehta, who co-writes the newsletter *Low Lift Ask*, says he finds some of the “crunchy” products funny, “The labels can just be so overt, with how ethically they are made.” Ordan wryly told me that the funniest product she’s seen at the Coop is “a Court Street Grocers sandwich for under \$10”—but admits that the pre-made sandwiches are the perfect snack before a show at a nearby venue.

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