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Wyatt Cenac

10 Comics to Watch

By DIANE GARRETT

"The Daily Show" gig couldn't have come at a better time for Wyatt Cenac. In June 2008, the physically unimposing writer-performer was working the door at Lucky Strike in Hollywood. He had recently been evicted, his car had been repossessed and he owed a friend one month's rent for his new place. It had been four years since his last TV gig writing for "The King of the Hill."

"I was panicked," he recalls, sipping a beverage poolside at the Roosevelt Hotel. "I was in dire straits."

Three days after he got the "Daily Show" job, Cenac was interviewing elderly Jews in Florida about Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. If he seemed dazed, that's because he was.

Since then, Cenac, 33, has honed his seemingly innocent "Daily Show" faux news persona, keeping a straight face (mostly) while going off ridiculously absurd tangents about the "boyotes" Sen. Mark Sanford might have sired during his supposed hike along the Appalachian Trail.

"Wyatt is deceptive," says "Daily Show" executive producer Josh Lieb. "He's got that outward mask of innocence, but that's actually very thin. He has a deep, incisive core."

That innocence, Lieb says, draws people in and lulls them into relaxing their guard. "That's when he kills you," Lieb says. "He's a vampire of comedy."

The pace is a lot faster at "The Daily Show" than at "King of the Hill." But an even bigger shock to the system was getting thrown into field pieces where "you're talking to someone and they're not along for the ride."

The Dallas-bred multihyphenate has acted in one indie drama, "Medicine for Melancholy," and written a comicbook for Marvel. On his breaks, he always hits the standup circuit.

"If I can do movies, it would be great. I would definitely like to do more," he says. "At the same time, I'm just trying to enjoy this moment. I have a job I never thought I would have."

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"I'm a comedian who can do both -- I can write and perform. That's what I've always admired about people like Mike Judge, Woody Allen and Ben Stiller. I always thought I'd like to do both because I wanted the freedom."