

What Larry Wants

Larry David gets down—on packing, audiences and wearing a chauffeur's cap

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THE EAR

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Stand-up comedians need someone to bounce their stuff off of. It's usually a close friend, because you have to say what's funny out loud to someone you trust before you perform in front of an audience. Any comic with a brain has an Ear or two he entrusts with his comedic life—in other words, his material. The Ear is a sounding board. He gets to know a comedian's cadence, his point of view, his mind. Most stand-ups never step on-stage without going through the routine with their Ear. I have had the opportunity to be the Ear for some of the greatest comedy minds in the business. One example is Larry David, my friend and colleague for more than 20 years, who was a guest on my show Sit Down Comedy.

DS How are you? You look a little bothered.
LD I scan the faces in the audience to see if I know anybody—because if I do, I run right out in a second. So much better to be in front of strangers, isn't it?

DS You mean than to actually know someone in an audience?
LD I'd totally freeze up if I saw a relative out there.

DS Well, relatives had to have come to *Seinfeld*, didn't they?
LD Yeah, but *Seinfeld* was okay. I wasn't in that show. I was just standing on the side. "Come in, folks, enjoy yourself." And then they give you notes. "Larry, come here, I want to tell you something. I didn't like the way Jerry said that line." My parents never saw me do stand-up in all the years I did it.

DS Because you didn't want them to?
LD I didn't want them there. When I did the show *Fridays*—it was a *Saturday Night Live* kind of show—my mother had to take 20 milligrams of Valium just to watch it. Just to watch her poor son. How's he gonna get through it? So to see

me do stand-up, never in a zillion years. I wouldn't be able to get a word out.

DS Could you support yourself as a stand-up comic?

LD No, because I didn't want to travel.

DS That's bad for a stand-up.

LD I don't like packing. It doesn't suit me. There's so much thought that has to go into one pack. It's so taxing. I don't know how anybody can travel—it's the worst thing. You're thinking about underwear and socks and sweaters for 12 days in advance—it's too much. You could have a breakdown doing that. So I just stayed in New York and did these clubs that would just give you cab fare.

DS What do you think makes stand-up so hard? Is it that you have to establish an identity with the audience when they don't know you at all?

LD Exactly. They don't know who you are, and they're very demanding.

DS In what way?

LD They want to be fed, like sharks.

DS Right.

LD They want jokes, jokes, jokes, jokes! And if they go a minute without one, they stop liking you.

DS It's true. I would do tested, good material all the way through the show. Then when I would try the new piece of material, the audience would stop laughing. Like they wanted to take back their laughter. Like a bathtub draining.

LD I did a set at the Improv one night, and I walk off the stage, and this guy comes up to me and says, "I'm Jim McCauley. I'm the talent booker at *The Tonight Show*, and I just want you to know you can never come on the show!" He said, "Johnny wouldn't like you."

DS Not exactly Knute Rockne. Before stand-up, what did you do?

LD I had a variety of odd jobs. I was a private chauffeur.

DS Now, as a chauffeur, you have to treat people nicely...

LD Ostensibly, yes. I once worked for an elderly woman who was kind of half blind, but she wanted me to wear the cap every day. The uniform. And I would argue with her. I'd go, "Why? Why do I have to wear this uniform? I don't understand why you're humiliating me like this!" I remember it as one of the lowest points in my life. I have a college degree, okay? And this is what I'm doing for a living. I don't know what I'm gonna do with my life. Then one day, I'm leaning against the limo, waiting for



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her, and a guy I know from college walks down the street. He sees me with a cap on, tilted back, smoking a cigarette. He's lookin' at me like he can't believe his eyes. And I go, "Yeah, yeah, it's me!" I couldn't quit the job, because that was my only source of income, but I said, "I'm not gonna wear this f--kin' cap anymore. That's it. I'm not wearin' the uniform." So I began to take advantage of her blindness. I would take the cap off, and I wouldn't have the tie on. And I would hear from the backseat, "Do you have your cap on?" And I'd go, "Yeah, I got the cap on."

DS Did you ever think *Curb Your Enthusiasm* would be a big success?

LD Oh, God, are you kidding?

DS I felt you thought it was just for us, in a way. A small group.

LD Yes, some people would like it.

DS In one of our shows, you had your wife's pubic hair stuck in your throat. Did you ever think for one second people would think that's crossing the line?

LD No, no, no. I think that's right on the line. If you take the dive that has a high degree of difficulty and you land it, you get more points from the judges. But if you take the easy dive, you don't get anywhere. You have to take some of these things and see if you can thread the needle.

DS People think *Curb* is all improvised, but the stories are actually carefully written.

LD Right, it's a very detailed outline. It's about seven or eight pages, but, still, within this outline we improvise.

DS Right, so one of the reasons you weren't fully improvising is because you can't act?

LD I don't like acting. I don't want to wait for somebody else to talk when I feel like talking. And it's the best of both worlds, really, because you know there is acting involved but there's also stand-up involved,

because you're making stuff up while you're talking.

DS But now that you've unleashed this improv wave, all pilots try to be like *Curb*, try to improvise leaving out the writing part. And very few succeed, because that's the most important part.

LD The story is the most important part.

DS You know what question I'm asked the most about you?

LD Yes: Is that what he's really like?

DS Right.

LD So what do you tell them?

DS When you see W.C. Fields in a movie, he's playing a character. He's not that way in real life.

LD But he doesn't call himself W.C. Fields in the movie.

DS Then does it bother you that people confuse you as being that person on *Curb*?

LD I like that person. I love that guy—I really do. That's who I really want to be. There's no bulls--t with that guy. From me, all you get is bulls--t. I'm so unbelievably dishonest. I fake my way through every day, and that guy doesn't.

DS What was your notion of what success could be? Did you think about having money? Being rich?

LD My notion was maybe I'd be a good comedian. I was hoping for some kind of cult following, and I would have these rabid fans. And I thought if I could just get that, it would be *so* enough. I didn't care. I didn't want to be on TV. I never thought about money. I thought about having enough to get by. But I never thought, I have to make money! All of that was just a fluke. All I wanted to be, honest to God, was a really good comedian.

DAVID STEINBERG has directed episodes of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Weeds*, written *The Book of David* and is currently back on the lecture circuit.