

April 30, 1989---

NEW YORK---The limestone-facade Rockefeller Center remains a respected Manhattan landmark, despite the misspent youth on the 14th floor. That's where the "Late Night With David Letterman" offices resemble a Midwestern frat house.

Take the conference room. *Puh-leeze.*

Eight red-and-white fishing bobbers are lodged in the ceiling's light grates. File cards list ideas for upcoming shows: "Try to donate ceramic monkey to the Met" and "Row of seats collapses from laughter."

"Late Night" head writer Steve O'Donnell walks into the room and spear chucks a 4-foot plunger at a metal bulletin board. It sticks, and he laughs.

Welcome to Sigma Delta Ultra-Hip, where David Letterman is housefather.

Letterman is preparing to take the gang on what's becoming its annual field trip. In 1985, "Late Night" went to Burbank. In 1987, it was broadcast from Las Vegas, and last year, "Late Night" was supposed to go to London, but those plans were scrapped due to the writers' strike. Beginning Tuesday, Letterman and a staff of 120 will deliver a week's worth of "Late Nights" from the historic Chicago Theatre.

Guests for the Chicago telecasts include Oprah Winfrey (Tuesday), John Cougar Mellencamp (Friday), and Michael Jordan (his spot depends on the Bulls' playoff schedule). "Late Night" ringer David Sanborn will come along to play saxophone in Paul Shaffer's "World's Most Dangerous Band," and on a nightly basis, the band will absorb local blues stars James Cotton on harmonica and Buddy Guy on guitar. Look for a Chicago blues jam to be part of Tuesday's kickoff broadcast.

Whether it is assembling a band with a local slant or writing and researching material, detail and nuance are key signposts of the "Late Night" landscape. Letterman tells his stories in the same way.

"I have pleasant, deeply rooted memories of my visits to Chicago," Letterman said in his 14th-floor office after a recent Friday evening taping. The office had the celebratory smell of champagne poppers, which somehow fit in with the pencils stuck into the ceiling and the collection of baseball caps lining a shelf. "My father and I flew up on an Eastern Airlines DC-3, and to me, the whole thing was just magic. You're 10 years old, and you've never flown before. I remember we hung around the Palmer House for a trade show. My father owned a flower shop.

"Or, the last time I was in Chicago for any length of time, I drove up from Indianapolis to take a Federal Communications radio third-class license test at the Federal Building. Now, that was very exciting."

The "Late Night" one-week stand will be reminiscent of the regular live network broadcasts from Chicago of NBC's "Garroway at Large" variety show. The program originated from the Merchandise Mart from 1949 to 1951.

Garroway is one of several television godfathers for Letterman and the "Late Night" writing staff of 13 people. Although their median age is just over 30, the writers have learned from people who were on television before they were born - when the form wasn't embellished. Garroway or Steve Allen couldn't lean on an illustrious staff of writers, an extensive wardrobe budget or fancy props. What

they could rely on were attitude and personality. Those are basic factors behind the seven-year run of "Late Night."

Letterman, who turned 42 earlier this month, is too young to have experienced Garroway out of Chicago. He does remember seeing Steve Allen, Jonathan Winters and Johnny Carson on the "Who Do You Trust?" quiz show.

"Those three guys meant something to me before anyone else did," he said. "I liked how each of them pursued what they did. I liked Carson because he was so effortless. I liked Steve Allen because he was a guy in a suit and a tie being really silly. I liked the uninhibited nature of Jonathan Winters. I just saw him at a restaurant in Los Angeles, where he cornered a group of people and was relentless. He would not leave. At first, they were all kind of amused because they were just tourists having lunch with Jonathan Winters while he performed for them. But he wouldn't stop performing. He just went on and on and on. You could sense a collective anxiety like, 'Gawd, how are we going to get on with our lives?'"

Letterman got up from his chair and paced around the office. He wore a black and gold sweatshirt, baggy gray sweats and tennis shoes. At 6 feet 2 inches and 170 pounds, he looks like the type of guy you'd want on your tag football team. Or, with that vulnerable gap-toothed smile, like the type of guy who took a permanent hit for your tag football team.

As Letterman sat down, I said I was surprised he didn't mention Jack Paar in his rundown of television deities.

Paar hosted the "Tonight Show" between 1957 and 1962. It is Paar's history of boyish unpredictability, occasionally coarse treatment of guests and small-screen veracity that begs comparisons with Letterman.

"Paar was the best," Letterman said. "I saw a little of him, but when he was doing the 'Tonight Show,' I was too young to be allowed to stay up that late. It's funny. Now when I look at clips of his shows, I think I may have seen more than I think I saw. They all look somewhat familiar."

Most people don't realize that "Late Night" director Hal Gurnee was the associate director of "The Jack Paar Show" between 1960-62, and between 1962-65, the director of the weekly prime-time "The Jack Paar Program."

In a separate conversation, Gurnee said, "There's an intrinsic honesty about (Jack and Dave). I don't think Jack was intentionally honest. I think it was a Presbyterian rigid background that made him blurt out the truth, and he did that on the air. Sometimes it was startling, sometimes it was funny, but it was always interesting."

"Dave is that way, too. The stories Dave tells on the air at the beginning of the show are not terribly embroidered. They're pretty much what happened to him, and the ability to use things that happen on a daily basis comes easy to the two of them."

Paar hails from Canton, Ohio, and Letterman is a native of Indianapolis. It's the Midwestern sensibility that demands honesty, which, in turn, creates vulnerability. It's this openness that makes Letterman appealing on a hip national scale. He currently draws 4 million viewers, half of them in that 18-34 age bracket so precious to advertisers.

Letterman is loosening his stance about following Carson and Paar on "The Tonight Show" carousel.

"Now, I feel if I could be considered for the job, that would be fine," he said. "The truth is, after having done this for seven years, the hard work, difficulty and heartbreak of doing a show night in and night out, I'm not sure if I want to start all over again."

And he would have to sack that irreverent "Late Night" style before the show could evolve into "The Tonight Show" of tomorrow. The one-hour difference between "The Tonight Show" and "Late Night" is a greater distance when measured in terms of television experimentation and posture.

"We'd have to stop doing much of what we do here," he said. "I think 'The Tonight Show' audience is such a core-foundational institution that they want to see more of the same. They don't want experimentation. I just don't think it would be the show we're doing now. Maybe that would be good, I don't know. I'm also pretty confident when this is finished, I'll make one really bad movie. I just think that's inevitable - one awful movie."

Making movies and hosting "The Tonight Show" were the last thing on Letterman's mind when he worked at WLWI-TV in Indianapolis between 1969 and 1975. Although he was best known as Letterman the weatherman, he also did time as the host of a Saturday morning children's show, news anchor and late-night movie host. In 1975, Letterman left Nap Town for Tinsel Town with the intention of becoming a comedy writer.

Watching Jay Leno (who will appear on Thursday's "Late Night" broadcast) helped Letterman tone his comedic observational skills. When Letterman moved to Los Angeles, his perception of stand-up comedy was a loose hybrid of impressions, props and a touch of music. "Seeing Leno was a real crystallizing effect," he said. "It was sort of like, 'Oh, I see - that's the way it can be done.' He was very observational, very smart about it and very funny. He had the ability - efficiently - to show you what was funny or ironic about the situation.

"It was boom-boom," said Letterman, clenching his fist and pounding it on his cluttered desk to emphasize his point. "He got right to it and then there was the punchline. I guess it was like foreign countries picking out a sewer system. You look around and think, 'This is the one best for our country,' " and Letterman knocked on the desk again. "I'll take this one here from Czechoslovakia. It meant a lot to me to see that (Leno's style)."

While Letterman is respected for giving up-and-coming comedians necessary exposure (most notably, Richard Lewis and ironically, Leno, who crested only after regular "Late Night" appearances), he's concerned about the comedy-to-go trend, especially prevalent in Chicago.

"I can really get wound up on this, but I think the collective American sense of humor is suffering because of oversaturation," he said. "It's great there are so many outlets, but I see stuff on these cable shows. Now I sound like my Dad or Danny Thomas here, but it's so needlessly dirty and so foul and not all that funny. Then there are guys out working clubs who are middle acts, and they're making a quarter of a million dollars a year working Ho-Ho's in Toledo and on and on. Which is good, but I think if somebody goes to nightclub having never seen a comedian before, and they see a guy come out and do 30 minutes of material about drugs or really off-color stuff, then they think, 'That's it. That's what standup comedy is.'"

"I just wonder if it has any lasting effect."

That's essential to Letterman, because he is a student of comedy's lasting effects, cultivating and shaping the distinct styles of those who preceded him. The "Late Night" broadcasts from Chicago

this week will celebrate a time when television was pure and comedy was funny, and Chicago is a limestone landmark in that regard.