

Street

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STREET CRACKS



Dennis Wolfberg

Wolfberg ready for his make-up

BY BOB SADLER
SPECIAL WRITER

A not-so-funny thing happened to Dennis Wolfberg on the way to the forum... I mean Royal Oak Music Theatre for a sold-out May 4 performance. He broke his hip.

It all happened in a hotel room in Charlotte, N.C., where Wolfberg was getting ready for a performance.

"I had been booked to play for the Jewish community there," Wolfberg despatched. "I guess all three of them were invited."

After taking the painful spill that caused the injury, Wolfberg struggled for 25 minutes before reaching the phone.

"The one thing that was going through my mind at the time was whether the honor bar in the room had morphine in it," Wolfberg said.

Wolfberg spent a few weeks off his feet at a home in Los Angeles recuperating, needless to say, before returning to the road two weekends ago in Seattle. Of course, the whole experience has provided him with a wealth of new material.

"If my pain can benefit people in some way by making them laugh, then it's all been worth it," Wolfberg said.

Ironically, if there was anything that moved Wolfberg in the direction of comedy, it was fear of pain. A native New Yorker, he was a sixth grade teacher in a public school in the South Bronx for 12 years. The area was so bad even Mother Teresa referred to it as a "hellhole," Wolfberg joked.

"You've seen the clips of D-Day all over television recently. Think of my teaching experience as a daily D-Day. It was relentlessly challenging. You reach some kids, and others you don't, but you give it a good try."

"By the time a lot of these kids reach the sixth grade, they're already beyond helping."

Wolfberg had five goals — he called them fantasies — when he started doing standup comedy, and he's already achieved all five. The final one was reached when Wolfberg won the Best Male Comic category at the American Comedy Awards a couple years ago.

"In no particular order, the first fantasy was to be able to travel the country and entertain people — and get paid for it," Wolfberg said. "Number two was to be able to play a place called the Westbury Music Fair, which was five minutes from the house I grew up in."

"Number three was to play Las Vegas, which years ago was the culminating club success. Number four was to do 'The Tonight Show,' and five was to win an Oscar."

The Oscar was the last one — and an unlikely one, Wolfberg admitted. But the American Comedy Awards are presented at the Shrine Theatre in Los Angeles, are televised by ABC, and have the same format.

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AT THE MIKE

One of the funniest dogs around... He adds his irreverent wit and inimitable tone to those Acurs Inters "spots" (pun intended) — he supplies the voice of the dog, and became one of the first performers to release an entertainment CD-ROM. Yes, Dennis Miller is back in town this week for two shows Thursday at the Royal Oak Music Theatre (where the laughs will still be coming from Dennis Wolfberg). Westland's own Jim McLean is slated to open. Tickets are available at all TicketMaster outlets or charge at (810) 645-6666.

If you can't make it to Woodstock '94, man... You could check out "America's Last Hippie" — Van Wiggins in Ann Arbor. He makes his way out of a purple haze and to the stage of the Main-Street Comedy Showcases for shows Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Call (313) 996-0000.

All-American lumbar at Meadowbrook... Elizabeth Jent, the "Flytype Man" from New York City, returns to the arena under the stars at Meadowbrook July 1. You can always count on Jent to deliver top-notch laughter. His show marks the first three really cool comedy shows at Meadowbrook this summer. Tickets are available at The Palace box office, all TicketMaster outlets or charge at (810) 645-6666.

Vancouver's sound heads East

The musical hoopla surrounding the World Cup games takes on a definite Canadian flavor with performances by two Vancouver groups — The Odds at CIMX's third birthday party and 54.40 at St. Andrew's Hall.

BY CHRISTINA FUOCO
STAFF WRITER

Vancouver may have lost the Stanley Cup, but bands hailing from the western Canadian city are hoping to win over fans in the Detroit area within the next week.

The Odds will be in town Saturday, June 25, to help radio station 88.7-FM (CIMX) celebrate its third birthday with a free show, featuring a couple of alternative rock acts; at the Phoenix Plaza Amphitheatre in Pontiac. The show is also part of a massive 1½-week long celebration of the World Cup games that includes a "restaurant row," artists' booths and retailers.

With harmonies and storybook lyrics similar to Squeeze's Chris Difford and Glenn Tilbrook, the Odds' 1993 album "Bedbugs" is by far one of the year's best releases.

The album is a tongue-in-cheek, loosely based concept album about a young man's coming of age. Descriptions next to the songs like "Gets lost," "Gets offed" tell the listener which part of the man's life the songs represent.

The Odds didn't set out to do a record like that. The band members wrote songs separately, and when they got together to record "Bedbugs," they realized that their songs all had a common bond — relationships.

"When we finished the record, we started putting the songs together in some sort of order, and we realized there was some similarity," said Craig Northey, the Odds' lead singer. "It turned out to be interesting, cheery and serendipitous at the same time. We put the little descriptions next to it, so everyone could read along."

The Odds, whose follow-up album will be released by Warner Bros. in late fall, are excited about returning to the Detroit area. Northey figures the band's biggest crowd was when they played the Freedom Festival in Windsor, Ont., last year.



Odd men out: The Odds — Paul Brennan (from left), Steven Drake, Doug Elliott and Craig Northey — help radio station 89X-CIMX celebrate its birthday with a free show in Pontiac June 25.

"I think that was the highest attendance figure we ever had — if you counted the fish flies," he said. "They were mostly all over Doug (Elliott, bassist). They were covering him like the Guinness Book of World Records' guy with the beard made of bees."

Needless to say, he's pleased that the Odds' show Saturday is nowhere near water.

Fellow Vancouverians, the quirky alterna-poppers 54.40 will perform

STREET BEATS

at St. Andrew's Hall in Detroit on Monday, June 27, to promote its latest Canadian release "Smilin' Buddha Cabaret." The title of the album, due to be released here in the fall, pays homage to the landmark Vancouver club where 54.40 made its debut. Although the club closed in 1989, its spirit has remained at the heart of 54.40. Smilin' Buddha's neon sign, which the band recently bought, is the centerpiece of 54.40's show.

"It's a Vancouver landmark," said drummer Matt Johnson of the club. "The history of it goes back to, I believe... the mid-'50s. There's a lot of lore that goes along with it. Cheech and Chong supposedly met there. (Jim) Hendrix has played there. It's deep rooted in Vancouver history."

54.40 is fairly planted in Vancouver as well. The quartet was formed 15 years ago by vocalist/guitarist Neil Osborne and bassist Brad Merritt, who were inspired to start a band after seeing shows at the Smilin' Buddha. Although 54.40's most frequently played hit around here is the snappy "I Go Blind," Johnson said that in Canada many have overlooked the band's quirkiness in lieu of its political statements.

"Our prior releases were taken too seriously, especially in Canada, because of our songs and the benefits we do," he said. "I think for a number of years we were kind of pegged as a politically correct band."

"I think the band's always had a

sense of humor. I don't think it's been translated that well."

Nevertheless, Johnson, who's been a member of 54.40 since 1985, is pleased with the success of his band, which also includes guitarist/vocalist Phil Compere.

"It does say a lot that fact that we have stuck around this long. For us, success has always been the longer we stay around, and we enjoy what we're doing. That's successful enough for us."

The free 89X Birthday Bash on Saturday, June 25, also includes the Afghan Whigs, Beck, Superchunk, Scraw!, Polvo, Sponge and Triaman's Water. It starts at 4 p.m. at the Phoenix Plaza Amphitheatre, 10 Water St., Pontiac. Call (810) 335-4850.

54.40 plays St. Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit, with Junkhouse and Sonic Boomerang at 8 p.m. Monday, June 27. Tickets are \$9. Call (313) 961-MELT.

Ball, Burns bring blues to Frog Island



Marcia Ball: At the Frog Island Festival in Ypsilanti.

BY MARK GALLO
SPECIAL WRITER

"I woke up to one of those steady, tropical rains this morning," Marcia Ball related by phone from her Austin, Texas, home last week. "Now it's a sauna."

Ball knows a lot about heat, particularly the injection of it in performance. One of the premier boogie pianist/vocalists in the country, she's guaranteed to add a few degrees to the Frog Island Music Festival, the annual site of summer set for Ypsilanti's Depot Town this weekend. Outside of Katie Webster, who Ball calls "the Godmother I'd never known before," and whose Lake Charles, La., home is 20 miles from Ball's Vinton birthplace, the list of truly incendiary female pianists is a short one. That she's in such constant demand is no surprise.

And with a new CD to promote, her first in five years, this appearance promises to be a major treat.

"It's in the can," she said of the new Rounder CD, to be entitled

"Blue House."

Expected to be out in August, there will be a few new stylistic things to grab the ear on "Blue House," but "not anything too radical," she promised.

On the subject of the blues, legendary Detroit bluesman Eddie Burns, making an all-too-rare local appearance, is sure to be one of the highlights of the weekend.

As much as she's enjoying its most substantial popularity in years, Burns is proof positive that, as with all manner of U.S. pop culture, blues is far more appreciated across the oceans. Just back from a tour that took him to Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland ("It was the first time I'd played Helsinki in 25 years"), he has some pretty harsh thoughts on the local blues scene that has turned its back on many of the players that put Detroit on the musical map.

"It's all rock'n'roll and rockabilly; it's a joke," he said. "I played here when they were playing blues. Now,

it's all dog-eat-dog. The people who deserve the right money aren't getting it."

The internationally renowned guitarist/vocalist known where of he speaks.

Born in Belzoni, Miss., in 1928, it was as a 20-year-old that he first came to Detroit.

Stranded in Iowa with his guitar-playing compatriot, John T. Smith ("I was a harmonica player. Want'n no clubs to play in Waterloo, so we played on street corners and at house parties."), they met a woman, visiting a relative from Detroit. In short order, she convinced Smith that Detroit was a much more happening town, and the two of them convinced Burns of the same.

When they first hit town, Hastings Street and Black Bottom, the birthplace of the local blues scene "were already happening." Within a couple of weeks, he met John Lee Hooker, and his life was changed.

See FESTIVAL, 7A

IN CONCERT

Pine Knob Music Theatre, I-75 and Sashabaw Road, Independence Township, (rock) (810) 377-0100
RAY CHARLES
 With Tower of Power at Meadow Brook Music Festival on Oakland University campus, Waterford Boulevard and Adams Road, Rochester, (R&B) (810) 377-0100
THE MACHOS AND SURGERY AT BLIND PIG
 205-208 S. First St., Ann Arbor, (jazz/rock) (313) 966-8555
THE GRASSES
 With Wesley and The Flying Saucers, Intellectuals Mosque and Guy Hevans at Griff's Grub, 49 N. Saginaw, Pontiac, (rock) (810) 334-9292

KEEPER
 Hosts a blues jam at The Office, 15414 Telegraph, Redford, (blues) (313) 553-4477
THE ALLMAYERS
 Q Club, 29 S. Saginaw St., Pontiac, (blues) (810) 334-7411
FRANK LAMB AND STONE TEMPLE PILOTS VJ-see appreciation night
 3-D, 1815 N. Main St., Royal Oak, (video) (810) 965-3344
Wednesday, June 22
METALLICA
 With Derrig and Succidal Tendencies at Pine Knob Music Theatre, I-75 and Sashabaw Road, Independence Township, (rock) (810) 377-0100

ARMIAN BELEV
 With the Psychodots at Majestic, 4140 Woodward Ave., Detroit, (rock) (313) 963-7880
BOBBY LEWIS
 Big Fish, 700 Town Center Drive, Dearborn, (blues) (313) 335-6350
PETS OR MEAT
 With Thunderbird Choir and Crazy Jacks at Griff's Grub, 49 N. Saginaw, Pontiac, (rock) (810) 334-9292
MATRACA BERS
 Magic Bag, 22918 Woodward Ave., Farmdale, (jazz/rock) (810) 944-3330

See IN CONCERT, 7A