

# 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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**THAT'S IT. THAT'S THE ISSUE.**

## INTERVIEW: SCOTT DIKKERS

*Scott Dikkers is a founding editor of The Onion and one of the most influential voices in modern satire. A bestselling author and longtime comedy writing teacher, best known for How to Write Funny, he's also the mind behind FunnyCon, a comedy convention running March 31–April 2 at The Lincoln Lodge. We talk: what to expect from FunnyCon, what separates comics who build careers from those who just stay busy, the difference between amateur and professional satire, applying to The Onion, and more.*



### **For those who aren't familiar, what is FunnyCon?**

FunnyCon is a mix between a comedy festival and like a Comic-Con. So, it's a convention and it's a place for performances. The way it's different from a comedy festival is it doesn't focus on just one type of comedy. It's not a sketch fest, a standup fest, or an improv fest; it's everything, including written comedy. It's a celebration of comedy, in all the media, and it's gonna be super fun. This is our first one and we're really excited about it. The most important thing is to have a super fun event that gets everybody excited and makes them want to come back next year.

### **What problem were you trying to address by creating FunnyCon?**

The main problem was what became the centerpiece of our festival, which is The Funny Awards on April 1st at 8:00 PM. We're gonna be giving out awards to the funniest movie, funniest standup comedian, funniest TV show, et cetera. Why didn't we have that already? We've got the Emmy, we've got the Grammy, we've got the Webby. Why don't we have the Funny? So, we're taking a swing at it and we're gonna keep bringing it back every year so that it does become part of the pantheon of awards.

### **What made you want to host it in Chicago as opposed to New York or LA?**

Everything about The Funnys is trying to make it the definitive comedy awards presentation. You have it on April 1 every year, because that's the comedy day of the year, and you do it in Chicago, which is the undisputed comedy capital of the world. It just seemed like that was the way to do it: plant a flag and say, "We're doing this."

### **I know you have your own workshop at FunnyCon, so as a preview, what's one key insight you'd want every comic to take away from it?**

The whole workshop is about how to make money from your comedy. I'm big on that. I feel like there's this idea that comics need to spend 20 years in the trenches performing to get good. And yes, it does take a long time to get good at the craft of standup, but diversify. Write some comedy articles, try to write a book, make some sketch videos. Work in other media of comedy because that builds your repertoire and it exercises all your comedy muscles. If you're only doing standup, you are basically like a weightlifter who only works biceps. You look really weird. When you work all the other comedy muscles and try to do anything and everything in comedy, you become so well-rounded that you help the standup, you help yourself as a writer, you understand audiences in a new, deeper way. Then, as you improve and as you get better, you're building other products as well. You can sell a book, you can sell your services as a voiceover actor, whatever. That's kind of how I put my career together. I just did everything. You kind of have to tee yourself up for opportunity, so that when it comes, you're at the ready.

**To me it sounds like you're saying to become a comedian as opposed to just a standup comedian.**

That's a good way to put it, yeah. And you know, if you look at some of the most successful comedians, they do it all. They have written on a staff of a show, they have a book. The people who aren't doing that get kind of stuck being road dogs or whatever, you know?

**What do you think separates people that have successful careers in comedy from people who are just staying busy? It's really easy to say "Okay, I'm gonna do a podcast, I'm gonna do spots, I'm gonna write this pilot," but you can keep yourself busy without actually moving anywhere.**

It's a really good question and I'm partnering with David Uribe, who does comedy branding for people, to offer a program where we're gonna help people get to that next level, depending on where they are. First and foremost, is owning your audience: build an email list and have products that you can offer to people for free, just for signing up for your email list. The comedians who have enormous social media followings, they can blast out on social, "Hey, I'm gonna be here doing this." But it's the comedians who actually have an email list who become their own distributor, production company, streaming service. They can do everything. If you look at what Louis CK is doing, even after he's canceled, he still has this thriving career where he can make anything he wants and he sells it to the people who are on his email list. He just blasts out an email and says, "Hey, I did a new special. It's five bucks on the website." And then he makes 10 million bucks in a weekend. So, I think that's the key difference, is thinking like a business person and building your own thing, instead of working for the man.

**How can somebody go about starting their own email list?**

The best thing you can do is have what is called a lead magnet; it's some kind of product that you make that you give away for free. So, if you can block out six months, put together a book, then you can give away your book. Any time you perform, you say, "Hey, pick up my book." Maybe there's copies of the book for sale at the club that people can buy and on all your social media. It's in your bio, give them a link to go to your website to get your book. But in order to get the book, they have to give you their email. Anybody can do that. There are other things you can sell or give away, but I think a book is really the most meaty thing. If you find something that works, you just keep pushing it out

there and it grows over time. It's just like a savings account.

**I want to give you a hypothetical scenario. Say someone approaches you and goes, "Alright, we have this promising young standup. In five years, they need to be making a living doing comedy and they'll do exactly what you say." How would you advise this person and what path would you take them down?**

Sure. Everything we've talked about, plus I would totally recommend that they do what Josh Johnson did, because he blew up in about that amount of time. What he did was he got on stage as often as he could and he wrote new material every time he got on stage. So, be writing constantly and try new material constantly, so that you get super comfortable on stage and build the skill of a writer. Then, you can write more quickly and write in more volume, so that you can quickly turn things over. For a long time, George Carlin was the standard and he would do a new HBO special every few years, then he'd delete all that material and he'd start from scratch. Then Louis CK comes along and he's doing one every year, and everybody's like, "Whoa, that's incredible. What a hardworking comedian!" Then Josh Johnson gets on the scene and he's doing one every week. It's just astounding when you think about it. But the way he's able to do that is that he writes so diligently and he finds every angle of a joke and doesn't stop until he's covered it from a thousand different angles. He's a great writer, and because he's performed so much, he has such an ease on stage that it takes most comics 20, 30 years to get to that kind of calm and confidence. The combination of those two things is really what it's all about.

**I know a lot of standup comics who are trying to land paid writing jobs. What advice would you give to somebody who's funny, but isn't getting offered any opportunity to create for a paycheck? How do you take that next step?**

There's a couple ways I would recommend doing that. One is more the traditional way and one is sort of the maverick way. The traditional way would be to keep performing, be active on social media so you're building your audience, and keep your eyes open anytime they have an open call for submissions. Look for any agents in Hollywood who accept unsolicited submissions and just send them videotapes. Send them material and say, "Hey, I'm looking for a writing job on a show." Submit to any show that has an open submission and always be working on a submission. Always have a few sketches, a few monologue jokes or a spec script. Just keep lobbing things over the castle walls. That's the traditional way. The maverick route is what I did; I just created my own thing. I created the thing that I wanted to create, which was a comedy publication. I created a comic strip, created a bunch of radio shows, did a TV pilot on my own. This is a long time ago, but if I were doing that now, I'd be doing it on social media. I'd be producing a show on YouTube, and I would package it like a TV show. I would do the job that I want to get hired for. If you make a great show, people will find it and they will call you and say, "Oh my God, you're doing amazing." And they'll want to pilfer your staff of primarily you. That's the *Tim and Eric, Awesome Show* formula. It happened with this sketch group in Chicago called The Katydids; they did a show, put it up on YouTube and they got a deal with TV Land. I think it's tougher to get offered a show when you have not made a show. So, you gotta start making a show.

**I feel like I need to ask you about *The Onion*. If there are people who are interested in working there, what path would you recommend they take to either get some headlines featured or become a staff writer?**

The best way to get hired at *The Onion* is to check their job postings for interns or fellows and get a job as an intern or a fellow. The best way to get that job is to be patient, to write a lot of headlines, write a lot of stories, and get a lot of feedback. And then winnow those down. Write hundreds, cause that's how they do it at *The Onion*. They write hundreds of headlines, then they pick the top six or seven that they're gonna use that week. So, anybody submitting needs to do the same. Write 500 headlines and then get as much opinion from

people as you can on which are the funniest. Make your list and be at the ready. When they announce those job listings, send in your submission. I'll tell you, the articles are the hardest thing. Everybody thinks you can just write those, but it's a very particular skill that if you want to get good at it, you need to do it a lot. Write a News in Brief every day, and get feedback on it so you're improving. And that's it. Once you're a fellow or an intern, they know you and you're in the office and you understand the culture. That's the best way to get hired as a staff writer. If you just continue to submit stuff, you can also become part of the contributor core, where you never go into the office but you're just writing jokes and sending them in.

**Got it.**

One more bit to that question. My advice to anyone wanting to do that would be: don't do that. Don't try to get hired at *The Onion*, because *The Onion* is like the top humor publication, right? So start low, start at the bottom. Submit to some other humor publications and try to get your foot in the door. Cause that'll get you work, that'll get you experience. You'll get better, and by the time you're applying for a job at *The Onion*, your resume says, "I've been published in *McSweeney's*, I've been published in *The New Yorker*, *American Bystander*, you name it." That makes you look more impressive as a contributor who's serious about comedy, rather than somebody who's just trying to throw a hail mary pass and get hired at the top comedy publication with no experience. It happens, but it's rare.

**As somebody who submitted for the fellowship in my early twenties, how do you get feedback on your headlines? Looking back, I'm like, "Oh, these are terrible," but it's hard working in a vacuum, whereas with standup, you get immediate feedback. Do you have any advice on how to navigate that?**

Yeah, you gotta have a feedback group.

I run a weekly writer's room and people bring headlines in there all the time, and everybody reads them and gives their feedback. It's super helpful. If you have a group of comedy friends or whatever, you could show them and offer to feedback their stuff whenever they have something. Comedy is a social art form; it has to have other people involved. Other people have to like it and find it funny in order for it to work.

### **When you're looking at a piece of satire, what to you is the mark of an amateur versus the mark of a pro?**

That's an excellent question. I would say the main thing is that amateurs don't understand the power of playing it straight, whereas the pros play it so straight. In fact, you can almost grade how professional someone is on the scale of how straight it is – straight means you can't tell if they think this is supposed to be funny cause it's told so deadly serious. That's what I always went for at *The Onion*, was AP style that sounded like a real newspaper, and there was no hint that the writer had any idea that this was supposed to be funny. Here's an analogy: you can often tell a good standup comedian by how long the pauses are between jokes; a really good, professional standup comedian is very comfortable in a long pause. But an amateur, they're panicking because one second feels like an eternity up there. There are humor articles where you can read a whole paragraph where there's no joke, but it's still incredibly funny because the premise is so funny and the writer's playing it so straight that there's literally no joke and it works. Then, when the joke does come, it's a real banger because you've built up the anticipation. Most people will try to slip in so many off-take jokes. They'll break character to tell a stupid joke, like an acronym joke. This is the worst mistake: the acronyms. They're doing a story about some new government program, and then they'll say it's called the department of blah, blah, blah, and the acronym is DUMB. It's like, "Okay, right away I know you're an amateur cause you're trying to be funny." Like, stop trying to be funny. Comedy articles are serious business!

**That's interesting. The humor will almost take you out of it because you're too aware of it.**

Yeah. When we did a big retooling of *The Onion* in the

mid to late 90s, the editor Rob Siegel and I talked about it and we basically said that the mission now is "no jokes." We don't want any jokes. Whenever we were working on an article, critiquing it, editing it, whatever, we were taking out jokes. It was all about, "Okay, this article's good to go. It's clean, there's no jokes." And what we meant by that is the concept was just adopted in complete seriousness and then written about with no jokes. And that's what makes it work.

**I wish we had this conversation when I was like 20 years old, cause this is a revelation. I remember somebody gave me feedback like, "This is too punchy." And I was a standup, so I was like, "What are you talking about? It should be funny!"**

Well, speaking of standup, Steve Martin had the same idea for doing standup. He didn't wanna do jokes with punchlines, right? He wanted the whole act to be a parody of standup that would be funny throughout. And so, I totally get that. It's a very similar principle.

### **Aside from the jokes, what else are you editing out of a piece of satire?**

For me, the main thing when I'm editing a piece is making sure that I'm on the right take. Every comedy premise has the proper take. Like, what is the joke that we're telling? What track should it be on? And then just being really disciplined about staying on that track, because anything that's off track is gonna feel like a distraction that you're trying to make a joke. Knowing the right take can be difficult, and we would have these whole staff meetings at *The Onion* where people would disagree. Sometimes you pick a take you think is gonna work, you see a draft, and it's like, "Nah, it doesn't work. We're not really capitalizing on the humor here." So, I'm pretty good at knowing what the take should be and seeing where it's working and then finessing everything else that maybe is off-take, so that it's on take.

**"I KNOW YOU'RE AN AMATEUR CAUSE YOU'RE TRYING TO BE FUNNY. STOP TRYING TO BE FUNNY. COMEDY ARTICLES ARE SERIOUS BUSINESS!"**

**So, I know that for a lot of standups – I'll use myself as an example. I love standup comedy. I'm a diehard standup comedy fan, love performing, writing, everything. But the brand-building aspect takes a lot out of it for me. I got into standup to do standup, not to be a funny social media influencer. To me, it's a completely different thing, but the world's evolved and that's the reality. So, I guess, tough love advice – what would you say to somebody that is turned off by the whole aspect of social media and self-promotion?**

I understand and accept your challenge to give that in a tough love manner. What you said is so common. So many people say that. "I don't like social media. I don't wanna be on social media. I'm not interested in social media." I think that's just self-sabotage talking. I think that's low self-esteem talking because people are afraid to put themselves out there and get the haters. What they don't realize is just how important social media is now to a standup career. It's critical. All the most successful standups have enormous social media followings. Even if you're just posting clips of your standup, that's fine. You don't have to do skits or anything else, but you have to be on there. When I was coming up in the 80s and 90s, the thing was the phone; you had to call people. Social media is the new phone. It's like the new calling; you're calling all the people in the world who might be interested in your type of comedy, and that's how you let them know about you. Otherwise, they're never gonna discover you. It's so critically important. Every job has the part of that job you don't like to do; it has the washing dishes or the taking out the trash part of the job. That's what social media is for standup comedy. It's just part of the job. You may not like it, but be a professional. Buckle down and do it, just like a farmer has to get up every morning and take care of the animals. That's his job and he has to do it every day. There's no complaining, there's no, "I don't feel like doing it today." Just do it. Because it's super important.

**Yeah, there's no farmer who's starving the animals. Like, "I just wanna plant crops!" You gotta deal with the whole farm.**

Exactly. "I really just like mowing. I just wanted to mow."

**Yeah, then mow your own lawn and make no money.**

Right, right. I know some comics who have been doing it for 20, 30 years, and they're amazing comics. But they just aren't active on social media. They know other comics, they'll get invited on the late night talk shows or whatever, but they're suffering. Like we were talking about earlier, they haven't monetized their fan base, so they're

stuck doing the road. They're barely getting by and they're purists, but with just a little extra work on that social media, they'd be writing their own ticket, you know?

**Do you have any advice for a frustrated comedian? What would you tell somebody who's working really hard, but is frustrated that nothing's really happening and feels stuck?**

Number one is I think we all get caught in someday-ism, like, "I'll be happy someday when X, Y, and Z happens." It's very important to do the mental work of enjoying the now, because if you're a comedian, even if you're spinning your wheels, you don't feel like you're getting anywhere – you're performing, you're a comedian, you're going out there, you're making people laugh. Like, that's an amazing thing and you need to enjoy that. Be proud of the fact that you've gotten that far and know that in 10 years if everything goes great and you're at the top of the heap, you're gonna think back to these simpler times when it was just you going out doing these little gigs and it was so pure. You're gonna feel nostalgic for this moment. Enjoy it now while you have it, right? So, that's a mental thing; you gotta enjoy the moment. And then the other thing is the reason that people stagnate is because they're not hustling. They're not doing the work of building the business: going on social media, building an email list, working in other media. Doing all those things really add excitement to a comedian's life because it's like, "Ooh, all these exciting other things to do!" I need to have like ten pots on the stove that I can move between. And that keeps things exciting. If I just had one thing going, I think I would feel very constrained in an unhealthy way.

**"EVERY JOB HAS THE PART OF THAT JOB YOU DON'T LIKE TO DO... THAT'S WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA IS FOR STANDUP COMEDY. IT'S JUST PART OF THE JOB."**

**Yeah, I think that's a good point. I feel like there's a lot of people who are maybe only focused on standup, and then when they're not seeing the results they're expecting right away, they feel like there's nothing else going on for them.**

Right. And if you love comedy, try it in other media. Keep working at it, keep trying stuff.

**Before we go, is there anything else about FunnyCon that you'd like to touch on?**

I'd say there are so many great workshops, even if you don't care about the Funny Awards or the performances in the evening. Each one of those workshops would cost like \$200 as a course if you bought it online, and we've got a stream of them for three days in a row. The Make Money Being Funny course, the How to Pitch in Hollywood course, how to build your brand, how to improve your voice so you can start getting voiceover gigs. There's a standup workshop with Lisa Ann The Glam Ham. Any one of those workshops would be so valuable for a standup comic to go to. The other thing about FunnyCon is it's gonna be so fun; it's gonna be such a great vibe. We put together a lot of heavy hitters in the Chicago comedy world; there's some really smart, great people you just want to be around and learn from.

**And it's 100% at the Lincoln Lodge, correct?**

Correct.

**Awesome. I'm glad it's not at some random place no one's ever heard of.**

Can you imagine? We're at the Radisson Inn conference room!

**WANT TO CHECK OUT FUNNYCON?  
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