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Philosophy and Discipline Define Margaret Cho

...Not to Mention Bawdy and Brilliant Humor

By Tim Sullivan

Life can be brutal. Sometimes things are so difficult or painful, the only way to talk about them is in the context of humor. In those moments, truth and healing are found in the fragile, vulnerable place that makes the standup comic our modern day philosopher. Margaret Cho is the Socrates of our age.

I recently had the pleasure of burning an afternoon with Margaret in the lounge of the W Hotel on 40th Street. She greeted me exactly as one would expect after seeing her live standup act – she was casual, familiar, friendly. But under her cordial nature is a brilliant and slicing comedic wit with a brutally honest approach to telling it like it is and just how she feels about it.

I've been watching Margaret for years. Certain comedienne have a way of making you think. Their humor serves as constructive social commentary – insight without the constrictions of formality, politeness and, in Margaret's case, obscenity laws. I have always found her uproariously funny and have found myself agreeing with many of her observations and political points of view. I've found myself quoting her in discussions with friends and colleagues. I've always wanted to meet her and find out how she is able to say what everyone is thinking and frankly, what I have never heard a woman say before.

"I have a process," she shared with me when I asked about her muse. "When I get up in the morning, before I eat breakfast or do anything, I have to write a joke. I force myself. They don't all become jokes in my act, some spring off into other things, but it's a discipline that works for me."

That discipline has made her one of the most popular and prolific comedienne of the last 10 years. She headlined Carnegie Hall and turned out a live album. She has released four major DVDs, written and starred in a feature film, directed another, acted in her own sitcom, and written and starred in her own one-woman show.

"It's very hard for a woman in comedy," she tells me. "It's hard for women to be bold and not care what anyone, particularly men, think. Maybe that is why so many women comics are lesbians." We both laugh.

To say Margaret is really funny would be only telling a



Photos by Austin Young

fraction of the story. Margaret has always hit her audience with very challenging material. She reacts to news of the day and points out the obvious absurdities to which we as a culture have grown so desensitized. As a fellow news junkie, I asked her what was bothering her that particular afternoon. "Ann Coulter," she snaps immediately and jumps in her seat as if poked with a fork. "Do you believe what she said about John Edwards? I think I am upset this woman gets any attention for such hate-filled rhetoric when she obviously has some issues." We both laugh again.

Margaret started standup comedy in the early '90s in California; it was the beginning of her climb to superstardom. She toured incessantly at colleges, clubs and then

bigger and bigger venues. She was a smash on late night television (Arsenio, Leno, Conan, etc.) and finally on a Bob Hope primetime special. She broke and she broke big. A sitcom about an Asian American family followed, and after its collapse, Cho used the experience as material in her one-woman show called *I'm the One That I Want*. The show was also a book and a film, and was an unprecedented success.

Her next two DVDs, *Notorious C.H.O.* and *Revolution*, continued Margaret's march into uncharted territory for a woman comic. The topics were so over the top – gross sexual acts, body functions and the signature "mommy" character that satirizes her Korean mother. Margaret lays three issues out in her material: She is a woman. She is a Korean-American woman. She is a Korean-American bisexual woman. Watch out. You might think you're watching an entertainer make fun of all three categories, but you're actually watching a champion of civil rights.

"One of my favorite gigs was when I played for the Gay Games at Soldier Field. It was so moving and I was so proud because there were thousands of people who were celebrating being out and I was honored to be a part of that event," she reminisced. "That stood for something."

Margaret doesn't just address issues, she physically fights for them. She plays various advocacy events, benefits and fundraisers for causes that are important to her. "When I first started in comedy I was trying to be funny and make it," she reflected. "But after a while you realize that you care about certain things and you have to talk about what bothers you. A comic can't not talk about what's bothering them."

So Cho plowed onward with the irreverent revolutionary image – not just metaphorically but in her material: pictured on DVD box covers dressed as Che Guevara and titling a book *I Have Chosen to Stay and Fight*. I think most people enjoy comics that position themselves as ballbusters, but there was always something a little smarter under what Margaret was saying. This was authenticated by her autobiographical material surrounding her dieting issues and her struggles with drugs and alcohol.



"I had this terrible body image and I was struggling with it. I do a lot of belly dancing now and that is a way of me exercising through acceptance," she explains. "But once I was on this horrendous diet and I lost a lot of weight quickly and I went into kidney failure. Coming through that I had the epiphany that I just didn't have to do that to myself. It was so awful. So I write about it because if I can clean up something painful for me then maybe someone else can learn from it."

I told Margaret that a person very close to me who is a therapist knew I would be seeing her that afternoon. She had made me swear to tell Cho that she uses her bit about the

famous diet injuries with her patients struggling with bulimia and anorexia. I told her. She looked genuinely pleased.

Margaret's feature film *Bam Bam and Celeste* will premiere in New York City this summer. She wrote, directed and starred in the movie, which is a coming of age tale about two teens that leave their small town and head for New York. In typical Cho fashion, both characters have myriad "issues" to sort through.

As our afternoon progressed I pressed her for more impressions from the news of the day and she immediately brought up Anna Nicole Smith. "I was just really sad when Anna Nicole died," she said as her eyes misted. "She was a nice person, and she made a very huge impression on me many years ago. I never forgot it. And to see her sadly die so quickly and now, how the story is developing is just a bummer. I have been writing down my thoughts about it but I haven't found anything funny to say yet." And with that our discussion turns to celebrity. After a half-hour of chatting with Margaret, I felt as if I were talking with a familiar friend, an officemate or someone I know really well. Margaret, while gracious, isn't trying to win anyone over. She has nothing to sell. For someone so opinionated and vulgar, those qualities give her absolution and make hanging with Cho an afternoon well spent.

Margaret travels without pretension. She walks amid her fame and notoriety oblivious to the gilded snow globe insulation that can be so cancerous to a person's enlightenment. Instead, she remains normal, sort of. "I make it a point to remain immune to the stifling insulation of celebrity," she says with disdain. Frankly, she is either too smart or too irreverent. Maybe both. Definitely both. ●

