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Bay Area comedian Brian Copeland explores hometown's sorry history

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By ERIKA MILVY
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Not a Genuine Black Man," Brian Copeland's sold-out and subsequently extended hit solo show at the Marsh, is a personal essay cum psycho-social-political history that smacks of local interest and scandal.

Copeland's account of coming up in the 1970s in the 99.4 percent white San Leandro is an eye-opening tale of institutionalized racism and post-Jim Crow stealth segregation just a stone's throw from the hot bed of progressive reform that was swirling around Berkeley's campus.

In 1972, an 8-year-old Brian and his family had the distinction of being the first on their block to be evicted for skin color.

How Copeland received hate mail, condemning him for not being black enough, is revealed in this engaging story told by the KGO talk show star and stand-up comic in his first solo show.

Copeland talked about the success of his show and the notion that his white suburban upbringing has turned him a Beach Boys fan, a not-at-all genuine black man.

Question: Do you really like Rick Springfield?

Answer: Been a fan since the summer before my senior year in high school. I used to see him whenever he'd come to town and play the Concord Pavilion. Bought all of his albums and today, I'm usually his opening act when he does Northern California gigs.

We've become friendly over the years. He even let my son

Adam play drums onstage with him at a concert on "Don't Talk to Strangers."

Q: What prompted you to write this show?

A: I have been a stand-up for my entire adult life, I started at 18 and have done just about every stand-up show known to man -- MTV, Comedy Central, A&E, etc. I decided that I wanted to take it to the next step. The only problem was that I didn't know how.

I spent some time with Carl Reiner, one of my comedy writing gods, and asked for his advice. Carl told me to "find the piece of ground that you and you alone stand on and write from there."

That's what he'd done to create "The Dick Van Dyke Show." His ground was that he was a comedy writer working for a variety show in New York and living in New Rochelle with his wife and son.

Q: Have you been surprised by the show's success?

A: Totally. I've never done anything this personal before and was leery about how it would be received. I thought, "Well, at least I'm finally doing a show in my own way on my own terms."

To sell out every night and receive standing ovations nightly, to have people come back three and four times and bring people with them whom they feel "have got to see this show" blows my mind.

Q: Have you noticed any differences between responses to your show from black audiences vs. white audiences?

A: During previews there were a few groups of black folks who came in expecting some Def Jam thing. Unfortunately, when the word "black" is in the title of anything these days, hip hop is the assumption. They left during intermission.

Since then, and especially after reviews came out, the black folks who've attended -- and surprisingly there have been tons ... surprising because I was warned that black audiences aren't big supporters of theater -- have been very kind, very responsive. And, in many cases, they tell me that they're grateful that I'm saying some things that they've thought but haven't been able to voice.

I'm finding that it's not all a black/white thing. I had an elderly Jewish lady come up to me last weekend in tears saying that hers was the only Jewish family in their Midwestern neighborhood when she was growing up and that I had just told her life story.

I have victims of child and spousal abuse tell me that my father was their father. I've had people tell me that they've struggled with depression like me. One woman even told me that because of the show, she was finally going to get help for her condition.

Q: You depict your mom with a lot of love and respect. Were you ever angry at her for moving you to San Leandro and thereby putting you in such a difficult situation as a child?

A: I was never angry at her for putting us in that position. She taught us that we had a right to be wherever we wanted to be ... no matter what people said or did to try and hamper our progress.

Q: What do San Leandreans think about the show? Have you received any criticism?

A: I think half the city has been to see it.

Some, who have not attended the show -- primarily older folks who were here in those days and complicit in the segregation -- are angry that I'm bringing it to the forefront. Most are supportive and coming back with friends.

Q: Your show deals with very serious topics and covers some difficult emotional terrain and yet you manage to keep it mostly light and entertaining. Are you not in touch with your anger?

A: Comedians deal with pain through laughter. That's why we do what we do.

Q: What with this level of success and the extension at the Marsh, do you have plans to remount this show elsewhere or do another show?

A: We're talking about several different projects involving "Genuine" right now including a network series, a movie and a book.

Q: What about your personal history and past experiences may have contributed to your chosen profession as a performer, commentator and comic?

A: The need to laugh so I didn't cry.

Erika Milvy, a free-lance writer living in San Francisco, reviews Bay Area theater for Q.