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Ernie G's out to make the Latino world funnier

One of the first things you notice about Ernie G is that the guy is articulate.

Which shouldn't be surprising. The 29-year-old (in Hollywood years) comic graduated from Loyola Marymount University in 1994, with a bachelor's in psychology and a minor in Chicano studies. He uses the phrase "paradigm shift" in one of his skits, to refer to a new age in the Latino-American experience.

"Ernie G is all about creating a whole new world for Latinos to live in," he said on "Mama's Boy," his 2000 CD release. "There is, right now in the Latino community ... a huge paradigm shift. ... We're now in the age of celebrating who we are, instead of trying to prove who we're not."

The statement dissolved into the familiar "pair of dimes" shtick, but he made his point.

His humor is infused with the theme of celebrating Latino excellence -- while stressing that from Bangladesh to Baltimore to the Bay Area, humans are all the same.

The L.A.-based comedian brings his act to Salinas on Saturday. "Ernie G's PICANTE Comedy Fiesta!" features Las Vegas headliner Johnny Sanchez, who just finished taping a 30-minute "Comedy Central Presents" special.

Sheila Rivera, the sole female in the show, hails from Puerto Rico and earned a degree in aerospace engineering from Texas A&M University. She went on to work for NASA, but she has quipped, "NASA and I had to part ways when they refused to put St. Christopher on the Shuttle's dashboard."

Luke Torres, the third comedian in the lineup, has opened for Dennis Miller, Jerry Seinfeld, Louie Anderson and many others.

Ernie G came to the Central Coast during the Memorial Day weekend to promote the show and attend his cousin, Tony's, graduation ceremony at the University of California, Berkeley.

The two of us had lunch Friday after he wrapped up a radio spot for KOCN 105.1 FM.

"Because of this movie we're doing, I have to watch my weight," he said of an upcoming comedy project he is working on with David Morales of Picante Pictures. "You don't know how bad I want to say: 'Bro let's go to the greasiest Mexican food in town.'"

As imposing of a physical presence Ernie G is (he once played a wrestler on the Family Channel TV show "Outrageous!"), he insists the Comedy Fiesta isn't about him.

"I think I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing," he said Friday, as he ate a salad and moved his huge hands around for emphasis. "It's about what we're providing people with, it's not about how funny I am."

It's a funny thought for a man who has devoted his life to comedy, so much so that he dropped out of graduate school after he heard a motivational speaker.

"She said, 'For you performers, if you're not out there performing, you're robbing the world of your talent.'"

He's also keenly aware of the long history of Latino comedians who have preceded him. The list reads like a who's who of 20th century entertainment: Cantinflas, Carmen Miranda, Desi Arnaz, Freddy Prinze, Paul Rodriguez, George Lopez, Charro.

"There's a whole sense of lineage," Ernie G said. "It's building on this need for more Latino funny people."

One of these days, when he slows down enough, Ernie G would like to do a poster that chronicles Latino comedians.

The irony of a comic's life isn't lost on Ernie G.

"I paid for this car with jokes," he said.