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His Big Break Canceled, Comic Adapts

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If you're the Last Comic Standing but no one sees you stand, do you make a splash?

Alonzo Bodden has been searching for the answer since October. So far, it appears to be a qualified yes.

Mr. Bodden, 42, who begins a four-night headlining engagement at Carolines on Broadway tonight, is a former jet mechanic from St. Albans, Queens. He became a full-time stand-up comedian 12 years ago because, as he explains it, he was getting big laughs when he conducted training sessions, and "I thought it would be more fun to be an unemployed comedian than an unemployed aircraft mechanic."

He was, in fact, an employed comedian in Los Angeles but far from a national name last summer when he was seen on "Last Comic Standing," the NBC series that aimed to do for little-known comedians what "American Idol" does for unknown singers, with a touch of "Big Brother" thrown into the mix. He finished second; when the show was brought back in the fall, he finished first, but not until after NBC had taken the series off the air.

"Last Comic Standing" selected

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Ann Johansson for The New York Times "Last Comic Standing" went off the air before Alonzo Bodden won.

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10 comedians through a nationwide talent search, put them together in a typical reality-show house and threw various challenges at them: telling jokes in a Laundromat, entertaining a roomful of very young children. Each hourlong episode ended with a face-off between two stand-ups in front of an audience, which voted one off the show. In the final weeks, viewers voted by phone and on the Internet.

In its first two seasons as a summer show, "Last Comic Standing" averaged eight million viewers a week, according to Nielsen Media Research, or about one-third of what "American Idol" has drawn this year. Although less than spectacular, the ratings were good enough for NBC, which rushed a third season onto the fall schedule, just three weeks after the summer season had ended.

With no time to conduct another talent search, the producers changed the format to a stand-up contest between the comedians of Seasons 1 and 2. Viewership dropped by two million, and NBC canceled the show a week before it was scheduled to end. The final episode, in which Mr. Bodden was named the winner, was seen only on Comedy Central, which had been rerunning episodes. It was watched by about 750,000 people: decent numbers for Comedy Central, but hardly star-making.

So it is not surprising that Mr. Bodden is less than a star. (This might have been the case even if NBC had broadcast his triumph: neither Dat Phan, the neophyte who was the surprise winner of Season 1, nor John Heffron, the seasoned road comic who won Season 2, has achieved breakthrough success.) But he is also more than just another hard-working comic.

He admits that "it would have been a lot better for me had everyone known I won" because "then I wouldn't have to keep responding to people saying to me, 'You should have won.'" Still, millions of people did watch him every week for a while, and as a result he is working more than he ever has, for a lot more money. He also received \$250,000 for winning, which he acknowledges means that he "can't be too mad at NBC."

Mr. Bodden (pronounced BEAU-den) said in a recent telephone interview from his home in Los Angeles that before last summer, "I was what we call a working headliner: I was closing clubs, but people didn't necessarily know who I was." Now, he continued, "places are selling out, and they're coming to see me because they know who I am."

That "introduction to America," Mr. Bodden said, is what makes "Last Comic Standing" comparable to "American Idol," regardless of the numbers. What makes the two shows different, he added, is that "we have to do our own material. We can't tell Eddie Murphy's jokes and they say, 'Hey, he's good!'"

There are other differences. If you win on "American Idol," you may not become a bona fide idol, but you get a recording contract. Victory on "Last Comic Standing" offered considerably less.

Mr. Bodden was given a one-year development deal with NBC, as a result not of winning Season 3 but of doing well in Season 2. So far nothing has come of that arrangement.

Still, things are moving forward. He has taped a half-hour stand-up special, which will be shown June 24 on Comedy Central. He has appeared on the "Tonight" show, although Jay Leno does not have nearly the influence on comedians' careers that Johnny Carson did.

But Mr. Bodden has made an impression. Well over six feet tall, muscular and shaven-headed, with a voice deep enough to qualify him as the James Earl Jones of stand-up, he commands a stage. His delivery, conversational and quiet but with an angry edge, and his original take on well-worn subjects like race, sex and politics also helped set him apart from his "Last Comic Standing" rivals, as did the fact that he worked week after week to come up with new material.

Virginia Heffernan, writing in The Times about the second season of "Last Comic Standing," called Mr. Bodden "consistently brilliant" and praised his "unerring, almost frightening" wit. Caroline Hirsch, the founder and owner of Carolines on Broadway, said, "In watching the show it was obvious that Alonzo had that 'thing' that sets certain comics apart from others."

His future as a comic is by no means clear, but Mr. Bodden professes not to be too concerned. If his NBC deal yields nothing, which seems likely, he says he will take the sitcom ideas the network rejected and pitch them elsewhere. He has had small roles in the films "Bringing Down the House" and "The Girl Next Door," and would like to do more movies and perhaps even a talk show. Because of his work on "Last Comic Standing," he said, some casting directors now see him as more than just another "black comic-slash-actor," although others still see him as "not hard-core enough."

"See, St. Albans, when I was growing up, was the suburbs," he said. "At some point rappers turned it into the 'hood, but I missed that; I was busy mowing the lawn."

In the meantime, Mr. Bodden says, he is happy to continue doing stand-up: "I'm not focused on anything in particular. Whatever comes up, whatever opportunity comes up and I get to do it, that's what I want to do next."

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