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Take the New Comedy. Please.

BY NEIL STRAUSS

IN the big comedy boom of the 1980's, it was nearly impossible to channel surf without running into at least one average-looking man in an open-collar shirt talking about his mother-in-law, masturbation or Roman Catholicism. Stand-up comedy has had a bad reputation ever since.

There's something cloyingly insincere about the way a stand-up comic tries to establish a connection with the audience and make transitions between unrelated gags. Everybody knows that the opening line, "So, I just got back from L.A. the other day," usually means that the comic wrote the joke three years ago, and that the question, "How many of you have ever been to L.A.?" is just a manipulative tactic to try to get the audience to relate to the comic's experience.

This is why the best place to see comedy in New York City is in the dingy back room of a small smoky bar on the Lower East Side that's packed wall to wall on Monday nights. The performances at the bar, the Luna Lounge, are not typical stand-up comedy but what is often called alternative comedy or, more cynically, thinking-person's stand-up comedy. The contrivances that comics rely on to work an audience in a traditional club don't work at the Luna Lounge: risks are taken and new ground is explored, some of it by comics better known for being cast members of television shows like "Saturday Night Live," "The State" and "Mad TV." At the Luna Lounge, none of them are allowed to do anything they've performed before.

Highlights of past shows have included Michael Black's parody of acting-school classes, trying to understand what it feels like to be a cat; the Upright Citizens Brigade's countless conceptual sketches that test the audience's ability to play along; Sarah Silverman's attempt to salvage a difficult night by delivering her neurotic monologue with her pants around her ankles; Jon Benjamin and Mike Lee's confrontation between a comic and a panda-suited heckler, and Janeane Garofalo's many stream-of-conscious dissections of her life that week.

The Luna Lounge isn't the only place for alternative comedy in Manhattan. In the past few years, cutting-edge comedy nights have popped up downtown, from the performance-art comedy of Surf Reality on the Lower East Side to some of the shows at Collective Unconscious, also on the Lower East Side, and the TriBeCa Lab. In recent months, performers at these clubs have been appearing on television in droves, as other clubs and restaurants around the country (including Luna Park in Los Angeles, the Velveeta Room in Austin, Tex., and the Subterranean Cabaret in Chicago) now have their own nights for alternative comedy.

Even established figures in the mainstream comedy world admit that a fresh wind is blowing. "This is an evolution of a new kind of comedy, and it's time for it to happen," said Rick Newman, the owner of Catch a Rising Star, the 70's comedy club that reopened in Manhattan this month. "It's still in the early stages, but you're going to see people who in two years are going to be your new Seinfelds and Paul Reisers and Steve Martins."

The Toyota Comedy Festival, a performance marathon at local clubs and theaters that begins next Friday and ends on June 16, is focusing more than ever on Manhattan's downtown scene, with bookings that demonstrate that the festival is aware of alternative comedy and its kinship to performance art and poetry. Shows are taking place at Carnegie Hall and Caroline's as well as the Luna Lounge, Surf Reality and the performance space P.S. 122.

"We want the festival to be reflective of where comedy is headed," said John Schreiber, one of the festival's producers. "And the expanding in the last 18 months of this alternative comedy scene is probably the center of what is truly innovative in New York City. It's a movement that's occurred without a lot of hype attached to it, which is good for a movement."

One main difference between an alternative comedy room and a traditional comedy club is a drink minimum. This may sound flippant, but mainstream comedy clubs are pricey affairs, full of tourists who tend to be drunk, boisterously insistent on getting their money's worth (usually at the rate of a laugh a minute) and as interested in socializing with one another as in listening to the person onstage.

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At the Luna Lounge, the performance is free, the comics are paid nothing (as opposed to the \$10 to \$75 they make at regular clubs), and even when a performance does not elicit a single laugh, it is not always considered a failure. That's why the night was originally called "Eating It" (comedy slang for bombing) when it began at another small site, the Rebar in Chelsea, a year and a half ago.

Testing the Audience

Performing at the Luna Lounge is "the most challenging thing I do," said Marc Maron, a favorite there who delivers ideas as much as jokes. "I can take more risks emotionally in an alternative room. It indulges us. There are people who think differently or lead different lives, and part of the Luna trip is that those people are going to be embraced for that."

At alternative nights, comedy is freed from the tyranny of the punch line. There are comics like David Wain, a member of the sketch-comedy group the State, who had never performed stand-up before the Luna Lounge. His sense of humor comes from the fact that he is pointedly not funny. Instead, he slowly unravels the layers of deception involved in putting a joke over on an audience. As Barry Sobel commented during his own performance at the Luna Lounge, making fun of its anti-comedy stance, "This is my first attempt at alternative comedy, and by the quiet lulls, I think I'm doing well."

The Luna Lounge's precedents are not just in the glory days before the comedy boom (the times of Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and Andy Kaufman), when audiences had fewer expectations and performers, in most cases, had more social relevance. Its origins are also in theater workshops, performance art, coffeehouse culture and poetry readings.

"For all of us, the show was born out of maybe a selfish need to see comedy that felt new and different and exciting," said Amanda Schatz, a talent scout at MTV who organizes the night along with Michael O'Brien, an entertainment publicity agent, and Dave Becky, who manages many of comedy's most exciting younger performers, including Mr. Maron, Dave Attell, Todd Barry and Louis C. K. "We would go to clubs every night and see the comics doing the same bits over and over again. We could do their act for them, if we wanted to. That was like comedy for civilians. We wanted to create comedy for people who loved it. We wanted to do comedy that was cool, and prove that all that television didn't kill it."

The Luna Lounge is not just a place where seasoned comics can work out new material and attempt the performances they really want to do. It is also a spawning ground for new comics. One of the funniest characters performing in Manhattan today is Ross Brockley, a carpenter and house painter by day who delivers his jokes with a deep monotone and all the poise of the Kramer character on "Seinfeld." He can be seen almost nowhere else except in three-minute bursts at the Luna Lounge.

A sure sign of the growing importance of what is happening at the Luna Lounge is that every week the room is packed with agents and entertainment moguls. Based on their short performances there, many comics have been given deals to develop sitcom pilots, create promotional spots for cable channels or appear on talk shows.

Mocking the Cliches

Slowly, what is happening at the club (and others like it) is seeping its way into mainstream comedy: hardly a week goes by without at least one joke that was first told at the Luna Lounge being told by the same performer on television. And at traditional clubs, young comics like Kevin Brennan regularly mock the contrivances of the comedy transition, using bridges like, "Raise your hand if you've ever been in an elevator."

Peter Principato, a talent agent at William Morris who represents several Luna Lounge regulars, said: "When people come from the West Coast looking for new, up-and-coming, edgy talent, they'll come to Luna Lounge. Some of these performers that are coming out of what people are calling alternative forms of comedy are jumping to the television quicker, because they've become more seasoned

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in their confidence and abilities as performers, actors and writers and have pushed their ability to try things they're afraid to do or haven't done. Out of the bunch right now, you're going to see 70 to 75 percent working in the medium of television."

For Jeffrey Ross, performing at the Luna Lounge has meant pushing his own material to come up with something that is not only new but also more marketable.

"That room changed my life," he said about the Luna Lounge's predecessor, the Rebar. "I was a comic bumping around doing one-liners, and one day at Rebar there was an HBO guy who said I might have a full show out of a short piece I did about how I used to live with my grandfather who was sick. So piece by piece, in six-minute increments, I developed a one-man show there. Also, I probably wouldn't have got on Letterman or image spots on Comedy Central or a development deal with Castle Rock otherwise."

But the envelope that is being pushed at the Luna Lounge can't be pushed quite as far elsewhere. After a tough performance at the Comedy Cellar, Mr. Brennan explained: "At the beginning of my set, I felt like I had to curse more to get the audience's attention. I almost wanted to wink and say, 'I have to do it.'"

Zach Galifianakis, who is host on Wednesday nights at Stand-Up New York and performed at the Luna Lounge for the first time two weeks ago, said that he was hoping to see the alternative and mainstream fuse.

"At an amateur night, or even at a traditional stand-up club, these comics know they're not going to get the same response as when they're doing anti-comedy," he said. "What I and my small circle of friends try to do is to marry the two, to bring that goofiness and experimentation to stand-up clubs. That's what the owner of Stand-Up New York wants. He's sick of seeing the same relationship and airplane jokes."

'The Place for Me'

At Surf Reality, a form of comedy is being worked on even more alternative than alternative comedy. Mixing stand-up, sketch comedy and East Village-style performance art, the acts there can range from ex-prostitutes talking about their jobs while taking off their clothes to singers who perform at children's parties trying their material out on an adult crowd. Wednesday's more straightforward stand-up show, Sunday's open-mike marathon and the monthly Saturday revue "Serious Pratsfalls" are Surf Reality's most consistently entertaining programs.

Megan Johnson, who moved from Austin to Manhattan two years ago to pursue her dream of becoming stand-up's first female sex symbol, is a comedy double agent. In the evenings, she is a waitress at the Comedy Cellar; late at night, she is a flaboyantly costumed comedian herself at Surf Reality.

"I got a job at the Comedy Cellar because I wanted to be around comics, and they have probably the best in the city," she said. "But the audience that comes to see them is very Middle America. The more I worked there, the more I realized there was no way I could do straight stand-up for those people. They wouldn't understand me. Someone told me about Surf Reality, and after my first time there, I knew it was the place for me. Those people are really nuts."

Robert Prichard, who opened Surf Reality in 1993 with his wife, Jennifer, said: "We call it performance comedy, because alternative means it might not be funny. And we insist on that. The performances here generally have a beginning, middle and end, and they're not conducive to waitresses or heckling."

Unlike other comedy clubs, where tourists come once and then leave town, Surf Reality and the Luna Lounge parade their performers before a jury of regulars and peers who come back again and again. It's not a comedy one-night stand, but a long-term relationship where a joke may refer to something that happened a week or two before.

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At drink-minimum clubs, one can feel most comedians' resentment of their audience. At alternative nights, the audience is respected as intelligent. In fact, a comment from a spectator is often feared because it might be cleverer than anything the comedian has said.

Whether alternative or not, stand-up is still dependent on its audience. There are few performers as vulnerable as a comic about to deliver a punch line, because laughter, unlike applause, cannot easily be faked. Comedy can only change if its audience is changing. And this is happening as the Internet and cable television bridge cultural gaps, younger generations grow more cynical and world-wise, and detachment replaces 70's activism and 80's materialism.

A new sensibility is developing, one that requires a new kind of comic. In the next few years, that comic will emerge. And chances are that the person will have risen, if not from these nights on the Lower East Side, at least from a milieu like them.