

## S P O T L I G H T

### Under one roof with three comics

**T**here are so many comics packed into San Francisco that you sometimes find them living together, like comedy cubs crowded together in dens.

"There's always a lot going on. Always a lot of laughter," said Jeannene Hansen, 31, who presides over a side-splitting household of comedians in a walk-up flat overlooking the BART station in the Mission District.

Her fellow rent-paying residents are New Jersey-born Jon Ross, 24, and Warren Thomas, 25, a muscular former wide receiver for the University of Idaho who grew up in the notorious Pink Palace housing project here.

Hansen, who last week won a comedy award from the San Francisco Council on Entertainment, arrived here eight years ago from Nebraska. "I came out here mainly because I would do almost anything not to be in Nebraska," she said.

Life is relaxed in the Hansen-Ross-Thomas household, except for the standing regulation that the door to Thomas' bedroom must never be opened lest people think a small explosive charge had been detonated, scattering belongings in every direction.

Comedy routines and lines are practiced, mugging is commonplace

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BY JERRY TELFER

The madhouse life: Jon Ross, Jeannene Hansen, Warren Thomas

## FUNNY HOUSEMATES

### Three under one roof

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and solemnity generally frowned upon.

When Hansen began to theorize to a visitor recently that sexism was at the bottom of the paucity of female comics, Thomas interrupted her: "Aw, come on, broad. Go fix me some roast beef," he barked.

Comedy pays the rent for Hansen, and the photography she does out of a studio in the apartment helps put groceries on the table. Sometimes the housemates find one or another on the same comedy bill.

Ross and Thomas became friends when Ross was a bartender at a black disco in the East Bay.

Ross was a cheerleader at the University of Virginia who majored in physics before graduating and moving here in 1981 to take a fling at comedy.

"In college I performed before 30,000 people, and it was electrifying. People thought I was funny and I was." Ross did odd jobs, including a stint as a substitute teacher on the Penin-

sula, and accepted handouts from home before getting steady comedy work.

"The comedy scene is more developed here than anywhere else in the country," he says.

"But if you have any kind of goals, this is not the place to end up." A cable television outfit recently named him the funniest man in California, a source of some embarrassment for Ross.

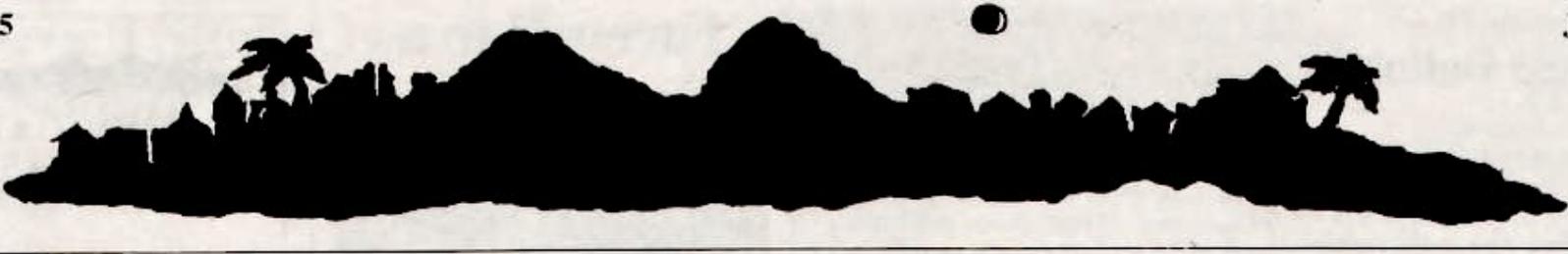
"I just wish the title wasn't called that," he said. "As long as people understand..."

Ross works 15 to 20 dates a month, driving his 1979 Toyota as far as Chico and Grass Valley for club dates. "It's got 83,000 miles on it," he said.

Thomas debuted three years ago at the now-defunct Holy City Zoo. "I work now as much as I want to," he said. "But comedy is like my waiter job. I want to act."

There are problems in a household where nobody takes himself seriously. "It's kind of a bummer when it time to pay the rent," Hansen said.

JERRY CARROLL



# THE NOE VALLEY VOICE

## Three Funny Folks Share Comedy Career and Rent

By Jeff Kaliss

How many stand-up comics does it take to run a household? Three, in the case of a spacious apartment above 24th Street near Mission.

"There's a real scrambling for who's funniest," says Jeannene Hansen, who found the place 10 years ago. "It seems like we live in a sitcom," adds roommate Jon Ross.

"Jeannene's definitely the head of the household," explains Warren Thomas, the newest resident. "Jon's the fix-it-man, and I'm the resident guy to leave dirty dishes. I take pride in my role."

All three also take pride in the fact that their comedy careers are taking off. They all perform extensively in the Bay Area, sometimes on the same bill: last month Hansen and Thomas appeared at the Rooster T. Feathers club in Sunnyvale, and Ross and Thomas co-headlined at the Other Cafe in the Haight. And they've all been booked across the country and in various radio and TV appearances.

### Beginning Bits

The three have arrived on the comedy stage from widely divergent starting points. Only Thomas was raised in the

Bay Area. Hansen hails from the Midwest, and Ross from the shores of New Jersey, in the shadow of the Big Apple. And comedy was not the intended route for any of them.

Hansen had scored a BFA in photography and a Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Nebraska before she decided to make a "desperation move" to California at age 23. "I just knew," she recalls, "that if I got to be 30 years old living in Nebraska, I'd say, 'You know, all I've really done is watch a lot of TV.'"

So it was a *mitzvah* (a blessing, in Hebrew) when Ross made the acquaintance of a visiting artist who offered him a place to stay in San Francisco. After arriving here, Ross divided his evenings between checking out Bay Area clubs and bartending for bucks.

The third roommate, Bay Area native Warren Thomas, spent his teen years dreaming of becoming a professional athlete. He was "funny all the time," though, even when playing wide receiver on a high school team in Albany.

"One time we got in a huddle at a crucial time during the game," remembers Thomas. "The quarterback looked at me, sweating, time running down on the clock, and said, 'Were you open on that play?' I said, 'deaf-jan, I'm like a 7-11. I'm always open,' and everybody in the huddle cracked up."

Thomas' sports dreams were weakened when he broke his ankle in college, and he ended up studying journalism at San Francisco State. One night he found himself "tryin' to get some cheesecake" at Sill's, an Oakland disco where Ross was employed as a bartender.

The pair collided on the way to the job, and Thomas noticed Ross' "I'm comedy" button and asked about it. Within a couple of weeks they were hitting the comedy clubs together.

Getting Known  
Since Ross had been scoring the scene for a while, he was able to advise his new buddy about how to find open mikes, where new comics can get an audience, just by putting their name on a sign-up list.

"After you watch an open mike," notes Thomas, "you have a tendency to think, I can do that. I'd go to three or four open mikes a night. I'd hit Holy City Zoo, hit the Other Cafe [in the Haight], then I'd hit the Punch Line [near the Embarcadero Center]."

This was a period of hustle for Thomas and Ross, as it is in the lives of all stand-up comics. As Thomas puts it, "If we heard about eight drinks in a club down the Tenderloin, we'd run down there

## Slow Ascension of the Comedy Star

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with this."

He went on to finish undergraduate school, but thought more and more about comedy as a job. "I knew I could go to New York and do stand-up," says Ross, "but I didn't want to be so close to my family. Their influence was negative, as far as instilling confidence. (He breaks into a New York accent.) It's so HAH-D. Hoo-yagomma MAKE it? Hoo-yagomma pay ya RENT? Very Jewish. Plus, I never liked cold weather."

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just to do a set."

Although Hansen was performing steadily with Periprow, she found that it took her three years "to get any gigs up" to do solo stand-up. In the meantime, she continued her photography, gradually specializing in "head shots" (publicity photos) for comedians and other performers. (It was through this sideline, in fact, that she met roommate Ross.)

At the start of her first open mike, the tape recorder, which was essential to her act, failed. Hansen had "learned to get up on stage, follow the tear and go with it," so she used the predicament. "Can I have a suggestion of a place a comic might go after she's had her first bad set?" she implored the crowd. "They laughed, and I got off with that."

The climb out of the cellar is tedious for most comedians, however, warns Thomas. "If you're gonna be good, you'll get good," he says, "and that's the advice I give to comics now when they say, 'What we'll gotta do.' I say, 'Just do a thousand open mikes and get back to me.' And they think that's a smart-ass answer, but it's true."

### Stylings

Although all three comic roommates share a tendency off-stage to speak hurriedly in unfinished sentences, their on-stage styles are distinctly different. Ross' delivery is somewhat reminiscent of the heroes of San Francisco's heyday of comedy 25 years ago, when Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl worked the smoky night-



Carrying on the punch and topical humor of San Francisco's '60s comedians, Jon Ross is shown here at the Other Cafe in the Haight, where he first headlined a few years ago. Ross and roommate Warren Thomas shared the bill at the Other last month.

PHOTO BY MARELLA POLI

clubs of North Beach. Like many of these earlier comics, Ross, 26, is neatly groomed, believably but not necessarily identifiably Jewish. His jokes are hip and topical—about Nautlius machines, Tai Chi, vitamins, and cigarette warnings—and his wit is dry.

Behind Ross' patter is a meticulous sense of development, apparent even in the way he loosens his tie and removes his jacket while telling an audience how he was "thrown out" of the Physics Department at the University of Virginia. "I wrote a paper debunking Einstein," explains Ross. "I believe the theory of

relativity was wrong. I believe that E = MC squared plus seven."

Hansen, now in her early 30s, has a clever face and wit beneath a New Wave haircut, which, she says, was an accident and which, like other accidents in her life, she uses as part of her act. "Maybe the best thing for me to do," she'll tell an audience, "is bleach it white and parade around like a Q-tip. Whaddya think?"

Some of the rest of Hansen's material relates to her body ("I have my mother's butt. The sad part is, she won't take it back"), her identity as a woman, and the battle of the sexes, but she avoids portraying herself as a victim.

"Comedians are notorious for dick jokes," she reminded the crowd at Rooster T. Feathers last month. "I have a little problem. I don't have one. I can joke about it. I can get one. I'm just not carrying one right now. I actually suffer from a malady called 'dick joke envy.'"

Partly because of her preparation in improvisation, Hansen is particularly sensitive to the mood of her audience. The morning after the Rooster gig, she reflected on the problems of the somewhat inattentive Sunnyvale crowd. "Last night I was tap dancing around," she remarked. "There was a whole birthday party of people that was not aware that I was on stage. By talking to them and giving them some attention, they not only start to be aware of what's going on, but they really say, 'Hey, this show's for me.'"

Thomas, 25, is also fond of using his audience, but a little more roughly. "Here's what we're gonna do tonight," he

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## Funny Folks

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confronted the folks at Squid's in the Civic Center. "I'm gonna sing a couple of jokes and then, you like 'em, you laugh, you don't like 'em, you don't laugh, and that's how it works, okay?" There was a smattering of nervous laughter.

"If you don't laugh," continued Thomas, "I go home, I sleep, I wake up, I eat breakfast, I go on, I live my f---in' life, so don't pull that attitude shit with me like 'I'm gonna suck, okay? Okay?'"

In Ross' opinion, Thomas is "quicker on his feet than anybody I've ever met," and Thomas is about as freaky as he is fast. At Rooster's, where he was billed as a middle act (Hansen opened), Thomas did one bit impersonating the educated, pompous style of actor John Houseman doing a TV commercial.

"Good evening, this is John HOUSEMAN," he began. "Have I ever been laid before? HARDY! That's why I use Paritan Oil. I have sex the old-fashioned way, I EARN it!"

Hansen and Thomas are both wary of being typed as minorities in the comedy community. "When I walk on stage," says Thomas, who dresses casually and comfortably, "people go, 'Oh, black comic, the guy's gonna grab his dick and talk about the differences between the black dude and the white dude at the breakfast table.' I don't do that."

Instead, Thomas is likely to take a side-swipe at Reagan's foreign policy. But he points out, regretfully, that "comics locally are the most apolitical group I've ever met. Nobody gives a shit, there're no issues anymore, it's not a political time."

Hansen refuses to include "a lot of tampion material" in her act. Still, she finds persistent discrimination from producers in that she's not "booked equally as a comic. As a woman," she explains, "I'm in a variety act. I'm something to fill out a bill, to give it a little spice."

Even though he is both comic and Jewish, Ross claims that people don't think of him as a Jewish comic, but he feels some ethnic identity nonetheless. "I'm just another skinny Jewish guy from New York doing comedy," he says.

### Making It

Developing a comedy career demands steady progress, from open mikes to opening acts to becoming a middle act and then a headliner, and all three of the comic roommates are at this point roughly between the last two stages. Progress locally involves TV appearances, "guesting" on Alex Bennett's manic morning show on KITS-FM, plac-

ing in the annual San Francisco Comedy Competition (the 1986 version will hold auditions this month), and performing in the annual Comedy Celebration Day in Golden Gate Park (this year on Aug. 2).

Last year Ross hosted one of the Comedy Day segments. Thomas reached the semi-finals in the competition, and Hansen warmed up the crowd for a "Comedy Tonight" taping at KQED-TV. But each of the three harbors some skepticism about fame and the San Francisco scene in particular.

"Here they have this little tiny star system," complains Ross, "where you work your way up and you have to do something of major importance to make that next move up. They start telling you about your 'draw,' which is a ridiculous concept for me to understand. There are no comedians in the country, bar one or two, who really have a draw."

Ross believes that "the club is responsible for bringing people in, and your job is just to go in and do a good act." (Later this month, he'll be doing his act at the new What's On Second club in San Mateo.)

Hansen is in the difficult and uncommon position of pursuing stand-up while maintaining her art as an improviser with Periprow and the Comedy Underground, which performs regularly at the Punch Line. She sometimes feels that stand-up clubs have "bastardized" her art a bit, because "you can't let the nuances of certain pieces develop."

Thomas, though the most aggressive of the three on stage, still sees himself as the player who "didn't take the game serious." He appears widely, including gigs this month at What's On Second, the Miramar Inn near Half Moon Bay, and Cobb's Pub in the Marina. But he has "blown off connections" with the Johnny Carson and David Letterman shows because "I feel like I've got a little more work to do before I feel like capitalizing on it commercially."

Career development also inevitably involves road work, with out-of-state bookings, and possible relocation. Ross has found it "hard to move out of the middle act" locally, and has worked Portland, New York, New Jersey and elsewhere. But his preference is for Boston, with its "intelligent collegiate audience" and its different style of billing a show. He notes that the "Boston style," recently adopted locally by Holy City Zoo, allows comics equal billing and equal time on stage, rather than imposing a hierarchical "headliner" billing. This "prevents a lot of the ego thing getting involved," says Ross.

Hansen followed Ross last month in Portland and also did a stint this spring in Texas and a "Gumbo Tour" in Louisiana. She's been advised, though,



Jeannene Hansen is the Super Woman of the 24th and Mission comedy den. She's described by roommate Warren Thomas as "a photographer, an improviser, an actress, a stand-up, and a mother... to me." In this shot, Hansen is emceeing at Rooster T. Feathers in Sunnyvale. PHOTO BY MARELLA POLI

not to spend too much time traveling. "I said to one of my agents, 'Well, anything you have, I'll take,' and he said, 'Don't say that, 'cause I can give you two months of work solid, all one-nighters. I book 60 cities.' And I thought, I could be in such bad shape after that. One-nighters are tough!"

According to her "Master Plan," Hansen will eventually relocate to Los Angeles, where she can audition for film and TV roles while continuing to earn some money on the road. This month, she'll be doing improv with mentor John Elk in Zurich and Amsterdam.

Thomas is convinced that "me and Hollywood are so incompatible, it's ridiculous," but he's drawn to New York City, where he's gotten a warm reception at Rodney Dangerfield's, the Comedy Cellar in Greenwich Village, and Governor's on Long Island. He says he enjoys "the energy of the town. It's non-show bizy, and most people are writing or dancing or trying to." "To be closer to that, he'll probably move there."

For the time being, though, while waiting in the wings for success, these three witty people of different origins, styles and destinations are fortuitarily sharing their lives with a growing gaggle of local fans, and with each other. As Thomas proclaims, "There's enough funny to go around for everybody." □

