

It's All Wood

WILLIE AND WOODY SHOW WHAT THEY'RE MADE OF

By Amber Scott

"I think I'm about 21 years old. We age faster than humans, so in two years that's 210. I traced my roots to an oak tree in Georgia. My father was a Georgia pine and my mother was an evergreen and I just sort of branched out. Sometimes I call my mother long distance. A Tree and Tree...it's all wood."

—WOODY

When Woody gets a chance to talk, he really cuts up. "We tell jokes and we make people laugh," proclaims Willie Brown, the human half of the comedian/ventriloquist duo, Willie Brown and Woody. "However, a ventriloquist act is a different art. Sometimes it's not easily received in comedy venues. I think it's becoming better received now than in the past, so I'm here to stay," he adds.

Recently the comedian/ventriloquist team appeared on Russell Simmons' HBO *Def Comedy Jam*, a half-hour comedy program that features black comedians. They were the first, and at this point the only ventriloquist act to appear on *Def Comedy Jam*.

"Everybody remembers us because we were on the show. It's easier to be remembered when you are doing something different. The people call because they've heard about us," says Brown, referring to organizations and clubs that want to use his services.

"As a ventriloquist, it was great to be able to break through to share a different style of comedy from a stand-up routine," he shares. "HBO *Def Comedy Jam* is a great national venue for black comedians because it puts them in the public's eye." The duo also has appeared on B.E.T.'s *Comic View*, traveled up and down the East Coast, and even entertained U.S. troops in Japan and Korea.

Brown always knew he wanted to be famous and appear on television. Six years ago, he left a full-time sales job with Xerox to become a full-time ventriloquist. At a young age, he was inspired by Jay Johnson, an actor who played a ventriloquist on the hit sitcom, "Soap," and by the black ventriloquist team of Willie Tyler and Lester.

As a teenager, Brown received his first dummy for Christmas. After months of practice, he won a talent contest and began performing at birthday parties and private engagements. Brown continued to

perform while attending Hampton University in Virginia.

There Brown met his wife, Wanda Shaw, who is now his manager. They have two children, a daughter, 11, and a son, 6. "She handles the business for me when I'm on the road and books my shows. She's very supportive of what I'm doing and has been there since the beginning. So she understands the business and knows what I'm trying to do. We really click," he states.

From the outside, Brown appears to be taking a smooth ride to fame, but this entertainer is turning his childhood dream into a reality by working hard. "It's difficult for black performers to get work in this business. There just aren't as many venues as there are for white performers, so we have to be really creative. I've been blessed, but you also must have perseverance."

Are comedy clubs labeled "black" or "white"? According to Brown, "Some say there isn't any division, some say there is. I think black people have a different style of comedy—our perceptions are different in the way we receive comedy," he says. "Sometimes I think white audiences are more receptive if your dialect isn't too strong. They seem to prefer a performer who's not an angry black comic."

"Some audiences take you the way you are, black or white. However, it's harder to make black audiences laugh. They tend to want you to go to the gut. White people are more prone to take you at face value. I just try to be funny and just be me."

Brown's ability to change gears to suit different audiences is essential to his success. He writes his own material, therefore, making the shift is easier for him. "You can do a joke that might make an audience laugh like crazy one night, and on another night they may not laugh at that joke at all," states Brown, who per-

forms for adult audiences, church programs, and for school children.

The schools want to tie education and entertainment together and that is where Willie Brown and Woody step in with their gift. "I use Woody to help talk to children about self-esteem and confidence. I'm a big fan of Les Brown, so I'm really into motivating students. I use a little humor with motivational tips to help capture the children's attention by subtly



sending messages of positivity, and letting them know they can do or be whatever they want to be as long as they believe in themselves," Brown says.

Brown is still charging full speed ahead. He has plans to get an instructional ventriloquist tape on the market by January 1996. He wants to do more commercial television, get into the movie industry, and ultimately have his own children's television program.

Brown and Woody will not be slowing down any time soon and in Woody's words, "It's all wood." □□□