FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS:

COMEDIANS OF COMEDY

Don’t visit Los Angeles in February. Seriously.

It’s gray. It rains. Temperatures flirt with warmth but never seal the deal. Everyone is sick of what-passes-for-winter there, aching to crank up their air conditioners, clean out their pools, and flaunt their new tans and noses. There’s nothing more depressing than attempting to fulfill the dutiful tourist role and photograph the famous Hollywood sign only to find it obscured by thick, rolling white fog for hours on end. And did I mention the insane traffic in Hollywood when the city shuts down a couple blocks for the Academy Awards? That’s fun, too.

Any self-respecting culture whore or tourist has either made a point to visit LA or actively avoided its luminous, apocalyptic plasticity. At least that’s what I believed, never actually having been to the entertainment mecca of the Western world. But in order to conduct face-to-face interviews with comedians like Patton Oswalt, see comedy shows like Comedy Death-Ray, and get a general sense of comedy in LA, I would have no choice but to
fly there and spend several days exploring it. Not that I was one of those avoiders—I had friends and family in the city, both of whom regularly implored me to come see them and bathe in LA’s jolly, delusional milieu.

So I did. It’s just that during the late-February week I chose, the weather sucked mountains of ass. Granted, I didn’t go there solely to bask in the sunshine, but a little light wouldn’t have killed anybody. I was able to stay with my cousin Jerry, who lives in a modest but appropriately hip abode on Sierra Bonita Avenue, just off the busy, boutique-ridden expanse of Melrose. That location afforded me comfortable equidistance from all the restaurants, coffee shops, venues, and painfully trendy bars at which I had planned to meet various people for interviews.

The famed Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre (UCB Theatre) on Franklin Avenue was the first order of business. Nearly every week for the last six years, former Mr. Show writers/actors Scott Aukerman and B. J. Porter (aka The Fun Bunch) have presented their Comedy Death-Ray show to comedy fans and occasional industry scouts, inviting big and small names to test new jokes and scrape away at older ones. In the great tradition of LA’s alternative-comedy scene, it’s an off-the-cuff, experimental, generally nurturing environment that can occasionally (and quickly) turn sour. Nearly everyone profiled in this book—and hundreds more—have barked into its hallowed mics. With a long-standing reputation as one of the hottest comedy nights in the country (LA blog Defamer once said it “will have you either soiling your drawers with laughter or from the intimidation of being in such a small space with such big names [or both]”), I would have been a fool to pass it up.

Aukerman and Porter originally staged Death-Ray at LA’s M Bar on October 1, 2002. They moved it to the UCB Theatre shortly after that improv troupe’s Hollywood
location opened on July 1, 2005, instantly giving the West Coast another respected outlet for experimental comedy. Like any good punk-rock show, Comedy Death-Ray’s Tuesday installments are always all-ages and only cost $5—although you’d better get your tickets early, as they disappear within minutes. (Porter and Aukerman were nice enough to squeeze me in when I noticed the February 19 show was sold out.) No snacks or booze are served, but many in the shallow, black-walled, 100-seat theater enter with discreet brown bags of what can only be delicious Juicy Juice.

A glance at the 2007 two-disc Comedy Death-Ray album on Comedy Central Records, or Death-Ray’s MySpace profile, reveals candid pictures of the regulars: Mr. Show vets David Cross, Bob Odenkirk, Sarah Silverman, Brian Posehn, Paul F. Tompkins, and Mary Lynn Rajskub; Comedians of Comedy members Patton Oswalt, Maria Bamford, Zach Galifianakis, Eugene Mirman, and Morgan Murphy; and others such as Neil Hamburger, musical duo Hard ‘N’ Phirm, Jen Kirkman, Jimmy Pardo, and more. Patton Oswalt has called it “a show that functions like a flight simulator for comedians,” and after seeing one, I’m hard pressed to disagree.

I parked my rental car outside the Hollywood Presbyterian Church and hiked a block north to Franklin, where the UCB Theatre sits across from the imposing, impeccably manicured Scientology Celebrity Centre (“See famous weirdos in person!” Death-Ray’s website proclaims. What they don’t tell you is that lingering or taking pictures outside the building will draw expressionless, robotlike security guards who demand to know what you’re doing). The line to get into Death-Ray extended out of the UCB Theatre’s door and down the block, composed, or so I gleaned from various conversations, of hipsters, nerds, college students, and industry types in T-shirts, summer
dresses, and black-framed eyeglasses. A production assistant walked the line, politely but expediently asking people to sign release forms so they could appear on camera for an Andy Dick VH1 pilot (You Don’t Know Dick).

People slowly took their seats—I found one on the side of the stage, uncomfortably close to the action—and the show started promptly at 9 PM. Host Eddie Pepitone, of The Sarah Silverman Program and Flight of the Conchords, came on first, his bowl-shaped frame and brusque New York accent commanding the theater with a “Hey, it’s me here!” sort of vibe. He poked fun at the nervous-looking girls seated a few feet away and mocked his own portly appearance before setting the show in motion.

A half-dozen comedians each got their ten-to-fifteen-minute shot. A nervous, crack-voiced kid from Austin, Texas, bombed instantly. Alt-comedy hero Blaine Capatch regained the jovial mood, his lanky, goofy gesticulations belying the stinging intelligence of his bits. Notorious substance abuser and Ben Stiller Show alum Andy Dick went through an intentionally awkward routine with his son in the audience, multiple video cameras swirling to catch it. Dick’s “sponsor” (a morbidly overweight man dressed in black named Robert) appeared unsteadily near the back of the room, heckling Dick while clutching a Heineken. Dick yelled for him to be removed from the theater, but Robert stumbled onstage and began thrashing with Dick. By the time the sponsor disappeared backstage and returned to vomit violently on Dick, I could smell the staged quality of the bit (and the fake vomit), although many audience members seemed genuinely disturbed. Chalk up another win for Andy Kaufman–style confrontational humor.

Tall, pretty, and with a shock of long, curly red hair, deadpan stoner Morgan Murphy joked self-consciously about looking at her body in the mirror, because “this is the best it’s ever gonna get.” Aziz Ansari, Rob Huebel,
and Paul Scheer of MTV's *Human Giant* were slated to headline a few nights at UCB that week, so they took the stage to test a high-energy sketch about red-and-blue-clad fools with T-shirt guns (you know, the kind at arena sporting events), zipping around the theater like meth-addled motivational speakers. They turned on the audience and threatened to rob them of their Urban Outfitters T-shirts, only to double-cross each other, the heist becoming predictably bloody and satisfyingly ridiculous. Martha Kelly offered an appealingly calm set that relied less on histrionic delivery than brutally honest material and occasional injections of harsh, out-of-nowhere profanity. Headliner Brendon Small, the cocreator of Adult Swim's heavy-metal cartoon *Metalocalypse*, performed a short, mildly funny headlining set, a bearded roadie continually attempting to hand him an electric guitar. He finally accepted it and shredded through a technical metal solo before exiting the stage.

Random? Hell yes. The inconsistent tone left me a little flat (particularly as the comics hammered away at themes of self-loathing, depression, and dumb, fat midwesterners), but I could understand why comedy nerds salivated over each new *Death-Ray*, savoring the unpredictability of its lineup and mood: A good night and a bad night at *Death-Ray* are only inches away from each other, although, based on its reputation, most probably lean toward the former.

I considered heading back to my car and returning to my cousin's house for some much-needed sleep when Pepitone announced that *See You Next Tuesday* (SYNT), the free after-show, would be starting shortly. I also remembered hearing that Maria Bamford, one of my favorite comics, would be performing at it, so I decided to stick around. Presented by Matt Belknap of popular comedy website ASpecialThing.com, and *Death-Ray*’s Aukerman and
Porter, the show was the alternative-to-the-alternative of Death-Ray, a place where up-and-comers could grab valuable time in front of smaller but equally devoted crowds.

"It's easier to do a good show when you're kind of under the radar like that," Belknap would later tell me. "Death-Ray is an established brand now in terms of live comedy. The audience sometimes has that attitude of 'Hey, I've heard this is great. Show us what you got. Prove it,' and that affects the comics, too. But See You Next Tuesday's stakes are so low. It's free. It's late at night on a Tuesday. There's lots of experimenting and trying out of material. The crowds are really great because they show up for the right reasons: they want to laugh, and they don't pay to get in. They can leave whenever they want."

I skipped over to a nearby grocery store for some beverages and returned to watch SYNT, which only attracted about thirty people. Aukerman and Porter performed a couple sketches they were to unveil at the Vancouver Global Comedy Fest the next week, such as a hysterically masculine fight that escalates into a naked slap-match, and a topical spoof of Fidel Castro's security doubles. Avuncular, wide-eyed slab of a man Matt Braunger killed with his perfectly timed bits, presenting an ostensibly tighter set than any on the Death-Ray roster an hour before. TV regular Aisha Tyler harped on the inanity of living in LA, while Paul Gilmartin offered a brilliant, dead-on parody of a squeaky-clean Republican politician, taking questions from the crowd and spinning them into improv gold. By the time closers Janice Davidson and Shelagh Ratner came around, my eyelids were leaden and my brain threatening to shut down, so I left to find my car. (Sadly, Maria Bamford never showed up.)

As I walked past the Scientology Celebrity Centre, I divined a pair of footsteps trailing me. They turned corners when I did, crossed when I did. My heart jumped
into my throat when I approached my parking spot and found only an empty square of concrete. A street sign informed me it became a tow-away zone after 11 PM (I’d later find out the city towed me at 11:15, two hours before I left the UCB Theatre). I had only been in LA for a half a day and had already managed to strand myself in Hollywood after midnight. Nice.

I turned to confront the footsteps, expecting a couple strung-out addicts eager to jump me for loose change and God knows what else (or perhaps a manic Tom Cruise who spotted me from the lofty windows of the Scientology compound). Instead there stood two young, mild-looking guys wearing equally exasperated expressions. “Did you park here, too?” one of them asked, his eyes glinting under the orange street lamp. I nodded. “Well, we parked here because we saw your car and figured it was safe.” I shrugged. “Sorry.”

We searched street signs and chain-link fences for tow company numbers, eventually calling Hollywood Tow Service and confirming they had our vehicles. One of the dudes lived nearby, so I followed him back to his grubby apartment—probably a foolish thing to do—but the guys turned out to be harmless, talkative types, hungrily devouring fries and burgers from Wendy’s while ESPN flickered in the background, their apartment reeking of bong hits and mildew. Just when I was starting to think a cab might have been a better idea, we were ready to leave for the tow company. Two hours and $250 later, I was back at my cousin’s house on Sierra Bonita Avenue.

As I drifted off to sleep on the fold-out couch, the Death-Ray jokes about dumb midwesterners suddenly didn’t seem so off-base.
My girlfriend, Kathleen, has a thing for plastic surgery.

I don’t mean that she wants it for herself, or that she finds it in some way miraculous and just. She just takes delight in the most hideous products of these cosmetic procedures, gawking at them online, whispering quietly to me when we glimpse one of the sad freaks in public, barely restraining herself from staring openly or giggling. It’s endearing, and it made me think of her often as I drove around Los Angeles that next morning, my eyes assaulted by the colorful monstrosities that populate the general area in which I was staying.

People streamed in and out of boutiques and trendy cafés in Beverly Hills, iPhones glued to their ears, bags of clothing and jewelry dangling from their impossibly skinny, tanned arms. Remember, this was my first time in LA, so I’d never seen many of these otherworldly places that most people only glimpse on TV and in film, these stores that have arisen to sop up the fat dripping from the entertainment industry, acting as grease traps for the city’s ostentatious wealth. The sea of comically large boobs, birdlike noses, tucked tummies, and lifted faces made me feel as if I were adrift in some mixture of John Carpenter’s They Live and Aphex Twin’s “Windowlicker” video.

It was reassuring, then, to arrive at Krust Café and Bakery on Verdugo Avenue in Burbank and find Patton Oswalt looking every bit the normal person. He was seated at a four-top near the counter, flipping through a pile of comic books he had picked up that morning (Wednesday equals comic-book day in Nerd Land). I must have looked the part of the writer, with my black glasses, messy hair, dirty Converse, and overstuffed messenger bag, because the instant he saw me, he rose and said, “John?” I shook his hand, noticing how he looked at once bigger and
smaller in person. I'd been vaguely familiar with him for years, occasionally seeing him on the CBS sitcom *The King of Queens*, on which he played star Kevin James's squat, quirky friend Spence Olchin from 1998 to 2007. That role is probably how most everyone else knows him, and Olchin's fastidiousness and comic book/sci-fi obsessions aren't too far from Oswalt's own personality.

But in Burbank, in the sickly gray light of a February morning at this earthy bakery, Oswalt just looked like a regular guy, his sneakers, baggy pants, and loose black T-shirt contrasting with his oversized sunglasses. "Have you been here long?" I asked, hoping he hadn't. "Nah, just got here early," he replied. "I'm so sorry, but I've actually got a thing I have to do at Disney in an hour, so we should probably start."

Ah, yes: Disney. Oswalt had recently starred in the 2007 Pixar feature *Ratatouille* as the voice of Remy the Rat. It was arguably the biggest role of his acting career, and one that would send him to the Oscars four days later, where the movie ended up walking away with the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film. Oswalt had already landed himself sixty-odd acting and voice roles over the years, from a video store clerk in a *Seinfeld* episode to appearances on *NewsRadio* and Comedy Central's *Reno 911!* His film credits have usually consisted of brief appearances in movies like *Magnolia* and *Starsky and Hutch*, although he has taken bigger parts in *Reno 911!: Miami* and the sports-movie spoof *Balls of Fury*. He's often afforded the everyman role, which is unsurprising considering his calm, rounded face and malleable voice. That last instrument, in particular, is his secret weapon, packing all the satisfying punch of a wet boxing glove filled with concrete.

But I was there to dissect Oswalt's stand-up career, and the way it led to his seminal *Comedians of Comedy* tour
and films and, eventually, his Sub Pop CD. Granted, his talents have landed him brief stints on hipster favorites Mr. Show, MTV’s Human Giant, and Adult Swim shows including Aqua Teen Hunger Force and Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job! But Oswalt is notoriously suspicious of indie cred, even as his career benefits from it. He loves the art of comedy and will perform it whenever he can. And other than David Cross, there’s no one else more noted for bringing comedy to the indie-music crowd.

Like Cross, Oswalt is a transplanted southerner. He was born on January 27, 1969, in Portsmouth, Virginia, a waterfront city in the southeastern bend of the state. His dad was a Marine colonel, so the family frequently moved around. At an early age, Oswalt’s father exposed him to Jonathan Winters records. He also developed an instant love of horror movies after watching the original silent version of Nosferatu at a public library in Tustin Meadows, California, when he was five years old, relishing the way it made the other children scream. Eventually he would appreciate the parallels between horror and comedy—the visceral setup and punch, the mixture of laughter and disbelief at grotesque images and ideas.

His appreciation of stand-up developed along that path. “When I was young, Jonathan Winters and Bill Cosby were really, really big deals for me,” he says, leaning across the table as I cradle an enormous cup of green tea. “Especially Jonathan Winters. As I got older it became Steve Martin and Richard Pryor and George Carlin. But it’s almost like, you know how in the seventh grade everyone’s into The Who for awhile? It just speaks to something, and you kind of always keep that with you. But not every kid has comedic idols like I did, or like most comedians did.”

Oswalt became interested in the darkly brilliant writing of Harlan Ellison in seventh grade, starting with the anthology A Boy and His Dog. (He now counts the
living-legend author among his friends.) Throughout his teenage years, Oswalt envisioned himself becoming a writer, although after he graduated from Broad Run High School in Ashburn, Virginia, in 1987, he was furnished with a more realistic sense of the world. He majored in English while at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, on a partial scholarship. During his sophomore year he realized that writing alone wasn’t going to pay the bills, so he worked a variety of temp jobs, including DJ, paralegal, and reporter for sports papers. He soon came to resent the failed jocks he worked with at the law office. “I couldn’t take another liquid lunch at Bennigan’s,” he told ASpecialThing.com in 2005. “There was an actual Bennigan’s on Leesburg Pike Route 7 in the Tyson’s Corner area where we would go every Friday, and it was so fuckin’ depressing.”

Oswalt was a rabid fan of magazines like National Lampoon and shows like Monty Python’s Flying Circus, so he jumped into stand-up while in college, even though he immediately found it difficult and unrewarding. Still, something about the masochistic work-for-it aspect of stand-up subtly appealed to him. His first shot came at Garvin’s in Washington, DC, in July 1988. Blaine Capatch was emceeing a radio station-sponsored open-mic contest that included the nineteen-year-old Oswalt and a fourteen-year-old Dave Chappelle. Oswalt took an immediate liking to Capatch and comedian Mark Voyce, who were part of the general DC scene at the time—a scene starting to experience the death throes of the eighties comedy boom. He also admired the better touring comedians who would come through town, like Louis C. K., Bobcat Goldthwait, Emo Phillips, and even Jay Leno.

Oswalt played scattered regional gigs in places such as Baltimore and Philadelphia, driving only as far as his dilapidated car could take him, and hosted weekly
open-mic nights in DC. He worked the rest of the region when he could, taking stand-up jobs across the Midwest and the South, often subject to last-minute cancellations. He received terrible advice from comedians whose careers were circling the drain—comedians who tried to convince him that being competitive and money-oriented in the stand-up world was the only way to survive.

Oswalt also experienced his political awakening around this time, realizing that the start of the first Gulf War late in 1990 meant some of his friends would be shipped overseas. At one point, he headed down to a commons area at his college to see what sort of protests were going on, only to discover a pair of football frats throwing a prowar rally. “There was a guy dressed as Captain America, there was a guy dressed as Rambo, and there was a dude in a kind of shitty Uncle Sam costume, and a guy wearing a turban with a cardboard scimitar, and Uncle Sam was kicking him and running around in a circle and all this shit,” he told IGN.com in April 2006. “I was watching this going, ‘These guys are in danger of going to the war, and they’re so into this.’ Because to them, it’s just a big aggressive fight, like it’s fun.”

Like fellow comedians David Cross and Janeane Garofalo, Oswalt would later become a vocal critic of the George W. Bush administration and its own preemptive 2003 war in Iraq, playing anti-Bush events and lending his material to a Rock Against Bush DVD. But in the summer of 1991, Oswalt was mostly thinking about where to live. He had just graduated from college and moved to Baltimore, but Capatch tried to convince him that San Francisco held untold opportunities for the pair. With that in mind, Oswalt moved back in with his parents to save money, eventually heading to San Francisco in the summer of 1992, and making the difficult decision to break it off with his college fiancée.
On the drive out, Oswalt’s Volkswagen Jetta blew its water pump in Truckee, California. Fixing it required all the cash he’d saved living with his parents. He was never more desperate for work, and had been sending tapes to clubs in San Francisco before leaving the East Coast. All of them told him the same thing: “Talk to us when you get here.” Fortunately, San Francisco’s boldly experimental, inclusive comedy scene immediately heartened Oswalt. The bulging alternative comedy wave had yet to fully wash north from Los Angeles and meet with San Francisco’s, but San Francisco already had a scene of its own. Soon, Oswalt’s comedic heroes weren’t Jonathan Winters and Richard Pryor, but his friends—people like Brian Posehn, Dana Gould, Blaine Capatch, Greg Proops, Bob Rubin, and Jeremy Kramer. Even before alternative comedy became a catchphrase, these comedians forged their own paths in and outside of the traditional stand-up circuit.

“Look at someone like Dana Gould,” Oswalt says. “He’s very much like the Johnny Cash of this generation. A lot of these so-called alternative comics and newer comics are doing what they do because of stuff they saw Dana do back in the day. He was doing it when most comedians weren’t very personal onstage. You had those ‘Man, shopping’s crazy, isn’t it?’ people, and he’s up there going, ‘Man, I tried to kill myself the other night.’ You’re like, ‘Wow, what the fuck is this?’ And he fuckin’ destroyed audiences.”

Oswalt marveled at the respect that other stand-ups held for the art of comedy in San Francisco, with comics regularly watching their peers’ sets—something Oswalt had never witnessed on the East Coast. Their material and performance styles dripped with surprise and shock, or alternately, thoughtfulness and political material, their sets often presented as cultural events akin to experimental theater rather than mindless nightclub entertainment. These comedians labored to perform
each and every night, regardless of the composition of the audience, instead of honing a single set of jokes (although they did that, too). They bared their souls and took humor in whatever direction they pleased. Expectations, in other words, went out the door. Big crowd? Small crowd? Good mood? Bad? It didn't matter.

Bigger touring names such as Dave Attell, Andy Kindler, Laura Kightlinger, Brian Regan, and Janeane Garofalo would stop through, Oswalt giddily soaking up their sensibilities. He gradually overhauled his style, ditching the double-breasted suits and solid but unspectacular subject matter that typified his DC days. He imitated his betters and attempted to get onstage every night of the week at the Phoenix Theater, The Punch Line, and Holy City Zoo. Eventually he found a style all his own, but it would take him seven years and a mini breakdown in early 1995 (when he inexplicably sabotaged his sets onstage) in order to achieve it.

Oswalt had been working toward a direct, conversational style, like that of the guy at a bar relating an amazing story and continuing to drink heartily while doing so. He counted a Washington, DC, sportscaster named Glen Brenner among his influences. Brenner would often reference the artificiality of TV while on camera, pointing out crew members and breaking down the necessarily mediated distance by emphasizing it.

Moving to Los Angeles from San Francisco in 1995 pushed Oswalt into yet another creative realm. He had lived there briefly in 1994 while working with Blaine Capatch on Comedy Central's short-format show Food for Thought, in which the pair played pseudosophical grocery store clerks, but the timing didn't feel right to establish roots just yet. He returned to San Francisco, then played a short residency with Capatch at Slapstix in Baltimore.
It was a grim sight. The comedy scene in that city—and most every place in the East outside of New York—had been thoroughly decimated by the downturn of the 1980s boom, clubs closing by the dozen and out-of-work comedians littering the streets. Fortunately, the crowds and waitstaff at Slapstix loved Oswalt and Capatch’s material, bolstering the pair’s sense that moving to San Francisco for the sake of stand-up had been a worthy quest. But the club’s owner, Chris Cahill, freaked out when he received a half-dozen negative comment cards about their sets. That, and the owner’s refusal to kick out rowdy drunks for fear of alienating them as customers, helped reinforce Oswalt’s ideas about the flaws and limitations of the comedy club model. “In the shittier comedy clubs, drunk people are GODS,” he asserted in a 2004 Q&A on ASpecialThing.com.

Despite his devotion to touring and playing wherever he could, the experience helped Oswalt realize that his future could only be in Los Angeles. When he arrived, he found a city teeming with “refugees,” as he put it, from other scenes around the country: friends and influences like Dana Gould and the darkly brilliant Jeremy Kramer; up-and-comers like Karen Kilgariff, Mary Lynn Rajskub, Laura Milligan, and Greg Behrendt; East Coast- and Midwest-bred comedian-writers like David Cross, Bob Odenkirk, and Paul F. Tompkins. All were coalescing around LA’s small, experimental comedy rooms. “The eighties comedy boom was just an intensely genericizing force,” says Jesse Thorn of radio’s The Sound of Young America. “Everybody could get work as long as you weren’t too weird, so everybody was working. But once all the jobs disappeared, people were like, ‘Well, we want to do the stuff that we like.’ So that led to things like the Largo scene and Beth Lapides’ Un-Cabaret scene in LA, and then the equivalents in San Francisco and Boston.”
Oswalt's idealism would quickly turn on him. He and Capatch were hired as writers for the MadTV pilot on Fox, then later as staffers after the network picked up the young sketch comedy. Oswalt watched with envy as his friends on Mr. Show aired groundbreaking, inspired sketches, whereas most of the ideas that made it onto MadTV seemed creatively retarded by comparison. But as correct as he may have been about MadTV's unchallenging premises and lame recurring characters, Oswalt failed to offer alternatives to the writers on his show. He chose to direct his anger at people in essentially the same boat, like executive producers Adam Small and Fax Bahr. That pair eventually asked Oswalt and Capatch not to return after the second season. By that point, Oswalt pretty much agreed with them.

Oswalt would look back on the situation with some regret, remembering the quality of a writing staff he didn't appreciate at the time, and the fact that a handful of Mr. Show regulars actually tried to get on MadTV. It wasn't so much a lack of ideas on the show, but the fact that Fox instantly killed most of the good ones for fear of losing viewers who wouldn't get the references. Two years later, Bob Odenkirk and David Cross solicited Oswalt to write for Mr. Show in its third season, which Oswalt initially turned down due to a prior writing commitment with MTV. When that inevitably fell through, he returned to Bob and David with a half-dozen hastily written sketches. Mr. Show's staff holes had been filled by then, and Bob and David never used Oswalt's sketches. In the end, Oswalt only appeared as a character actor in a couple Mr. Show episodes, and the show's promised fifth season—when he was planning to join as a writer—never happened.

Fortunately, by 1996 Oswalt was a legitimate headliner at clubs. He started to write for and appear on a handful of TV shows, and made his feature film debut in the middling
comedy *Down Periscope*. In 1997 he snagged his own HBO *Comedy Half-Hour* special, and two years later, a *Comedy Central Presents* special. Oswalt later pointed to the latter program as an example of how *not* to shoot short-form stand-up, but the material at least showed promise.

Taped in New York, it begins with Oswalt taking the stage in a crisp, dark suit. He talks about ignoring pot laws and treating them like a kid’s game, where the rules don’t apply because he didn’t pay attention when they were laid out. He makes fun of the “Starbucks liberalism” he sees at classic movie houses in LA, listening to audience members complain about the sexism in *The Searchers*, misguidedly attempting to adapt its message to today’s politically correct environment. He also drops musical references while talking about the Dolphin coffee shop in Amsterdam, and how Supergrass, Elvis Costello, and the Beastie Boys (“the holy triumvirate”) are playing over the loudspeakers while he selects his weed. While enjoying some White Widow from Afghanistan, Queen’s “We Are The Champions” rings out, and all he can think about is how he could have been back in LA getting up to work on the crappy sketch show he used to do (*MadTV*).

The special isn’t bad, but it pales next to the material Oswalt would later devise, and the organic, inviting way in which he would present it. As he continued to work in the industry, writing for and appearing in shows such as *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist* and taking small roles in big movies like *Magnolia* and *Man on the Moon*, he befriended other LA comics and musicians, including singer-songwriter Aimee Mann.

A small but vibrant scene had begun to develop around Largo nightclub on Fairfax Avenue in West Hollywood. Mark Flanagan, owner of the artist-friendly venue, and SF Improv and NBC veteran Lisa Leingang went out of their way to book up-and-coming musicians
and comedians, helping boost the careers of Mitch Hedberg, Tenacious D, Elliott Smith, Ryan Adams, and others. It wasn’t odd to see Elvis Costello, Neil Young, Michael Stipe, or Beck stop by to work out material or collaborate with one of the night’s performers, although due to the club’s limited capacity (about 100 seats, plus standing room) it almost always sold out. “I have a lot of singer-songwriters who don’t write about the happy things in life,” Flanagan told the Los Angeles Times in 2002. “I mean, there’s a sense of humor in there, but you gotta dig deep for it. In Ireland, when I was growing up, a comedian or a magician would often open for an artist. So I thought it would be good to do that at Largo.”

Aimee Mann and singer-songwriter husband Michael Penn often played at Largo with friend Jon Brion, whom Mann knew from her days in Boston. Brion’s weekly Friday night gigs drew consistent crowds and celebrity musical friends. A producer for Mann, Fiona Apple, The Eels, Rufus Wainwright, and others, Brion went on to score a few movies for Paul Thomas Anderson (such as Magnolia, to which Mann contributed the Grammy- and Academy Award–nominated song “Save Me”).

Mann, the Berklee-trained singer-guitarist formerly of eighties pop act Til Tuesday (remember “Voices Carry”?!) had always been a bit wary of stand-up comedy. “I remember when I was in Boston and just the idea of going to a comedy show was like, ‘Please, God, no,’” she says. “My idea of a comedian was like Gallagher or something. I thought I would get sprayed with water or the audience would get harassed.”

But it was a different story in Los Angeles. One of the first people Mann saw performing stand-up there was Patton Oswalt. She fondly recalls an impromptu “super nerds” bit that Oswalt and Brian Posehn concocted in which they argued about the minutiae of Star Wars and Star Trek.
They improvised the show-saving routine after a planned reading of the script of Jerry Lewis’s infamous, unreleased Holocaust film, *The Day the Clown Cried*, was shut down.

Largo’s Monday night comedy showcases helped introduce Mann to the new vanguard of comedy. “I’d already met [Mr. Show alumnus] Paul F. Tompkins, and he was a big favorite of mine,” Mann says. “But we’d also see Sarah Silverman, Andy Kindler, David Cross, Mary Lynn Rajskub, and people like that at Largo.” Oswalt had already opened for several musical acts at Largo, including Jack Black’s comedy-metal duo Tenacious D and Men at Work’s Colin Hay. “The Largo was a music club. The Diamond Club was a music club,” Oswalt said. “The whole thing was that we were taking it out of comedy clubs and doing it anywhere else we could—coffee shops, bookstores, whatever. It was the same thing in New York with the Luna Lounge and the Time Café and all that stuff.”

Mann loved the unpredictable artistic fare, intimate mood, and passionate, occasionally boisterous Largo audiences. That eventually led her and Michael Penn to create their Tuesday night Acoustic Vaudeville shows in 1999. As the name implies, the anything-goes format reinforced Largo’s already strong mash of cutting-edge comedy and music. Mann and Penn also launched a series of occasional tours starting in 2000 that visited cities across the United States, and eventually England and Ireland. Comedians Oswalt, David Cross, Paul F. Tompkins, Andy Kindler, Janeane Garofalo, and others joined them, with Oswalt logging considerable time on the road. “We just had the idea of involving comedians because we both felt so awkward talking onstage all the time,” Mann says. “So the idea was to have a comic, who’s a professional talker onstage, to come in and pinch hit. They’d do the heavy lifting of the banter and basically pretend to be us, then we’d step out and take over with the music.”
The format worked, and soon critics were heralding its innovative approach—which harkened back to the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century stage format from which it took its name. National publications dubbed the sold-out tours “an intimate cabaret” (Daily Variety) and “a new form of entertainment” (The Boston Globe), and Largo’s designation as “LA’s worst-kept secret” (Q magazine) only grew. It wasn’t the only venue in LA hosting comedy and music, but like New York’s Luna Lounge, it was often the hottest.

Mann eventually adopted the format for her annual Christmas variety show, which tours the country with musician friends and features stand-ups Morgan Murphy, Paul F. Tompkins, Fred Armisen, John C. Reilly, and others in a musical-comedy revue. “I really like the ensemble approach,” Mann says. “I’ve always liked that sort of buffet approach to anything.”

“She was also very gung-ho about a Presidents’ Day show not too long ago,” says Paul F. Tompkins. “The more diversity you have onstage, the more interested people remain because they don’t know what’s going to happen next. For me that’s about all I can ask for from a show: to be kept on my toes. The element of surprise is so much fun.”

“Aimee Mann is definitely the den mother to a lot of comics,” David Cross adds. “Wait, she’s the one who directed Heat, right?”

★★★★★

Throughout the early 2000s, Patton Oswalt appeared on TV (Adult Swim’s Home Movies) and in films (Ben Stiller’s cult comedy Zoolander). Variety had already dubbed him one of the “Ten Comedians to Watch” in 1999, and in 2002 Entertainment Weekly named him the “It” comedian of the year. He popped up on game shows
(Hollywood Squares, Pyramid) and cable TV (Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn, VH1’s I Love the ’80s) and as a lifelong comic book nerd, fulfilled a dream by penning DC Comics’ one-off JLA: Welcome to the Working Week in 2003. Around this time he also started writing “punch-up” for Hollywood movies, a process by which writers attack a preexisting script and add whatever seems to be missing, whether that’s pithy dialogue, necessary emotional beats, or, as was often the case with Oswalt, jokes in computer-animated movies.

But Oswalt’s love for stand-up remained strong, and in March of 2002 he met someone who opened him to a different side of that world. Oswalt and comedian Brian Posehn were booked for a weekend at The Punchline in Atlanta, where David Cross had performed his first gig twenty years earlier. Atlanta resident Henry Owings, a graphic designer and editor of the unapologetically harsh, hilarious magazine Chunklet, knew Posehn through David Cross and wanted to check out the shows. “Brian and Patton were playing Thursday through Saturday and I went out to every single show,” Owings recalls. “We just hung out and talked about authors and comics and music. I think Patton was kind of smitten with who I was, as far as the kind of stuff I’ve done in my life and how I’ve done it. That weekend I took both of them around to comic book shops and record stores in my ratty old Volkswagen and we just nerded out.”

Owings could immediately sense that Oswalt was unlike most comedians. The way he sought out challenging new audiences and experiences impressed Owings, Oswalt relentlessly honing his set night after night, three shows a night, and eschewing the typical postset dressing room for interaction. “Right after (Patton) got home from that weekend, I got a check in the mail from him for $200 for driving him around, and this is right around
the time that I was burglarized," Owings says. "I was just like, 'This guy is a fucking class act.'"

During a Chunklet phone interview with Oswalt, Owings asked if he would be interested in playing the magazine's tenth anniversary party at the 40 Watt Club in Athens, Georgia, in March 2003. The 40 Watt had helped kick-start the careers of new wave, post-punk, and indie fixtures Pylon, R.E.M., Indigo Girls, Of Montreal, Drive-By Truckers, and others. And since Oswalt had played music venues before—and gotten along famously with Owings during their first meeting—he agreed to fly out for it. "He absolutely fell in love with the vibe of it and how he was received," Owings says of the show. "He was playing to fans, and not just people that came to see a 'comedy' show. He felt like it was almost opulent to play in front of people that were so appreciative and got what he was doing. I've probably seen him 200 times now and I've never seen him thrive or have as much fun as he has in a rock club. He's a force of nature."

Indeed, Oswalt enjoyed the experience so much that he returned to Athens four months later, although Owings mistakenly booked him in a room that was far too big for Oswalt's draw at the time. "It was this theater with like a 1,000-person capacity, where The Melvins and Queens of the Stone Age would play, and he performed for three hours to forty fucking people," Owings remembers. "He came onstage, and I'll never forget this—he had this kind of wine lipstick ring around his mouth—and he was out-of-his-mind drunk. When he got off stage, he just bear-hugged me and said, 'That was the most fun I've ever had in my life.'" According to Owings, Oswalt even refused payment for the show. "It was very modest, only a couple hundred bucks. He told me, 'It's like getting paid to eat chocolate cake. It's just wrong.'"
The experience, it seemed, threatened to sour Oswalt on the traditional comedy club experience for good. Not that Oswalt hated comedy clubs. His long-standing ethos of performing stand-up for its own sake was (and still is) fully intact. But a bad night at a comedy club was quickly becoming his least favorite experience. In a June 13, 2004, blog entry he opened up about the frustrations of playing to not one, but two bachelorette parties, reinforcing every stereotype that existed about the club environment. “I hate bachelorette parties,” he wrote. “Not in theory. A woman getting married, surrounded by her supportive friends who want to celebrate someone they love finding a true companion to share this poem called life is a beautiful thing. It’s a lullaby sung under moonlight to a child that will grow to bring peace to the world. But a bachelorette party at one of my shows? Like AIDS, rape, and Avril Lavigne at the same time. Take your fake wigs, rubber dildos [wow, you’re so dangerous and sassy, waving a big, black rubber cock around in public—guess who else does that? Gay winos] and bullshit Sex and the City attitudes to a strip club or a P. J. O’Flannawackery’s.”

Oswalt savored the rock club environment so much that he returned to the 40 Watt in Athens to record his first stand-up CD, Feelin’ Kinda Patton. Aimee Mann’s United Musicians label released the twenty-eight-track record on June 29, 2004, and Dan Schlissel’s Stand Up! Records later issued a limited-edition vinyl version, just as he did with David Cross’s albums. 

*Feelin’ Kinda Patton* included impassioned and laser-focused attacks on the inanity of America’s political leadership and our drooling acceptance of it, but it also employed Oswalt’s vibrant vocabulary and nimble, twisted brain to skewer nearly everything else. “There’s a bit of David Cross in Oswalt’s style, mostly in how effectively both use the F-word, but also in their common
ability to weave hilarious cynicism through a jumble of personal experience and mundane pop culture events,” wrote Johnny Loftus in All Music Guide. “But Feelin’ Kinda Patton really gets going whenever Oswalt vaults off the usual comic fodder—eighties hair metal, porn, hippies—into bizarre flights of disposable culture surrealism. His recollection of an old Asti Spumante ad becomes an invitation into the twisted sex life of a frustrated midlevel professional; Robert Evans is the anchor for a meta-analysis of 1970s Hollywood Babylon.” In a nod toward Oswalt’s growing fan base, Chunklet later released an unedited version of Feelin’ Kinda Patton under the title 222.

Oswalt’s reputation in the industry was already on an upswing, thanks in part to his regular presence on The King of Queens. His stand-up had found a unique, pointed voice, and releasing a CD necessarily opened him to new audiences. He also appeared in his own one-hour Comedy Central special in 2004, No Reason to Complain. In it, he takes on e-mail spam, midgets, food (a favorite topic, including Black Angus’s ridiculous ads, and reality TV. He predicts Fox’s eventual programming desperation will lead to a program called World’s Most Listless Loiterers). He expresses deep ambivalence about adulthood: “I’m thirty-five years old now. All my friends are either having babies or getting sober, and they’re equally annoying.” The camera later cuts to the audience and shows familiar, bearded Anthrax guitarist Scott Ian sitting with a female friend. “If you were into metal in the eighties, guess what?” Oswalt says. “You were gay.” The special garnered mostly positive reviews, but despite his growing personal success, Oswalt still felt that the type of comedy he loved would require a brand name of sorts for people to appreciate it fully. Mostly, he just wished he could showcase his talented friends outside of the standard club circuit.
He had seen the comedy-music mixture work on his Acoustic Vaudeville dates, and his early experiences in the alt-comedy scenes of San Francisco and LA had taught him that not every crowd feared guileless, experimental humor. He had also paid keen attention to the success of David Cross’s tours with Ultrababyfat, and was quick to remember the negative experiences the comedy club environment could engender, such as the ones that happened at Slapstix. These things ultimately led him to create the winkingly titled *Comedians of Comedy* tour, the next step in stand-up’s march away from comedy clubs and onto the indie-music circuit.

The first official *Comedians of Comedy* show took place at the 40 Watt in Athens on April 29, 2004, with Oswalt, comedian Zach Galifianakis, and Superchunk drummer Jon Wurster (one half of the Scharpling and Wurster comedy team). Brian Posehn had been scheduled to perform in place of Galifianakis, but backed out a couple days prior to shoot a commercial. Subsequent shows took place in Chapel Hill (April 30) and Baltimore (May 1, minus Wurster). Henry Owings, always the self-contained unit, managed, booked, and promoted them. “He’d done it for years with bands and had to deal with load-ins and equipment and shipping,” Oswalt says. “With comedians it’s just us and the microphone, so it’s easy.”

The setup’s simplicity appealed to Owings, who remembered the immense amount of work in schlepping merchandise for the *Mr. Show* live tour, *Hooray for America!*, in 2002. “I come from a very punk-rock, underground, DIY background, a land free of managers and lawyers and publicists,” Owings says. “If you wanted to call someone you fucking did it, and I think what I brought to the table was this immediacy. I can manage tours and book shows and design the posters, because I’ve been fucking doing it...
my entire adult life. I don’t have to go through six or seven hoops and have conference calls about it.”

Oswalt realized the potential in conducting his shows the way an indie rock or punk band would, mounting grassroots marketing campaigns on radio stations, in college papers, and at record shop in-stores. “It’s not hard to promote yourself, especially for someone like me that is constantly building on my fan base and adding to my website and MySpace page,” he says. “And it’s especially so if your end goal is to do stand-up comedy. Because it’s not like I want to get out of stand-up comedy and just do movies. Everything I do—movies, TV, writing—is so I can keep doing stand-up.”

Oswalt introduced the first proper Comedians of Comedy tour on September 22, 2004, in Seattle. Filmmaker Michael Blieden and a small crew joined the comedians on the weeklong West Coast jaunt to document their every waking (and sleeping) moment, although manager Owings didn’t enjoy the added complication of a film crew on his self-contained tour. Comedian Maria Bamford joined Oswalt, Galiffianakis, and Posehn as they played small to midsized rock venues up and down the seaboard. David Cross’s 2002 tour with Ultrababyfat provided partial inspiration, but Oswalt intended the Comedians of Comedy more as a comic variety show, using his existing notoriety to draw new audiences to artists who lacked that same renown.

“(Cross’s tour) was a model I used to put together the travel, logistics, as well as choose the types of venues we’d perform in,” Oswalt says. “But the idea came from a lot of different areas—even seeing what The Original Kings of Comedy and the Blue Collar Comedy Tour did. It was just that whole do-it-yourself idea of promoting it yourself, bringing out your own audience that you like, and not depending on a club.” Oswalt says he was particularly struck by a series of shows he did with Cross at Cobb’s
Comedy Club in San Francisco a year prior. "The club meant well, but the tickets were way too high, and they weren't advertising in the places that our fans would have seen. That's what really got me thinking, OK, it's time to put this into my own hands. I was also coasting on the recognition from The King of Queens and realized it was getting easier to fill these clubs. But I was bringing people out that weren't necessarily fans of me. It was just like, 'Oh, that guy's on TV. Let's go see him.' I thought I needed to take a little more control over how I was presenting myself."

Oswalt didn't intentionally create the Comedians of Comedy as an antidote to the mainstream club experience, but, like Cross, he sympathized with fans who couldn't afford the high covers, parking costs, and food at those venues. Many of his fans were also too young to satisfy the two-drink minimum at a comedy club. And unlike musicians, comedians rarely had the chance to perform at the sort of small, all-ages shows that drew people in their own age group—or younger. "Comedians start off performing for people that are much older than them," Oswalt explains. "Then you have to either catch up with them or wait until it levels out. I thought that was silly, so I went the other way."

At the forefront of Oswalt's mind was the fact that many people still didn't consider stand-up comedy a legitimate art form on par with music or literature. He wanted crowds to feel the same thrill he got from watching his favorite comics, to follow them as they would their favorite bands or writers, watching them experiment, fail, and sometimes triumph with new creative approaches.

But the grind of the road on the first Comedians of Comedy tour also paralleled many small bands' experiences. "I've stayed in some pretty shitty places in my 104 years doing stand-up," Oswalt quipped in a September 23, 2004, online tour diary just after the tour's first show,
“but nothing could prepare me for the doom-soaked atmosphere of our Seattle residential hotel, which I’m going to call the James Whitmore Hangs Himself In The Shawshank Redemption Suites.”

Ample evidence of the tour’s ups and downs exists on Michael Blieden’s 2005 Comedians of Comedy documentary, financed by online movie rental company Netflix. It captures Oswalt, Posehn, Bamford, and Galifianakis candidly interacting on and off stage, trading jabs and developing jokes, telling road stories, sitting through interviews at radio stations, and generally marveling at the fact that young people in America were so primed to see stand-up comedy outside of comedy clubs.

Like any tour, the triumphant moments (Oswalt particularly enjoyed an all-ages show in Portland, Oregon, where young fans appeared in droves) mingle with hecklers, breakdowns, clowning, and drunken introspection. In one scene, Oswalt seems acutely aware that what he’s doing is simply a step in the evolution of stand-up comedy. “We are the ugly motherfuckers that are setting it up,” he tells Michael Blieden after the first-ever Comedians of Comedy show. “Someone’s gonna spike it and it’s not going to be us. I’m setting up the next guy. That’s my purpose.” The irony of course is that Oswalt was the next guy, taking cues from David Cross and others in a tour that helped propel him and his cadre of creative friends into the semi-national consciousness. Not that the movie was general-audience fare. The core quartet in the Comedians of Comedy come off alternately as nerds, stoners, smarty-pants, and maladjusted (if mostly likeable) people. “You get to see how antisocial and horrible we kind of are,” Oswalt joked on Jimmy Kimmel Live! shortly before the film premiered at South by Southwest on March 13, 2005. Indeed, the movie shows the comedians passing time in hotel rooms and tour vans, glued to
their head phones and laptops, their personalities sometimes growing prickly as the tour wears on.

But since it contains only scattered snippets of different stand-up sets, it ultimately fulfills its purpose of making the viewer want to seek out more of the comedians’ material. More to the point, it allows us to get to know the principals as human beings.

Maria Bamford, the lone woman on the tour, tells a comedy club horror story of an unruly man getting tasered by police during a solo set in Boise, Idaho. “He falls to the ground and starts crawling toward the stage going, ‘I’m having a good time, I wanna watch the rest of the shooow!‘”

Most of Bamford’s negative experiences in clubs, however, were milder than that. “Some people are like, ‘This comedy didn’t go with my nachos! I like my comedy to go with my nachos!’” she tells me. “It’s such a bummer when you have rough shows like that. Somebody will be like, ‘It’s my fucking birthday and I didn’t want to see this!’”

Bamford’s style is significantly different from that of her counterparts—which is exactly what Oswalt was going for. Her profanity-free collection of observations and deeply personal jokes occasionally reference her battles with depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder: “I’ve never really thought of myself as depressed as much as paralyzed by hope,” she says in 2007’s The Comedians of Comedy: Live at the Troubadour. She frequently finds humor in elevating mundane situations to ridiculous heights. She compares praying to “a bad ventriloquism act,” turning her hand into a maniacal version of Señor Wences’ Johnny character, who stands in for God. She also inverts familiar, lazy punch lines: “Your mama’s so fat...she’s humiliated and rejected by the very society that made your mama so fat!”
A travel-hardened comedian through and through, Bamford was born in Port Hueneme, California, on September 3, 1970, the daughter of a Navy doctor. She grew up in Duluth, Minnesota, before leaving for Bates College in Maine, the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, and finally the University of Minnesota, where she graduated with a degree in creative writing. She spent her childhood, as she tells the documentary camera at one point, imitating commercials and doing funny voices around her family, and that flair for impressively distinct voices came to underpin her vignette-driven act. Her normally high, upper-midwestern speaking voice, for example, can mutate into a languid California-cool persona or a Katherine Hepburnesque impression of her mother (a frequent source of inspiration). In one bit, she relates how she ran into a bitchy former high school classmate at Target while visiting Duluth, perfectly affecting that region’s coiled accent while skewering the gum-chewing, dismissive provincialism of someone still mired in adolescence.

Bamford had much to gain from the Comedians of Comedy tours. She’d been performing stand-up since she was nineteen years old, and had previously appeared on Late Night with Conan O’Brien, various Comedy Central specials, and TV shows like Mystery Science Theater 3000 and Dharma and Greg. But her solo touring schedule didn’t possess the overall brand appeal and exposure of the Comedians of Comedy—a shame, since her vocal mastery and unpredictable nature often provide the highlights of whatever projects she appears in. “Maria’s awesome,” says David Cross. “She’s really unique and talented and I hope other people see that. She’s capable of a lot of great stuff that I don’t think she gets a lot of opportunity to do.”

In one of Bamford’s more notable bits, she recounts a story that effectively splits the difference between Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? and Blue Velvet.
“My mom told me recently, ‘Honey, when you don’t wear makeup, you look mentally ill.’ So now when I go home I’m certain to wear thick green eye shadow and a line of lipstick around my lips. [In a shaky voice, eyelids fluttering,] ‘Baby look pretty now, Mommy?’”

Bamford’s body language reinforces the joke, her thin frame and wide eyes never seeming completely comfortable onstage despite her years of experience. The stance may or may not be intentional. “I like to do shows where nobody’s there, where there are only five people, or only other comics,” Bamford says. It’s the sort of humor-therapy approach that attracts many people to stand-up in the first place. (A few of Bamford’s bits also involve her therapist.) “Maria’s fiercely creative, an absolute font of talent, but I don’t think she was meant to go on tour like that,” says Henry Owings.

Bamford more or less agrees. “On the Comedians of Comedy shows I get more nervous sometimes because a lot of people come to see Patton and Brian,” she says, noting that she pretends to know very little about indie rock or metal. “I am a part of the problem! I do love the album covers and I love the T-shirts of the hip bands, though. I asked Brian to teach me about metal, and what’s happening in the music, and why they’re mad. They’re like, ‘We’re super mad! Everything’s happening and it’s happening fast!’ Of course, I’m not singing fast enough and the drummers are unbelievable on metal. They have a lot of carpal tunnel, which I can relate with because I used to type for a living. But in my brain I think maybe I’m not as hard core as those guys.”

Of course, hard core is a relative term. When we visit Brian Posehn’s LA home in the Comedians of Comedy documentary, we enter a room filled with sci-fi and fantasy action figures, comic books neatly wrapped in protective plastic covers and stacked in boxes, and a vintage Ms. Pac-Man
machine against the wall. When Bamford says “hard core,” it’s more likely she’s referencing Posehn’s reputation as a heavy-metal comedian as opposed to his obvious nerd rep.

Born July 6, 1966, in Sacramento, California, Posehn often suffered the tall, geeky role among his friends and classmates (he’s currently a burly, imposing 6’ 6”). He took classical piano lessons for eight years, starting when he was twelve, before jumping into stand-up. Moving to San Francisco from Sacramento introduced him to the group of comedians he matured with, including Oswalt, Greg Behrendt, Doug Benson, Laura Milligan, and Blaine Capatch. He met David Cross when Cross traveled to San Francisco to play the Improv, and came to admire his style. He moved to LA in 1993, at the same time as many other comedians, and soon signed with manager Dave Rath (who counted Oswalt, Janeane Garofalo, and others among his clients). Mr. Show propelled the deadpan, potty-mouthed Posehn into appearances on other sitcoms such as Seinfeld, Friends, Just Shoot Me!, and Everybody Loves Raymond. He also provided voice work for a number of animated shows on Adult Swim (Tom Goes to the Mayor, Aqua Teen Hunger Force) and Disney (Kim Possible), and currently plays gay stoner Brian Spukowski on The Sarah Silverman Program.

But the most undiluted version of Posehn resides on his CD, Live In: Nerd Rage, which metal label Relapse released in 2006. It’s not his only metal credential: he’s also a lifelong fan of the genre. “As I started to speak more about who I am onstage it just came out,” Posehn says. “I have simple pleasures and simple tastes. I still love the same stuff I loved when I was fifteen, like horror movies, comic books, heavy metal, and video games. So when I decided to talk about that stuff, I tried to be more real.” His jokes on the album cover porn, puppies, video games, late-night TV, and the vicissitudes of marriage. His biggest laughs
tend to come when he drops all pretense and goes straight for the gross-out, or grafts average-sounding phrases onto bizarre, unfamiliar ones, as when he relates the story of a pickup bar in LA where he’s amazed at “how slutty and hot” some of the women were dressed. “And I grew up in the eighties, so I know what sluts look like,” he assures us. Then he flips it around, to great effect:

“Guys don’t wear outfits that feature the dong. I think we should, though. Start pulling your pants down, show a little bit of neck, a little bit of dick neck, a little male cleavage. Just keep it tasteful, like two inches. Classy. That way you let the ladies know that if they play their cards right, later on they can see the other inch. Three-inch cock. Hooray! In summertime out in LA, the girls always wear the half-shirt, you know, showing the bottom tit, which is a sweet look. Fellas, pull up the shorts for a little bottom nut. Tie that in with the dick neck and you’re going to be knee-deep in ladies...or dudes.”

Between the bathroom humor and adolescent-style sexual observations, Posehn also relates an appropriately indignant bit about feeling betrayed by the Star Wars prequels, likening George Lucas to a creepy, molesting uncle. And ever since Posehn and Oswalt became headliners, they can play to audiences who actually get their Star Wars and Slayer references, whether it’s in a rock club or a comedy club. “I can be pretty sure the majority of my audience is going to know who Slayer is, and they’re going to get it because they’re close to who I am. We wouldn’t have run into that at the Improv when people just went to see whoever, and I’m up there talking about pot and Metallica.”

Like stoner-comedian Doug Benson, Posehn also loves his weed. Many of Posehn’s jokes are self-deprecating jabs, relating what a screw-up he is when he’s high. “He’s definitely a bit of a stoner. Or I should say, his motivation is very stonerlike,” says Henry Owings.
"I don't mean that negatively, either. It's just how he is."

Posehn's existing notoriety from *Mr. Show* and *Just Shoot Me!* helped draw crowds to the *Comedians of Comedy* tours, attracting cable TV devotees, sitcom fans, and metal nerds alike. (Incidentally, *Mr. Show* alums David Cross, Bob Odenkirk, and Tom Kenny also appeared on *Just Shoot Me!*, the equivalent of Oswalt's *King of Queens* in Posehn's career.)

But the genius of the *Comedians of Comedy* tours wasn't just that they attracted people with tastes similar to their performers, but that the settings tended to ensure even non-metal or indie-rock fans, for example, would get the references. "We knew there was an audience in New York and Los Angeles because that scene has been growing for a number of years," Zach Galifianakis says via e-mail, echoing his peers. "Patton had the clever idea to take it to the rest of the country, and it seemed to catch on. It has been a nice cult following of goth chicks with back acne."

Galifianakis's jokes waver between paunchy awkwardness and javelin-like resolve, appealing to an absurdist wit and contempt for pop-culture inanity. The short, fat, wiry-bearded comedian is the most unhinged of the bunch, sometimes prowling the stage in too-small shirts and a cheap visor, occasionally sitting down to play gentle, Windham Hill-style melodies on his piano while dropping devastating one-liners:

"I wish there was a morning-after pill for Denny's Moons Over My Hammy."

"I think that sign in neighborhoods, Slow Children Playing, is so mean."

"I hate to be gross, but the only time it's good to yell out 'I have diarrhea' is when you're playing Scrabble—because it's worth a shitload of points."
In the 2007 film *The Comedians of Comedy: Live at the Troubadour*, fans even bequeath Galifianakis a homemade pink visor with “Fat Jesus” written on the bill, a makeshift crown of thorns encircling the top. It speaks to Galifianakis’s sensitive-yet-harsh persona, which comedy fans have increasingly been gravitating toward as Galifianakis fulfills the role of the tortured genius. Perhaps it’s because he comes across as a genuinely complex character, an occasionally depressed, immensely talented humorist with unforced charm and endearing vulnerability (he often buries his face in his hands onstage, as if pushing back a psychotic episode or riding out a nasty cocaine high). He has joked before about being an alcoholic and grappling with losing his mind, genuine fear flickering in his eyes when he says it. “Zach, on the one hand, is a tremendously clearheaded guy,” says Henry Owings. “On the other hand, I think he’s really coming to grips with what it means to be a celebrity. He’s asked me countless questions about Jeff Mangum [the reclusive former leader of Neutral Milk Hotel, who reportedly suffered a nervous breakdown due to the strain of success]. I think he’s starting to identify more with that level of seclusion, and being kind of cryptic and not so immediately easy to pigeonhole. Every time he’s in Athens he’s like, ‘Show me where [Jeff] used to live and play shows.’ I might be extrapolating where there’s no need to, because with Zach at least, he’s got a farm in North Carolina that he uses to get away from everything.”

Galifianakis counts musicians such as Will Oldham (of Palace Brothers and Bonnie “Prince” Billy—with whom he appeared in a bizarre Kanye West video remake for “Can’t Tell Me Nothing,” filmed on his farm in North Carolina) and Fiona Apple (another music video buddy for whom he has opened) as friends. But he, like most of his peers, is no indie snob. At least not consciously.
“I don’t really think about it,” Galifianakis says of the crowds he plays to. “I just show up where there is a stage and a mic and some cheese and crackers. It really has more to do with the affordability of an offensive-smelling rock club versus the high-price comedy clubs. Both work. But both can be horrible, too. I feel it is a bit snobbish to say that only the cool people come to those indie shows. I have a general disdain for all audiences.”

Galifianakis was born on October 1, 1969, in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, a Greek Orthodox nephew of former US congressman Nick Galifianakis. After studying film and communications at North Carolina State University, he fled for New York in 1992. “I started performing in the midnineties in the back of a hamburger restaurant in Times Square,” he says. “I had moved to New York to act but could not stop giggling in classes because everyone took themselves very seriously, so I ventured into stand-up. It was kind of a last straw thing because I knew I wanted to be onstage but did not know in what capacity. After I got off stage at my first open mic, I knew that’s what I was going to do for the next twenty years.”

Galifianakis didn’t have comedy idols the same way other stand-ups did—at least none that were specific. He listened to records by Bill Cosby, Cheech & Chong, and even Andy Griffith, but mostly he paid attention to his older brother and cousins, “who were so very funny.”

He eventually netted random screen roles, appearing in TV shows such as Boston Common and Tru Calling, and briefly in the movies Bubble Boy, Corky Romano, and Heartland. He even hosted a short-lived VH1 talk show called Late World with Zach in 2002, although none of these projects allowed his true humor to shine. “Zach is kind of the merry prankster, the Ken Kesey of comedy,” says David Cross, before wryly adding: “He’s our generation’s Tim Conway.”
Henry Owings fell in love with Galifianakis immediately after seeing him at the first *Comedians of Comedy* show, in April 2004. “As a person he’s incredible, but as a comedian he’s one of the best I’ve ever seen. He’s just a genius. And he’s funny the second he wakes up. It’s just instinctual, like if you were left-handed. Whereas everything Patton does is poetry—every last fucking word that comes out of his mouth. You think it’s totally off the cuff, but it’s meticulously written. With Zach, it’s the complete opposite. It’s like a GG Allin concert. He might take a shit on the crowd, or pass out, or he might not even show up.”

The unlikely quartet of Oswalt, Posehn, Bamford, and Galifianakis came to represent the *Comedians of Comedy* to most people, each member complementing the others’ strengths and mitigating their weaknesses. Oswalt was the honed, brutally precise wordsmith, spinning elaborate metaphors with a sharp, reference-heavy tone. Posehn was the lumbering stoner giant, as adept in scatological humor and exploring the teenage male psyche as verbal self-immolation. Bamford’s vulnerable, randomly devastating, voice-driven characters belied her sophisticated philosophy and impeccable timing. And Galifianakis’s surreal, powder keg persona and conceptual jokes made crowds wonder alternately why they hadn’t heard of him and whether he was going to walk off the stage halfway through the set.

The quartet showed their solidarity in the *Comedians of Comedy* TV show, a six-episode series filmed during the summer of 2005 and aired that November on Comedy Central. Oswalt pitched the show based on a twenty-two-minute edit of Blieden’s documentary, and the TV version attempted to re-create that same spontaneous tone, trailing the quartet as they played venues out East. “Casual fans of funny need not apply,” wrote *Entertainment Weekly* in a review. “It’s the hard core—those who care
how comics write jokes, what inspires them, and whether they play well with others—who’ll dig this tour show.” (The series has never been released on DVD, and Oswalt doesn’t know if it ever will be.)

But the four core members weren’t the only Comedians of Comedy. Oswalt had originally intended the Comedians of Comedy just to be whomever he brought on the tour. When Galifianakis left, Oswalt tapped New York comedian Eugene Mirman to replace him. During the filming of the Comedy Central series, Adult Swim regular and stand-up veteran Jon Benjamin joined. When they toured again in 2006, Oswalt, Posehn, and Mirman adopted LA deadpan comic Morgan Murphy—a favorite of Oswalt and Aimee Mann—who hosts a weekly talk show at LA’s Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre with comedian Jen Kirkman. And when Comedians of Comedy became the first-ever stand-up showcase invited to perform at the Coachella music festival, Oswalt brought Bay-area comedians Jasper Redd and Brent Weinbach along.

Oswalt envisioned Comedians of Comedy as a running showcase of talent that he felt deserved more attention, bolstered by a handful of comedians who’d already gotten some. It was his show, but he played the emcee and the headliner, just as David Letterman is the guiding presence on Late Night, one whose personality recedes when the guests arrive.

“It’s called Boston-style comedy,” Oswalt explains. “There’s no such thing as, ‘Oh, the first guy sucks.’ On my shows, everyone’s the headliner. It’s their show when they’re onstage. I just hate that shitty comedy club pecking order, which is like, ‘Eh, fighting through all that stuff makes you good.’ No it doesn’t. It just makes you combative. There’s such a thing as seasoning, but there’s another such thing as battering someone for no other reason than that’s the way they’ve always done it.”
Oswalt likens the power of the Positive Unknown to watching the opening band at a Pixies concert: “It’s probably going to be a band that they like, and it’s probably going to be something that I like, too. Then I can discover something new. If I bring out unknowns on Comedians of Comedy, I guarantee you’ll like them at the end of the show. You’ll go, ‘Wow, who the fuck was that?’”

That approach extended to the two Comedians of Comedy concert films. The first, 2006’s Live at the El Rey, celebrated the end of a tour by bringing Blaine Capatch and Bob Odenkirk onstage at the art deco music venue on Wilshire Boulevard. (Odenkirk is hardly an unknown, but Capatch had probably escaped most people’s attention at that point, at least outside of comedy circles.) Odenkirk’s set lays the ground rules for the “judging” that will be done during the set, employing the knowingly dubbed Garofalo-Benet Alternative Comic Standards Scale.

“Referring to your notes will get you 3.5 points,” he says, looking directly at his notes. “Talking about how you are referring to your notes while you refer to your notes, 5.3 points. And reading directly from your notes, 8.2 points.” The scale awards points for references to Hong Kong and French filmmakers, seventies blaxploitation filmmakers, and Michel Gondry (an automatic win). Any mention of deeply ingrained antisocial behavior or an anti-Bush comment will also net points, as would use of the phrase “Who’s with me?” in an arch manner. (Self-deprecation had never been so meta.)

But the true tour de force of the Comedians of Comedy is 2007’s Live at the Troubadour. Oswalt pulls out all the stops for the marathon event, inviting the core Comedians of Comedy and nearly a dozen others to that storied music venue on Santa Monica Boulevard. Upon taking the stage, Oswalt holds up his fist to his mouth as if choking back a body-racking laugh, a common sight at his shows. (He
often begins by saying, “Holy SHIT, you guys. Wow... Look at this!” Whether it’s genuine amazement or showmanship, it always seems to set an inclusive tone.) After a few jokes he introduces Dana Gould. “In my opinion, and many people’s opinion, alternative comedy would not exist without this next guy,” he says. “The Johnny Cash/Elvis Costello of the alternative-comedy scene—the guy that made me want to be a better comedian.”

Gould winds his way through potentially pedestrian topics like kids and marriage, adroitly flipping them over by inserting reactionary, narrative punch lines through the matter-of-fact delivery and “Huh? How’s that for you?” facial expressions. The crowd seems a little too “on” (likely due to the cameras), but loosens up once Gould begins talking about performing angry oral sex behind a gay bar just to spite a thoughtless comment his father made. He pretends to weep bitterly when he learns that his father has died, all the while pantomiming dispassionate, workman-like blowjobs and handjobs to the invisible customers.

As the camera pans across the audience, we see that everyone seems to be wearing black hoodies and T-shirts, the uniform of choice for scruffy hipsters. Alt-comedy godfather Andy Kindler takes the stage and lays into the premise of the show, testing the hipsters’ sense of humor:

“This is fantastic. I hope this whole movement takes off, because I think a lot of people said, ‘You know what? Comedy clubs kind of suck. You know what would be good? Let’s put comedy in an even more inappropriate venue. How would that be? You know what people would love to do during stand-up acts?’ They would like to stand-up themselves. For years they were in a club: ‘Why are we stuck here at a table with elbow room and the ability to breathe?’”

Other comedians toy with audience expectations: Sarah Silverman’s set begins with random jokes until she
spots a portly fellow in the audience and starts mocking him. That fellow is a plant, Silverman's friend Steve Agee, who also appears on The Sarah Silverman Program, as Brian Posehn's equally large, bearded lover. Agee takes the stage and dons a guitar, leading Silverman through a number of saccharine, predictably offensive songs.

David Cross offers a truncated set, chiding himself for doing something as pedestrian as getting a dog. "I know that a dog is a cheap, shitty substitute for a kid," he says. "I like my dog but I don't love my dog. They're not better than people. They're better than shitty people...but you might as well have a retarded person in the house." He follows with an ingenious, Mr. Showesque pretaped piece in which he and friend Jon Benjamin argue in their New York office about heading to the Troubadour for the show. Oswalt had previously announced that Benjamin wasn't showing up, so he plays the video in Benjamin's place. Afterward, Benjamin "unexpectedly" pops onto the Troubadour stage, although Cross has already left by that point. Cross then appears on the video screen, speaking directly to Benjamin onstage, bickering with and cursing at him. Cross starts crying and the video ends, so Benjamin leaves to find him. Then Cross takes the stage again and speaks to Benjamin on the video screen: he's already "gone" looking for Cross.

If it all sounds a bit convoluted it's because it is, but it makes sense visually. The dialogue may be disposable, but the near perfectly timed concept harkens to both Mr. Show and Cross Comedy bits from the early nineties. In the end, both comedians meet onstage and hug triumphantly while sarcastically singing Bonnie Raitt's "Something to Talk About" to a karaoke backing track. They also pantomime anal and oral sex on an unlucky (but surprisingly good-natured) audience member. When Patton returns to the stage, the only words he can find are "Holy fucking shit."
Jasper Redd, the only comedian of color, talks about growing up black in Tennessee, the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan. He’s surprised, he says, that the state flag isn’t a white flag with two eyeholes.

“Don’t nobody hate like the KKK. You might think you hate something, but it’s actually just a pet peeve. You ain’t really hatin’. Like, I can’t stand people who snore. I will seriously sneak into your room and hit you with a bag of nickels in your face for snoring. But over that fact, I’m not going to form an organization. You see what I’m saying? I’m not going to get five other motherfuckers who hate snoring and get in costumes and hit the street.”

Eugene Mirman’s set vacillates between surreal one-liners and longer narratives. “A lot of people think that kids say the darnedest things, but so would you if you had no education.” Or this bit about a friend who thinks it’s okay to call gay people “fags” because she has a gay brother: “That’s a terrible excuse—just because you know somebody. For instance, the reason it’s okay for me to say ‘fag’ is because I’m full of hate!”

The Troubadour provides the perfect venue for this experimental, boundary-pushing comedy, says booker and historian Brian Smith on the DVD. He notes how the club, founded in 1957, formerly hosted both comedy and music without batting an eye. In the 1970s, for example, people like Tom Waits would perform back-to-back with Albert Brooks. “It’s just a big part of the tradition of this place,” he tells the camera. “This room really started out as just a place for people to express themselves. My parents saw Lenny Bruce here in ’61, and he got arrested here. Smothers Brothers famously performed with John Lennon and Harry Nilsson mucking about. Nina Simone would do three nights, and Richard Pryor, who recorded a record here in 1970, would perform. Cheech & Chong came up here. Steve Martin opened up for an awful band called
Poco.” The *Comedians of Comedy*, he says, helped remove the museum aspect of going to see stand-up. “I think Zach Galifianakis and David Cross and Brian Posehn are probably more punk rock than a lot of these bands.”

While not widely distributed, the DVD received a handful of loving reviews from the comedy faithful. *The Onion*’s Nathan Rabin felt that it flew by, despite its epic 134-minute running time. “For most stand-up DVDs, that would qualify as entirely too much of a good thing, but the scary fact about *Troubadour* is that it could easily be fifteen minutes longer,” he wrote. “A lot of great Oswalt material ends up in the special features, especially a scathing dressing-down of a hapless heckler. Oswalt is the rare conceptual mastermind who arguably errs on the side of including too little of his own material in his collaborative projects.”

Oswalt agrees, but only to an extent. His intention all along was to showcase his friends and not make the entire project about him. “I never want to be the funniest guy in my time,” he says. “I want to be one of many, and that keeps me working harder. I always want the next generation nipping at my heels. I like change and destruction and I see really good things coming out of that.”

Oswalt often showcases younger comedians at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre when industry types such as writer-producer Frank Smiley of *Late Night with Conan O’Brien* come to LA. When I ask Oswalt to name examples, he nearly runs out of breath: “Where do I begin? Morgan Murphy, Nick Kroll, Ian Edwards, Riley Newton, Nick Thune, Tig Notaro, Kristen Schaal, Anthony Jeselnik, John Mulaney...I’m just hoping that someone in ten or fifteen years goes against what we do and moves it forward. That’s the only way the art form stays fresh.”
My hour with Patton Oswalt is almost up, and he’s doubled over in laughter, smacking his hand on the table, threatening to upset my wobbly mini-cassette recorder. A few seconds earlier I’d asked him if he thought the Comedians of Comedy had inspired other stand-ups to go the nontraditional route, instead of having to “get up in front of the potato skins.”

“That’s great slang,” he says, still laughing. “It’s like, ‘How’s Tig [Notaro]?’ ‘Oh, she’s good, she’s just gotta get in front of the potato skins a little more.’ I’m stealing that. I’ll credit you, but I’m stealing that.”

I relate this story not to congratulate myself for accidentally making Patton Oswalt laugh (though I count it among my best unintentional accomplishments, such as shooting my hand with a BB gun or discovering that I love sushi), but rather to illustrate Oswalt’s hungry, ever-roaming mind—one that’s constantly panning society’s verbal detritus for economical nuggets of language. “That bit of slang just got rid of eight paragraphs of explaining in your book,” he says. “I’m going to call Greg Fitzsimmons right after this, because we were having that conversation last week. You know, about how people have to get out there more and season themselves? And I’ve just heard a perfect expression. ‘Getting in front of the potato skins.’ He’s going to fucking lose it.”

While creatively valuable (and, often, deliciously salty), seasoning has the potential to suck the moisture out of an artist. Nothing is less appealing than realizing a stand-up grew stale and jaded before (s)he ever hit the big time, having used all the good material on shitty crowds instead of appreciative ones. More heartening are the ones who bring out their most brilliant jokes just as the spotlight begins to crank in their direction.
There's inherent value in paying dues and learning a craft, but there's something to be said for breaking with tradition when it doesn't make sense. As Oswalt had told me earlier, doing something "for no other reason than that's the way they've always done it" often just makes comedians combative.

Fortunately, Oswalt's own years of seasoning had given him a unique voice by the time he launched the Comedians of Comedy tours, acquainted as he was with typical club scenes and their politics. Enduring those tours sharpened his perspective and bolstered his already loyal audience. In its January 2006 issue, Spin magazine bestowed Oswalt's "Alt-comedy goes rock 'n' roll tours" the Trend of the Year (the article also mentioned the late Mitch Hedberg as an example of comedy-music kinship). With an increasingly public blessing from the hipster-rock media, it became clear that Oswalt's next big step wasn't into the mainstream, but onto a more prestigious record label.

It doesn't take a genius to guess where he landed.

Comedians of Comedy manager Henry Owings more or less acted as Oswalt's A&R rep when he approached Sub Pop Records, pitching him to former publicist Joan Hiller as ideal for that imprint. With the indie-rock friendly Comedians of Comedy tours under his belt and an overlap audience with preexisting Sub Pop comedians David Cross and Eugene Mirman, Oswalt seemed like the perfect fit. "Alternative comedians coming up are actually aware of Sub Pop and care about the records we're putting out," says Sub Pop A&R head Tony Kiewel. "That's certainly something that mattered to us. Each community was feeding the other."

Owings wanted to make Oswalt's Sub Pop debut flawless. An obsessive fan of comedy albums (he grew up listening to Bob Newhart, Bill Cosby, and Steve Martin records with a religious fervor), Owings was determined to get the best sound quality possible out of the set, even
though Oswalt said he'd be fine with essentially setting up a tape recorder at the edge of the stage. "I spent fucking ages working on that record," Owings says. "It was great to have Patton rely on me and take my judgment calls at their word. I would go, 'Yeah, I think you can do this part better,' or 'I think you need to change this up.' The Star Wars bit is a prime example of that: the voice he does for George Lucas is one of the joke voices I do around him. Going into producing the record I just knew his material so thoroughly that I could recite it verbatim. That helped."

Owings recorded the album in December 2006 at the Cap City Comedy Club in Austin, Texas, taking great pains with mic placement and editing. Oswalt's material had never been stronger, thanks in part to an increasingly insider perspective on the entertainment industry (he relates bits about punching-up scripts and performing at a Comedy Central roast for William Shatner) and the relentless test-driving of jokes at previous gigs.

Sub Pop dropped the fruits of that labor, Werewolves and Lollipops, on July 9, 2007. A single spin will convince anyone that it's easily the best stand-up album released that year, and one of the overall best of Oswalt's generation. It weathers repeated listens with the strength of a Richard Pryor, Bill Hicks, or David Cross album, with Oswalt's appealingly wet smack of a voice doing much of the heavy lifting. Everything Oswalt had learned—the insanely detailed descriptions, disgusting/hilarious metaphors, and ease of dispatching with hecklers—went into the set.

The album begins with Oswalt's succinct proclamation: "Thank you guys so much for coming out. I'm drunk. Here we go." He launches into "America Has Spoken," a takedown of fast food's top-selling "wet mound of starch that I can eat with a spoon like I'm a death row prisoner on suicide watch," aka KFC's Famous Bowl. The "failure pile in a sadness bowl," as he dubs it, is just the appetizer.
The enduring appeal of character actors, “G-rated filth,” racist cell phones, the horrendous *Star Wars* prequels, birth control, ill-advised birthday celebrations, and the death-defying stunts of the Bush White House also come into play. In one of the more memorable bits, “The Miracle of Child Birth,” he discusses the moral ambiguity of fertility drugs after reading about a sixty-three-year-old woman who gave birth. “Science,” he barks. “We’re all about *coulda*, not *shoulda*.” His description of a father telling his child about the improbable event is particularly visceral: “You see, when a man loves a woman very much he heaves himself off of his hemorrhoid donut. He takes three Viagra, a beta blocker, and an eyedropper full of blood thinner. Then he lays on top of his beloved like a pile of laundry on top of another pile of laundry. Then his penis, erect in defiance of God’s will, enters her vagina like a Chapstick entering the Luray Caverns. Then, nine months later, she gives birth to a beautiful baby, which I will illustrate by pushing this uncooked Cornish game hen through these gray drapes. Now, if you have any questions about the magic of the birthing process…” “Well, Dad, you’re going to have to repeat all of that, because I can’t hear you over the sound of my DICK SCREAMING.”

*Werewolves and Lollipops* also includes a DVD of Oswalt’s October 27, 2006, warm-up set. At one point during it, he breaks down in laughter at the fact that one of his fans has just peed on another. “See, this is where my career starts to go in the wrong direction,” he says, thoroughly exasperated. “It’s like, ‘I can’t perform. People just pee on each other at my shows. It’s creepy. It wasn’t any fun for me, man…’ I’m the anti-Gallagher. I get the fans to get each other wet.” Then later: “This is what a comedy show would be like in *Escape from New York*,” he states, before addressing the offended individual. “I’m sorry you got peed on. I never thought I’d have to say this in my
showbiz career.” Oswalt is making light of the situation, but you can tell he’s legitimately exasperated.

Upon its release, critics embraced Werewolves as another entry in the growing comedy-album revitalization, an example of classic stand-up loaded with substance and aimed directly at the head. “It tastes like sweet manna from heaven after the five-year reign of the Blue Collar Comedy crowd,” wrote David Jeffries in the All Music Guide. “After so much ‘stupid is as stupid does’ has flooded the stand-up market, it’s good to feel uncomprisingly smart for a change, and even better when the material is honed to perfection.”

Pitchfork tossed it an unusually high 8.0 rating, reviewer Jessica Suarez noting its relatable tone. “He never sinks into sneering condescension as David Cross so frequently does. And his careful timing eliminates the non-sequitur flights of fancy that labelmate Eugene Mirman’s jokes become...When much alternative comedy consists of clever tricks and YouTube videos, it’s a relief just to hear someone tell a joke.” Dave Segal of the Orange County Register kicked off his review with the assertion that “comedy is the new indie rock,” and Stylus magazine’s Tal Rosenberg said it captured “a seasoned comedian at his prime.”

Despite Henry Owings’s detail-oriented recording, and the fact that Werewolves is more accessible than much of the material on the shock-oriented indie-comedy circuit, the album still flew mostly under the radar. “It’s kind of discouraging when you have Patton or Brian putting out really solid records and then you see who’s fucking nominated for comedy album of the year on the Grammys,” Owings said. “It’s George Lopez and Steven Wright and Lisa Lampanelli. They’re brick-wall comedians—the people doing the same old shit that Patton and Brian and Zach and Sarah Silverman are trying to fight against.”
Nonetheless, *Werewolves* has sold about 40,000 copies (roughly the same as David Cross's second CD, *It's Not Funny*) and remains part of the legitimate creative renaissance of the comedy album. Granted, it's not a mainstream commercial phenomenon. Comedy albums on Sub Pop, Matador, Drag City, Suicide Squeeze, and other indie labels aren't selling by the millions like comedy records did thirty or forty years ago. But the proliferation of quality voices is stunning compared to the relative creative drought of the 1990s. Comedy Central Records has even been releasing discs from stand-ups like Demetri Martin, Todd Barry, and Michael Ian Black that could easily fit on an indie-music label. Dan Schlissel's Minneapolis-based Stand Up! Records also boasts a who's who of alt and indie comedians like Maria Bamford, Greg Proops, Marc Maron, and the Sklar Brothers, as well as cult hero Doug Stanhope and lesser-known stand-ups.

"Dan Schlissel is someone that has done a great job trying to reintroduce some fresh blood into comedy albums," says Owings. "He's even more of a comedy nerd than me, if there is such a thing. He's just completely obsessed with getting, like, original Lenny Bruce vinyl, kind of like how indie-rock nerds are about getting the Halo of Flies single or whatever. If anybody's trying to bring back the idea of comedy albums being something that should be looked at in the same light as a music album, it's him."

Schlissel, who formerly ran the prolific -ismist record label, has released nearly forty records on Stand Up! since 2001. He's generally ambivalent about the idea of indie comedy, and cool to the potential ghettoization such a label spawns. He noted that his imprint, for example, includes a few relatively conservative voices as well as liberal ones. "Jimmy Shubert and Tim Slagel are on the right-leaning side of my label," he says. "To me, diversity of voice is more important than sticking with one thing."
Political material necessarily dates itself, but not every album follows that path. Former *Mr. Show* writer-actor Paul F. Tompkins trades in the sort of delivery style and material that generally steers clear of pop-culture references in favor of righteous indignation, logic, and off-the-cuff crowd interaction. His 2007 album, *Impersonal* (AST Records), is an underappreciated high point in the recent surge of releases. “His stuff is amazing. It’s going to be like a really classic Woody Allen album, still great twenty years from now,” says *Commercial Appeal* writer Bob Mehr. “I’ve listened to a lot of comedy albums, and I’m not saying I’m biased toward modern stuff, but some of the albums coming out now are really great. I’m glad the comedy album is important enough that people are releasing them and spending time on them, because they can be excellent representations of these people’s work.”

★★★★★★

By the time they had run their course, the *Comedians of Comedy* tours and films accomplished the things Oswalt had set out to do: shine a light on hidden talent, create opportunities for the performers, and exhibit the array of styles bouncing around the contemporary stand-up underground.

“I remember the first time I did South by Southwest [music festival] was with the *Comedians of Comedy*,” says Aziz Ansari of MTV sketch show *Human Giant*. “Very few people in the audience probably knew who I was, but that show was one of the most fun shows I did. Even if they hadn’t seen me before, I had that seal of approval from the *Comedians of Comedy* guys, and so [the crowd] was up for it.”

The relationships forged between the principal *Comedians of Comedy* also continued, with documentary
director Michael Blieden helming Zach Galifianakis’s 2006 DVD taping in San Francisco, Live at the Purple Onion. That disc paints perhaps the most well-rounded picture of the comedian to date: Galifianakis mixing piano one-liners and uncomfortably awkward (and hilariously mean) audience interaction with what seems like genuinely raw emotion. Galifianakis later took part in a sold-out college tour with Will Ferrell, Nick Swardson, and Demetri Martin in 2007, sponsored by Ferrell’s FunnyorDie.com. And starring film roles like 2008’s Visioneers and TV pilot offers have exploded for the bearded stand-up. “Sometimes explosions have a negative meaning. But my pretentious attitude will assume that you mean that in a good way,” Galifianakis says. “I owe a lot to Patton Oswalt, who asked me to be part of that documentary. It has really helped, to be quite honest. It is one of those little films that have a strong word of mouth. Before that I was just sitting around alphabetizing my coat hangers and auditioning for sitcoms.”

Maria Bamford’s weekly no-cover What’s Up, Tiger Lily? shows in LA with Melinda Hill have become welcome options for fans of quality stand-up, often hosting many of the same names as the better-known Comedy Death-Ray. Her short-form series on the now-defunct SuperDeluxe.com gave her a web presence and an arena in which to exercise her army of characters and voices. Mitch Hurwitz, creator of Arrested Development, tapped her to provide the voice of a religious schoolteacher in the cartoon remake of Australia’s Sit Down, Shut Up! In May 2008, the show was picked up by Fox for a thirteen-episode run, though Bamford was cut from the show after taping three episodes. (The retitled Class Dismissed stars Mr. Show’s Tom Kenny, Arrested Development’s Jason Bateman and Will Arnett, and Saturday Night Live’s Will Forte.) Like her peers, Bamford will work in pretty much
any environment that wants to have her—it just so happens that she discovered a chunk of her current audience at rock clubs.

“Mainstream shows are great, too. There’s great artistry to all types of shows,” she says. “I really don’t have the opinion that some types of comedy are not good. If someone’s getting up there and saying something they’ve written, that takes a lot of courage, so I feel like all comedy is good. If I don’t do well in a particular venue, it doesn’t mean that it’s a shitty venue, or that comedy clubs are all bad. There’s a comic who came and did a show at Tiger Lily [now called Cuba Libre], the little hipster bar that I perform at once a week, and he was kind of more like The Comedy Store and Laugh Factory type, just a different kind of crowd. At Tiger Lily he was like, ‘What the fuck’s wrong with you people? Why is this going poorly?’ It’s not anybody’s fault, there are just different sensibilities in every place.”

His initial goals achieved, Oswalt thinks the Comedians of Comedy has run its course. The extended tours, he says, are finished. “The problem with the tours is that you have to deal with all these personalities and it cuts into your creative time. It’s like, ‘Wait a minute, my job is to be a comedian, not to constantly be a producer and deal with different personalities and egos.’ We did eleven tours. We did a TV show. We did a feature film and two concert films. We did Coachella. We did pretty good, and it helped get Zach and Maria and Brian more exposure, which is what I wanted.”

At the time, Oswalt wouldn’t rule out the occasional music festival or one-nighter, but said the long road jaunts were too burdensome for him at that point in his career, when he and the other Comedians of Comedy alumni were in a position to actually turn down roles and focus on the long-term. “It’s a young man’s game,
man. The motivation at the time was my frustration with how people were not using Maria and Zach to their full benefit. I think those guys are truly comedic geniuses, and now they've both really exploded. So I can't call them up and say, 'Hey, yeah, everyone back in the van for five hundred bucks a night. Congrats on the movie, but back in the van.' I have to let people go and do their own thing. And also I'm busy doing shit now.'

Indeed, a few months after our interview, Oswalt announced the last-ever Comedians of Comedy show, on July 26, 2008, set at Spreckels Theatre in San Diego that included most of the principals and other special guests. But in Burbank on that gray February morning, I could sense that Oswalt was itching to get over to Disney and prepare for whatever evil deed he had to do. On that note, we exchanged pleasantries and handshakes, him assuring me that any follow-up questions would be promptly and happily answered via e-mail.

As I leaned forward and dove into my delicious Krust Klub ($8 worth of smoked turkey, tomato, lettuce, bacon, and Gouda), I laughed to myself as I thought about Oswalt appearing in a Disney movie, then playing club gigs where he says such gentle things as, "Paris Hilton is a cunt who should die of AIDS."

Even Richard Pryor and George Carlin appeared on Sesame Street.
Human Giant principals (from left to right) Paul Scheer, Rob Huebel, and Aziz Ansari lather up at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in New York City. Photo by Seth Olenick