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An Evangelical Comic Provokes Holy Laughter

By JOHN LELAND

BRENTWOOD, Tenn., Sept. 14 - In his study in suburban Nashville, Brad Stine was working out a routine about intelligent design. The bit was in its formative stages, but Mr. Stine, a born-again Christian, felt the topic had potential. "I'm trying to find elements of evolution that are suspect," he said, ramping up into character. "Like, if it took a billion years for a bug to develop camouflage, what did he do in the meantime - hiii-iiide?" He sneered the last word into two escalating syllables.

"And then I'll go off and talk about toilet seats," he said.

In the competitive world of stand-up comedians, Mr. Stine, 45, has found a niche as a conservative Christian, riffing on topics like gay marriage, judicial activism and judges who cite precedents from foreign courts. If this seems like an unlikely route to the "Tonight" show, it has its rewards. After years in secular comedy clubs, where he made up to \$1,500 a week, he now performs at basketball arenas and football stadiums for gatherings of the Promise Keepers, a ministry aimed at men. For less than an hour onstage, he earns \$20,000.

Mr. Stine, who delivers his routines in a hyperactive rant, has performed at every Promise Keepers event since 2003, sandwiching them between gigs at churches, Christian retreats, county fairs and corporate events that pay \$5,000 or more a pop. (He will be at the Promise Keepers event that closes Sept. 17 at Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale on Long Island.) In January, he entertained at the Republican House and Senate Retreat at Greenbrier Estate in West Virginia, trading banter with the House majority leader, Tom DeLay, and having his photograph taken with Katherine Harris, Dennis Hastert and Rudolph W. Giuliani. He has also released three performance videos - including the new "Tolerate This!" - and a book, "Being a Christian Without Being an Idiot: 10 Assumed Truths That Make Us Look Stupid."

Mr. Stine describes his work as a mission. "Christians are totally marginalized on television, unless it's a serial killer," he said. In his act, he declares himself a conservative Christian who believes "America is the greatest country that ever existed on the face of the earth," and portrays his values as under attack from all sides by puny liberals, relativists, atheists, Hollywood producers and the politically correct. "Christians have never had a guy with an attitude who's hip and in-your-face before," he said.

But in the age of Fox News and "South Park" conservatives, his positions also define an untapped market, he said. "We're not talking about some fringe subculture. The people I'm representing are over half of America. All I want is a place at the table, next to the Jewish comic and the lesbian comic, and if there're enough people who say yes, you can make a living." As a

comedian, "there's another advantage to what I believe: there's not many doing it," he said, adding: "And in a capitalist society, that's not bad. Because there's not 500 Brad Stines to pick from."

John Styll, president of the Gospel Music Association in Nashville, likened Mr. Stine to the Christian rock bands of the 1990's, who shed the squeaky-clean church image to reach an audience that wanted performers to be as aggressive and hairy as their secular peers. "Brad came out as edgier than most Christian comedians," Mr. Styll said. "He says a lot of things that people wish they could say but don't. He's put his tush on the line. I've never said that before."

For the organizers of Promise Keepers, Mr. Stine's aggressive style seemed made to order. In recent years, the organization has seen annual attendance drop below 200,000 people, from 1.1 million. Harold Velasquez, vice president of creative services, said: "Brad showed us that we had permission to speak out about the Judeo-Christian values that we believe in, that we don't have to cower or back down, or we don't have to spiritualize everything. We have every right as Americans to say, 'I don't believe in same-sex marriage.' That's what Brad reminds us."

Mr. Stine, who accepted Jesus when he was 9, came slowly to the holy laugh. He began his career as magician, gradually developing a comedy act that included fire-eating, sword-swallowing and a particularly gritty bit he called the "nose floss," which involved snorting a length of string and pulling one end out of his mouth. "That's what I was known for, until I started doing what I do now," he said. Always, he prided himself on working without profanity.

Then, in 1999, after working with a lesbian comedian who discussed her orientation in her act, Mr. Stine decided to "out" himself, telling his audience he was a born-again Christian. It was the beginning of a transformation, he said. "I thought, I'm dead in the water, because I admit that I have religious beliefs.

"I wanted a sitcom. I wanted to be on Letterman. I wanted to be successful. I felt like God was saying: 'You're sacrificing your dream to me. Like Abraham and Isaac, you're bringing the knife down on the thing dearest to you.' Then I got to Nashville and I started working."

What he found, after prayer and networking, was a mature Christian industry, with its own managers, agents (Mr. Stine is represented by the William Morris Agency), marketing consultants, speakers bureaus and megachurches with large entertainment budgets. "I didn't know that this world was out there," he said. "I didn't know that people could pay you more for one show than I was making for eight shows. The money's out there, but you have to connect to that world."

Mr. Stine and his management are still pitching sitcoms and cable shows, trying to compete with comedians like Bill Maher, whom he considers anti-Christian and offensive. For his next album, he hopes to talk about abortion and intelligent design.

"I don't want to be polarizing," he said. "I don't want to be Andrew Dice Clay, who had great success but was destined to fail because he offended people. But my feeling is, if you're offended by the truth, that's your problem. If I say the country was founded on Judeo-Christian principles,

and you don't like it, that's your problem. It's the truth. To pretend that the Founding Fathers were liberal - come on. They were hard-core."

Much of Mr. Stine's material is neither political nor religious, but leans on comic staples like gender differences and the manners of convenience store clerks. But for now, he said, it is the red meat stuff that gets the attention.

"I'm playing a character onstage," he said. "I'm playing the in-your-face guy, uncompromising. He's unbending. I believe in much of what I say, but he is a hammer. If you met that guy offstage, you'd want to hit him. But nobody says to Anthony Hopkins, 'You're a good actor, but you're a cannibal.' "

At the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York, he had been tentatively scheduled to perform at a party for young Republicans but was canceled at the last minute, he said. "I've had Republicans inquire about me doing fund-raisers, but it hasn't happened yet," he said. "But President Bush has three more years in the White House. I keep thinking I'll get an invitation yet."