

Obituary, Wednesday, May 14, 2003:

John Cantu — passionate voice for comics in S.F.

By Steve Rubenstein, Chronicle Staff Writer



John Cantu, the loud, funny and beloved promoter and impresario of the San Francisco stand-up comedy scene, has died.

Mr. Cantu, 55, who ran the Holy City Zoo comedy club and for years stood on the sidewalk in front, cajoling and wheedling passers-by to come in, died Sunday at Laguna Honda Hospital in San Francisco after a long battle with cancer.

"I loved John. He was such a character," said comedian Michael Pritchard, his friend. "He was so gifted, and he really helped build comedy and comedians in San Francisco."

Comedian Dan St. Paul, one of the regulars at the club, said Mr. Cantu liked to encourage young comedians, and although his criticism of their performances could be devastating, it was also forthright, perceptive and accurate.

You felt a camaraderie with the guy, and he was really delighted just listening to people laugh," St. Paul said.

Mr. Cantu, who often slept on the stage of the club after the shows, was well known for attempting to snag new customers by hollering "Comedy! Comedy!

Comedy!" at perplexed Clement Street pedestrians. Few who ventured inside were disappointed. Although he rarely performed himself; he taught joke-writing classes, operated a humor Web site, made speeches about comedy, and supplied one-liners to columnists, comedians, customers and anyone else who would listen. "The art of comedy," he often said, is to not let the audience know you're doing jokes.

"For five bucks, would-be comedians were invited to attend Mr. Cantu's comedy workshops, where he would plead with nervous newcomers to slow down and relax.

"You're like a Mack truck," he told one woman in a 1987 class. "It's not how fast you say the words, but how much pause you allow between sentences. Get into a rhythm When I snap my fingers, you stop, when I snap them again, you go."

Comedian Will Durst said Mr. Cantu was "larger than

life, and he gave me a break when not everyone was sure I deserved one." Durst remembered the first the Mr. Cantu put him on stage at the now-closed Holy City Zoo in the late 1970s -- directly after a knockout performance by Robin Williams.

Afterward, Mr. Cantu told Durst, "Tough break, kid. At least you didn't flip out."

Mr. Cantu was one of the founders of Comedy Celebration Day, an annual outdoor marathon of standup comedy in Golden Gate Park that draws tens of thousands of spectators. He also was a founder of the "Too Many Larrys!" improvisational troupe.

Mr. Cantu, a native of Saginaw, Mich., dropped out of high school to serve in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War. He came to San Francisco in the 1970s, the beginning of a golden age of standup comedy that Mr. Cantu nurtured and promoted.

He is survived by his former wife, Susan Cerce, of San Francisco, and by his parents, Juan and Leona Cantu. *Funeral services were held at 1 p.m. Friday at the Neptune Society Columbarium, 1 Loraine Court, San Francisco.*

Photo Chronicle/Julie Plasencia

For more about John Cantu visit www.Humormall.com