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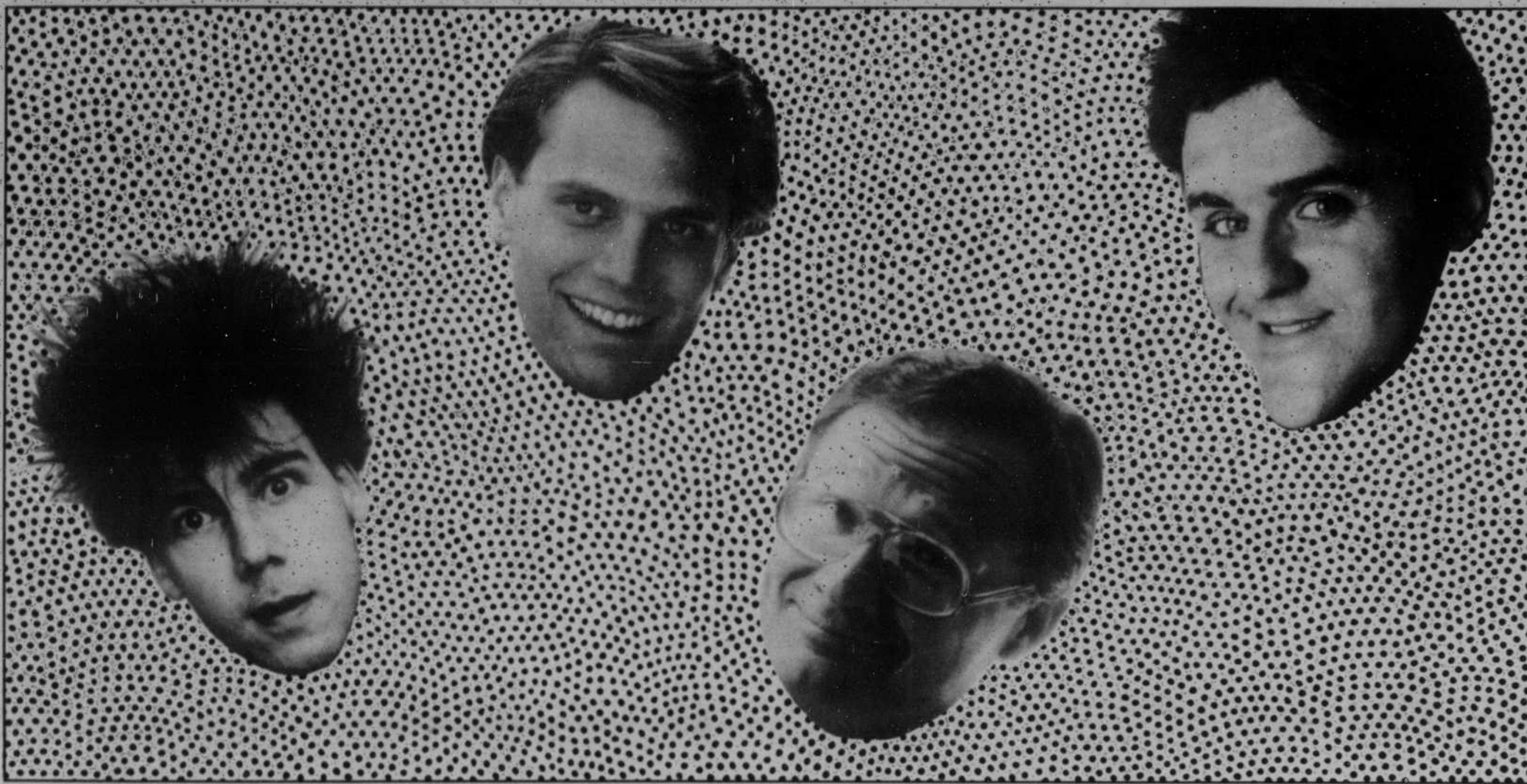
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Leno, Comedy Jam to boost local talent



Jay Leno, nationally-acclaimed funnyman and David Letterman sidekick, will be accompanied by three of Oregon's top-drawer comics tonight at the First Annual Oregon Comedy Jam in the Hult Center's Silva Concert Hall. Clockwise from top left: Dwight Slade, Leno, Mike Johnson and Robert Jenkins.

There are times when one can be stigmatized for being a "local talent" — for example, when one is a stand-up comic in Oregon.

For some vague reason, Oregonians seem to assume that real comedic talent has to come from somewhere else.

Robert Jenkins, a stand-up comedian from Portland who recently moved to Los Angeles, says, "Certain clubs in town (Portland) have a tendency to look down their noses at the local talent, just because they're local talent. You know — if they were any good they'd be in New York or L.A. That whole attitude thinking that people who come from Seattle are a little cooler, if they come from San Francisco then they're great, and if they come from New York it's just got to be the coolest thing in the world."

Dwight Slade, another Portland stand-up comic, finds this attitude frustrating because he knows there is quality comic talent in Oregon. And just to prove it to everybody, he has organized the First Annual Oregon Comedy Jam, which takes place tonight at the Hult Center.

Originally, Slade intended the show to feature Oregon comedians only. Later, he decided that the comedians would receive more exposure if the show featured a nationally-acclaimed headlining act. Eventually, he got hold of "Late Night With David Letterman" regular Jay Leno — the consummate stand-up comedian, Slade asserts.

Slade, Jenkins and Portland comedian Mike "Boats" Johnson will open for Leno's one-and-a-half-hour show with 15-minute performances.

Slade, 24, has been doing stand-up routines since he was 16. Three years ago, he moved to Portland after a disappointing two-year stint in Los Angeles and thought he stumbled onto a new West Coast mecca for stand-up comics.

"In '83, what was emerging in Portland was a really unique thing," Slade says. "There was no national or any type of comedy except the local Portland scene. There were eight or 10 comedians who were really dedicated to comedy as an art... original types of styles that were just so refreshing that it led me to believe that the talent there was amazing."

Today, Slade no longer has an image of Portland as a hotbed of explosive comic talent. He says he hasn't

seen even one unique stand-up comedian emerge on the Portland circuit in two years.

Slade blames the current status of Portland's comedy scene on the changing attitudes of comedy-club owners and audiences toward the local talent.

"(At) The Last Laugh, which is the only big club there is in Portland, local people are treated with disregard and are forced to take the lowest price salarywise, and also the lowest position on the bill and the least amount of time onstage," he says.

"Back in 1983, the local comedians were given the headline spot. That's not to say I don't think there's a market for local comedy both in Eugene or Portland, because it's worked before and there's no reason it shouldn't work again. The problem is there's no one who has an interest in it."

Slade hopes the Oregon Comedy Jam will spark club and audience interest in local talent again. He seems optimistic that the combination of Jenkins, Johnson, and himself — the three best-known comics on the Portland comedy circuit — will expose local audiences to the diversity and quality of Oregon's stand-up comedians.

Jenkins, 25, is a former hairdresser, who won last year's Portland Stand-Up Comedy Competition. He's been cracking up audiences in comedy clubs throughout the West Coast for the last two and a half years with a demented stage persona that he calls The Character. One Portland journalist described The Character's spiky-haired good looks as "a youthful version of the star of 'Eraserhead' on his way to the Multnomah Athletic Club."

Johnson, 37, is a Portlander who got into stand-up comedy three and a half years ago after his wife challenged him to follow up on a boast he made while slightly drunk. In 1984, he won first place in the Portland Stand-Up Comedy Competition. Last year, he was runner-up in the Seattle International Comedy Competition.

Slade admits that one of his motives for organizing the Oregon Comedy Jam was to get a chance to be onstage with Jay Leno, one of the country's most highly acclaimed stand-up comics.

"From a comedian's standpoint, when I watch Jay Leno I start to see definite artistic techniques coming out that you can actually pin down," Slade says.

It seems appropriate that Leno should headline this

particular showing of struggling stand-up comedians. He's a 10-year veteran of comedy clubs in Boston (his hometown), New York City and Los Angeles. He has attained national recognition only in the last two years, largely due to his regular appearances on the Letterman show.

The story of Leno's success is one of indomitable perseverance and love for his art. In a telephone interview, he asserts it was his determination to keep doing what he loved best that got him where he is today.

"When I was starting out I used to do a lot of Kiwanis Club and every conceivable kind of job there was (in comedy) just to get the experience," Leno recalls. "I used to go into bars, and I'd offer the owner \$50 to let me go on. And I'd tell them, 'If I did good, give me my \$50 back. If I did real bad you can keep the fifty.' You know, in Boston there weren't any comedy places, it was all music. They would always say, 'We don't want any comedians,' and I'll say, 'Well, here's \$50.' That was always an incentive."

And Leno almost always got his \$50 back, even when he did terribly.

You have to have a natural ability to do (stand-up comedy)," he says, "but the real ability I think is the perseverance. It's a matter of standing in line and hoping the person in front of you gets sick of it and falls out so you can move up a bit."

Leno is certainly one of the most unique comedians to emerge on the national scene recently, ironically so because he is such a regular guy in a field of entertainment filled with even more oddballs than rock 'n roll. One Chicago writer called Leno "the Bruce Springsteen of comedy," a tag that continues to plague him.

Leno avoids using obscene, sexist, ethnic or drug jokes and relies on lightning wit and dead-on observations of the absurdities of American popular culture. His approach to comedy, he says, is to be as natural as possible. But Leno has nothing against comedians who adopt stage persona. "To me, if a person's funny, then all rules are null and void."

The Oregon Comedy Jam will play tonight at the Hult Center's Silva Concert Hall at 8:00. Tickets cost \$9, \$12 and \$14, and are available at the EMU Main Desk, Earth River Records, Everybody's Records and the Hult Center box office.

Story by Patrick Low