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Alternative comedy: Laughs on the edge

BY JAMES S. HIRSCH

New York -- She has wavy blond hair, thick red lipstick and a Deep South shtick. In a darkened loft on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, "Tammy Faye Starlight" takes the stage and coos "Daddy's Hands," a sympathetic personal ballad about child abuse and molestation. She mourns that the man she married turned out to be her brother, and that's not the half of it. The crowd at Surf Reality, an alternative comedy club that invites experimentation, cheers the spoof. "I'm just a nice Jewish girl from New York, and I had to come up with a little invention," explains the 29-year-old performer, Tammy Lang, whose husband, James Oakes, in a separate skit plays the part of an alcoholic, pedophilic priest. "Surf filled a void for us. The audience is so nonjudgmental about the material. Nothing is sacred. Nothing is forbidden."

Nothing, indeed. In the track-lighted seams of the alternative comedy world, performers shun the rat-tat-tat style of comics strafing a crowd with punch lines. They opt instead for self-confessional narratives, for longer skits involving several characters and overlapping story lines, for free-verse poems and a cappella songs. Also welcomed are outrageously profane stunts -- unorthodox, often unpolished and occasionally unfunny. They are the brackish undertow of the cultural comedy wave, a radical rejection of standard stand-up.

"The comedy scene has just become so homogenized, so much about getting a sitcom or an Armani suit," says Lillian Slugocki, a spokeswoman for PS122, an alternative performance space in the same grotty Lower East Side neighborhood as Surf Reality. "Maybe that's what you're looking for if you're from Connecticut or New Jersey, but not if you're in the arts." In two years, about a half-dozen places for "performance comedy," as it's sometimes called, have opened here. (Los Angeles and Chicago have similar venues.) They range from dingy back rooms of bars to private living rooms or lofts. Cabarets and coffee shops also have opened their doors to the comedic fringe. At these sites, the cover charge is minimal (or nonexistent), there are no drink minimums and heckling is rare. The clubs strive for raffish intimacy and appeal to college students, struggling artists and -- according to Marc Maron, a popular performer -- "disenfranchised upper-middle-class white kids who like to poke around and be dangerous." He calls the alternative minitrend "dorm-room vaudeville."

Take Surf Reality. It holds about 50 people and more closely resembles a commune than a club. In real reality, it is a loft space in videographer Robert Prichard's second-story walk-up apartment. The dressing room is a muggy stairwell whose psychedelic walls could have been painted by Picasso on a graffiti binge. Anyone who needs a bathroom uses the Prichards' private quarters, which is stocked with the family's shampoo, toothpaste and the plastic potty trainer for the resident tot, four-year-old Skye Hunter.

Some nights feature scheduled acts, such as Mistress Elsa and the Bondage Theater, but the night I was there, Surf Reality's microphone was available to any soul, witty or otherwise. There is no pay, but dozens sign up. Many are sometime actors or writers, looking for a break. Whatever the skit -- Annette Funicello on acid, a Jewish comic who can't find his name on Schindler's list -- patrons are patient and supportive. Sharon Houston, who's performed at well-known joke palaces like Caroline's in a better part of town, says audiences here look for deeper connections to the performer. "When you're playing in a mainstream club, you're getting up and saying 'I'm going to win,'" she says. "It's like lion taming." At regular clubs, Ms. Houston describes the true experience of driving off a cliff in Virginia after she fell asleep at the wheel. The riff focuses on her injuries and recuperation. At Surf Reality, she tells the audience how her parents assumed, incorrectly, she had been drunk, and the anger she felt until her parents apologized. "I'm allowed to be a lot more vulnerable here," the 26-year-old says.

Some acts are just plain outrageous. In one, two women appear on the black-lit stage dressed in bridal gowns and hair beads and perform a kind of mating dance. The performers, Devon McKernan, 21, and Melanie Smith-Jacks, 25, kiss, hug, thrash and rip off each other's gowns. Hot wax is poured. Flowers, fruit and milk -- yes, milk -- tumble from their bodies. "The first time it was very violent," Ms. McKernan says later. "Melanie chipped a tooth. Sometimes it's S & M. Sometimes it's sexy. Tonight it was very sensual." The women also perform their routines at private functions (presumably not weddings or children's birthday parties).

Some alternative comedy veers off toward real theater. Jason and Randy Sklar, 24-year-old twin brothers, wrote a 13-minute skit that put Barbara Mandrell on trial. The accusation: She killed comedy. Randy maintained that one writer-assassin had acted alone; Jason

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alleged a conspiracy by the three Mandrell sisters. Actual Mandrell video clips were introduced as evidence. The verdict was inconclusive, but funny. "Stand-up is an art form, and we didn't feel comfortable with that tone of voice," says Jason. Patrons of alternative comedy clubs "are going to get performance art, not just the latest O.J. joke."

The most prominent alternative site is the Luna Lounge, a Lower East Side bar where about a dozen performers are invited each Monday night and instructed to try new material. "We're trying to avoid observational Kmart jokes," says David Becky, an entertainment manager who co-founded the club two years ago in part to give the comics he represents a free-form outlet. An eager audience followed.

On a recent Monday, more than 100 people crammed inside the bar's back room; almost as many others were locked out. There are no tickets; admission is free. There are also no chairs, just a handful of beat-up couches. A black-velvet painting of the Last Supper hangs on the wall. The air conditioner groans loudly; rainwater seeps in from the roof.

Todd Barry junks the sure-fire jokes he's used on "The David Letterman Show" and in many top clubs. Instead he tries a three-person restaurant skit, asking two audience members to participate. It bombs. Mr. Barry, 32, shrugs it off. "There is more acceptance of failure here," he says, sipping a beer at the bar afterward.

Painful personal experiences, mixing poignancy and punch lines, animate some of the better material. Anita Liberty reads poems she's written about her failed romance with Mitchell, who left her for a woman named Heather. "You'll get letters full of memories and private jokes, and things only a jealous woman would understand," she reads. "I know she'll read them because I'll make it easy for her. I'll send postcards."

Hollywood types are now showing up at Luna Lounge, and some comics grumble they need an agent just for a chance to appear there. Some fear the alternative scene is becoming too popular, too commercial and less edgy. But a funny stand-up can't stay on the periphery forever. "You want to be alternative, but you want to hit as many people as possible," says Ms. Liberty, who has spent two years in the comedy nether world but is now talking to the major television networks about developing a series. "If you want to get paid, you have to hit the mainstream."