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NY CULTURE

High-Wattage Improvisation

Comedian Reggie Watts at Town Hall

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

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Reggie Watts, who counts 'Monty Python' and Weird-Al Yankovic as inspirations, at Ground Control Studio. *Cassandra Giraldo for The Wall Street Journal*

The musician and comedian Reggie Watts plays his first show at the 1,500-seat Town Hall on Wednesday, and he has no idea what he will do.

"It's a similar feeling to taking a box of Legos and dumping it on the ground," he said. Improvisation, his preferred mode of performing, "is essentially a sense of free play."

On his television series "Comedy Bang! Bang!" Mr. Watts makes a game of preparing as little as possible.

"He has a unique process of how he makes the show: He doesn't read the scripts before," said Scott Aukerman, the creator and co-star of "Comedy Bang! Bang!," a farcical talk show on IFC that mixes skits with guest interviews. "But he's such a huge comic force that I never doubt he'll be able to do whatever we ask, whether it be piloting an alien spaceship or being a medieval knight."

Mr. Watts, striking on screen with his shock of hair and sartorial preference for suspenders, makes music for the show too. "He improvised our theme song right on the spot," Mr. Aukerman said.

In fact, Mr. Watts might be as well-known for his music as for his comedy, though in his act, the distinctions between the disciplines aren't always easy to detect. His Town Hall show is part of the Blue Note Jazz Festival, but his stage performances tend to favor monologues even as they delve into surreal interludes made with nothing more than his voice, a microphone and digital samplers.

It is a practice he made his own after years of taking music lessons as a child. The

eureka moment happened after discovering "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" while growing up in Great Falls, Mont.

"That opening scene of hearing horse sounds and then you see a guy wearing a backpack and a guy with a crown, a king acting like he's on a horse and the guy with the backpack just hitting coconuts—that moment, everything changed," Mr. Watts said. "It subverted so much expectation. It was a revelation that you could set up something so intensely and then just pull the rug out."

He communed early on with "Weird Al" Yankovic as well.

"I was all about [Michael Jackson](#), and then some guy does a song called 'Eat It' and makes a video almost exactly like the original," Mr. Watts said. "It's so stupid, the dumbest thing ever, and it's hilarious. That was another eye-opener for me."

Decades later, Mr. Watts, who is 42 years old and lives in Williamsburg, has made a career of finding laughs while confounding expectations.

Mr. Aukerman didn't understand what Mr. Watts was up to the first time he saw him perform. "He did a long protracted bit about the microphone not working and cutting out, and he was speaking in an English accent for quite a bit of it."

Now, Mr. Aukerman laughs at nearly everything his co-star does. "We have a saying in the editing room," he said. "When we're in trouble, cut to Reggie."

At a recording studio where Mr. Watts works on multimedia projects such as Web videos, songs and spoken word, his unpredictable nature has long been apparent.

"As recording engineers, our job is to anticipate what he's going to do next, and someone like Reggie, where creativity emanates from every pore in his body, makes us work," said Murray Trider, owner of Ground Control Studio in Williamsburg.

Mr. Watts, for his part, likes to take everyone, even himself, by surprise. "I'll be talking on stage and stumble on some syllables and suddenly a word is no longer a word," he said. "It's a weird movement where people are wondering, 'Is he losing it?' Then I just roll with it."

Does it worry him to take such an untroubled approach at a venue like Town Hall?

"There are screw-ups, but the screw-ups are usually just divergence points," he said. "It's an opportunity to change the rhythm, an opportunity to roll with something new. Improvisation is almost a constant stream of screw-ups."

Corrections & Amplifications

Scott Aukerman's surname was misspelled Auckerman in an article on comedian Reggie Watts.

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