21 New York comedy scene linchpins

0 ADD COMMENT 1 LOVE IT SAVE IT

The New York comedy personalities who keep things vibrant, fresh and funny—we can't imagine the local scene without them

Share Tweet G+

By Ian Gibbs and Matthew Love
Posted: Thursday September 20 2012

Feedback

Seth Herzog

Some New York comedy people are born great, some are made great, but most achieve greatness by pouring out their blood, sweat and tears in grubby clubs and the back rooms of East Village bars for years. This list comprises some of those comic characters whose contributions to the New York comedy world make them indispensable—the performers and behind-the-scenes supporters who make the scene happen night by night and show by show. (We also believe that, for whatever reason, many of them are a bit underrated or underappreciated.)

RECOMMENDED: Best comedy in NYC

Seth Herzog

This goofy and gallant host has been nothing less than a cheerleader for local comedy, providing a platform for the casual foolishness of fellow comics for years. Seth Herzog's long-running show, Sweet—which just celebrated its eighth anniversary—has been a place for him to indulge his penchant for flamboyant dancing, sparkly costumes, stripping to his skivvies and trying to get his ever-tolerant mother to say naughty things. More than this, it's been a worthy heir to Luna Lounge's famous Eating It, an enduring (and affordable) beacon of downtown comedy that gives bright new faces time alongside some of the country's best. *—ML*

Christina Gausas

Chicago transplant Christina Gausas is a great improviser with an innate talent to dwell in and reflect the individual energy brought to her by the improvisers with whom she plays. This might be said of good improvisers in general, but Gausas's emotional vulnerability and level of commitment allow her to enhance her scene partners' ideas in an uncanny way. She plays best in intimate settings, often just with one other person, and her shows are tonally very different—e.g., with Scott Adsit, they're dark and deep, and with Ellie Kemper, they're loopy. Though she's been threatening a move to L.A. of late—like half of the comedy community—we hope that won't happen. *—ML*

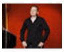
Tom Shillue

Tom Shillue was a storyteller before telling stories was something comics did. At popular indie shows like Moonwork, before the Moth was the institution it has become, Shillue would experiment with tales of growing up Catholic in Massachusetts and flying paper airplanes with his pals in college. As he's progressed, he's not only paved the way for other tellers of comic tales, he's honed his skill set; his recent

You might also like

Time Out Live, our New York Comedy Festival show stars… Michael Che and Hari Kondabolu

Holiday gift guide 2012: Comedy


The 25 best shows to see at the New York Comedy Festival

W. Kamau Bell interview: 'It pays way better to be Jeff Dunham than it ever paid to be George Carlin or Lenny Bruce'

Aparna Nancherla talks about her new album and crafting the perfect tweet

one-man show, *Supernormal,* showcased some of his best material, and he continues to grow onstage in his own series, Funny Story. Shillue regularly accuses transplanted New Yorkers of coming here because they were the coolest people in their hometown. Thankfully, Shillue felt the same way. *—ML*

ADVERTISING

Rebecca Trent

In 2007, Rebecca Trent bought the Creek and the Cave in Long Island City and converted its programming to exclusively comedy. Since then, the capacious multilevel manor has flourished as not only a dedicated platform for the art form but a busy clubhouse for up-and-coming young comics. With its seven nights a week of sketch, stand-up and improv open mikes; festival and late-night auditions; and its own podcast network, the Creek offers a multitude of ways for comedians to get involved, and its regular cast has grown considerably. For her part, Trent has not only booked but championed countless numbers of these comics, silently paving their way to stardom. *—IG*

Victor Varnado

As a comic, actor, writer and director, Victor Varnado is one auteur whose vision extends far beyond the stage and microphone. His provocative mining of the adversity he's faced as a legally blind, African-American albino serves as a springboard from which he explicates the subtle intricacies of race relations. The filmmaker's Comedy Central documentary, *The Awkward Comedy Show,* was a finely cast pastiche of black alternative comedy, featuring friends Hannibal Buress, Marina Franklin, Eric Andre and Baron Vaughn. Varnado also founded the ten-year-running Iron Mule Short Comedy Screening Series, which meets monthly at 92YTribeca and is a convivial coming together of filmmakers, aficionados and comics alike. *—IG*

Pat Baer

Baer is someone everyone knows and everyone loves, but almost no one sees. Though he does improvise and host shows at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre or the UCBEast, most of those who sing his praises do so from the stage because he's followed their cues to a T. He was made the head technician at the UCBT in 2004 and won the local ECNY Award for Best Technician nearly every time he was nominated. Because he is a performer, he knows how to black out an improv set, and because he's both creative and proficient, he can add spooky, sexy or otherwise evocative lighting effects to a show at a moment's notice. And he always, always seems to be at the theater. *—ML*

ADVERTISING

Murderfist

After migrating from Florida en masse in 2005, this boisterous cast of ten sketch players slowly made their mark on the local scene—an altogether stanky, bloody stain that we hope will never come out. Their rowdy, messy and altogether memorable sketch shows are filled with uniquely bold, joke-laden scenes that help them float between the various stages of the New York comedy world. They play sketch festivals, stand-up nights, Coney Island sideshows and last year, they produced a show that was 12 hours long. In a transient city, they're a dedicated, all-for-one crew. *—ML*

Frank Spitznagel

If anyone is responsible for the evolution of musical-improv theater in New York from behind the piano, it's Frank Spitznagel. He's got formal musical degrees, but the first time we heard him play was during early I Eat Pandas shows; he's now playing regularly with a number of budding troupes and is helping teach young improvisers how to communicate with their accompanists. His buoyant tunes and playful spirit not only liven up the impromptu musicals taking place onstage, but one glance at his face—in most cases, he and his piano are immediately offstage due to small facilities, or so he might communicate more clearly with the performers—and it's clear the man is having a ball hearing and watching it all take place. *—ML*

Jeffrey Joseph

After making an impact on comedy in the '90s—Emmy-nominated writer for *In Living Color,* appearances on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and Comedy Central—Jeffrey Joseph withdrew from stand-up to pursue acting. After a 12-year hiatus, Joseph returned to the scene two and a half years ago. For a plenitude of showgoers watching his act now, his familiar face belies its origin, but he's been well noticed by New Yorkers with a DNA-deep proclivity for comebacks. He's also served the community in a broader sense by playing the experienced mentor to many young, promising hopefuls—including Seaton Smith, Michael Che and Kevin Barnett—each of whom is charging full tilt toward greater recognition as well. Young comic Nimesh Patel says, "Jeffrey's somebody that a lot of comedians look up to, whether they're just starting out or on the verge of being household names. His advice is always really incisive, whenever he gives it. He's a peer that everybody respects more than a peer."*—IG*

ADVERTISING

Mindy Tucker and Seth Olenick

Mindy Tucker is everywhere: She snaps photos before, during and after seemingly every comedy show—and when she's not doing that, she takes comics' headshots or group photos. Maybe it's Tucker's bubbly personality or her charming Alabama twang, but comics trust her implicitly. Her shots of comedians from Paul F. Tompkins to Hannibal Buress frequently nab a casual and unguarded backstage vibe that's incredibly difficult to pull off.

Seth Olenick, on the other hand, is a man of planning. His pictures, often taken in the studio or another tailored environment, are brimming with ideas both comedic and imagistic—ideas that bring out the playful and vulnerable qualities in his subjects. Whether he's shooting Sean Patton with his foot in his mouth or Joe Mande as a grossed-out politician, Olenick is like Annie Liebovitz of the comedy world: Once a comic has been photographed by him, they've arrived.—*ML*

Michael Delaney

Michael Delaney wears many hats: He's a teacher, a writer, a director and most visibly, a measured and cerebral improviser who performs regularly with the Stepfathers, the UCBT's most senior team. Many in this stalwart crew deserve recognition, but the former Swarm member is notable in that he has been dedicated to the craft of comedy since the big bang of the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre. His smarts, his approachability and his thoughtful, patient stage presence have endured for more than 20 years; improv fans revere him as one of the best in the country for a very good reason.*—ML*

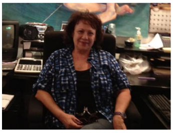
Keith Robinson

The emcee role can be thankless. The job entails making an audience comfortable, keeping its energy up while introducing a parade of comics and, at all other times, disappearing. Keith Robinson—a man you'll see play this role if you go to the Comedy Cellar almost any night of the weekend—is the rare sort of talent that rises above his station. He's wily, personable, and he disarms rowdy Village crowds with genuine charm as he slings jokes about race, politics or whatever's on his mind that night. In addition, this vet is a native Philadelphian who has offered a steadying hand to a number of young comics from Philly, including Kevin Hart. —*ML*

ADVERTISING

Lizz Winstead

Even if the only thing she'd done was help create *The Daily Show,* Lizz Winstead would have her New York reputation made. But the sociable and outspoken Winstead continues to be a force around town; she helped launch Air America radio, and since that went to pasture, she's continued performing pointed, political stand-up across the country as well as appeared on podcasts or one-off interview shows in town, seemingly whenever she's needed. She recently wrote a funny essay collection, *Lizz Free or Die,* which may indicate where she's headed next. More likely, it's just another feather in an array of multicolored plumage. —*ML*



Estee Adoram

Machiavelli said, "It is far safer to be feared than loved." In the case of Estee Adoram, the talent booker at the Comedy Cellar, her awe-inspiring persona probably has more to do with the influence of her rigorous programming than any sort of inherent personality traits. At the club seemingly every night, when she hears rumor of a hot, new comic she'll wander down from the Olive Tree Cafe and listen for five minutes—if they kill, they're in but if not, they may not get another shot for years. And getting passed at the Cellar is a golden ticket to lots of other venues. Greer Barnes, a Cellar regular, puts it this way: "Everyone's dying to get in this club, and she's its goddess. If you can make her laugh, you're good." —*IG*

Mark Normand

Since arriving from New Orleans in 2007, Mark Normand, 29, has been a mainstay of hilarity on the local scene. Though he's one of a multitude of up-and-comers, his contribution to the comedic landscape supersedes that of his contemporaries. He cohosts Hot Soup! at Ella Lounge and the We're All Friends Here podcast on Cave Comedy Radio—which have both bolstered a high caliber of green and seasoned talent alike—and has appeared on *Last Comic Standing,* Comedy Central's 2011 Comics to Watch showcase and John Oliver's *New York Stand-Up Show.* The wry, effortlessly likable stand-up, whose piquant hand gestures smack of Carson, evokes a bygone era of comedians as entertainers first. Add to that his self-proclaimed nigh Jewishness ("I live in New York, I have curly hair, I'm circumcised, I'm a comedian—I'm right there!), and he's an oddball amalgam of funny. —*IG*

ADVERTISING

Liam McEneaney

This local comic has given a boost to so many of his peers, it's hard to count. His ongoing show, Tell Your Friends, has been a welcoming environment for comics young, old, unknown and famous since 2005. Lately, the "workout" room Liam McEneaney encouraged has grown into spaces like the Bell House and recently translated into a concert film with Reggie Watts, Kristen Schaal and many more. He's peeled away from the show's weekly schedule at Ella, but his friendly presence and willingness to play along with all types of shenanigans will continue to pack in fans whenever he decides to host. —*ML*

Ted Alexandro

As a comic, Ted Alexandro is a New York fixture as firm as bedrock. His high-minded, cogitative approach to comedy is equally effective whether he's scrutinizing President Obama's Nobel Peace Prize or expounding on the art of speaking fake Chinese. He opened for Louis C.K. at Carnegie Hall, but he'll show up just as easily on a Tuesday in the back room of Parkside Lounge. He's not only political in his comedy, he aided his fellow comics when he cofounded the New York Comedians Coalition in 2004—which successfully raised comedians' wages at a handful of New York clubs after extensive deliberation with their owners. But whether on the front lines in Zuccotti Park or his two *Comedy Central Presents* specials, the lithe, lionhearted native of Queens unapologetically speaks his mind. —*IG*

Comedy as a Second Language

Thanks to the auspicious Chesley Calloway's genteel hosting, the prolific Sean Patton's comic derring-do, and solid booking from the Creek and the Cave owner Rebecca Trent, the intimate back room of Kabin is consistently overflowing every Thursday night for Comedy as a Second Language. More than that, however, this weekly stand-up showcase and its affiliated bar has become one of the shows comics themselves frequent more than any other. "Are you going to Kabin?" is a common refrain, and whether they're performing or not, hordes gather weekly to commiserate, workshop bits and keep Friday morning at bay. —*IG*

ADVERTISING

Dave Hill

Dave Hill is a musician-author-impresario who has slowly but surely made himself a fixture in the comedy world. His brand of coy braggadocio is a signature; whether he's interviewing his celebrity pals at the long-running Dave Hill Explosion, teaching people to learn from his mistakes in essay collection *Tasteful Nudes* or simply flailing around shirtless in performance, he owns the stage while feigning timidity. And none of it would fly if he weren't a great joke writer. Though he still rocks out with his band, Valley Lodge, we suspect lovers of good comedy would sorely miss him if he ever became too famous for his guitar riffs. —*ML*

Colin Quinn

Only a modicum of comics can rival Colin Quinn's tenure in comedy. The Brooklyn native's been a household name since some of us at *TONY* were zygotes. In the course of his nearly 30 years in the medium, the gruff-voiced Irish-American stand-up has served as "Weekend Update" anchor on *SNL,* hosted Comedy Central's *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn*—which gave exposure to a plethora of comics, many of whom still talk about their time on the show with whimsy—and toured his one-man theater piece turned HBO special, *Colin Quinn: Long Story Short,* a sagacious satire of fallen empires through the lens of modern society's foibles. Even now, he continues to drop in at bars and clubs across the city, letting New Yorkers know the depth of his love and dedication—or, possibly, his compulsion. In any case, we'll take it. —*IG*

You Might Also Like

The best NYC concerts of 2017

The best free kayaking in NYC

B
Bedford Park Blvd
Brighton Beach
21 excuses that only work in New York

Sponsored Content

15+ Mindboggling Pictures From The Land Down Under
(Gloriousa)

Stay Cool With This Summer's Hottest Handbags From Macy's
(Macys.com)

Dr. Scholl's Shine Women's Block Heel Sandals
(Polyvore)

Recommended by

Share Tweet G+ 0 ADD COMMENT

Comments

Top

© 2017 Time Out America LLC and affiliated companies owned by Time Out Group Plc. All rights reserved. Time Out is a registered trademark of Time Out America LLC.