

Today he BRINGS THE PAIN to his act for laughs, but his fast rising comedy career has been thirteen hard years in the making. By Craig Barboza

It is early afternoon at Harpo Studios in Chicago, and the reservation lines are blowing up with callers. Word has gotten out that Chris Rock is coming to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and everyone is eager to catch a glimpse of this 31-year-old from Brooklyn, who has been hailed by critics as one of the most gifted and talented comedians working today—as well as one of the smartest.

In the past year he's been all over the television, doing the voice of Orlando Magic star Anfernee Hardaway's alter ego, Li'l Penny, on Nike commercials, sending subversive dispatches as the presidential campaign correspondent for "Politically Incorrect," and prodding customers to dial 1-800-COLLECT for MCI. He's also hosted the 1996 Billboard Music Awards from Las Vegas and gone one-on-one with Mr. Basketball himself, Michael Jordan, on the cover of *Vibe*.

more than cracking jokes. It's also about an image. He has to be someone who can not only make you laugh about all of this generation's dashed hopes, fallen heroes and absurdities but also get you to pay \$135 for a pair of kicks with a swoosh stitched on the side.

A few minutes with Rock will show you that being funny is his primary instinct, and he almost always is, even when digging deep for answers. He's also street-smart and quick on his feet,

qualities that made him especially appealing to HBO, which produced his five-part variety show. When it aired in February and March, *The Chris Rock Show* won raves for masterly monologues, interviews, music and pretaped comedy sketches.

But don't expect to see Rock popping crystal at Hollywood parties or celebrity benefits. When he's not busting his rump, he loves to kick back at home and watch his big-screen TV: He's a serious Knicks fan.

A Piece of The

ROCK

His stand-up act *Bring the Pain*, a fast, furious and funny look at the major divisions in America—race, sex and class—made audiences laugh so hard they almost went into hysterics. The spin-off album, *Roll With the New*, was released in April. It is expected to be one of the highest-selling comedy albums in years. Forget hot, he's on fire! Everybody from NBC to Walt Disney is hoping to get something cooking with him.

They'll all have to take a number. Rock signed with DreamWorks this year, an entertainment company founded by Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen. He is also finishing a humor book, due out this fall, for Hyperion, which reportedly paid him \$1 million. When he finishes a 30-city concert tour, Rock is slated to shoot at least one motion picture over his summer "break." He's so busy he can barely enjoy his recent marriage to Malaak Compton.

At a Saturday-afternoon photo shoot, Rock is resting in a corner, near the window. He is dressed all in black, in a button-down shirt and polyester pants, and bouncing possible book titles off friends and associates. "How about *I Killed Nicole?*" he quips.

In person, as onstage, this new bad boy of comedy comes off as both hard and sophisticated. The secret to his success may lie, in part, in his ability to effortlessly combine opposites. Rock knows it's

"Y'know, my life really hasn't changed that much," Rock says, frankly. "I'm getting a lot of attention, but I live in the same spot, same woman. I bought a car [a Range Rover]. I haven't really done anything. I haven't left the country or anything. I party less—I do everything less. I'm just trying to keep an even keel.

"It's like we had a big party after the show last night," he says, referring to the wrap party for *CRS*. "I didn't celebrate at all."

Why not?

"It's like a team that wins the play-offs. There's no time to celebrate when you win the play-offs."

"I'll start celebrating when I'm in a position where I know my lifestyle will never change. Not that I could lose it all, but my lifestyle could change," he says, looking away from the vanity mirror where he's being powdered and buffed. "I got about five years' worth of money and, hopefully, about sixty-five more to live. So I got sixty years of money to make, and I got to make it within the next, y'know, ten years."

Rock is the first to admit he hasn't always been this levelheaded. A few years ago he bought a \$40,000 Corvette with only \$50,000 in the bank (he says after insuring it he was \$2,000 in the hole). He was also "running around in limos with models" and had "a different girl every week."



But Rock was dead broke before that, telling jokes and doing stand-up out of state for \$300 a week. In an age where some comedians are swept up off the club circuit after one show and given a development deal to become the next Seinfeld or Rosanne, he has paid his dues, 13 years of them.

Rock was discovered way back in 1984 by another Brooklynite, Eddie Murphy. The star of last summer's hit comedy *The Nutty Professor*, Murphy was at The Comic Strip in Manhattan when the manager brought the 18-year-old to his table. Rock wasn't scheduled to go on until much later that night, but Murphy snapped, "Put the kid on next," and the lineup shuffled quickly. Shortly after that, Chris found himself on a plane to LAX in sunny California.

"Chris had a Jheri curl, and his tooth was chipped, and he was really funny. He had stage presence," Murphy recently told Oprah. "I'm a comic, so I can look and tell when someone's the real deal or just someone whose friends thought they were funny and got onstage. Chris is a student of comedy, and he's real."

Although Murphy gave him his first break—putting him down for the HBO special *Uptown Comedy Express* and a small part in *Beverly Hills Cop 2*—back in the mid-'80s, Chris Rock was far from a household name. For years Rock was the wrong guy in the wrong place at the wrong time. He did three seasons on *Saturday Night Live*, where he created memorable characters such as Nat X (a riled-up black-power militant late-night host), but that was when audiences were watching *In Living Color*. When he moved over to *ILC* during the 1993-94 season, it was too late; the show was already washed up.

In Hollywood, Rock had lousy roles in movies like *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka!* and *Boomerang*. *New Jack City* was the one exception. In that 1991 film, starring Wesley Snipes as a Harlem drug lord, Rock was convincing, and at times hysterical, as Pooky, the crackhead turned police informant. His breakthrough role was supposed to be Gusto in *CB4*, which Rock also wrote

and produced. This 1993 spoof on hard-core rap opened Number One at the box-office but quickly vanished; even rappers dogged the movie in their songs.

Since then, a lot has changed. For one, the offers have started to pour in, as many as 10 scripts a week compared with just three a month two years ago. And Rock is now being presented with a variety of roles, ranging from Jim Carrey-ish broad, physical comedies to a big, dramatic role in *Species 2*.



"Chris had a Jheri curl, and his tooth was chipped, and he was really funny"— Eddie Murphy on the 18-year-old Rock.

The main thing Rock wants is star power—the ability to determine his own fate, meaning better access to good material and more assurance of creative control. He'll probably get both.

"There's tremendous heat on Chris in Hollywood," says Reginald Hudlin, the director of *Boomerang* and Rock's close friend. "I think *Bring the Pain* just really blew everyone's mind in the industry, black and white. I remember being at Andre Harrell's [CEO of Motown Records] in the Hamptons last summer, and, I swear to God, Chris Rock's tape was permanently playing in the TV room," he recently recalled by telephone from his Los Angeles headquarters. "Day or night, there were always at least three or

four people in there laughing their heads off."

At least part of his appeal lies in his politically sharp humor and incendiary wit. Unlike Jeff Foxworthy (who romanticizes redneck culture), or most of the raunchy comedians from the *Def Comedy Jam* troupe (who revert to shock tactics in order to disguise weak material), Rock frowns on ignorance, white or black.

His favorite topics are the "3Rs"—race, religion and relationships, which he takes on with stinging satire, drawing refreshingly original conclusions. "Who's more racist, black people or white people?" he asked the predominantly black Washington, D.C., audience in his second HBO special. "Black people! Know why? Cuz we hate black people, too! . . . There's a civil war going on between black people and there's two sides: black people and niggas . . . Niggas like to keep it real—rrecaal dumb!"

"He wants to be respected for a certain intelligence beyond anything else," says his agent, Michael Rotenburg, who has been guiding the young star's career since *SNL*. "There are a lot of places in his material he won't go as a performer because he may feel that it's beneath his ability."

Some think that his stint on *Politically Incorrect* was pivotal for his career. The timing couldn't have been better. Rock added much-needed comic relief to the primary proceedings in white-bread New Hampshire. He also attended the Young Republicans Convention, where he said he felt "like I'm at the Million White Boy March." Stephen Saban of *Esquire* wrote that Rock's reports "were the high point of Campaign '96."

"That was crucial," says Nelson George, the author and critic who served as producer on *CRS*. "Everybody from Dan Rather . . . to daily columnists thought he was funny. . . . Even Stanley Crouch (a black conservative) picked up on Chris," George says, pointing out that the *60 Minutes* coverage of *PI* prominently featured the comic. "So pacemakers then wrote about him in smart publications, and it began to trickle down into other media."

Rock has now become one of only a handful of black comedians, and the first in 10 years, to cross over. In fact, he has as many white fans today as he does black—Jerry Seinfeld, Warren Beatty and Howard Stern among them. It's a testament, some say, to his broad range and dexterity with timely issues.

"Comedy has a lot to do with intelligence and point of view," George adds, "and Chris has the ability to make jokes that both a college-educated, 20- or 30-year-old white man can laugh at and a black woman in the projects can laugh at. It's because he has a pretty wide range of reference about what's funny."

The block where Rock and his wife, Malaak, live today—a three-bedroom carriage house just around the corner from Spike Lee and Rosie Perez—is not too far from where the comedian was raised. He grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, on Decatur Street, the



oldest of seven children, in a family with strong, supportive parents who also had a good sense of humor.

Rock was, in his own words, an underachiever, who preferred reading newspapers and magazines to studying. He was also bussed to classes from grade school all the way through James Madison High School, where he eventually dropped out.

"I got horrible grades. I once got a 13 in math," he admits, with a subtle half-roll of his mahogany-brown eyes. "I don't even know how they came up with that number." His mother, a teacher of the mentally ill, broke out in laughter when he showed her. "It was too low for her to even get mad. It became kind of a joke around the house."

Julius Rock, his father, drove a delivery truck for the *Daily News* and taught him the importance of integrity, hard work and responsibility. "From the time I was seven my father was telling me the kind of man I was going to be. Every action I did was reflective of what kind of man I was going to be. Well, if you do this, what kind of man are you going to be? A good man does this. A man does this. Being a man was really big with my dad," Rock says, thinking back. "'One day you're going to be a man,' he used to say, 'and that's some big shit so I want to make sure you're ready.'"

Rock wasn't ready for the loss of his father, who passed away suddenly a few years ago. "It was probably the most important thing that ever happened to me," he says, pausing, perhaps thinking back to the initial impact. Rock believes his father was a closer comic, full of personality and eager to entertain every face in the crowd. His death is a subject Rock has yet to approach comedically, but he plans to on the upcoming tour.

To prepare for *Roll With the New*, Rock is reading and listening to a lot of music, everything from Ice Cube to Marvin Gaye. He thinks it's important to look to other mediums for material. Live stand-up is like jazz, he says. "It's all the classics. People redoing the classics."

Rock wants the world to know he's not about to pull a Robin Williams or a Steve Martin and desert the stage to become an actor. He loves working before a live audience and is absolutely content with being the leader of the new school of live comedy. After all, he's dreamed of being a big-league comedian since his days at James Madison.

Rock doesn't actually write new material. Instead, he carries around a black-and-white composition notebook, in which he scribbles down ideas: affirmative action, abortion, athletes on drugs, black-on-black crime. The notebook is filled with chicken scratchings, little more than phrases or sentences. The ideas that make the cut are fleshed out live, onstage.

"I got to do something about how we don't have a black leader," he says, sifting through the frayed pages, completely unaware that he has become one in his own right. "I like to not bore myself," he says, laughing. "I just try to make a show I'd want to see. And then, hopefully, I'm no different. There's nothing really special about me, I believe. If I get it, there's a million guys and women who get it too." ■

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