

TUESDAY

NOW IMPROV



# Funny Girls

Meet the women changing New York's comedy club scene

By TRIPP WHETSELL

LAUGH RIOT: Comic Summer Shohji performs at the Improv  
SHIHO FUKADA



Judge speeds hearing on NBC bid to KO Fox show  
SEE TELEVISION



R. Kelly shows spiritual side in new double CD  
SEE INSIDE

# Ladies stand(up) and deliver

By TRIPP WHETSELL  
DAILY NEWS WRITER

Meet the women who keep New Yorkers in stitches. Every night like clockwork, they come out by the dozens armed with microphones and cracking one-liners to anyone who'll listen.

Many aspire to achieve the gold medals of standup: sitcom deals, HBO specials or at least guest appearances on Letterman and Conan. But those journeys begin in the city's comedy clubs, toiling long hours for little money.

On a recent Wednesday night, Maureen Langan could be found zipping around town in a taxi. In between spots at Gotham Comedy Club and the Comic Strip on Second Ave., Langan touches up her makeup and goes over some new material about Martha Stewart and Anna Nicole Smith.

Think "Collateral" — only Langan wants to kill with jokes, not bullets.

Langan, a former reporter and anchor for Bloomberg Television, averages three clubs a night and earns \$15 to \$20 a show — comics earn more on weekends depending on their name recognition and experience. Langan's been doing standup full-time for seven years and plays prime spots in Manhattan.

"It's like hosting your own party and setting the tone," she says. "The minute I get up there it's like they've thrown me into the deep end of the pool and I've got to swim, and I like that."

Standups need that live audience.

"It's all about the first laugh," says newcomer Summer Shofi, 38. "Once you do it and you like it and you realize that stuff is in you, you're doomed forever."

Shofi, who looks a little like Brett Butler, recently quit her job as a special-events coordinator to perform at open-mike nights for free. One day, she says,

View" and Lifetime Television's "Girls Night Out" and hopes to turn her family-based routine into a sitcom.

But while Condon shares her private life with audiences, some performers say that the public nature of their work carries a risk.

"I've done shows where these men will see me in the audience and think we've made a special connection, which can be very troubling," says Sherry Davey, 36, a redhead from England who performs regularly at the Improv, the Comic Strip and "Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn."

"Whenever I appear on television," she says, "I get at least 15 men Googling me and sending me pictures of themselves."

Still, says Peggy Boyce, who started the Ladies of Laughter contest, "More women are entering the field of comedy each year, and if you're a woman who is really good you can get some attention because it sets you apart from the traditional old boys' network."

So what does it take to get to the next level?

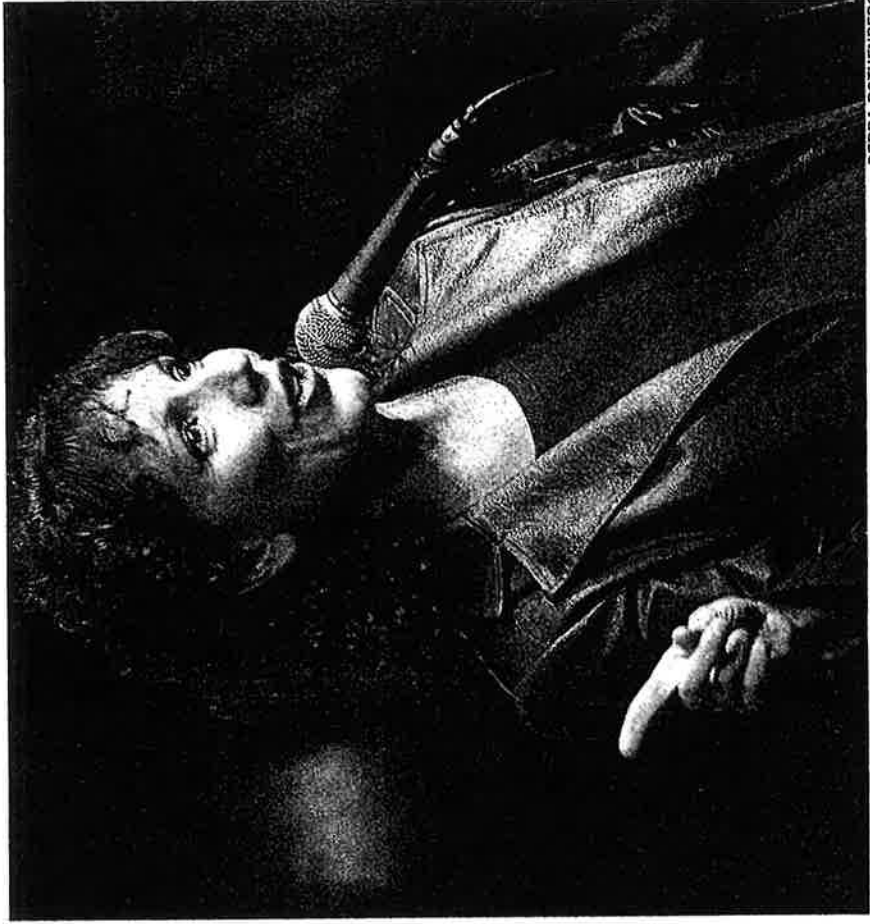
"It's not any one thing," says Eddie Brill, talent coordinator of "Late Show with David Letterman." "The biggest thing I'm looking for is intelligent material, and if they've got that and a distinctive voice then I'd be happy to put them on."

And these women share the need to make their voices heard.

Between cab rides, Langan makes the case for standup, using nearly the same words as Laurie Kilmartin, a staff writer for "Tough Crowd" who has been doing standup for more than a decade.

"It's exciting, it's challenging and I love the autonomy of it and the energy when you can really connect with people."

Of course, Langan wants to get where Kilmartin is and Kilmartin, who has been where Langan stands, says, without hesitation: "For me, the most exhilarating thing is just working out a bit and cracking people up."



DEBRA ROTHENBERG

**BEST HER THING: Maureen Langan has been doing standup for seven years.**

she'll even get paid to tell jokes.

People in the know estimate there are about 200 women riding the standup circuit in the city. Opportunities have increased with the addition this year of new clubs such as the Improv and a Times Square branch of Hollywood's Laugh Factory joining Carolines and the others. The Improv played host to this year's Ladies of Laughter contest. The winner,

Jane Condon, lives in Greenwich, Conn., with her husband and two teenage sons. She was a magazine writer until 1988, when she attended a comedy class at the New School and was hooked.

"What's great about being in this business is that I can keep doing it until I'm 100, as long as I'm funny," she says.

More than a decade after breaking into local clubs, she has appeared on "The