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Pulling No Punches at the Bell House

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

With a droll delivery and a mischievous matter-of-factness about the mundanities of life, Todd Barry has established himself as one of the most distinctive stand-up comics in New York today. Born in the Bronx, he spent his childhood in Florida before moving back to the city on his own in 1989, when he began a career that has placed him on club stages, TV screens and movie cast-lists in the decades since. Although stand-up is his primary mode, he has acted in a range of high-profile scenarios, including director Darren Aronofsky's film "The Wrestler" and "Louie," the TV show starring comedian Louis C.K.



Bryan Thomas for The Wall Street Journal

Todd Barry

On stage, Mr. Barry, who is 48, has honed his act into sharply observed sets marked by subtle, withering punch lines and an extreme economy of words. It plays out to rousing effect on his recent full-length comedy album "Super Crazy," and it stands to be on display on Wednesday when he performs at the Bell House in Brooklyn. Billed as commemorating Mr. Barry's "25th anniversary in comedy," the show includes supporters and friends such as Janeane Garofalo, Eugene Mirman, Jim Gaffigan and more.

At his apartment in the East Village, Mr. Barry spoke with The Wall Street Journal about his first time on stage, his evolution in New York and the times when the job of comedy is less than extravagantly rewarding.

Your show this week is commemorating your 25th anniversary in comedy. What marked the start?

The first time I went on stage was in North Miami Beach in 1987, during the big

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comedy boom in the late '80s. It was at a place called Coconuts. I had watched a few open-mic nights without ever thinking about trying it, and then all of a sudden I just got the urge. It actually went pretty well. The crowd wasn't looking for anyone to fail. They weren't a hostile crowd. I've since had that, many times.

Were you nervous?

I remember not feeling as nervous as I thought I would. Then, when I walked off, I felt like I had just done something really intense. I remember two jokes: a [McDonald's \(MCD -0.63%\)](#) joke and then one about masturbation. No, not masturbation—circumcision. Classic topics. I don't remember how I segued between the two, but I figured it out somehow.

Knowing what you know now, would you have made the same formative move then?

It seemed like what I was meant to do. I always wanted to do something creative. I was in bands, but I didn't really have the discipline to be in a band. Something involving not working with anyone else was perfect for me.

Were you funny as a kid?

I was always considered funny in class, but I wasn't a class clown to the extent of getting into trouble. I was kind of like a gutless class clown.



Enlarge Image Getty Images

Todd Barry is commemorating his 25th year in comedy.

Have you developed a routine for writing your stand-up sets?

I don't have a discipline where I wake up at a certain time and say [mock-dramatically]: "This is my writing hour." It's more just when something pops into my head, or if I'm having a conversation with someone and make them laugh, I think, "Ooh, that's something I can bring on stage." A lot of my stuff comes from running into

people who say something I can make fun of after we're done.

When was the first time you performed in New York?

It was some time in 1989, maybe at Catch a Rising Star. I hung out there a lot, just trying to get on. There was a lot of hanging out. At the old Catch a Rising Star, if you were there, they might not schedule you, but they would throw you on if somebody didn't show up, if some guy was late in a cab or something. It was sort of humiliating—unless you got on. There aren't really a lot of clubs where that happens anymore.

The comedy scene seems to be forever changing. How is it in New York now?

There are loads of places, so that hasn't really changed. If you really hustle, you can get on stage. If you work on weekends and bounce around and do a few sets, you can make, not necessarily a full-on living, but money you can actually use. New York pay is still way better than L.A. pay.

How is it different in L.A.?

There's a book about it, "I'm Dying Up Here." It isn't so great out there. I've had people hand me an envelope with \$8 in it, and that was in the past year.

Are audiences in New York different than elsewhere?

It depends on the room and how they get people in there. At some clubs people are

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—I don't want to say "dragged in," but there are a lot of barkers out in Times Square. Some of them will be a little, let's say, "slightly misleading" as to who might be there. Maybe Chris Rock stopped by the club one time so they'll make it sound like he'll be there. But you can go anywhere and have a great audience or a terrible audience.

What kind of "hostile" crowds have you experienced?

A handful of times I've had stuff thrown at me, a cup or something else. I haven't had any violent encounters, but I've had to slip out of clubs before. You say something and people don't understand you're joking. A high proportion of the time if you have a problem with someone in the audience it's because they're there in a group. No one wants to see a bachelorette party walk in wearing penis hats. I didn't go on stage to share in a celebration of your stupid marriage.

A lot of your material is inspired by New York. How does it play out of town?

You can't make a St. Marks Place joke or something, but I just did some of the New York stuff in Sydney, Australia, and it went fine. It might not fly everywhere. If you go to a city where people pay \$400 for a two-bedroom apartment, they're not going to understand what you go through here.

Corrections & Amplifications

Todd Barry's full-length comedy album is titled "Super Crazy." An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the title was "Super Fever."

A version of this article appeared December 19, 2012, on page A21 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Pulling No Punches at the Bell House.

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