

TREND OF THE YEAR

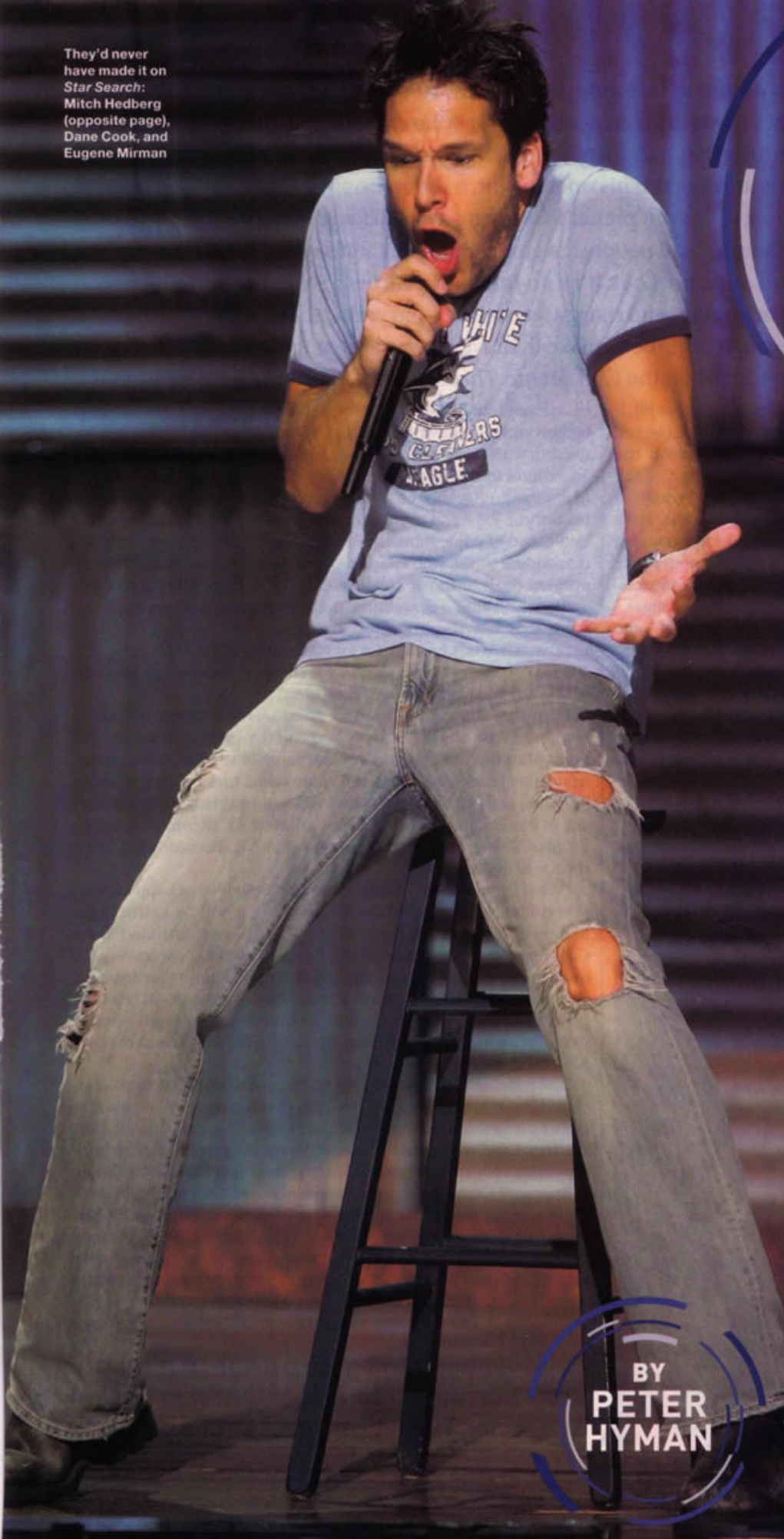
alt comedy goes rock and roll



Clearly, their barbers
have a sense of humor
too (clockwise from
left): Brian Posehn,
Patton Oswalt, Zach
Galifianakis, and
Maria Bamford



They'd never
have made it on
Star Search:
Mitch Hedberg
(opposite page),
Dane Cook, and
Eugene Mirman



They book their own tours, flaunt their love of obscure bands, overdose on drugs—and they're the biggest names in stand-up comedy. In 2005 they lived, thrived, and died by the rules of rock.

BY
PETER
HYMAN





On a humid Friday night in late July, Patton Oswalt stepped onto the stage at Irving Plaza, an all-ages venue in Manhattan that usually hosts rock bands, not neurotic comics. The restless throng that had spent the last hour milling about the main floor rushed forward as he launched into his opening bit, a riff on ironic T-shirts. → “Somewhere the last sincere guy on the planet is wearing a T-shirt with a unicorn sitting on a rainbow,” said Oswalt, “and people are going up to him and saying, ‘Hey, man, are you in the Strokes? You must be. Look how *awful* that T-shirt is!’” → The crowd, thick with bespectacled twentysomethings and shaggy teenage fans too young to see comedy elsewhere,

took the pointed ribbing in stride as they continue to make their way toward the stage. Had the 5'5" Oswalt (who plays Spence, Kevin James' nerdy pal on the CBS sitcom *The King of Queens*) taken a dive from the platform, he would have found himself in the middle of a mosh pit. It was as close to being part of a punk-rock stomping as a comic can get.

More importantly for Oswalt and his three partners on the *Comedians of Comedy* tour—stand-ups Maria Bamford, Zach Galifianakis, and Brian Posehn—their appearance at a rock venue was worlds away from the faux-brick-walled clubs that for decades have had a monopolistic chokehold on live comedy. The 13-city excursion is also an unabashed attempt to bring some rock'n'roll spontaneity to an art form plagued by shopworn punch lines and hacky routines. “I figured, why not do one of those Stiff Records-style packages,” Oswalt says from Irving Plaza's cramped dressing room before the show. “Like in the early '80s, where they would take three or four bands with loyal but small followings and then pool the fans, so you not only get a sold-out show, but everyone sees something new that they end up liking. It would show other comedians that there are different ways to make it if what they do doesn't fit into the club scene.”

Though Oswalt continues to produce and pay for the *Comedians*

of Comedy tour himself, in 2005 it suddenly went legit, playing in its biggest venues, drawing its largest crowds, and even landing a partnership with Comedy Central, which turned Oswalt and Co.'s road adventures into a documentary series. His success was just one facet of the stand-up scene's eerily charmed year, when its most promising breakthroughs—and its most dramatic tragedy—belonged to a certain breed of comedians who'd rather joke about Pavement lyrics than airline travel, who take the stage not in hopes of scoring development deals or movie roles, but for the thrill of playing to a live audience. “There is something in this underground comedy movement that has the tinges of what rock'n'roll used to be,” says Galifianakis, who's best known for his short-lived VH1 talk show, *Late World With Zach*. “It goes against the sitcom mold and was born out of this ‘anything but a comedy club’ idea.”

Of course, this isn't the first time stand-ups have looked to rock for inspiration. During the comedy boom of the 1980s, performers like Eddie Murphy, Andrew Dice Clay, and Sam Kinison had all the accoutrements of rock-god status: the arena tours, the spandex-sporting groupies, and—at least in Kinison's case—the big hair. And while this era of comedians spawned a slew of network sitcoms, including *Seinfeld*, *Roseanne*, and *Home Improvement*, it also nearly led to the demise of live comedy.

“What happened to comedy in the late 1980s is what happens with everything in America: Make it bigger and it will be better,” says Maureen Taran, a manager whose clients have included Dave Chappelle, Wanda Sykes, and Jeffrey Ross. “Instead of controlling the quality, the industry kept pumping out more shows that featured stand-ups, and business people opened comedy clubs as if they were pizza parlors. The scene became so oversaturated that it almost caved in on itself. Comedy forgot its own most important mantra: Always leave them wanting more.”

The collapse of the comedy market helped to eradicate the blazer-clad cliché that stand-up had become, clearing the way for younger, edgier performers. “In the late '80s a crappy comic could travel short distances and make tons of money,” says Eugene Mirman, whose absurdist, conceptual style has led to gigs on *Late Night With Conan O'Brien* and Comedy Central's *Premium Blend*. “But once that died, there was no reason for mediocre comics to do stand-up. It just wasn't profitable for shitty people to talk about stupid things they noticed. From that came shows that were cheap or free, where people weren't making much money but were experimenting with form and content. It made comedy more do-it-yourself.”

This DIY movement has since blossomed into the

“Rock venues don't have a drink minimum or fix the men's room door that was broken at a Minor Threat concert.” —TODD BARRY

Mr. Showmanship: Pioneering comedian and indie-rock fan David Cross



So a former VH1 host, a voice-over artist, and a guy with an ironic appreciation for *Friday the 13th* walk into a bar (clockwise from left): Galifianakis, Bamford, and Posehn



all of whom bring this experimental energy to their more mainstream day jobs. And on any given night, many of these comics can be found returning to the small stages to try out new material.

"Wanna hear my most bizarre September 11th story?" goes one such bit on Todd Barry's second album, *Falling Off the Bone*, which was recorded at Pianos, an intimate, 150-capacity rock venue in Manhattan. "I'm walking down the street; it's smoky, it's sad, it's awful. I see a guy I know a little bit coming toward me. He comes within a foot of me, looks up, and he goes, 'The new Mercury Rev album is out.' 'Are you sure about that?' 'Cause I just watched the news, and I didn't fucking see that.'" Barry, a medium-energy observationist who's opened for Yo La Tengo and the Shins, has spent most of his career performing alongside them. "Rock venues are a refreshing change from sterile comedy clubs for what they *don't* do," he says. "They don't make you do multiple shows over several nights. They don't have a drink minimum or a high cover charge. And they don't replace the men's room door that was kicked off its hinges during a Minor Threat concert in 1982."

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alternative-comedy scene—the constellation of smaller shows that have dotted the Lower East Side of Manhattan and West Hollywood (and many points in between) since the early 1990s. Venues such as Riffifi in Manhattan and the M Bar in Los Angeles are to comedy today what CBGB was to punk rock in the 1970s. "These experimental rooms were founded to allow comics to try out new material without the pressured expectations of a two-drink-minimum-paying audience," says Jeff Singer, who produces *Eating It*, one of New York City's most respected and longest-running experimental showcases. "Patrons aren't thinking to themselves, 'I just paid 24 dollars for two cosmos, this next guy better make me laugh.' Part of the thrill is watching the comic live or die by the strength of an untested bit."

This is the universe that gave rise to David Cross, Sarah Silverman, Marc Maron, Upright Citizens Brigade, *Saturday Night Live* cast members Amy Poehler and Fred Armisen, as well as dozens of writers for *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* and *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*,

most stand-ups agree that the convergence of comedy and indie rock was set in motion by David Cross, who began touring with the Atlanta-based glam-rock quartet Ultrababycat in 2000. ("He's like the Ramones of this subculture," says Oswalt.) For Cross, the decision to perform with indie artists proved to be a liberating one. "The key ingredient is being able to control everything," says the *Arrested Development* star. "Once I did the first tour, it was like, 'Fuck, this is really fun,' because I was able set the ticket prices lower and do as much time as I wanted."

Five years later, stand-ups have more power than ever to build their careers and attract fans. "Comedians now are very much like indie-rock bands," says Jack Vaughn, the director of Comedy Central Records. "They are out there creating their own scene, making their own merch, and booking their own gigs—and not necessarily at comedy clubs. As such, they no longer necessarily have to appeal to a broad audience."

Perhaps no comedian exemplified this rebellious ethos more than

They're Full of Shtick

A sampling of the greatest bits from some of alt comedy's most distinctive voices

Eugene Mirman

"I signed up for a credit card online. And you know how when you want access to a credit card or bank account, you have to give them your mother's maiden name? Well, this credit card allowed me to pick the question they ask me and the answer I give them. So now, whenever I call, they *have* to ask me, 'What are you wearing?' And I have to respond, 'I don't think that's appropriate.'"



Patton Oswalt

"I think you should be allowed to own a Humvee—I just think that when you go to buy it, you should be hit on the back of the neck with a fucking roll

of quarters in a sock, and then just wake up in Iraq with a gun, and they're like, 'Oh yeah, you can drive it. You just have to get the gasoline by yourself.'"



Dane Cook

"The other day I saw a young boy and he was eating an ice-cream cone. I ran up and I smashed it in his face. I leaned in and I go, 'You remember me forever!' and I

ran away. 'Cause you know when he's 50, he's gonna be like, 'One day a man ran up to me. I did not know this man. He smashed my treat into my eyes! And he pointed



and said, 'You fuckin' remember me forever!'" But I did not say fuckin'. He added fuckin' to make the story more intense and interesting. He deserves to have ice cream smashed in his face."

Mitch Hedberg

"I got some tartar-control toothpaste. I still got tartar, but that shit's under control. If the tartar gets out of line, I'm like, 'Come on, man, you know the deal. Fall in.'"

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MIKE GUASTELLA/WIREIMAGE.COM; SCOTT GREIS/GETTY IMAGES/COURTESY COMEDY CENTRAL (2); ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES; SCOTT GREIS/GETTY IMAGES/COURTESY COMEDY CENTRAL; JOY E. SCHELLER/IF; KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES

Mitch Hedberg, whose death in March resonated in both the comedy and rock'n'roll universes. The laconic, long-haired comic known for his trippy observations and singular logic could count Howard Stern and the Strokes among his most vocal admirers, but he also killed in front of regular folks, at places like the Comedy Gallery in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where he performed regularly. And though Hedberg never became a household name—he joked that that was because “my fans all live in apartments”—his two live albums, *Strategic Grill Locations* and *Mitch All Together*, have sold more than 250,000 copies combined, and he appeared on *Letterman* ten times.

With his flowing blond mane and his habit of hiding behind sunglasses onstage, Hedberg has often been described as comedy's Kurt Cobain. But Hedberg's material lacked the darkness of Cobain's music. In contrast, his Cajun-inspired drawl was endearing; his riffs on doughnut receipts were accessible. But his live shows had an electric, unpredictable energy. “Mitch brought that rock'n'roll spirit that is so rare,” says comedian Doug Stanhope, a former cohost of *The Man Show*. “And if the crowd wasn't running with it, sometimes chaos ensued. That is what made it beautiful to watch.”

But this artistic temperament also had the potential to spiral out of control. On June 23, 2003, Hedberg was arrested at the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in Texas, for possession of a controlled substance after a routine security check of his carry-on baggage revealed three syringes and a Red Bull can that tested positive for heroin. After spending two nights in jail, Hedberg was hospitalized for six weeks following surgery to save his right leg, which had been so badly damaged from needle injections that doctors originally told him it would have to be amputated. At the end of his stay, he limped right back on the road, joining Dave Attell and Lewis Black on their Comedy Central Live tour.

Though he had just completed a grueling 44-city run to sold-out houses in the months before he died, Hedberg signed on for a full schedule of club dates throughout the Northeast and the South with his wife, comedian Lynn Shawcroft, and fellow stand-up Randy Kagan. He would not live to perform most of this second tour. In the late evening of March 29, 2005, he was found unconscious by Shawcroft in their hotel room in Livingston, New Jersey, 28 miles west of Manhattan. Paramedics were unable to revive him. While the cause of death was initially attributed to heart failure (he had been born with a heart condition), autopsy and toxicology reports filed in early May by the Office of the State Medical Examiner of New Jersey confirm what some suspected all along: The 37-year-old died accidentally of “multiple drug toxicity,” including cocaine and heroin.

Hedberg's iron-willed work ethic—part Midwestern upbringing, part muscle memory—may have also contributed to his undoing. “Mitch had a hard time taking time off or saying no to work,” says Shawcroft, via e-mail. “I wish we had taken several months off in order to rejuvenate and take care of our own lives, but he really pushed himself in the one thing he knew and loved right until the end—stand-up comedy.”

“Unfortunately his death shows a very realistic side to the life of a performer on the road,” says Maureen Taran, who first met Hedberg in the early '90s. “It's a very lonely existence, but there is nothing mundane about the life, and that's what makes it so hard to walk away from. There's a reason people in this line of work have chosen it—part of the rush is the highs and the lows. If you aren't born with manic depression, you will have it after being in this business.”

Still, Hedberg is more the exception than the rule, and many comics live the rock-star lifestyle without falling off the edge. Earlier this year Dane Cook became the latest road warrior to break big without any significant help from Hollywood. Despite his relative anonymity—he is probably better recognized from his *Jimmy*

Kimmel Live appearances than his bit parts in *Torque* and *Mr. 3000*—the hard-charging Bostonian's second album, *Retaliation*, debuted at No. 4 on the *Billboard* Top 200 in late July, becoming the first comedy record to break the Top 5 since Steve Martin's *A Wild and Crazy Guy*, in 1978.

Taking a page from the rock handbook, Cook, 33, built a fan base himself, using the preregulated Napster to upload free sound clips from his first CD, which he produced and sold himself. “If you want to get elected, you've got to shake hands and meet the people,” says Cook. “So I decided that I had to actively participate with my fans. If Jimmy Buffett can sell CDs though his website, it just shows you that you can cut out the middleman.”

But not every comedian wants what Dane Cook has. If he's the Bon Jovi of stand-up—his good looks and frat-boy-friendly style took him on a national tour last fall that included three shows at the 5,600-seat Theater at Madison Square Garden in New York—then Oswald and his ragged band are the Wilco of the lo-fi alt-comedy scene. “This tour shows that comedy is an ongoing, organic process,” Oswald says.

“Some nights you do badly, but you keep going. It doesn't come down to a five-minute set that decides your life.”

The thousand or so fans who gathered at Irving Plaza last July were more than willing to follow Oswald and his crew wherever their highly personal, punch-line-averse monologues led, even if they ended up in some very strange places: In her bubbly, near-whisper of a voice, Maria Bamford lamented being pigeonholed as a “pretty white lady,” and the inordinately tall, inordinately gawky Brian Posehn flagellated himself for his lifelong obsession with *Star Wars*. When Zach Galifianakis finally took the stage, the bearded comic spent most of his 20-minute routine seated at a grand piano, looking like a healthier Brian Wilson and rattling off esoteric characters, including one he calls the Pretentious Illiterate and another he's named the Lispering Gay-Basher. Then, in a single sentence, he demonstrated to his misfit audience just how closely he identifies with them, while deftly cutting them down to size. “To show that I can be a dirty comic and also appeal to the arts crowd,” he said, “I call my balls Belle and Sebastian.” To a lot of people who thought they would never laugh at stand-up comedy again, it was the funniest line they heard all night. ●

Killing yourself to laugh: Hedberg backstage in 2000



“Mitch brought the rock'n'roll spirit, and if the crowd wasn't running with it, chaos ensued.” —DOUG STANHOPE