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By MATT TAIBBI

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O'Neal onstage in 2009. "He was funnier than everybody," said Chris Rock.

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DEATH OF A STAND-UP

Chris Rock and Louis C.K. said Patrice O'Neal was the funniest comic in America - and America was starting to catch on. But just a month after his breakthrough gig, it all came to a tragic end By Jonah Weiner

PATRICE O'NEAL, THE FUNNIEST comedian America had never heard of, boarded a Los Angeles-bound plane at JFK last September, heading to the biggest gig of his life. Later that month, 6.4 million people would tune in to watch Comedy Central's *Roast of Charlie Sheen* - the largest audience to ever watch O'Neal work a room. Joining a motley panel that included William Shatner and Mike Tyson, O'Neal would be the last to whip jokes at the Warlock. The six-foot-five, 300-pound comedian was accustomed to closing out a batting order. Even Chris Rock, who called O'Neal "funnier than everybody," once admitted he'd be nervous to follow the man. ♣ He landed at LAX at 9 p.m. and headed to the Ritz-Carlton

in Marina del Rey to freshen up, nibble on a fruit plate and, oh yeah, figure out some jokes. He was due at the taping at 1:45 p.m. the next day, but still wasn't sure what he'd say; he'd only gotten the job a week before, and he'd been busy shooting a movie with Patton Oswalt and Johnny Knoxville. The network kept asking him to e-mail his bit, and he kept blowing them off. "I don't want some smarmy white writers looking at my unfinished shit," he said. Around 11 p.m., Comedy Central sent a comedian named Kurt Metzger over to help hash together jokes. "He had general ideas in a notebook," Metzger says. "I was just helping him polish it into something they could put on a teleprompter." ♣ O'Neal had grown up playing football, and he came at humor as if it were a contact sport. He loved messing with people, flaying them with such glee that it could take a while to realize that this was how he expressed affection. "He didn't take any shit from anybody, and he presented himself that way," says comedian and podcast host Marc Maron, who first met O'Neal in 1997. "Most of the attention you were going to get from him wasn't going to be positive, but it would be framed in a way that was so cutting and funny that you kind of craved it." ♣ Louis C.K., who called O'Neal his favorite working

stand-up, said the two would get into sparring matches: "We would lock horns on stuff. I told him once I wasn't sexually attracted to black women, and he tested me for two hours, saying that meant I'm gay."

His combativeness was essential to his stand-up, where racial and gender tensions were his big themes. O'Neal, who grew up worshipping Richard Pryor and George Carlin, saw comedy as a platform for id-dredging honesty; the more offensive the better. He fantasized in his acts about owning white slaves. He contemplated chaining a white baby to his belt and going sailing, guaranteeing his rescue should he go missing. His observations on women were even more confrontational, full of over-the-top misogyny: "When you suck a dick, make a sound between retarded and choking," he instructed women in one bit, simultaneously celebrating and mocking male depravity. "That's sexy to us." His provocations were bolstered by a vast, searching intelligence. "He had a perspective, a distance, that most people don't have," says Sarah Silverman. "He seemed to be able to see the big picture when the rest of us saw dots."

At the Sheen roast, the participants railed on each other, and O'Neal's race, heft and health were easy targets – he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes at age 23. "Holy Christ, you're fat – you look like you deep-fry your hands before you bite your fingernails," said comic Anthony Jeselnik. Amy Schumer dubbed the night "a farewell party for Patrice's foot."

When his turn came, O'Neal did something unexpected: He abandoned almost all of his prepared jokes and ripped, hilariously and viciously, into his fellow roasters. "I'm just disappointed and hurt at how much comfort white people have around you now," he told Tyson. Shatner made a joke about housing projects; O'Neal theorized, "I think he might be racist because his hair plugs look like black girls' pussy hair." He changed the air in the room: Whereas the other comics were doing material, he was maneuvering on the fly. "His dissection of us was so pure and real, and damn funny," roast master and *Family Guy* creator Seth MacFarlane said later. "He was so very in the moment," said fellow panelist Jeffrey Ross. "He roasted the roaster."

After the program aired, O'Neal's buzz rocketed as new converts traded YouTube links to his performance and dug up older bits. The broadcast – the highest-rated roast in Comedy Central history – capped what was looking like O'Neal's year: *Elephant in the Room*, his brilliant hourlong Comedy Central special, had aired to acclaim in February; FX, which saw O'Neal as something like a black Louis C.K., signed him up for a sitcom and promised free creative rein; offers were pouring in. At 41,



Life After Death

O'Neal with longtime girlfriend Brown (1) in 2008. The 300-pounder played high school football (2) and treated comedy like a contact sport. On *Arrested Development* in 2003 (3).



O'Neal was poised to achieve the fame that had eluded him for two decades.

AROUND 2 A.M. ON OCTOBER 19th, a month to the day after the broadcast, O'Neal called his longtime girlfriend, Vondercarlo Brown, saying he couldn't move his legs. "I think I'm having a stroke," he said in a voice fainter than any she'd ever heard him use. Paramedics rushed him to Jersey City Medical Center; he was soon transferred to Englewood Hospital for surgery to remove a blood clot in his head. He'd never leave the hospital again. He lost his speech, then control of his limbs. Brown installed herself beside, as did O'Neal's 64-year-old mother, Georgia, who came in from his hometown of Boston. Doctors warned that even if O'Neal survived he'd likely be "locked in" – conscious but unable to speak or move. He responded to stimuli for a time by moving his eyes, then he lost that ability too. On November 29th, just eight days shy of his 42nd birthday, Patrice O'Neal died.

On a cold, sunny day in January, Georgia O'Neal is at her son's Jersey City condo, where he lived since 2006, packing up his things. The walls are painted a rich maroon that Patrice picked out himself, and art he bought during several trips to Brazil – landscapes, abstracts – hangs everywhere. There's a photograph of Carlin on

one wall, and another of Pryor in the bedroom. "I've got so much to do," Georgia says, trying not to choke up. She works in customer service at a Massachusetts health-insurance company, but "I've been out here for so long, I don't know whether I'm gonna have a job when I get back. I'm trying to resume a halfway normal life. It will never be completely normal again. I've lost my son."

Georgia raised Patrice and his sister by herself in the largely black working-class Boston neighborhood of Roxbury. His father was never in the picture, and Patrice said he had no interest in meeting him. Georgia named him Patrice Malcolm O'Neal, after Malcolm X and Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese independence fighter. Other kids made fun of his name, teasing that it sounded like a girl's, and he learned to give as good as he got. When he began performing, his mother asked if he would adopt a stage name. "Aw, no," he said. "I learned how to be a man with this name." He was a gregarious kid: popular, cracking everybody up. He had a hungry mind, too. He'd pore through books from the library and take apart toys to put them back together, "analyzing things and figuring out how they worked," Georgia says. "He did the same thing in his comedy."

At summer camp when Patrice was 10, a white boy called him "nigger"; when he grabbed the kid to avenge the insult, Patrice was kicked out of the camp. The in-

justice stung, but mostly, he said, he grew up accustomed to "covert racism," which irritated him more. On *Mr. P*, a live CD out this month, O'Neal tells the crowd, "White people used to be able to walk around and go - singsong voice - 'I don't like niggers! I'm gonna hang one of you motherfuckers!'" The post-civil-rights era is infuriating, he says, "cause I gotta figure out, 'Is this motherfucker being racist? I don't know!'"

O'Neal was masterful on the subject of race - as perceptive, trenchant and wild as Chris Rock or Dave Chappelle. He came at the subject with bits that belied their conceptual sophistication and avoided easy moralizing: "I feel more comfortable when I see old white men doing some kinda shit," he said in a 2008 bit, lampooning black self-hatred. "You ever see a black pilot on a plane? You be like, 'Where the fuck - is this nigga driving to where the real pilot is?'" He scoffed at the notion of black doctors, too. "What you gonna operate on, my pinkie toe? Because that's the only thing I'm gonna let you touch, nigger!"

At 16, O'Neal had sex with a 15-year-old white girl. She complained to police, although O'Neal always maintained the encounter had been consensual. Convicted of statutory rape, he was sentenced to 60 days at the MCI-Concord holding facility outside Boston. "It was my worst nightmare," he said. "When I get there, I'm not trying to be hard, 'cause I know I'm not hard." He was a sensitive kid. The first time he'd seen N.W.A., he confessed, they scared him.

After high school, he enrolled at Northeastern University, majoring in theater. In 1992, watching an open-mic night at the comedy club Estelle's, he heckled a performer, who challenged him to try it himself. O'Neal returned the following week and "kept on going from there." Dane Cook, who worked Boston clubs around the same time, recalls seeing one of O'Neal's earliest performances, during which he joked about going to summer camp in the countryside and, growing homesick, wanting a cassette of gunshots and sirens to lull him to sleep. "He had this gentle-giant appeal," Cook says. "He already had an edge, but he was a little more vulnerable."

That vulnerability, at least outwardly, didn't last long. The comedian Jim Norton, who went on to become one of O'Neal's closest friends, recalls that the two first met while sharing a college bill near New York in the mid-Nineties. Both bombed, but O'Neal laid into Norton afterward, jabbering about how shitty his act had been. "I thought he was a complete asshole," Norton says. O'Neal sometimes began meetings with television executives by quizzing them about their network's failures. Being confrontational "was his way of testing you, gauging your reaction,"

says JoAnn Grigioni, vice president of talent at Comedy Central.

His brasshock could be self-sabotaging. After O'Neal played a bouncer in Spike Lee's *25th Hour*, Lee, impressed, asked him to forgo pilot-season auditions, suggesting that he'd make it worth O'Neal's while if he remained available for upcoming projects; O'Neal refused. He'd had roles on *Arrested Development* and *The Office*, but when *Office* producers asked him to fly to L.A. to shoot another episode, he blew it off. It was a six-line character, he later explained. "I just couldn't do it."

He came to auditions unprepared, goaded executives, became known as a bridge-burner. Louis C.K. remarked that O'Neal "could be slumped in a chair, and Steven Spielberg walks up to him, and he'd look at him like, 'Do I have to take my hands out of my pockets and shake your hand?'" O'Neal's manager, Jonathan Brandstein, once pitched him to a network big who rejected him flatly: "We don't have time for Patrick's bullshit."

O'NEAL OFTEN JOKED ABOUT HIS DIABETES. IN A BIT ABOUT EATING WHITE-CHOCOLATE OREOS, HE SAID, "I DON'T NEED BOTH MY FEET. I'M NOT A BALLERINA!"

But that same candor killed during his countless appearances on SiriusXM's *Opie & Anthony Show*, where O'Neal elevated shooting the shit to an art, riffing on everything from Illuminati conspiracy theories (he liked them) to why *Fight Club* is "the *Scarface* of white people." "I'd be thinking, 'Has he been working on this concept forever?'" says co-host Greg "Opie" Hughes. "But it was a subject we'd just brought up!"

Onstage, O'Neal said, his aim was to be "an unedited racist, unedited sexist, unedited piece of garbage." An animal lover, he kept a 200-gallon fish tank full of African cichlids and adored his two dogs: Gladys, a poodle, and Dude, a Westie. At a "Canine Comedy" fundraiser in 2003, however, after the crowd had talked through several performers' sets, he began describing the dog he'd eaten that morning for breakfast. The room got silent. "Let's hear it for countries that eat dogs!" he hollered. An organizer ordered him to stop; he didn't. They cut off his mic; he began bashing out songs on a piano. "I don't give audiences power," he declared later. "I don't need them."

FOR YEARS, O'NEAL HAD TURNED his illness into grist for comedy. "I joke about everything," he said, "because that just keeps you from killing yourself." In *Elephant in the Room* there's a bit about eating white-chocolate-covered Oreos: "I be like, 'You know what, I don't need both my feet. I'm not a ballerina!'" He goes on to talk about pissing in his girlfriend's mouth during sex, after which she suggests they go to the hospital: "Your pee taste like birthday cake."

It's hard to say exactly where O'Neal's problems with self-control veered into self-destructiveness. In an interview a few days before his stroke, he said he was miserable "all the time." He loved Brazilian steakhouses, devouring skewer after skewer. In 2008, he kept a diary for the food blog Grub Street; his intake over five days included mac-'n-cheese with fried chicken, buffalo wings, an omelet with corned-beef hash and two pancakes, fish and chips, kielbasa, cheese bread and several "dead animals on a stick." "I like going, 'Uhuhh, I'm done' when I eat," he wrote.

O'Neal's ravenous appetite went beyond food. Beginning in the early 2000s, he took a series of vacations to Rio de Janeiro with the express purpose of fucking prostitutes. "We'd take 100 milligrams of Viagra and go to the whorehouse," Norton, who accompanied O'Neal on three trips, recalls. When O'Neal went in 2006, he brought his girlfriend, Brown, a musician and actress he'd met on the set of *25th Hour*. How comfortable was she with O'Neal's sex tourism? "Oh, I was a participant," she says with a sly smile. "We were swingers at a point." There had been less of that recently: The pair had plans to marry, and O'Neal treated Brown's daughter, now 13, like his own. His death came as a relative shock, says Brown. He'd been living better: trying veganism, eating sugar-free cookies, resisting soda and sweets.

In the end, it was too late. The service for O'Neal was held on December 5th at New York's Park Avenue Christian Church. Rock, Cook, Colin Quinn and Wanda Sykes were all there; Russell Simmons and Martin Lawrence sent flowers. Several speakers were comedians. One of the biggest laughs came when Quinn took the microphone. "I bet Patrice is up in heaven right now," he said, "trying to talk to God as an equal."

Over the following weeks, the flurry of YouTube links that had followed the Sheen roast became a storm. *Elephant in the Room* and the roast were in heavy rotation on Comedy Central, and tributes from stand-up giants piled up online. In death, O'Neal had become a certified comedy superstar. "I think if he were still around he'd be surprised to know the outpouring of love he's gotten," Jim Norton says. "He didn't realize how much people really liked him." 