

RAMBLER

Itinerant Storyteller,
Standup, Musician,
and Actor **Mary Mack**
Stumbles into
Comedy and
Staves Off Insanity

Susan Swartz for City Pages

Mary Mack seems to attract odd coincidences, and eccentric raconteurs, and car trouble, though this last fate is perhaps not uncommon among owners of 1991 Ford Escorts. Mack has in fact owned three '91 Escorts, and is looking for another, or at least another cheap old car; she recently responded to an ad for just such a vehicle. As we're chatting in Minneapolis's Anodyne coffee shop a couple of weeks before her Fringe Festival debut, Mack hears back from the seller. It turns out to be the artistic director of the Red Eye Theater, where Mack will be starring in the festival's *Everyone's a Winner*.

"How weird is that," she says, her eyes widening as she hangs up her cell phone. "I'm a magnet for weird events like that. I don't know why." Her Midwestern accent is thick, and her wide eyes mirror the "ohs" she forms with her lips.

The traveling comedian, actor, writer, and musician taps her fingernails on the Formica tabletop as she details a story about a recent trip up north to perform her comic storytelling act. After the show, she met a chain-smoking elderly woman, a former fur trapper, in a bar; the woman had a pig's heart sewed onto her own barely functioning ticker. "Not only did she have a pig's heart," Mack explains, pausing for suspense, "but she had a weasel in her trailer. Yeah, and she said, 'One night I woke up and the dang

thing was latched onto my elbow.' So now she has to go through rabies shots while dealing with a pig heart. Can you believe that? I learned all that from going out after a comedy show. I learned about a pig heart, about trappers, and about weasels. Gosh, I have to write that into a story."

Mack, whose offstage name is Mikelle Budge, is a 30-year-old self-proclaimed "late bloomer." Such a description could be evident in her bulky blue transparent watch, which is so circa-'85 Swatch-like you imagine it smells like plastic and blueberries. Or in her voice that rings with genuine excitement over snagging her first apartment in the Cities: "It's right next to the Turf Club. Do you know where that is? It will be great because I love seeing music shows," she says.

Mack describes her musical comedy act as a cross between Gilda Radner and *A Prairie Home Companion*. To this fan, her standup persona is a hybrid of humorist Sarah Vowell and *SNL* alum Victoria Jackson. First of all, there's the voice, an all-natural baby squeak that gives all of Mack's drolleries an added punch of often hilariously incongruous innocence. And like Jackson, once known for her eccentric musical numbers, Mack performs self-penned songs and covers on her mandolin. You must hear her singsong rendition of AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long."

Mack grew up in Webster, Wisconsin, "the Sunfish Capital of the World," she offers dryly, where a dearth of entertainment options gave her time to play music and write jokes. She says her school was made up of poor white kids and kids from the nearby Indian reservation. For fun, she and her friends would go "mudding," which involved using the biggest available truck to ravage dirt trails and kick up enough mud to make the vehicle look like it had been dunked in the bowels of the Mississippi. "We actually started a Bronco on fire that way," she says. "So it was a good time."

As one of six siblings, Mack admits it was partly the competition for attention that attracted her to corny knock-knock jokes, which she catalogued into a homemade book of 500 eye-rollers. Her comic instincts led her to pen a Jack Handy-like column for her high school newspaper, and later to the stage. "Nobody ever listened to me," she says. "I was always picked on. So it's amazing to me that I can go onstage and people will actually listen to me. It makes me so happy."

Mack received her undergraduate degree in music from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, and got her MFA in conducting from Middle Tennessee State University. In Tennessee, she played clarinet in a polka band, which she quit because her bandmates were all unreliable. [See RAMBLER page 42]

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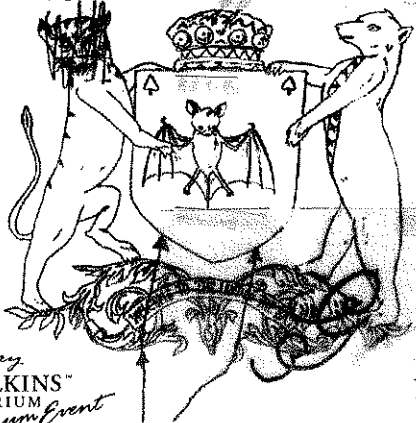
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drum's. The intemperance of polka musicians is not widely known, but it's a real problem. Mack also was an elementary school band teacher before she turned to standup, happily abandoning the routine job of giving kids lessons if they simply abstained from pummeling one another. "I didn't like going to band director conferences," she says, wrinkling up her nose. "Everybody carried the same attaché case. Everybody wore the same pants. And the older they got, the flatter their rear ends were."

Now she does a bit of substitute teaching and focuses as much as possible on performing. When I meet with her again a few weeks later, Mack has encountered a recent spate of celeb-on-the-verge good fortune that has left her dumbfounded. A talent booker for the *Tonight Show* has invited her out to L.A. for a meeting, and the casting director for Paramount is anxious to meet with her, too. The casting director e-mailed Mack and told her to come to "Lot 3" at 3:00 p.m., but offered no sort of juicy details, or even driving directions. "I don't even know where that is. I e-mailed back and asked for a street address but she never responded. Those people," she says, smiling and shaking her head as if she's talking about a group of wacky teens who have an affinity for plushies and piercing. "They just think the rest

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of the world lives like they do."

Mack admits she's about as well-versed in the business of Hollywood and the finer art of acting itself as the lady with the pig organ in her chest. So far, Mack has only acted in a pair of independent films: a short about a mishap stemming from the careless use of an invisibility potion, and a longer movie, *Back Soon*, by local writer-director Matt Olson, in which Mack plays a luckless woman who finally snaps.

"That character is exactly how I feel all the time," Mack says. "This character's really passive-aggressive. And she actually kills somebody. Not like I'm going to kill anybody...but it's the way I am," she says.

When I tell Mack that she's far from aggressive, she thinks for a moment before innocently offering, "Oh, that's good." Like many performers, maybe Mack gets all that dark stuff out through performing. "I never really had anything before comedy to express those feelings except go running," she says, skipping a beat to set up another dry punch line. "And you can only run so far when you're not in shape."

MAR MACK can be seen at the **ACME COMEDY COMPANY** AUGUST 24-26