

So, HAVE you
heard the one
about the comedian
who laid down on
the TRAIN tracks?

By Peter Jones / Portraits by David Mejias

He has no ticket, no suitcases, but Don Becker has baggage.

On a dark August night in 1986, the rumble of an approaching train vibrates through the rubber soles of his shoes. The tracks shudder, a whistle cuts the night, a white light grows larger.

For days now, he's been hearing the voices—relentless, piercing, threatening. Their presence robs him of peace, crowds his thoughts, crushes his sense of reality. The voices aren't new, but they are more insistent than they've ever been: "Sacrifice your arms...or you're a dead man. Sacrifice your arms...you won't have to die, and you won't have to kill anyone." Becker falls to his knees next to the track.

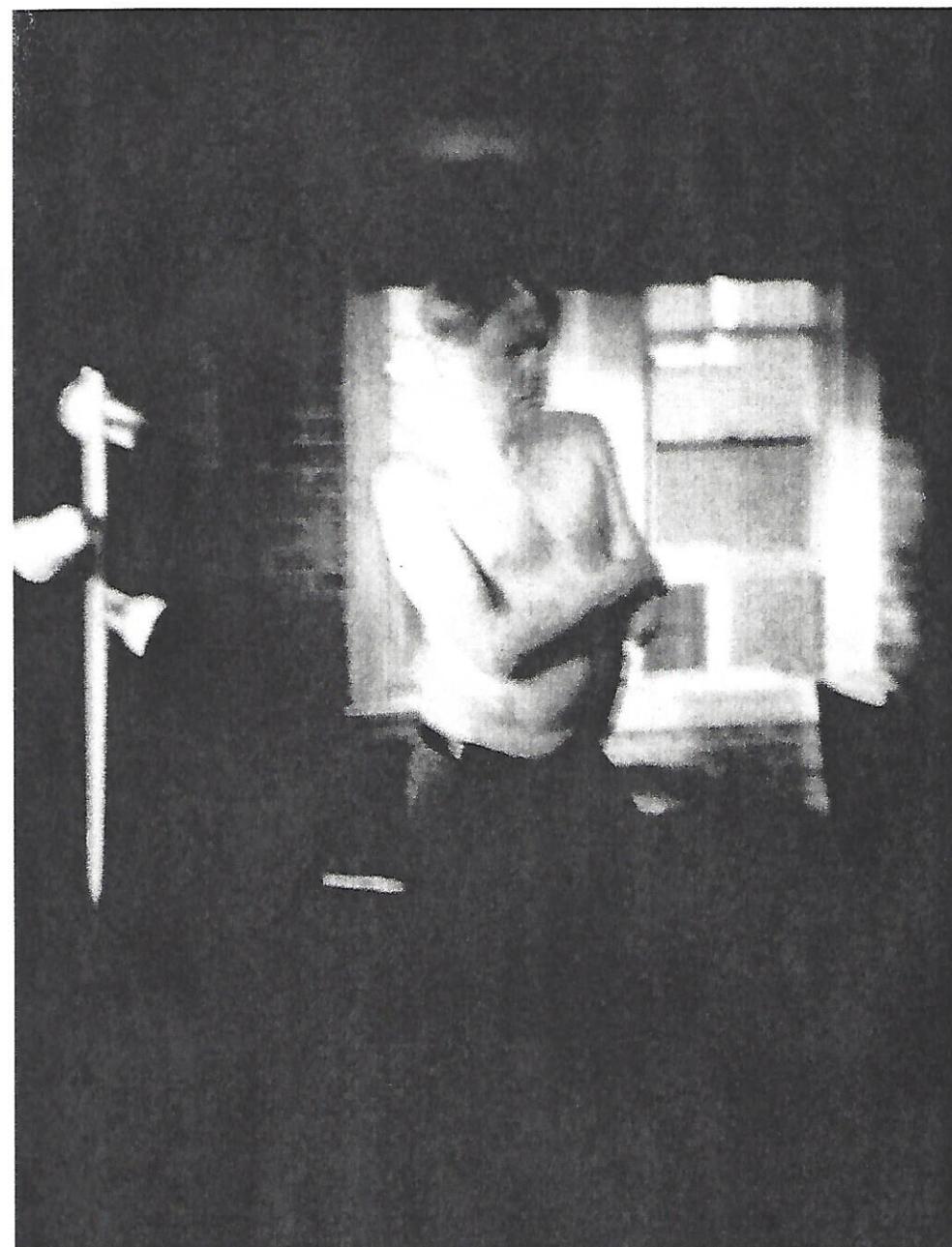
"What happened to my hand?!
Damn dog!"

Members of the audience shift in their seats and laugh uncomfortably. This is no joke—the comedian wears a prosthetic arm. It's a year or so after the incident that claimed one of Becker's arms. Someone wonders out loud if it's a prop. The audience in the Denver club has come to see the man they remember as young, bookish, and edgy, a guy who looked like the bespectacled Sherman from "The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle." But tonight at Comedy Works, Don Becker is rough around the edges. Gone are the tie and short hair. In their place, a garish shirt, a tousle of stringy hair, and a hook at the end of his left arm. His wild appearance is meant to distract from the sinister-looking prosthetic, but instead it heightens the unsettling effect Becker has on his audience.

Many in the crowd had heard something about the comic's disfigurement. As a local story, the incident was a source of discomfort, shrouded in the mystery of conflicting stories: It was described as a suicide attempt, an injury from Vietnam, a drunken accident.

"Actually, I was feeling really fat," he tells the crowd. "I wanted to lose some weight, so I tried the Amtrak Weight-Loss Program."

The audience laughs with a little more certainty this time. The arm jokes diffuse tension. Becker hates telling them, hates drawing attention to his missing limb, but knows he has to address the curious stares before he can move on with his routine. As he changes the subject, perspiration runs into his eyes. The microphone is in his right hand. His reflex is to wipe his brow with his left, but he catches himself—yet another reminder that his hand is no longer there.



Twenty years ago, Becker, along with Roseanne Barr, was one of Denver's top comics and a favorite among local critics. Both stand-up comedians were favored to go far, but a battle with mental illness cost Becker his left arm and his promising career. Still, despite his profound psychosis and years of self-destructive behavior, Becker is a survivor. In recent years, he has fused personal experience, religion, humor, and tragedy into a series of offbeat plays and solo performances. *Back on a Limb*, for one, was an emotionally raw exploration of his illness. "Former *Rocky Mountain News* theater critic Jackie Campbell gave it a D," Becker says, "because she said it sounded like a madman yelling at the back of the bus. Jackie, that's what it is. Give it an A!"

Until *Back on a Limb*, Becker circulated a very different version of the story, in the vain hope of saving face. "He said he was drinking and he tripped and a train ran over him," says longtime friend Diane Jeffrey. Becker was so convincing in his tale that, to this day, some people still insist the comic was intoxicated, jumping trains, or seeking new material from homeless drunks in the Platte Valley. At the time, no one would have guessed he intentionally placed his arms on the train tracks.

The lies, in part, made Becker look like a sympathetic character. They were also an attempt to preserve his comedy career. A one-armed comedian ain't funny, says Becker. He cites a line from a psychology book he once read: "Evil is the feeling you get when you look at somebody with one arm."

It's comedy night in 1980 at the now-defunct Chicago Speakeasy on South Colorado Boulevard. Don Becker has convinced comedy-club owner George McKelvey to give him his first shot at stand-up. By the time he gets his chance, the audience is starting to dwindle. McKelvey wants to call it a night—Becker does not. He insists on having his turn, nervously taking his cue to the sound of polite applause. From center stage he looks out into the bright light and he freezes. For one horrible moment his mind is blank, emptied of the jokes that just moments earlier were ready to go. But as he pulls out his first line and hears the audience's laughter, he smiles, moving smoothly into his next bit:

There's been a proliferation of these ethnic hybrid bars. Jose O'Shea's, O'Rourke's Cantina. These restaurants. They're always Irish and Chicano, which is like a marriage made in Northglenn.

After his four minutes are up, one thing is clear: Becker is a hit. Once backstage, he's euphoric, jumping around and throwing shadow punches. "This is the first thing I've ever done in my life that feels right," he crows.

Becker is soon one of Denver's top regulars at Comedy Works. Before long, he's touring medium-size cities and opening for well-known comedians such as Bobcat Goldthwait, Louie Anderson, and Dennis Miller. Like his idols George Carlin, Dick Shawn, and Professor Irwin Corey, Becker's style is acerbic and urbane:

Heroin was developed after World War I as a cure for morphine addiction. And it works! LSD was discovered in the 1940s by Albert Hofmann as a cure for the migraine headache. I guess it's for people who can't take Tylenol. Cocaine was developed as a cure for money.

He looked down at his mutilated limbs and felt a searing, powerful sense of relief.

"Don would go places nobody else would go," says Mark Corrigan, a Denver improv actor who watched Becker's star rise. "He was more erudite. He wouldn't necessarily get on the bicycle every night and just ride it." What Becker did was make the audience think. Denver singer Lannie Garrett liked his witty style so much she had him open for her. "The first time I saw him perform," she says, "I fell in love with his brain."

But Becker's rough edges also estranged him from some in Denver entertainment circles. "If he didn't like what you were doing," Corrigan remembers, "he had no bones about making that obvious to you." True enough, says Becker, who claims he had a near-perfect record of determining if a comic had talent after only few minutes on stage.

One of the up-and-comers he marked for stardom was Denver housewife-turned-comic Roseanne, for whom Becker occasionally wrote material. *Westword* used to have a category for Best Comic, which Becker won twice over Roseanne. "If I talked to her today, I would lord that over her," Becker says. "Then

she hit hyperdrive, and she entered this new area where she was just unbelievable. I think she's the best comic in the world."

According to Roseanne, Becker was one of the few Denver comics to support her debut as a stand-up comedian. In her autobiography, *My Life as a Woman*, she wrote about her first appearance at Comedy Works, where after perkily introducing herself to others backstage, "They all turned around and looked at me with great loathing, like 'Oh, my God.' I went on stage and did my show and people just loved it," she continued. "The very first night was just great. I went off, and the only person to come up to me was Don Becker."

Becker did not experience the same kind of breakthrough celebrity as Roseanne, but he did enjoy regional success. He received numerous write-ups and positive reviews. But as his career was taking shape, intermittent

binge drug use and increasing mental instability were taking a toll on his health. Around that time he had opportunities to work in Los Angeles. Comic Louie Anderson offered to help facilitate a major audition. But Becker never left Denver. "I never went to L.A., and a lot of people felt that was a big mistake," he says. "But I was making better money than any other comic in Colorado, and I could sleep in my bed every night. In some ways, I think it's serendipity and kismet and karma. I think if I had gone to L.A., I would have ended up a cocaine casualty."

It was hard enough for Becker to keep his head above water in Denver. In some ways, he was not unlike John Belushi, Sam Kinison, or Freddie Prinze, self-destructive figures whose comic lives belied their darker personalities. In Becker's case, his comedy was a refuge from his demons.

Mental illness runs deep in the Becker family. His father, Channel 7 weatherman Dick Becker, suffered from bipolar disorder, and clinical depression goes back

at least three generations in the family tree. Becker's paternal grandmother's bipolar disorder was treated with shock therapy, and both of her parents were also mentally ill.

Becker's sister was deaf and received most of the family's attention. In order to get noticed, Becker acted out with comedy and used his humor to forge a bond with his father. When Dick was briefly hospitalized for depression in the early 1960s, Becker's own downward spiral began.

As a teenager, Becker was hospitalized after a bad LSD experience, and diagnosed as having teenage schizophrenia. He briefly saw a psychiatrist, who suggested he try the recently banned drug ecstasy, which had been used as a therapeutic drug since the 1960s. Becker continued to use drugs to self-medicate, and believes ecstasy later aggravated his condition. "It was like plugging into the heart of the universe," Becker says of his experimentation. Whatever its consequences, Becker's early drug use seemed to enable a creative streak, and he began writing poetry and was active in student theater at Denver's Lincoln High School.

"They had this little clique of kind of the weirdo kids," says Pamela Clifton, a Denver actor and director who attended East High but met Becker through mutual friends when they were 16 years old. "They were the artists who smoked and went to the coffee shop and waxed philosophical until all hours of the morning. Donald was always just like he is now, biting funny. He would hold everybody's attention by just being so witty and satirical."

Having discovered his comedic gifts and thirsty for attention, Becker, the class clown, turned to the burgeoning Denver comedy scene of the early 1980s. Despite his comedic gift, Becker's deep depression and psychosis grew progressively worse. By 1986, he was teetering on the edge.

A week before his 32nd birthday, Becker broadsided another car. Although he was unharmed, the accident triggered the thought that he was going to die—and that he was going to kill someone else in the process. He had just begun taking lithium, prescribed by his psychiatrist to help ease the wild emotional swings of bipolar disorder. He was not, however, being treated for psychosis, the accompanying delusions and paranoia that were part of his mental condition. With lithium in his system, Becker's psychotic delusions in fact intensified—he even became convinced that if he didn't lose an arm he would die by the time he turned 32.

"Donald had always kind of gnawed on

his arm," says Clifton, recalling a high school friend's account. "I guess these voices always had this arm thing. 'Get rid of the arm' or something."

On that evening of Aug. 12, 1986, over a game of gin rummy with friends, Becker began to feel the chill of death in his feet, clawing its way up his body. As he added and discarded playing cards, he made a plan. Then he threw down his cards and a few dollars, ran from the room, and drove his Subaru wagon to the 15th Street viaduct.

In the dark car he stared at the nearby train tracks, mustering up the courage to carry out the voices' ultimatum. He sprinted from his car to the tracks and—just to be safe—he deliberately, calmly pressed both arms to the quivering track. Beneath the sound of grinding metal and screeching brakes, he recited the Lord's Prayer. In an instant, the train was upon him. The wheels tore through his flesh. Blood darkened the dirt beneath the rails.

The heavy rumbling and haunting whistle faded as Becker fell back from the tracks, battered and bloodied. He looked down at his mutilated limbs and felt a searing, powerful sense of relief. He remembers musing that he'd never play the piano.

A passerby eventually noticed Becker sitting calmly in the dark, mangled arms still dangling from his body. When the man offered help, Becker asked him to pull a cigarette from his bloody shirt pocket and light it for him. The comic smoked, slowly pulling the hot smoke into his lungs while the panicked stranger ran to find a phone.

Ambulance sirens penetrated the silence and Becker's calm. Although bleeding heavily, he felt no pain until the EMTs arrived and told him he was going to live. "Then there was this surge of pain, unbelievable agony." While hurriedly wrapping his shredded arms in gauze and trying to keep him from going into shock, the medics told him he would likely lose at least one of his arms. He thought to himself, "They should take the other one too."

Don Becker is known to answer the door of his Capitol Hill condo without his prosthetic arm. The scars that stretch around his back and abdomen could almost pass for battle wounds. They are convincing "evidence" when he has sometimes answered unwelcome questions with fictional stories about fighting in Vietnam. And though his wrinkles and graying hair now seem natural for a man in his early 50s, many say he looked much the same 15 years ago.

In the years following the railroad incident, Becker was admittedly antisocial, had poor hygiene, and was generally difficult, especially when he refused to take Haldol (haloperidol), the antipsychotic medication he was prescribed shortly after losing his arm.

"I lost virtually all my friends from that period of time," he says. "I was just too hard to deal with. I'd call them from the hospital after trying to gouge my eyes out, and they'd be mad at me." Becker likens his plight to that of an alcoholic who, though sober, has inflicted so much harm that he has damaged relationships beyond repair. "But now I'm healthy and my friends haven't come back," he says sadly. Then he adds, "My friends don't want to admit that I survived, because they all banked on me not surviving."

Becker insists self-pity is not in his nature. While in the hospital, he rejected offers from lawyers to help him sue everyone from his therapist to the railroad company. He believes emphatically in individual responsibility. He has instead chosen to seek spiritual meaning in his experiences, a sometimes disturbing path that has defined his recovery process. During his convalescence, Becker explored world religions, a journey he continues to this day, though he facetiously dubs himself an agnostic Calvinist. "A Calvinist believes in predestination," he says. "In a way, I very much believe I'm going to hell. But in a way, I'm an agnostic. The literal meaning of agnostic is 'without knowledge.' I don't have any knowledge."

While hospitalized, Becker attended a benefit comedy show that was organized to help pay for his medical expenses. Roseanne, Robin Williams, and Dennis Miller were among the comics who came to Denver's Rainbow Music Hall to participate, as well as local comics Jeff Cesario, Allan Stephen, and Eddie Strange. "I think that really is a testament to Donald's wit and humor," says friend Pamela Clifton, who attended. "I was really starstruck. I felt like, 'Wow, I know Donald Becker!'"

Becker was not on stage that night, but he soon made his short-lived effort to return to stand-up comedy. Within a few years, however, he quit for good. His prosthetic, he feels, is a glaring distraction. "Imagine Bill Maher with one arm," he says. "It just doesn't work for comedy. If you have one arm, what you instantly represent to people is 'pain.'"

After years of hiding his prosthetic arm, Don Becker rolled up his sleeves, literally and figuratively. He had a radio talk show for a while. He later wrote poetry and

hosted poetry-slam competitions. He did not fully explore the "accident" and his so-called "madness" until he wrote and starred in *Back on a Limb*, a brutally honest piece of theatrical catharsis.

In 1996, Becker placed his relationship with tragedy on a metaphorical level with *Lucifer Tonight*, a one-man show in which he portrayed the devil. The show's emotional peak happens when Lucifer kneels before God. In a gut-wrenching scene, Becker takes off his prosthetic arm, exposing his limb and bodily scars to the audience, looking to God for redemption.

The highly personal sequence was difficult for Becker. During rehearsals he was frequently overwhelmed by the material. The role was so demanding that he says he likely will not play it in future performances. But a new production of the show (with a different lead taking Becker's place) opens the last week of February at the Bug Theater. There are also hopes to translate and produce the show in Germany in 2005.

Many think the one-man show is Becker at his very best. "*Lucifer Tonight* was treated pretty well by the critics, and it deserved every bit of it," says Denver actress Mary Gay Coit. Becker chalks that up to the range of emotions he can portray in theater, something he could never try in stand-up comedy. Perhaps Becker had reached a point where he had control of his emotions, rather than the other way around. "It doesn't have to be setup, punch line, setup, punch line," he says. "You can stretch out with concepts and ideas." There's still a glimmer of the youthful comic in his performances. "I thought he was way too funny to wind up being a performance artist," observes comic Dennis Miller, who has hired Becker as a freelance joke writer. "He was a very funny comic. I'm glad he found another permutation for his art."

Dark humor has dominated Becker's later work. *Absence Makes the Peter Fonda* contains 10 short erotic plays, including *White Knuckles*, which Becker describes as a "pornographic opera." *Kurt Cobain Was Right*, a political farce, sees a Reaganesque president putting a positive spin on mass suicide. *Subgenius Police*, Becker's favorite, imagines punks in an ultracyber society of the near future.

Becker's edgy subject matter and iconoclasm are not for everyone, leading some audience members to walk out before intermission. "Sometimes, I think neuroses can manifest themselves as self-indulgence," says Becker's friend Coit, "and he is certainly no stranger to that."

Don Becker fights a continuing battle with mental illness and receives federal disability payments for his extreme bipolar condition. He also battles public perceptions. "There's a great book called *Madness in Civilization*," he says. "They used to warehouse the mentally ill with convicts, and the convicts would complain and say, 'We don't want to be in here with these crazy people.' Crazy people were viewed lower than convicts. There is still a stigma."

The creative process has been instrumental to Becker's long road to recovery. While there is no proven link between mental illness and artistic inclinations, psychiatric experts don't dismiss a connection out of hand, especially as it relates to therapeutic benefits. "We probably don't hear about the people who aren't creative, but there is quite an association between creativity and bipolar disorder," says Dr. Sylvia Simpson, an associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center. "Sticking to the medication is a big part of it. I don't think Don Becker's case is that unusual. I would see this as the kind of excellent outcome you can have if you stick with the prescribed treatment."

Since the late 1980s, Becker has been hospitalized 10 times. All but one were during periods when he decided to go off his medication to find God. "I ran down the street naked twice," he says. "I tried to gouge my eyes out with a screwdriver. I tried to climb Mt. Evans in the middle of winter. Finally, I had a friend of mine say, 'Do you think God is all powerful?' And I said, 'Yeah.' 'Then why don't you just stay on your medication and let God come to you?'"

Becker has remained on Haldol ever since. He has yet to find God, but he has made new friends, most of whom have not experienced the pits of his psychosis and never knew the brash young comic with two arms. "In the past, I couldn't deal with anybody that was the least bit troubled or upset," he says. "Now, I'm everybody's dry shoulder."

Becker also persists in his ever-evolving spiritual quest. "The one thing I learned from cutting off my arm," he says, "is that I am able to cut off my arm. That takes tremendous will. Imagine how fucking scary it is to put your arms on a train track. What that proves for me is that with my creator, if I'm Abraham and God asks me to sacrifice my son, I can do it. What's scary about it is, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm nuts." ▲

Peter Jones is a Denver-based freelance writer, a broadcaster, and a lousy comic.