

COMEDY CENTRAL

Half of the networks on TV are buying high-risk stock in 28-year-old comedian Whitney Cummings, the brains behind two new shows (and star of one) and the sharpest joke-slinger this side of Joan Rivers. *By Richard Rys*

Whitney Cummings doesn't usually hang out in places like this. The comedian is strolling through L.A.'s Studio City Farmers Market, a quaint bohemian mélange of organic food stands, men with un-ironic beards, and toned mommies with newborns strapped to their chests, on a cloudless Sunday afternoon. It's the perfect backdrop for Cummings—who is, by all accounts, the first person in the history of television to write, produce, and star in one sitcom (*Whitney*, new on NBC) while writing and producing another (CBS's *2 Broke Girls*)—to take aim and fire away.

"Farmers markets are like yoga," she says. "When people talk about it, it's their way of telling you they're better than you. And all of these people drove Hummers. And they all drove separately." An errant step backward, and Cummings nearly takes out a baby stroller. "Oh, shit. Did I step on it? I'm fully sweating now. That's like a fiftieth-trimester abortion."

That breathless banter helps explain, in part, why this 28-year-old stand-up is currently living a showbiz dream. She's also gorgeous (never hurts) and writes scripts that reduce seen-it-all industry veterans to fits of laughter. In Hollywood terms, Cummings is having a moment.

We flee the chicken-chasing toddlers and take cover at Umami Burger, a trendy lunch spot on Ventura Boulevard. "I'm very desperate to be liked," Cummings jokes to the hostess. "If you need help cleaning up, just let me know."

Cummings is best known for the caustic humor she unleashed on Comedy Central's Friars Club roasts, where for the past two years she's mercilessly skewered the likes of David Hasselhoff ("I actually tried to buy one of your songs on Amazon, and it said, 'Users who bought this item also bought a shotgun'"), Joan Rivers ("I loved you in *The Wrestler*"), and Donald Trump ("You should not have gotten [Melania] a diamond. Now she knows what hard is supposed to feel like").

But as with the farmers market, Cummings finds herself in unfamiliar territory these days, far from the comedy clubs across the country where she honed her material to a steely point. Her sitcoms aren't waiting to be discovered by a small but passionate fan base. *The New York Times* referred to the shows as the "hottest prospects" for their respective networks; *Variety* called



Cummings "the poster child for hyphenate overachievers"; and *2 Broke Girls* tested higher with preview audiences than any show in the network's history, including ratings juggernaut *CSI*. The sitcom follows a pair of waitresses—one gritty and street-smart, the other a newly poor socialite—and will be sandwiched between CBS's hit *How I Met Your Mother* and the retooled *Two and a Half Men* on Mondays. The loosely autobiographical *Whitney* will join NBC's storied Thursday night lineup, following *The Office* in 14-time Emmy winner *30 Rock*'s old time slot. (No pressure.) Landing the two coveted time slots is like buying a pair of winning lottery tickets—with the possibility of never collecting the cash. "I don't know what my expectations are because it's such a unique situation," Cummings says. "It's a little surreal." She also joins an exclusive club of comics with shows bearing their name—*Seinfeld*, *Cosby*, *Roseanne*, *Ellen*. "The show is based on my stand-up, and I'm playing myself, which is high risk, high reward," she says. "If it doesn't do well, it means America is saying no to me. Not to the show—to me personally."

Even in Los Angeles, where everyone has a demo reel they're shopping around, Cummings looks like *somebody*. There's a glow about her pale skin, and in her skinny black jeans, frilly purple tank top, and slim leather jacket she's all legs and arms, hinting at her days making extra money as a model in high school and college. "That was my first introduction to how fucked-up this business is," she says. "At 14, I was doing maternity catalogs. They just put a little pillow on your stomach."

Cummings wears a gold ring in the shape of a microphone on her right hand; around her neck is a gun-shape charm. "That sums her up: guns and ruffles," says Betsy Thomas, *Whitney*'s showrunner. "Underneath that edge, she's a total marshmallow, and that's what's so lovable about her. She's what everybody's

Photographed by Sasha Eisenman (styling by Samantha Traina at The Wall Group; hair by Jenny Cho for Suave Professionals at The Wall Group; makeup by Kate Lee for Chanel at StarworksArtists.com; manicure by Lisa Postma for Only Int./Celestine)

looking for—a woman who's beautiful and really funny and independent and smart and has a point of view. Kristen Wiig has it. Tina Fey has it. And Whitney has it."

On the small screen, the big four networks purchased 429 scripts this fall alone. Only around 70 became pilots, and just 23 were picked up for broadcast. You can almost hear the tweeters preparing their barbs, wondering who this woman is and where she even came from. When Cummings was growing up in Georgetown, her mother was a publicist for Bloomingdale's and Neiman Marcus. She credits her venture-capitalist father for her sense of humor; he'd pick her up from school and hide behind a car, making bird noises to get her attention, like Steve Martin in one of her favorite movies, *Three Amigos*. Her parents divorced when she was five, a seismic event for a young girl who was, by her own account, "very serious and sensitive. I used to sit in the basement and write about things that stressed me out, like sugar in ketchup, or doilies." The aftermath of the breakup, she says, shaped her lifelong struggles with love, as well as her comedy. "All I talk about in my stand-up is relationships and sex," Cummings says. "*Whitney* is all about the point of view of someone who's seen divorce. For me, it's all about wanting [a happy marriage] and having no evidence that it's possible."

If Cummings' take on relationships is one half of her ethos,

to gamble on an unproven, largely unknown star was simple: "She's got the looks, the comic timing, the on-screen charisma," he says. "I hate to compare her to anyone else, but she's Jennifer Aniston, with the added benefit of her original, relatable point of view on men and women."

Cummings says she feels lucky that her show is on NBC, known for giving comedies a chance to find their voices—and an audience. "*Seinfeld* wasn't doing that well in its first season, ratings-wise. It was getting beaten by *ALF*. Hopefully I'll be lucky and not have ratings be the biggest priority." Early reviews of *Whitney* have been mixed, though in fairness, much of the chatter is based on a four-minute preview that circulated online and what sounds like a laugh track but is actually a live studio audience. The show is also shot with multiple cameras, breaking from the faux-documentary style of its Thursday night counterparts in what some say could be a jarring fit. Even if *Whitney* is a slow starter, sitcoms rarely catch fire out of the gate: *Seinfeld* didn't crack the Nielsen top 30 until its fourth season, and *Cheers* flirted with cancellation its first season. Time will tell if fourth-place NBC and the Twitter generation will have the same kind of patience. *Whitney*'s executive producer, Scott Stuber, says one key to the show's success will be revealing a different side to Cummings than viewers know from the roasts

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the other is old-fashioned hard work, which she learned from her mother. "She was working her ass off, struggling to take care of us," Cummings says. "I have a bit of that survival thing in me." After graduating in three years from the University of Pennsylvania with a communications degree—because she was paying her own way, she says, not because she was a prodigy—Cummings headed to L.A., where her first job in show business was an internship with E!, pixelating errant nipples and logging tapes for *Wild On!*, a bikini-babes travel show. "I'd write, '10:09, the slut dances in the ocean,'" she recalls.

One day, a friend suggested she should try stand-up. "I think it was like, 'You should get your energy out in front of strangers. Get away from us.' That second, I was like, I will be a comedian for a living. That's my job." What followed, she says, is years of nightly stand-up sets anywhere she could find a mic, including bowling alleys and karaoke lounges. But Cummings eventually made it to L.A.'s hallowed Comedy Store, where she quickly earned the respect of her (mostly male) peers. "I feel like she did 10 years' worth of work in four years," says comedian Jeffrey Ross, a veteran Friars Club roaster. Ross recalls stopping by her dressing room before a show they did together last fall. Minutes before she stepped onstage, there was Cummings on her laptop, polishing her pilot scripts. "If she was a bodybuilder, she'd be the one at the gym all day. This is no lucky break. She did this joke by joke, night by night, gig by gig."

With her shark-like instinct to keep swimming to survive, Cummings decided that instead of waiting for opportunities, she'd create some. Enter *Whitney*, a comic roman à clef of sorts, with Cummings' character struggling to reconcile her love for her boyfriend (played by fellow stand-up and friend Chris D'Elia) with her doubts about marriage and healthy relationships. NBC entertainment chairman Bob Greenblatt, who's credited with transforming Showtime with shows like *Dexter* and *Nurse Jackie* during his seven-year tenure, says the decision

or guest spots on *Chelsea Lately*. "She can be brash, but she's also vulnerable. The fact that she's self-deprecating and humble makes you love her."

Before she knew NBC would take a chance on her, Cummings doubled down and wrote a second pilot. She took a meeting with *Sex and the City* writer-producer Michael Patrick King (now her co-executive producer on *2 Broke Girls*), who was looking for a female writing partner to help him concoct a new sitcom—a search that King likens to casting Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*. (Regarding her self-styled fashion choices for that meeting, Cummings, who calls *SATC* "a religion," says: "I bought some black tutu and jeans and was wearing brand-new Louboutins and it was 110 degrees. I looked like Natalie Portman at the end of *Black Swan*—sweating, bloodshot eyes. It was a complete disaster.") King, who isn't easily impressed, says, "She blew me away. No one could touch her script. I wanted someone with a unique voice, an edge, and really funny. The extra bonus is that she's an amazingly hard worker. But hardworking is one thing. Hardworking and brilliant is another."

Cummings' ascendance is also partly due to timing, as broadcast television is trying to keep pace with edgy cable fare; in the *2 Broke Girls* pilot, sex jokes fly fast. "Have you seen *Two and a Half Men*?" asks Wendi Trilling, the network's executive vice president of comedy development. "It may feel more extreme with young girls saying it than old, horny white guys. But that's how young, smart girls talk. That's what feels surprising. It's been a long time since there have been young smart girls in prime time."

Cummings knows there are no sure things in show business, so she's handling the pressure the only way she knows how. "Head down and just doing the work," she says between bites of a lettuce-wrapped turkey burger. "That's what's worked for me so far. Not 'Look how great I'm doing.' If this doesn't work, I'll just move to New Mexico and sell soap. Or work at the farmers market." ❖