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the eye



It's Kind Of a Funny Story...

columbia's comedy renaissance

by Hillary Busis

searching for health care's holy grail ∞ randall balmer's faith in democracy ∞ how the other half drinks

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IT'S KIND OF A FUNNY STORY

Columbia gets serious about on-campus comedy, pg. 07.

by Hillary Busis
cover illustration by Rebekah Kim

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Walking onto campus yesterday, I noticed that some arm of the school's bureaucracy had placed signs behind Lerner Hall's large glass façade in commemoration of the building's 10-year anniversary. The signs were notable only for their incredible lack of self-awareness. One of them oohed at the architect's frenzied sketches of what would become Lerner's awful zig-zagging ramps; another aahed at his pretentious declaration that "movement is what defines space." As someone nearby said: "They're making it look like they built the World Trade Center. It's just a bunch of old-ass pictures of old-ass guys." That seemed on the mark.

My few years at Columbia have been full of moments like this, when pomposity or vanity or condescension have just begged to be called out for what they are. The first time I heard the dismissive phrase "*that* guy" used to describe the kid in class who never shuts up, I felt a sort of catharsis in realizing

that some other person, somewhere, had perfectly articulated a feeling I myself had harbored. In a place as bloated with self-regard as Columbia, it's deeply comforting to know that you're not the only person rolling your eyes.

That's why the health of the campus comedy scene matters—Columbia, to stay sane, desperately needs to poke fun at itself. As Hillary Busis explains in this week's cover story, though, Columbia comedy groups have historically flickered in and out of existence, and the same structural problems that beleaguer most student groups—finding talent, retaining eager newbies, cutting through the administration's red tape—have made it difficult for comedy groups to flourish. Fortunately, Busis believes that all may be changing. If our idea of resonant humor is ever to transcend a stick-figure "Columbia" screwing a stick-figure "You," let's hope she's right.

—Thomas Rhiel

Submit your creative writing to The Eye.

We are now accepting short stories, narrative non-fiction, and humorous essays. For more information, e-mail eye@columbiaspectator.com.

TWO WAYS TO SPEND FALL BREAK

A TEXT MESSAGE CONVERSATION

BY NATHAN McALONE AND EVAN OMI

E: Hey man, you around NY this weekend?
 N: Actually, I'm on the Chinatown Bus headed to Boston. We're a little delayed because of turf war between the bus attendants and the local homeless.
 E: Sounds fun, I'm just trying to catch up with work, maybe take a walk in Central Park...
 N: Chill... Going to my friend's Halloween party. Looking forward to not having to answer for my behavior in the morning.
 E: Met up with Dan in Central Park. New York really is beautiful this time of year
 N: This dorm is beautiful, three pong tables and two kegs. People outside of Manhattan really understand how to use the extra space.
 E: Where should I go Deluxe or Community? What do you think will have more a relaxing ambience?
 N: Deluxe has a fine ass waitress. You know who else is fine, my friend's roommate's sister. Uh oh!

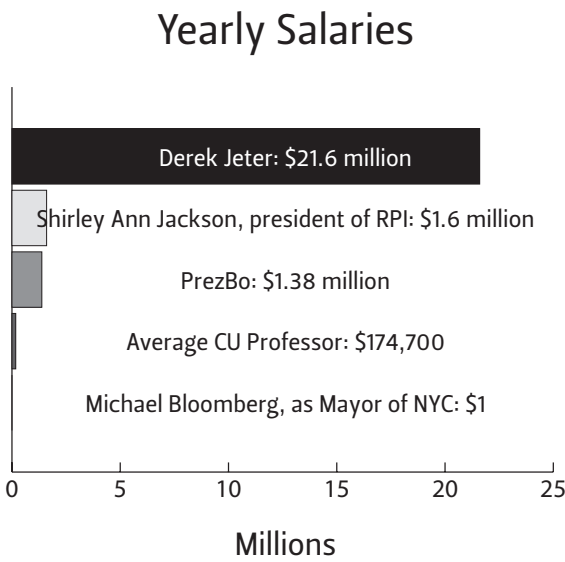
She's dressed as a slutty devil J
 E: Had a really nice meal. Split a salad with Jon. Think we might go back to Broadway to watch Eternal Sunshine. You know take it easy.
 N: Maybe I'll be taking it easy. Just figured out no one really gets my hipster costume. They just think I'm a gay guy from NYU who didn't dress up.
 N: Nvermind, Freshmaan Guurrl from Wellesley got my costume but lost interest when she realized I didn't have a bed to sleep in. What r uuu up to?
 E: Watching a movie. Still...
 N: Friends' roommate sister, uh oh!
 E: You already said that...
 N: NyQuil SHOT!!! So I don't have to hear my friend making out with Ms. Pac-man while I sleeeeeeep on the aiiir mattress.
 E: Fuck it, I'm bored. I'm going to 1020.
 E: No one here... You still up?
 E: Hello...?
 N: Uh Oh!

BIG MONEY

DEREK JETER = 15.65 PREZBO'S

BY EVAN OMI

A recent Bloomberg.com article listed the highest-paid college presidents in the country. Lee Bollinger ranked sixth—the highest in the Ivy League—but he still has a way to go before matching the salaries of some of the guys playing baseball up in the Bronx.

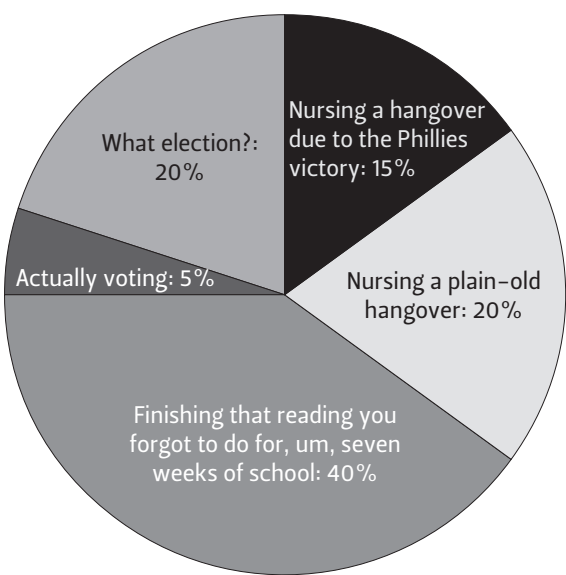


POLLS = SCIENCE

ELECTION DAY OVERVIEW

BY LAURA OSELAND

We got Election Day off this Tuesday, but how many Columbians actually used the break to fulfill their civic duties? We took a very unscientific poll to find out.



Conclusion: Either Columbia isn't as politically charged an environment as we thought, or we really like the Yankees.

EDITORS' TEN

OUR FAVORITE MOMENTS OF FALL BREAK

- Eating at Ninja New York for Halloween:** If you haven't had a silver platter set on fire and then turned into a chocolate cake with a ninja star on top, you have not truly lived.
—Melanie Jones, managing editor, features
- Getting extra time to work on my thesis:** My mentor decided it would be fun to tack on additional projects to my thesis, so having the extra few days to plan and write was a godsend.
—Haley Vecchiarelli, senior design editor
- Eating meat:** I don't trust my cooking skills enough to cook anything with protein (except for tuna) in my dorm-room kitchen. My dad's steak definitely hit the spot.
—Hannah Yudkin, art editor
- "Nosferatu" and the Procession of the Ghouls:** Right before Halloween each year, Saint John the Divine shows a different silent movie, accompanied by their resident organist. The movie is followed by a "Procession of the Ghouls," in which people wearing insanely elaborate costumes frolic up and down the aisles and interact with audience members. I'm kicking myself for not finding out about this tradition until my senior year.
—Hillary Busis, managing editor, a&e
- Being in Jersey:** I spent Halloween in suburbia instead of the city, but the sacrifice was worthwhile—there's really just no place like home. Besides, it's much sweeter than candy.
—Yin Yin Lu, books editor
- Seeing Simian Mobile Disco at Webster Hall:** Such an intense, high-energy experience—a great way to start off fall break!
—Devin Briski, food and drink editor
- New York City Marathon:** There's nothing like watching design editor Yipeng Huang beast through 26.2 miles.
—Peter Labuza, film editor
- Meeting the governor of Chiapas:** Not only did he give us a gigantic photo book and CD with the local hit "Yo Soy Chiapas," he also gave us his personal assistant's e-mail, and told us that we would be invited guests to his residence if we were ever in the area.
—Evan Omi, Eyesites editor
- Going to City Island:** Birthplace of professor Oliver Sacks and the home of White House Director of Urban Affairs Adolfo Carrión. The salty sea air was intoxicating. And I walked the island end to end.
—Raphael Pope-Sussman, deputy editor, features
- New Jersey's gubernatorial election:** The Corzine vs. Christie showdown may have been bad for Jersey, but it was great for lovers of fat jokes.
—Thomas Rhiel, editor in chief

COMPILED BY EVAN OMI

Health Care's Holy Grail

columbia's quest for personalized medicine

BY SARAH NGU

PHOTO COURTESY OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

How does a simple petri dish of DNA constitute the identity of a complex human being—from the way she laughs to her love of Cocoa Krispies? It turns out that the question of how biology determines identity interests not only the philosophically-inclined but those in the drug and healthcare industry as well. In a recent study published in *Molecular Systems Biology*, a computational biology team at Columbia explored the very questions that drive the current research on personalized care: How does a cell take a genotype and translate it into a phenotype? More specifically, how do genes determine our responses to medicine?

"The idea behind personalized care is that each of us is very different—we look different, we behave different, we have clearly different disease susceptibilities. All these things are genetically determined. Genetics also determines our responses to drugs," Dana Pe'er, head of that computational biology research team, explained.

Like many gadget lovers today, patients are clamoring for one-pill-fits-all cures. Tylenol, for instance, claims to relieve four different types of aches, fever, cold, cramps, and arthritis. But with standardization comes the possibility of unpleasant side effects, such as, in the case of Tylenol, liver damage. Medicines tailored to individuals would reduce the possibility of such side effects. But wouldn't personalized care be much more expensive than the generic options we have now?

"It would be cheaper!" Pe'er exclaims. "It would do away with the trial and error. A cancer patient has to pay \$100,000 for chemotherapy. Won't it be nice to tell them, 'This won't work for you because of your genes?' Instead of getting it right on the third try, you can get it right on the first try."

She also points out that avoiding all the adverse effects saves "tons of money and pain," and that the "right meds put you back in the workforce in one day instead of three." A genotype scan currently costs a hefty \$399, but patients only need it once in a lifetime.

So what's stopping personalized care from becoming an everyday reality? Part of the reason is that the science hasn't yet come that far. According to Pe'er, the technology developed to investigate the connection between genotype and phenotype in terms of drug-responses is only a few years old, and the task it faces is gargantuan.

Pe'er analogizes: "Imagine there's this huge cave, maze-like, with lots of passageways and everything's pitch dark. Trying to do research

on humans is like searching in this cave without even knowing what you're looking for."

To improve the search for the human genes that are related to drug resistance, Pe'er and her team focused on an easier subject: yeast, the common "workhorse" that scientists use to develop technology to apply to humans.

By manipulating and testing 104 strains of yeast, they improved old search methods that traditionally relied on genetics by creating a new method that also harnesses gene expression (RNA), which indicates which genes are actively used. Their RNA-utilizing algorithm accurately predicted strain resistance for 87 of the 94 drugs tested, effectively narrowing down the number of genes related to drug resistance. Their yeast-based project, titled "Camelot," provides a "flashlight" for geneticists researching the human body.

Even with this new study, massive amounts of data on the human body still needs to be collected, a task Pe'er equates to "finding tiny needles in a dark haystack where the hay looks like needles."

But she remains optimistic, pointing to Germany and Japan, countries that have developed personalized care for cancer patients. Pe'er says if the appropriate resources are mobilized here in the United States, the science behind personalized care can also develop quickly.

This is where politics come in. The main opponents of personalized care are not health insurers. For them, Pe'er believes, profits will rise with the reduction of the trial-and-error process, which forces insurers to pay up with every treatment. Instead, pharmaceutical companies are the real antagonists: In order to maximize profit, they want standardized drugs to serve the whole population and not just a section of it.

"TRYING TO DO RESEARCH ON HUMANS IS LIKE SEARCHING IN A CAVE WITHOUT EVEN KNOWING WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR."

Recent pressure from the FDA—which has threatened to take drugs with adverse side effects off the shelves—has led to heavy investment in a new field that combines pharmaceutical research and genetics: pharmacogenetics. Pharmaceutical companies like Eli Lilly, that have been involved



in legal disputes for marketing unapproved drugs, are now increasingly involved in studies on patient responses due to genetic variation.

But even if all pharmaceuticals participate to produce personalized medicine on a large scale, the truth is that we are not yet ready for personalized care. Patients and doctors are not adequately trained to interpret genotypes and translate them into appropriate treatments. Specialized knowledge needs to be transferred from genetic-researchers to everyday medical practitioners.

As Joel Burrill points out in an interview with *Wired Science*, unless medical schools adapt their training programs, there will be a shortage of DNA interpreters. Web sites like 23andme.com do a good job of explaining what the data means, but a large-scale implementation of personalized care would require more than Web sites.

Perhaps just as important, the legal infrastructure to protect the privacy of genetic information isn't sufficiently established. It would be a veritable disaster if health insurers or workplaces got a hold of their clients' or employees' genetic predispositions to illnesses.

Despite these obstacles, Pe'er believes that personalized care will be a reality within our lifetimes. Things are moving, even if slowly, in the right direction. ●

Keeping the Faith

the eye interviews randall balmer

BY MELANIE JONES

PHOTO COURTESY OF RANDALL BALMER

Professor Randall Balmer is no stranger to religious diversity. Raised by evangelists, he left his fundamentalist background when he became a liberal in the 1970s. Then he joined the Episcopal Church and became ordained in 2006. Over the course of his almost 30-year career, he's authored numerous books, including his most recent, "God in the White House," and has appeared on TV shows including "The Colbert Report," where last week, he spoke against Pope Benedict's move to absorb conservative Episcopalians and Anglicans into the Vatican. Melanie Jones talked with Balmer about the difference between bias and balance, bringing academia back to earth, and why he won't be taking the Pope up on his offer. For the full interview, check out the Eye Web site.

You're a professor of religious history here at Barnard. How do you balance your own subjectivity? Is there a difference between being unbiased and being "fair"?

If we've learned nothing else from postmodernism in recent years, we've learned that true objectivity is, if not impossible, at least elusive. Yes, of course I'm subjective; everyone is. The real issue is how we deal with our subjectivity. When I'm addressing something about which I have strong convictions, whether in the classroom or in a publication, I feel obliged to disclose my biases. When I wrote a book about the religious right a couple of years ago, for example, I was careful to say that I approached the topic not as a detached observer but as someone with an investment in the topic. The first sentence of the preface reads, "I write as a jilted lover."

As for the difference between fair and unbiased, I try very hard to be fair, even when I acknowledge my own biases. I'm sure I don't always succeed, but I try. I confess that teaching a new course on Mormonism this semester, for example, has presented a bit of a challenge. When I lecture about the Spaulding manuscript or Joseph Smith's "Book of Abraham," both of which cast very serious doubts on the integrity of Mormonism, I force myself to withhold my own judgments and simply present the material as straightforwardly as I can.

WHAT MAKES ME PATRIOTIC IS THE RECOGNITION THAT WE AMERICANS GENERALLY RISE TO OUR BETTER SELVES.

You've been nominated for an Emmy for script-writing and hosting a PBS adaptation of your book "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory," and just last week you were on "The Colbert Report." How do you get involved in these projects?

When I embarked on doctoral studies in 1980, I made a vow that I would never allow my scholarship to become so recondite that I could not communicate with a larger audience. ... We've now reached the point where the average American is deriving his information on current events from Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck. I find that frightening. We're in serious trouble as a society, and it's because—in part, at least—we academics view it as somehow beneath our dignity to communicate with the masses. I emphatically reject that presumption.

On the "Report," you said you wouldn't join the Catholic Church because it defines itself in negative terms. If the Vatican opened its doors to women and gay priests, would you consider joining then? Or do you feel that the divide is an important, necessary one?

I have nothing against the Catholic Church and certainly nothing against Roman Catholics. At the same time, I have no desire to sign up! ... I'm very content as an Episcopal priest, and I happen to believe that we Episcopalians are addressing some vitally important issues right now, including—but not limited to—homosexuality, same-sex unions, and the role of women. We're approaching these matters thoughtfully, prayerfully, and with integrity. The decisions we've made as a Church may well precipitate a continued diminution of our numbers, but that really doesn't bother me. Sometimes the price of faithfulness to the demands of the gospel is popularity. In my judgment, moreover, the most effective religious movements throughout American history have positioned themselves on the margins of society, not in the councils of power.

Your most recent book, "God in the White House," discusses how religion has shaped the presidency since the 1960s. Where do you feel the line is between church and state?

I don't for a moment argue that people of faith should not bring their religious convictions into the arena of public discourse. I happen to believe, in fact, that public discourse would be impoverished without those voices. At the same time, however, I am a passionate defender of the First Amendment and the separation of church and state, a notion that derives from Roger Williams, founder of the Baptist tradition in America. ... I was one of the expert witnesses in the Alabama Ten Commandments case, when Roy S. Moore, then the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, plopped a two-and-one-half-ton granite monument, emblazoned with the Decalogue, in the lobby of the Judicial Building



in Montgomery. When Judge Myron Thompson ruled—correctly—that the monument violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment, and the workers were preparing to remove it, one of the protesters shouted, "Get your hands off my God!" Unless I miss my guess, one of the commandments etched onto the side of the monument said something about "graven images"—thereby illustrating Roger Williams's point about protecting the integrity of the faith from associations with the state. What makes me patriotic is not flag-waving, but rather, the recognition that we Americans generally rise to our better selves—not quickly enough, to be sure, in the matters of race or gender. But sooner or later, a sense of fair play prevails, and we seek to live up to the ideals inscribed into our charter documents.

You have often been an outspoken opponent of the religious right. What if Christian doctrine was picked up by the left? Would you still oppose the use of religious rhetoric to aid mass politics?

I am, and I have been at least as far back as 1972, an unabashed political liberal. And it's a label, by the way, that I carry proudly. Liberalism is responsible for some pretty good things throughout American history: women's rights, the labor movement, Social Security, Medicare, the civil rights movement. I'm proud to be associated with that tradition, and even though the downstream media have tried mightily in recent decades to make "liberal" into a dirty word, I refuse to succumb by calling myself a "progressive," or anything else. ... Religious convictions informed the civil rights struggle, as well as opposition to the war in Vietnam. So the notion of religion being associated with the left is by no means a novel idea. A person of faith must always position herself on the outside, calling those in power to account. Martin Luther King, Jr. provides a case in point. ... On April 4, 1967, King mounted the pulpit of Riverside Church, here on Morningside Heights, and unleashed a thunderous denunciation of Johnson's war in Vietnam. Despite his cooperation with Johnson on civil rights legislation, King retained his prophetic voice. ●

¡Fútbol!

experiencing argentina's national sport

TEXT AND PHOTO BY MICHELLE HARRISON

There's a crystal clear sky above, a perfectly manicured field below. I am surrounded by thousands of people packed together in a sea of red and white clothing and banners. The sounds of starter guns ring from the stands; an army of policemen and several SWAT teams stand ready to pat down every visitor from head to toe. Young and middle aged men sing, scream, and chant, accompanied by a full drum corps and other orchestral instruments. Obscenities fly. This is a fútbol game in Argentina.

ON ONE SIDE OF ME, ONE MAN WAS PULLING HIS HAIR OUT

Fútbol is not just a sport. It's a psychological phenomenon, at least according to my professor here in Argentina. And I would dare say that the majority of Argentina would agree with him. Fútbol is not just a fun pastime, but an obsession, an addiction, a way of life. I knew soccer, or fútbol, was popular in South America, but I had no idea of the magnitude. Before leaving for Argentina my friends commonly asked me if I had any plans of attending a fútbol game while here, and my answer was always, "no." But in a country where there are approximately half a million federated soccer players alone, hundreds of thousands more Argentines who play recreational fútbol, and where at least 90 percent of the population are fans of one team or another, run-ins with fútbol are inevitable. It is an essential part of the daily life and culture.

It's not only on television, or on the radio, or played in every park, but it is present in daily interactions with people. Another professor frequently uses fútbol metaphors to explain political theories, none of which, of course, I understand. Knowing this, the professor would often shake his head at me and mumble "pobre intercambio, en su propio mundo" ("poor exchange student, in her own world"). The other employees at my internship always discuss the big fútbol games from the previous night with enthusiasm. When I then inform them that I never watch the game, I am then, most often, excluded from the rest of the lunchtime conversation.

Each of these instances seemed a bit absurd to me, at first. Yet they sparked my curiosity, and I, too, suddenly desired to be let in on the secret of this beloved game, a game that is loved by the

majority of the world. I wanted to understand its appeal: Why did people go crazy over it?

Then, thankfully, the perfect opportunity presented itself. I was invited by a friend to a fútbol game: Boca Juniors vs. River Plate, two of the most important teams in the club league and in the country. The director of this study abroad program had originally advised us all against going to fútbol games because of their raucous and often dangerous nature, but I shrugged that off and decided to go anyway. It turned out to be a once in a lifetime experience.

Looking at the distraught faces and listening to the angry screams of the fans, I'd never encountered such excitement and intensity before. On one side of me, one man was pulling his hair out, while on the other, a man was punching and kicking the stands to relieve his anger after missed goals or fouls. Another man yelled some of the most offensive comments I have ever heard, attacking personal traits of the opposing team members such as their heritage or immigration status, rather than standard insults about their playing skills.

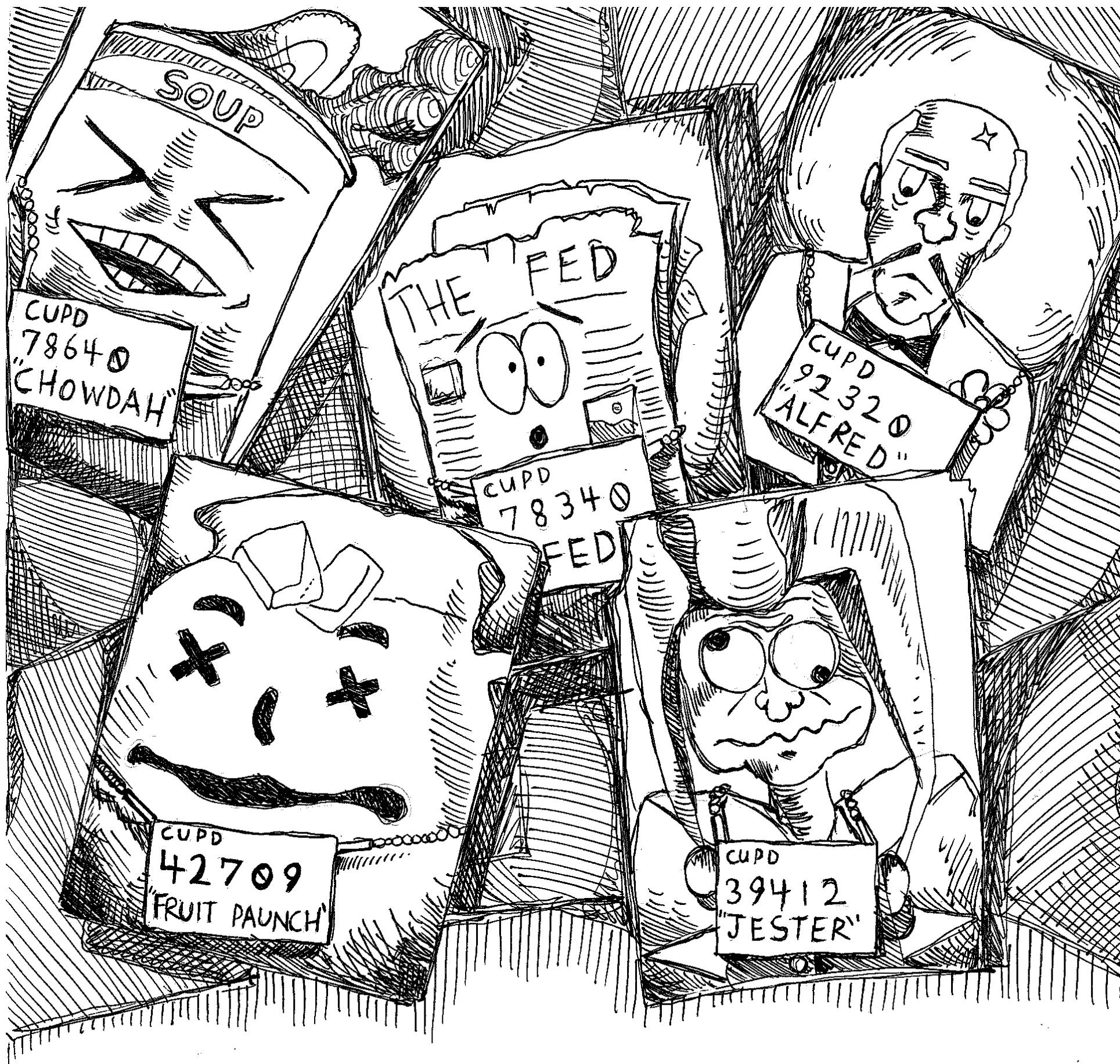
Despite my shock and fear, I found myself getting caught up in the excitement, holding my breath when a player was about to score, swaying back and forth in the stands with the fans to the beats of the drums, clapping as loudly as I could

over a good play. The fans stood the entire game, making sure to see every kick, every shot, and every foul. I, too, wanted to know what was going on at every moment so I, too, stood most of the game, straining my neck to see past the towering men in front of me, looking past the clouds of red and white smoke coming from the dozens of smoke machines surrounding the field. As I scanned the field and the crowded stands, I began to appreciate the intense competition and devotion of fútbol and its fans. This game created a great division of loyalties, but in some ways it also united.

For the first time since arriving in Argentina, I felt like I at least halfway belonged. I was not the target of strange men's inappropriate comments and offensive looks. They were all too busy paying attention to the game. I did not have to explain to a million people that I was from the United States and not Brazil. No one tried to engage me in a conversation about Disney World or Obama; I didn't have to listen to negative opinions of United States foreign policy. It did not matter that I did not know the rules of the game, or that I was a strange foreigner, or that I was a minority, it only mattered that I was supporting and cheering for their team.

I left the game that evening, feeling lucky that the game ended in a tie (and therefore no serious violence broke out), but also with a better understanding of the phenomenon. I cannot say that I now like the sport of fútbol any more than I previously had, but I can say that I love the spirit that it embodies, the festivities that it produces, and the camaraderie it created between the Argentines and myself. This game gave me something to now talk about at lunch or in class with my Argentine friends: It thus removed me from the position of social outcast. It has provided me with a newfound respect and appreciation for this integral aspect of Argentine life. ●





IT'S KIND OF A FUNNY STORY

columbia's comedy renaissance

by Hillary Busis • illustrations by Matteo Malinverno

"WE'RE ALL VERY HAPPY YOU'RE HERE. BECAUSE THIS IS WHERE THE SHOW IS."

Columbia College junior Ben Weiner pauses, inviting the crowd gathered before him to chuckle. Though it's 9 on a rainy Saturday night, the folding chairs that have been lined up in Lerner 555 are filled with people. They've come to see Weiner's musical improv comedy troupe, Alfred, perform its first show of the semester.

Only three of Alfred's eight members have been in the group for longer than a few months. Still, the improvisers seem comfortable with one another, easily picking up cues and establishing running jokes. Their audience laughs and applauds as Alfred spins a yarn about a mild-mannered man and Roberto, the pigeon he loves. When the show ends, most of the crowd mills around. As the performers re-emerge, the audience members congratulate them on a job well done.

“Alfred’s Lerner Ball” is more than just a comedy show—it’s a coming-out party for the troupe, triumphant proof that it has navigated the sometimes choppy waters of Columbia’s comedy scene and lived to tell the tale. Alfred rose from the ashes of another improv group, Klaritin, which was founded in 2004, and, after abruptly changing its name to Sweeps, quietly disbanded in the spring of 2008. A few Klaritin refugees formed Alfred in September of that year.

Alfred’s mere existence is indicative of a minor renaissance in Columbia’s comedy community. Though the University’s undergraduate comedy culture has been growing steadily over the past 10 years, until recently, Morningside comedy was nothing special—particularly when compared to that other prominent university in New York.

New York University has always been a creative mecca. Its Tisch School of the Arts is one of the most distinguished performing arts schools in the country, and even those who attend NYU’s College of Arts and Science have a reputation for being artsy, among other things. Comedians like Billy Crystal, Adam Sandler, and Aziz Ansari all honed their craft while undergrads at NYU. The university is also the birthplace of The State, a comedy group that started as an extracurricular activity and rose to fame with an eponymous sketch show on MTV in 1993.

Selection bias could explain the discrepancy between NYU and Columbia—maybe NYU’s creative atmosphere not only creates comedians, but also drives wannabe comedians to attend the school in the first place. But even colleges that are academically and atmospherically similar to Columbia have more developed comedic communities than ours. Harvard is home to the Harvard

Lampoon, the “world’s oldest continually published humor magazine,” according to its Web site—an establishment so, well, established, that its offices are housed in an honest-to-God castle. The National Lampoon, a once-mighty humor franchise responsible for an influential magazine and movies like “Animal House” and “Vacation,” was spun off from the Harvard Lampoon in 1971. More recently, the Lampoon has acted as a feeder for the writing staffs of TV shows like “The Simpsons” and “Saturday Night Live.”

Similarly, Yale has two humor publications and four improv comedy groups. The groups operate semi-professionally, earning money by touring around the country during winter and spring breaks. Yale’s improvisers have also performed at venues like The Second City in Chicago and Caroline’s in New York.

But at Columbia, comedy has never been taken very seriously. We have a humor magazine called The Jester that was officially founded in 1901, but it has a rocky publishing history that includes numerous, sometimes decade-long gaps between issues. Former Jester Editor-in-Chief Sam West, who graduated in 2008, revived the magazine most recently in 2004. None of the comedy performing groups currently on campus has been around for longer than six years. The Fed, Columbia’s humor newspaper, began in 1986 as a conservative alternative to Spectator and only evolved into a humor publication around 2003.

Even the Varsity Show, Columbia’s oldest performing institution and the University’s only real large-scale showcase for student-written comedy, has suffered periods of discontinuity. The Varsity Show proudly claims to have been an annual tradition since its inaugural performance in 1894.

But as recent graduate Rob Trump, who wrote the show in 2007 and 2008, explains, saying that the Varsity Show has existed for 116 full years, “is sort of a lie. I’m going to get capped by the powers that be for saying that, but it didn’t exist for several stretches of time in there.”

Between 1956 and 1958, 1968 and 1977, and during a few other years, there was no Varsity Show. Trump explains that the show as we know it today is a fairly recent invention: “I think most recently it was revived in the ’80s, and only in the past 10 or 15 years did it turn into a really big production, the way it is now.”

AT COLUMBIA, COMEDY HAS NEVER BEEN TAKEN VERY SERIOUSLY.

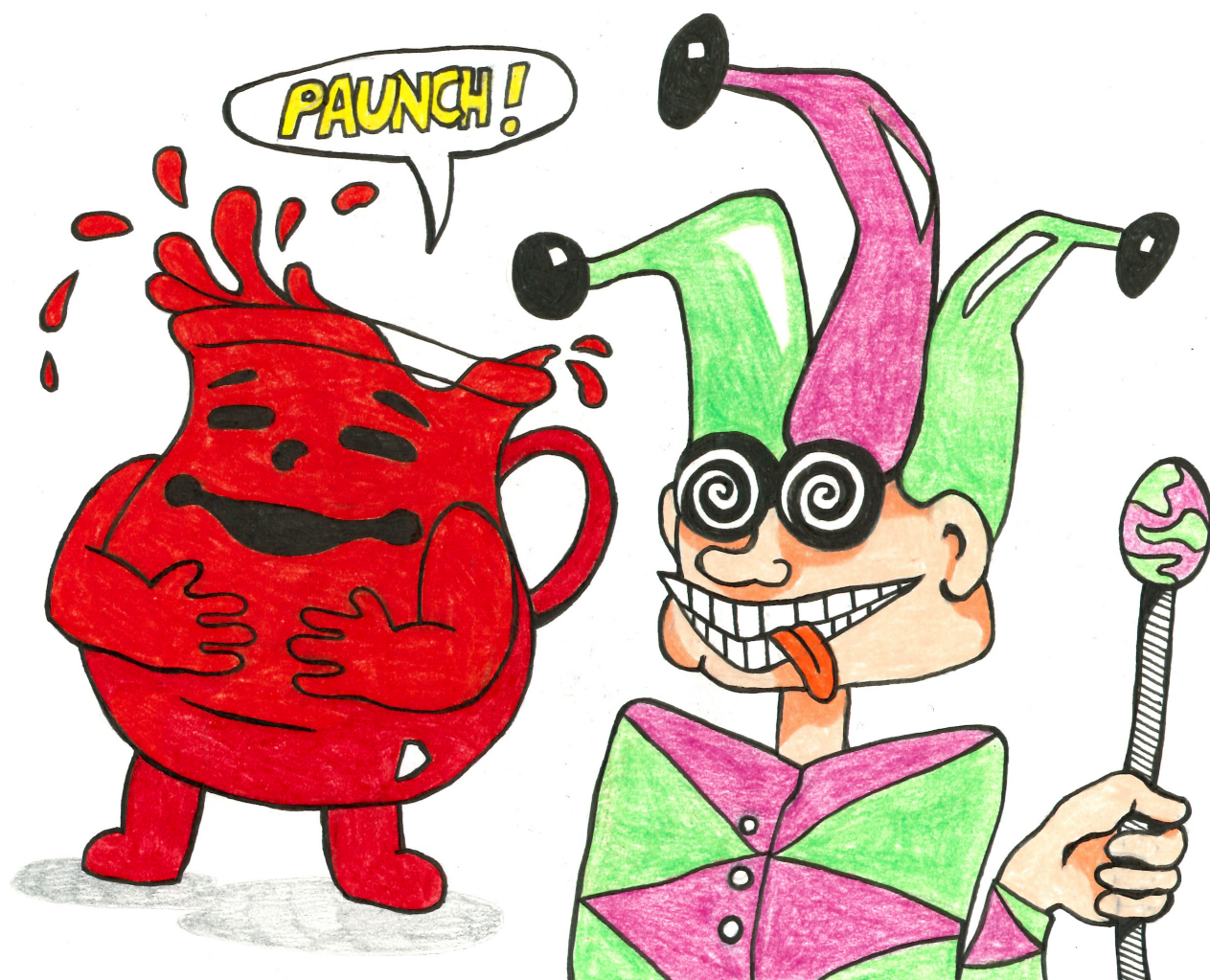
Columbia’s oldest and most prestigious comedic institution, then, is relatively young. But the stop-and-start nature that characterizes The Jester and the Varsity Show isn’t unique. Many of the University’s oldest organizations have followed the same pattern of early establishment, years of dormancy, and recent resurgence. The Blue and White was founded in 1890, disbanded in 1893, and not revived again until 1998. Similarly, the Philolexian Society was founded in 1802, dissolved in the 1950s, and revived in 1985.

Several factors could explain the initial deterioration of each of these groups, including Columbia’s notoriously nonexistent school spirit and the radical politics that dominated campus in the middle of the century. Either way, apathy seems to have a long and illustrious history at Columbia. Upholding long-standing traditions has never been much of a priority for our administration.

It is, then, no surprise that Columbia’s comedy community is so young and relatively small. What is surprising is the way that Columbia’s comedy scene has grown rapidly since the beginning of the decade. In 2004, the same year that The Jester was revived, sketch comedy troupe Chowdah was formed. Improv group Fruit Paunch emerged in 2003. The Fed completed its transition from conservative rag to satirical newspaper around the same time. (Full disclosure: I’ve lived with members of Chowdah and Klaritin, as well as an editor of The Fed.)

It’s unclear why the comedy renaissance began when it did—Trump facetiously proposes that the “post-9/11” atmosphere might be to blame—but the fact remains that the Columbia comedy scene has been reborn in the new millennium.

Groups once needed to consolidate in order to survive. Fruit Paunch, for example, was the result of a merger between two now-defunct troupes called Six Milks and Two Left Feet. Columbia’s troupes have also had a tendency to disappear once their founders have graduated: Two musical improv groups, Tea Party and Prangstgrüp, perished when their creators walked out of the 116th Street gates for the last time. Alfred’s survival, though, is an indication that comedy groups on campus are now making a greater effort to ensure longevity.



Even so, the community still has plenty of hurdles to overcome before it can truly solidify. New York City is full of opportunities to see comedy—and when given the choice between seeing campus comedy or taking in professional shows at venues like the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, students might be more likely to choose the latter. Aspiring comedians at Columbia also have the option of performing at open mic nights around the city or in professional improv classes rather than participating in on-campus comedy groups. “I think a lot of the comedy scene here bleeds into the comedy scene of the city,” says Nina Pedrad, a Columbia College junior and a member of Fruit Paunch. “We don’t need 50 groups, because we have New York.”

Columbia’s labyrinthine bureaucracy is also an impediment to the comedy scene. Students report that governing boards can make forming a new organization difficult. “You have to get approval, and funding, and a faculty advisor, and I think that the people that go in to try out [for comedy groups] don’t necessarily know how to go about making their own group” if they don’t get into the ones that exist already, says current Fed Editor-in-Chief Rachel Katz, a GS/JTS senior. If a junior decides to form a new group, “it takes a year to make—you have a club, and then you graduate,” says Chowdah president and Columbia College senior Matt Shields.

CC senior and Fruit Paunch veteran Michael Molina offers another reason for why those who are rejected from already extant groups don’t start their own. “I don’t know what it’s like to start up, and to emerge into this environment where Fruit Paunch has been around for so long,” he says. “Maybe Sweeps and Klaritin only went on for so long because they didn’t have the tradition. Maybe. I don’t know.” The 6-year-old Paunch may not be as august as the Harvard Lampoon, but at least it’s an established entity.

Molina’s comments also bring up another issue plaguing the comedy community: the perceived hierarchy that exists among groups. When asked how she would characterize comedy at Columbia, Reni Callister, a Barnard junior and a member of Chowdah, immediately suggests the word “segregated.” Former members of Chowdah, like Olivia Whelan and Liz Varner, who graduated Barnard in 2008, and Shira Danan, who graduated CC in 2007, also say that they felt that a clear separation existed between members of their group and members of other groups. “The community is definitely internally divided,” Varner says. She feels that the scene is stratified, mostly because she perceived Fruit Paunch to be exclusive and cliquey when she was a student.

“Fruit Paunch got a lot of money,” Danan adds, implying that Chowdah didn’t when she was a part of it.

Comments from current Paunch members confirm that it is a selective and tightly knit group. Molina estimates that 50 people auditioned for the troupe this year, but only two were chosen to join it. “Smaller numbers are better for improv,” says Rachel Leopold, a former Varsity Show writer, a member of Paunch, and a Columbia College senior. “The fact that we’re very, very tight, like as friends—we can be on the same wavelength as each other in a scene, and I think that helps

us comedically,” explains Paunch member Toby Mitnick, also a senior in CC.

“We have lunch every day together. Not, like, selectively, but...” starts Molina. Leopold completes his thought: “...It’s sort of a standing invitation that anyone can do who wants to.” They explain that Paunch also goes on an annual retreat every fall, usually to a member’s country home. “We basically hang out and have a good time,” Molina says. “It was very heartwarming afterwards when Bob [Vulfov, a new member and the only first-year in Fruit Paunch] was just like, ‘I feel really close to you guys now.’”

Members of Chowdah, by contrast, say that they don’t see their sketch group as a huge commitment. They also don’t spend much time with each other outside of rehearsals. “We’ve been talking about hanging out more,” says Chowdah actor Rami Levi, a Columbia College sophomore.

“It’s not like we have lunch together every single day,” adds Callister.

ROB TRUMP FACETIOUSLY PROPOSES THAT THE “POST-9/11” ATMOSPHERE MIGHT BE TO BLAME FOR THE COMEDY RENAISSANCE.

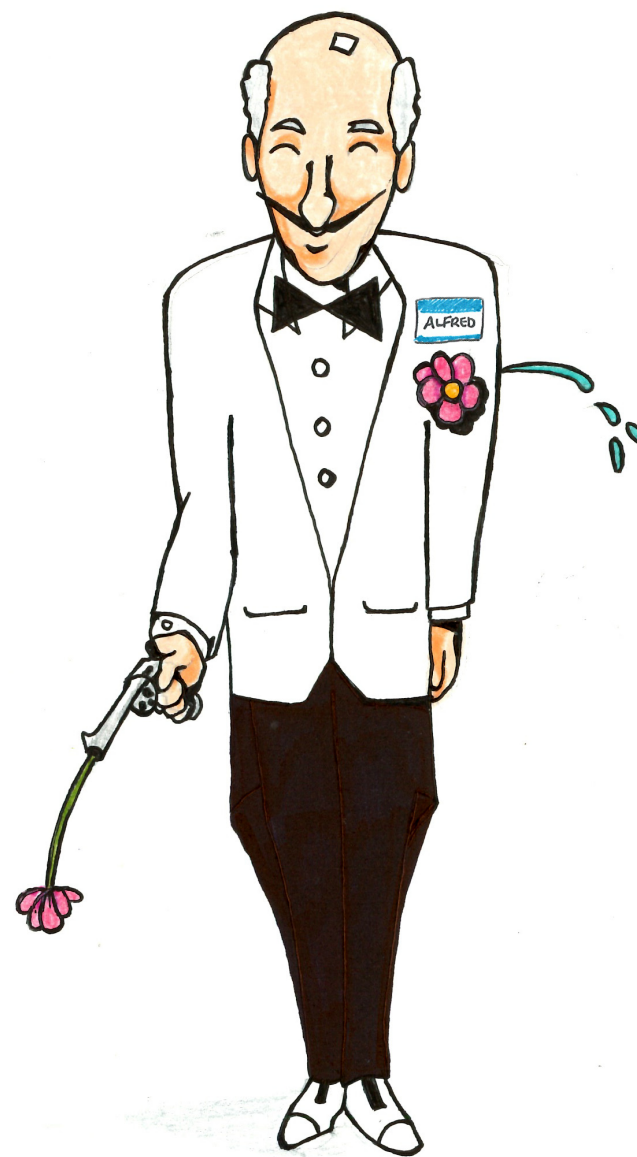
Even newcomers can see that members of the comedy community feel divided from one another. “Oh, there’s definitely a rivalry. I’m not saying it’s a bad rivalry—it’s friendly. But it’s still a rivalry,” says Alfred’s Will Cybriwsky, a Columbia College sophomore.

The Fed and The Jester have a similarly charged relationship: “We usually don’t get as many new people as The Fed,” says Adam Nover, a Columbia College senior and editor in chief of The Jester. “But most of the time, it does seem like we get the funnier people.”

Katz playfully fires back by noting that at activities fairs, “People will go to their [The Jester’s] table and they’ll be like, ‘Oh, we publish twice yearly,’ or quarterly, or however often they publish. And they’ll be like, ‘How often do you guys publish?’ And we’ll say ‘Once a month.’ And they’ll be like, ‘Oh—thanks!’ Then they’ll come over to us.”

But despite the competition, comedy veterans agree that collaboration across the community has become more and more common. Nover cites the sketch comedy shows that Jester has put on in the past, in which Chowdah, Fruit Paunch, Klaritin, and even Alfred have all participated. “Everyone has been talking about collaboration this year, which is cool,” says Weiner. As the comedy scene becomes more established, its growth should be aided by the atmosphere of creative cooperation.

A gradual movement away from scatological humor and vulgarity should also assist that growth. Fart jokes and punch lines involving penises are the easiest forms of humor, as well as the first type of jokes to which new comedians tend to turn. According to Katz, new writers for The Fed



“come in from very conservative backgrounds, like, ‘Oh, I worked for my school newspaper.’ And they come here, and they’re like, ‘Oh, fuck yeah! Woo! I can say any bad word I want!’ And the first submissions they get in are horrible.”

Katz says that The Fed is now making a conscious effort to “be more tasteful.” Whether this shift has actually occurred, though, is debatable—when she is trying to describe “the kind of stuff that we like,” Katz enthusiastically recalls an article written last year by Adam Weiler, GS, that was “a monologue from a frat boy whose cock was St. Augustine.”

Shields echoes Katz, saying that Chowdah is also making a conscious effort to write with more nuance: “Before, there would be a lot of sketches where we’d be like, ‘Oh, where do we go now? Uh—blow job!’” Over time, he says, Chowdah’s sketches have become more than collections of bad words and sexual puns.

Columbia College first-year and new Chowdah member Annie Birinyi admits, however, that there is still plenty of vulgarity in her group’s sketches. “I remember that for one sketch, one of my notes was the word ‘BALLS,’ all in caps and circled,” she says. Chowdah’s most recent show also included a piece titled “On the Origin of Feces.”

Even at The Jester, a magazine with a sense of humor that Nover calls “esoteric,” purposefully offensive jokes pop up frequently: Last year,

"I think a girl wrote a piece that was like, 'Grand Theft Auto' in 'The Wizard of Oz,' or something," he remembers. "And it was all dick jokes. And I did not see that coming. They were all dick jokes." He pauses. "Yeah, they were all dick jokes."

Maybe Columbia comedians are still fixated on adolescent humor because the scene itself is still in its adolescence. As the community matures, though, the jokes being told should diversify as well.

A new initiative spearheaded by Alfred, which it's calling Alfred's Ruckus, should help to combat many of the problems that threaten the comedy scene. Cybriwsky explains that Alfred's Ruckus is to be a sister group to Alfred, one that will stage spontaneous musicals around campus much like Prangstgrüp did earlier in the aughts. Ruckus has the potential to get Columbia students interested in campus comedy by creating attention-grabbing scenes in Morningside Heights, and it could give different groups an opportunity to collaborate on big publicity stunts, overcoming their differences in the process. Creating musicals to be presented in public will also force Columbia comedians to look beyond scatology for their punch lines.

Getting Ruckus off the ground won't be easy, though. As Weiner explains, the troupe already attempted to put on their first spontaneous show a few weeks ago. They performed a "Swine Flusical" in Lerner for people standing in line to get their flu shots. "Someone was filming, and there lies the problem," he says. "It violated patient-doctor confidentiality laws. But they were very friendly. We got an e-mail saying, 'Hey, we loved

your musical.' And then the second e-mail was like, 'Uh-oh.'"

Even so, the stunt has led to bigger and better things for Alfred: Though he can't reveal many details, "later, we will probably be collaborating with Health Services," Weiner says. The troupe immediately had to take the video of the "Swine Flusical" off YouTube, but Alfred's members remain hopeful about Ruckus's future.

Their optimism is mirrored by the enthusiasm for comedy that Columbia's nascent scene has already begun to inspire in its participants. Writing and performing jokes at Columbia has convinced several graduates to try their luck at doing comedy professionally. Though Varner's involvement with Chowdah was initially "a complete accident," she's now writing a comedy blog and improvising with other Columbia alumni at clubs around the city. Similarly, Trump came to Columbia thinking he "was going to go to medical school, probably." He's now living in Los Angeles and "looking to land somewhere in the world of comedy and entertainment."

Members of comedy groups are also finding it easier to get involved with professional comedy institutions. Michael Grinspan, who graduated CC in 2009, notes that several members of Chowdah—himself included—have snagged internships with "The Colbert Report." Nover also says that the past two editors in chief of The Jester have gone on to work at The Onion. Though going to school in New York means that Columbia students have always been able to intern at comedy institutions, the relationships that certain groups are forming with

organizations like "Colbert" and The Onion are further proof that Columbia's comedy community is becoming increasingly well-established.

NEW WRITERS FOR THE FED "COME HERE AND THEY'RE LIKE, 'OH, FUCK YEAH! I CAN SAY ANY BAD WORD I WANT!'"

After 10 more years, who knows—there may be dozens of Columbia alumni following career paths similar to that of 2004 Columbia College graduate Jenny Slate. Slate helped to form Fruit Paunch while a student at Columbia and entered New York's comedy scene after she graduated, performing and writing with fellow Class of 2004 alum Gabe Liedman. She got her big break this past September when she joined the cast of "Saturday Night Live." Slate may not be as famous as NYU grad Adam Sandler—she's best known currently for accidentally dropping an f-bomb on air during her very first episode of "SNL"—but she nevertheless serves as the poster child for Columbia's comedy renaissance. The efforts of alumni like Slate have laid the foundation for an established comedy scene at Columbia. And we fuckin' love her for that. ■



YOU ARE WHAT YOU DRINK

college's biggest social lubricant makes life rough for those who abstain

BY DEVIN BRISKI

ILLUSTRATION BY DARYL SEITCHIK

We've all had one of those nights. You're at a party, having a beer or a mixed drink. Later, you do a shot with an old friend from your freshman floor, then you have another beer—maybe two—you don't really remember. You spot that girl in your CC class who always makes intelligent comments, and you decide to tell her that. Someone offers to get you another drink. You stumble over, inhibition-free, to a guy who just walked into the room—then it hits. You spend the next two or three hours hunched over a toilet, the seat creating a circular indentation around your face, watching your day's diet be expelled and thinking: "Why do people do this to themselves?"

Surprisingly enough, some don't.

It's a normal Saturday night in Claremont 21. Duygu Yilmaz, a CC sophomore, invites me into her cozy and brightly lit suite to chat with her and a few of her roommates. They are all sitting around the kitchen table wearing pajamas and typing away on laptops. Not a wild weekend, but the setting doesn't seem boring either—the suite gives off a vibe of wholesome comfort. "We're not anti-social, but we're not crazy. We have pretty high morals in our suite," Yilmaz says.

While there's huge hype in the media about the binge-drinking culture that characterizes college, non-drinkers seem to fly under the radar. Some of

them socialize with students who do drink. Coke-filled red cups in hand, they are the designated sensible ones who hold their friends' hair and look for lost cellphone batteries at the end of the night. Other teetotalers prefer to socialize primarily with like-minded students in social groups based around an aversion to substances. Despite their absence from the media spotlight, non-drinkers are associated with a slew of negative adjectives, like "boring" and "antisocial"—especially among college students.

Starting from the first week of NSOP, many groups of college friends are united by alcohol-fueled experiences. Alcohol has the ability to bring people together, whether it's igniting the beginning sparks of lifelong friendships or inspiring imbibers to engage in sloppy, ill-advised hook-ups.

For students who don't drink, though, alcohol can have a divisive effect. "I enjoy myself just fine, but the people around me don't seem to enjoy themselves when I'm not drinking, which I don't understand," relates Chuck Roberts, a sophomore in CC. "I'm not trying to make a moral judgment. I just say 'no, thank you.'"

Not all students who abstain from drinking have the same live-and-let-live attitude as Roberts, though. "When my friends get drunk, I wish they wouldn't because I think it is to cover up insecurity. I just don't approve of that lifestyle," says Barnard sophomore Joy Harrison.

Any John Jay or Carman veteran can attest to the self-selecting nature of freshman year social groups, which are all-too-frequently based on common drugs of choice—or lack thereof.

"Last year, I lived on a floor with 50 percent heavy drinkers, and they would spend most of their waking hours on vodka and other things they weren't supposed to have because they weren't 21. I think we [the non-drinkers] eventually

decided we just couldn't be friends with them," explains Janelle Mills, a sophomore in SEAS. From the outside perspective of students who don't drink, alcohol-based social connections can seem artificial. "When you form a bond with someone who's completely sober and sane, you trust them more in the future," Mills continues.

"I don't consciously seek out people who don't drink; it just happens to be that way," says Yilmaz. This furthers the divide between the two groups: "Since my friends don't drink, it would be weird for me to—a kind of reverse peer pressure."

While students generally fall into social scenes that feel comfortable to them—drinking or non-drinking—tension can arise when campus groups bring people from different social groups together. One student who wished to remain anonymous describes a conference he attended with a campus club: "There were only drinking parties, so I couldn't go. Instead I was just sitting alone in my room."

"I'M NOT TRYING TO MAKE A MORAL JUDGMENT. I JUST SAY 'NO, THANK YOU.'"

Alcohol has always divided as much as it has united, both on and off college campuses, and across cultures, drawing lines and perpetuating stereotypes. Alcoholism was used to condemn the "immoral" Irish immigrants in the 1920s by temperance advocates, while in China, alcohol is traditionally a staple of business negotiations and refraining from drinking is considered to be a sign of untrustworthiness.

In fact, these culturally varying attitudes affect the judgments of students studying abroad. Roberts describes his experience in England, saying, "You start [drinking] when you're 14 or 15 in England, trying to get into bars. That's the only social outlet—it's fueled by alcohol. It was certainly not a societal set-up that was beneficial; it looked dangerous.

Little tiny kids should not be drinking." This stands in stark contrast to the prevailing (and self-serving) opinion that most under-21 college students hold: that the drinking age should be lowered.

While religion and politics are verboten dinner party conversation topics for a reason, it is hard to turn down a glass of wine without inviting preconceptions. At Columbia, this tension is only emphasized by the diversity of experiences—both cultural and otherwise—students bring to the table.

As long as sugar continues to ferment into ethanol, some abstainers will judge and drinkers will choose to cloud their judgment. Some students choose to look past this in their social interactions. As Roberts concludes, "I don't consider it [whether a person drinks] to be a major aspect of anyone's personality." We can only hope drinkers will return the favor. ●



ART HO-HUM

what the core doesn't teach you

BY HANNAH YUDKIN

ILLUSTRATION BY IGOR SIMIC

"We learn about the big names—Michelangelo, Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso. But we just don't know the others because it's not what we're taught," a friend of mine told me a few weeks ago. When he asked me if I could name five modern or contemporary artists, I eagerly rambled off some noteworthy names—Cindy Sherman, Vito Accornci, Carolee Schneemann, Patty Chang, Bill Viola—names that were famous, at least, to an art history student like me. But when I asked my friend to name a few artists he knew, he sat in silence, unable to come up with anything but the usual Art Hum suspects.

Art awareness at Columbia is low. When I ask students around campus the same set of questions—Can you name any contemporary artists? Have you been to a gallery show lately? What

do you think of the Kara Walker installation in Dodge?—I get the same blank, quizzical looks.

This doesn't mean, however, that people aren't aware of what art is. As a matter of fact, most students on campus are required as part of Columbia's Core Curriculum to take Art Humanities. Just like the rest of the core, Art Hum is meant simply to familiarize students with art, and in doing so, to encourage further exploration of the subject. There are, of course, things "which a man must experience and understand if he is to be called educated," as the core's mission statement so eloquently puts it. And although the course has its setbacks, it generally succeeds in fulfilling this mantra.

Art Hum teaches students about the major moments in art history by looking at and discussing

important figures like Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, Goya, Monet, Picasso, and Frank Lloyd Wright. The class asks students to look at art in a way that is less daunting than, say, a class on the avant-garde—a topic that would certainly scare off any Columbia student unfamiliar with art.

For art newcomers, Art Hum proves to be the perfect introductory course. Eleanor Shi, a junior at Columbia College, says that Art Hum made her want to study art history further. Although she had already been an avid museum-goer, her knowledge of art beyond what she had seen in museums was slim. Shi says that the class "presents you with a different way of looking at art and from that, gives you the chance to appreciate art." She later decided to take Twentieth Century Art with Branden Joseph, which convinced her that her passion lay with art history. Shi does warn, however, that "Art Hum is not indicative of art history ... I think it's really impossible to learn all of Western art in a semester."

Ariel Brenman, who graduated from Columbia last year, says that the class "turned me onto things I didn't know I liked." Furthermore, by requiring students to go on three museum trips throughout the semester (to MoMA, the Met, and one of their own choosing), the course encourages active participation in the art world. Brenman discovered his favorite work—Rembrandt's "Aristotle with a Bust of Homer"—because of Art Hum.

But beyond the classroom, Art Hum doesn't seem to make much of a dent at Columbia. The

CAN YOU NAME ANY CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS?



course may inspire people like Shi to major or concentrate in art history, but that is the exception, not the rule. Often, those in the class aren't even interested in taking it. Some juniors and seniors are simply there to get it over with.

What makes matters worse is that Art Hum isn't designed to get people interested in the art of today. What the course lacks is a focus on contemporary art—the art that fills today's museums and galleries and drives critical conversation. That's somewhat understandable, though, considering that the course has to cover all of Western art in a semester.

The problem of art awareness, then, may lie in the fact that we, as students, are not taught what is currently going on in the art world. And even if professors do mention modern and contemporary art in class, they have to squeeze it in at the end.

Instead, we are left in the dark when it comes to everything that comes after Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock. As a result, modern and contemporary art just doesn't seem to fit into the art vocabulary with which many students new to art are familiar. As Barnard professor Alexander Alberro says, "Many people are not interested in modern and contemporary art, and even more distrust it. So why should they know the names of artists? The ones they know are the names of the artists who have most effectively used publicity—the relentless self-promoters. So someone like Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst will be known, but much more interesting artists will not."

Why would people, then, be compelled to go to a gallery downtown or an exhibit at the New Museum if the art they'll see there is indecipherable to them? "Most people only want a very limited knowledge of art," Alberro says. "They believe that it's important to know the basics so that they can talk about it at dinner parties, but don't care about it enough to know more. Therefore, 'the greatest hits' will do."

With art, ignorance seems to be bliss.

Although some people may decide to remain removed from the art culture of New York because they find it uncomfortable, others find it impossible to keep up with what's going on because of the nature of being a student at Columbia. For many, going to a gallery or a museum and discovering new art is an exhaustingly cerebral experience. "I think the Columbia academia setting makes it that if you have one Saturday free, you don't want to do something that involves extra thought," says Barnard junior Katie Stricker.

DESPITE ITS PROXIMITY AND ACCESSIBILITY, MANY STUDENTS ARE UNAWARE THAT WALLACH EVEN EXISTS.

Others, like Bianca Perta, also a junior at Barnard, are simply not drawn to art museums and galleries. "I'm not an art person," she says. "I like the Museum of Natural History more." But when asked whether she had visited that museum recently, Perta said no.



What Columbia students seem to be suffering from is something more than just a remove from the art world at large. Rather, it's a remove from the world outside of Morningside Heights. Many of us don't have the time or interest to go see art. The art, then, must be brought to us.

Luckily, there are galleries and groups on campus that are attempting to do just that. The Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery in Schermerhorn Hall is one such venue. The gallery brings attention to contemporary debates in art, as well as debates outside the realm of the art history discourse.

Last semester, an exhibit titled "Modernism and Iraq" featured modernist artworks from Iraq's museum in Baghdad, which was looted in 2003 during the first months of the war. The current show discusses the controversial new Parthenon museum in Athens. These topics are interesting not only to those studying art history, but also to students majoring in subjects like political science, archeology, ancient studies, anthropology, sociology, and Middle Eastern languages and cultures.

Despite its proximity and accessibility, many students are still unaware that Wallach even exists. "Wait, there's a gallery there?" says Brennan. And those who do know rarely make the trek up to the 8th floor.

Postcrypt, the undergraduate-run art gallery that holds its shows in the basement of St. Paul's Chapel, is trying to combat this lack of interest in art by giving people incentive to pay attention to it. For one, art openings always feature free wine.

"We do get a decent proportion of newcomers who are clearly out of their element and came primarily for the free wine," says Ian Kwok, president of the group and a senior at Columbia College. "And we totally approve, by the way." Maybe all people need in order to see a contemporary art exhibit is one small push.

But, of course, a class isn't necessarily going to make students want to go down to Chelsea. Instead, Kwok brings the art to campus: "One of our primary goals at Postcrypt Art Gallery is to integrate students—both artists and art appreciators—into contemporary art culture. This involves leading gallery hops, giving students a chance to curate shows and organize public art installations, and simply talking about art in a contemporary context."

For art awareness to increase on campus, art needs to follow Postscript's model and become accessible, exciting, and relevant. Art Hum attempts to do this, but it fails to make people curious about how art functions today. Alberta Wright, a senior at Barnard College, offers a simple remedy: Students should view art, especially the art we learn about in classes, as an "avenue to learn other things." Art, says Wright, can relate to everything in some way—be it biology, anthropology, or philosophy. Connecting art to academic disciplines or current events may not be a goal of Art Hum, but perhaps it should be. For people to appreciate art, they first have to be convinced that it matters. ●

FILMHISTORY.COM

the global history of cinema at your fingertips

BY PETER LABUZA

ILLUSTRATION BY HALEY VECCHIARELLI

For my Hungarian cinema class, I had hoped to write a paper on the films of Miklos Jancso, an influential New Wave director of movies like “The Red and the White.” Not wanting to shell out a large amount of cash for imported DVDs—not to mention a region-specific DVD player—I turned to Butler. Of the more than 20 films Jancso directed, Butler housed only three. Paper topic denied.

There have been many changes in the film industry of late—YouTube filmmakers, on-demand movies, Netflix via the Internet. Many have spoken about how filmmakers and companies should adapt to the new age, but what about those in academia? After all, a film studies community connected by the Web could pioneer stronger research. Fortunately, the digital age has given those in academia a reason for hope.

Consider The Auteurs (theauteurs.com), a new Web site that has risen in popularity over the last year, founded by Efe Cakarel, Kamer Altinova, and Halim Cillov. Cillov, a graduate of the MA program at Columbia in modern European studies, explains in an e-mail the genesis of the Web site: “Efe Cakarel was stuck in Tokyo with nothing but his laptop and an Internet connection, and he wanted to watch a movie. Specifically he wanted to watch Wong Kar-wai’s ‘In the Mood for Love,’ and was shocked to find that not only could he not watch that film online, but also there were hardly any great films available to watch online.”

The Auteurs now offers a number of art films and classics, available either individually or with a monthly subscription. The films are preserved in the best way possible, with subtitles, the correct aspect ratios, and perfect streaming quality. After watching the films, members can then discuss them by posting reviews, engaging in debates, or simply recommending other titles to watch.

The Auteurs is a fun Web site for anyone who loves cinema, but what if there were a site specifically designed for academic institutions? Research in today’s film community is limited by the scarcity of classic films from around the globe. Too many films are available only in their original countries, and access to the best prints of films is even more limited. Often, only scholars from those countries are aware certain cinematic gems even exist.

Imagine a Web site where you could watch any classic movie. Trying to find a good print of Jancso’s directorial debut “The Bells Have Gone to Rome”? Just pull up it up and click play. You could also throw in a discussion forum, links to academic articles about a film’s production and critical reception, or clips that show examples of specific filmmaking techniques. And it would all

be controlled by a cooperative of academic film intuitions across the globe.

As wonderful as that idea may sound, its conception is easier than its implementation. Annette Insdorf, director of Columbia’s undergraduate film studies program, worries about many of the potential logistical problems, some of which cropped up when she attempted to get digital copies of films for her students in her senior seminar. “As I learned from our media librarian at Butler, digital access to film content exists, but because of copyright, licensing, etc., adapting it to curricular needs is quite a challenge,” she says.

The Auteurs has had similar difficulties, as many film companies have been unwilling to license their material. “Speaking from the point of view of someone who has spent the last two years trying—and usually succeeding—to convince a very conservative industry to put their [films] online, it has been a continual uphill struggle,” Cillov says. While Disney and Universal can

screen their films online for a small fee, a small Romanian company might not have that same luxury. Universities would have to transfer their old prints to digital copies—a process much easier said than done.

And Insdorf brings up another major problem: most students would watch films for class on their MacBooks, but “a film like ‘2001’ really should be seen on a large screen with an audience, replicating the ‘theatrical’ experience that fulfills Stanley Kubrick’s original vision.”

But if academics could simply access, say, the great Iranian films of the 1950s without scouring the Earth for a pirated dubbed VHS, the Internet seems almost a necessity more than a commodity in promoting the film academic community. The Auteurs has already been in contact with a number of universities, hoping to give students access to the films in their online database. Cillov, in fact, finds students to be some of their best members: “Film students are among the most active and passionate members of our community, and we not only want to give them a social platform to meet and discuss cinema, but also a VOD [video on-demand] platform to assist in their studies.”

If The Auteurs continues to be a success, can an academic film site also become reality, despite the setbacks? It’s tough to say. But both would help engineer a truly global film community—a place to study the cinematic masters like Jancso or Kubrick. The Auteurs already shows that there is a community willing to examine movies critically, beyond discussions of how cool a film’s special effects are. And film historians can now geek out on the Internet as well. ●

NOW FILM HISTORIANS TOO CAN GEEK OUT ON THE INTERNET.



BACK TO THE FUTURE

vinyl albums make a comeback

BY WILLIAM JACOBS
PHOTO BY ROSE DONLON

In the introduction to the “cerebral” side of his 1972 double LP “Something/Anything?,” Todd Rundgren greets listeners with a tongue-in-cheek paean—now quietly quaint—to the gramophone record:

“Before we go any further, I’d like to show you all a game I made up. This game is called ‘Sounds of the Studio,’ and it can be played with any record, including this one. You can play it with, uh, you can even play it with your favorite record—you may be surprised! ... [Hissing] Now I’m sure you all recognize this. This is called hiss. It comes on, uh, records that were mastered lousy or, uh, mono- reprocessed for stereo, or any number of things. [Humming] This, of course, is hum. [Popping] P’s popping. And here’s what happens when the machine gains control and mangles your tape. [skips and clips] Punch. Outs.”

“NOTHING CAN COMPETE WITH VINYL.”

Ah, vinyl. Is Todd Rundgren inadvertently showing us how hopelessly outdated that medium is? His references to the format’s limitations and idiosyncrasies would never trouble the minds of today’s audiophiles, who buy music just by clicking a button.

With the advent of the CD in the 1980s, and the digital music industry afterwards, one might assume that the old phonograph disc has simply gone the way of the dodo. The statistics are grim: vinyl record sales, from a peak share of almost 100 percent of the music market, declined to less than a 5-percent portion by 1990.

But not all modern musicians have jumped ship. The Stone Roses, part of the Manchester 1960s-revival movement of the late 1980s, sung about the excitement when “the needle hit the groove.” Pearl Jam, godfathers of the subsequent grunge craze, still exhorts listeners to “spin the black circle.” Radiohead offered a vinyl edition of its latest album, “In Rainbows,” which has sold over 100,000 copies. Bands from Fleet Foxes to Beck to Portishead have also released vinyl copies of their albums.

Older groups, too, see potential in the old format. Legendary hard rock acts Guns N’ Roses and Metallica recently sold well with phonograph LPs. Elvis Costello initially offered his 2006 reissue of “The Juliet Letters” only as a vinyl record. Even U2, a band somewhat notorious for bustling to keep up with new trends, stubbornly offers its latest opus, “No Line on The Horizon,” in a turntable-friendly form.

And while the gramophone album will never dominate the charts as it did before, it has begun to make a comeback. According to Nielsen Soundscan, vinyl sales doubled in 2008, after increasing by 14 percent from 2006–2007. The new figures are the highest since 1991.

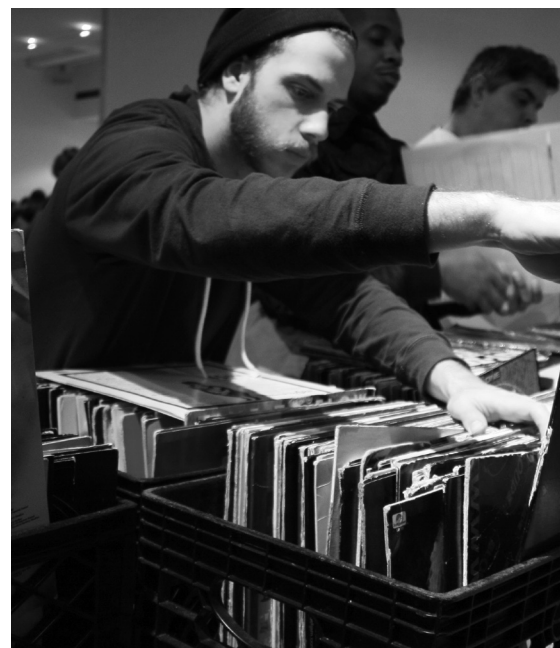
Why the increase? Rachel Mersky, a Barnard junior, is a younger fan of the older format. She says that listening to records changes her experience of music: “I listen to vinyl because it can play louder than my computer can, because it actually forces me to listen to an album how it was designed to be listened to—in order. And there’s this sort of nostalgia I think many people our age have for a time we didn’t even get to experience.”

Vinyl-oriented design marks albums from previous eras. Around the same time that Rundgren was teasing his audience, David Bowie was perplexing them on his “Diamond Dogs” album not only with a jumbled dystopian storyline—which still shines even on CD—but also with a track called “Chant of the Ever Circling

Skeletal Family” that ends with an insistent shout intended to last as long as the listener lets the needle spin in the record’s final groove. For vinyl listeners, the possibilities are endless. For others, the ride lasts approximately 35 seconds.

Many vinyl aficionados also favor the format for its clearer, sharper sound quality. Bob Abramson, who has run his House of Oldies store on Carmine Street since the heyday of Hendrix, is one of these aficionados, and a vocal one at that. “Nothing can compete with vinyl. It sounds much better. No challenge at all,” he says.

Mersky appreciates the sound as well, saying, “There’s something about the scratches and imperfections that is charming. There’s something really charming and exciting about the tactility of putting an album on.”

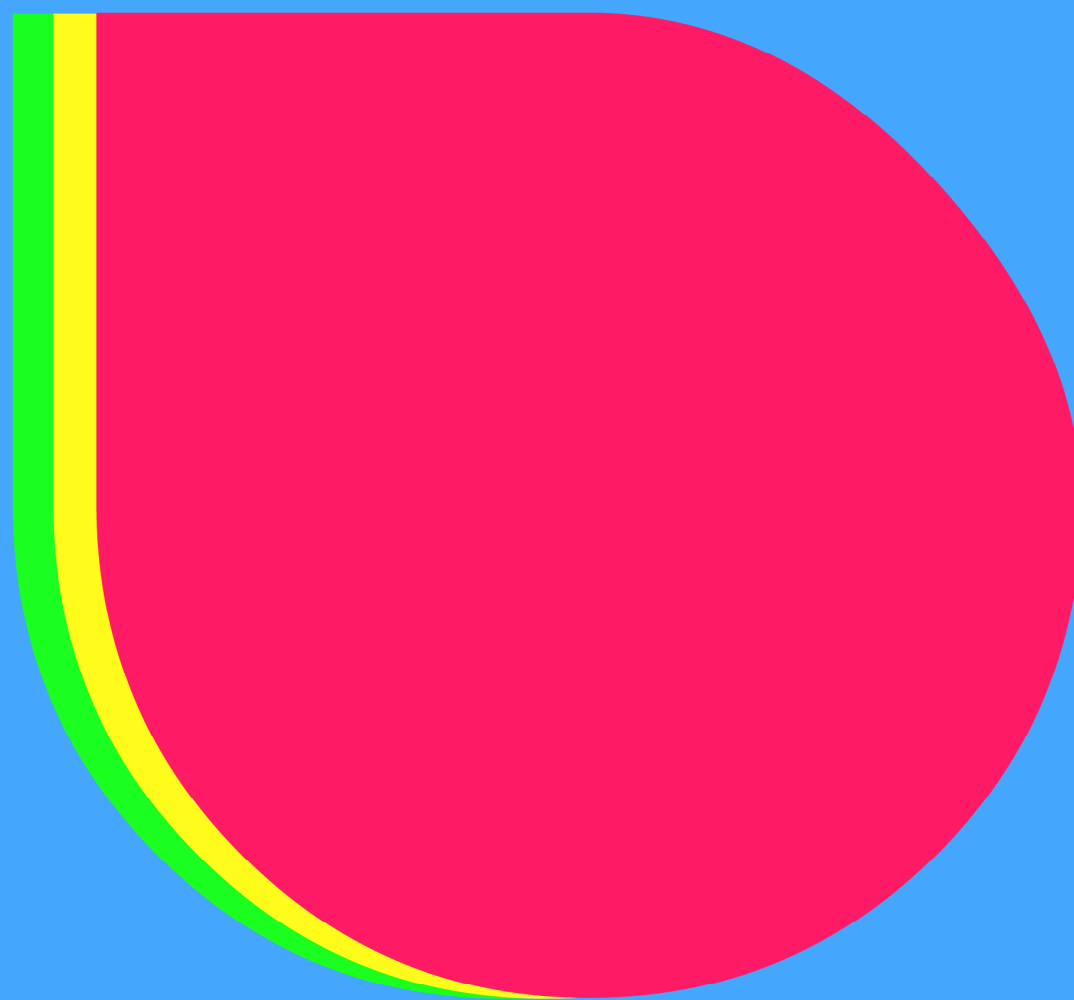


The feel of a vinyl record, weighty and silky, is intoxicating in itself. Every act, from removing the disc from its sleeve to applying the needle to the groove, literally connects the listener to the music. And MP3s will never compete with old records in hypnosis: “Desolation Row” becomes more mesmerizing and immersing than it already is when every whining harmonica blast and frank guitar strum is accompanied by another revolution of the circle. The sound, so intimate and personal, stands in stark contrast to the hyper-compressed music on those downloading sites.

The cost and convenience of producing gramophone records, however, is impersonal. The format is unappealing to most companies, both due to vinyl’s decline and because the format calls for more expensive materials. Many businesses, however, still offer the medium of the past.

Perhaps the most positive indication for vinyl lovers of the format’s new ascendance is the fact that the upswing of vinyl sales is concomitant with a sharp decline of CD sales. When given a choice to buy music, people opt for either a physical copy—vinyl and CDs—or a nonphysical one, like MP3s. Already becoming outmatched by digital downloads, the CD now faces stiff competition from its old, resurgent rival, as people realize that the former’s sole advantage is size-related. And does size really matter when you’re just listening to the Shins in your dorm room? ●





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