

CALENDAR

SUNDAY, AUGUST 30, 2009 • LATIMES.COM/CALENDAR

Indie Focus: The rise and fall of Germany's Red Army Faction. **D8**

FEEDBACK D2 • SMART LIST D3 • THE SUNDAY CONVERSATION D3 • HOME THEATER D6 • THE GUIDE D12 • TV THIS WEEK D17



CHRISTINA HOUSE FOR THE TIMES

ALTERNATIVE CLUBS
ARE THE HOT SOURCE
FOR MAINSTREAM
HUMOR. IS SOMETHING
FUNNY GOING ON?

THE COMEDY PIPELINE



MATT SAYLES ASSOCIATED PRESS
COMICS: Sarah Silverman is a subversive star; Harris Wittels, at top, wrote on her show.

First in a series of occasional articles about how alternative comedy is fueling Hollywood.

BY GINA PICCALO >>> Four years ago, Harris Wittels was just another alternative-comedy nerd with big dreams, the kind of guy who started doing stand-up in junior high, revered the sketches on HBO's "Mr. Show" and could recite the late comic Mitch Hedberg's bits from memory. Now the 25-year-old tours with Louis C.K., hangs out with alt-comedy princess Sarah Silverman and writes for NBC's Amy Poehler comedy "Parks and Recreation." ¶ This is what success looks like inside today's comedy pipeline. It starts in the small theaters of L.A., places like the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, Largo at the Coronet and ImprovOlympic — today's version of the Catskills of the '40s — where a comic like Wittels can be playing to small crowds and quickly end up reaching millions of fans on prime-time TV and the cineplex in one exhilarating ride. ¶ Wittels' leap up the comedy food chain says as much about his talent as it does about the changing appetites of the Ameri- [See Comedy, Page D4]



Photograph from "The Hurt Locker" by JONATHAN OLLEY
BUNNICK ENTERTAINMENT

THE BEST OF 2009 (SO FAR)

AS SUMMER WINDS DOWN, CRITICS KENNETH TURAN AND BETSY SHARKEY CALL OUT THE MOVIES THAT HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE THIS YEAR.
ON FILM, D10-11

PRIME-TIME TV

Resurrecting 'Melrose Place'

She's alive! Oh, no — she's dead again! Mystery, fresh bodies, familiar faces and old sleeping habits reboot the '90s hit.

MARIA ELENA FERNANDEZ

Todd Slavkin and Darren Swimmer are the kinds of writers who bring back popular people from the dead only to kill them.

In 1997, "Melrose Place" viewers were devastated when a car struck and killed Sydney Andrews (Laura Leighton) on her wedding day. But in the pilot of Slavkin's and Swimmer's remake, Sydney is alive and looking sensational in her middle age — until she's discovered floating in the apartment complex pool about 10 minutes into the show.

That the executive producers have chosen to kick off the new series with the resurrection and swift death of a fan favorite is a fitting tribute to the '90s version and the classic episode in which the villainous Kimberly Shaw (Marcia Cross) [See "Melrose," Page D16]



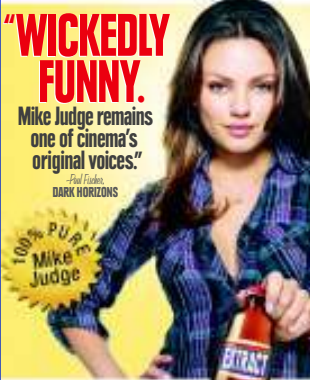
LAWRENCE K. HO Los Angeles Times

CAST: Colin Egglesfield, left, Shaun Sipos, Katie Cassidy and Michael Rady.

This Friday, the creator of
OFFICE SPACE
heads back to work

**"MY FAVORITE
COMEDY OF 2009.**
Mike Judge continues to be one of the most
unique voices in American comedy."
—*AMT IT COOL NEWS*

**"INSANELY FUNNY.
IF YOU LIKED 'OFFICE SPACE,'
YOU'LL REALLY LOVE 'EXTRACT.'"**
Mike Judge has done it again."
—*Stephen Lee, CBS-TV*



**"JASON BATEMAN
IS HILARIOUS."**
—*Jim Ferguson, ABC-TV*



A COMEDY WITH A FLAVOR OF ITS OWN
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with GEORGE S. CLAYTON (EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS) BY JULIA WONG (PRODUCED BY) MARIAM AHMAD
PRODUCTION DESIGNER TIM SHURTLEFF BY MICHAEL RUTENBERG ANDREW DAKE KENNY TOM LASSALU GLENN LUCAS
PRODUCED BY MICHAEL RUTENBERG JOHN AUSSCHLER WRITTEN BY MIKE JUDGE
DIRECTED BY MIKE JUDGE
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BALDWIN HILLS 11111 Wilshire Blvd. Baldwin Hills 310-354-1411
AND AT THEATERS EVERYWHERE



PERFORMING: A doctor's son with a dark brand of humor, Wittels writes for Amy Poehler's sitcom on NBC.

When alternative goes mainstream

[Comedy, from Page D1]
can audience. What once was primarily the domain of self-proclaimed intellectuals and artists is becoming the new mainstream. When an oddball like "The Hangovers" Zach Galifianakis is a bankable movie star, College Humor.com is owned by Barry Diller and the Internet absurdity of Funnyor Die.com is soon to be an HBO show, something has clearly shifted in the collective idea of what's funny.
"In comedy alternative is the path to the mainstream," noted B.J. Novak, a Harvard grad whose offbeat stand-up bits landed him on TV.
Or, as Silverman said: "It used to be that alternative comedy was alternative to something. It really isn't anymore," added Silverman, whose shock comedy launched her from stand-up at Largo to a hit Comedy Central show to a \$2.5-million book deal with HarperCollins last year. Years ago, someone with Wittels' dark, twisted sense of humor — with jokes about date rape and Megan's Law — was likely to be the product of a poor, lonely childhood who spent years bombing at open mikes from Tampa to Barstow. Instead, Wittels is a doctor's son who grew up in Houston, watching MTV's sketch comedy show "The State" — "That was my Monty Python," he said — and whose parents booked 200-seat performance halls so Wittels and his friends could put up their sketches. Not exactly the school of hard knocks.
Indeed, this darkly ironic, scathing, scatological and subversive humor actually disguises a more pragmatic point of view: Comedy is a savvy career move. And though serious comics have always been creatures of New York and Los Angeles, more and more of them end up here for the work. Yes, success is still a longshot and demands slavish devotion, but the opportunities — and the ethnicities of the comics themselves — are far

more diverse than they've ever been.
Study the credits of NBC's prime-time shows, for instance, and you'll find a whole crop of young comics like Wittels, an unassuming guy who looks like he just moseyed off the college quad, which is no coincidence: TV executives noticed alternative comedy selling out university campuses and generating millions of Web hits, and it got them to thinking.
"We love the fact that we can go toward some of these comedians who 10 years ago may have felt narrow, maybe harder for the entire country to get behind," said NBC's head of comedy, Jeff Ingold. "But because of the commercial success of these guys, we're finding it's OK to put them in our TV shows."
With more and more young TV viewers migrating to the Web, TV executives are trying to lure them back with the same awkward-ironic brand of humor that drew them to the Internet in the first place. But as Novak, costar, co-executive producer and writer of "The Office," points out, this isn't exactly groundbreaking strategy. Every successful mainstream comic has initially been labeled alternative, he notes. It's often just a matter of time before the mainstream catches on.
"Judd Apatow for years was synonymous with brilliant-but-canceled alternative programming, and now he is synonymous with the most mind-blowing mainstream success in comedy you could imagine. I don't think he would have been a success if he hadn't been alternative."
"Comedy is meant to be an alternative. It's an alternative to your expectation and the mainstream and the predictable. That's what the whole joke is of comedy itself."
What struck Silverman the first time she saw Wittels perform was his willingness to take something ordinary — in this case, a fast-food order at Burger

King — and turn it into something ridiculously epic.
He was opening for her that night, a big coup for a guy still working a day job as a nanny. But Wittels had laid the groundwork. Rather than work more mainstream clubs like the Improv and the Comedy Store where more traditional stand-up acts still dominate, he went the alternative route, sending his stand-up video to Upright Citizens Brigade in Hollywood. That got him a spot on the theater's "See You Next Tuesday" stand-up night, which led to a spot in its hottest show, "Comedy Death-Ray," which got the attention of Largo owner Mark Flanagan, who booked Wittels.
Wittels now says his "Have It Your Way" joke was so "performance-art" that you really had to be there. "It's impossible to type," he wrote in an e-mail, when asked to reproduce the joke. "So it does not exist in print."
Three months after that night, Silverman offered Wittels a job on her Comedy Central show.
A big tent
There's no one definition of "alternative comedy." It covers Demetri Martin's sweet-natured riffs on New Jersey furniture chain Puton World ("A magical place that becomes less comfortable over time"), Galifianakis' belligerence in the Web series "Between Two Ferns" and even the pedophile sketches by Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim on their Adult Swim show "Tim and Eric: Awesome Show, Great Job."
"One of the common traits," says comic Scott Aukerman, a co-creator of "Between Two Ferns" and co-host of UCB's "Comedy Death-Ray" night, "is just how far it'll go for a laugh."
The latest wave of alt comedy first surfaced in the 1990s with comics such as Janeane Garofalo, Beth Lapides of the long-running L.A. comedy show "Un-



CO-HOST: Scott Aukerman performs at "Comedy Death-Ray," Upright Citizens Brigade's hottest show.

THE COMEDY PIPELINE



CHRISTINA HOUSE For The Times



IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

LAUGH CENTRAL: Funnymen Adam Carolla, left, Patton Oswalt and Doug Benson (facing away from camera) at Upright Citizens Brigade.

Cabaret. "M. Shows" David Cross and Patton Oswalt, who couldn't get a gig or didn't want — stage time in traditional comedy clubs. So they started staging shows in rock clubs, coffee shops, dive bars and odd public spaces. Those cheap seats and all-ages gigs built a grass-roots following. And once the Internet picked up speed, so did the saturation of this sensibility onto the mainstream.

By 2005, NBC had premiered the U.S. version of "The Office." Apatow had released "The 40-Year-Old Virgin" and ratings spiked at Adult Swim, the late-night bizarro-ton on the Cartoon Network. 18. Within two years, Diller had bought the quirky, CollegeHumor.com, shows with a more alt sensibility such as "30 Rock" had arrived and FunnyorDie.com launched.

Early last year, Will Ferrell's *Funny or Die Comedy Tour*, headlined by Galifianakis, Martin, Andrea Savage and Nick Swardson, visited eight college campuses — plus Radio City Music Hall — and sold out every show. "Is 10,000 to 15,000 people a night alternative?" asked Nick Nucifora of Creative Artists Agency, who helped coordinate the tour.

Today's alt-comedy nerds — the same scruffy 20-somethings who pack UCB every night — aren't just devoted fans. They're a target demo. Or, as CAA TV agent Greg Cavie called them, "taste-maker hipsters." And when they laugh, the agents in the audience hear money.

"We're seeing how that audience reacts immediately," said Cavie, who helped bring the New Zealand comic duo Flight of the Conchords to the U.S. for the HBO series that's become a cult hit and Emmy nominee. "That's a great litmus test to see who's really on to something."

In L.A., alt comedy can be found in the basement club of the Ramada Inn on Vermont Avenue and karaoke bars in Koreatown. But the de facto headquarters are at UCB, tucked between a cafe and a bookstore on Franklin Avenue. There, writers of almost every late-night talk show test monologue material and sketch groups work out ideas they hope will grab the agents and casting directors in the audience.

FunnyorDie writer Seth Morris was the artistic director of UCB L.A. in the theater's first two years and watched the sea change. Actors such as Heather Graham and Jerry O'Connell started showing up in his improv classes.

"One of the ways you knew something was happening was that good-looking people started taking comedy classes," said Morris. "And they'd been told by casting directors and managers: 'You need to know improv!'"

There's a well-worn path: Take classes at UCB. Assemble an improv group and a sketch team. Perform at UCB's "Spunk" on Wednesdays and "Not Too Shabby" on Fridays, at Tre Stage's "Crashbar" and Sierra Stage's "Tuesday Night Thunder." Then corral some

friends to film your sketches and post them on YouTube.

Novak's first gig was at the Hollywood Youth Hostel in 2001, following a guy impersonating Robert De Niro on the toilet. His "very collegiate, central one-liners" failed to ignite much interest. But two years later, after Novak had a stint with Ashton Kutcher on MTV's "Punk'd," "The Office" executive producer Greg Daniels saw his set and hired him off of one joke: "I learned nothing in college. It was kind of my own fault. I had a double major: Psychology. And reverse psychology."

"I think comedy is about surprise and honesty," said Novak. "And ideally you surprise people with a sudden burst of honesty. And I think that's what 'The Office' did when it came on the air. And I think it's what 'Seinfeld' did. And what they did. People were used to comedies that were based on other comedies. Not that were based on real life. And so they stopped being funny."

"Every few years, you have, when you're lucky, a correction on television and in the movies with how people actually talk and actually think. And it feels like a revolution."

Holding down the job

FunnyorDie's Morris argues that true alternative comedy will never be mainstream. While "Arrested Development," Fox's critically acclaimed cult hit, was canceled after three seasons, CBS' broad sitcom "Two and a Half Men" is entering its seventh season with a deal for three more.

Wittels knows this clash firsthand. After he left the bawdy enclave of Comedy Central's "The Sarah Silverman Program" for the corporate environs of NBC, Wittels was in culture shock. And that delighted Silverman.

She and her writers assembled a giant collage of photos featuring Wittels flashing a very private body part for his "Silverman Program" co-writers. They had it delivered to his new office. Wittels was mortified and hid the poster.

Wittels wants to hang on to this job. "I lack some of the ambition some of those comics have," he said of his peers. "I'm comfortable going from writing job to writing job."

But he is also diligent about honing his own act. And he doesn't buy the notion that alternative comedy is an outsider art form.

"No alternative comedian wants to remain obscure," Wittels said. "Any great comedian can play both. A trap that a lot of alternative comedians fall into is thinking that they are better than those improv audiences and they hide at UCB. But the bottom line is, those are paying customers too. And it's not like an audience at the Comedy Store doesn't have a lower mandible. They can laugh."

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Funny people on the way up

Here are five rising stars of the alt-comedy scene.

GINA PICCALO

Aziz Ansari

Ansari started doing stand-up while still a business student at New York University. He and veteran Upright Citizens Brigade New York regulars Paul Scheer and Rob Huebel in 2005 formed the sketch group Human Giant, which debuted as an MTV series in 2007. This year, Ansari appears in Judd Apatow's "Funny People" and costars in UCB founder Amy Poehler's NBC sitcom "Parks and Recreation." Next year, he'll costar in Apatow Productions' summer release "Get Him to the Greek," with Jonah Hill and Russell Brand. See his blog at azizisbored.tumblr.com/.

Paul Rust

Rust left Iowa in 2004 and moved to L.A. with a film degree and a couple of short films. He signed up for classes at UCB L.A. when it opened in late 2005 and started performing sketch comedy there. When FunnyorDie.com launched, Rust posted a video every two weeks. By 2008, he had landed a starring role in 20th Century Fox's comedy "I Love You, Beth Cooper," and a small part in Quentin Tarantino's "Inglourious Basterds." Rust's now writing two features, one for Will Ferrell and Adam McKay and another (with Charlyne Yi) for Judd Apatow. See his blog at paulrust.com/.

Ben Schwartz

Schwartz left college in 2003 and spent four years studying at UCB N.Y. He used the Internet to raise his profile, posting sketches on YouTube and launching BeJetted.com, a blog of jokes he submitted as a freelance writer to David Letterman and "Weekend Update" on "Saturday Night Live." By 2007, he got his first staff writing job on "Robot Chicken" on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim and a book deal with HarperCollins. By 2008, he'd been hired by Hugh Jackman to co-write the 81st Academy Awards opening number (it that earned an Emmy nod), and was cast in two feature films ("Peep World" and "Every-



DAVID SPADE For The Times

COSTAR: Ansari has a role as "Parks and Recreation."



FRAZER HARRISON

OUT OF IOWA: Rust was a star of "Beth Cooper" film.



CHAD BLANENBERG

POSTING: Schwartz used the Internet to boost his profile.



ETHAN MILLER Getty Images

DAILY SHOW: Cenac was hired as a correspondent.



LAWRENCE K. HO Los Angeles Times

A BIG WEEK: Plaza landed good roles in succession.

body's Fine") and a network TV pilot created by "Arrested Development's" Mitch Hurwitz (though it didn't get picked up).

Wyatt Cenac

Cenac came to Los Angeles about eight years ago and got a job as a writer on "King of the Hill." He spent three years there, then left to spend the next four years soul-searching and doing sketch and stand-up comedy at UCB L.A. Posted on YouTube, his impersonation of then-Sen. Barack Obama got him some attention during the presidential campaign and led to an audition for "Saturday Night Live." But he was passed over for Fred Armisen. Last summer, Cenac was broke and panicked. Then he mailed an audition for "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart," earning a correspondent gig. Earlier this

Aubrey Plaza

Plaza moved to New York largely to be close to UCB. She got to intern at "Saturday Night Live" and page at NBC, all the while posting online videos, including her dead-on Sarah Silverman impersonation. But it wasn't until she auditioned in L.A. that her career launched. In one week last summer, Plaza landed three major roles: Seth Rogen's love interest in Judd Apatow's "Funny People," Amy Poehler's intern on NBC's "Parks and Recreation" and a part in next summer's "Scott Pilgrim vs. the World." See her site here: aubreyplaza.com/.

calendar@latimes.com



IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

WORTH THE WAIT: A line of fans stretches outside the Brigade's small Hollywood theater.

A place for the in-jokesters

The Upright Citizens Brigade, an alt-comedy hive, is also a clubhouse for celebrity comics.

The comedy nerds arrived first, confident that they'd have first choice of the 92 seats in the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater on Franklin Avenue in Hollywood. They would wait over an hour to get in. And that in itself is a status thing, because this tiny black-box theater houses the nucleus of the nation's alternative comedy scene, a place where Dan Aykroyd is always a punch line. "The style of comedy just appeals to our sensibility," waiting fan Eric Wickersham, 25, said re-

cently. His girlfriend, Jayme Burrows, 28, added, "I'm very specific about the friends I tell, because once you have seen this, everything else is disappointing." For a while, UCB felt like their little secret. For \$5, anybody can see a couple of hours of some of the best improv, sketch or stand-up comedy in the country. But now, the L.A. theater — an offshoot of the original UCB in New York, both founded by Amy Poehler, Matt Besser, Ian Roberts and Matt Walsh — is a regular clubhouse for celebrity comics.

Here, Judd Apatow tested material for "Funny People." "The Hangover's" Ed Helms has a regular puppet show on Saturday nights. The guys from MTV's "Human Giant" host a show on Monday nights. And the Tuesday night known as "Comedy Death-

GINA PICCALO