

SHOWCASE

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Bright spot in Conan's fade

COMEDIAN | S. Sider's bits get big laughs as host winds down

BY MIKE THOMAS
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The Tonight Show With Conan O'Brien is dead after this evening's episode, but the career of show writer Deon Cole has never been more alive.

After the veteran stand-up comic and South Side native killed as a performer on the program late last summer, he was invited to join its writing staff. Cole, who officially began his duties in October, is the first black writer in "Tonight Show" history.

Aside from his written contributions, Cole has appeared in several on-camera segments — including ones in which he likened O'Brien (self-proclaimed "whitest guy on television") to a black man, a ho and a pimp — that have delighted audiences and earned him praise.

TVGuide.com hailed their hilarity, and opined that NBC would do well to give Cole his own late-night gabfest.

"Wait a minute, Deon," O'Brien says in the "ho" sketch. "I'm a talk show host. I don't consider myself a ho."

"Oh, really, Conan," Cole replies, his eyes wide in mock incredulity. "Do you work at night? [O'Brien: 'Yeah.'] Is your job making people happy before they go to sleep? [O'Brien: 'Yeah.'] Do you ever feel like everybody wants a piece of you and no one cares [O'Brien: 'Well, I kind of think, yeah...'] Has Charlie Sheen ever been on your couch? [O'Brien: 'OK, now, wait a minute! A couple of times, yeah, a couple of times.'] And do you give a piece of your earnings to someone who sponsors you and they don't do no work but they tell you what to do? [O'Brien: 'Well, yeah, but I still don't think it's any reason...']"

While O'Brien sputters his response, a large red "HO" is stamped across the screen.

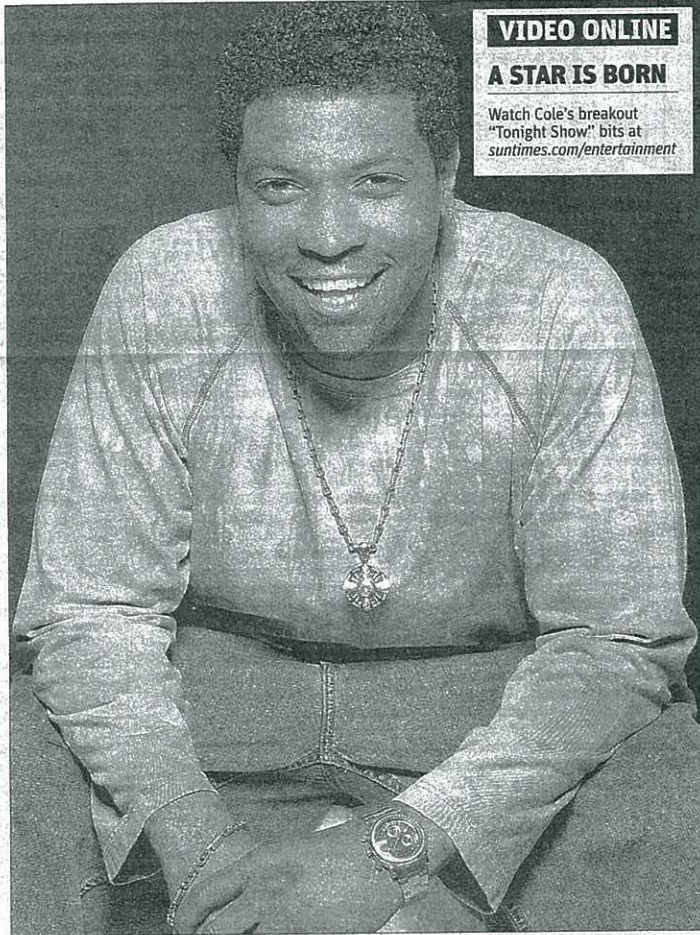
The streetwise, in-your-face bits aren't typical O'Brien fare, but that's part of their charm.

"That was vintage Deon," says Raymond Lambert, who hired Cole to perform at his now-defunct South Loop comedy club All Jokes Aside in the mid-90s.

"It's kind of interesting that he gets that opportunity, because his act is a little bit different. It's very intelligent. I think it's tailor-made for late night." Cole was unavailable for an interview during this busy "Tonight Show" week.

Chicago-based stand-up and WGCI-FM (107.5) personality Tony Sculfield toured with Cole, domestically and internationally, for many years.

Deon is a great writer, so it wasn't really a shock to me that he was able to do material that was suitable for 'The Tonight Show,' Sculfield says. "It was just, was 'The Tonight Show' ready for Deon Cole?"



VIDEO ONLINE
A STAR IS BORN

Watch Cole's breakout "Tonight Show" bits at suntimes.com/entertainment



Conan O'Brien will sit at the "Tonight Show" desk one last time when he hosts this evening.

O'Brien: Good night to 'Tonight'

NEW YORK — Conan O'Brien told NBC good riddance Thursday in a \$45 million deal for his exit from "The Tonight Show," allowing Jay Leno to return to the late-night program he hosted for 17 years.

Under the deal, which came less than eight months after O'Brien took the reins from Leno, O'Brien will get more than \$33 million, NBC said. The rest will go to his 200-strong staff in severance.

O'Brien will be free to start another TV job after Sept. 1, NBC said. His final show will be tonight, with Tom Hanks scheduled to appear as well as Will Ferrell — his first guest as "Tonight" host last June. Leno will return to "Tonight" on March 1.

What happens next for O'Brien? "We don't know," said his manager, Gavin Polone. "While we have had expressions of interest, we have not had any substantive conversations with anybody."

O'Brien, Polone said, "wants to get back on the air, doing the show he's doing now, as soon as possible."

There has been much speculation that he could land at Fox, which lacks a late-night show, or Comedy Central.

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Cole's segments, Sculfield says, brought an edginess that was previously unseen in that hour.

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ing and was about to cover the Winter Olympics for O'Brien, the rug was yanked out from under him — and everyone else on the "Tonight Show" staff.

"He's not really upset about it," says Sculfield, who has been swapping text messages with Cole over the past week or so. "I think he feels that wherever Conan goes, he's going to

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