

GREEN IS GOOD

Paul Provenza's Showtime showcase puts comedians' behind-the-scenes personalities on center stage **BY JIM COLUCCI**

In his more-than-30-year career, Paul Provenza has been performing stand-up comedy—and, apparently, observing the art form, too. In 2005, his critically lauded film *The Aristocrats* celebrated comics of varying generations as each told the same famously off-color, vaudeville-era joke. Last year, his book *Satiristas!* served up uncensored interviews with dozens of comedic legends.

Now, with *The Green Room with Paul Provenza*, which airs its second season of six hour-long episodes this summer, the 54-year-old actor and writer is successfully coaxing his fellow

funnymen and -women into dropping their stage schtick to instead engage in candid conversations about anything from pop culture to politics. Part performance, part free-wheeling talk show, Provenza's brainchild comes to life not on a typical TV soundstage but on the floor of the Hollywood rock club The Vanguard—where, yes, liquor is served during tapings. Provenza says *The Green Room's* relaxed setting, paired with Showtime's generous anything-goes attitude, allows today's wittiest stars the freedom not just to work blue, but to dig deep into true comedy gold.

The Green Room creator Paul Provenza says he compares his role as host to a jazz musician, not a moderator.

WATCH! The way *The Green Room* is shot, it seems like anything can happen and end up on camera. Is that intentional?

PAUL PROVENZA: I've always been frustrated by how the most important and valuable things about comedy seem to get lost in the effort to capture it on television. Because comedians have to adapt to the medium. We wanted this show to feel like an experience, and not like it had been staged for the audience. The content would be all off the cuff, very conversational and organic. We told the camera guys to shoot as if they're shooting sports, where you don't know where that ball is going.

WATCH! Where did the idea for this series come from?

PAUL: The first incarnation of my idea to capture a behind-the-scenes look at comedy started with *Comics Only* back in the early 1990s. And even before that, I had done a pilot where comedians sat around looking at newspapers and riffing on the day's events. So I've always been captivated by the possibilities of capturing what I've experienced hanging out with comedians. Then, in the past few years, my phenomenal friend and co-executive Barbara Romen and I partnered to develop live shows. We started doing *The Green Room* live as a stage show at the Fringe festival in Edinburgh and at Montreal's Just For Laughs. We ended up doing it maybe 50 times live before we had a "sizzle reel" to pitch to Showtime.

WATCH! Without that actual footage, it seems like this must have been a hard concept to describe.

PAUL: Yes, and that's why the pitch meeting ended up being really hilarious. "What's the theme and the format of the show?" There is no format. "Well, are there themes?" No. "What's the structure?" There is none. Showtime wants their image to be fearless, and for a long time, "No Limits" was their slogan. So I actually

said to them, here's a chance for you to really do that. And to their huge credit, they really did take a leap of faith.

WATCH! It sounds like the famous Seinfeld pitch, for a "show about nothing."

PAUL: And the whole point is that the show really isn't about nothing. There is no topic list or agenda so some of the shows get very political, and some get very personal and intimate. We have real discourse, where it doesn't matter who's right or who's wrong. I always feel frustrated when I watch *Real Time with Bill Maher* or *The Daily Show* and think, "This is such a great conversation—keep going!" But they don't, because they have a format they have to keep to.

WATCH! Why did you decide to call it *The Green Room*?

PAUL: In a "green room" before and after shows, comics aren't concerned about their images, or how their hair looks, or having everything they say be perfectly crafted. That's the vibe we try to capture on the show.

WATCH! You tape each show for nearly an hour and a half, and then you have to edit down to an hour. Doesn't it kill you

to lose so many great jokes and moments?

PAUL: That was a really big problem when I was doing *The Aristocrats*—"This is so great and I don't want to lose it!" But I learned that in the editing room, our mantra can be "DVD extras." So it's a little bit easier because we know that the good stuff is not going to just disappear.

WATCH! What is the process of putting each panel of comics together? Is there a formula for getting the best chemistry?

PAUL: Showtime has asked that we have at least one or two names on every show that will make people watch. In Season 2, we have Margaret Cho, Richard Lewis and Lewis Black. Then it's a question of which two do I put together, and who do I put around them? I also have a personal mission both to bring in some unknown talent, and to respect the Old Guard.

WATCH! What differences can we expect in *The Green Room* for Season 2?

PAUL: This second season felt so much more organic and authentic right out

of the gate that at one point when I had to go to the bathroom, I got up and left the panel to carry on the conversation. Then, I realized, "I just got up and took a leak in the middle of a TV show!" 🚽

THE GREEN ROOM

airs Thursdays
at 11 p.m. ET/PT
on Showtime.



Comedians Dana Gould, Andy Dick, Brendon Burns and Andy Kindler join Provenza in a roundtable discussion.