



The Platt Brothers: An Act You MUST See by Mark Gabrish Conlan

The Platt Brothers, playing at the Sunset Temple near Claire de Lune Coffeehouse in North Park through the end of April, offer an exciting, hilarious combination of the Smothers Brothers, Monty Python and the Three Stooges. Their act combines three-part vocal harmonies, comedy sketches and stunning acrobatics, all centered around their real-life family history. See them before they become major stars!

The first time I encountered the Platt Brothers was at a “Say What!” open-mike night in February at Filter, the coffeehouse at 30th and Polk in North Park formerly known as the Other Side, where three nice-looking (if a bit gangly) young men came out and did a couple of songs in impeccable three-part harmony. They were particularly impressive on a song called “His Name’s Boone,” a parody of the Beach Boys’ “In My Room” that managed to capture the Beach Boys’ sound while making delightful nonsense of the lyrics. So it was a surprise — a jolt, actually — when I saw them again at an outdoor show promoted by the Planet Rooth gallery, also in North Park, and instead of dressing in casual street clothes they came out wearing comic versions of the Superman costume and did a spectacular acrobatic act that ended with the three of them grabbing each other and doing circular flips. (Don’t try this at home.)

The Platts gave both these free performances to promote their two-month residency at the Sunset Temple, 3911 Kansas Street in North Park, in the same building as the Claire de Lune coffeehouse — whose owners are promoting their show. Their shows continue through April 3, 4, 11, 17, 18 and 25 at 8 p.m. and April 10 and 24 at 9 p.m. Tickets are \$10 and available through their own Web site at <http://www.theplattbrothers.com> or the venue’s site at <http://www.sunsettemple.com>. You owe it to yourselves not to miss them; that way, when they become major stars, you can regale your friends with tales that you saw them way back when ...

For make no mistake about it: the Platt Brothers are major talents. And in answer to your first question about them — or at least my first question when I had a chance to interview them after their March 20 show — their last name really is Platt and they really are brothers. Their show can basically be described as the Smothers Brothers (an influence they readily acknowledged) meet Monty Python meet the Three Stooges. They seamlessly blend music, dance, sketch comedy and acrobatics into a stunning, outrageously funny whole that’s based — so they insist — on their actual experiences growing up in a remote Northern California town.

There are actually seven Platt siblings, though two of them are female and the oldest and youngest Platt brothers aren’t part of the act. The ones that are are, in age order, Cy — short for Cyril William Neill, a name he quickly abandoned in kindergarten for reasons that are explained in one of the show’s most hilarious bits — Cheetah (originally Benjamin, and the circumstances and reasons for the change are also part of the program) and Boone. Cy is the (relatively) short, wiry one; Cheetah the tallest and the one with

the frizzed-out red hair and band of freckles across the face (a feature he's had since childhood, as documented by the family snapshots shown on big screens as part of the act); and Boone is the youngest, blondest and cutest — at least by consensus of the young straight women who form a good chunk of their fan base.

The Platts can't remember a time when they weren't interested in performing. When their ages were still in single digits they got their first exposure to live dance from a ballet company. "I saw people jumping, leaping and hurling," Cy recalled. Told by their parents that they'd have to sign up for some sport in school, Boone said, "We tried gymnastics and soccer, and that just encouraged us to perform." They wanted to learn circus tricks and couldn't find a school to do so, but they managed to find opportunities to work with acrobats and learn the skills needed to build what eventually became their act.

Cheetah first came to San Diego in the early 2000's to earn a theatre degree at UCSD, but the genesis of the Platt Brothers' act began in 2004. "Cy and I got cast in Wonderland at Harrah's Reno," Cheetah recalled. They put together a five-minute duo routine which Cy said was "hip-hop with jokes, an elephant sound and an Irish jig." Boone was still in high school, but as soon as he graduated he joined his brothers in Reno and the three of them expanded their show to a 45-minute routine that's the basis of what they perform today.

"The first time we did a full-length version was in 2006," Cheetah recalled.

"No, it was in 2007," said Cy.

"We did one-night stands, but then we had no reason to fine-tune the show," Cheetah said. Their two-month stand at the Sunset Temple gave them the opportunity to hone the performance and figure out a way to lengthen it without totally wearing themselves out physically "We started out with very little singing," Boone said — and the reason they added more, according to Cy, was "we got tired really fast when we did all the physical stuff. We had to find slow, quiet moments."

"We loved singing in the high-school choir," said Cheetah, so vocals were a natural addition for them. What wasn't was a folk-music singer-songwriter parody in which Cheetah tells the story of his name change in song — and accompanies himself on guitar. Cheetah had never played the guitar before in his life. "We wrote the words and the tune," said Boone, "and we had to teach Cheetah to play guitar."

One commitment they've made to themselves and their performance is to keep it real. Everything in the show — from the gospel-soul song about how their father used to punish them by making them fill a wheelbarrow full of rocks and push it home, to their accounts of hunting raccoons that were eating the family's chickens and starting brush fires around their home — is, they insist, merely a comic "spin" on real events from their childhoods. "We make lots of jokes, but every story is 100 percent true," Cheetah insists. "We've tried hard not to add anything that wasn't true or wasn't us."

"They really burned the hill down, and his name really is Cheetah," added Cy. They said they've brainstormed doing skits about made-up stories but rejected the idea — which suggests they might be letting themselves in for the Augusten Burroughs problem. Burroughs did such a great job strip-mining his life for comedy in his first two books, *Running with Scissors* and *Dry*, that his more recent ones have seemed dull by comparison.

Asked how hard they rehearsed the show, Cy said they started rehearsing in December and aimed for a mid-February opening. It was a difficult process, Cheetah added, because not only did they have to learn

difficult acrobatic tricks, three-part harmonies and comic timing, as well as recording all the sound effects for the show (even when they're clearly performing to a tape, it's their tape) but because, as Cheetah put it, "We didn't have a producer, director, choreographer or anything but us."

"We can rehearse the songs in the living room, but the dance pieces take a lot of time just working on the computer even before we physically do it," said Boone.

"A lot of times we agree, but also we disagree," Cheetah added. He said they sometimes have long arguments about a particular routine when "either way would work."

Asked who's influenced them, they say the Smothers Brothers (they don't use the Smothers' signature joke, "Mom always liked you best!," but a lot of their humor is in a similar sibling-rivalry vein) and Mark Lewis, a veteran storyteller who's appeared on the Tonight Show and who opened for them March 20. Part of the quirkiness of the show is explained by the fact that when they were growing up, their parents didn't have a television — and even after they got one, virtually all they watched were movies. "If we watched Looney Tunes, it was a movie and we studied it," said Cheetah.

What their parents did have was a record player and a large collection of comedy albums from the heyday of stand-up recordings in the 1960's. "Older comedians influenced us because they weren't dirty," Cheetah said. "You could listen to them with your parents or with your kids. I've always respected people who could entertain the whole room. A lot of people today say they're just children's entertainers, or they're just adult entertainers."

"Our parents didn't tell us no, and part of that rubbed off on us," said Cy. "We don't have to label ourselves or our intentions. We'll take characters from everyday life." He added that the three-man flip — the spectacular acrobatic climax of the act — was taught to them by "an eighth-generation Italian dude from a circus, who spoke almost no English" — and who was also teaching it to his own sons so they could extend it into the ninth generation.

Asked what the future holds for the Platt Brothers, Boone said, "We really don't know, but we get people to see the act for two months. We get to get everything where we want it to be."

Cy added that their two-month residency at the Sunset Temple has been "the first time we've been able to do our performance as our profession" — the first time they've been able to consider the possibility of making this their life's work. "We have the viable possibility of going on tour and doing this as a job," he said. "We're hoping to take it to a wider audience, but still with the interactions of a small room."

In the meantime, they've been able to build up a big enough local following that their show fills up nearly all of the 300 seats in the Sunset Temple — and Cheetah says he loves the setup of the room, a large performing floor with a horseshoe-shaped seating arrangement with the audience on three sides of them. "We want to offer them a glimpse into Platt family history, and give them the impression that we'd be doing this even without an audience," he said. "We'd love to arrange tours in different theatres."

"Anything that could bring us a new audience, we'll keep doing it," Boone added.