

# THE COMEDY GAZELLE



# ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I first moved to Chicago, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey supercharge herself with a firm slap of the puss.

## Why haven't I heard of her before?

It's a question I come back to often, and a major problem here. The city's bursting with household-name level talent, but unless you're in the midst of it, it's easy to miss.

That's why I'm starting The Comedy Gazelle — to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to showcase this city's unrivaled talent. To keep everyone up-to-date on the scene, and to do it in a fun way. And not just in a one-off article, but all the time.

Each issue will include an exclusive interview, as well as whatever else I can pull together.

Hope you enjoy.

— Jerry

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# INTERVIEW: JIM WEBER

*If you've ever been to North Bar, you probably noticed a sweaty alcoholic sitting in the back playing iPhone games. That's Dale McPeck. Beside him is my good friend, Jim Weber, who ran the show at North for over 10 years, helping make a lot of people a lot better. I met up with Jim at Parson's Chicken, where we talked North Bar history, building an audience, pet peeves, and more. Then he left me with the bill.*

## **Everyone's wondering. What's next for you now that North's closed?**

I'm not exactly sure. But in the interim, the shows I had I'm trying to do them at other venues. Then I'm gonna start trying to do shows in other rooms and see if I can make that work and make some money while I figure it out.

## **Are you still looking for your own room?**

Yeah, it's been hard, but I'm gonna try to meet with some people. I'm gonna meet with the Reggies guys and maybe try to do stuff more consistently there. But it's tricky because of the sound with the bands. But otherwise it's a great room.

## **Would you ever start your own club or something, or are you more of an alt room guy?**

Well, like, the Lincoln Lodge is a great place, but there is also a place for what I was doing at North Bar. Lincoln Lodge sets up comedy perfectly. It's like T-ball. It's hard not to get a good hit, which is good. But that's not gonna make you better in a way. It will, but when you go to our place and you deal with more random situations, crazy people, noise, naked bike ride going by — that kinda stuff makes you better because you have to learn how to think on your feet and be quick and deal with situations. That will come up because not every place, even when it's set up for T-ball, is gonna be T-ball. You're gonna get an idiot in the crowd that you'll have to deal with. I think any huge comic would say the importance of learning that skill.

## **You're a big music fan. Would you ever do anything combining music and comedy?**

I used to in Minneapolis. I would do comedy and music shows. When I got reconnected with the Sklars they came to Minneapolis to do these Star Tribune commercials. They were there for like three months and had a lot of down time, and so they'd come and see music and perform at some of them. Nick Swardson



brought them to ACME cause they started out with him in New York. So he brought them to ACME and I got to be very good buddies with Nick. And through that I met Derek Hughes and Mary Mack and Pete Lee. So we would do some of these shows at a warehouse spot or a bar.

## **So you knew Pete Lee and them very early on?**

Yeah, I got Pete Lee his college agent. I love Pete. I still remember his first joke: "I quit my job. I didn't give two weeks notice, I gave them two weeks to notice me gone." He was just so funny and so positive. I knew he'd be perfect for colleges. I also got Derek a college agent and he did really well too.

## **How'd you get started at North?**

I used to do that poker game upstairs and then we got robbed.

## **Wait, what happened?**

It was upstairs. That's how I fell into the bar. I was living up there running a poker game with a friend of mine. That's why I moved to Chicago. I started doing that and that was fascinating. Cause we had FBI agents that played the game, DAs, lawyers, judges, gangbangers, cops, CEOs.

**You were running it out of your apartment?**

Yeah, upstairs. Sometimes we would do two floors. 4-5 nights a week and it would go from like 5:00pm to 5:00am, 6:00am. There were some pro players that came through. Some guy had a bracelet. My buddy started it with one of the Walgreen kids at this Adventure Club, but then they decided to revamp the club so they wouldn't let them do the poker game. So they moved into that place and that's when I came. So I could stay upstairs and run the game.

**So what happened?**

One day we did a tournament on two floors and we had a lot of people. About an hour and a half, two hours into it, four guys with ski masks came in. It was definitely an inside job. They probably got, I'd guess, like 50 grand? The iPhone had just come out, so they took everyone's iPhones. I wasn't gonna throw my phone in there, but they were like, "Everyone throw your stuff in there otherwise we're gonna search you, then we'll fucking shoot ya." If they're gonna grab anyone it's me, so I threw my phone in there. And as soon as I did it started ringing too. My good friend Benny, who was Matisyahu's tour manager, was staying upstairs in my room working on Matisyahu stuff. Then they went upstairs and I couldn't find Benny. I couldn't find him anywhere. I went down to the bar and called him. He had been hiding in my closet for 30 minutes.

**So how did that lead into comedy at North Bar?**

After that happened, that kind of killed the game. I started helping out at the bar, out of more sheer boredom. I would kind of help out, closing, hanging out there. Then they decided to shut down the bar, remodel and reopen for the new neighborhood. New neighbors would come in and not wanna hangout cause there were a lot of gangbangs hanging out there.

**And what year is this?**

Probably 2011, 2012.

**And when was the first comedy show you did there?**

I think it was that December. It was Mary Mack and her husband, Tim. It was the weirdest thing. I wish I had a picture of it because five Tibetan monks, dressed in their monk robes and shaved heads, came in to watch Mary Mack. They were drinking beer laughing their asses off. It's funny cause Colt Cabana and Marty DeRosa were at that show. That's the beauty of Mary Mack. She can bring everyone together. Everyone just likes her. Then my buddy was booking Timmy Williams from Whitest Kids U'Know. So he came through and Zach Peterson was on

tour with him. And I heard Zach say from the stage that he had just moved to Chicago about a year ago, and I thought Zach was hilarious. Way better than Timmy. So I just went up to Zach like, "Hey, if you wanna do any comedy here I'm open to it. I'd love to do more." Then he started running the open mic on Sunday nights.

**How is it looking back from the last show to the first show?**

It's funny because Mary Mack texted me that weekend after. She was at a Bitcoin conference in Florida doing stand up and Hannibal was the headliner. I go, "That's kinda funny. The first comedian to perform at the bar and the last one." It just took a while. When I tried to do this in Minneapolis it was a lot harder. There was no social media, podcasts were just kind of starting out, so comedians didn't have a draw and comedy clubs kind of have their own in-house draw. But when we opened and Zach started doing the open mic, anyone I would see that I'd like I'd ask to do stuff. Kristen Toomey, Dave Helem. For four months I just kept asking Dave to do something, and finally he did. I had Henry Phillips through, I'd go to Zach, "Hey, can you help me out with openers?" And Zach put Junior [Stopka] on the show. I realized I'd seen him before opening up for Stanhope at Reggies. I met Dale [McPeck] at the Sunday night open mic. He'd be outside by himself and I'd go out there and talk to him. At this point he was working on the dock and got hurt. He was off work and I got him to work the door and put him on anything I could. Through the Sklars, I knew Dan Van Kirk. Dan was on their podcast and he was a Second City guy from Illinois, but had never done his own show. So he decides to try something on a Monday. It's the first show we had sell out, like 100 people on a Monday. It was great. He'd come back and I think he's the one that told Geoff Tate and Jay Larson. Then pretty

soon — that's the thing. Comics talk. You have a decent show, you treat them well, you get recommended.

**I remember a while ago when we talked, you mentioned how musicians on the road need to sell merch and hustle.**

Well comedians never did merch. Remember Todd Glass? The Sklars were with him at ACME so I went down. After the show he was selling a piece of paper that said, "This gets you backstage into any future Todd Glass show" and was selling them for a dollar. It was just a Xerox, it probably cost him four cents. But he sold like 50 or 60 of them. That's 50-60 extra dollars on the road, which means a lot. Comedians were always too cool for merch. Dave Stone was the first guy that came through with real merch. T-shirts and everything, he sold like 40 of them. People wanna support. People were bringing him bags of groceries, "Here, for the road." That's so fucking cool.

**I think it says something about how much you can actually connect with an audience in comedy.**

You're connecting and any extra money helps. Our band would go to Costco and get a brick of lighters, 50 lighters, for 10 bucks. Our buddy worked at a sticker shop, so he'd make Detroit stickers and we'd put them on all the lighters. We'd sell them for like two dollars a show. And everyone needs a lighter, everyone bought it cause it had Detroit on it, then during the show everyone would hold them up. That's an extra 20-30 dollars. Back then that was a tank of gas.

**I also remember we talked about how even if there's not a lot of people in the room, you still have to perform. That was really helpful for me.**

Yeah, that was my big thing with Dale for a little bit. I really got on him about it, and he changed. I think he finally realized it. Because he would just be so bitter that no one was there. And if you didn't know him and you were there, you would hate him. He wasn't funny. It's funny to his friends because they just see him melting down. But if you don't know him you're just like, "This guy's not funny" and you're not gonna go see him again.

**Do you think it was an anger thing or him being used to bigger laughs?**

I've seen bands do it all the time. They get mad on stage, "Where's everyone at?" I just think that's the biggest asshole move because what you're saying is you don't give a fuck about the people that did come. You care about the people that aren't there. And you can't



*Jim Weber (right) poses with Blake Burkhart*

do anything about it now. When I'm in the audience and a band does that I hate it. It turns me off from the band. I'm like, "Fuck you! What am I, shit?" When our band would tour we did pyrotechnics. If one person paid, we would still do pyro. I remember this one time this guy kept turning around thinking people came in. He couldn't believe we were doing pyro for one person. Then the next time we came to that city, that guy brought 15 people. You put on a show and people want to discover new shit and tell their friends about it.

**Definitely.**

I noticed Dale changed when him and Junior were doing this show. And Junior has the greatest attitude. Junior will go up until no one's there, he doesn't care. He will have fun and he's hilarious. But all of a sudden, Dale goes up and does 45 minutes for one guy. He did the same thing, he turned around and thought people must be walking in. This guy brought a couple of people the following week and would come and see Dale a lot. I'd go, "Dale, man, you should just be happy to go on stage. There's no entitlement. You don't deserve to have people there. But you're funny enough that people will come if you keep at it."

**You sat through a lot of open mics and have seen a bunch of newer comics. What's a common mistake you see them making?**

Well, the microphone thing. People hold it too far back. You can always tell when they're new and have never performed much because they don't know how to hold a mic. So just holding it so people can hear you. I love Perry [Carter], I think she's funny, but sometimes I miss a lot of what she says and that bums me out. Another one is showing up late. And not pushing the show you're on if you're the low man on the totem pole. Appreciate where you are and be respectful. Excitement's contagious. If you're not excited about what you're doing, then maybe you're not ready and should stay at open mics. You have to at least stand by what you're doing and deliver. But I hate sitting through bad comedy.

**What to you is bad comedy?**

When you're just talking about something that everyone talks about and you don't reveal anything new. Sometimes the simplest, best joke shines a light on something that seems so obvious. The perfect example to me is Junior's retarded Holocaust joke. Like of course they were happy, they didn't know what was going on. Of course they were killed and nobody mentions it. And Dale too, his joke about believing in climate change but what's worse is not even caring about the environment. People always want to comment on what's going on and say something poignant, but if it's not funny then it's pointless. Dale will get people to think about climate change even though that wasn't what he was trying to do. And that joke is so obvious, you can't believe someone hasn't said that before. That's the kind of thing you remember the next day. I always knew I liked the band when the next day I'd start singing the song. With a comedian, if I laugh the next day that's when I knew something was funny.

**Do you have any comedy pet peeves?**

Fake laughing is my biggest pet peeve. Cause they think they're helping the comedian. But you're trying to trick them into thinking something he knows isn't funny is funny.

**That's what I appreciated the most about North Bar. It's an honest room.**

You should eat shit. It'll make you better. You'll get more respect by fighting through it instead of running away. People don't understand you gotta go through like a boot camp. You have to look at it as a challenge. It should motivate you to do better and show them on stage. I want someone to eat it if it's not funny.

**Any other pet peeves?**

When I have a comic on the show and they have to leave to go to another show. I've started asking them if they have another show that night because I want the comics to hang out, especially when it's a tour night. If you have another show, do that show. Let someone else have it. Cause if the comics hang out, people will hang out and drink. That's why a lot of touring comics do that and they purposefully make sure they stick around for a while. At least a good hour, hour and a half. And people are buying them drinks. I heard one comic go, "No, I get free drinks." I go, "Not anymore!" Let him buy you one. Also, that dude wants to buy you a drink because he likes you. That's an insult. You're insulting him.

**That's interesting. Just because you did your set doesn't mean your job's done.**

I mean, if this is what you want to do for a living, your fan base is gonna provide you the ability to do that. Without a fan base, unless you get on TV or something — my friend Jeff really taught me this with the band. He was so happy after shows. "Hey, how ya doing?" People would buy him drinks, sometimes he would buy them a drink. Then the next time he came to town, there's guys that would be like, "Hey, you've gotta go see this band!" Then they see Jeff and Jeff remembers them and they hang out. There's these two nerdy nerdy kids that used to see him in Ames, Iowa. Jeff would introduce them to girls and bring them to the party. They were starting a band and he would encourage them. It was the greatest thing for these kids. He just loves that kind of shit. I don't think all performers are like that, but your music, your comedy, what are you putting it out there for? For people to enjoy it? Maybe to help people to get through a hard day? Or are you doing it because you have to and want to make money and don't care about that? You look at all the successful bands and comics,

and they have a good fan base that's supportive. Our band, we just loved what we were doing so much. Dave Helem gets so excited about what he's doing, it's contagious. And he delivers. He's actually really funny. There are people who are really excited about what they're doing but they can't deliver. It's like, "What the fuck are you so excited about?"

**I know a lot of Chicago comics feel kind of stuck. Like they're trying to get a show or into a club and can't, or they have, but it's not really leading to anything. What advice would you give them?**

You just work harder and do stuff at other places. Fuck that place. I think people put too much emphasis and time into it. Trying to get more established there and thinking it will lead to all this better stuff. For some people it will, but for most it ain't. If you don't get asked on a show, say fuck that show and kick ass somewhere else. You're basically telling everyone that you need that show. I would never. If you believe in what you're doing, let them come to you. It's better. Our band's attitude was always, "Oh, we're not cool enough to do a show there? Okay we'll show you. We're gonna do this other place, it's gonna go really well, it's gonna be a blast, the bar's gonna do really well, and then we'll get there." I remember Mary Mack telling me this. Five years after she did JFL, she got an email from a guy saying, "Hey, I saw you at JFL five years ago. I've been meaning to reach out to you, sorry it's taken so long. Just wanted you to know if I ever do an animated show, I want you on it."

**Solar Opposites?**

No it was this other show, Golan the Insatiable, on Fox. And this was 11 years after she did JFL. Then the Solar Opposites guy saw her on that, and that's how she got that. You kinda have to plant seeds and hope they grow. And they won't always. With our band, Detroit, I thought maybe we failed, maybe I failed them because we didn't have financial success. But as you move on in life, you realize how many friends you've made, how many people met their wives and girlfriends, how many friends in other cities you still talk to and see, how people came together and had it be a big part of their life during their college years and experience. That's the best kind of success. You just have to get out there.

**Any parting words for the North Bar faithful?**

I'm glad to see everyone's doing something. Isabelle's gonna maybe work at Lincoln Lodge, Cleo's. Blake's probably gonna work at Cleo's and Galway Bay. You're doing a show. It's good to see that. It sucks that everyone's not at the bar and everyone's going to be in the midst of it.

**Gotta leave the nest.**

Yeah, but now I've got empty nest syndrome.



## **BONUS: Jim Weber's Top 10 Chicago Comics**

- 1. JUNIOR STOPKA**
- 2. DALE MCPEEK**
- 3. KRISTEN TOOMEY**
- 4. MARTY DEROSA**
- 5. JUSH NESH**
- 6. MARILEE**
- 7. DAN DOCIMO**
- 8. MICHAEL MEYERS**
- 9. EM BROWN**
- 10. ADAM BURKE**

**HONORABLE MENTIONS: BEN NOBLE, CHRIS DAMEN, JASON MELTON,  
BRANDON KIEFFER, SONAL AGGARWAL, ED TOWNS, DANNY KALLAS**

## Blake Burkhart Comes Up Short



**Blake, how do you not feel about not being on Jim's Top 10 list?**

Couldn't care less. Fuck him. Worst boss I've ever had. Rest in piece North Bar. Burn in hell Jim.

# **BONUS: Jim Weber's Top 10 Touring Comics | Comics That Moved Away**

- 1. MARY MACK**
- 2. THE SKLAR BROTHERS**
- 3. DANIEL VAN KIRK**
- 4. JAY LARSON**
- 5. CJ SULLIVAN**
- 6. DAVE HELEM**
- 7. JON DORE**
- 8. HANNIBAL BURESS**
- 9. MARY LYNN RAJSKUB**
- 10. HENRY PHILLIPS**

**HONORABLE MENTIONS: MARTHA KELLY, AMY MILLER, JONAH RAY,  
BRENDON WALSH, FRANK & TRACE FROM MST3K, GEOFF TATE, ANDY  
ANDRIST, DEREK HUGHES**

# HOW TO BE GOOD AT COMEDY

by Johnny G: Comedian and Owner of House of Yuks, Canton Ohio's #1 Choice for Comedy

So you're funny around the water cooler, huh? You think you got what it takes to make it big in showbiz? Well, take some notes and listen closely, because you're about to get some tips that'll help you make the big time in this breakneck industry. A little about me: I've been a comedian, entertainer, and club owner for 25 years, and I've performed alongside some of the BIGGEST names in comedy. Household names like Skinny Pete, Planet Chips, The Bad Girls of Comedy, The Good Girls of Comedy, Popeye the Comedian, Lady KraZZZee, Bambi Lizardskin A.K.A. "The Gut Buster," and Lisa Lampanelli.

I have also been featured on The CW.

But enough about me, let's get down to brass tacks. First things first: If you want to be good at comedy go out and buy a nice suit, and when I say *nice suit*, I mean *nice suit*. This isn't the time to rummage around your dad's closet and grab that tacky plaid suit he wore for his THIRD wedding; this is time to head to the Men's Warehouse and drop a few buck-a-roonies. The big time bookers won't waste their time on someone who looks like a grade-A slob. They want an act that looks polished. If you want to see your name in lights you've GOTTA dress the part. (Skinny Pete caught me wearing a wrinkled shirt when I was featuring in Atlantic City back in the '80s, and you wouldn't believe the flak he gave me for that!) Also, while we're on the topic, don't EVER perform comedy in shorts! There is only one thing that audiences hate more than bad jokes, and that's shins.

Second, get a stage name already! You might be thinking, "Hey Johnny, why do I need a stage name? Can't I just use my own name?" Sure you can use your own name...if you want to be the biggest laughingstock of the entire industry! Get a stage name ASAP! You'll thank me later.

Next, be on time! When you go to a show don't be late like a lady who spent too much time working on her hair and putting on makeup —get to the club early. Agents will take notice of someone who isn't just a natural talent, but someone who is a gentleman and has some class. Being early to the show also gives you time to write down jokes about the crazy traffic on the way over, or grocery stores, but don't you *dare* write about wacky billboards. Wacky billboards are Donnie's bit.

Now, just one more thing before I get on out of here. Everyone and their half-Jewish godmother wants to do comedy, but you have to be willing to put in the work if you want to be a real professional comedian like me. My advice: Treat comedy like it's your gal. Spend time with her, treat her right, take her out to a nice steak dinner at the Outback Steakhouse and maybe JUST MAYBE she'll come home and fool around with you. Learn early on how to treat ol' lady comedy right and I promise she'll return the favor, but please DON'T TELL MY WIFE OF 24 YEARS THAT!

by Luke Ipsum (@lukeipsum)

# PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK CAPAPAS (@MARK CAPAPAS)

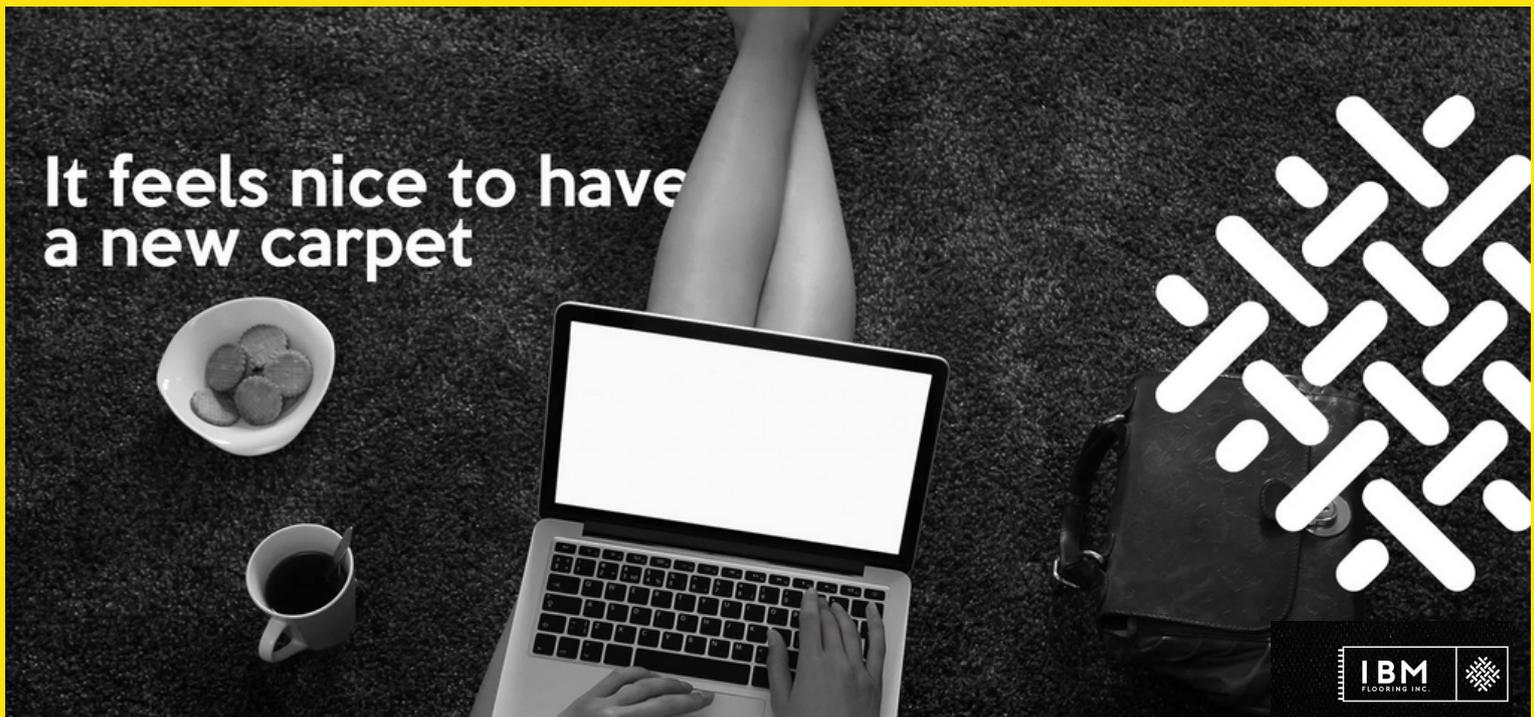




**HEY, MY NAME IS MARK AND I GUESS YOU CAN CALL ME A PHOTOGRAPHER, CREATIVE, PRODUCER, OR WHATEVER YOU WANT. I REALLY CARE ABOUT CREATING STUFF IN WHATEVER MEDIUM AND AM CONSTANTLY PUSHING THAT BOUNDARY. MY MOST PRACTICED MEDIUM IS PHOTO, WITH MY START BEING IN STREET PHOTOGRAPHY, USUALLY IN THE CHICAGO AREA. SINCE THEN, I HAVE WORKED FOR THE SUN-TIMES AND THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, WORKED WITH LOTS OF COOL FOOD AND COMMERCIAL BRANDS, AND JUST GENERAL FREELANCE STUFF TO PAY THE BILLS. IN RECENT TIMES, I HAVE SHIFTED MY CREATIVE WORK INTO LONG-FORM STUFF. CURRENTLY, A PROJECT I AM WORKING ON IS A FILM ON THE COIN-OP GAMING INDUSTRY, WHICH I HAVE BEEN PRODUCING FOR ABOUT 3 MONTHS.**

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