



Phoenix flight attendant
laughs

Bruce Yamini
along with

feeds his passengers
peanuts.

Written and Photographed by Linda Owen

Except for the vibrating sway of the airplane and the woman in the first row diapering her infant, it could be any floor show in any comedy club anywhere. Here, in the clouds above Phoenix, Southwest Airlines flight attendant Bruce Yamini takes center stage, joking with passengers and belt-

ing out witty songs. Behind him, three female flight attendants sway in rhythm, singing out courageously in not-too-melodious harmony.

It's been a flight to remember. From my perch on the fifth row, it's hard to tell who is having the most fun — the flight attendants or the passengers.

Today Yamini is flying in the senior position — which makes him the attendant in charge of the microphone. As he stands there, teasing us that we are his "captive audience," his athletic frame blocks the entryway. He is almost six feet tall, confident and quick-witted, personable and cheerful.

His twinkling brown eyes tell us that he loves his job and he wants everyone to have a good time.

He was the last thing we expected, of course. Who expects a stand-up comedian 20,000 feet in the air?

An hour ago, when ninety-two passengers trudged up the ramp to the waiting Boeing 737 in El Paso, it was 9:45 p.m. — and no one was smiling. Fatigue hung over us like a cloud. Anxious to depart, we stowed away our carry-on luggage and sank into our seats. We waited for the same old, boring safety drill — something we knew that we had to put up with before the plane could begin its journey.

However, Yamini knows that “people get tired of the traditional safety regulations” so he’s transformed the presentation into a comedy routine. By fusing wry humor and his singing talents with the required data, Yamini astonishes and delights SW passengers traveling to forty-four states.

He begins by elaborating about the absurdity of using a flotation device “over streams, puddles and hot tubs,” and he warns that “anyone caught smoking during the flight will be asked to step off the aircraft.”

Although Yamini still includes the necessary safety information required by law, he doctors the routine with his own witty substance. With a smile that is contagious, he instructs the passengers to breathe through the oxygen mask in times of crisis — “after you’re through screaming.” Also, if a change in cabin pressure should occur, he suggests: “Be sure to pull the mask down over your face first — unless there’s a passed out drunk sitting beside you.”

During flight, Yamini, forty, conducts business as usual, taking drink orders and serving snacks. When the plane begins its descent, Yamini sprints back to the microphone, transformed once again into a performer. This time, instead of the usual announcement that “the plane is about to land,” Yamini breaks into song:

*Make sure all your trays and seat backs, too
Are locked as we come passing through...
Tilt that head back, finish that brew,
Have your glasses ready when we get to you*

People listen intently, smiling — and they do as he says. Seats become erect, carry-ons are stowed away and empty glasses are passed to the flight attendants coming up the aisle. Then passengers applaud.

Applause is nothing new to Yamini. As a teenager he was selected to attend a “special” magnet high school for the musically talented in Dallas. At sixteen, he formed his first band. Since the 1960s



he has sung in nightclubs and coffee houses, at weddings and private parties. He has even demonstrated jingles for an advertising company.

“I thought I’d done it all,” he says cheerfully. “The last place anyone expects to find an entertainer is in the air. When I realized that, I had to try it!”

In 1989, when Yamini joined the SW team, he had no such ambitions. But one day flight attendants were given a company-written parody of TV’s *Beverly Hillbillies* theme song (“Y’all come back now, ya here!”). Yamini sang it a few times and the passengers seemed to enjoy it, so he decided to sing something else of his own creation “to tunes I’d always liked.” Today his repertoire consists of easily recognizable jazz, western and pop favorites. Some he sings during the flight; others he sings as the plane taxis to the gate.

Yamini says his “flight show” devel-

oped from his desire “to have a good time with the passengers.” One day, trying to deal with holiday air traffic delays, Yamini’s natural wit took over and he began clowning around. He discovered “making jokes about it” was the best way to deal with delays. “The secret is to just have fun with it — or sing clever lyrics to a holiday song,” he explains. “Then travelers and crew will have a good time together.”

Sometimes Yamini entices other flight attendants into singing with him. On occasion, another flight attendant plays harmonica while Yamini sings.

Like anyone planning a “real” floor show, Yamini has to change his material “to keep frequent fliers from getting bored.” On occasion, instead of song, Yamini spouts a humorous warning so travelers will keep their seatbelts on until the aircraft has stopped:

“We now have video cameras on the plane,” he teases. “If you stand up while we’re moving, your picture will be taken and flashed over TV screens across America. You’ll be labeled a troublesome passen-

ger and no flight attendant will ever serve you again — unless it’s knock-out drops!”

In spite of his clownish acts, Yamini is quick to point out that he takes the safety precautions seriously. “It’s all in fun,” he explains. “People know that I’m just trying to give them a good time.”

Although SW policy dictates that attendants alternate their positions, Yamini is grateful to those colleagues who fly in the senior spot but still turn over the mike to him. Because of this “need to perform,” Yamini, who is single, recently moved his home base to Phoenix. He says he chose to make the move “because I have more seniority here and can log more time in the senior position — which means I get to clown around more often.”

Freelance writer Linda Owen lives in Dallas. **PM**