

As Seen in

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Interview

The Character Question

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In his new show at Surf Reality, the real D.C. Benny does more than just stand-up

By Cynthia Try

I'm waiting for D.C. Benny at the café where we've agreed to meet. I keep circling the room, because I'm worried about missing him. Even though I've seen him perform live two or three times and I've just reviewed his reel, I have a foggy image of him in my head – I've seen him as both good-looking bearded hood and clean-cut boy. The first piece I ever saw him perform, a character monologue as an elderly black guy hanging out on a Bronx street corner, was so genuine, I simply assumed his background was African-American.

In fact, Benny is half Jewish, half German Catholic, and he grew up in Washington, D.C., hangout out mostly in Southeast and other tough neighborhoods with an ethnically mixed group of friends. As a result, his wide-ranging personae, from an Asian dry cleaner to a meaty Italian, have a rare authenticity. His impression of an Italian psychologist ("You got a fuckin' problem? Heh?") is just as real as his version of the code language that "brothers use during times of stress": "What up, B?" "Nothing, G, my girl is sweatin' me like 5-0 talkin' 'bout what's the 411 on the O.P.P...." Benny's every man quality allows the emphasis his material places on race to come off as loving, rather than crass. His characters manage to acknowledge difference and alienate much of its tension, evoking a sense of fundamental unity. "My approach is not disparaging," says Benny. "My whole thing is that we're basically all the same, we all do funny shit."

That quality may be what opened the door when he approached Harlem's Uptown Comedy Club after getting turned away elsewhere. "They were like, 'We'll put you on. It'll be a novelty,'" he recalls. "It was the best training any comedian could ever have. You had to have your shit together, because these guys needed to laugh. That's the difference between blue-collar and Upper East Side crowds." Word got around, and Benny made his first national TV appearance on Showtime at the Apollo. "Surprise!" he yelled at the nearly all black audience as he walked onstage. That, along with his impression of Shabba Ranks singing country music, killed. More TV followed, including several Comedy Central spots of his various characters.

For all of his acceptance on the black comedy circuit and his memorable TV appearances, Benny insists he has many critics in the business. "I respect all forms of stand-up," he says politely. "But a lot of [stand-up comics] tend to criticize character comics because they think it's just a voice or a crutch you're leaning on. Really, it's much more than that. You have to make it a real person."

Breaking the stand-up mold should be an asset at a time when alternative comedy is driving the industry, but Benny feels somewhat alienated from that scene, which, he says, is more concerned with political correctness than humor. "It's a pseudo-beatnik, pseudo-intellectual scene where there is no real commitment to further the art of comedy," he says. "I think it's great for those who are there. It's a little fraternity, and I don't want to be part of it. I think the only way to make something happen for yourself in the city is to create your own place where you can do your own stuff."

And so he has. He is now hosting his own weekly show, D.C. Benny's Joint, at Surf Reality-which was, ironically enough, one of the first venues for comedy performance art, before it became all the rage. The show is a melting pot that encourages comedians from all walks to try off beat material. "I wanted that night for everybody," he says, "and I just felt that black and Latino comics weren't being seen. I'm not patronizing anybody. It's for everyone who has something to say, who is willing to experiment."

His most ambitious project yet is his upcoming show, Winter's Cold Reality, in which both Benny and Chris Arcudi turn in one-man performances. Benny's segment, "Pipe dreams of an Urban Chameleon," features five different characters ranging from a clothing salesman to an art curator. They're all in therapy, and the audience members get to see the erstwhile shrinks. "I love to write," says Benny. "This is about the freedom to tell a story in the character. I'm trying to wean myself of the fear that most comedians have of doing something that's not all funny. I just think if you're going to say something, you should commit to it and not sham on the depth of it."

This time, D.C. Benny has made a lasting impression on me.

DC Benny's one-man show Winter's Cold Reality will be at Surf Reality January 18, 19, and 20.

