

JULY 3, 2025 | ISSUE 58

# 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 annihilate a sold out Laugh Factory. *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 can pass you by.

That's why I started The Comedy Gazelle — to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to share knowledge that can hopefully make the scene that much stronger.

Thank you for your support!

— Jerry

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# INTERVIEW: IAN ABRAMSON

*Ian Abramson is a Chicago-based comedian and writer. Described as “like a Vaudeville show done by one guy,” his debut comedy special, *The Heist*, is available on Prime Video, Apple TV, and Tubi. We discuss the shock collar bit he performed on Conan, how to navigate an audience not being on board, advice for developing new material, seeing Maria Bamford at an open mic, what comics can do to contribute to their scenes, and more!*

**I know you started in Chicago. Were you initially a standup, or did you start in sketch and improv? It seems like you have such a theatrical act and stage presence.**

I was very much drawn towards that sort of thing immediately. You don't get to pick the comedian you are, you kind of figure it out bit by bit; it feels like you're excavating it. I did take improv classes, though. I moved here thinking I'd be doing a lot more of that, and then I connected with standup and was like, “I guess this is the path for me.” I was doing a little bit of everything and centered in on standup.

**My first introduction to you, years ago, was your Conan set with the whole shock collar bit. Can you walk me through how you even developed the idea for that?**

My favorite thing about standup is that you are a person speaking to a bunch of other people. In a play or a sketch or improv, you are acting in front of the audience on some level. Whereas in standup, you look them in the eyes and are speaking to them. There's such a unique dynamic there. The shock collar felt like a way to heighten that. But I remember my roommate at the time, Ross Kelly, owned one, so it probably started as, “Oh shit, we have a shock collar! What's the funniest way to use it?” Then trying to go backwards from there.

**Did you intentionally write any jokes to not work, or were you trying to get through the whole thing without getting shocked?**

It's funny, people are like, “I get it, you write bad jokes.” And I'm like, “Damn, that hurts.” But it's more that if you tell ten jokes, the audience is gonna have a favorite and a least favorite, right? And for me, I love that energy. It makes everyone feel like it's very active suddenly. We're all very aware that someone could be electrocuted if we



don't like this. And then even if it doesn't work, they are still gonna laugh at the fact that it didn't work. Honestly, I'll always throw in stuff that's newer and less reliable, but I think it's best to make it a genuine experiment, right? Let's see what they like and what they don't like.

**How do you view yourself in terms of your relationship to the crowd? Do you see yourself as an entertainer?**

I try to think, “Who's here and what are they expecting?” If you're doing standup, sometimes you're gonna be in front of three people, and that energy is really different than a room filled with people, right? That's what I love about standup, is that it's going to affect the performance so much. If it was a play, five people would watch the play pretty similarly. But if you're talking to three people instead of a hundred people, that's a different situation. So to me, I try to go up thinking, “What do they want?” Sometimes a crowd feels a little uncomfortable, so can I set them at ease? Sometimes it's like, “Oh, these people are just here to have a good time. They're down for anything. How do I connect with them?” A lot of standup is about connection, whether you're talking about your parents or politics or something totally silly, and I think that it's very helpful to set some intentions before a set. To be like, “What vibe do I

want?" I don't strictly think, "I need to entertain these people," because that's a harder thing to connect over, but I can let them know that I'm trying to be entertaining by going out there with energy.

**I watched your Humboldt Jungle set online, and at the start it seemed like there wasn't a ton of energy in the room. What were you thinking for that show? Were you like, "I'm just gonna go for it and eventually I'll win them over?" Or did you have a specific plan?**

Going into that set, I can tell you exactly where my brain was. I felt like I was still finding my footing again in standup. I had almost entirely been doing new material, and that night I was mostly doing old material, so it felt like putting on an old pair of pants. It was material that I really knew, that was built for that kind of situation. We're in a basement and people know they're in a basement, right? And that makes them a little more like, "Yeah, anything could happen." But also, these are people who are going to their day jobs the next day. There are teachers and other folks there to see a comedy show. And to me, even if you're going up and the energy feels a little low, that's the ideal situation. That's a room full of people. I'm thinking, "Remember to do this joke, remember these things," rather than being like, "How do I just absolutely crush right now?" If I try to think like that, I'll trip up on something.

**It sounds like you really read the room and adapt to different situations.**

I try to be very aware of it. Before I hit the stage, I've done a lot of looking around and thinking. But when I hit the stage, I'm like, "Let me show you immediately what the mood is." It might take a minute or two for you to get on board, but you'll see that I'm consistent. I'm guiding us, right? I'm the tour guide here. That's kind of the vibe of the first couple minutes to me.

**We've all been there where you've got your approach, it's not going as planned, and you're kind of getting knocked on your ass. What do you do then, especially with these big, high-concept bits? What are you doing in the moment if the crowd isn't on board?**

So, for that Humboldt Jungle set my opener was about five minutes. And there's a lot of different pieces to that, that are designed to be like dominoes, so that if I haven't gotten you by here, you can still get on board here. That doesn't mean that it will always work, but

even if you absolutely hate me, by the end of that five minutes, you're like, "I get this guy," and then I move on. And let's say that it totally bombed and I was like, "What do I do now? They hate me." My mind goes to reminding them that you are in the room with them, in any way possible. I have talked about the ceilings, "Wow, these ceilings are cool!" But I think a good impulse is to say, "I'm here with you."

**What are your thoughts on "committing to the bit?" I watched your most recent special, and by the end, you're shirtless with stuff written on your chest, shaving your head. I was like, "Wow, this guy's really committed!"**

Every joke has a different version of committing to the bit. But to me, committing to the joke is putting the audience's experience before your own, always. For example, I don't like to laugh at my own jokes. I think it's better for them if you take what you're doing seriously in whatever direction is interesting to you.

**Where do you meet the audience in terms of developing material? How much leeway do you give them versus, "Sorry, this is what I'm gonna do; get on board or don't?"**

I think there's two versions of "get on board eventually." There's something that is well refined that I'm like, "They'll get there." And I have to tell myself that, even if they don't. But the thing to do is show confidence and then move on and hope they like the next thing. But then there's also, like you're saying, trying something brand new. The challenge of trying something new is such an important part of standup. I try to boil it down to the smallest piece that I can, oftentimes making it a one-liner. Then if I can get that to work, I can figure out how to expand it. I think the mistake a lot of high concept, alt comedians make is hoping you like the last beat and wasting

your time until then. I resent that as an audience member. Whereas if they get to it in 30 seconds, I'm like, "Okay, that's fun." Even if it's messy and not perfect, I get the idea. I don't need a 10-minute song; I want a two-minute song, especially if you don't know what it is yet.

**Say you've got a new idea you want to try, but you're hesitant to do it because you know it doesn't stack up to your refined material. Do you have any advice for powering through and developing it?**

I would say a couple things. The first thing is that a lot of what we're doing is getting used to the feeling of getting slapped in the face; that's how it feels when an audience doesn't like a joke. But remember that they're not slapping you in the face; they probably are confused most of the time. Confusion is the thing you're up against more than anything else: "Did it make sense? Did it make sense in the right way? Did it make sense quick enough?" Bracing yourself for failure is part of it; being able to tell a joke that doesn't work and move on is a specific skill inside of standup. But also, if you're not doing anything new, it can start to feel stale, so just throw it in the middle. I try to have faith that by doing something new, I am in the moment, they'll feel that, and they might think that it's a little messy or not as good, but that's why I have a beginning and an end that are stronger and more reliable. If I have a seven minute set, I try to think, "What are my first two minutes? What are my last two minutes?" And then I fill the in-between. I try to make sure I have a couple of new things and a couple of medium things. And I try to resist acknowledging if a joke doesn't work.

**Yeah, I feel like it's a cheap way of being present with the crowd.**

You're asking them to relate to you over the fact that you can't do what they're there to see. I don't think that's helpful. I think it's helpful in that one little moment and maybe you can get away with it once, but people don't want to hear that your jokes aren't working. I would so much rather watch a comic fully struggle for five minutes without acknowledging it. I'd be like, "Well, they're going for it. I'm listening. I kind of get what they're trying to do."

**I'm curious what your stance is on open mics. I think in Chicago, and probably other scenes as well, there's this idea that you need to graduate from the open mic scene.**

To me, mics are more like going to the gym than playing the game. Open mics are built to be bad. They're made to make it a little easier to figure out

something. If I'm doing an open mic, I'm not doing any joke that feels even remotely old, but also that's because I'm doing shows outside of open mics. So when you're starting, you're like, "When can I graduate beyond this?" But I've seen Maria Bamford at open mics in the best way. Like, that's amazing to get to see Maria Bamford at an open mic. Oh my god.

**What did that look like?**

I remember doing an open mic that she was at outside of a hot dog stand. An outside open mic is even worse than your average open mic. There were maybe 10 or so people — that might be generous — and we just took turns going up. I don't remember what her set was about, but I remember that it was loose. I was like, "This doesn't have as many punchlines as this probably will eventually," but she was working it out. Why else would she take the time to go to something like that except to get some work done? To me, that really reinforced that as a philosophy: "If I'm trying something out, picture it a year from now." It's like, "How can I set myself up a year from now so that I feel better than I do in this moment?"

**I'm curious what the process of developing material looks like for you, especially with something more high concept. Are you a sit down, pen and paper person?**

I sit in front of a legal pad and I'll go through notes on my phone of little ideas and things that I've written. If I want something high concept to be successful, I need a hundred different little pieces of it to add on to each other, right? Little laughs, little things. And sometimes those will be one-liners or other ideas that help get there, but I'm all for doing a tremendous amount of writing that's a waste of time. I think that's a huge help. Most of the time I'm not getting anything at all, but powering through that is helpful. I had this idea, "What if I did an impression of every single president?" I don't want to be the comedian that

makes the audience sit through that when it's not funny after 30 seconds, but I wrote jokes for every president. And then out of all that, I got a one-liner. That's it. I did all of that and I got a new joke, my impression of Thomas Jefferson: "Racist? My son was a slave!" I wrote jokes for every president and that's the only thing I got out of it. But guess what? I have it now. It's mine. Maybe I've just wasted my time, but that's okay. Over-prep is helpful.

**How often are you sitting down to write? Do you have a strict cadence you hold yourself to?**

I wish I was more disciplined, but the discipline that I do have is an overwhelming anxiety that if I'm not doing something creative in a day, I feel really bad about it. It's not always standup, but I write every day one way or another. And even when I'm not in writing mode, I am compiling little jokes, little ideas, where if I ended up doing five minutes, these are the things I would try out in the middle.

**And how many years have you been doing comedy now?**

At least one.

**Is there any advice that's really stuck with you in your 1+ year of comedy?**

I will quote a story from Emo Philips that he told me. I'm paraphrasing, but basically there were two people in a play, a man and a woman, and one night the man said, "Could I get a coffee?" And it got a huge laugh and. Every performance after that, he was like, "Now I know my big laugh." And he was chasing it, right? He was doing it and he could not get it to work. He could not get that line to get a big laugh when it had gotten a huge laugh. And so finally he asks his co-star, this lady, he's like, "What is going on with that? What happened that's different?" And she said, "The first time you asked for coffee, every other time you've asked for a laugh."

**I love that. That's such a good way to describe it.**

Go up trying to be the comedian you want to be. A pet peeve of mine is when a comedian is going up and having an attitude of like, "Don't worry, I don't really care about this." That's more prominent in alt scenes, but I'm an alt guy.

**I remember I interviewed Chris Higgins and he said trying to look cool on stage is the death of comedy. It's never good. Unless it's Jeselnik, where that's part of the persona.**

Let's take Jeselnik as an example. Think of how important that must have been to him starting out. I bet it sucked

for years. I bet it was hard for him and sometimes it would work and then other times they would just hate him. But that was the thing for him where he was like, "I have to chase this." And for me, that's shock collars and balloon animals. I want to make that work. And everything else will fall in line behind that because that's what I'm excited about.

**Was that the case for you early on? Or did you kind of discover that as you went?**

I was trying everything. I would tell personal stories, I would do this sort of thing or that sort of thing. Long jokes, short jokes, whatever. But it doesn't take long to realize what you are excited about and what the audience actually responds to. Listening to those things is everything. If you practice the guitar alone, you can get a lot done. But you're not doing standup if there's not an audience, so I try to listen closely.

**You mentioned Emo Philips. Do you have any early influences that still stick with you, even if they're not necessarily reflected in your comedy?**

Emo is definitely one of my favorites. There's a very early set where I'm pretty sure he is at Zanies in Old Town, and he's just telling jokes, but then he pulls a trombone out and at some point it goes through his pants. He's never addressing it and it's more of just an interesting thing happening throughout as he's being funny. I'd think, "Why would he do that? What parts of it work? What parts of it aren't funny, but are helpful?" Steve Martin, Zach Galifianakis and Groucho Marx were the three big ones for me when I started. I would obsess over them. I read so many Groucho books, thinking, "What parts of Groucho feel old fashioned? What

**"'RACIST? MY SON WAS A SLAVE!' – THOMAS JEFFERSON"  
– IAN ABRAMSON**



parts don't have to feel old fashioned?" But I'd say these days I think more about comedians that are different than me, than I do comedians that are more similar to me. I think a lot about how Bill Burr makes sure you know that he is kind of an idiot, right? He's being really smart, but he is like, "If you wanna write me off, you can. I'm just a guy."

**Having experienced the Chicago scene in different eras — when you were starting and now — is there anything you miss about it from when you were coming up?**

I get so overwhelmed and excited about how much talent and potential there is in Chicago right now. There are a lot of things that are different, but the heart and the soul of it are the same, and that's really what I care about. But I think that there is a lot of really good, well-intentioned energy that falls to the wayside. A lot of really great creative and driven producers and performers have to throw themselves into systems that are built to keep them at bay more than raise them up.

**How so? In the sense they need to conform in order to get booked at a certain place?**

I think folks will try to do that and the institution doesn't even watch or care. I think that whether you're trying to do that or subvert that, there isn't much of a path. Comedy is not something that has an HR department, but these institutions could have HR departments, and they often don't. We're talking about companies. I'm not gonna be pro company, I'm gonna be pro community.

**If you could change one thing in the Chicago scene, what would you want to change?**

I wish that the resources that the companies running venues acquired were more focused on building the community. It's a shame that they don't seem as focused on collaboration and building community as they could.

**This has been one of my favorite questions to ask recently — because it seems like everyone in Chicago is feeling it — do you have any advice for someone that's frustrated with where they are in comedy?**

The positive answer is you can always build something yourself. Keep that simple, whatever it is you're building, because any project quickly expands and gets out of hand. The other thing I would say is don't be afraid to ask questions to companies. They're just companies. If something isn't right, don't be afraid to find a way to say, "Hey, that's not right."

**Earlier you said there's a lot of potential in Chicago. What do you think individual comics can do to bring out that potential in others? Because I feel like, yes, there is so much talent here, but what can the average comic do to contribute to the scene and elevate it?**

I think it is about making things, and I think it's about making things with community in mind. When I think of trying to build a large-scale project, I try to think, "Where does the person that just moved here fit into this?" It's not the most important thing, but is there somewhere for folks to get involved? I really value that. I think that we spend so much time building these communities, we end up creating little fences that can accidentally keep people out. You don't want a project that has hundreds of people who barely care. How do you balance that? I don't know, but you try. Value the community that you're in. It can be things like hosting an open mic. Don't you wish there were more good open mics in the city? Hosting an open mic is such a slog, but I think of what a value that adds, right? That mic at Schuba's is incredible, dude. And it's so strong because they care about it. It's not because they're working magic; it's not because they are the royalty of the scene or something. They're building community, and if you're just starting, then you're like, "Oh my god, this is as close to a show as I can get!" As opposed to these other small mics that Maria Bamford's at.

**Nice little tie-in there.**

Yeah, we call that a callback. Write that down.



VOUGH OPEN MIC  
NIGHT

MONDAY

JULY 7





# VOUCH COMEDY SHOW - JUNE

# BOOKING RESULTS



## *Fresh Faces*

ELAINE GOLDEN, TORY WARD, TOMMY SAXTON

## *Chicago Comedy Club*

ELAINE GOLDEN, TORY WARD, WILL HILL

## *Roast Battle*

ELAINE GOLDEN, TORY WARD, TOMMY SAXTON,  
WILL HILL, JACOB MUNDELL, RICARDO RIVERA

## *Still Not Friday*

ELAINE GOLDEN

## *The Vixen*

ELAINE GOLDEN, WILL HILL, JACOB MUNDELL

## *Clever Comedy*

JACOB MUNDELL, RICARDO RIVERA

## *Comedy Cru*

WILL HILL

## *Hustlers*

ELAINE GOLDEN, TORY WARD, TOMMY SAXTON

## *Cafe Comedy Night*

TOMMY SAXTON

# Comedians Recognizing Comedians

## TITO

"Tito is popping off. This man has been working in the Chicago scene for years and truly has found his stride and is incredibly talented. Yes he is a killer roaster, but he hosts a weekly mic which is the most fun mic in town. He's traveling and he's producing better content than ever, all while always taking the time to help other comics punch up their jokes. He is one of those comedians who always gives back and makes the community stronger. Keep it up!"

## ADDISON O'NEAL

"He's always working on his craft whether it be Hosting his Open Mic or Getting Booked in the Big Rooms of Chitown! He's recently added Producer to his resume, he's a Star on the rise!"

## NICK EMEKA

"He's continually crushing every set I've seen him do lately. Really makes you want to get better so you don't look dumb compared to him."

## ALAN SALAZAR

"He is out here grinding every single night and is the nicest comic you'll ever meet."

## TAMIR BRYANT

"Bro moved from Austin and is actually funny and not wack like the comics from there usually are! This dude has a wild style and says what's on his mind and I love it! He's a killer and give him a disability check and book him for shows cuz dude is monstrous!"

## JACK ALLEN

"One of the funniest and most unique comics in the scene. Jack deserves to be on every major show this city has. Period."

## DIMITRI VENICE

"Dude is funny and one of the kindest fuckers you will ever meet in this scene. Not a hint of malice in his heart. He's actually a really good guy which is rare to come across in life. He's winning competitions left and right through Chicago! He may even be on vouch next! Keep killing it buddy you're doing great!"

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?  
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

**DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE**

