

# comic relief

Photographer Dan Dion is addicted to stand-up comedy, but his lasting portraits of classic comedians are no joke.

Photographs by **DAN DION**

Photographer Dan Dion believes that comedy is magic. "Stand-up is the most honest performing art there is," he explains. "It's magic. There's one person, one microphone and nothing else in between. You'll know immediately if people are getting you or if they think you suck. It's not like you have to wait to read your reviews tomorrow. Your reviews are instantaneous. People are either laughing or they're not." A self-described "comedy junkie," Dion has made a name for himself by photographing more than his fair share of comedy legends, which explains why Chris Mazzilli, owner and founder of the Gotham Comedy Club, has commissioned him to install a permanent 100-piece portrait exhibition at the new flagship location of the popular venue. "I selected Dan for this project because Dan's photos capture the true essence of a comedian," Mazzilli says. And according to Dion, a comedian's essence is no laughing matter. "I don't ask them to do things — wacky stuff," he explains. "If you look at most of my work, they're not kooky joke photos." In fact, the only time he takes purposefully funny images is when he's shooting musicians. "If I can make my rock stars look like comedians and my comedians look like rock stars, that's the best," he explains.

Instead of directing his comic subjects, asking them to hold a bunch of balloons or do spit-takes, Dion shoots them with the sharp, virtually undetectable presence of a cat burglar. Often, before the comedian even realizes the shoot has begun, it's over. And that's exactly why "painless" is the word most often used to describe his sessions. "Because so many shoots for these guys are *painful*," Dion adds. But keeping his clients comfortable isn't his only goal. What he really wants is a great shot, and, in his opinion, celebrity photographs aren't always worth a thousand words, but he won't stand for anything less. "Even if that person *weren't* famous, would it still be a good picture?" he asks himself. "Would you still want to look at that, if it were just a regular Joe?"

As the house photographer for the Fillmore Auditorium, the Warfield Theatre and Punchline Comedy Club in his hometown of San Francisco, Dion has had the opportunity to shoot some of his favorite comedians, including George Carlin, Jerry Seinfeld and Dave Chappelle. But there are plenty of comedy greats he'd still love to get his hands on, including Woody Allen, Steve Martin, Mel Brooks and Bill Cosby, who famously assaulted an unwanted photographer while dining at a restaurant. "The photographer sued him, and he was found guilty," Dion explains, "and Cosby was fined *one* dollar. In a sense, it tells you where our legal system places the value of photographers. If it only costs a dollar



Dan Dion

to assault us, a lot of celebs would be like, 'Here's \$20. I'm gonna kick his ass.' But on the other hand, I firmly believe that a lot of photographers really deserve to be taken out and beaten. The paparazzi make my job and legitimate photographers' jobs that much harder." But the truth is Dion doesn't have much to complain about. Currently at work on a book of his portraits, he's got his hands full with photo projects and a baby daughter, who's quickly become his favorite subject. "They say never work with children or animals," he laughs. "Well, comedians are often both. So I have experience in both areas. Thankfully, she's just a really happy, giggly, smiley little girl. I'm lucky that way." **JANINE ANDERSON**

## ROBIN WILLIAMS

"He mugs a lot for the camera, making a lot of faces. In this case, there was just one frame that had this moment where he wasn't mugging. He was just Robin Williams. He wasn't the performer Robin Williams. He wasn't onstage thinking about how it was going to look in a picture. He was just genuinely laughing, which stood out."





### JERRY SEINFELD

"He was really cool but definitely not on. He's got his stage persona and then he's just an affable, likable guy ordinarily. This is an example of the work kind of snowballing because he doesn't do photo shoots. It's very rare. And you can imagine why. But he hangs out at Gotham Comedy Club all the time and became appreciative of my work. I'd shot Robert Klein and George Carlin, and Klein is one of his heroes, so he agreed to do it. This was one of the shots that he just loved. He thought he looked like Buster Keaton."



### GEORGE CARLIN

"I was about eight-years-old when my best friend's hip dad had a George Carlin album, and there were lots of dirty parts. Some jokes I didn't understand because I was too young. But he did this bit where he asked, 'Where is all the blue food? Why don't we have blue food?' And to my little eight-year-old mind, it was like, 'No one's ever asked a question like that before! He's right!' When I met him, he was just the nicest guy. He was everything that I could have hoped he'd be. The shot on the piano was done at Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco. His stage presence is very biting and angry, but he's not like that at all. I gave him a print from the piano session, and a month later, he phoned me up and asked if he could buy another print for his daughter. And to me, that was the ultimate. It was a great feeling, like a young musician getting to open for one of his heroes or have them say, 'I listened to your song and really loved it.'"



#### SARAH SILVERMAN

"This was actually taken at my house. She was playing at the Punchline, and I'd met her and hung out with her before at the club, but I'd never done a portrait of her. So I brought her to my house and shot her up against the quilt a friend made and gave to my wife and I for our wedding. Sometimes I choose a picture because it's so different from all the rest of them." With regard to her comedy, he says, "If you don't like it, don't watch it. You don't have to go to her shows. You don't have to see her movie. You don't have to participate in the Sarah Silverman Fan Club, of which I'm a member. It's not like she's destructive. I think Sarah's comedy is smart."

#### ELLEN DEGENERES

"She used to spend a lot of time here in San Francisco when she was just starting out, and in 1985, I'd seen her come in second to Sinbad at the San Francisco International Comedy Competition! It was a crime. She was so funny, and Sinbad is, you know, Sinbad. Second place is actually called the Robin spot in that competition because Robin Williams also came in second. So whoever comes in second usually ends up having a better career than whoever wins." When asked who Williams came in second to, Dion laughs, "Exactly."







### DAVE CHAPPELLE

"I've been shooting him for nine years, and this was shot two years ago at the Warfield Theatre. My home club here, the Punchline, is his favorite club in America. I shot him there this past Monday, and he brought Mos Def onstage with him. He got onstage at 11:30 pm and left the stage at 3 am. He did three and a half hours of material. There aren't too many comics who can be up there for that long. I'm lucky that I've known him for awhile because right now his big thing is that everyone wants something from him. Everyone wants a piece of Chappelle. It's good that I appreciated him and photographed him nearly ten years ago, so there's a trust there that wouldn't necessarily exist with someone he'd never met before. He's as famous as any comedian can be right now."

### CHRIS ROCK

"This was at the height of his fame, not that he's gone down, but he was definitely at his peak. I didn't have a lot of time with him, but he was really cool and cooperative. The best thing for me is when I'm able to show people my work before I shoot them, especially in terms of these big guys like Chris Rock. When they look at my book, it's full of their friends, people they know. My respect for the art of comedy comes through. I shot probably three rolls of him, which is not a lot. But when I'm doing this, I'm only shooting for *one* shot. That's all that matters. So I just shoot and let people relax. I let it happen."

Visit Gotham Comedy Club, located at 208 West 23rd Street in NYC, or [DanDion.com](http://DanDion.com) to view more of his work.

