

Local laughs and Letterman's couch

Bridgetown Comedy Festival co-founder and comedian Matt Braunger talks about the good times, bad times and the Portland he remembers

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Though now a successful comedian, actor and writer living in Los Angeles, Matt Braunger hangs onto his Northeast Portland roots. He grew up here and his parents still live in the City of Roses.

Braunger left Portland when he was 17, almost two decades ago. He'll tell you that, corny as it sounds, life is a journey — not a destination. He should know. Braunger has spent years in the Chicago and Los Angeles comedy scenes and he's lived on the road doing stand-up comedy. That journey took him from open mics in Chicago to Letterman's couch, and landed him a gig playing the role of Gene Martin on NBC's "Up All Night" where he played opposite Christina Applegate and Will Arnett.

Braunger is also a co-founder of the Bridgetown Comedy Festival, an annual event in Portland since 2008. The festival puts Portland "on the map" in the comedy world — and in light of Portland's most recent über-cool status, lots of comedians want to do the festival. The event includes hundreds of comedians — many of whom are unknown, incredibly funny people, right here in Portland.

Matt Braunger will be in town for the holidays and is hosting the first official, "Coldest and Darkest Time of the Year Comedy Spectacular" with Ron Funches and Ian Karmel on Dec. 27 at the Mission Theater.

Sue Zalokar: It seems like you have been on the path to performing since the beginning. When did you realize you were a stand-up comedian?

Matt Braunger: MADtv might have been the thing that made it real. Sitting on Letterman's couch was definitely a peak. It's getting people to trust you and kind of believe in you. And then they give you their money.

One of the best compliments I ever got was when I was in high school or college. I was doing plays and somebody told me they were glad to be on stage with me because I feel like you'll handle it no matter what's going to happen. If somebody drops a line, I've always been such a goof that I was never afraid to be in the moment.

S.Z.: You said sitting on Letterman's couch was a pinnacle moment.

M.B.: That was huge. I was the last guest of that year, for the season. He had Tracy Morgan on before me and Tracy was being really nuts. I could tell that David was not into his shenanigans. It was really fun to sit there with him and make (Letterman) laugh.

The thing is, when they say "cut," you're not allowed to move. No one gets to move or talk to Letterman, so you just sit there. And then he goes up the stairs and shuts the door and they're like, "OK, everybody." And then you can get up.

When I was sitting there, they called "That's cut" everything went dark and I heard him get up and walk behind me and he put his hand out and he said, "You're very funny." I shook his hand. I said, "Thanks."

I didn't even turn around. He was over my left shoulder and my right arm went back to where he was, like, "I'm not allowed to look at you."

S.Z.: You just did "Just for Laughs" (a Montreal comedy festival) in November. You opened for Dave Chappelle. That must have been amazing.

M.B.: Yes. We hung out that night a little bit. He is very private. Audiences in Montreal are just incredible. It's actually a lot like Portland where audiences really like to have fun, but they're also really smart. They'll let you experiment and fool around. There are certain towns where you play and people expect you to talk about how much your wife and kids annoy you.

S.Z.: I watched a YouTube video where you recently rapped Big Daddy Kane's "Aint No Half Steppin'" in its entirety. That was at Just for Laughs as well

M.B.: Yes. My manager pulled aside Robbie Praw — one of the guys who run Just for Laughs — and asked to get me into the Hip Hop Karaoke. My manager told him I was in a rap group in college. And Robbie looked at her and said, "Get the fuck outta here." People don't look at me and go, "Oh yeah, that guy raps."

I've always been a huge fan of hip hop. I used to go to 2nd Avenue Records (in its old location, two doors down — right by the Morrison Bridge) when I was a kid. I would literally walk in and all of the vinyl to the right was all hip hop. And I would just buy

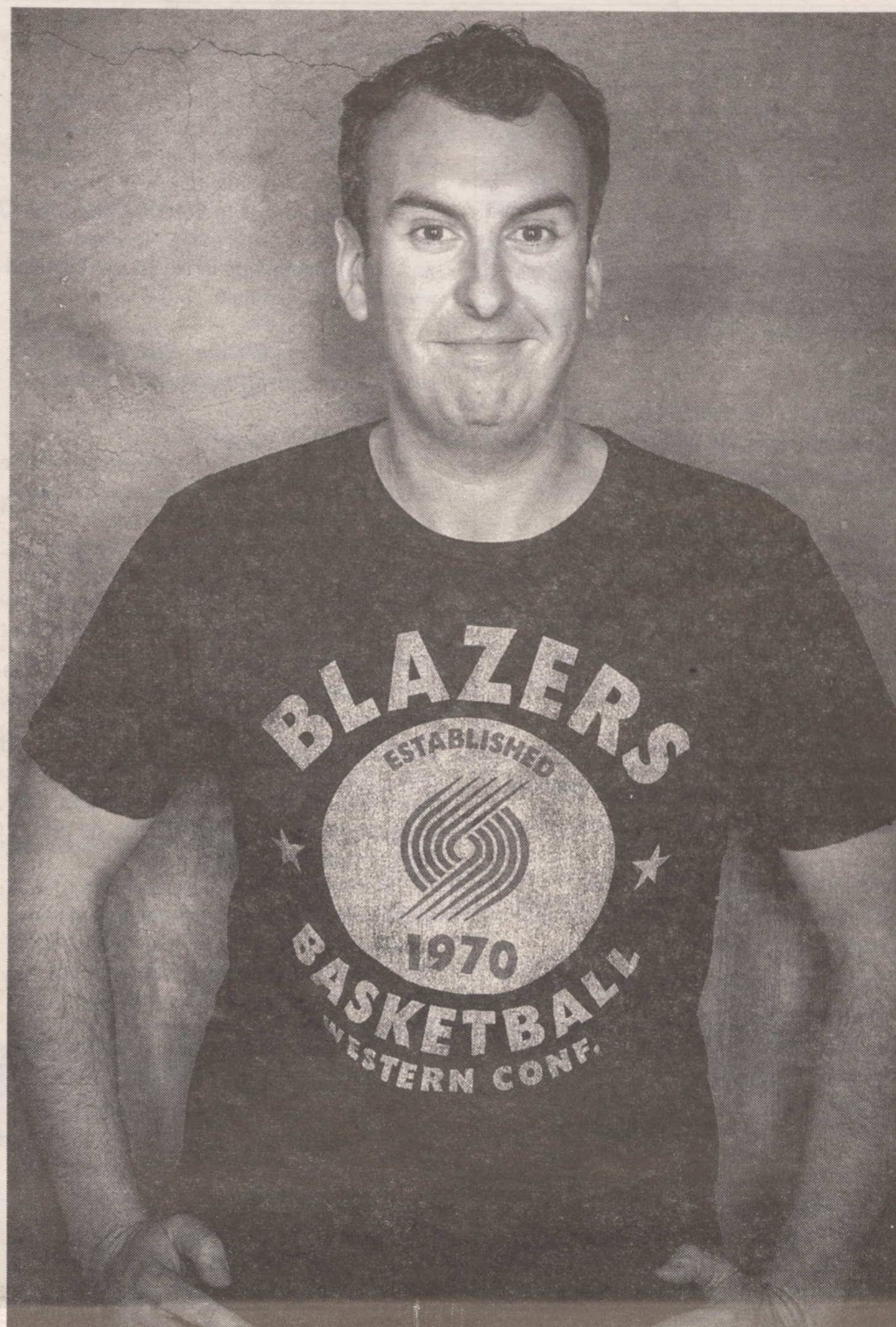


PHOTO BY ROBYN VON SWANK

Comedian Matt Braunger returns to his roots in Portland to host the inaugural Coldest and Darkest Time of the Year Comedy Spectacular, Dec. 27 at Mission Theater.

whatever they put out. That's how I discovered Big Daddy Kane, NWA, Eazy E, Public Enemy, you name it — all the greats.

That night at hip hop karaoke, I was so nervous. The room was "8 Mile-ish." There was no teleprompter. You had to know the whole song. It ended up being the most fun night ever. People did everything from Biggie to Macklemore and everyone was really good.

S.Z.: You'll be at the Mission Theater in December for the First annual Darkest, Coldest Time of the Year Comedy Spectacular.

M.B.: I figure, I come home for Christmas every year anyway, so why not have an event every year? Last year I played the Hollywood Theater with Ian Karmel and Ron Funches — who both have a Portland connection — and this year we wanted to do it again.

S.Z.: You hold claim to Portland still, though you have lived in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles for the past couple of decades. What was Portland like when you were growing up here?

M.B.: Now, it's a thing. For instance, wherever I go people are like, "Oh! You're from Portland. It's so cool. Why did you leave?" I always think, It wasn't that cool when I was a kid. That's not to say it wasn't great — it really was fantastic. It was a great place to grow up. Chuck Palahniuk wrote a book about how Portland is basically a place for refugees. People who don't fit in other places end up here. And in a sense, it's really like that.

You can make your own thing in Portland, and that's always been true. My parents are

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