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Northwest Herald, The (Crystal Lake, IL)

March 12, 2010

Section: Sidetracks

Rumba spends time in '80s, '60s at Raue

JANA THOMPSON

A chat with impressions comic Bob Rumba is punctuated by product-placement relics and soundbite gags from days gone by. The Froot Loops spokesperson promotes a balanced breakfast. Long-gone radio and TV sensation Ed Wynn tells a joke. Jimmy Stewart sells canned vegetables.

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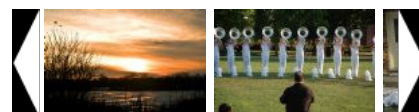
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Rumba will be bringing his celebrity mimicry and ventriloquism bits to the **Raue Center** for the Arts in Crystal Lake for Friday's "Awesome '80s Comedy Show." The decade was prosperous for Rumba and two other comics who will be appearing.

"We're not going to talk about Mr. T or anything," Rumba explains. "I'm going to emcee stuff in between Judy (Tenuta) and Emo (Phillips). It's almost like a reunion show. The three of us haven't done a show together in 15 years. We haven't been together since Vegas."

Saturday night, Rumba will become Ed Sullivan to host Beatles tribute band American English. Younger folks may not remember Sullivan so well, but "the musical acts still transcend," Rumba said.

Originally from Pittsburgh, Rumba moved to Chicago to nurture his career with comedy partner Gorman Lowe. "I moved to Chicago when I was fresh out of high school. I did some legit theater here (in Pittsburgh). ... I was a fetus with clothes on."

Before comedy clubs had their heyday, the pair worked between acts at Chicago's Kingston Mines blues club doing impressions between acts. "(Lowe) was fat, so we did Laurel and Hardy."

Eventually, they hosted their own variety show on Sunday afternoons, brushing elbows with other unique comics.

"Bob Zmuda used to work in the kitchen at Kingston Mines as a cook. He used to come out and do his act and go back in the kitchen. He was really funny. He used to say 'I work with Andy Kaufman,' and were all like, 'yeeeeeah, OK.' And when Andy Kaufman was wresting women, we said 'Hey, look! The ref is Bob Zmuda!' Now he's in charge of Comic Relief."

Lowe and Rumba parted ways when Lowe had to return to Pittsburgh due to family obligations, but Rumba had picked up ventriloquist skills during the pair's run.

"When I started out as a ventriloquist, I didn't have enough money for a regular dummy, so I bought a head on a stick. It didn't have arms. You stuck your arms through the sleeves and pretended they were his arms. That doesn't really separate the two of you."

Rick Kiebdaj – a Chicago artist known for "carving lion heads and headboards with naked women for Hugh Hefner," according to Rumba – crafted a pair of \$25 arms for Rumba's dummy.

Rumba's been mimicking other comics since before he can remember. Well almost.

He was setting up for what he thought was his first gig as Groucho Marx at age 17, when his mother said "You've been doing this for years." She produced a photo album of Rumba playing Groucho at age 5.

"It all comes back. I remember having a real cigar. It was still in the wrapper, so they figured it was OK."

Rumba has made two appearances on Oprah – to tell a joke for a "joke-a-minute" episode and to show off his celeb lookalike prowess as Groucho alongside a friend done up as Henry Fonda. It must have looked odd as they drove to the studio together, Rumba notes.

Through the years, Rumba has had an interesting look at TV from the inside.

He's a time capsule of America's favorite soundbites and characters – Groucho, Charlie Chaplin, Barney Fife, Stan Laurel and Peter Sellers.

When 9 Lives was looking for a new Morris the Cat voice, Rumba tried out. "They were on about the fifth Morris at that point. I made him sound like Thurston Howell III."

He was a finalist to play the eponymous cereal seaman Cap'n Crunch after the original actor died. He tried a little method acting.

"I even ate the cereal to help me sound more like him."

See Bob Rumba

What: "Awesome '80s Comedy Show"

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday

Where: **Raue Center** for the Arts, 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake

About: Rumba performs with comic pals Judy Tenuta and Emo Phillips

Tickets: \$32 to \$38

What: American English with Bob Rumba

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: **Raue Center** for the Arts, 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake

About: Rumba impersonates Ed Sullivan to complement the Beatles tribute band

Tickets: \$37 to \$43

Information: 815-356-9212 or www.rauecenter.org.

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