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COMEDY SCENE

In D.C., getting the last laugh over N.Y. and L.A.

By Paul Farhi
Washington Post Staff Writer
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In nearly 30 years as a stand-up comedian, political satirist Will Durst has played thousands of gigs all over the country. Ask him how Washington rates on his list of comedy stops and he doesn't hesitate: "I love D.C.," Durst enthuses. "It's a company town and I speak of the company business. I don't have to explain the jokes. Whereas in the rest of the country, it's a crapshoot."

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Top comics flock to Washington

Washington is a city of intellectuals and thinkers, which helps to explain why the funniest and hottest comedians continually bring their tours and talents to the area.

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Turns out audiences in Washington get more than just political cracks. New York and Los Angeles may have more comedians and more rooms for them to play, but, joke for joke, Washington is one of the nation's most receptive markets for stand-up comedy. Maybe the most receptive.

Live Nation, the giant concert and entertainment promotion company, says it has booked 201 stand-up comedy acts into various Washington venues over the past six years, and only three have failed to earn a profit -- the highest success rate of any city in the nation. "Comedy plays exceptionally well in D.C.," says Geof Wills, who runs Live Nation's comedy division. "It doesn't matter if it's white, black, Asian, straight or gay [humor]. It just works."

Odd, no? Washington as comic haven belies its national image as a city of gasbaggers and sour-faced careerists, a place of solemn decorum and oppressive wonk seriousness. Despite all that, or maybe because of it,

big-name comics have attracted sellouts and near sellouts. Chelsea Handler and Conan O'Brien both filled 3,700-seat DAR Constitution Hall on stops here this spring. Tickets are also selling well for the wave of TV-friendly comedians who will play Constitution Hall or the 1,800-seat Warner Theatre over the next three months: Patton Oswalt, Aziz Ansari, Lewis Black, Bob Saget, Mike Birbiglia, Craig Ferguson, Margaret Cho, Kathy Griffin and Daniel Tosh.

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In addition to the headliners parachuting in from elsewhere, Washington has developed its own sizable pool of comic talent through its club scene. Local comics who've left for bigger things include Black, Wanda Sykes, Martin Lawrence and Dave Chappelle, who honed his chops by trolling the open-mike nights as a high school student at the District's Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Oswalt, who is also a thriving comedic actor, grew up in Northern Virginia. Comedy Central staple Birbiglia got his start by winning a "Funniest

Man on Campus" contest while he was a sophomore at Georgetown (he later bused tables at the D.C. Improv, the city's only full-time comedy club).

Comedy isn't just performed here, either; it's a go-to place for recorded shows. Chappelle's taped-for-TV gig at the Lincoln Theatre in 2000 was a career-making prelude to his Comedy Central series, "Chappelle's Show." Chris Rock's 2004 show at Constitution Hall became a CD and an HBO special, as did Black's 2006 "Red, White and Screwed" set at the Warner. Others who've taped TV specials here in the past two years include Robin Williams, Jeff Dunham, Sykes, Oswalt, Whitney Cummings and the Blue Collar Comedy guys.

Promoters, venue operators and comics all explain Washington's appeal as a comedy destination essentially the same way: The city and its environs have a huge number of younger adults (the main audience for live comedy), with better than average incomes (so they can afford tickets) and relatively high levels of education (so they get the jokes).

The area also features a variety of showcases suitable for comedy -- mid- to larger-size venues such as the Warner, Constitution Hall, Harman Center and Lisner Auditorium in the District; jumbo arenas such as Verizon Center and the Patriot Center in Fairfax; and more intimate locales such as the DC Improv and the Birchmere. Informal open-mike nights have come and gone at a number of places but still thrive in places such as Ri Ra Irish Pub in Arlington County and the Topaz Hotel in Dupont Circle.

Washington used to have its own stand-up comedy festival, but it died in 2008 after four years. No matter. The D.C. Comedy Festival morphed into the Bentzen Ball (named after a Danish man who allegedly laughed himself to death); it featured some 60 comics over four days last fall, including headliners Oswalt and Sarah Silverman (plans for a second ball haven't been announced).

One of Washington's strengths may be that it isn't Chicago or New York or L.A. when it comes to comedy, says Michael Smardak, who runs Outback Concerts, a Nashville-based music and comedy promoter that regularly books comedy shows here. Big-time touring comics face fewer competing events in Washington than they might in a more populous metropolis, which means that a hot comic is a bigger deal here than elsewhere. In relative terms, "comedy overachieves in Washington," Smardak says. "Historically, it has just been very solid."

The area's cosmopolitan nature is a plus, too. "It's a great city [for comedy] because there are so many different kinds of people here," says Allyson Jaffe, the manager and part owner of the Improv, which has been in business for 18 years. "Comics like working in D.C. venues because the audience tends to appreciate all kinds of humor. You're not going to find that in a smaller town."

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That was certainly true for four comedians of Middle Eastern descent, including Reston native Aron Kader, who created the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour back in 2005. The group began what eventually became a 16-city, five-nation tour with a sold-out show at the Lisner. They returned for two more sellouts at the Warner. The show drew many fans from the region's sizable Muslim and Arabic communities, something unlikely to happen in, say, Tampa or Salt Lake City.

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