

Mp3 Lewis Grizzard - On The Road With Lewis Grizzard



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Columnist, humorist, author and lecturer tells some of his most hilarious stories. 11 MP3 Songs SPOKEN WORD: Comedy Details: For a man who spent so much time recovering from so many operations; a man who had so many close calls before the last one, Lewis Grizzard never seemed very interested in 'The Great Beyond.' Oh, he wrote about illness and hospitals often enough in his books and columns; joked about it on hundreds of stages across the South. But the last sentence of his last book gives a better clue to his real passion than all those jokes. "Life," he wrote, "I do love that word." It was life that Lewis Grizzard loved. And how he did live: Four wives, 450 daily newspapers, Millions of fans, Hundreds of concerts, Oceans of vodka, Thousands of prayers, and at the beginning and the end of it all, Moreland. Always Moreland, the tiny town that time forgot and Lewis embellished. It was his Mayberry, his Lake Wobegon. Like Twain before him, Grizzard used the scenes of his youth to weave tales that were always truth, even when they weren't exactly fact. And like Twain, he made us laugh and think at the same time. Indeed, during his lifetime, Lewis Grizzard heard himself described as "this generation's Mark Twain," "one of the foremost humorists in the country" and "a Faulkner for plain folks" by the national press. What he was, without a doubt, was a masterful storyteller, stand-up comedian, syndicated columnist and best selling author. "I am," he would say, "the only person from Moreland, Georgia who ever made the New York Times Bestseller List.... I am the only person in Moreland, Georgia who ever HEARD of the New York Times Bestseller List..." He could poke fun at his hometown and still be loved there. "Lewis is a good boy," they would say with toleration and affection. Actually, he was born in Fort Benning, Georgia, and only moved to Moreland with his mother after his father left both the Army and his young bride in a fit of despair and mystery that would haunt Grizzard to his dying day. The tremendous love and frustration he felt for Captain Lewis McDonald Grizzard, Sr. finally overflowed,' typical Lewis style, in a book. "My Daddy

"Was A Pistol and I'm a Son of a Gun" remains one of his most remarkable works, evoking tears and laughter in such rapid succession that the reader finally understands that they are opposite sides of the single coin of parenthood. Years later he penned his homage to "Miss Christine," (his longsuffering, tough, school teacher mother), entitled "Don't Forget To Call Your Mama - I Wish I Could Call Mine." Together they form bookends to the entire Grizzard library, these sentimental melancholy, misty memories of the Mama and Daddy from which he came. Lewis often told interviewers he was raised "poor, proud, and patriotic." Stories of his childhood in Moreland ring with American archetypes; the strong, quiet man (his maternal grandfather "Daddy Bun," a farmer and school janitor who was the inspiration for Grizzard's famous "Definition of a Redneck"), the strong Southern woman who bends but does not break (his mother, beginning life anew at age 40 after Lewis Sr.'s departure), the fearsome school authority figure (O.P. Evans, principal of Newnan High School), and of course the girls, always the girls (Kathy Sue Loudermilk and company). To note that Lewis Grizzard was a graduate of the University of Georgia may seem a bit like noting that the sky is blue. For the benefit of the uninitiated however, it must be said here. Bulldog to the bone, he later pulled off one of the great feats in syndicated newspaper history - that of publishing an almost entirely empty column. It was the day after his beloved alma mater had lost a match-up with rival Georgia Tech. Lewis wrote one sentence above several columns of stark white. The sentence read, "Frankly, I don't want to talk about it." His ashes (half of them, anyway) were, in accordance with his fondest wishes, scattered over the fifty-yard line at UGA's Sanford Stadium. Lewis' UGA jokes, both at his own school's expense and at their rivals', were among his fans' favorites. They recited them by heart on his concert tours, waiting for the punch lines, ready to laugh yet again. "Earl," they would mouth silently as Lewis hit the pause perfectly..."that dog would BITE you-u-u-!!" Lewis was like that- like family; like a funny uncle or brother. You always laughed and you always asked for the old stories one more time. Lewis obliged. "I'm Bulldog born" he'd say, "Bulldog bred, and when I die I'll be-by-God Bulldog dead!" He once said that while in between marriages, he had considered placing a classified personal ad seeking a UGA coed with whom he could attend the games because, "She would not think that getting down on one's knees and barking at a Clemson fan was odd behavior." At 23, he became the youngest-ever executive sports editor of The Atlanta Journal, where he was hired by the legendary Jim Minter ("Mr. Minter" to Lewis all his life). Mr. Minter was sports editor at the time and later became the Journal's executive editor during the big years of the Grizzard books and columns. But that

was yet to come. Now, filled with the indecision and impulsiveness of youth, He left the Journal and went to Chicago. Lewis liked to say that he was "held prisoner" there. Actually he went to make his reputation as sports editor of the Chicago Sun-Times. Lewis loved newspaper business. He loved the sound of the old typewriters clanging, the copy room floor covered with discarded rewrites, the pressure of deadlines, and the beer or two or three at the bar down the street after it was all over. When others began to suggest that he should switch to more modern methods of composition, he said, "When I write, I like to hear some noise." He was good. Mr. Minter later said that had Lewis not begun a writing career, he might have wound up as one of the great newspaper editors of this century. He was that good. Fortunately for Southern literature, however, he was also very, very cold. So Lewis came home to Atlanta and the Journal. The story of those years in exile, "If I Ever Get Back To Georgia, I'm Gonna Nail My Feet To The Ground" was a huge hit ... even in Chicago. It was Mr. Minter, his mentor and professional father figure, who first encouraged him to write a column. "What the hell would I write about?" he asked. But one day, he tried it. He rolled the paper into his old manual clunker and he hit a key and wrote a column. It was a task he would repeat afterwards for upwards of two decades. Steve Enoch, his friend and manager in later years, tells a story about a lady of the evening who approached Grizzard in a bar in Mexico. "I make you very happy," she is supposed to have said, "for one hundred American dollars I do anything you want!," whereupon Grizzard shouts, "Thank you Jesus! It's a miracle!" pulls out a hundred dollar bill and says "Here. Go upstairs and write my next column." Grizzard likened the pressure to top oneself day after day in print to "being married to a nymphomaniac... it's a whole lot of fun for the first week." But the work paid off. The 1980's and early 1990's were the glory years of Lewis Grizzard Enterprises. He became a business, and things got, he would later admit, "a little crazy." It was a wild ride, but Lewis' particular genius was that he always took his readers along. Sure, he was famous, but he was also the friend in the paper each morning. He let us in on the joke of celebrity. He sat with Johnny Carson ("Johnny wears a lot of makeup."). He acted with Delta Burke ("she don't sweat much for a fat girl..."). He did "Larry King Live," "Designing Women," "Tonight," "Today," "Tomorrow." He was everywhere, even in his own TV special, "Love, Sex, and Romance." Steve Enoch tells how Lewis, at the height of his reign as a cultural phenomenon, was approached by Hollywood executives to be a regular in a sitcom. "We need someone very Southern" they had said. So he and Grizzard flew to L.A. and power-brunched and met the TV guys. They called back. "Sorry, but Lewis is TOO Southern," they said. The column wrote itself that day. "Too

Southern?" Lewis wrote with mock indignation, "Why, that's an oxymoron. There's no such thing as being "TOO Southern." He ticked off a lot of people during the glory years, writing what he thought and becoming increasingly loved and/or hated. Southerners of all stripes could not help but feel a certain protective ownership of their testy bard. He was, after all, one of them, writing from the point of view of a culture that WAS a little different and a little slower and a lot more eccentric than that of other parts of the country. Lewis was conservative. His favorite movie was "Patton." He railed against "the speech police" and the stereotyping of the South in films and literature. Sometimes he brought to mind the legendary statement of LBJ regarding a foreign dictator who enjoyed American support. "Yeah, he's an S.O.B.," Johnson growled, "but he's our S.O.B!" And then, just when you thought you had him pegged as an angry man, Lewis would up and surprise you. He'd write, "I've been noticing flowers lately, which is something I've never done before." Or he'd speak of the funeral of a friend's father with such quiet dignity and respect and heart-rending loss that you wanted to comfort him. Lewis was like that. But always, just offstage, there was his heart trouble, a lurking, looming danger. He was born with a congenital heart defect, a faulty valve, which led to three open-heart surgeries and a series of near-death moments. The worst was the third operation in 1993, from which he never fully recovered. The whole story is contained in one of his finest works, "I Took A Lickin' and Kept On Tickin' (and Now I Believe in Miracles)". The title was no exaggeration. He HAD been just shy of being pronounced dead; was even on a heart donor list for a time. Dedra Kyle, who would become his wife the next year and who was already his primary caregiver, received a telling dedication from him on the first page of that book. It read, "To Dedra, the real survivor." She says, "When he came home, there were some very, very hard days. We did a lot of crying together; a lot of talking about serious things; a lot of praying, but Lewis always tried to find the humor." The news coverage of this worst-yet Grizzard illness unleashed a remarkable outpouring of sympathy, prayer, and affection. There were 50,000 pieces of mail, calls from dying people wanting to donate their hearts, busloads of church groups driving past Atlanta's Emory Hospital with get-well banners- a family even drove from Louisiana just to be at the hospital for the deathwatch. But Lewis recovered. His heart simply started beating on its own. The doctors called it a bon-a-fide miracle. So did Lewis. He publicly thanked those who had prayed. He made out a list of things he wanted to accomplish in his remaining years. It included writing a funny novel and a book about male friendship, planting a garden, riding more trains and catching a trout on a fly rod. At the end of the list was this entry: "See Rock City. I've never

seen the son of a bitch. Honest." He lived a little less than a year after that. There were low points (pain, depression, the death of his black lab, Catfish, and the famous column about it that broke reader's hearts along with his own) and high points (the joy of his marriage to Dedra just four days before the fourth and final surgery, and his delight and fulfillment in a fatherly relationship with her daughter Jordan). He wrote less frequently, was unable to tour, and gave few interviews. But when he did write, the power of his pen seemed only enhanced by the stress his body and spirit were under. The same year that he was voted "The Author From Hell" at a publishing convention (for his "insensitivity" to his escorts on book tours, he was writing powerful, evocative and deceptively simple columns like "Be Sweet," based on his late mother's habitual last words in every conversation. In it he wrote, "My mother's words were so simple. Be sweet. But we aren't sweet. We don't honor sweet. We don't even like sweet. Sweet is weak. Respect me or I'll shoot you. Sweet is weak. No. No. Be sweet. Be kind and gentle. Be tolerant. Be forgiving and slow to anger. Be tender and able to cry. Be kind to old people and dogs. Be loving. Share. Don't pout. Don't be so loud. Hold a puppy. Kiss a hand. Put your arms around a frightened child. Make an outstanding play and then don't do the King Tut Butt Strut to point to the inadequacies of the vanquished. Be sweet. The wonders that might do. The wonders that just might do. I can still hear you, Mama." Two month later, on March 20, 1994, at 10:45am, he went to join her. The doctors said he died peacefully. There was brain damage. He would never have been the same. Lewis Grizzard was 47. They sang "Precious Memories" at his funeral, like he wanted. Fans still drive to Moreland looking for him. They leave notes or flags or little toy bulldogs by the stone, which reads, "A Great American." Lewis might have laughed at the reverence, which suddenly descended on him at his death. He was, after all, rather irreverent, sentimental, arrogant, kind, outspoken, gifted, driven, troubled, and brilliant. He was a bundle of contradictions and a very funny man.

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