



MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

## Anybody Here From Astoria?

Professional comedians find camaraderie and economic relief in an unlikely Queens neighborhood.

By ALLEN SALKIN

**O**N Monday, John Garrett loaded a rental truck with his possessions in Indianapolis and started driving. Far away in Astoria, Queens, a \$450-a-month bedroom, the tiniest in a dark second-floor apartment, awaited.

That the room, featuring a view of power lines, had been dubbed "the P.O.W. room" by others who had lived in it was not fazing Mr. Garrett, 33. For him it represented a foothold from which he could battle to make it big in the New York comedy scene.

A former accountant, he had been performing in the Midwest, booking corporate gigs with his no-profanity act. Standing in his new room on Tuesday, not two hours after moving in, he said, "It's time to do bigger

projects, do bigger things, time to be discovered, seen, whatever."

A stick of deodorant stood on his otherwise empty bookshelf, and his girlfriend from back home, Jenni Maple, sat with her laptop on his sheetless mattress, which touched the room's walls on either end.

Mr. Garrett had found the room because he knew Keith Alberstadt, an Astoria resident and comedian who writes for Jimmy Fallon. The two had met at the Funny Bone club in South Bend, Ind. Mr. Alberstadt, in turn, knew Dan Allen, a comedian who is known for knowing everyone in New York's comedy world. In Astoria, Mr. Allen is the self-appointed commissioner of a basketball league that counts about 50 comedians as

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### THE PUNCH LINE

How many comics get off at this Queens subway station every day and call it home?



# Anybody Here From Astoria?

From First Styles Page

members. He hooked Mr. Garrett up with the room.

"Whenever a new kid comes in, we definitely give him a place to stay," said Mr. Allen, 36. "We look around, start e-mailing, start calling. We make sure it's an easy entry into New York City."

An unlikely ecosystem has developed in the northwest corner of Queens. Just as there are some creatures that flourish at certain warm depths of a coral reef but not a foot deeper where the water is colder, a thriving hive of comedians has affixed itself to Astoria, perfectly suited to the particular microclimate there.

Thanks to cheap rents that allow time for writing, ample parking that makes road trips to out-of-town clubs easy and a myriad of other comedian-lifestyle perks, it has become more than likely that if you meet a comedian outside a New York City club, he (most of them are men) will tell you he lives in the Queens neigh-

borhood better known as a gold mine of Greek restaurants.

"It has become this weird 'Where do you live?' 'Astoria?' 'Well, who doesn't,'" said Rob Gordon, a comedian who lives there on 44th Street.

Exactly how many comedians live in Astoria is impossible to pin down, and it is certain that some of New York's other artist-friendly neighborhoods — Bushwick, Williamsburg and East Harlem among them — house a few comedians. But when Mr. Allen was asked to help turn out a group of Astoria-based comedians for a photo shoot, he produced 27 with just one day's notice.

Astoria is so rife with joke-tellers that Angela Bowers, a talent coordinator at VH1 who lives in the neighborhood, said she has been pestered while riding an exercise bike in her gym by comics hoping she will book them.

"I would say, 'Really? Now? Please don't try your jokes on me here,'" Ms. Bowers said. "When you are mid-workout the last



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**I'LL RAISE YOU A CHUCKLE** A group of comics gather to play a low-stakes poker game in Astoria.

thing you want to hear is someone's new set or have their CD passed to you."

The fact that many Astoria comics do not find the neighborhood funny in and of itself has not dissuaded them from living there. Nor, said Grant Gordon, a

stand-up with curly Seth Rogen hair, has the relative absence of lanky dudes slinging electric guitars and tattooed young women.

"It's cool to live in Brooklyn, but comics aren't the cool kids," Mr. Gordon said, standing outside the Neptune Diner on As-

toria Boulevard. "We just want somewhere cheap. I've never had a hip bar that I go to that has, like, indie music bands. I just do shows and go home."

Paul Oddo, who performs in sketch and improv troupes and lives in one of the bigger bed-

rooms in the apartment Mr. Garrett was moving into, on 29th Street, said he decided to leave Bushwick the day someone shot an arrow across the common room in the warehouse on McKibben Street where he was living. "It was constant weed smoke and parties," he said.

His girlfriend, Emily Tarver, an improv performer, moved from Manhattan a year ago to an apartment two blocks away.

Unlike certain areas of Brooklyn where pricey clothing shops and buzzy restaurants have changed old neighborhoods, Astoria seems to have absorbed its newcomers with barely a blink. In the afternoon, schoolchildren in uniform walk home in quiet groups, sometimes accompanied by parents, past Egyptian, Greek and South American restaurants. Commercial 31st Street, under elevated tracks, remains a mish-mash of dry cleaners, variety stores and un-ironic bars.

"We have real people in Astoria," said Tim Young, who has appeared on Comedy Central's "Premium Blend." "All that's left in Manhattan are yuppies and crazies. If you're a people watcher, what's better than a bridge-and-tunnel crowd 24/7?"

Naturally, Astoria has seeped into many comedians' acts.



"My block is so quiet," begins a joke that Moody McCarthy has added to his routine, "if there's any yelling at night that means Ecuador scored a goal."

Andy Hendrickson, who performs at comedy clubs across the country, tells this one: "I live in Astoria, which is great because anytime you need something you can just wish for it and it shows up on the curb. I got a nice TV just sitting on the curb on my block. I was leaving the house to

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## The neighborhood isn't funny per se, but the roomies are.

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look at DVD players. I walked out of my apartment and there was a DVD player sitting on the curb. I took it, went right back in. Still works perfectly. Thanks, magic curb! One time, I was headed out to get something to eat and I walked outside. Turkey sandwich. Thanks, magic curb!"

But Astoria as a well of material is less important than its affordability. "Astoria allows me to live for a long time without working at a day job," said Eliza Skin-

ner, who performs with the improv group I Eat Pandas.

The less hectic pace helps, too. Ted Alexandro, who has appeared on "Late Show With David Letterman," can be found daily at the Waltz-Astoria cafe on Ditmars Avenue, a relaxed place with a piano and beaten-in couches. "It's a good place to sit and think," he said, a memo book and a cafe Americano on his table.

"I write on my porch," said Anthony Atamanuik, who does regular extra work for "30 Rock." "I have a porch." His rent for a duplex three-bedroom house with a living room, dining room and full kitchen is \$1,800 a month.

Since most comedy clubs in New York pay only \$25 a set on weeknights and \$75 on weekends, comedians frequently take to their cars, or to La Guardia Airport, which is Astoria-adjacent, for out-of-town gigs that can pay a headliner \$4,000 for a weekend.

"It's incredibly easy to get into or out of town," said Tony Deyo, who does stand-up nationally.

Another reason a particular fish will choose a particular cranny on a reef is not only the opportunities it offers for feeding, but the protection from predators.

"It's a neighborhood you can come back to any time of night and feel safe," said Leah Bonne-



**FUNHOUSE** Paul Oddo, far left, and John Garrett, right, at their Astoria apartment where Dan Allen, center, once lived.

ma, who has been a guest on the Opie and Anthony radio show. "I used to live in deep Brooklyn and I'd have to take a car service all the way to my door."

There are certain dangers to living in an area colonized by comedians, like being corralled into

a low-stakes poker game.

Mr. Hendrickson moved to an apartment on 34th Street in Astoria in 2007 from Washington, D.C., but neither he nor his roommate, Mr. Alberstadt, has done much decorating. In the living room there are two sets of golf

clubs, a ratty green couch and an ironing board on which an iron and a bottle of Bud Light rested.

Near the TV, tuned to a baseball playoff game, the roommates had unfolded a card table. For \$20 apiece, a group of comics had bought into a poker game: in addition to the two roommates were Jeff Kreisler, the author of "Get Rich Cheating;" the stand-ups Dan Cartwright, Chris Wilkes and Costaki Economopoulos; and Mr. Allen, who had been reading a book on Texas hold 'em, but was losing anyway.

"Just like stand-up, you can't learn it from a book, Dan," Mr. Hendrickson said.

Mr. Wilkes was ahead in the competition to hold the floor's attention, relating a story about a woman who asked him and two other comics to perform at her wedding reception. He had asked if they should clean up their language. "She said, 'No, do it just

like in the club,'" Mr. Wilkes said.

The poker players looked up from their cards.

"We had people getting up after the second guy's set," he continued. "They were telling the bride and groom: 'Look, congratulations, we wish you the best and all, but we've got to go. This is too much for us.'"

An even worse idea, Mr. Hendrickson offered, was allowing men to get up on stage at clubs and propose to their girlfriends on bended knee. (Apparently it happens.) "It ruins the whole show," Mr. Hendrickson said. "The girl showing off her ring the whole time to friends and stuff."

In case you haven't been to a comedy show in a while, comedians are still having little luck with the ladies. And living in Astoria isn't necessarily helping.

"The only caveat about living here," Mr. Allen said, "is convincing and extracting a beautiful girl with a sweet Manhattan apartment to come out to Queens, which in their mind is filled with serial killers, rusty above-ground tracks and barrels of fire straight from the scenes in Eddie Murphy's 'Coming to America.' When girls ask me where I live I say, 'I live on the Upper East East Side.'"

He could always try dating a fellow comedian. Helen Hong, a stand-up who lives in the East Village, once the nexus of the city's young bohemian culture, said she now feels marooned.

"Especially if you are hanging out with a bunch of comics after the show," she said, "it's always like, 'Hey who's catching the N, R, W?' Or 'so and so is giving us a ride home, hop in.' And I have to be like, 'No I'm going the other way.'"