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## Andy Kaufman lives on in Tony Clifton

The late comedian's friend Bob Zmuda will appear as Kaufman's abrasive alter-ego Clifton in a benefit show at the Comedy Store.

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Tony Clifton's shtick, as played by Bob Zmuda, is a Vegas-style lounge act. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los, Lawrence K. Ho / Los / May 15, 2010)

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Tony Clifton

By Gina Piccalo, Special to the Los Angeles Times  
*May 15, 2010*



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Tony Clifton lumbered into the vacant Comedy Store on Sunset Boulevard on Wednesday afternoon, decked in his usual powder blue tuxedo shirt and sunglasses with a glass of Jack Daniels in one hand and a brunette lovely on each arm, spewing racist jokes and lewd asides. It was clear that pointed questions would get an interviewer absolutely nowhere.

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This is a guy (or a character, anyway), who decades before the likes of Borat or Ali G got his kicks humiliating the straights, dumping raw eggs on Dinah Shore's head and fooling David Letterman. That's because the bellicose lounge singer was the late comic Andy Kaufman's alter ego, a sort of palate-cleanser to the unctuous character Latka that Kaufman played in the late 1970s and early 1980s on the sitcom "Taxi."

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Now, Clifton is back, salvaged from the dregs of New Orleans after what he says was a years-long stint touring soccer stadiums in the Third World as a faith healer, of all things. On Sunday night and again May 19-21, he's performing at the Comedy Store in West Hollywood with an eight-piece band, two back-up singers and a troupe of burlesque dancers. The

event will benefit Comic Relief, which has raised millions for the homeless and more recently, has helped support displaced entertainers from New Orleans.

Clifton's comeback was comedy producer Bob Zmuda's idea. The founder of Comic Relief, he has revived the character a few times over the years as a way to raise money for his charity and pay tribute to Kaufman, his friend and creative partner. Though Zmuda has admitted to playing him in the past, this time around, questions about Clifton's true identity are met with half-smiles and denials.

"It just so happened that Mr. Tony Clifton had got arrested in New Orleans and the judge was going to throw the book at him," Zmuda said, explaining the setup. "We talked to the judge and asked if instead of jail time, could Tony do community service for the charity?"

Right. So here's that unlikely champion of the needy, holding court at the Comedy Store while his crew sets up the stage, showing off a pornographic video montage one minute and braying about his sexual exploits the next. It was belligerence as performance art, Kaufman's comedy of choice. When Kaufman's name came up, Clifton spat whiskey all over the table. He still hasn't gotten over the late comedian "riding my coattails."

"I always spit when someone says Andy Kaufman's name," he explained. But even Clifton acknowledged the real reason behind these shows. "Thanks to me," he said, "it's keeping his ... image alive."

According to legend — or in this case Zmuda — Clifton's infamy stems from Kaufman's life-changing encounter with Elvis Presley in 1969 in Las Vegas. Kaufman hitchhiked from Boston to Las Vegas to meet the King. There, he discovered Clifton (or as Zmuda refers to him in his book "Mr. X") performing in a seedy downtown bar. Soon after, he started impersonating him.

Clifton's act hasn't evolved too much over the years. He usually has a Vegas-style entourage of singers, dancers and a band. He performs dated pop hits like "I Will Survive" and "Jambalaya (On the Bayou)" in an excruciatingly nasal voice. He tells terribly unfunny jokes and periodically shouts insults at the audience. At one early '80s show in Harrah's lounge in Las Vegas, he took a break from singing to make carrot juice atop a piano. When audience members started walking out, he pointed them out in the crowd. "This is a personal insult!" he screamed.

Over the years, Kaufman enlisted other people to play Clifton to keep his fans guessing. (Letterman and Hugh Hefner have been fooled.) And Clifton's appearances — which inevitably coincide with the May 16 anniversary of Kaufman's 1984 death — are not only reminders of Kaufman's prankster genius, they stoke rumors that the comedian is still alive. That's because years before he died, he told his girlfriend, Lynn Margulies, that if he ever faked his death, he might turn up after a while, between 10 and 25 years later, depending on who's telling the story.

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**MsRubyTuesday** at 9:15 PM May 19, 2010

I was there... & the show was GREAT!!!! and- there was a man who looked a lot like Andy...

Heres the vid I made at the after party-

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNxABR-ot68>

**glenrubens** at 9:29 PM May 15, 2010

My associates are suspicious that Mr. Doobie McDonald will be making a guest appearance at this May 16th show. My Youtube account details the evidence.

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