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January 6, 2011

The Comic Who Explores Comedy's Darkest Side

By DAN SALTZSTEIN

HERE'S a riposte you're not likely to hear in an interview by [Jay Leno](#) or [Charlie Rose](#): "You've got to have rage, man. Because I see the posture — your posture is built for rage." That's Marc Maron talking to [Dane Cook](#), the popular but bland comedian, on an episode of Mr. Maron's twice-weekly podcast.

On his show, whose title includes an exclamation that can't be printed here, Mr. Maron, a stand-up comic by trade, has cast himself as an unlikely celebrity interviewer — one who is angry, probing, neurotic and a vulnerable recovering addict. And somehow he's able to elicit from his guests, mostly other comedians like [Sarah Silverman](#) and [Ben Stiller](#), the same level of vulnerability.

The interviews, usually taped in his garage in Los Angeles, often end up feeling more like therapy sessions. Take, for example, [Robin Williams](#) talking to Mr. Maron about the dark side of dealing with audiences: "I guess it's that fear that they'll recognize — as you know — how insecure are we really? How desperately insecure that made us do *this* for a living?"

Thanks to moments like these [the podcast](#) has, over the last year or so, become a cult hit and a must-listen in show business and comedy circles. The success of the show has everything to do with its perceptive, prickly host and his ability to coax surprisingly revealing things from his guests.

Comedians, Mr. Maron said, are temperamentally complicated — otherwise they probably wouldn't be comedians.

"Most of them live difficult lives," he said. "So that was always more in the forefront than 'Let's talk about the business of comedy.'"

Each hourlong episode begins with Mr. Maron riffing in the style that has characterized his comedy over the years: unscripted banter layered with humor, narcissism and anger, directed both outward and inward. But after about 10 or 15 minutes he turns to a long-form interview. And that's when the show really takes off.

"People say stuff to him that you can't imagine them saying to anyone else," said Ira Glass, host of the public radio show (and podcast) "This American Life," and a recent guest of Mr. Maron's. "And they offer it. They want to give it to him. Because he is so bare, he calls it forward."

After the show goes up on Mondays and Thursdays, it regularly appears on the iTunes Top 10 podcasts list. According to Brendan McDonald, the producer of the podcast, which is free, the show averages 230,000 downloads a week from iTunes and the podcast's Web site.

In a recent interview in New York City, where he was performing a series of stand-up shows and recording interviews for his podcast, Mr. Maron talked in his usual manner: candidly, verbosely, intensely. At 47 he is lean (though he obsesses over his weight and eating habits) and sports ever-changing facial hair. (He obsesses over that too, theorizing that the lack of a consistent look has held his career back. "I don't think [Jon Stewart](#)'s changed his hair in 25 years," he said.) He lives in the Highland Park neighborhood of Los Angeles — just across town from Hollywood, but a world away — and has three cats. He calls his house "the cat ranch."

Many of the comedians he came up with have passed him by. In 1995 he shared a photo spread in *New York* magazine with Dave Attell, Louis C. K. and Ms. Silverman, all of whom went on to have TV projects. He never got that sitcom, those major movie roles, a spot on “*Saturday Night Live*.” (He famously showed up stoned to an interview with [Lorne Michaels](#); he didn't get the gig.)

His personal life was — and still is — tumultuous. He has battled addictions to alcohol, cocaine and nicotine. He's twice divorced, and has consistently included details about his relationships in his stand-up and on the podcast. During the first of four shows last month at Union Hall in Brooklyn, which were being recorded for a CD, he talked about changing the locks on his house because of a fight with a girlfriend.

Over the years he's also struggled with jealousy and hostility toward other comics. Many of the podcasts begin with an apology from Mr. Maron — or at least a half-hearted attempt at one. And conflicts that have developed over the years crop up regularly, most notably during a recent two-hour interview with Louis C. K.

The two had drifted apart in the last few years, and Mr. Maron expressed envy — though also enormous respect — toward his old friend, who has his own show on FX. “If you see me doing something, and you're having a hard time coming to terms with it 'cause of your feeling about your own life,” Louis C. K. said toward the end of the interview, “what's really happening is you're letting me down as a friend.”

Mr. Maron began doing comedy in the early 1980s as a student at [Boston University](#). Over the next decade or so he performed at small clubs. He moved between the East and West Coasts in these years before settling in New York in 1993. There he helped lay the groundwork for what became known as the alt-comedy scene (a term he says he's never really understood), alongside Louis C. K., Mr. Stewart, [Janeane Garofalo](#) and others.

“He really was the real deal,” said Mr. Attell, who began sharing stages with Mr. Maron more than 15 years ago in New York. “He truly did hate himself.”

But Mr. Attell added: “He turned it into gold. Nobody does angry and bitter better than him.”

Mr. Maron had a few short-lived TV jobs, including [comedy specials](#). He had a minor role in the film “*Almost Famous*.” In 2000 he had a modestly successful one-man show, “*The Jerusalem Syndrome*,” Off Off Broadway. He appeared several times on “*The Late Show with David Letterman*” and more than 40 times on “*Late Night With Conan O'Brien*.”

But, as he put it, “America didn't notice.”

In 2004 he found a temporary home at Air America, the left-leaning radio network that went off the air last January. It didn't work out. “I really began to believe that the struggles of most people are existential, not political,” he said, “and my biggest struggles were existential.”

He was canceled by Air America — twice.

A third project with the network, a Web-based show with the comedian Sam Seder, also failed. In September 2009, after that show was canceled, he and Mr. McDonald began to sneak into the Air America studios after hours to record his podcast, bringing guests up in the freight elevator. Soon, he moved from Astoria, Queens, to Los Angeles, where he had spent time on the comedy circuit. And so his garage became the new home of the podcast.

On the early episodes he interviewed — sometimes awkwardly, thanks perhaps to all that hostile jealousy — old friends and comedy personalities he had intersected with over the years: [Zach Galifianakis](#), [Bob Odenkirk](#), Mr. Attell.

Last April he interviewed Robin Williams at Mr. Williams's home in Marin County, Calif. (Using a technique repeated in later episodes, on the drive up he talked through and recorded his anxieties about the interview.) Mr. Williams, usually an unstoppable riff machine, mostly laid off the jokes, and the discussion was notably raw and real.

The Williams show “put the thing on the map,” Mr. Maron said. “It was unlike any other interview with him. We talked about addiction, divorce, joke theft, about his reputation, about his career.”

So how does Mr. Maron create the space that allows for comics to finally open up?

“What helps him,” said [Judd Apatow](#), the director and producer, and another recent guest, “is the fact that people mistakenly think that no one is going to listen to it, when in fact a ton of people listen to it, and it will last forever.”

The do-it-yourself quality of the podcast — his setup includes only a laptop computer or digital recorder, a mixer and two microphones — puts guests at ease. As Mr. Apatow put it, “You kind of feel like he might lose the tape on the way home.”

Another breakthrough occurred in May: Mr. Maron interviewed Carlos Mencia, a popular comedian who has been repeatedly accused of stealing jokes and bullying his peers. Mr. Maron, though, approached the interview with empathy.

“In my mind this was a guy that obviously paid his dues,” he said. “And so I wanted to talk to him about the accusations — the little I knew about them — but more so just to say, ‘How do you deal with this burden?’”

They taped the interview, and Mr. Maron said he immediately knew that Mr. Mencia hadn't answered the criticism leveled at him. “It was a snow job,” he said.

After reaching out to a handful of Latino comics who had worked with Mr. Mencia, Mr. Maron spoke to two of them, Willie Barcena and Steve Trevino, on a second show. They spoke very bluntly and negatively about Mr. Mencia. Mr. Barcena said that he would not go on in front of Mr. Mencia when working on new material. Mr. Trevino, who for years opened for Mr. Mencia, said of his alleged joke-stealing: “I think he doesn't know. I think he's ill.”

Soon after, Mr. Maron called Mr. Mencia, who agreed to a follow-up interview.

“I'm literally frightened on a few levels, 'cause I've never been in this position,” Mr. Maron recalled. “I don't know him enough to know whether I can handle what's about to happen.”

On the second episode Mr. Maron relentlessly confronted Mr. Mencia with what the other comics said. Mr. Mencia was defensive, but admitted, “I've cared so much about what people think about me that it has led me to negative behavior.” Later he apologized for bumping performers at comedy clubs, another criticism.

The interview was widely praised.

“All of a sudden I'm a journalist,” Mr. Maron said. “I have no idea how to be a journalist.”

For his part Mr. Mencia does not see the incident as a negative one and credits Mr. Maron for creating a “familial” environment.

“Had it been anyone else, I would have said, ‘I answered that question a million times,’” Mr. Mencia said. “But he's a comedian, he's a friend.”

He added that the podcast's influence on the comedy world is real. “He's got power, man,” Mr. Mencia said.

The show is unscripted. Mr. Maron does simple outlines before his interviews and relies heavily on his abilities as a conversationalist to carry the interviews.

“He's a much better talker than me,” Mr. Glass, the radio host, said. “As a performer he's incredibly bare. And then to bring that bareness to a journalism setting gives you this secret weapon that's immensely powerful.”

The podcast may be a success, but financially it about breaks even. Mr. Maron solicits donations from listeners, and the

show has occasional sponsors.

“I’m getting by,” Mr. Maron said. “But I’m not making a living.”

Mr. Maron said he was working with a production company on a TV project that would combine his interviews and some of the back stories around them. But because the podcast is the perfect format for what he’s doing, allowing for all that intimacy and depth (and raw language), it’s easy to imagine some of the appeal being lost in the translation. For now, though, he’s content — or at least as content as he ever gets — with doing the podcast.

Backstage at Union Hall, he conceded that he can be his own worst enemy. “I’m wired to destroy myself,” he said, “so fighting that wiring is always challenging.”