

# A Guy Who Finds The News Funny

by Clark Peterson

Mort Sahl is blitzing San Francisco while he sandwiches an appearance at Masonic Auditorium between extended engagements in the Glitter Citadel of Nevada. In a replay of his fledgling days at the Hungry I where he was weaned on comedy, Sahl trucks his always informative and entertaining show into town Saturday night for a single performance, sharing the bill with the musical humorist, Jim Stafford.

At 47, Sahl never grew old in the tradition of Bertrand Russell or Mark Twain (one of his heroes). He retains a quick mind capable of retaining reams of information gleaned from a voracious appetite for newsprint. Due to the success of his Las Vegas act he remains the perennial satirist although his trips on the campus circuit have shrunk to merely 3-4 weeks. He'll be jostling tourists there for 10 months next year.

Swearing there's nothing political about his stuff, Sahl prefers even not to categorize himself, as evidenced by his response this week when I asked him whether he thought of himself as an

entertainer.

"I don't think of myself. Intellectualizing what you're doing is dangerous. You just have to be relevant. It interrupts communication to start thinking about it," he told me.

His act evolves straight from newspapers as it always has and often from the United Press teletype ticker that hums away in his LA home. It's commentary and comedy, and how he handles it is to let it "stretch out, develop and then run with it." The bigger the crowd, the better, for only then can the performer "achieve unity and become one with his audience. But the material cannot exist on its own virtue alone." He's been doing it for 21 years.

Now that Nixon is out to pasture it may have shaved a half hour off his lines. But you can wager there'll be a lean look in his eye when reminiscing about those "dear, departed days" before the Constitution was subverted. Then, Sahl told me, "the dissidents were pre-empted by the Federal Government, but now that's the only place one can find dissidents."

The upcoming one night stand

in the City nearly coincides with Sahl's first book. Still untitled, partly autobiography and partly reflections on America, it will be available soon. Hard work and lonely, he relates in a phone interview from his home, and I can sense sadness tinged with relief in his voice. After all, he's been on almost every talk show around, been interviewed in *Playboy* and has defended the honor of Jim Garrison, the New Orleans D.A. who challenged the Warren Commission's findings concerning JFK's assassination. His is a voice of authority which embarrasses mossbacks and bleeding hearts alike. Once he has done his homework and committed himself, he is stubborn about backing off in the face of pressure, for at this time he is his own best defender. His own best fan too, Sahl often lets go a deep chuckle during his act in case the audience trails too far behind or misses the joke entirely. That is his style, as permanent and unfaltering as the rolled up newspaper he hugs on stage. For this special San Francisco show he plans on removing the *Chronicle* from a parrot cage bottom somewhere and was his tongue in his cheek when he said that?



'Everyone's goal is to be recognized'

# The Reluctant Celebrity Is a Hot Comedian

By Clark Peterson

**W**HEN'S THE hottest comedian in the Bay Area," says Holy City Zoo MC/comedian Tony DePaul. He won the "Gong Show" three times, the Boarding House's Top Banana Contest last September, and has been featured on local TV shows "Videowest" and "Showcase II." Will he be the next Robin Williams? Only if he wants to be.

"To a lot of stand-up comedians, comedy is a business," he says. "I do comedy to have fun."

Michael Pritchard, who will appear Friday at the Great American Music Hall with opening act Papaya Juice, blows you over with a tornado of sound effects, faces, voices and other madness. But he's a reluctant celebrity. He's happy with what he has and he wants to keep it that way.

"It's the lack of fame that brings you a whole lot of fun," he says, echoing Rev. Ike. Then he adds modestly, "I don't think I'll ever be famous."

In five years, Pritchard fully expects to still be a youth counselor at Juvenile Hall. He got the job when he moved to the Noe Valley from L.A. in January, 1979, having left his hometown of St. Louis in 1977.

**B**ACK home, Pritchard was the only stand-up comedian he was aware of. Now 29, he has been doing impish things ever since he was 7. His brothers and he would go into a movie theater, for instance, and one of them would pour a can of barley-beef soup over the balcony while another would make retching sounds. When they rode in the car, Pritchard would sit in the back seat with a gag in his mouth, his hands behind his back and, when a police car passed, bang his head on the window.

In his act, Pritchard draws heavily on these experiences and also incidents at his virtually all-black Catholic grade school. He was a fat boy like Larry Mondello of "Leave it to Beaver," one time announcing in a bratty voice, "Oh



MICHAEL PRITCHARD

teacher. It's 2:30 Friday and you haven't given us our over-the-weekend homework," much to the dismay of his classmates.

No longer a tubby kid, Pritchard is a 6'6", 250-lb. Gulliver to dozens of Lilliputian-like kids who call on him to come out and play. He enjoys kids just as much as he does comedy. If he's not entertaining them on a playground, he's keeping them guffawing at Juvenile Hall. "Not one of them has failed to laugh," he says of his delinquent charges, "as angry and hostile and murderous as they might be."

During his act, Pritchard describes how one tough teen was disarmed through humor. "I had to physically restrain him," he said. "He was saying, 'Go ahead and break my arm. Go ahead. You can't make me do what I don't want to do.' So I let him up and put my arms

See Page 35

## Comedian Pritchard

Continued from Page 34

around him and gave him a big kiss. He got real flustered and said, 'Okay. I'll do anything you want me to, just don't ever embarrass me like that again?'"

Sometimes, however, even one as friendly as Pritchard is abused. One kid left purple strangle marks on his neck while another gave him a black eye. The only other abuse he ever underwent was from hecklers when Don Bexley (Bubba on "Sanford and Son") booked him into San Diego strip joints.

At the time, Pritchard was living in L.A. and also performing at The Comedy Store, Ice House and other clubs. He discovered that his peers were, by and large, "trying to make it in comedy for the bucks or fame without giving a damn about anyone else." So when he happened to visit San Francisco and found "a lot more community feeling and support," he moved.

Last January, Pritchard and comedy writer/producer John Cantu founded a comedy co-op to keep this camaraderie alive among Bay Area stand-up comedians while upgrading their professionalism. It is his dream to make San Francisco, "the most beautiful city in the world," such a comedy hot-spot that no one will have to move to L.A. to be discovered.

"Everyone's ultimate goal is to be recognized by the media," he explains. "If you asked many comedians what they'd prefer — money or recognition — they'd go for recognition. Robin Williams struggled two years here and got so disgusted he took off for L.A."

Pritchard doesn't need to follow Williams' footsteps. He's already played for audiences all over the country, including 7000 at St. Louis' Riverfront Stadium, the Punch Line, Other Cafe and Veteran's Auditorium in Reno. He was flown to Santa Barbara for a half-hour's work for \$300 after a talent scout saw his act, and he was offered \$1000 for a show in Boston. Last New Year's Eve, he was filmed on the streets of North Beach, interviewing passersby for a documentary on alcoholism.

Add to these kudos a recent two-part interview with Alex Adams on KYUU and an upcoming appearance on "Creature Feature," and you'll see Pritchard is a media darling. The question is: Does he want stardom? Yes and no.

"I don't have that go-for-the-throat attitude which 95 percent of the comedians have," he says. "But success is not measured in fame or fortune. To me, it's the success of the person and how he feels about himself."

# NIGHT LIFE

## Bob Sarlatte's Star Went Up As David Letterman's Went Down

By Clark Peterson

**B**ACK IN 1976, Bob Sarlatte placed third in the First Annual San Francisco International Stand-Up Comedy Competition, only a few hundredths of a point behind second-place finisher Robin Williams. Sarlatte is not as famous as Williams (TV's "Mork"), but his recent tenure as the Ed McMahon of the David Letterman show could enhance his chances for hitting the big time.

The day after he appeared at a showcase for CBS-TV at the Other Cafe (where he headlines Friday and Saturday), Sarlatte sat down at a Clement Street deli to discuss the Letterman show and his future. He'd been back home from New York only a few weeks, having completed his six-week contract with Letterman from June 23 to August 1.

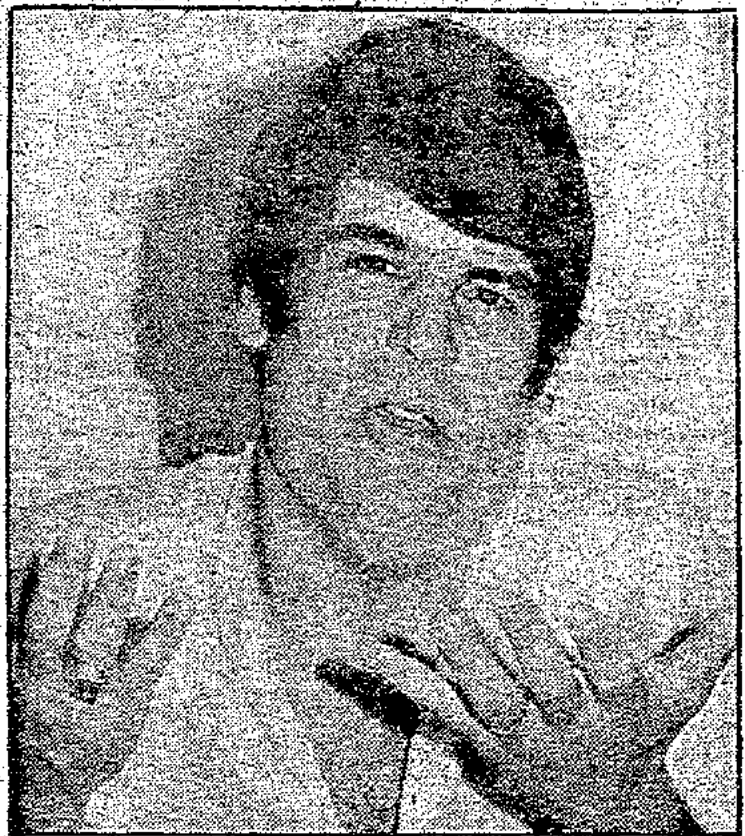
Sarlatte was Letterman's right-hand man, whether warming up the crowd, announcing guests, doing bits or just chitchatting. But he bailed out at the right time, because the 90-minute talk show (which still airs on Sacramento's Channel 3 and Salinas' Channel 8) was dropped by San Francisco's NBC affiliate, KRON, after being pared down to one hour and then half an hour.

"After 27 minutes," relates Sarlatte, "David would say, 'We'll be right back after these messages.' But when the commercials were over, there'd be a game show on."

Both men remain good friends — Letterman hoped Sarlatte would continue his role for the entire 26-week run — but Sarlatte is just as pleased to be off the show as he was to take the job in the first place.

"I knew I wouldn't be quite right for the show," he

*Comedian Bob Sarlatte will appear for two shows nightly Friday and Saturday at The Other, 160 Carl Street, San Francisco.*



By Clem Albers

**SARLATTE: STRETCHING REALITY IS HIS STYLE** admits, "but I figured it was too good a chance to pass up. I did nothing but good by going there.

"On the other hand, I never really wanted to be a sidekick. It was a subordinate sort of role. We both do similar things, and it was his show, so he was the one who got to do them. I thought it would be more give-and-take because NBC executive Fred Silverman wanted guys sitting around having fun and BSing in a low-key way."

# NIGHT LIFE

## Carrie Snow — Heavy Comedy

By Clark Peterson

**C**ARRIE SNOW is in a hurry, stamped-ing around her rented Oakland house trying to get ready for a show.

"This place is a mess," she moans on the phone to the reporter. "I need a bulldozer to clean it up." Then she announces she has to go now so that she can put on her make-up. "I have to use Spackle," she deadpans.

Snow, 27, is one of the few stand-up comediennees in the Bay Area (she was the only woman in the Top Ten of the 1980 San Francisco International Open Stand-Up Comedy competition). She stands out from the crowd not only due to her ample size (5'7", 175 pounds) but because she uses that excess tonnage in her act.

"What's the matter?" she says, stepping onto the Punch Line stage. "Haven't you ever seen thighs in two time zones before?" She goes on to discuss the weight-reducing spa she visited, Elizabeth Arden's Main Chance. "I got sent to the annex out back: Fat Chance," she quips. Later she mentions that the jeans she's wearing aren't Gloria Vanderbilt — "they're Gloria Peterbilt."

"I acknowledge my weight," Snow admits weeks later, calling from the apartment she rents in Hollywood when not in Oakland. "But I also acknowledge that I'm hot stuff and gorgeous — fat or thin."

Nevertheless, Snow makes herself

*Carrie Snow appears Wednesday through Saturday at the Punch Line.*



CARRIE SNOW: 'I'M HOT STUFF AND GORGEOUS—FAT OR THIN'

the butt of many jokes. She describes her new curly hairdo as "Donna Summer with a gland problem" and she seemingly unveils pent-up jealousy of slim models when she says, "Have you seen those blonde sluts in L.A. with those tight Spandex pants? They're so tight, you can almost hear the infections growing. I like

to push those girls down in the bathroom and steal their gold jewelry."

It is material like that which has made Snow a headliner in comedy clubs from La Jolla and Palm Springs to Sacramento and got her selected as one of the best of the Comedy Store performers at Mitzi Shore's famous club. Having done comedy for a mere three years, she has already achieved the unlikely honor of being the third woman to perform at the Comic Strip in Florida.

Snow made her comedy debut at the Holy City Zoo on Feb. 21, 1978, her mother's birthday. The date was a coincidence but did have some meaning: Snow was telling her mother that pleasing herself was her first priority.

"I was supposed to be in law school and doing things correctly," says Snow. "Instead I was doing what I wanted."

Snow says that her mother is "somewhat pleased at this point" by her daughter's career, but parental approval has come slowly. She had to quit her receptionist job at the Kaiser Medical Center in Oakland in September 1979 to devote full time to comedy. Her mother wanted to know why she wasn't making better use of a degree in Rhetoric (argumentative thinking and writing) from U.C. Berkeley and why she hadn't lassoed a husband.

"My mother's always done what she

wanted," says Snow, explaining why she's established her own independence, "but she did have kids and virtually gave up her art (water color). She paints now, but only rarely did so when we were kids. She doesn't especially like what I'm doing. She used to say, 'If you don't make it at Berkeley, you can always be a secretary.' Henceforth, I've never learned to type. I lasted a semester in high school and got up to 30 words per minute with about 80 errors!"

Snow appears to be driven by two forces: proving to herself that she has talent and proving to her mother that being a comedienne can be more fulfilling than being a housewife.

Snow spent last February through August as the emcee at Off Broadway, the male strip club. "The job changed my life," she said. "I learned I could talk to women and that they enjoyed people saying silly things. Ragging on women is nothing new but it's safer than doing it to men."

And yet, Snow has found that women can be even more difficult to please than men. On the one hand she will hear women gush, "God, that needed to be said," on the other she will bear the brunt of some female hecklers.

"I was at All Women Night at the Holy City Zoo once," she remembers, "and there were some gay women who were not into anybody's cookies. They hissed at every female onstage and left during my act. That bummed me to the max. They should be looking at me and saying, 'Hey, she's making it.'"

Fortunately, Snow is often rewarded by night club waitresses who put down their trays and listen when she takes the stage. They can see she is grabbing for all the gusto she can, and doing so without a manager.

She prefers to concentrate on writing material. During those times that she "panics over volume," she accepts jokes from friends and others.

Some of Snow's friends have nothing to do with show biz and therefore "can't understand the sickness" of working six to seven nights a week. "I've given up my social life to work all the time," she admits, "even during the week when I could be going out."

The fact that stand-up comedy is dominated by men hasn't deterred Snow one iota, especially since she "almost got Biggest Flirt" as a high school senior and her parents "never told me I couldn't do comedy." She's always been a self-starter and she's always felt that women are just as funny as men. Being so determined got her through her apprentice days when she was the new kid on the block.

"People say, 'You should get together with the women and form a group,'" she says. "Hey, my idea of a good time is not bitching and moaning about how difficult things are. My idea is going out and doing things."

"When I started, there was only one other woman, V. Sande Childers, performing locally. All the men treated me like I had leprosy. But I can't say it was because I'm a woman; they treated the new men like that too."

# NIGHT LIFE

## Papaya's Billy Lucas: Self-doubting Funnyman

By Clark Peterson

**S**INCE MICHAEL PRITCHARD won the 1980 S.F. Stand-Up Comedy Competition, he must be the funniest jester in the city, right? Not necessarily. Just listen to Pritchard himself.

"Billy Lucas is far and away the funniest comedian in San Francisco," he claims. "He's consistent in coming up with something extremely humorous, topical and to the point."

Take, for example, the time Lucas was asked to improvise an M&M's commercial on the spot. "In this hand I have M&M's," he immediately said, "and in this hand I have radioactive plutonium. Which hand will melt down first?"

Or take the time he had to invent a song lyric about President Nixon. "I did so much for de-tente-e/So they let me live in San Cle-ment-e," he sang without hesitating more than a few seconds.

Lucas, 25, is the featured performer in Papaya Juice, an improvisational comedy group which includes Tony DePaul, Joe Sharkey, Rodney Sheriff and guests. Robin Williams is a former member.

"When I started doing comedy five years ago," says Lucas, "I thought I was the funniest guy around. Then Robin came around and opened my eyes. He had everything I could do: voices, acting, and characters. His wit is almost computer-like." When Williams moved to L.A. in 1976, Lucas took his place. Then, when Williams became a nationwide sensation on *Laugh-In*, the show's producer, George Schlatter, scoured San Francisco for new talent.

"He looked at me and told me to stay with it, that it might happen to me," said Lucas, who has since auditioned for *Fridays* and *Saturday Night Live*. "I think once I get more concentration and time onstage — it's like flight time — I can get that thing that everybody notices."

A perfectionist and his own worst critic, Lucas admits to occasionally falling into the I'm-not-funny-anymore trap. His self-doubts and lack of discipline have kept him from entering the annual Comedy Competition the past five years.

"Improvisation is comfortable for me," he says, "but stand-up comedy is a torture to my psyche. You rack your brain. You can't take every joke you think is funny and have it suit your personality."

Pritchard says Lucas is held back by the one thing all performers must face: lack of recognition. In addition, Lucas is a minority-group member entertaining WASPy audiences.

"Everyone tells me I'm funny regardless of my ancestry," he says, "but inside I'm like half-Filipino and half-American

... A lot of people who haven't related to Filipinos won't find my material funny unless it explains itself. The only Filipino jokes that are popular are that we mix up our p's and f's and that we eat dogs. It's hard to get beyond that stereotype."

Lucas has been creating humorous tidbits ever since his days at E. R. Taylor elementary school in Portola Valley. At 20, he took Frank Kidder's comedy workshop at the Intersection and was



BILLY LUCAS

hooked. Since then he's been with Papaya Juice every Friday and Saturday night (now performing at the Open Theatre at 441 Clement Street).

During the day, Lucas turns out reports and forms on an offset press at Levi Strauss Co. He clings to the job for security, too reluctant to pursue comedy as a career and risk failure. He could be happy as a character actor in movies, a screenwriter, a stand-up comedian or a voice on cartoon soundtracks, but he's in no hurry to get there.

Said Pritchard: "Maybe he has what some people would call a lack of ambition, but I feel he's biding his time and will come on in the near future. When someone finds him a useful vehicle, he will probably go forward to superstardom."

With his squat, chubby body and impish grin, Lucas could be a Filipino John Belushi or a jumbo version of Fantasy Island's "Tattoo," if he got the right breaks. But you have to wonder if he could leave the safety of his job on that great quest into the unknown and cope with the flightiness of fame.

"I say to myself that I could never be a Bill Cosby," Lucas says, peering into his psyche, "entertaining people for a couple of hours when I have only 15 minutes. I'm very leery sometimes. I've been one of the slowest-rising comedians around."

"I feel I'm naturally funny and I take pride in the fact I'm witty at times. But it's one thing to be kidding around onstage and get over. If you try to do it as your actual job, it's a completely different thing."

*Billy Lucas can be seen with Papaya Juice Thursday at the Holy City Zoo.*

SF Sunday  
Examiner & Chronicle

• April 19, 1981



## NIGHT LIFE

A bookkeeper turned comic at the Other Cafe

# Kramer the Comedian: Small Guy, Big Ambition

By Clark Peterson

**W**ITH A WOLVERINE'S mane of wiry hair, Groucho Marxist glasses and moustache, and Munchkin stature ("5 feet 4 inches of raw passion"), Jeremy Kramer would be an easy target for a police sketch artist. He often wears pleated pants and dinner coat that seem to have been left on the curb for Goodwill by someone of middle-linebacker build. His appearance is just as unique as his stand-up comedy act: his full-time occupation since he quit his bookkeeper job May 29 with California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.

Berkeley-born Kramer, 28, like former certified public accountant Bob Newhart, was an unlikely candidate for comedy. He had just finished working the 1978 tax season for H&R Block and

Kramer admits to seeming bizarre to some people, skipping from one style to another. He'll tell a joke, for instance, then break into a song by an affected lounge singer before doing an impression of a vegetarian Marinite. "Whether it works or not depends on the flow and what follows what," he said. "If I don't pay attention, it may come across as disjointed."

Even if you don't like his material, it's hard not to like him. He's no threat to men, and women seem to fall for his mousy, Woody Allenesque physique. Although he often gives in to long pauses ("dead air" in disc jockey lingo), he makes up for it by being conversational.

"I found that if an audience feels they know you more, even if you don't

with just about anything, but he does steer away from jokes that have relevance only to the small world of comedians or the club he's in. To broaden his sphere of jokes, he keeps in touch with the workaday world. "I never want to be so far away from it that I forget what those pressures are like," he said.

Ideally, Kramer would work part-time at a regular job for this reason and so he'd have a better bargaining position when comedy jobs come his way. There are only a few bookings he desires — headliner at all the city's comedy clubs — before moving to entertainment centers

like New York or Los Angeles to become an actor (he's taken lessons from Mill Valley's Larry Menkin). He's already headlined at the Other Cafe but doesn't expect to be booked at the Holy City Zoo because. "After I signed with Other Productions (a talent agency), I became *persona non grata* at the Zoo."

"The irony of this business," said Kramer, "is that automatically other producers don't like you and won't use you even if they think you're good. You're a pawn. The more successful you get, the more frustrating it is and the more valuable a chesspiece you become."



By Steve Ringman

### JEREMY KRAMER: WOMEN FALL FOR HIS WOODY ALLENESQUE PHYSIQUE

finished his third unsuccessful campaign for the Santa Barbara Board of Education when he decided to move to San Francisco. By chance, he found an apartment close to the Holy City Zoo, the club where Robin Williams learned his craft.

However, Kramer preferred going to movies and concerts, thinking that most night club acts were "mechanical joke tellers" and "very phony guys who do off-color material." It took him until September, 1979, more than a year later, to drop by the club. He immediately felt he could be just as funny as the performers there, so he gave it a shot.

"From the very first I got laughs," he said, interviewed at the Richmond district flat he shares with a woman and her son, "but it took a while to realize why. I had thought it was just a matter of writing material and, if it's funny enough, people will laugh. But it was how you came across as a performer."

Says his agent, Bob Ayres: "A lot of the time, people don't like Jeremy or 'get' him the first two or three times, but after that they hook in. He'll be ... big ... if he's allowed to be himself."

*Jeremy Kramer will perform Friday and Saturday nights at the Other Cafe, Cole and Carl Streets.*

get big laughs, they feel more comfortable," he said. And so he tells them his name is really O'Kramer and he emigrated from Ireland during the great bagel failure. Or he talks about how his mother would say, "Are you hungry?" and, when he'd say he was, she'd respond, "Well, why don't you make yourself something to eat?"

Kramer tries to perform directly to individuals in the audience rather than simply doing an act. This scores him brownie points for rapport but he still finds that crowd response varies according to whether he's headlining or stuck with a lousy time slot on an open-mike night.

"If they've never heard of you or you're put in an inferior role," he explained, "they have the attitude of, 'Make me laugh.' If you're creating onstage, it takes patience and then wanting to see something funny rather than wanting you to finish as soon as you can."

Kramer's act is tailored to his different audiences. When he performed for executives at a Sears Roebuck office party one time, he quickly cut out all the material "with those kinds of people as the punch lines."

Generally speaking, Kramer's goal is to be likeable so that he can get away

## They Can't Use His Stuff on TV

By Clark Peterson

COMEDIAN Jack Marion comes across as either hysterically funny, or downright revolting. It's all because, he says, he speaks his mind, a mind the Moral Majority might say is teeming with depravity. Marion, for instance, did a 90-minute show in Cleveland last January, and a local TV station — looking for a segment to air — couldn't find even 30 suitable seconds. "I'm rather proud of that," Marion boasts, phoning from his Newport Beach, Orange County residence.

Jack Marion appears at the Punch Line Wednesday through Saturday.



MARION: 'PEOPLE ARE RUDER THAN HELL; I WAS GOING TO FIGHT A GUY ONE TIME'

In the 1978 S.F. Comedy Competition, Marion came in third by a few hundredths of a point, even though four of seven judges (including the late John L. Wasserman and George Carlin) scored him in first place. "The judges think I'm dirty," he admits.

Born in Sonoma 32 years ago, Marion has lived all over the Bay Area. In his 20s, he was a garbageman in Oakland and a barker on Broadway. He got his comedy start at the Coffee Gallery in 1974 when he saw an ad for try-outs. "The first time I did it I was funny," he says matter-of-factly. "I was nervous at first but once there I felt at home."

He became a regular at North Beach coffee houses on audition nights. "If you can emerge from that without psychological scars," he says, "maybe you can survive."

In 1975, unable to find enough comedy work in the Bay Area, Marion settled in Hollywood. People told him to shave off his beard and drop his blue material if he wanted jobs. He refused and spent six months with nowhere to go. Then he gave in. "But it wasn't me," he

says. "I got depressed. I finally decided to be myself, and if it didn't work, do something else. Since then, I've been getting plenty of work."

Marion traditionally was noted for his wit on male-female relationships, but lately his material seems to have taken on an ominous turn. Swearing he isn't a pessimist, Marion nevertheless thinks our

**Comedian Jack Marion:**  
*'They think I'm dirty . . . (but) I'm rather proud of that'*

civilization is ready to be embalmed. "We're in our death throes, and I'm just talking about that," he said. "It's an interesting time to be alive to see what mettle people are made of. People are real confident because they have some job or title that vests power in them, but when you take away their badge and power, they're squeaky little wimps."

"I think everybody's real afraid, and hardly anyone's natural or happy. People always cling to isms when they're scared. There's all this b.s. about gender — feminism and all these weird things."

Wherever he performs, Marion encounters people unprepared for his earthy humor. He can be gratuitously smutty, although he claims he is not trying to shock anyone with the seven banned words. Nonetheless, he gets his share of heckling. "People are ruder than hell," he says in disgust. "They'll ruin the whole night for everybody, and if you mention anything about it, you're a piece of s---. It happens everywhere. I was going to fight a guy at the Punch Line one time."

To Marion's mind, such people are miserable due to their jobs and the break-neck rush for bucks. "It's bad for your soul, and it kills your spirit to have a dumb job," he says. And that's why Marion is a comedian. He doesn't want to do anything else. When he was starting out, bombing never bothered his thick skin. That nonchalant attitude is invaluable whenever he confronts people who squirm over his sex jokes.

"Everybody isn't going to like you," he says bluntly. "I don't know anyone who everybody likes. You'd wonder about a person like that, wouldn't you?"

# NIGHT LIFE



JOHN CANTU. HE SELECTS COMEDIANS FOR 'ZOO'

## The Great Curmudgeon Behind S.F. Comedy

By Clark Peterson

**Q**UASIMODO lives. Behind the balcony at the Italy City Zoo on Clement Street is a tiny office with a ceiling so low even the hunchback of Notre Dame would bump his hump. It is here that comedy producer John Cantu, who is buying the night club 5650 with Jason Christoble, works and sometimes sleeps.

An honest-to-God character with a slippery hide and a meager body that shows evidence of countless beers and cigarettes, Cantu is the butt of many jokes from comedians who perform at the Zoo.

Michael Pritchard says, "Cantu mooses only two ways: slither and scurry." Robin Williams questions Cantu's personal hygiene and says, "If you look up sneeze in the dictionary, it says 'See Cantu.'" And Steve Pearl has a song lyric that goes, "All the comics want to give a fat lip to big John."

"I've never had so many people hate me," said Cantu, on a recent afternoon at the Zoo. "It's because I'd never been in a position of authority before where I had to make bread and butter decisions."

When Cantu ran the open mike comedy two years ago at the old Beering House, he picked the order of performance by lottery. No one complained, he said, but the audience never exceeded 30 people "because there were times when the draw was 13 turkeys in a row." This doesn't happen at the Zoo, he asserts, because he selects comedians who are attuned to the audience's tastes.

"I have a good sense of the audience mood," he maintains. "I make up the first set list and then may realize one-liner comedians are going over real well but observational humor, musicians and guys who do observational humor aren't. Since I apparently am the only one who sees this, it looks arbitrary when I put names down."

It may make more sense to schedule acts according to

See Page 40

## Comedy's Curmudgeon

Continued From Page 39

to their strength as laugh-getters rather than by their style, but Cantu always can be articulate in his reasoning. As a producer, it's natural that he sees a side to the comedy business that comedians don't. But he claims that he, unlike most comedians, bases his actions on facts.

"It's frustrating to deal with people who don't have a pragmatic viewpoint — not seeing what is obvious to me," he said. "One thing I learned after a couple months in comedy is the astounding ability of a comedian to do his act to dead silence and be absolutely convinced he killed. I've also seen powerful comedians be convinced they bombed, because they're insecure. There's no correlation between a comedian's feelings and objective reality."

Consequently, Cantu, who has a low tolerance level and hot temper, says he carries grudges and refuses to do business with certain people. He admits to having "a lot less respect for comedians as a whole than I used to" and confesses to preferring a weak comedian who obeys orders over a strong comedian who causes him aggravation. "I would take a good working performer over an erratic genius any day," he said.

Cantu feels he must have a trustworthy staff and a solid financial base before he "can afford to tolerate a prima donna." Last January 17, the Zoo was closed down by the fire marshal for exceeding the 49-person limit. But remodeling for safety has upped its capacity to 74, and those expenses should be offset by September.

If Cantu has his way, he'll soon have a cabaret license which will push the present 2 a.m. closing time to

5 a.m. He's found that weekend audiences want to stay out late and comedians want a hangout. "We'd just as soon stay here, than go to the Sugar Plum restaurant," he said. Cantu is not worried about attracting an audience in the wee hours because the Zoo has a popular reputation as the spawning ground of Robin Williams, and it also lures in curious drop-ins from the Clement Street bar scene. Ever since one night in 1975 when comedian Tony DePaul brought in 15 to 20 members of his residence club, comedy has been hot there and "we've never had less than 30 people in the crowd."

However, the Zoo is nothing without comedians, and they have been grumbling about the *enfant terrible* named Cantu, even discussing a petition to have him replaced. In his defense, Cantu says he's making some corrections. "I'm one of the few producers who will tell a comedian to his face, 'You're doing this and I don't like it,'" he said. "It annoys me that people won't call others on this. It's, 'Oh, hi. How are you? Call my secretary and we'll have lunch.' I can't do that phony yada yada, and it's a very strong weakness. I realize I need a staff to do that for me."

"Also, I'm discovering that I'm in a position where, if something is bugging me in my personal life, I'll walk through the club in a bad mood and 15 comedians will go, 'ARRRRGH!' But if I'm in a good mood and smiling, 15 comedians are suddenly having a good time. That's an image problem I have."

Considering that comedy at the Zoo has grown from one night a week in 1975 (when it was introduced by Darryl Rubin between sets in a belly dancer's act) to seven nights a week for the past few years, Cantu is sitting on a potential gold mine. But gold prices — just like Cantu's reputation — have both been on the relative decline lately.

SF Sunday Examiner & Chronicle • February 1, 1981

**A FEW WEEKS BACK** Pacific Stereo ran a couple of radio ads delivered by Ronald Reagan mimic Jim Morris for a 25 percent tax cut sale. As one of the ads came on one day, my plumber, who was working on the kitchen tap, stopped and gushed, "He sounds exactly like Reagan!" In fact, Morris's impression was too accurate for CBS, which pulled the ads from all their stations. Morris said, "out of respect for the presidency." But listeners in nine other markets across the country, including the Bay Area, all heard them.

Morris has been doing the impression since election eve 1980. The Pacific Stereo spots weren't the first time he aped the President. He played Reagan at an inaugural night party at the Boarding House, holding character for two hours, then introduced Mayor Feinstein at the Bay Area Music Awards April 15 at the Warfield.

"I had been asked to do the BAM Awards," said Morris, "and then two weeks before the show, Reagan was shot. So it was up in the air whether I would even consider doing it. As the days passed, Reagan hadn't been seen in public or photographed or heard, so it was controversial to go through with it. It was tense."

"I came out to the band playing 'Hail to the Chief' with myself all made up as Reagan. I heard groans, boos, lots of laughter and catcalls. One heckler in the balcony was relentless; so I looked up and ad libbed, 'Well, I'll have you know that sticks and guns may pierce my lungs, but names will never hurt me.' It got quite a reaction, and I was quite proud."

Since then, Morris has starred in a Reagan roast at the Other Cafe and done Reagan voice-overs for a play

*Impressionist Jim Morris will play Friday night at Cobb's Pub, 2069 Chestnut Street in San Francisco.*

# NIGHT LIFE

## Aping Reagan Is Comic Business

By Clark Peterson

about blacklisting actors, "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?." His latest project is Rent-A-Reagan, a service where he rents himself out to anyone willing to pay a minimum of \$150. "Since I can do Reagan so well," he explained, not shy about self-promotion, "why not capitalize on it? It's a novelty act."

Morris will make himself up as Reagan with fake wrinkles and slick hair and, if the customer wants him delivered with a limo, bodyguards and a "Nancy," he'll do it for the right price. He'll even write material tailored to the event. Although he does many other impressions, including Johnny Carson, Andy Rooney, Julia Child and Harry Reasoner, Morris finds that his Reagan impression gets the best response. But he has the added attraction of social comment wrapped around a Reaganesque tenor.

A former Boston resident who "reached a saturation point" in the comedy market there when he moved to San Francisco in September 1980, Morris, 24, was attracted to the Bay Area by a Playboy article on the local comedy scene. He'd been doing stand-up for two years, although he first mimicked Lily Tomlin's "Ernestine" character at age 12 and did impressions all through



By Susan Gilbert

MIMIC JIM MORRIS AND HIS FAVORITE TARGET

his school years.

The Reagan impression was gnawing away inside him, and giving it form was "like an exorcism." Now he finds that a few seconds after introducing the President in his act, people react to the prestige of the office as well as his on-target impression. "I always play to the crowd," said Morris. "At the Other Cafe, I have a lot more latitude because it's a politically-aware crowd. If I played in a small town where the only link with Ronald Reagan was TV, I'd have to play him as they see him and make him charming with no political overtones, or only subtle ones. I never put the President down to the extent he can't get up and dust himself off."

SF Chronicle • October 18, 1981



# NIGHT LIFE

## Rick and Ruby Have Gone Hollywood

By Clark Peterson

**“WHEN YOU HAVE a family,”** said Ruby of the musical comedy team Rick and Ruby — a woman the late Chronicle columnist John L. Wasserman once described as “plainly deranged” — “you want a house, a yard, a patio. I’ve realized I really mean business. I’ve actually sat down at a typewriter for the first time in four years. Before, I wanted success but I was horsing around. Now it’s on my head to either do it or get a real job.”

If Ruby is sounding a bit more mature these days, it’s the result of more than simply starting a family. Ruby (her real name is Monica Ganas; she is married to Scott Ganas) and Rick (Brian Seff) have moved to Los Angeles in a quest for fame and fortune among the glitter and glamour of Hollywood.

The group, which saw no reason to remain in the Bay Area working the same night clubs week after week, is best known for its parody versions of a “Last Prom,” television’s “Gong Show” and “Hollywood Squares,” and Ruby’s Memorex-like impressions of pop music’s Tina Turner and the late Janis Joplin.

Before Ruby gave birth to Erin Louise on April 30, she, Rick and their pianist, Raoul (Josh Brody), taped an appearance on ABC-TV’s “Mork and Mindy.” Her pregnancy was perfect for the show’s plot. The script called for her to go into labor while performing and for Mork (Robin Williams) to jump onstage and replace her as singer.

---

*The Rick and Ruby Show (with Raoul) plays Friday at the Boarding House, 901 Columbus Street, San Francisco.*



RUBY (MONICA GANAS) AND RICK (BRIAN SEFF)

# Deranged Improv: Satirists of News

By Clark Peterson

**J**IM CRANNA used to tear out bizarre newspaper clippings and put them in a big box. But when the box got too stuffed, he quit. "The Chronicle must have a guy whose only job is to find weird stuff," said Cranna, pausing between forkfuls of toast and eggs at Curley's Cafe in North Beach.

Cranna was referring to such strange-but-true items as the three sisters who stripped down to their shoes, smeared mustard on their naked bodies as a salve against sin, and hijacked a United Parcel Service truck because "we were trying to find God." Or the story about the man who killed his mother-in-law with a hatchet because he mistook her for a raccoon.

The last straw came when he was watching a TV news segment on a mass murder. "They were getting desperate," he said incredulously. "They interviewed his TAILOR! People had theories on why CLOTHING makes you kill!"

Clorox, Safeway, etc.), Nancy Garrett-Nash, Michael O'Brien, Chris Pray (who was with Cranna in the Pitschel Players and Committee) and Kelvin Yee. Every Wednesday at the Open Theater at 441 Clement Street, the Deranged group improvises from audience suggestions. Cranna doesn't like to rehearse or perform more than once per week because it saps the group's energy. Also, he sees the group as more of a hobby than a job since he already makes a living from radio ads (Fotomat, Marriott's Great America, McDonald's . . .), film acting ("The Sunshine Boys," "Who'll Stop the Rain," "Time After Time" . . .) and TV writing (three Flip Wilson shows, one Paul Lynde show and two "Laverne and Shirley" shows).

Cranna also teaches an improvisational acting workshop every Saturday for about 15 students, including Deranged members Delk, O'Brien and Bolt. "There's a lot of people very interested in improv who have been in S.F. since the Committee and have day jobs," he said. "The whole idea of improv is that if



By Eric Luse

## JIM CRANNA OF THE DERANGED: THE ULTIMATE RECYCLING

Cranna came to the conclusion that there was simply too much time for news—such as all-news cable stations and KRON's commute-time expansion to 90 minutes—and not enough hard stories. So last March he founded the National Theater of the Deranged, an eight-member troupe of news satirists who take the day's headlines and run them through a sort of lampooning Veg-O-Matic.

Cranna, a member of the Committee from 1968 until the famous San Francisco comedy group went belly-up in 1974, gathered together Diane Amos, Geoffrey Bolt, Denny Delk (the voice on ads for

something is going wrong, you can change. If you're doing Macbeth and the audience hates it, you can't stop and sing and dance and tell jokes. A stand-up comedian will get his 20 minutes down and, if by minute 10 it's not working, he can't change the next 10.

"In improv, most of the audiences don't come to watch it fail or succeed. They come to watch the process, to see it happen and to become involved. You can do stuff you've done before but you don't let them know it. You pretend you're making it up so you act sloppy. It's the ultimate recycling."

Cranna teaches his students to be themselves and discover what makes them unique. "When Robin Williams hit big," he said, "there were so many clones

## Deranged/Continued

who weren't him, so it didn't work. The point is to do who you are."

Cranna's father wanted him to be a welder but his high school aptitude tests showed he should be a lawyer. Since the only lawyer he knew of was Perry Mason, he liked the idea. "I thought that once a week you go into a courtroom and point at the murderer and say, 'You did it,'" said Cranna. "So they told me to take speech and dramatics. I couldn't do speech—talking in front of a group—but I loved dramatics. The first time I went onstage and got a laugh, I was hooked."

Eventually, Cranna heard about the Committee and moved from his native Portland in 1967 to join up. He saw them perform, decided "it was magic," and took one of their workshops before being hired as stage manager.

Now 38, Cranna is regurgitating what he learned with such famous Committee alumni as Mimi Farina, Howard Hesseman, Carl Gottlieb and Garry Goodrow. He likes spoofing the news because it's a change of pace from the other improv groups in town and because he believes the weirdest stuff is only as far away as your corner newsstand. Who could have made up the exhumation of Lee Harvey Oswald?

Although Cranna's favorite humor is British goon shows, he doesn't like to perform zany bits he would be tempted to laugh at. He keeps his acting deadpan and intellectual, and doesn't really live up to his troupe's Deranged title (a take-off on the National Theater of the Deaf). After all, when you've got headlines like "Nun, 63, Elopés With Her Sweetheart" and "Bare-Breasted Fencer Scolded," it's hard to be any more deranged than that.

The National Theater of the Deranged appears every Wednesday at 8:30 at the Open Theater, 441 Clement Street.

See Page 29

# NIGHTLIFE

## Dana Carvey Left His Jokes in San Francisco

By Clark Peterson

**D**ANA CARVEY, a San Carlos-bred comedian ("home of the Carnie Camper"), reluctantly moved to Los Angeles a month ago — but he says he left his jokes in San Francisco.

He'll be appearing New Year's Eve at the Other Cafe, and even though he hasn't been gone long, he's happy to be back. "I don't want to let go a feeling I have for this area," said Carvey, explaining his speedy return. "After working here for 3½ years and having a certain name for myself, I did not cherish the thought of moving. I didn't want to be doing five minutes at 1:30 a.m. at the Comedy Store in L.A. and being told, 'Come back in 6 months; you need more work.' But I knew I'd have to work down there if I wanted to be in TV and films."

Already, Carvey has appeared in a pilot — "Alone at Last" — and earlier this month he was on the Marie Osmond show. He's been discussing possible projects with Norman Lear Productions, and he's signed a developmental contract with NBC for one year. Carvey was just one of two comedians who landed such deals

*Dana Carvey will be performing at the Other Cafe, 100 Carl Street, on Wednesday night.*

after an October showcase for five San Francisco comedians in front of several hundred Hollywood media moguls.

Carvey would actually like to move toward acting, less toward comedy, but it hasn't been easy. "I was afraid of acting because it's performing without laughter," says Carvey. In 1977, at age 22, he missed an audition for "Laugh-In." Now, at 25, he says he's got a handle on it. "It's not as scary."

Ever mindful that "all comics need constant reassurance," Carvey plans to continue doing stand-up comedy but his ultimate goal is films. At present, he's being pushed in the direction of TV sit-coms.

His agent, Bob Ayres of Other Productions, is negotiating for film, and Carvey says he wants a quality sit-com. Ayres has brilliantly masterminded the whole thing, he says. "It's not like, 'This is a big shot from San Francisco.' It's just saying, 'We're a little different. We're not total rebels; we just don't want to be fed the same stupid lines.'"

Carvey, who has a handsome face underneath a Dutch-boy mop, won the S.F. Stand-Up Comedy Competi-



DANA CARVEY

tion in 1977 and finished third in 1979. He does impressions, sings (accompanied by guitar) and delivers lines with a matador's panache.

Beginning with entertaining friends at parties and his buddies on the Carmont High School cross-country team in San Carlos, Carvey made his comedy debut at La Salamandre in Berkeley at 21. Told that anyone from the audience could perform, he braced himself with four beers and winged it. The booker was impressed and invited him to open the show two weeks later with such peers as Robin Williams. One night, both he and Williams earned \$1 each.

Carvey continued there for a year, grew discouraged and quit. Four months later, he began anew, this time at the Holy City Zoo. He brought friends from S.F. State along, did well, and made it a weekly event. Through the freedom to stretch out at the Zoo, Carvey improved dramatically. He even earned enough money to live on.

Now Carvey says he's leading "a fairy tale life, doing what I like and getting paid tons of money for it." The fact that he was discovered here and didn't have to compete with "hundreds of comedians running around L.A. trying to get jobs" is gratifying to him.

Carvey says he didn't know he'd be a comic when he moved here from Montana at age 5, but his fourth-grade teacher predicted exactly that. "I was introverted for 12 years after that," he says. "Philosophically, all I want to do is get back to that fourth-grade classroom... Garson Kanin wrote a book that said it takes a long time to be young again. When you're just playing as a child, it's a great feeling. You want to get that sense of play onstage as a comic."



# NIGHT LIFE



By Susan Gilbert

JANE DORNACKER BELIEVES 'IT'S A WOMAN'S FEMININE NATURE TO BE KIND'

## Women Doing Stand-up — No Laughing Matter

By Clark Peterson

ONE REASON more women haven't chosen the field of stand-up comedy may best be illustrated by an experience comedienne Kit Hollerbach had one night. "I was emceeing a show," she said, "and I began by saying, 'Good evening and welcome to the Punch Line,' when a guy yelled out, 'Hey, f--- you: where are your t--s?'"

As recently as five years ago, there weren't more than two or three (known) stand-up comediennes working in the Bay Area. Today there are more than a dozen, hopefully following in the footsteps of such stars as Lily Tomlin and Gilda Radner.

Hollerbach and four other women (Jane Dornacker, Nora Dunn, Susan Healy and Paula Poundstone) demonstrate just how far women stand-up comics have come when they do a benefit for Big Sisters Friday at the Great American Music Hall, along with the all-female improvisation group Femprov. The show marks the first time Bay Area stand-up comediennes have had their own show at such a big venue (500 seats).

With women's inroads into other previously male-dominated occupations over the last few years, it's not surprising that there are more women doing stand-

up today than when Tony DePaul was telling jokes in the mid-70s. DePaul says in those days it was a lonely undertaking ("Who wants to be the only woman out of 20 guys?"), where rowdy lives offered the only opportunity for employment.

Today when Hollerbach and other women onstage are the targets of crude comments, at least there's a good chance they're getting paid a fair wage for their trouble. And the more they do it, the easier it becomes, Jane Dornacker says. "The audiences who were conditioned to seeing men only are living in Miami now."

Nonetheless, even in the Bay Area, the women stand-up comics know that things are different. "Any performer knows the first 30 seconds are critical," said local comedienne Paula Poundstone, "and if you don't get a laugh right away, (the audience doesn't) trust you. For a woman, it's a much shorter period of time. It has a lot to do with tone of voice: tiny voices or grating voices."

If trust and control aren't established quickly, Poundstone and others find they may be in for a long night of heckling or, at best, just inattention. Some comediennes, like Carrie Stone, have developed the arsenal of putdown lines to keep an audience in shape, but other women find it more difficult.

Jane Dornacker believes "it's a woman's feminine nature to be kind," which seems to run counter to the toughness and aggressiveness needed to survive as a

stand-up — male or female. Certain audiences can take kindness for weakness and test how far they can take it.

Hollerbach says there are even some situations where women in the audience won't support their own gender. When women are in a group situation they are her biggest fans, she says, but a few of them, in a dating situation, will actually feel a rivalry. "If the performer is not so good-looking," says Hollerbach, "the woman is less threatened."

In the six annual San Francisco Stand-up Competitions, which began in 1976, only one woman has ever made the finals — 1979 winner Marsha Warfield — and she was a Los Angeles professional. Carrie Snow is the only other woman who ever got as far as the semifinals (in 1980 and 1981). There have never been more than three women competing any year, although there are 40 slots and the producers wish more women could qualify.

Most of the Bay Area's stand-up comediennes have been performing for less than two years, so that's at least one reason why they haven't placed better in the competition. "Women are not dealt a particularly bad hand in the competition," said Paula Poundstone. "Three women getting in is actually a strong percentage. I can't think of ten women who should be in."

Susan Healy, a 1981 entrant, says that there's no reason women shouldn't do better in the future because "comedy is a fairer profession for a woman than some others and there's no physical limitations." She added that female comics are appealing to a wider group these days by foregoing the traditional women's humor, as seen in the routines of Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers.



PAULA POUNDSTONE: FIRST 30 SECONDS CRITICAL

None of the five comediennes appearing at the Great American Music Hall, for instance, does jokes about husbands or breasts, preferring instead to keep their material almost unisexual. "There is a new trend in stand-up among women today," said Poundstone. "Any complaining in our act is universal and doesn't focus on the hardships of being a woman. No one around here puts down men."

Hollerbach does do a parody of how some men talk. "I say, 'I didn't come here to tell jokes,'" she says. "I came here to get laid. It's funny to hear a woman say that, but for a guy it's second nature."

While it appears that women are still the vast minority in stand-up comedy, the number should rise as audiences grow to accept them equally with men. Most of the five women here don't believe it's more difficult to succeed. As Jane Dornacker says, "I don't know if it would be any different if I were a man. Is it harder to be a person than an act? Who knows, because you get only one shot in life."



KIT HOLLERBACH: SOMETIMES EVEN WOMEN WILL TURN ON COMEDIENNES

Datebook, Sunday, March 28, 1982

S.F. Sunday Examiner & Chronicle