

Comedy

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Mr. Showbiz

Comedian John Early blows up his flagship variety extravaganza, *Showgasm*, for a (close to) last hurrah.
By Jillian Anthony

FOR ARTS VENUE Ars Nova's annual benefit, resident performer John Early and pals (Ana Gasteyer, Kate Berlant and Cole Escola, to name a few) combine comedy, music and a heavy dose of the bizarre on Thursday 21 for *Showgasm*. XXL. Early talked with us about *Showgasm*'s impending end, his Netflix stardom and why his alter ego is so hard to watch.

Showgasm has been your monthly variety show at Ars Nova for years. What will the XXL version be like? Ars Nova is a place that supports emerging artists. It's the reason

I have any semblance of a career. *Showgasm* is where I developed my comedic voice, and the benefit helps keep the organization alive. This time it's at Marquee, so it'll be a bigger crowd and lineup. The show will be a little tighter than it usually is—but we will still be drinking.

How would you describe *Showgasm*?

It's really a place for [my cohort DJ Hamm Samwich] and me to force people to watch our friendship. It's a place for us to process the world and get drunk in public. It's the perfect expression of what I'm interested in, and I hope it feels like a party. I do think it's coming to

an end soon—there's no official end date, but it's really hard to schedule it now that I've become a massive star. [Laughs]

You got to create whatever you wanted for an episode of *Netflix Presents: The Characters*. What was that like?

I always had this idea for a half-hour sketch show, the through line being me as a heightened version of myself having a nervous breakdown, and then I would cut to self-contained shorts where I played characters and end in a showbizzy lip-synch number. [Netflix was] so excited about it and never once pushed back. They bought the rights to the

song I wanted to lip-synch, and I cast all my friends. It's all these people I made shorts with in my apartment for no money. Normally I'd make them at 2am the week of *Showgasm*, and we would be drunk and high, so it's lovely to do it with some professionalism.

Tell me about your dark alter ego in the episode.

I come from the South, from a culture of politeness and not talking about your feelings, so it was very natural for me to create this John character. He's based on these darker parts of myself—this person who is smiling through everything and has an intense need to control. I'm essentially forgiving myself by making this character.

As a gay comedian, is there anything specific you do or don't want your persona to be?

I think there's this assumption that stereotypes are bad, like the way people look down on Mario Cantone. As if he's doing anything different from Joan Rivers? If anything, I hope I become more like Mario Cantone—I want to be a sharper stand-up, showbizzy, be able to make people on a fucking cruise ship laugh. Camp aesthetic comes out of when you couldn't see gay characters onscreen, so you had to read gay experience from women onscreen. There are more opportunities and political acceptance, and these are all incredibly necessary things, but young, gay people are becoming less literate in that kind of aesthetic. If anything, I'm trying to hold on to it desperately.

→ *Showgasm*. XXL is at Marquee Thu 21 at 8pm. \$50-\$1,000, includes open bar.

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