

Bay State's Dane Cook strikes comedic gold on HBO // Early Boston gigs had 'Dane Train' wondering if he should quit

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Byline: Jorge Bannister

BOSTON - By a round of applause, how do you feel?

Comedian Dane Cook asked that question to open his first comedy special - a half-hour slot for "Comedy Central Presents" in 1999.

Seven years later, that was Cook's closing line after performing four hours' worth (two shows) of material for a taped HBO special - "Dane Cook: Vicious Circle" - at the TD Banknorth Garden in April.

Don't worry, your eyes didn't play a trick on you, you read that correctly - the 18,000-seat TD Banknorth Garden, the same arena where the Boston Bruins and Boston Celtics play.

The show was electric. Starting with the national anthem and ending with an encore - yes, an encore - Cook gave the sold-out crowd plenty to laugh about.

Using 95 percent new material, what the "Dane Train" did that night was nothing short of spectacular. Cook tapped into five old-time favorites, but the rest of the material was new, covering things like lying, relationships and arguments with significant others. Of course, to get the full effect, you'll just have to see the HBO special. A broadcast date has not been set.

In the meantime, fans who can't wait can get a taste of Cook's comedy and perhaps a glimpse of some college friends when "Tourgasm" debuts at 11 p.m. Sunday on HBO. "Tourgasm," a comedy documentary series featuring Cook and fellow comedians Robert Kelly, Gary Gulman and Jay Davis, was taped last year on college campuses across America, including Fitchburg State College.

The 34-year-old Cook has signed a multiproject deal with HBO that will feature specials and other projects, including development of a scripted series "Cooked." In addition, HBO will have exclusive rights to Cook for all nontraditional media platforms, including mobile and broadband.

How does Cook feel about it all?

"Honored, that's the word," Cook said via telephone from his office in Los Angeles. "I'm honored to be performing at these shows. Also honored, on another level, that HBO would deem me worthy and follow me and watch the process in my evolution and say, 'We feel like you're a guy that should have this floor.' I've watched (George) Carlin on there. I've watched Chris Rock. You name a special, I've seen them all. I am a fan of the art of stand-up comedy. I'm deeply honored."

Since 1990, Cook, who was raised in Arlington, has been trying to make a living out of telling jokes. Even though he started in front of a handful of people, he knew comedy was his niche.

"When I look at the gold and platinum album frames for 'Retaliation' on my wall, it's one of those things that catches my eye from time to time, and I can't believe what I'm looking at," Cook said. "It makes me remember being back in Boston, doing shows in front of 15 people and driving home and thinking, 'That might be it, Dane. This might be it. You love what you do, and this is your outlet. Maybe you'll have a

day job the rest of your life, but you'll find time to do this because you love it, because you're in love with comedy and in love with comedians."

As he predicted, he does have a day job - filming movies. He's filmed movies with actors Ryan Reynolds and Anna Farris ("Waiting...") and rapper Ice Cube ("Torque"), and he's in the process of filming with Kevin Costner ("Mr. Brooks") and singer Jessica Simpson ("Employee of the Month").

But comedy is his mainstay, and the audiences watching his standup routine now number in the tens of thousands. Seats for the April show at the Garden were sold without print or radio publicity.

According to Matthew Whelan, director of Ticket Operations at the Garden, the 18,000-seat arena sold out for two shows during a presale that was only advertised through Cook's Web site, e-mail list and MySpace Web site.

"For a show to sell out prior to a public on-sale has never happened," Whelan said via e-mail. "We sold 36,000 tickets without any advertising. Dane Cook sent an e-mail to his fan club announcing the dates and that sold the tickets. This is unprecedented."

Cook echoed Whelan's sentiments.

"I honestly will say I'm shocked," Cook said. "We put the first show up and the plan was to do a presale - I wanted to do that exclusively for my fans that have been there from the beginning. But, at the same time, the presale was more of a gesture. I wasn't saying that it's a presale because we're going to sell (18,000 tickets) in a matter of a couple of days. It was more of a gesture like, 'You're a part of my fan base, and you get first dibs on the best seats available.'

"Even though it's my hometown, and I've done so many shows in New England over the years, I knew they were going to come out," Cook said. "You just don't expect that it was going to be that fast. I was approached for adding a second show."

As Cook stepped on the Garden stage, he stood with his arms wide open, soaking in the roar and applause from the crowd at that show.

Judging by the multiple standing ovations he received that night, everyone was feeling great.