

Hemphill: Homing in on laughs

By Bob Sadler
special writer

The Comedy Store of Hollywood. Class of '74.

People would probably pay good money to see the 15-year reunion of all the comics who grabbed their first limelight back then.

David Letterman could be the host of such an event, or he could share the chores with Jay Leno, who went on to some late night bawling chores of his own.

Marsha Warfield, better known as Rox from NBC's "Night Court," would be there. So would Robin Williams, probably the best improvisational comic in the business today.

And certainly not lost in the shuffle would be Shirley Hemphill. Her work at The Comedy Store that year would be noticed by producer Norman Lear and his partner Bud Yorkin, which led to her role as Shirley the waitress in the late '70s sit-com, "What's Happening."

She remembers those early days at The Comedy Store quite well.

"We were all struggling at the

time. Freddie Prinze (the late co-star of "Chico and the Man") and David Brenner were getting all the prime time back then," she said. "We were all after the big stars — just before the placed closed."

"When I started there, Jay Leno was at 1 a.m. David Letterman was behind him. I was behind him. Marsha (Warfield) was in there. And Robin Williams was always the last one — because he'd go on forever. Nobody would get behind Robin, or else they'd be backstage screaming 'get him off!'"

HEMPHILL FIRST made the trek to Hollywood from her hometown of Asheville, N.C., at the insistence of Flip Wilson, who was still riding high with a successful television show.

"I sent him some jokes on a tape," she recalled, "and they were the worst. He plays them back whenever I get a big head."

Once in Hollywood, Hemphill picked up some odd jobs to support herself. She had worked as a medical receptionist in North Carolina. Eventually, Wilson intervened again

and moved her in the direction of The Comedy Store.

"I just sat there for a couple of weeks," she said. "My money started running low. I found out if you went there on a certain night and made a fool of yourself, you could get in free. The manager said that if I did well, he'd give me a slot."

She did well and joined the list of future comedy superstars on the roster. A couple of years later, a television opportunity knocked, but Hemphill almost didn't answer.

"I'd just come off and there was a man backstage asking me if I wanted to do television," she said. "At The Comedy Store then, it seemed like everybody had a card, was a producer and was doing a pilot. So I told him I wasn't interested."

"Later that night, Jimmy Walker (then starring in "Good Times") asked why I was telling Norman Lear I wasn't interested. I didn't even know who he was."

Hemphill went back to Lear and rectified the situation enough to get a screen test.

"I'D NEVER seen a script before, but I lied because I wanted to get in."

She wasn't originally chosen for the role of Shirley, the waitress at the neighborhood hangout of main characters Raj and Rerun of "What's Happening." An illness in the cast forced a reshuffling of female roles and, in Hemphill's words, "they panicked and called me."

"They asked if I could start Monday and who my agent was. Agent? I didn't have an agent! So I went to the phone book and called the first name."

"What's Happening" went on to a very successful three-season run on ABC, pegged nicely on Friday nights behind "Welcome Back, Kotter." Syndication followed for the show, and its unusual popularity led to a reunion of the cast for three more seasons in first-run syndication under the title "What's Happening Now" during the mid-80s. Between stints on "What's Happening," she starred in the short-lived sit-com, "One in a Million."

Hemphill, now 41, said she'd like



Shirley Hemphill belongs to the noteworthy class of 1974 of The Comedy Store. Her fellow graduates include Robin Williams, Jay Leno and David Letterman.

to get on television again in the future. However, in the interim, she's back out practicing her first love — stand-up comedy.

On stage, she keeps it simple, with a straight-forward observational brand of humor that has endeared her to audiences across the country.

"It looks like I'm out of control on stage," she said, "but I know what I'm doing."

"I use my observations of my family and relationships. Growing up, when all the little girls were out chasing boys, I was watching T.V. Now that I'm an old lady, I'm saying 'where'd those little boys go?'"

HEMPHILL THINKS that audiences in the country's comedy clubs are much more sophisticated than they used to be, attributing it to the huge upsurge in the number of clubs and the influx of comedy programming on cable television.

"It's not as easy now, and there's so much competition," she said. "Regardless of who you are, if you aren't any good after 10 minutes, they want you off. That's why you have to work hard and not take anything for granted."

When asked what inspires her, Hemphill unabashedly responded, "money. I'm greedy."

She was kidding and corrected herself: "Actually, I just love doing comedy."

Shirley Hemphill will appear at Chaplin's Comedy Club, 34244 Groesbeck Hwy., Fraser, Wednesday through Saturday. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m., with an additional 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For reservations, call 792-1902.

COMEDY CLUBS

Here are some listings of comedy clubs in our area. To let us know who is appearing at your club, send us the information: Comedy Listings, Observer & Eccentric, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

● BEA'S KITCHEN

Darwin Hines, Jeff Brennan and Downtown Tony Brown will appear Friday and Saturday, Jan. 27-28, at Bea's Comedy Kitchen, 541 Larned, Detroit. Showtimes are at 8:30 p.m. 10:45 p.m. For reservations, call 961-2581.

● CHAPLIN'S

Shirley Hemphill will appear on Wednesday through Saturday, Jan.

25-28, at Chaplin's Comedy Club, 34244 Groesbeck, Fraser. For information, call 792-1902.

● GALLAGHER

Gallagher will appear at 8 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 25, through Monday, Jan. 30, at the Fox Theatre in Detroit. Tickets are \$17.50 and \$15.50. For information, call 567-6060.

● COMEDY SPORTZ

Comedy Sports at the Heidelberg will have improvisational comedy at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. The club is at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. For reservations, call 995-8988.

● JOEY'S

Tom Anzalone will appear Wednesday through Saturday, Jan.

25-28, at Joey's Comedy Club, 36071 Plymouth Road, Livonia. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 8 and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. No smoking night is Thursday (also at 8 p.m. Friday).

● SAM KINISON

Sam Kinison will perform at 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 17, at the Fox Theatre in Detroit. Tickets are \$20. For information, call 567-6000.



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