

THE COMEDY GAZELLE

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: BLAKE BURKHART



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.

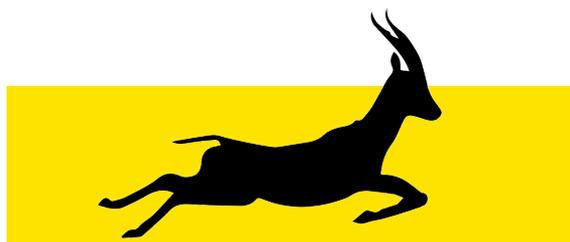
Hope you enjoy.

— Jerry

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INTERVIEW: BLAKE BURKHART

One of the city's most well-rounded comedians, Blake Burkhart is a staple of Chicago comedy. His debut album, Atlantis, opened at #1 on the iTunes Comedy Charts. He has also appeared on Dale City twice. We talked Late Night, hosting tips, his influences and more.

So I'm curious. You're hosting the Late Night Mic at Comedy Bar. Do you have Late Night aspirations? What are some of your goals for the long term?

I think if you're a comic and you don't wanna have your own late night show — I think everyone kinda wants that. I feel like that was the dream for a long time. But to answer your question, no, I don't even think about that anymore. I just love doing stand up. But I love hosting a local version of a late night talk show, which wasn't my idea. Sahar at Comedy Bar came up with that whole idea, so she deserves all the credit for the success of my show. Since we started, it's been one of my favorite things I've been involved in with comedy, and people seem to really like it. A new generation of comics are coming in to watch it and try to get on the open mic. It's cool. It reminds me of how supportive the scene can be, and I'm proud to host it.

How do you feel behind the desk? Were you nervous at first?

No. Nothing's more nerve-wracking than stand up. I can't think of anything in the world more nerve-wracking. Sitting behind the desk and interviewing someone after they've performed stand up is almost the opposite in some ways. I'm there as a parachute for the comics. If their set goes well I can build on that, or if their set doesn't necessarily go great, I can talk to them about something else or give them another chance to get a big laugh. It feels really natural and easy at this point. But it's nothing like stand up. Once you're behind the desk doing the interviewing, it's kind of a different feeling.

Did that whole interview skill set come naturally to you?

This rarely comes up and I haven't even really thought about it, but I have a bit of interview experience from when I worked for a radio station called CHIRP Radio and I interviewed bands for a couple years. So before I ever got into stand up, I think I kind of got used to doing the interview process that way. The same rules of a good interview apply. You kind of keep it rolling, you let them do the talking, try to get an interesting answer. Give them another chance to build on anything interesting they say.



All those skills I learned from CHIRP Radio so I gotta shout them out.

So how did that lead to you getting into stand up?

I always wanted to do stand up but I was too afraid to try it. So I kind of did things that were adjacent to it, even though that was my dream. So I played music in a band and I did interviews for the radio station and I had my own radio show and I'd try to sprinkle in trying to be funny in all those things. But once I tried stand up for the first time, I was completely hooked and kind of quit everything else.

I didn't know that about you. I knew you were a big music guy, but had no idea you worked at a radio station.

Yeah, they gave me a chance as a volunteer and I put in enough volunteer hours where I could ask them to have my own show. Got my own show, then they let me interview the bands. And it was like a dream come true. But I was a lot younger then; I was in my early 20s. Then my love for indie pop music wore off a bit the closer I got to 30. But I did it right for myself where I followed all these interests of mine and then I landed at my true passion. If I had

started stand up earlier, I would probably be burned out or dead by now.

That's the thing. I think it's good to keep an open mind about what you wanna do.

I think you don't wanna drag your feet too much. But also, people don't realize that they have more time than they think. And when people give up on their passion or potential passion too early, it's hard to jump start it again. Because life happens. You have kids or you have to deal with your own health or mental health. Your spouse or your... what's it called when you own a house? A mortgage. First time I've ever said that word. I still rent. But life's always gonna happen. I think if you don't pick up and follow your passions at least a little bit, you're gonna regret it later on.

When you first started did you know immediately it was your passion?

The first time I ever did a set, I didn't get a single laugh and the host literally said "WHAT??" I think that was my first punchline ever. I was devastated. I thought coming in, my first set I'd be like, "I'm the chosen one." I thought it would go so great that everyone in the room would be like, "We were there when Burkhart started."

The great delusion.

Yeah, but it didn't go that way at all. I didn't get a single laugh. I was traumatized from it. I didn't have my first good set until like a month after that. I kinda realized that the people I'm performing with at these open mics are doing way more open mics than me. I was just doing the same one every week. So that's when I decided like, "Alright, I'm gonna try to actually get good at this." And I think the way to get good is just getting up and getting more comfortable on stage. And that turned out to be true for me. Once I was comfortable, there was really no looking back.

It's interesting you realized you had to get up more. When I first started I never realized, "Oh, I should be going up more." I just thought my material was bad, so I'd scrap everything and write all new stuff.

Yeah, I think people do it all sorts of different ways. Some people find a room that they do well in and then they try

other rooms and don't do as well and go right back to the room they were doing well in. If that makes them happy or they feel like they are progressing, then good for them. I think if I'm doing too well in a room, I don't really wanna ever go back. If it's too easy, I know personally I'm not gonna gain any knowledge of how to be a better performer from performing there. You just get a nice ego boost, then you go home thinking you're the king. But if you're not showing yourself in rooms that are considered hard, then why even bother doing stand up at all? Stand up is supposed to be hard. If it's easy, it's almost a different thing altogether. It's like a support group.

Do you have any advice for people on the open mic grind?

I was an open micer for a long time, so if you're not getting booked on shows, everyone else also went through that. The only advice I'd give is to do what you think is progressing you. You don't need to worry about whether the booker is in the room or not. You need to worry about if your jokes are going to make everybody laugh. I used to strive to be the best comic at the open mic I was at. If I'd have the funniest set that night, then maybe I'd try a different mic the next week where the big shot comics were hanging out. And then they would be way funnier than me. And that's when I realized I either have to evolve, stay where I'm at, or just quit. Those are kind of the options. Do whatever's making you feel content, but you should also be trying to push yourself. If you're on stage and you look out and you see your buddies and they all laugh, that doesn't mean

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anything at all. You're just making your friends laugh at that point. If you enjoy that, do it, but try to perform with the comics who you think are a step above you.

What kind of advice would you give to someone hosting for the first time?

My advice would be don't ever host ever. And if you're going to, don't be as good at it as I am. No, I will say that when the clubs came back, all three asked me to host immediately and I was like, "Oh man, I'm getting pigeon-holed here." I don't wanna be thought of as just a host. I'm flattered they thought of me, but I really consider myself good at all three levels of stand up, which is hosting, featuring and headlining. I headline on the road a lot and locally a lot. I feature wherever people ask me to. And I'm flattered that people consider me a great host, because that means I'm getting jobs in all three categories, which very few people get. Once you're pegged as a headliner, people are only gonna book you to headline, which means fewer shows, honestly. That's what everyone wants to be, but it's fewer shows. If you can headline, host and feature, you're on everybody's radar for every single spot. That's where I wound up, accidentally, and now I'm thrilled with the amount of stage time I get in the city. But that wasn't your question.

No, those are good points.

Advice for hosting. The best advice I ever got was from Danny Kallas, who started CYSK. When he hired me to work for them, he let me host after only like two months and I was absolutely terrified. Not to be gross, but I threw up like 10 times before that show. It was like being handed the keys to a Lamborghini, but you're used to driving a — what's a shitty car? I don't even have a car, how dare I. I ride a scooter around town. But what he told me right before the show was "Blake-O, just do your best out there. We've seen you perform great, we know you're a good fit for the show. Just make sure when you're getting off stage, the crowd is ready to go. Whatever that means to you. I don't care if you get barely any laughs. Get them hyped up, get them ready to start a show. You know how to do that. You've seen us do that." And that just washed away the pressure. If you think too much about it, you're probably not gonna be a good host. We're all entertainers, you know how to entertain a crowd. Start out by being entertaining. Tell your jokes, however shitty they are. Tell one last fun one, talk to the crowd a little bit if you want — you don't even have to — and get them ready for the first comedian.



You're the captain of the ship, so don't fuck up for your crew mates. Just commit to being an entertainer and making sure everyone has a good time. Also, don't do a ton of time between comics cause you look like a real fucking asshole.

Do you think having that responsibility pushed you as a comedian?

Oh yeah, 100%. Curtis at Laugh Factory and Sahar at Comedy Bar, I really don't think I'd be anywhere without those two. It would've taken me so long to get where I'm at without them giving me so many chances to host. It's just trial by fire, really. You're performing at the two greatest clubs in Chicago, maybe the Midwest by some people's opinion, and you're in charge of the entire show? That's pretty much as high pressure situation as you can get. Without a doubt it helped me get more comfortable on stage, get better at stand up, and now I feel I can perform anywhere.

Who did you look up to when you were first starting? Who was very influential for you?

To name a few, Danny Kallas, Marty DeRosa, Joe Kilgallon, Kristen Toomey. More than that, but those were kind of like my big brothers and sisters in stand up. They would tell

me what they thought. They'd be honest. They wouldn't sugar coat anything. But they'd also tell me when they thought I was doing good. And even before I got to know them, I was in awe of watching them perform. I thought I would kill one day to be that good. When you're friends with Kristen Toomey and you see her perform, trying to get to that level is the most inspiring thing in the world. Because still to this day, she's killed harder than anyone I've ever seen. And then there's people I don't know as well, like Pat McGann and Kevin Bozeman, who I think are the most undeniably talented stand ups Chicago's had, maybe ever, and those guys adjacently giving me advice as I do a guest spot on one of their shows – they help me immensely too. I really look up to both those guys a lot. And there's so many more. And so many of my comic friends that I started with pushed me to get better, too. So the people way above me and the people right neck and neck with me. Without those two driving forces, this would've taken me twice as long.

What was the best advice you've gotten from a local Chicago comic?

Just recently I did a weekend at Comedy Bar with Kevin Bozeman and he's hard on me I think because we've known each other a long time –

Still he's hard on you?

Yeah, because he's so high up and he's been doing this so long that he knows parts of the stand up game that I won't even fully grasp for years from now. But I was hosting the weekend with him and he kept telling me that I wasn't pushing myself hard enough. The more I thought about it, I was like, "Yeah, he's right. I'm not writing enough, I'm not working hard enough, I'm not trying new things enough to switch up my set." And he gave me hours of free advice as we hung out that weekend. So I owe a lot to him. In that same vein, Kristen Toomey told me to not be such a pussy all the time.

Like in reference to what?

It was right before a CYSK when both her and I were producers. I went up to her, I was like, "I wrote this new joke, can I run it by you and see if I should tell it on stage?" And she goes, "No you fucking pussy. You can run it by everyone on the stage tonight." She was like, "You can tell it to me, but you need to be more comfortable on stage here. You're a producer now, you've performed here dozens of times. Stop second guessing yourself. Go up there and fucking do it." I think in a lot of parts of life, when you hesitate you kinda shoot yourself in the foot. And with stand up you see the immediate effects of that. If you don't believe in yourself, nothing will happen. And if you do, something might work out. Even if it's a shitty joke, you can overcome it by selling it. You have to really deliver it. Sell it to the audience. See what they think. But don't go and half ass it. And don't doubt yourself, especially right before you go on stage – which I had a really bad habit of doing.

I feel like everybody does that.

I think that's something the quicker you overcome the better. And when you watch people like Bozeman, Toomey, everyone else I named, they show way less of that than someone at my level or someone newer than me. The best skill you can have as a comedian is fearlessness. In a nutshell, all the best advice I've gotten has been something along those lines. Stop holding yourself back with fear or nerves.

So how did the infamous "Yeah baby" start?

I'd say it joking around with the staff at Comedy Bar. I think it was just something I said to hype up the staff and comics. I feel like the more people loosen up, the better it all goes.

See, you're hosting even before the show.

Yeah, I think it's just positive reinforcement. If everyone's standing around frowning, it feels like we're about to go to war. I think we should feel like we're about to put on a show. Even bartenders and servers are a huge part of comedy shows. They don't get nearly enough credit. Not just for the work that they're doing, but they're also part of the show. A rude, shitty bartender can bring a show down. And a great bartender, good at their job and kind to the audience, can build up the show. When you go to a shitty club you can tell everyone's miserable. And when you go to a great club everyone's laughing, having a good time.

Why do you think CYSK is such a strong room? What makes that show so good?

That goes back to another thing that Danny said. He told me that the show was built on great hosts. And on top of that, they have the best comedians in Chicago. And still to this day, some of the best in the city work for the show. But everyone can host, and if you can't host you can't really be a part of the show. Because it needs to work from start to finish, rock solid. And then we have the room to book these other spots that go to the best comedians we've ever met. Between the six producers we have, that's a lot of comedians. Not just from Chicago, but from everywhere. So I think being selective with only booking the best comedians we can find — without exception — and having capable hosts that can keep the show running steady, without hiccups or any bad vibes.

Are you guys coming back soon at any point? I know a lot of people are probably curious about that.

I still don't know. But the answer is we'll absolutely be back in some form this year. And I'm hoping sooner than later. There's just some hoops to jump through when you're relaunching a show with that sort of reputation. We don't want to jump in and give you a lesser version. I know a lot of people love the show and miss it, but we'll be back as soon as we can put out that quality of show again.

Few more questions. If you're a new comic, why should you come to Chicago?

Now I think it's completely different. But if you asked me pre-Covid, I'd say this is the best place I've ever seen to get the most stage time possible. I can't imagine a city with more opportunities for a new comedian than Chicago. I can't even picture it. When I started, I wasn't very good and the idea of performing at a comedy club in front of an audience was like a pipe dream. But now if you're a new comedian, you could start today and perform in the next month at a comedy club in front of an audience. Sahar doesn't get enough credit for the opportunities she gives to new comics. And the same for Curtis of course. You're not gonna get more of a fair chance anywhere else. You have a lot of competition to deal with here, like more than you can imagine, but if you're afraid of competition I don't think you should get into stand up comedy anyways.

If you could change anything about the scene what would you change?

I don't wanna come off as mean here, but I think people need to start being more realistic with what a show is. I only say that because I think new comedians are hurting themselves by booking each other all the time. Because you're putting yourself in a league with your peers. I think everyone should be aspiring to be in the league of the elites around them. But I think it's gotten cliquey. I think it's more cliquey than ever. I think the scene is being a little too nice lately. When I started it was incredibly mean and cutthroat.

I wish it was more cutthroat.

I wish it was too. I might be guilty of it because I'm nice to everybody, so if I am I'm

sorry. But I think the scene should be a little bit more cutthroat, where the best comedians are getting the bookings and the up and coming comedians need to put in their time and get better naturally, as opposed to people starting shows to give themselves and their peers who are new stage time. I don't think that benefits them in the long run. Bring back mean Chicago. Being on a show isn't an achievement like it used to be. I think you should be picked to do a show because you're better than your peers at stand up comedy. Maybe I'm just old and don't get the new version of the scene, but I know how people get better at stand up and I don't think this is the way. It should be a challenge and people should be leaving their comfort zone more.

Can you elaborate on that?

Yeah, if you're just performing at the same 2-3 bar shows or only getting booked by the same 2-3 people, ask yourself why that is. Are you their friend? Are you a comic from their bubble of 20 people? Or are you at the place you wanna be? If you live in Chicago and perform stand up comedy, we're all in the same league. And when I see people popping up with shows that are all new comics, I'm like who is that for? Because the audience isn't gonna have a good time. Comedians are gonna maybe have too much fun. But are you progressing? I want the scene to progress because I want more competition. I love when comics come up that I don't know and they start killing harder than me on shows I've been doing for years. I have to work fucking harder, you know? Without that we all become kind of stagnant.

That's really interesting. I've never thought about that.

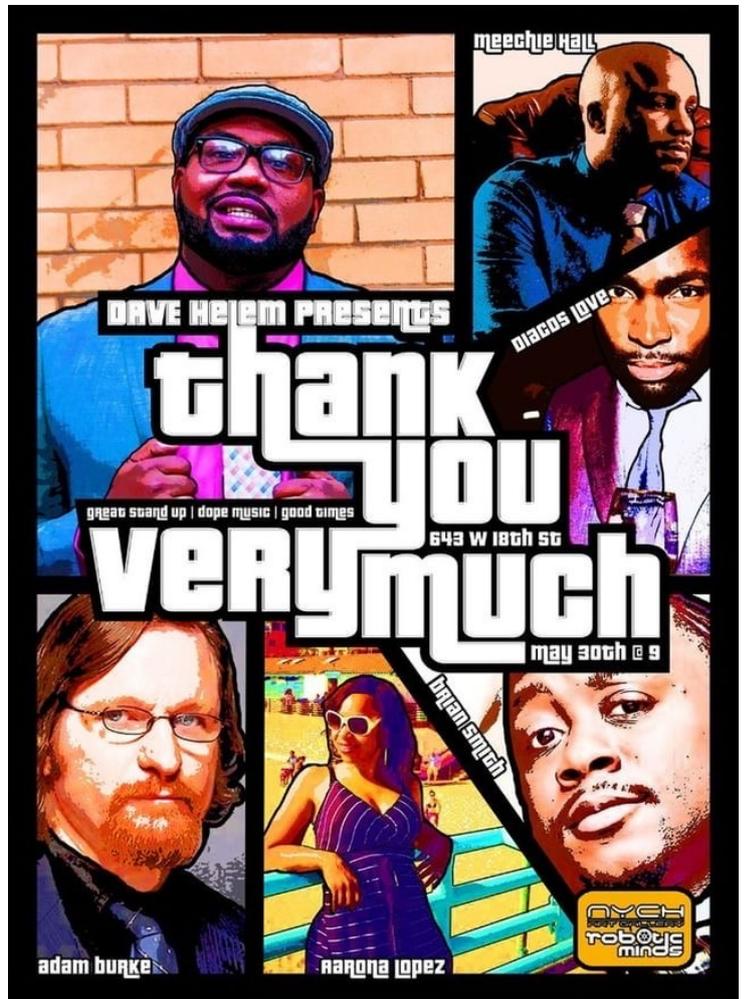
I could just hope that nobody good comes along ever, or I could hope that there's a good comic that I've never met that is suddenly blowing me out of the water on shows. You'll never see me work harder than after something like that. Think about how good Chicago comedy would be if everyone was pushing each other to that level. All my best friends are as funny as me or funnier, except for Rebekah Gibson, but that's who's still pushing me. If we all decided, "Let's just fuck around, nobody write any new jokes, don't worry about making that show better" – we'd all stay exactly where we are for the next five years. And then we're just getting older and not improving? That sounds awful to me. So if everyone's pushing themselves and pushing their peers and making your show better, making your show harder to get on – and I wanna say that again, that's a huge point, it'll make your show better, it'll make your comics better, your audience happier – if we're all doing that, Chicago comedy can be undeniably the center of the comedy universe. I think we could all do better, myself included.



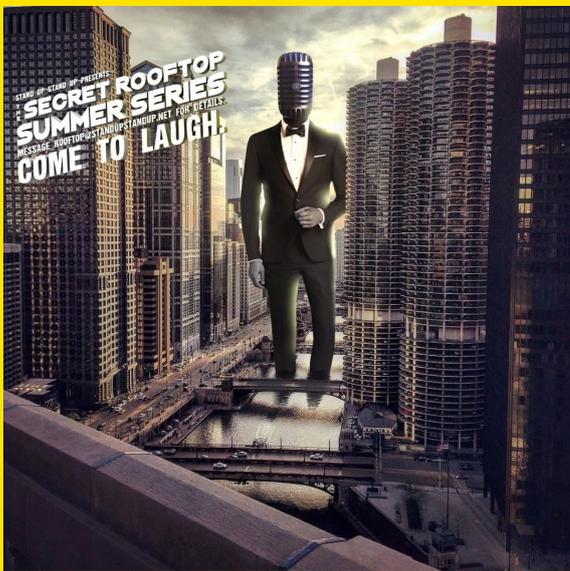
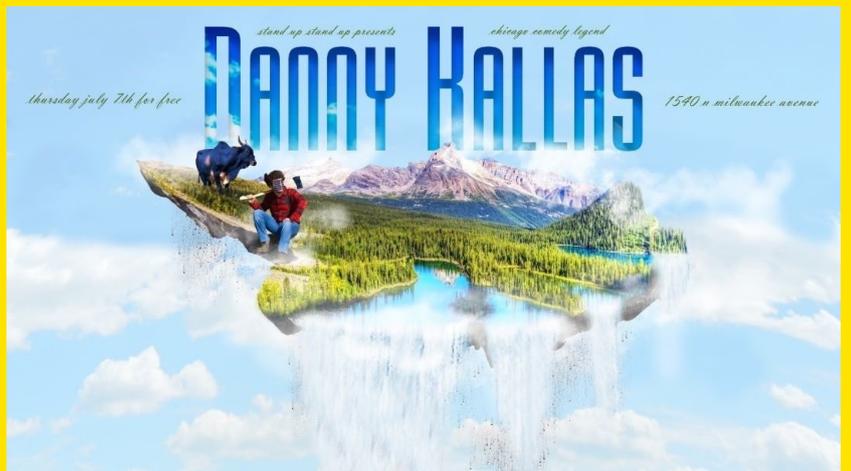
BONUS: BLAKE'S ALL-TIME CHICAGO FAVORITES

- 1. KRISTEN TOOMEY**
- 2. DANNY KALLAS**
- 3. KEVIN BOZEMAN**
- 4. PAT MCGANN**
- 5. MARTY DEROSA**
- 6. JOE KILGALLON**
- 7. JOEY VILLAGOMEZ**
- 8. JOE MCMAHON**
- 9. STEVEN (KING) CASTILLO**
- 10. DALE MCPEEK**

ARTWORK: JAMES WEBB



JAMES WEBB HAS BEEN PRODUCING STAND UP SHOWS & PODCASTS, DIRECTING LIVE SPECIALS, RECORDING ALBUMS, AND MAKING POSTERS IN CHICAGO COMEDY FOR OVER 14 YEARS.  ACLYSM



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BOOK REVIEW: ARE YOU THERE, VODKA? IT'S ME, CHELSEA

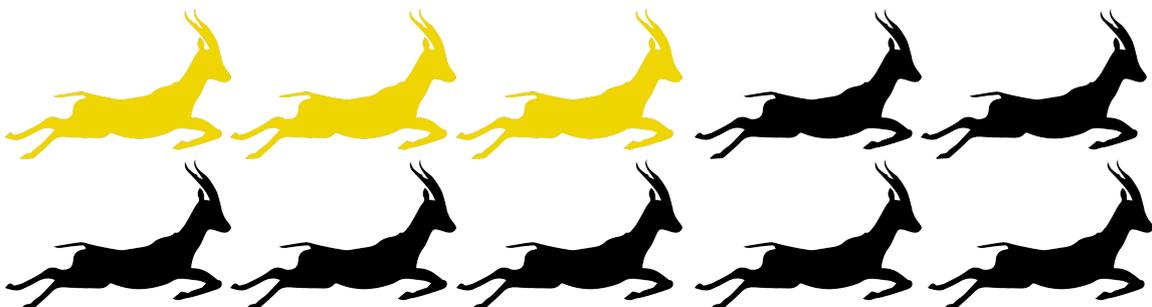
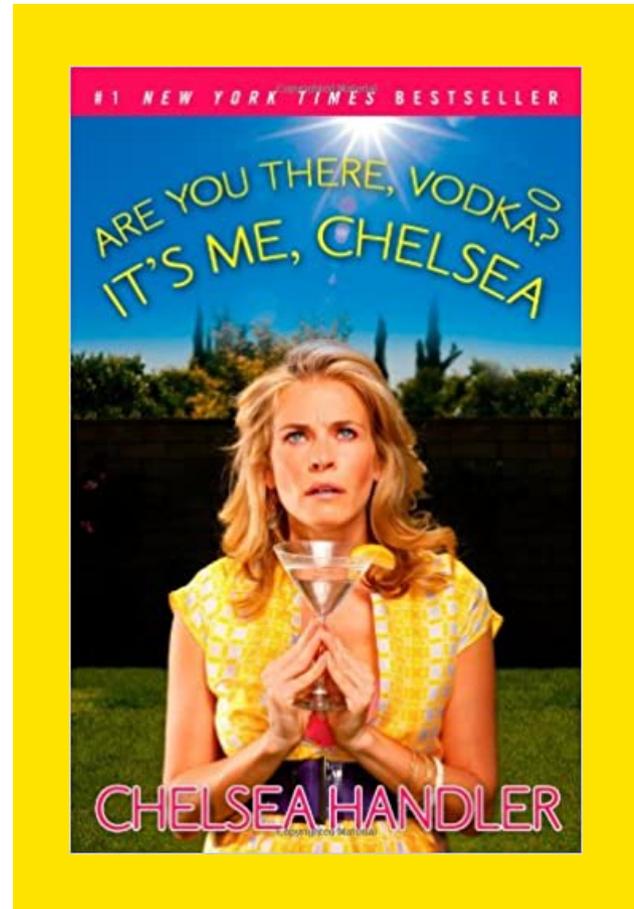
Review by Keay Crandall (@keaycrandall)

This book is the reason why people say women aren't funny. *Are You There Vodka? It's Me, Chelsea* is a collection of anecdotes about Chelsea's family life and she spares no embarrassment. These are both her "why I became a comedian" and "why I drink so much" stories. Which leads me to wonder- is there really a difference?

Chelsea lives in a world dictated by her own delusions. From an early age she was sizing up her parents finances, fully unloading the expectations she had for a lavish lifestyle. I would be worried too if I was the youngest of seven and my father was a car salesman.

Chelsea wrote this to entertain her branded audience. The people who watched her show on the E!, Chelsea Lately. So if you're a glutton for B celeb gossip you can borrow my copy. Otherwise you could probably skip reading this one!

3/10 Gazelles



**THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO
MADE THIS POSSIBLE.**

**WANT TO CONTRIBUTE? SELF
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WORK? DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE**

