

STREET CRACKS

Schiff taps life for laughs

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

A thousand anecdotes, a thousand places to tell them.

Such could sum up Mark Schiff's comedy career. He can tell you about performing standup comedy in a neighborhood so bad that "bacteria doesn't even like to go in," to the "Tonight Show" before millions of viewers where Johnny Carson gives his own seal of approval.

"He gives you that sign with his fingers," Schiff said.

As a stand-up comic for 12 years, Schiff has emerged at the top of his comedy class. His style is strictly mom and pop.

You know the stuff. Like the story when you were a kid going on vacation with your parents. You'd misbehave and they would threaten to turn the car around.

Or your father taking you to a baseball game and he gets drunk. Then there's the uncle who was always pulling off your nose.

"I do impressions of people," said Schiff, who will be appearing Tuesday through Saturday at Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle. "Not of famous people, but of your mother, your father, your uncle, your cat. People



It's taken 12 years for Mark Schiff to hone his comedic skills, he said that trace their roots back his mother and father.

will stop me in the street and say, 'Hey, how do you know my mother?'"

Comedy has always been all in the family for Schiff. Mom and dad indirectly led him to a career in it.

WHEN HE was 12, his parents let him tag along on their anniversary. The family went to the Boulevard Night Club in Queens, N.Y. A lot of comedian was drawing his fair share

of laughs while opening up for singer Al Martino.

That's when Schiff got his first taste of no respect. The comedian on stage was Rodney Dangerfield.

"The attention he was getting was unbelievable. Being an only child, we're attention freaks," Schiff said. "I said, 'I've got to get some of that.'"

After 12 years, Schiff has more than his share.

Thanks to cable television, the light of notoriety is only beginning to shine on the Mark Schiff of the world. In Schiff's case, the time during the climb appears to have been well spent.

His craft has been perfected in nearly every comedy club from the East Coast to the West Coast. He's performed at the Comedy Store in Los Angeles, Dangerfield's in New York, Caesar's in Atlantic City along with Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle.

In addition to the "Tonight Show," Schiff has appeared on "Late Night with David Letterman," "Too Close for Comfort," and was a winner on Showtime's "Comedy Laugh Off."

Schiff is busily putting together a comedy show which he hopes to sell to a cable TV network. The more

work, the merrier for Schiff.

"A jazz player can practice in his room," Schiff said. "A comedian needs to practice in front of an audience. We need to experiment before a live audience."

THE MATERIAL he experiments with is timeless. Unless people quit having parents, Schiff appears to have a long career ahead of him.

Schiff's parents have been his biggest source for material. Through the years, he estimates they have seen 150 of his shows.

His father was a truck driver who drove a cab on the weekend for extra money. His mother was a real estate agent. Schiff grew up in the Bronx.

10 blocks from Yankee Stadium where his father used to take him to see the likes of Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle.

His father died in October. "My father was a guy who came home from work every night," Schiff said. "My father was a very funny man. He had a great deadpan."

His mother was the opposite. She would become quite angry at the slightest thing, which Schiff said covers the extremes of comedy — deadpan to screaming.

His childhood was perhaps less than idyllic. For the comedian, though, it's first hour in the classroom of comedy.

"You have to come out of some pain to make people laugh," he said.

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.

will have improvisational comedy at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. The club is at 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. For reservations, call 995-8888.

● **BEA'S COMEDY**
Skeeter Murray, Bob Nelan and Downtown Tony Brown will perform on Friday and Saturday, March 31 and April 1, at Bea's Comedy Kitchen, 541 Larned, Detroit. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. For information, call 961-2581.

● **HOLLY HOTEL**
Jason Stewart will perform along with guests, Chris Jakeway and Rob Taylor, on Thursday through Saturday, March 30-April 1, at the Holly Hotel, 110 Battle Alley, Battle Creek. For information, call 634-5208.

● **CHAPLIN'S EAST**
Joe Vega will appear Wednesday through Saturday, March 29 to April 1, at Chaplin's East, 34244 Groesbeck, Fraser. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 8:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For information, call 792-1902.

● **JOEY'S**
Mark Sweetman will perform Wednesday through Saturday, March 29 to April 1, at Joey's Comedy Club, 3607 Plymouth, west of Wayne Road, Livonia. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 8 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Thursday is no smoking night. For information, call 261-0555.

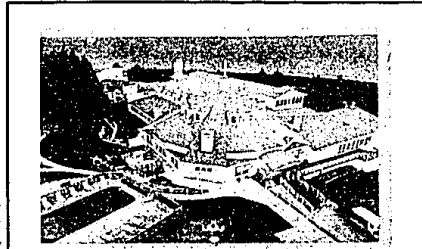
● **CHAPLIN'S WEST**
Greg Travis will perform Tuesday through Saturday, March 28 to April 1, at Chaplin's West, 16890 Telegraph Road, south of Six Mile, Detroit. For information, call 533-8866.

● **MAINSTREET**
Steve and Leo will perform on Friday through Sunday, April 7-9, at Mainstreet Comedy Showcase, 314 E. Liberty, between Division and Fifth, Ann Arbor. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Tickets are \$13. For information, call 996-9080.

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