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## **Television; TELEVISION; Dane Cook, pain-free comedian; Ever wonder what would happen if comedy lost its angst? Just take a look at its new smiley face.; [HOME EDITION]**

*Paul Brownfield. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 3, 2006. pg. E.1*

### **Abstract (Summary)**

"Tourgasm" was a conspicuously slight and infomercial-like ad to boost [Cook]'s rabid popularity among college-age fans; the rest was filler, Cook and his three comedian underlings in various states of homoerotic, roughhousing repose.

It seemed more than a little symbolic, in fact, that Cook was blowing up last year while Mitch Hedberg, a comedian whose following mirrored Cook's (Internet fan base, transcendent rock-star aura), died of a drug overdose in a New Jersey motel. Onstage, Hedberg cut an odd Kurt Cobain-like figure -- tall, skinny, beatnik clothes, hair over his eyes. He talked in idiosyncratic, absurdist mumbles ("I tried to walk into a Target, but I missed"; "I don't own a microwave, but I do have a clock that occasionally cooks [things]") and was afraid to lock eyes with the audience. He feared the very thing at which Cook excels -- tearing down the wall between the audience and himself but he loved that which Cook doesn't: the economy, the importance, of words.

MULTIMEDIA SPLASH: On the comedian's slate is a film costarring pop star [Jessica Simpson]. Above, the pair at the MTV Movie Awards in June.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Chris Carlson Associated Press; ON THE UP AND UP: Cook avoids the dark side, he says, to put "a more positive, productive take on what a comic is."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Damian Dovarganes Associated Press; ASCENDING: On the heels of Cook's tourbased reality show comes an HBO special.; PHOTOGRAPHER: John P. Johnson HBO

### **Full Text (1810 words)**

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COMEDIANS aren't supposed to be happy, just the opposite, but Dane Cook is the Disneyland of comics: He's the happiest, most uncomplicated place on Earth.

He's Seacrest-psyched, boy voted most likely. Cutest. Funniest. Coolest. For Cook, this is no ironic pose a la Andy Kaufman; it's a whole insufferable ethos, integral to the rise of his career. He's become huge by asserting that the comic mind does not come from alienation and restlessness but from adoration and social connection -- the comic as your instant-messaging best pal.

To watch his HBO special "Vicious Circle," which airs Monday night, is to be both disappointed in Cook for foisting his surface act on people with such energetic impunity and in audiences for drinking the stuff in as if it were vanguard.

You could also, for variety's sake, be disappointed in HBO for giving the wrong comedian the right kind of platform -- a 90-minute concert act recorded recently at the FleetCenter arena in Cook's native Boston, apparently in front of some 18,000 people.

To the question, "What happened to stand-up?" Cook might very well be the depressing answer: It put product in its

hair, dumbed itself down and became as eager to please as a trainee at a TGI Friday's. And still it got itself a series, "Tourgasm," which ended its run on HBO last month.

"Tourgasm" was a conspicuously slight and infomercial-like ad to boost Cook's rabid popularity among college-age fans; the rest was filler, Cook and his three comedian underlings in various states of homoerotic, roughhousing repose.

Now HBO, as part of a multiplatform deal, presents Cook in a stand-up special. These were once upon a time the province of active minds and voices (Robert Klein, George Carlin, Roseanne, Chris Rock). But having long watched the brand slacken, HBO has now lent it to the boy most likely to help them succeed wooing younger subscribers.

It makes sense, business sense, anyway: Cook might very well be the next Rob Schneider, or Tom Green, or Ashton Kutcher, or some three-headed beast incorporating some of each. ("Employee of the Month," a comedy in which he costars with rumored girlfriend Jessica Simpson, opens next month. Others are on the assembly line.)

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An online connection, the payoff

COOK, then, is a comic-on-the-verge, but with the twist of the new -- he's huge among the kids who download his bits off iTunes and onto their cell-phones.

It was on the Internet that Cook, who'd been kicking around in clubs and TV series for years, launched himself anew, advertising his cute-boy looks and general availability for human-to-comedian contact.

Single White Comic Seeks Fan Base for Meaningful Relationship. Reportedly on a \$25,000 gamble, Cook launched his own website, and his dogged use of the popular networking site MySpace (where he supposedly has over 1 million "friends") is seen as a model for building one's career, with the Improv chain signing up with MySpace this summer to offer their acts as chat friends.

"Treat the Web like your house," Cook advised comics in Wired magazine of the importance of Internet politicking. "When people knock, answer."

And yet there's something perverse about this. Comics, the best of them, are uniquely antisocial beings offstage, unreachable and idiosyncratic, the audience a kind of natural enemy to be won over with raw need and biting truth. Even multimillionaire Jerry Seinfeld refused to cash in on his popularity post-"Seinfeld," instead forcing himself as an artist to win over audiences through the crafting of a new act, as chronicled in his documentary "Comedian."

But Seinfeld is of the generation raised on Lenny Bruce and Klein. Cook, it seems, is looking to take the audience to lunch.

"There's so many things that I want to let you guys into my world about," is the ungrammatical sentence with which Cook greets his fans at the FleetCenter.

They're screaming like he's Justin Timberlake, and maybe he is. For what is demoralizing is the swagger in the face of such vanilla material, the total absence -- like Tom Cruise on Oprah's couch -- of self-loathing.

In Cook's act there is no war, no class divide, no crime, no fear, no news, no world. There is only solicitation, the "so many things that I want to let you guys into my world about."

"I'll say this, man," goes one set-up, "the thing I love, even more than the movie itself, I love -- we all love -- the previews.

"And I'll tell you why." Pause. "Because it doesn't matter what anybody here does for a living, whatever your occupation is, the reason you love the previews, it's because it's the one time, in all our lives, that we get to be a critic. Because you know as soon as that preview ends you're gonna turn to the person next to you, and you're gonna review that film."

At this point I experienced several strange feelings -- deja vu that I was back at the Improv and it was actually 1987 mixed with a sense that I'd misplaced the punch line. Fortunately, Cook proceeded to illustrate the joke he'd just taken too many words to say.

He loves this, the gestures. He pantomimes, in fact, nearly everything that comes out of his mouth. Two fingers down the side of the cheek for crying, wiggling the fingers for typing an e-mail, scribbling motion for writing down directions.

It's a way not to have to bother with language. Cook is disinterested in words and sometimes sloppy with references (he doesn't mean Danny Gans in one joke, he probably means Lance Burton; he doesn't mean baseball umpire in another, he means catcher).

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A positive spin

"THERE'S a stigma with comics that they are all so dark and ball-busy and negative," Cook said in July, during the summer TV press tour promoting "Tourgasm" and "Vicious Circle."

"And sure. There's that element," he said. "I don't roll with that. I never hung out with that, you know, and that was even what 'Tourgasm' was about, was putting out a more positive, productive take on what a -- what a comic is."

Comedy has traditionally sprung up as a reaction against oppression, internal and external -- from the pogrom to the contemporary neurosis. Cook's view flies in the face of what we know, generally, about every significant stand-up voice from Milton Berle on forward. Onstage, Cook exudes the need for attention that all comics have but none of the pain behind the need.

To be sure, feelings of outsider-ness do not guarantee you'll be funny. Drug addiction contributed to performances by Bruce in which he was a paranoid rambler; Kaufman delighted in leaving his audiences out in the cold and openly hostile. But it's the vulnerability that contributed to their artistry.

It seemed more than a little symbolic, in fact, that Cook was blowing up last year while Mitch Hedberg, a comedian whose following mirrored Cook's (Internet fan base, transcendent rock-star aura), died of a drug overdose in a New Jersey motel. Onstage, Hedberg cut an odd Kurt Cobain-like figure -- tall, skinny, beatnik clothes, hair over his eyes. He talked in idiosyncratic, absurdist mumbles ("I tried to walk into a Target, but I missed"; "I don't own a microwave, but I do have a clock that occasionally cooks [things]") and was afraid to lock eyes with the audience. He feared the very thing at which Cook excels -- tearing down the wall between the audience and himself but he loved that which Cook doesn't: the economy, the importance, of words.

Hedberg's memorial was held at the Friars Club in Beverly Hills; half a dozen comics eulogized him, and it was odd, the sight of them reduced to tears, or trying to reduce themselves, insofar as comedians can feel for one another. Nobody deplored the drug habit that had claimed Hedberg's life. It was understood, at least among his peers, that Hedberg's act would not have existed without his demons. It's what you figure about Dave Chappelle, who walked away from a \$50-million Comedy Central deal to hide away in South Africa. Or Drake Sather, a comedian and writer ("The Larry Sanders Show," "Zoolander") who on March 3, 2004, shot himself to death in his downtown loft. "On the wall above the head of the bed are multiple notes," the coroner's report reads, in part. "These notes are to the police officers and crime scene photographers and coroner staff. Many of the notes are humorous comments about suicide and the end of life."

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Committed to keeping in touch

"YOU know, Dane ... we put the first episode of 'Tourgasm' up on iTunes, and it became the No. 1 podcast -- the No. 1 downloaded podcast almost instantly," HBO Chairman Chris Albrecht told the press in July. "So his audience is an important audience, I think, to the future of HBO, which is, who are the subscribers coming into the category,

who are the young people that might want to subscribe. And for them, having Dane is very important."

Not long ago, I signed up to get e-mail alerts for Cook's "Dane- casts" -- the news about his life and career that Cook uploads onto his website.

"Everybody's saying, 'Dane, what's going on, "Tourgasm" is coming to a close,' " Cook said on July 23, from a hotel room in Vancouver, Canada, where he was shooting a movie.

"You gotta watch tonight," he said, "I go back and visit my high school, where I graduated from. And it's pretty -- and it's pretty touching. Very unexpected things happened when I went back to Arlington High School."

He then responded to some e-mail, some of which had to do with the death of his mother July 3 from cancer.

"The support from everybody has just been really incredible," he said. "It's new. It's a new thing for me to be dealing with, but I'm really OK."

As he went through more e-mails, a song by Weezer came on his iPod. "iPod shuffle's being good to me today," he said. "A couple more of these and then I gotta split, I gotta vamoose, gotta study my lines for tomorrow."

This is, for now, the Cook legacy: He signals the end of the comedian as we knew him -- reclusive, angry, socially awkward, anguished, self-defeating.

Negative.

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#### [Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: MULTIMEDIA SPLASH: On the comedian's slate is a film costarring pop star Jessica Simpson. Above, the pair at the MTV Movie Awards in June.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Chris Carlson Associated Press; PHOTO: ON THE UP AND UP: Cook avoids the dark side, he says, to put "a more positive, productive take on what a comic is."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Damian Dovarganes Associated Press; PHOTO: ASCENDING: On the heels of Cook's tourbased reality show comes an HBO special.; PHOTOGRAPHER: John P. Johnson HBO

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