

chris rock

long-familiar to the Black community, comedian/actor/writer takes his act on the road to national acclaim

By Stefanie P. Worth
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Interviewing Chris Rock over breakfast was comparable to breaking bread with an old friend. In town for his recent Music Hall appearance, we met at the 333 East restaurant to talk about his life's ambition.

Like most of his fans, I've been watching both he and his career grow over the past few years — cheering him on, nurturing his assimilation into mainstream stardom. So he's become almost like one of the family. You know, Richard, Eddie, Arsenio....

Maybe it's because he's done his maturing in full view of the adoration and criticism of his audience. From bit parts in episodes of Miami Vice to movie roles in "Beverly Hills Cop II," "I'm Gonna Get You Sucka" and "New Jack City," to a regular cast position on the crew of Saturday Night Live, it's been a steady climb to the time of his life for this veteran of a newcomer.

"I'm having a lot of fun. A lot, a lot, a lot of fun," Chris concedes over his orange juice and pancakes. "Comedy is just something I thought I could do. Something I like a lot and could do...as opposed to football."

Rock grew up as the oldest child on "the best block in the ghetto" of Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy with two working parents, five brothers and a sister, and lived what he terms a "decent childhood." But it wasn't always easy and the root of his humor deals with the trials of being Black in America.

"I was bussed to some really racist schools in Brooklyn's Gerritson Beach," he recalls. "It was very weird and scary. I'm eight years old and people are calling me 'nigger.' It's basically the reason I'm here now. Comedy is the blues for people who can't sing. You get on stage and fall down...people laugh. Pain's funny."

He can laugh now because his success has enabled him to put his brothers through college. Higher education was an option he passed on, commenting, "You go to college to become something, but I've pretty much become what I wanted to be."

The start of Rock's roll

The actor/comedian's early influences include "The Flip Wilson Show," "The Dean Martin Show" and Bill Cosby guest hosting the "Tonight" show. When he was 10 years old, he saw Garrett Morris portraying a Black Bruce

Lee on SNL and decided he "wanted to be that guy — the Black guy on Saturday Night Live."

So Rock started like most comic wannabees, observing life and serving it up with humor at local comedy night auditions in his home state of New York. He had been working the club circuit every night for three years when Eddie Murphy gave him his first big break by tapping him to perform on the "HBO Uptown Comedy Express."

Afterwards, he became a frequent sight across the TV dial until an appearance on "The Arsenio Hall Show" caught the eye of an SNL producer. Then, like magic, he was indeed "the Black guy on Saturday Night Live."

Following in the footsteps of Eddie Murphy as "the Black guy" on the show can't be an easy feat. And while Murphy's skits were generally well-received despite racial sensitivities, Rock's SNL characters have come under some criticism for their negative



stereotypical overtones. But he admits he's still searching for his niche on the show.

The comedian writes most of his own material, which is thoroughly screened by the show's producers, and hopes one day they'll hire a writer who "think poor." He also hopes he has two more good years with SNL.

"I hope I get popular and get the hell out of there," he says.

In the meantime, Rock has been paving the road for his future via big screen. His most recent movie role as "Pookie" in "New Jack City" caught his attention because "it was the only one they offered me.

"No.... (laughter) I read it and it was like 'I could do this, it's alright.' There was an art to it, it wasn't like, you know, 'Huggie Bear.' It wasn't one of those dopeheads. It was like he gets clean, he's actually a citizen.

"Probably the main reason I did it was because Ice-T had a good role and Mario had a good role. I wouldn't play a drug addict in Steve Martin's movie because it would be the only Black guy and he'd be a drug addict.

"You can play Black negativity as long as there's Black positivity around. Plus he died which took all the corniness out of it."

Rock raps on Black flicks

This has been a banner year for African Americans in the film industry. No longer acting solely in first-person-in-the-movie-to-be-killed roles, African Americans are directing, writing, producing, scoring, casting and acting in pivotal and compelling theatrical works. But our big screen success is an ambivalent state.

"It's great. I just wish the budgets were bigger," says Rock. "You hear so-and-so made a film for \$800,000. That means the actors didn't make \$---.

"I made electrician money on 'New Jack City.' It's good money, but not money for people to be tapping you everywhere you go," he laughs.

Those things will come in time, believes the actor, but he wants them to come in *his* time. "I don't want to be like Hank Aaron," he parodies, " 'Boy, these boys are making a lot of money now.' I don't want to be like that."

Does Rock think African Americans are being pigeon-holed by recurrent ghetto-life/drug-life movie themes? Not at all.

Chris Rock

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Brothers who make it, he alleges, are the exception and not the rule. And shows like "Cosby" are hits because White people watch them, not because of their Black audience members. He charges that educated Blacks have lost their sense of humor and are uncomfortable witnessing what is real-life for most Blacks.

It is the isolated outbreaks of movie house violence which Rock feels will threaten the future of Black movie makers. He believes the portrayal of violence does indeed incite some of our brothers and sisters to anti-social behavior. And the industry powers-that-be will only tolerate the bad PR for so long.

"When I was a kid I used to DJ parties and you couldn't play four rap records in a row or else a fight would break out — it never failed. You had to throw in a slow record," he says.

"Maybe the movies are like playing four rap records in a row.

To hammer home his point he mentions that when he saw "Terminator II" the same brothers were present who saw "Boyz N the Hood." "Do you think the Crypts and the Bloods go to the movies on different nights?" he asks. The answer isn't necessarily to make other kinds of movies, he says, "but maybe when we make a movie we should put a slow jam in there."

It'll be awhile before he starts choosing film themes for his own ventures. Rock says he'll wait to move into other areas of movie-making until after he's "old and got a little pot belly."

The funnyman's latest album, "Born Suspect," is in the stores now. His next flick, "Cell Block 4," described as a "rap Blues Brothers," is due out in December.