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MAKING IT IN THE FUNNY BUSINESS

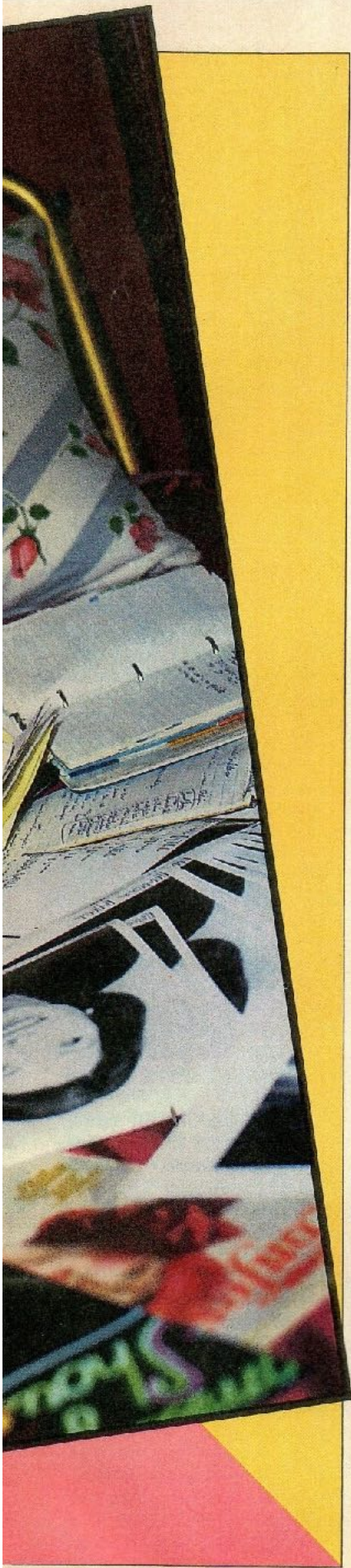
Linda Hill on the
San Francisco Laugh Track

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PHAROAH SANDERS AND
THE SACRAMENT OF JAZZ

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GETTING ORIENTED
AT A CHINESE MARKET







MAKING IT IN THE *f*UNNY BUSINESS

*Comic Linda Hill writes, mugs, phones,
flies and waits—all for a laugh.
This is a tale from tryout city.*

BY DAVID ARMSTRONG

Linda Hill is dressed to kill. She's onstage in a red cowgirl dress, red cowgirl boots on her feet. Her hair is red, she's wearing red lipstick, her nails are painted—yep—red. Her eyes are blue. At first glance, Hill, a San Francisco comedian, looks kind of . . . retro. But, no. Her stage presence is too tongue-in-cheek for her to be anything other than a deliberately cartoonish parody of an excessive country-western star, filtered through an arch, late '80s sensibility. Picture Lucy Ricardo leaving Ricky to join an all-woman cowpunk band South of Market and you've got the idea.

In Hill's hand is a paperback Harlequin romance novel entitled *The Ways of Love*. Pictured on the cover is a man, looking darkly handsome, mysterious; a woman, blond and beautiful, of course; and, inexplicably, a sheep. Hill often reads from the book's unintentionally funny prose in her stand-up comedy act. She proceeds to do so again tonight.

"In romance novels, the lovers have pet names for each other," Hill says, with the air of an amused instructor, "and this book is no exception. He calls her 'Cuddles.' Isn't that sweet? He calls her Cuddles throughout the entire book, until the moment of passion, when he calls her this"—Hill pauses, contorts her face comically—"Yes, devil doll, yes! Let's try it all together." Hill leads the nightclub audience, already dissolving into laughter, in a repetition of the line: "'Yes, devil doll, yes!'" and exits to applause.

She makes it look so easy. You just stand up there with a book in your hand—it costs maybe \$1.95—read a few sentences, people clap and you leave with the sound of approval in your ears. Who hasn't had the fantasy of slaying an audience with wit night after night? And maybe—if the fantasy is rich enough—joining former San Francisco funnypersons Robin Williams, Whoopi Goldberg, Bob Goldthwait and Dana Carvey, the latest *Saturday Night Live* wunderkind, in the big leagues. Your friends have always told you you're

a scream at parties. Maybe you could do it—Walter Mitty meets Mork from Ork. It looks easy enough.

It's not, of course, as the hundred or so Bay Area entertainers who make at least part of their living by performing comedy could tell you. One of them is the selfsame Linda Hill, who has been a full-time comedian for four-and-a-half years and is only now beginning to get recognition for her talent, vision and considerable drive.

Hill's work, which incorporates a wide range of original characters and satirizes ultrafeminine stereotypes, is far from the average comedy fare. But the relatively low pay (a typical opening act may get \$150 for emceeding and performing four short shows in Bay Area comedy nightclubs), long, odd hours, the almost surreal mingling of art and life and the professional adaptability she must cultivate are broadly representative of a working comic's life.

Hill's gifts as a stand-up comedian and comic actress have prompted show-business pros to compare her to Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett and Lily Tomlin in the early stages of their careers. For now, though, joining such exalted company is a distant dream. Hill's life is one of late-night club gigs, followed by early-morning auditions for roles in industrial films and red-eye flights to Los Angeles to try out for potentially lucrative roles in network television commercials.

"You get one national ad and you can do your act for many months," says Hill, who emigrated to San Francisco eight years ago from her native Kansas.

At the moment, Hill—prolific and energetic, even offstage when she's without the adrenaline rush of an audience's laughter—is working on three screenplays; guesting on comedy promoter Alex Bennett's local radio and TV shows; acting

David Armstrong is the comedy critic for the San Francisco Examiner.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARC GELLER

DESPITE LOW PAY AND A LACK OF COMMERCIAL WORK, SAN FRANCISCO HAS ITS ADVANTAGES FOR A DEVELOPING COMIC LIKE HILL. AUDIENCES KNOW COMEDY, SO THEIR RESPONSE IS A USEFUL GAUGE OF A COMEDIC PILGRIM'S PROGRESS.

in comedy sketches in videos, some of which she also wrote; doing her stand-up act one or two weekends a month; and readying "A Woman Possessed," her one-woman show, for a planned San Francisco run in August. After that, she hopes to take the show to Los Angeles, and, if all goes well, off-Broadway in New York, where she'll take a shot at the big time.

Hill's versatility in stand-up and commercial acting comes to artistic flower in "A Woman Possessed," in which she portrays 22 characters drawn from her girlhood in small-town Kansas and grown-up life in big-city California. There is, for example, Negateeva, an austere "performance poet" based on the arty scenes that Hill absorbed in her forays into SoMa, and Mrs. Cynthia Brewster, modeled on a matron Hill met when she was hired to provide comedic patter for the indifferent guests at a posh private party in Pacific Heights.

Then there are her country characters, more immediately endearing and intensely visual: sweet *Hillbilly Hayride* hostess Aunt Nellie, who wears a gone-dancin' frock and a ludicrous wig that most closely resembles the

bearskin hats on the sentries at Buckingham Palace; and the not-entirely-sweet lounge singer Miss Angel Drake, who pours herself into a slinky outfit and applies enough makeup to give Tammy Faye Bakker con-niption fits.

"A Woman Possessed" is, as Hill puts it, "where my heart is." But mounting the show onstage is still months off. Today, there are phone calls to make and return, auditions to attend—business, in short, to take care of.

Linda Hill's day begins with an early morning call for actors at a casting office on Fillmore Street. "I saw every character actor in town," says Hill, reconstructing her first audition of a long day.

The commercial is for the Denny's chain of restaurants. The director explains the scenario: There is a couple in bed, dreaming, perhaps, of fried eggs, coffee, toast, a little bacon on the side. On cue, the wife will nudge the husband, who will awake abruptly, delighted with the prospect of breaking his fast at Denny's.

One couple, apparently cued-in in ad-

vance, shows up at the casting call wearing matching blue flannel pajamas with tiny teddy bears on the breast pockets. This makes some of the actors at the audition uneasy; will it give the resourceful couple an edge?

Hill waits her turn. When her name is called, she smiles at the actor with whom she will do the scene—"trying to establish some chemistry," as she explains later. She has never met him before.

Hill and the other actor sit in adjoining, reclining lawn chairs, meant to simulate a bed. Hill intertwines her legs with his, as both feign sleep. On cue, Hill taps her "husband," who promptly awakens with a smile.

The director instructs them to wake up three more times, fast, varying the action each time. "OK, don't look at the camera this time," he advises the actor. Three scenes later, the audition is over. "OK, thank you," says the director.

If Hill gets a callback, she'll return to the casting office the following week for more testing, recorded on videotape. If that goes well, she'll be cast in the commercial, which will be shown in selected test markets in the Midwest. Even that success wouldn't guarantee Hill work in a national TV commercial, however.

"The national commercial could be recast and shot in LA," Hill says. "Most of them are shot down there. But producers are discovering that there's a big talent pool of versatile actors and comedians up here. And with San Francisco Studios [the big film and TV production facility on Seventh Street], there's more work in San Francisco. You can do all right here."

All right, but not great. In that regard, working in commercials is a lot like the rest of the TV and movie business, which is headquartered in Los Angeles. Theater is still centered in New York.

And top-dollar comedy is split between the two. New York has *Saturday Night Live* and *Late Night with David Letterman*, plus several important comedy clubs. Los Angeles also has clubs, essentially try-out rooms for TV sit-coms and the movies, to which most comedians, including Hill, aspire.

Although she doesn't say so directly, if Hill's one-woman show takes off, and start-time offers come her way, she may bid farewell to San Francisco. It's happened before, most notably for Whoopi Goldberg, who took her act to New York and was seen by Mike Nichols, who directed her in a one-woman show. In surprisingly short or-

SHOWCASING HERSELF

Hill is her own manager: Taking care of business means phone work, auditions, mailings of publicity photos and resumes.



der, Goldberg became a star of stage, screen and TV.

Meanwhile, San Francisco has its advantages, particularly for an adventurous, developing comedian like Hill. San Francisco audiences know comedy, so their response is a useful gauge of a comedic pilgrim's progress. And, because the city is known for its affection for the unconventional, offbeat comics are encouraged to try new things here. Robin Williams, after all, with his free-association improvisations, is hardly a conventional comic; neither is Whoopi Goldberg, with her in-your-face sass, or Bob Goldthwait, with his high-decibel dementia. And the success this past season of Dana Carvey's wonderfully sanctimonious Church Lady on *Saturday Night Live* further entrenched the reputation that San Francisco has as a spawning ground for comics who do characters.

Today, the main character Hill is trying to showcase is herself. The Denny's audition behind her, she has two more business appointments before cutting loose in a free-wheeling, improvisational comedy show that night.

First, she auditions for a radio commercial. Hill's voice is something of a cross between a Betty Boop squeak and a Debra Winger rasp, with a distinctive, appealing catch that's all her own. Together with her ability to mimic accents, it gets her a good deal of radio voice work.

Later, she meets with officials at KQED. She's been chosen to create a character for a station promotional campaign and is being primed with statistics, so she can portray the typical KQED subscriber.

Hopping a cab to Lipps, a South of Market basement comedy room on Ninth Street, Hill arrives just past the midpoint of the National Theatre of the Deranged's regular Friday night show. Hill is a former member of the troupe; tonight she's guesting. She steps out of her dressy shoes and slips backstage to join the ensemble in making spontaneous satire. In her funniest routine, Hill, portraying the Virgin Mary, climbs on a chair, her head covered with a scarf, her palms turned heavenward, and improvises a hilariously bawdy line that can't be reported in what journalists are still pleased to call a family magazine.

After the show, Hill strolls to the back of the small room, is paid for the night's work in cash and accepts how-ya-doin's and gosh-you're-greats from fans. Already, the room, which becomes a new wave dance club after the comedy show, is aching loud, but members of the Deranged's audience shout their greetings over the thump-thump of the music.

Although few in the general public know Hill's work, those who do—in Duke Ellington's elegant phrase—love her madly. She has a guileless, small-town charm that's still intact after eight years in Babylon, and a

WOONG ADVERTISERS

Hill hopes a soft-drink firm will go for a character she's created. "One national ad and you can do your art for months."



contagious sense of fun in performance that invites intimacy and loyalty.

This working day done, Hill leaves Lipps with her friend Diane Amos, a regular member of the Deranged. Hill has no scheduled stand-up gig tonight, partly because she has decided to cut back her evening commitments to hone "A Woman Possessed," but also for a less pleasant reason: The very quality that makes Hill special—her increasingly ambitious and sophisticated gallery of comic characters—makes her hard to sell to comedy club audiences convulsed by rapid-fire jokes about genitalia, toilet-training, Chinese drivers, doddering old people and drugs. Rather than perform self-mutilating surgery on her act, Hill has chosen to sit in with her old mates while she digs deeper into the storytelling tradition of her Kansas upbringing and her sources in pop culture.

ook," says Hill, raising the blinds on her dining room window, which overlooks half a dozen other apartments arranged around a courtyard: "Rear Window."

The reference to Hitchcock's film noir classic seems fitting, for Hill's apartment is a shrine of sorts to American pop and pulp culture. Vintage issues of *Ladies Home Journal*, *Mademoiselle* and other magazines—many stored in clear plastic bags, all carefully organized and stacked—fill one closet. Gothic novels and romance comics with titles like *Mr. Anthony's Love Clinic*

and *Girlie, Beware!* line a bookshelf.

In another corner, Hill keeps copies of things she's written—everything she's written, actually, and Hill is a prolific author. She pulls out a three-ring binder and flips it open. Inside, in her neat, clear handwriting, are biographies of her characters: what they wear, what they feel, where they're from, their hopes for the future. Also pasted into the book are images, aphorisms and other material that helps Hill focus her mental pictures of the characters, along with fascinating flotsam from the American past, such as vintage ads for Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, a popular patent medicine for treating "female complaints," and Thomas Edison's original phonograph (price: one dollar).

Hill writes and rehearses in her spacious Sacramento Street apartment and conducts all her business affairs there. She has represented herself since last December, when she and her manager ended a three-year personal and professional relationship. Between setting up her own bookings, Hill produces a newsletter about her doings for a mailing list of 800 fans.

Offstage, Hill is slender and smaller than she looks in performance. Without her elaborate makeup and costuming, she is scrubbed and attractive, with her red hair, amused blue eyes and alabaster skin that, she jokes, makes her "the whitest woman in the world." Hill is folksy and friendly, showing much of the storytelling flair that she exhibits on-

SATIRIZING STEREOTYPES

One of Hill's characters, Angel Drake, is a lounge singer with enough makeup to give Tammy Faye Bakker connoisseur fits.



stage. She takes hold of a subject, skips out the back door with it, takes it around the corner and down to the market, and comes back with bread and milk, snatches of overheard conversations, the weather report and change.

Hill hails from a community of storytellers and grassroots entertainers. She grew up in a four-room house with no indoor plumbing or telephone, 30 miles outside Topeka. By far the youngest of the family's four children, she was the only child her age in the vicinity. (Hill doesn't discuss her age for publication, for fear, she says, of being pigeonholed.)

"I had an active fantasy life," she recalls. "I built a town out of the pile of aluminium we kept in the backyard, by the outhouse. My dad and I had matching overalls. We'd go to the dump, and he'd see something he wanted, and he'd say, 'Linda, go get that thing, will you?' It was fun. I never realized we were poor. I had everything I needed."

On Saturdays, the Hills, like many rural families, went into town to take care of business and do a little socializing. "Everybody had his own style of storytelling," Hill recalls. "I think I saw a lot of performers, in their way."

When Linda was thirteen, the Hills moved to Abilene, the birthplace of Dwight David Eisenhower. The next year, she went to work at the White House Hotel and Restaurant as a part-time waitress, staying on until she was nineteen, pouring coffee and

drinking in conversation. Not too surprisingly, a big portion of "A Woman Possessed" revolves around the lives of waitresses in a Midwestern truck stop, gabbing with each other and their customers.

"I still have a following of coffee drinkers," Hill says. "When I was back in Kansas last month, I had a 25-minute conversation with a guy there about the merits of sausage gravy versus bacon gravy." An old gent very much like that guy appears in Hill's one-woman show. One of her several male characters, he sits straight-backed, with his legs splayed stiffly apart, patting his belly and loudly sipping hot coffee, as he makes gently disparaging remarks about the nuts out in California.

As a teenager, Hill pored over Louisa May Alcott's biography and "devoured Dorothy Parker." She wrote an unfinished novel at twelve (which she still has, complete with her teacher's corrections in red ink), acted in school plays and sang country music at town dances. One of her most popular characters, Aunt Nellie, comes from Hill's memories of those dances, and from watching Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner on TV. Today, Hill is full-throated and relaxed as the singing Aunt Nellie in front of a country combo.

Hill earned a partial scholarship in drama to Kansas State, but her father believed college was no place for a woman. "He thought that the only thing gals went to college for was to get their MRS." So she

didn't go. "I tried to fit into expectations for a girl from Abilene, Kansas."

But Hill was restless. She joined the four-person staff of the *Abilene Reflector-Chronicle*, where she served as society editor, writing about covered-dish church suppers and running photographs of readers' pets and odd-shaped vegetables.

Hill has held on to practically everything her readers sent in. "Listen to this." She pulls out a letter in a carefully scripted hand from a long-ago correspondent. It is an inspirational poem that Hill follows to the concluding verse and reads aloud in the Kansas twang she has largely lost in her own speech: "Be a jar of preserves for the Lord, instead of a sour pickle for the devil." Hill guffaws in delight. "You can't make up this stuff, it's too wonderful."

After a while, journalism proved less than inspiring. Hill was itching to get back to performing, anyway—and wanted to give San Francisco a try. Her best friend from the seventh grade, now a sculptor, had moved here.

"You know those scenic outlook signs on highways? In Dodge City [where she was working by then], the sign overlooks 9,000 head of cattle. Here, people go to the ocean to think, right? I needed to go look at the cows." She drove out there, at four a.m. and thought it over.

Hill arrived in San Francisco in January 1979 and found a job as a receptionist at a real estate firm. Once, she fielded a wrong number and talked the caller into selling her home. A flabbergasted salesman took her to lunch, where she saw men with manicures and \$50 haircuts talking about getting ready for the opening of the opera season. This was most assuredly not Kansas.

Hill signed up for classes in improvisational comedy, found she was good at it and joined Spaghetti Jam, one of the city's premier improv ensembles. Then she joined another group, and another. Before long, Hill was working with five different improv groups, making a few dollars a night with each, while holding down a daytime job.

In 1982, she decided to try stand-up comedy, where she could succeed or fail on her own. "This is going to sound so pretentious to every comedian who reads this, but what I really care about is the work. I wanted to grow. I decided to do five minutes somewhere. I thought maybe I could tell stories like I do to my friends, that make them laugh."

On May 1 of that year, after performing in a group improv show, Hill was startled to hear herself called to the stage at Cobb's Comedy Pub by fellow performers who knew she was thinking of trying stand-up. She had planned to debut her first five-minute set the next night at the Other Cafe. Hill confesses to being knock-kneed, but she went on. "I got

HILL'S EMPHASIS ON CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT HAS HURT HER ON THE STAND-UP CIRCUIT. ONE CLUB OWNER TOLD HILL, "IT'S TO YOUR CREDIT THAT PEOPLE ARE LISTENING TO YOU, BUT THEY WON'T INTERRUPT YOU TO BUY DRINKS."

an encore, but I didn't have any more material." She took a relieved bow.

"I was so freaked-out about it, I didn't do it again for four months," Hill recalls. Her subsequent forays into stand-up were infrequent and unpaid. "I never had a bad set, but I thought people would compare it unfavorably with my improv work."

Hill decided to plunge into comedy full-time when she was fired from her last daytime job, staked by a generous three months of severance pay. "It was good for me," Hill says now of her dismissal. "I probably wouldn't have had the courage to give up the steady income."

Hill performed with increasing frequency at the Holy City Zoo—the cramped, famed San Francisco comedy club where Robin Williams once tended bar—encouraged by manager Pat Higgins, who took her to breakfast after her first, promising open-mike appearance. Even then, Hill showed some of the spunk and ambition that now marks her career. She tried out for the 1982 San Francisco International Stand-Up Comedy Competition, but washed out in the auditions.

But Hill's perseverance, and the experience she gained from her appearances at open-mike nights around town, finally paid off. On February 27, 1983—she still keeps a clipping of the calendar listing—Hill landed her first paid booking, at the Zoo.

That summer, she performed in the Comedy Competition, a demanding, month-long joke-a-thon that confers valuable exposure, experience and cash prizes to the top finalists. One of only two women in the competition that year, Hill finished a respectable sixteenth in a field of 40. But she made only \$50 after working every night for a week and she found herself reeling under the intense pressure.

But Hill kept at it, learning from friends and contemporaries such as Carvey, Jeremy Kramer and Jack Gallagher. She also went into the past for inspiration, back to Ruth Draper, a monologist popular in the 1920s; Angna Enters, a mime, character actress and dancer; and Lord Buckley, a white monologist whose jazzy argot and spontaneous riffing was inspired by black musicians.

Remembering Buckley, Hill's eyes gleam, and she takes on his roiling delivery: "Hey, *bay-bee*, let's go back to my pad, suck up a little juice, hear a little wax, and go a little *cray-zzy*."

Possessed by Buckley, Draper and Enters, Hill's own characters became more and more vital to her stand-up act. On occasion,

Hill has performed entire shows as her characters. Aunt Nellie and Angel Drake each hosted their own cabaret revues last year. Before that, Hill appeared in a parody of early '60s girl groups, the Dynelles. With local actresses Nancy Endy and Nora Dunn (now also of *Saturday Night Live*), Hill put on a bouffant wig and white lipstick and did ironic renditions of Carole King's hopelessly submissive song "He Hit Me (and It Felt Like a Kiss)."

But Hill's emphasis on character development didn't do much to develop her commercial appeal on the stand-up circuit, and still doesn't. Of the city's four major comedy clubs, only the Other Cafe has featured Hill regularly since she turned pro, and the growing number of suburban clubs express little interest. One suburban club owner, whom Hill doesn't name for publication, bluntly told her her act just didn't have enough LPMs—nightclub-ese for "laughs per minute." Another confided to her, according to Hill: "Linda, it's to your credit that people are listening to you, but people won't interrupt you to buy drinks."

Some local comedy professionals (not the

ones Hill quoted above) feel that nightclub aesthetics—at least as much as economics—make character comedians hard for club audiences to accept.

Says Bob Fisher, who manages comedians and co-owns the Holy City Zoo, "It's easier to sell one character than half a dozen. What Linda does requires an audience to start liking her all over again, every time she changes character." Fisher, who has hired Hill in the past and says he expects to do so again, adds that "she has a very obvious acting talent" and predicts her future will be in theater, films and TV.

Anne Fox, who booked Hill a few years back in the comedy room at Caesar's Tahoe, agrees, observing that as a stand-up act Hill is "avant-garde. If her audience is too suburban, they're not going to get her at all. She's a very urban stylist."

Hill, Fox adds, impressed George Carlin, who caught her act in Tahoe. "She's a comedian's comedian." But her audiences were more attentive than enthusiastic. "Linda didn't bomb. She doesn't bomb, because people like her." But Hill hasn't played Caesar's Tahoe again, either.

TAKING ON THE TRENDIES

Negateeva is a performance poet with a bad attitude, based on Hill's forays into arty clubs South of Market.



FACING THE AUDIENCE

Hill is concentrating on her one-woman show now, but still does stand-up two weekends a month to stay sharp.



It's open-mike night at the Baybrick Inn, and Hill is holding forth as emcee and featured performer. The Baybrick is located on a now-trendy stretch of Folsom Street. It is a well-appointed, predominantly lesbian and gay club, where Hill is one of the few straight comics to perform regularly. She likes the Baybrick; she finds its audiences receptive to new and unconventional material.

Hill is in rare form. She sings a pretend-drunk rendition of "The Old Rugged Cross," impersonates a deranged Muni rider who informs his startled fellow passengers that he has "a hamster on a wheel in my head," and warms up the standing-room-only crowd by jokingly reminding patrons of the difference between live performance and TV.

Improvising a tune, Hill engages in some lighthearted didacticism. "The difference between live performance," she sings, "between video and live performance, is that you can par-ti-ci-pate. Hey, everybody," she sings, belting it out a la Sophie Tucker, "it's a live performance!"

Ducking backstage before the open-mike performers, most of them amateurs, go on, Hill is everybody's den mother. She calms down people who need calming down, psychs up people who need a lift. One fellow, who has never performed comedy before and is deathly afraid, has drifted off. Hill tracks him down, compliments him on his nice sweater and assures him:

"You're going to kill, and it's going to be

in your blood. You'll be back—you'll be back headlining, and we'll all be opening for you and we'll hate you." Looking dubious but somewhat fortified, the guy does his five minutes, is not bad at all, and walks off, relieved.

Hill is onstage maybe ten more times, introducing the aspiring comics and trying out new bits. She is not often visibly angry—she's that rarity, a comedian who isn't alienated—but she stops kidding at one point to lace into *Moonlighting* for linking sex and violence when Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd slapped each other around and made love. It's her reprise of the Dynelles' take on "He Hit Me," but less playful this time.

Then Hill is funny again. She gently satirizes the hard-core feminists in the audience, forming a triangle with her hands, which she introduces with mock-solemnity as "the sign of the womb." She repeats the bit several times during the evening and gets a laugh every time.

Hill gets to sleep that night at three a.m. Two hours later, she awakes to catch the airport shuttle for a flight to LA. There, she entertains at a press luncheon for Orangina, a French orange drink that's about to be heavily promoted in the United States. Hill makes a pitch of her own: She proposes to create a character especially for Orangina that could be featured in the ad campaign.

While Hill is wooing the soft-drink people, her friend and fellow comedian Diane Amos is in LA auditioning for a TV show.

Last time, Amos got on *Super Password* and won \$18,000. "And a La-Z-Boy recliner," Hill adds with a grin. With such enterprise are personal and artistic expenses met.

Last January, Hill went into her own pocket to finance the six-day run of "A Woman Possessed." She rented Crown Hall, an old, wooden Portuguese fishermen's hall in the town of Mendocino, hired a set designer and roughed out her advertising posters herself.

"A Woman Possessed," as seen on a video made of the show, is a far-reaching and risk-taking attempt to pull together the disparate elements in Hill's creative life: her country and city characters, pop culture figures from the past and present and the deepening intertwining of laughter and sorrow in her work.

While clearly still in rough working form, the show has moments of power. Hill doesn't always go for laughs, and when she does, they arise from the characters' predicaments, rather than being grafted onto the action. They're "real-life funny stories, not jokes," as Hill puts it.

While Hill's vision is not as dark as the visions of most solo performance artists riding the theatrical circuit, she plumbs moments of darkness. One of the show's 22 characters is a young man dying of AIDS, who says of his mortal crisis that the worst thing about it is that his well-meaning friends won't joke around with him anymore. He wants to laugh in the time he has left.

In another quietly moving scene, an elderly but still-salty woman confronts her partial paralysis. At such moments, Hill's work is funny, sad and wise, limned with affection for her characters and insights into their strengths and limits.

The last night of "A Woman Possessed" sold out the modest-sized house in Mendocino. Other Cafe partner Chip Romer, who was in the audience that night, plans to produce the show in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York, possibly with an outside director.

Long Hill's biggest booster in the Bay Area comedy scene, Romer says, "She really makes me laugh hard. As time passes, I'm more and more entertained by comedians who also do characters. Linda is a storehouse of characters. She's not at the level of Lily Tomlin yet, but I believe in time she will be."

The Holy City Zoo's Bob Fisher adds, "Unlike a lot of comedic actresses [who have writers], Linda thinks that stuff up herself. That's Linda's brain up there working, it's not somebody else's."

Meanwhile, the object of their attention—Linda Hill, professional silly girl—has some workaday but welcome business to take care of before she can think about joining Lily and Robin and Whoopi on the national stage. She got the national commercial for Denny's. □