

As Seen in

TimeOut
New York

Interview

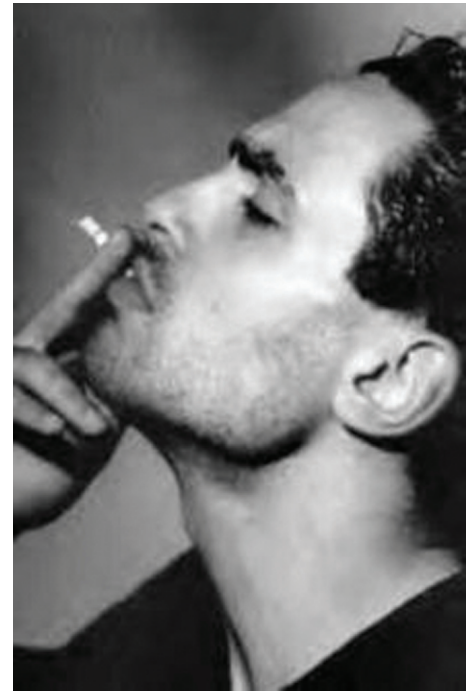
Heckle and jive

January 6-13, 2000

D.C. Benny learned to slay hostile crowds the hard way—as the "house honky" in black clubs

By Jon Hart

Comedian D.C. Benny will never forget one particular audience, and it will probably never forget him. Benny was opening for the rap band the Fugees, and the crowd was in no mood for laughs. "They did not want to see comedy. They were drinking, smoking pot," recalls Benny, 31, sitting in his Brooklyn Heights apartment. Fights were breaking out; one hooligan even jumped on the stage. But Benny did not let that interfere with his act. As the heckler tried to get in Benny's face, he staved off the drunk with one hand while holding the mike in the other. "At any minute, it could have turned into Jerry Springer," says Benny. "But I felt like I could handle that guy. I just had to keep him at a safe distance."



Benny is no stranger to hostile crowds; actually, he enjoys them. "It's like the cocaine of comedy," says Benny, a regular at rowdy clubs like the Boston Comedy Club ("It seems to be always on the verge of fisticuffs") and the Comic Strip, where a woman once showered him with her drink. "She had been stepping on my punch lines. Then she told me I was gay—and not with that exact wording," recalls Benny. "I told her the only way I would be gay is if I woke up one morning and she was lying next to me. I'd have to suck a dick just to get the taste out of my mouth."

Dressed normally in khakis and a plaid button-down, Benny looks like a harmless, preppy Jimmy Smits. "White guys think I'm Puerto Rican, but Puerto Ricans think I'm a cop," he quips. Actually, the comic's mother is Austrian, and his father is a Polish Jew. He grew up far from the Borscht Belt, though, in inner-city Washington, D.C., where he was one of the only white kids. "I was educated in the D.C. public schools," says Benny. "The only school system with white history month."

At the University of Maryland, Benny majored in English literature, but he learned more outside of class. He roomed with a half dozen Chinese immigrants and worked at a black nightclub. "People assumed I was a light-skinned black guy," recalls Benny, who eventually informed his coworkers of his racial makeup, but not before he had already won them over with his quick wit. Despite this, there were still some awkward moments. "People at the club would call the cops 'motherfuckin' crackers,' then they'd look at me and say, 'Except for you, you're whole wheat.' "

In 1992 Benny came to New York City to jump-start his comedy career, but the only place that would let him onstage was Harlem's Uptown Comedy Club. "I was the house honky," says Benny jokingly. "I was being heckled all the time." But rather than shy away, Benny honed his comeback lines, eventually delivering them with ease. ("This guy's head is so big, it takes him an hour to change his mind." Or, "This guy's so fat, he doesn't have a belt; he has an extension chord with a buckle.") Benny's quick tongue earned him a spot on Showtime at the Apollo and Friday Night Videos.

When Benny is not doing stand-up, he's boxing at Gleason's and doing a little acting. He landed a role in a UPN show called *Swift Justice*; however, on the show, Benny didn't vanquish his opponents like he does his hecklers. "I got into a fight with an Amish guy at a strip club," says Benny. "He did a Mr. Spock move, and I fell down. I got my ass kicked."

D.C. Benny performs at the Parkside Lounge every Tuesday night and the Boston Comedy Club every Friday and Saturday. See daily listings and Stand-up Clubs.