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Humor

Practicing jokers

Six top comedians walked into the Friars Club...to riff on Internet humor, dish about the state of the funny business and generally crack wise. By Moderated by Jane Borden Photographs by David Schinman

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ARE THEY CLOWNS TO YOU? Paying respects to their comedic forebears at the Friars Club are, from top, Anne Harris, Mike Britt, Ted Alexandro, Paul Scheer, Chelsea Peretti and Gilbert Gottfried.

Lately, the comedy industry has been producing a lot more than laughter. InterActiveCorp reportedly dropped at least \$10 million to buy the website CollegeHumor. The club and do-it-yourself scenes in New York are both exploding. Dane Cook's album Retaliation debuted at No. 4 on the Billboard album chart. It seems there's never been a better time to be in the business of making people laugh. To get a real taste of the state of comedy, we gathered a range of experts: club-circuit stand-ups Ted Alexandro and Mike Britt; downtown scenester and Web maven Chelsea Peretti; improviser and sketch comedian Paul Scheer; celebrated stand-up and duck impersonator Gilbert Gottfried; and Comedy Central talent manager Anne Harris. During a roundtable discussion in the Milton Berle Room of the august Friars Club in midtown, the home of countless roasts and the legendary haunt of comedy royalty, our panel mouthed off, pinpointed which areas of the genre are changing and agreed on those that never will.

A lot of people think we're having another comedy boom. What do you all think?

Gilbert Gottfried: It's not based on my act.

[Laughter]

Paul Scheer: There's more work, but there's less pay. Everything's free now. It's all on the Internet.

There's still big bucks on the road, right?

Ted Alexandro: The road is where you make money: clubs, colleges, corporate stuff. But I think there is a boom in New York as far as the number of clubs. There's never been a



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better time to be a comic as far as getting up onstage and working at what you do.

Mike Britt: If you're a comic, you've got to come to New York. There's, like, 13 [stand-up] clubs now—a new one just opened up, like, two weeks ago.

Scheer: Comix. That place is insane. You perform and then they produce a DVD of your show when you're done.

Alexandro: It goes on sale right after....

[Laughter]

That brings up another topic: videos on the Web. People attribute the downfall of the '80s boom to so much stand-up being televised. Could something like that happen now because of sites such as YouTube and CollegeHumor?

Britt: You don't have to go through the regular channels if you're doing your own thing [on the Internet]. Nobody's telling you what to do, nobody's saying no to your project.

Chelsea Peretti: And no one's paying you.

[Laughter]

Britt: Yeah, but everybody got to be a ho to be a pimp.

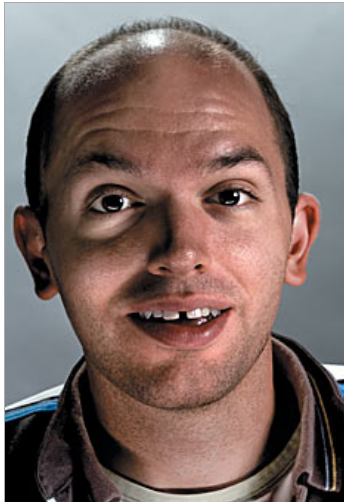
Scheer: It's crazy. We put these short films on YouTube, and then we got a TV show from MTV just based on that. We didn't pitch 'em, we didn't do anything. That never would have happened before.

Alexandro: I don't think technology eliminates people's need to see live entertainment, though. There's something unique about going to a club.

Scheer: Yeah, I watched *Saturday Night Live* one night in the studio, and I was like, "This is the best ever!" I went out and was like, "Did you see that show?" And my friends were like, "It was terrible!"

Britt: The Apollo Theater: Seeing someone get booed on TV is one thing, but sitting in there...500 people all screaming and booing and you're like, Wow, this is ugly. These are career-crushing boos.

Gottfried: My shows aren't funny live or on TV....



PAUL SCHEER: "There's more work, but there's less pay. Everything's free now. It's all on the Internet."

Are they funny in print?

Gottfried: Yes.

Is the industry going to the Internet to look for talent now?

Anne Harris: Yeah. You guys have all seen [Comedy Central's website] MotherLoad—you're all basically on MotherLoad. We're always looking for new great shorts and things we can turn into original programming that will bring people to see us.

Scheer: And now it's getting sneaky, too. Demetri Martin is doing this thing for Windows: He has a website but it's not his website. It's basically ads for Windows, but they're letting him make short films. It's interesting how advertising and comedy are coming together too. Even John Hodgman: He's on *The Daily Show*, and he's doing all those Mac/PC commercials. No one's losing integrity; it's not like those weird Japanese commercials where it's Michael J. Fox having a Sprite. They're allowing comedians to keep their sensibility but, at the same time, they're associating them with the product. You know, I'm the representative for bologna. [Laughter] It's a solid thing, they let me do my own stuff.

Is the market oversaturated with comics?

Britt: Cream rises to the top. You could put as many fish as you want in there, but the best

fish are going to be able to...

Peretti: Mmm, fish in cream.

[*Laughter*]

Alexandro: Also, because there are so many clubs now, they rely on comics to produce their own shows during the week. They'll have comics do a theme show: urban night, gay night, whatever. They try to get niches.

Let's talk about this hyperspecialization going on: shows like Chicks and Giggles, Asian Invasion. Does it bring more people to shows, or is it marginalizing?

Britt: I don't mind it. Latino people want to see their own people be funny and successful. But there was this Chocolate Sundays show in L.A., and those same "chocolate" comics couldn't perform the rest of the week. That I have a problem with.

Peretti: Suddenly chocolate doesn't seem so sweet anymore.

Gottfried: I know those shows are starting when I work a club and I'm sitting in the dressing room afterward and all of a sudden a bunch of black people come in. "Oh, this is the *next* show starting."

Scheer: Every now and then you'll see "all women sketch comedy!" But why do they only have to be in this one show? I mean, Chelsea, your Variety Shac show is all women, but that's great because it's put together by choice.

Peretti: We're not like, "Come see our all-female troupe of females!" We're just friends doing a show together. [Being women] isn't what binds us comedically.

Britt: Even your name, Variety Shac, has no gender.

Peretti: But *shac* is slang for "vagina."

Britt: Oh, I didn't know that. We don't use that on urban nights.

Peretti: You're chocolate; you'll learn, you'll learn.

Scheer: I'm doing vanilla-bean Sundays.

[*Laughter*]



CHELSEA PERETTI: "We're not like, 'Come see our all-female troupe of females!' We're just friends doing a show together."

What kind of comics perform in *The Bologna Show*?

Scheer: *The Bologna Show*? We got some great people.

Britt: I been wanting to perform in *Cracker* for a long time.

Alexandro: Is *bean* a euphemism for any body part? She said *shac* was...

Scheer: Yeah, yeah; *bean* is "penis." [*Laughs*] White guys with small penises, every Friday at 2 o'clock in the morning.

Peretti: And we've hit penis talk!

How long did that take? Now, there are a lot of stand-up classes in the city. Can you really teach someone how to do stand-up?

Britt: You can teach the structure, but not the art of it. Steve Harvey said somebody asked him, "Yo, what does it take to be a comedian?" And he was like, If you have to ask me, then you're not one. You can't think about it like it's a job, like going to DeVry Institute or something. It's either in you or it's not.

Alexandro: It also depends on how broad your definition of teaching is. I learned stand-up from being in clubs with guys like Dave Attell and Dave Chappelle, Greg Giraldo. That was an education.

Peretti: Yeah, I took stand-up class for seven years—and that was a five-night commitment each week and a two-hour class each night.

Scheer: How much did you spend on that?

Peretti: I got so good! I got so good.

Gottfried: I've always thought teaching stand-up is like me giving a course in tightrope walking. I have a line drawn across the floor, and I teach people every week to walk on the line.

[Laughter]

Comedians talk about a rift between what's considered mainstream comedy clubs and the more downtown or so-called alternative scene. Do you think something like that exists?

[Awkward silence, then laughter]

Peretti: Here we go!

Britt: There's an oxymoron: What's the alternative to comedy? Something that's not funny.

Gottfried: That's me.

People have problems with that label.

Britt: It gives people excuses to get up there and just talk or riff about stuff and go, "I'm alternative." No: You're not funny.

Scheer: A mainstream audience has a preconceived idea of what they're going to see at a stand-up club. And there are other audiences that are more open to a different type of comedy. I toured around the country with a short-form improv group that was like *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, and we killed everywhere we went. And then we took long-form improv out there and they'd never seen it, so it was harder for them to laugh. Alternative audiences are just more open.

Alexandro: If acts that aren't getting booked at the mainstream clubs need stage time, they go elsewhere. Or, you know, comics that aren't working in a traditional kind of "setup, punch line." That's how this alternative scene sprang up. The best comics work their way in and out of all those scenes. That's what ultimately makes you a good comic: if you can connect to different audiences.

Scheer: The one thing that irritates me is people who come unprepared. That's become a thing—and then people go, "That's alternative": I think that's lame.

Peretti: There are funny people in all types of venues and unfunny people in both places. Anytime I go to a show, it's like, Wow, this person is so funny, and, Wow, that person has nothing that I'm interested in. And it could be in either space. Some people just don't feel comfortable in clubs, but they're very funny people.



GILBERT GOTTFRIED: "People look at you—if they've seen you on TV once—and go, That guy has made it. It's never that way."

Why is Blue Collar Comedy so popular right now?

Harris: It is, it is.

Scheer: Doesn't it get the highest ratings?

Harris: It gets great ratings. There's just an audience for it.

Scheer: If audiences like that, then it should. People crap on those performers just because it's not necessarily their sensibility. It's not my cuppa tea, but I still think it's worthwhile comedy.

Britt: It's like Dane Cook. Dane Cook is not a comic's comic, but I have a lot of respect for the dude. He did his own thing, he has his audience: How could you hate him for that? You should look at him and go, I need to follow that model. He made the industry come to him.

Peretti: That'd be funny if you started crying.

He's definitely become a whipping boy.

Britt: He's laughing all the way to the bank.

Peretti: It feels corny to have a negative opinion of Dane Cook at this point anyway.

Scheer: He's got a chart-topping comedy album! That hasn't happened since Steve Martin. It's good for comedy, generally. Hopefully that opens the door for other comedians. It's not like Cook is coming to your house and knocking stuff off the shelves.

Alexandro: It's not an accident when people are that successful.

Britt: That's why you want a lot of comedy, so people can find where they want to go.

Scheer: And that brings it back to YouTube. You watch a minute of it; if it's not funny, click it off and go to something else. You get to pick your content. That's where comedy is headed.

These videos where you give it a minute: Will all that affect the attention span of the comedy audience?

Britt: I agree with Ted. None of these mediums are going to compare with the live experience.

Alexandro: People say, "Oh, MTV changed the generation's attention span." If something is good and it's long, people will listen.

Peretti: I'm sorry, what were you saying?

[*Laughter*]

Alexandro: But I've heard people say, "Woody Allen wouldn't have thrived in today's environment." Quality, no matter when it comes along, is gonna thrive.

Peretti: Yeah, he performed in nightclubs. Someone was just telling me comedy clubs were an invention of the '80s. Anyone?

Gottfried: Oh, I'm sorry. I just came in. [*Laughter*] Yeah, when I first started, they still had singers in clubs.

Peretti: How old are you?

[*Laughter*]

Gottfried: Jack Warner. That's somebody [who came in]. Errol Flynn was there.

[*Laughter*]

What's the purest form of comedy?

Britt: Honesty.

Peretti: People can sense when you're being fraudulent.

Alexandro: It's also what's fraudulent to you. Getting back to Dane Cook: He's not talking about politics or social commentary. It's silly, but it's him. He's distilled who he is.

Since we're in the Friars Club... Does the fraternal, communal aspect of being a comedian still exist?

Peretti: I don't feel any fraternity in here.

[*Laughter*]

Britt: Not like a long time ago, because there weren't a lot of venues; they stuck together. Now there are so many avenues.

Alexandro: When I was younger, I was a little more snobby, but as I've gotten older—you just respect comics. You know it's not an easy road.

Gottfried: That's not true; I didn't like you from the start. [*Laughter*] I've been waiting to tell you that.

Britt: If I see a comic getting dogged onstage, I'm pissed. If I see it, I feel it. I don't care if you're male, female...

Peretti: What about transgender?

Britt: I'd speak twice.

[*Laughter*]

Scheer: I think there is a friendliness like that in the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, in the improv community.

Peretti: It's like a weird family.

Scheer: When the blackout happened, all the lights went out in the city except for the UCBT. And the air conditioning was on. Like a hundred people were just watching movies and sleeping. It was fun.

Does it mean anything anymore to get spots on late-night television?

Britt: Not like it used to. Before, it was instantaneous success. You'd do the spot and get a

hundred calls. Nowadays, it's just another credit.

Alexandro: Anytime you get a TV spot, it's a good thing, though. It can't be bad.

Peretti: You get more MySpace friends.

[Laughter]

At what point can a comedian consider his or her career set, if ever?

Scheer: That's when it's a problem: when you feel like you can stop working. Every time you achieve some success, you have to work even harder to get that next thing.

Peretti: That's what Madonna said about why she got into Kabbalah. [Laughter] I can't believe I'm saying this! But she said every achievement she ever wanted she got, and at a certain point, she realized it had to be about something beyond your next goal. And that's when God entered the picture.

Gottfried: So she had to become a Jew.

[Laughter]

Britt: You're never done in comedy, because as you get older, your perspective changes.

Alexandro: Gilbert, as the most accomplished person in the room...

Gottfried: I'm like the Wilford Brimley here!

[Laughter]

Alexandro: But you've done a lot. Did you go through that feeling of, I've arrived now?

Gottfried: In this business, you can never kick your shoes off at any point. People look at you—even if they've only seen you on TV once—and go, That guy has made it. It's never that way.

What won't you tell a joke about?

Britt: Starving children.

Gottfried: Two starving children walk into a bar. [Laughter] A starving child is talking to a hooker! [Laughter]

Scheer: That gets back to what you can get away with. If I write a joke, it has to feel right coming out of my mouth.

Harris: Did you know that women still use a lot of toilet paper and have tons of pillows on their beds?

[Laughter]

Peretti: I used to feel there are things I shouldn't touch, but now I just think—even with hacky stuff—you should be able to talk about something if you want to, if you have something to say. Ah, I don't know what I'm saying...

Alexandro: Did Madonna tell you that?

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