

# Make 'em Laugh

by Mark Blankenship

**FEW FUNNYMEN OR FUNNYWOMEN** have ever become legendary headliners, or even slightly famous opening acts, without first honing their craft right here—in the city that never fails to see the humor in things. An array of comedy clubs attracts the most hilarious names in the business (particularly when they want to test new material before appearing on the Letterman or Leno shows), as well as promising newcomers destined to be the next Chris Rock or Jerry Seinfeld. What's it like to be a rising star on the Manhattan comedy circuit?

"There are so many different types of audiences that you can play the entire country just by traveling across the city," says Baron Vaughn, who lives in Queens and jokes about everything from iPods to racism in clubs including **Comix** (353 W. 14th St., 524-2500), **Carolines on Broadway** (1626 Broadway, 757-4100) and "Sweet Paprika," a Fridays-only show at **D-Lounge at the Daryl Roth Theatre** (101 E. 15th St., 375-1110). "It's like being on the road without leaving home," he marvels.

Like onion bagels, Wall Street and Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," stand-up comedy is synonymous with New York City.

"There's a really supportive community of comedians in New York," says Stephanie Sine, an actress and cabaret singer who has been performing her acerbic, New York-centric stand-up material for two years at **Comic Strip Live** (1568 Second Ave., 861-9386) and **The Duplex** (61 Christopher St., 255-5438). Audiences, on the other hand, can test the nerve of an unpolished rookie. "At one of my first gigs, I had a drink on an empty stomach, got up onstage and proceeded to drop the microphone and couldn't get it back in the mic stand," recalls Sine. "Then the mic and the mic cord came apart and someone had to come onstage to fix it for me. I started telling all of my set ups and forgetting my punch lines. Two guys wearing bad Hawaiian shirts heckled me and I was terrified. That taught me that audiences here won't let you slide if you're not prepared."

In New York, you just have to work harder," says Anthony Jeselnick, a transplant from L.A. who has appeared at **Gotham Comedy Club** (208 W. 23rd St., 367-9000) and **Comedy Cellar** (117 MacDougal St., 254-3480), as well as on **Jimmy Kimmel Live!** (ABC-TV, 2003-present). "The audiences in this town have seen it all, and you can't just say things that are funny and expect that to be enough. You need to have a personality." Hence, he's created an edgy persona. In other words, Jeselnick is not a caustic boor, he just plays one onstage, as he tells truly tasteless jokes, then scolds the audience for not laughing. Which, naturally, makes them roar.

To be a comedian in New York, "you have to be delusional," declares Mike Birbiglia, an Upper West Sider who has done specials for Comedy Central, appeared on **Late Night With Conan O'Brien** (NBC-TV, 1993-present) and confessed his own social awkwardness on comedy stages across America. Now he is mining the humor in his own somnambulism in a one-man Off-Broadway show, **Sleepwalk With Me** (Bleecker St. Theatre, 45 Bleecker St., 239-6200). "There's so much failure involved in being a stand-up comic that you have to tell yourself it's going pretty well, or else you'd never get onstage again."

Fame never comes easy, according to Susan Alexander, New York City-based producer and host of **5 Funny Females**, a national touring show with a lineup of undiscovered female comedians. "No one's just going to discover you, not even in New York," she warns. "You have to make your own path. It's a constant hustle." Still, Alexander loves her life as a stand-up. "Nothing replaces being able to get an audience in a rhythm with you. No matter if it's 10, 100 or 1,000 people. If you get them laughing, it's amazing."