

AUGUST 19, 2024 | ISSUE 47

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. It was also the pandemic and I had shit else to do.

Thanks for your support!

— Jerry

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INTERVIEW: ANDY BOLDOC

Andy Bolduc (@andy_bolduc) is a Mainstage cast member at Second City and founding member of the sketch group Cigarette Sandwich. We discuss his journey to the Mainstage, overcoming self-imposed pressure, developing characters, advice for young improvisers, and more.

I normally interview standups, so I'm excited to talk to you about improv and sketch. Can you give me a high-level overview of how you got to the Mainstage at Second City?

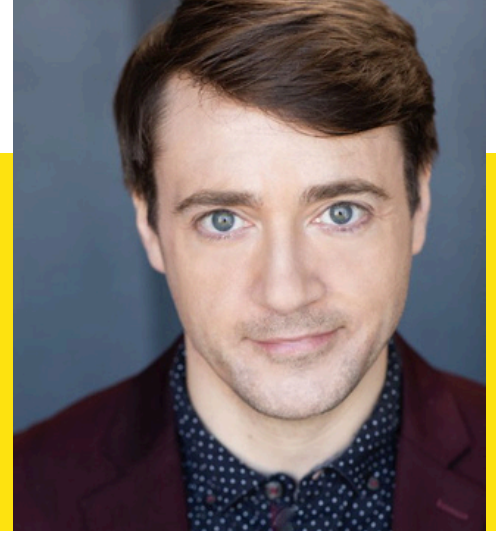
Sure. So, the first time I ever did improv was in college. I went to a college back in Maine called Colby College, where I did some short form. We didn't know what we were doing at all; we were watching YouTube videos of *Whose Line is it Anyway* to learn, like, "Okay, this is how you do improv." But I really, really loved it and I'd always been a performer when I was a kid. I moved to Chicago after college to perform and do comedy – not to do Second City specifically or anything. I'd actually seen a Mainstage show at Second City before I moved here, when Tim Robinson was on the Mainstage cast.

When you saw that show, was it as mind boggling to you as it was to me? I saw Mainstage and was like, "I could never do that."

I was there with some friends and they were asking me about what was happening on stage, and I was like, "I can't tell when they're improvising." I couldn't really recognize the distinction. There were so many moments where it seemed like it had to be written, but I didn't know how they could have possibly written that. I'm kind of surprised too; I don't remember thinking Tim Robinson was the man or anything like that. Which is funny, because every time I saw him after moving here, I was like, "This guy is truly on another level." He's one of my absolute favorite comedians.

Have you gotten to work with Tim at all?

No, I did get to meet him when he and Sam Richardson came to the show. They said they didn't want to do the set with us because they were hungover from a Cubs game, but they were both super, super cool and grabbed a drink with us at Old Town Ale House. I also really appreciated how honest Tim was about the aspects of the job that he didn't like, which is something a lot of the people who come back seem very hesitant to divulge.



What didn't he like about it?

He mentioned that he loved improvising – we improvise every night in a set after the show – and he loved writing the show – putting together new sketches and testing them out – but he didn't enjoy the run of the show. In modern Second City, you write the show for 2-3 months and then you run the show for like 9-10 months. It's a real grind, particularly on the Mainstage, six nights a week. So to hear him say, "That was not for me," made me feel good.

So you moved to Chicago, then what? I'm curious about your early days in improv.

So when I moved here, I initially just found a couple of plays to do that were at comedy theaters. And then I met somebody who was like, "You should take improv classes," so I started taking classes at iO; I never actually ended up taking any classes at Second City. But I went through the whole iO program. Didn't make a Herald team. Was super bummed about that. Then retook the final levels later and did get on a Herald team eventually. I was spending most of my time at iO and Annoyance, and I started putting on sketch shows with some friends of mine, Case Blackwell and Tim Lamphier. We started a sketch group, Cigarette Sandwich, and that's where I really felt like I figured out how to be on stage. Because I wasn't doing improv very well in my own estimation; I found it so difficult, and I was just super

stiff on stage. I just felt mentally inadequate. I understand now it was anxiety gripping my brain incredibly tightly and not letting my thoughts flow.

Can you talk about that some more? When you say anxiety, were you nervous about getting on stage? What form did your anxiety take?

I think for me, every time I got on stage was the test of whether or not I should be doing this at all. Every time I got on stage was like facing the existential question of whether or not I deserve to be alive: "If I do this well, I deserve to be alive. If I don't, I'm a worm who has fucked his life up, who has chosen the stupidest path possible, and the audience not responding is proof of that." So I had this incredible pressure I'd put on myself. Every time I would get on stage I couldn't have fun because it mattered so much to me that I do well. Doing well means you have a shot to not be completely unhappy for the rest of your life; doing poorly means you are condemned, you're a failure, and you've hurt those who love you the most by choosing this path in life.

How were you able to get past that?

Well, I don't think I really did. I still feel that way, but I think that voice, rather than being the one that controls me, is now one of many voices. I've just made it smaller. It's still there; I still desperately want to do well, which is probably a good thing. I do at some level feel like God is judging me, and I need to do well so that God judges me favorably. But I've shrunk it down and I think it was by doing sketch; it was by doing something I felt I was good at. I just grew this confidence, and then my brain started making these connections between sketch and improv, like, "Oh, how you're performing this sketch isn't so different from improv. You're improvising within the sketch, now just take that looseness and joy that you feel doing sketch," and it just started entering into my improv. So I loosened up and could have fun on stage, and I started to understand what that even meant. Improv teachers would always say that, and I'd be like, "How can I have fun? This needs to go well!" That's the opposite of fun, when you really need something to go well. But I started having fun and I started being able to be light on stage. That huge weight I put on my shoulders just became so much lighter. That burning desire to do really well is still there, but it's not dragging me down anymore. Before, it was all encompassing.

Yeah, now it sounds like more of a motivating, driving force.

Yes, yes. And I think just doing it more is ultimately what shrunk it. Almost without even intending to you start doing well. And that just made that pressure feel less intense.

Do you find that as you're having more fun, you're willing to take more risks?

Yes, and that all synergistically works together. The more you're having fun and the audience sees you having fun and they see the light dancing in your eyes, the more they connect with you. They like you more for that, they're not worried for you, and all of the best parts of your personality get to rise to the surface. All your innately funny features get to come up because they're not being crushed down by self-imposed pressure.

It's so crazy. We do this for fun, but sometimes you take it so seriously because you want to be good at it, then suddenly you're not having fun anymore.

Yes, yes. You and I could tell that to someone who's struggling with this problem, right? And the likelihood of them being able to take that piece of advice, which is so true and so helpful, and actually use it, is so small. Because I know people told me this stuff, and I couldn't make any sense of it until I did it myself a thousand times. I'm sure it's different person by person, but I think you mostly have to learn it through painful experience. But maybe hearing that advice is good too, because then the few times that you do have a breakthrough, you can connect it to that piece of advice and start to form a larger pattern of understanding.

I'm curious about your process for creating characters. How do you typically generate and develop an idea for a character?

Most of the ideas for characters come from hanging out with friends and riffing.

I make people laugh a little bit and I'm like, "Oh shit, write that down!" Then later I'm like, "Okay, I've got a show. What do I have in the notepad?" I think through the structure for that character and walk around my apartment and get some key phrases out, then try it in front of an audience and see what needs to change. So the spark comes from hanging out with people and riffing, and then it gets built more when I'm alone.

Can you walk me through how you developed your Snakewort character?

That one is interesting because it was developed for Second City. We were in process, writing the second show, and our director took us on a little group field trip for inspiration. We went over to the Lincoln Park Conservatory and the assignment was to walk around, look at the plants, and see what burbles up from your subconscious for character ideas. I saw a plant called snakewort and I did not think the plant was very interesting, but the word "snakewort" immediately made me think of Wormtongue from the Lord of the Rings. Are you familiar with him?

Grima? Yeah, I'm familiar.

Yeah, the creepy king's advisor whispering in Théoden's ear. I was like, "That sounds like a name for a Wormtongue type character," and I immediately started pulling from other characters that I have played in improv and with my sketch group, Cigarette Sandwich. Other sorts of creepy, Littlefinger type guys who are hunched over and have a hissing voice. I played a Voldemort character who was very similar, so I sort of had him conceptualized by the end of that little trip.

I can't believe the trip actually worked.

Me neither. I was not really expecting it to be fruitful, but I was super, super happy. That day, our director was like, "Hey, does anybody have any characters or ideas they want to pitch based off of this?" And I was like, "Well, this really made me think of this guy, Wormtongue, but it would be a character named Snakewort. I think he's always an advisor, so we would find some setting where he's advising people." My initial thought was to have him either advising people in a corporate setting or as a guidance counselor. Maybe he went from being a king's counselor to a guidance counselor at a high school and he's advising high school kids. It was my director, Carisa Barreca, who was like, "Let's make this an audience interaction piece," where you actually go out into the audience. I was a little worried that the audience wouldn't vibe with it or get



Andy Bolduc as Snakewort

what the character was doing, but they seemed to just find it immediately funny, which gave me a huge amount of confidence. Then it developed pretty quickly. It was, "Okay, he's a corporate advisor and I will treat the audience like they're at some sort of corporate conference and I'm doing a keynote inspirational speech, but all of my advice will be how to be more conniving, more Machiavellian, more backstabbing, very explicitly."

I loved that character. You walked right by me.

Where were you sitting?

Maybe five or six rows back, in the aisle. You looked right at me too.

I was probably considering whether or not to go to you. That first person I always try to choose very carefully. I'm not doing that character right now in the show anymore, but when I was doing it, I was always worried about getting somebody who would make it more difficult to set up the premise; that they would try to add too much and then it wouldn't be clear what I was doing. So, I would look for somebody who looked like they were going to go along with what I'm saying at the beginning, so I can get that out smoothly.

So I didn't look fun to you.

It's not always the case, but more often women are helpful. They try to be helpful in audience interaction bits, and men — it's not all men or even most men — but there is a significant percentage of men who will be like, "Well, now is my turn to

be funny!" and they will try to do a lot. That is relatively rare to find in women, so I'd often go to a woman for the first piece.

What does the ideal audience member look like?

Smiling, engaged, but a little bit shy. They don't actually want to be called on. That's the ideal audience participant for improv, I think. Because the audience really likes it when they can relate to the audience member's hesitation. They don't want them to be too scared to interact with you, but if they're like, "Oh no, I don't really want to do this," they really enjoy the tension of that interaction. So when somebody clearly wants it too much and is adding too much, people are a little turned off or confused by that.

You were talking about how you pulled from different characters to create Snakewort. Is that something you find with a lot of your characters, that they're just a more refined version of a previous one?

I've been finding that more and more. I used to think that they were all fully separate pieces that were each a little gem that I discovered. I wanted them to be very distinct, but I've been finding more and more that you have a range of possibilities. There's a certain number of voices that I'm really good at and a certain number of ways I can tweak those voices, so certain things are going to overlap. I'm kind of like, "Oh, I really am doing that again." So yes, I'm sort of evolving something that I've already done, and advancing it, hopefully. I think by embracing that a little bit, things have gotten better. I'm like, "Oh yeah, this is definitely a shade of that guy." And that's okay if they evolve and overlap. These are all movable pieces. Everything is like Lego parts; you can pull your Legos from different sets, like the pirate set and the spaceship set, and mix them up together.

That reminds me of standup, where a lot of material is stitched together over time. Did you ever get into stand up, or has that not been something of interest to you?

It's definitely something of interest to me; I think I just went down the improv path. In college, I did a stand up contest at my very, very, small school and won it with what I'm sure was not very good standup at all. Then I did some standup right when I moved to Chicago, but as soon as I started getting into the improv scene, I wasn't really doing it anymore. I would still do standup shows, but I would just go and do characters.

I wanted to ask you a little bit about Cig Sandwich because I heard you guys developed a dedicated following. How were you able to do that in something as odd as indie sketch?

I think it was really just doing it so much, and continuing to do it with the same group of people. I've seen a lot of people put together sketch groups and they are doing stuff together really intensely for a few months, but then things kind of fall off. The people that became Cigarette Sandwich all really liked doing this and we were each other's really good friends, so we were just going to be hanging out anyway. But we're all the type of psychos that our favorite kind of hanging out is making comedy with each other. We did this show called The Power Half Hour, where we would write 30 sketches that were each a minute long. For some of them we'd just have a really simple idea, like "Power Rangers, But Bread." So it was just like, "Okay, we're rye and bagels and all these things come together and form a thing on stage," but we don't work out how that's gonna actually happen. Then other ones we would actually script out very carefully. We would come up with 30 of them every Saturday and did that for close to a year. Just every Saturday, showing up at Case Blackwell's house, and while one person played Overwatch, the rest of us would be putting together a sketch show for that night. And then we did another show that wasn't quite as intense; we would just do five sketches of a slightly longer length. We did that show for like three years. We were doing a lot of sketches with each other.

What's it like doing your own stuff with your friends in Cig Sandwich versus at Second City? I imagine Second City is a little more buttoned up.

Yeah, it is very different. I think the biggest difference is that at the

Annoyance, you're getting a lot more people who are already into comedy in your audiences. So they will just follow you much more quickly into weird places and into more interesting comedy, in my opinion. You're around a bunch of people who have studied this a bit more, or the audience is just a bit younger and savvier in general. At Second City, you sort of have to realize, "Okay, what are they not going to be able to get without more explanation?" And that's sort of been my quest at Second City while I've been there, is to find the ways to do sketches that are really interesting to me, but that the audience will also be able to really sink their teeth into and follow you on. Because I've definitely tried things at Second City that are a little too Annoyance and you can be met with some blank stares.

Just a little too out there?

Yes, yes. And they don't understand what you're making fun of; you're too many folds past them. Like, "This is reflecting this, this is reflecting this," and they're like, "Are you making fun of us? Are you making fun of yourself? Are you making fun of this whole idea?" I definitely don't think I do anti-comedy or anything like that, but you have to be careful with stuff that's a little bit too aware of itself as comedy.

So you were doing Cig Sandwich, then how did you end up at Second City?

I put on these sketch shows with Case Blackwell and some other people at the Public House Theater, and Case, who had gone through classes at Second City, invited some producers to come and see it. That was kind of a way to get in — you would invite producers at Second City to come see shows in the hopes that they might hire you. And some did come and saw us perform, and they invited a few of us to audition for a ship contract, which is going out on a cruise ship. I did that audition and they hired me to perform on a cruise ship, which was my first gig with Second City: performing for four months on Norwegian cruise lines.

Did that lead to an opportunity to audition for Mainstage?

How it works is they put you on this thing called the short list, where you're basically in consideration to become an understudy. Then you get hired to be an understudy, and they start giving you various different gigs. Then, as an understudy, you get put on a more regular sort of understudy role, like, "Okay, you are this specific performer's understudy on this particular touring company." Then you might get hired to be in the touring company itself. So I went through all of that, became a touring company member, and toured for like three and a half years. Then coming out of the pandemic, I toured for a little bit, and from there got hired to do Mainstage.

I was always under the impression you just kinda graduate from level to level. It sounds like there's a lot of different paths you can take.

Yeah, it's a lot more like a weird company, where there's internal networking and stuff like that happening. It's definitely not a clear path. It's sort of a path that only becomes clear in hindsight.

What's next for you? Any big goal you have your sights set on?

The big goal would be my own sketch show on TV, created with people that I really like. I would love to be one of, if not the primary creative force on a TV show.

I feel like for a lot of Second City people the goal is SNL. Is that of interest to you?

Absolutely, let them know! I've encountered very few opportunities where I've been like, "Well, I wouldn't want to do that." Whatever people will take me for I'm usually a yes on it, and I'll just keep working on my own projects.

What kind of advice would you give to someone a few years into improv, trying to make it onto the Mainstage?

One would be to know for sure that that's what you want. I didn't have that plan. This was me saying yes to opportunities that seemed good and helpful to me, but I was not really thinking, "This is where I want to go with this." It was just like, "I'm gonna keep working and trying my best at everything that comes over my plate," but I wasn't thinking, "Oh, I want to be on the Mainstage," until I was in the touring company. So define for yourself if that's definitely what you want; figure out as best as you can in your young mind, "What do I want?" which is difficult. And then work on your own stuff. Have your own independence, to whatever degree you can make that happen. Make opportunities for yourself outside of an improv institution or Second City; don't just be in there. Find other people that you vibe with and work with them. Have your own thing and then have your institutional work, because that's where I feel like you get good. You have to be doing your own thing. It just won't happen for so many people so much of the time, but doing your own thing, making your own comedy — that's what's going to ultimately keep your soul alive. If you love this and you want to do it, you've got to have your own thing.

I love that. And what kind of advice would you give to someone like me, who's starting their first improv class tomorrow?

To the totally beginning improv student, my advice would be to make friends. Be super friendly to everybody and be a person that people want to be around. It makes it so much easier. It really greases the wheels and makes you want to keep coming back and doing it. Early on, people are really scared and closed off and competitive, which I definitely was myself, but I forced myself to be really friendly and social as well. If you are too closed off, that will just hurt you. Be super friendly and make it a fun experience that you'll want to come back to. And then for you: you're a standup with experience, so I'd say to take what you need and have as much fun as possible. To whatever degree that you can, stay open-minded. There's a lot of goofy theater stuff in improv, things that can feel very silly, stuff that makes you feel slightly embarrassed to even be there, so be open to that stuff and be like, "Okay, I'm gonna feel silly and weird, but this is good, and this is doing something good for me." A type of comedy that I really love is the silly and smart, risk-taking comedy, like Steve Martin and Martin Short. They're so silly, but they're also incredibly smart and edgy. I feel like improv can make you cool with silliness, and that is a really powerful comedic flavor.

As a stand up, I'm used to being the one that has to make everything funny. A fear of mine with improv is that I'll try too hard to drive the scene. My understanding is that good improv is setting up other people to do well.

Probably that is true of good improv, yes. There's a lot of improv where people are not doing that at all and everybody's just trying to dunk by themselves. If you are feeling like, "I've got to make this funny," that's probably coming from a thought-oriented, executive mind kind of place. What improv can help you do is release that controlling part of your mind and allow things to become more unknown and chaotic in front of you. Then that executive mind, rather than controlling the situation, is just there as a tool, and you can pounce on things with it. One thing that I love to do in improv is play the scene really authentically, almost in a theatrical way; you're locked in as a character, and as soon as someone makes a mistake or says something that's a little bit off to you, that executive mind leaps in and snatches onto that opportunity. Whatever the little bit of weirdness or inconsistency is, you latch onto it and you turn that into the central focus of the scene. But if that executive, controlling mind is too active from the beginning, it won't allow those opportunities to present themselves and you'll try to make it happen before it needs to happen.

Interesting. Just kind of let things unfold.

Yeah, it's like making certain parts of your brain relax. I think that's when you get good at it, when certain things are relaxed rather than being tense and tight up there in the brain. It's like, "This is good. This is fine. This is happening. I know what I'm doing. I'm playing a character. It's all good. It's all good," then an opportunity presents itself — boom, you go hard at the opportunity and strike for a big laugh. But yeah, when I was starting out in improv I was way too tense to allow opportunities to arise by themselves.

What do you think separates good from great improv? Not good from horrible — cause we've all seen that — but good from great?

That's a very good question; that is so much harder to define. I think for me, one thing is originality: "Have I seen somebody else do this before?" I'm much more impressed when I'm truly like, "Oh my God, where did that come from?" Maybe it's an interpretation or angle on a particular character. That's what elevates something to me, like, "Oh man, that's new. I have not seen something like that before." When you're not copying somebody, that's when it becomes incredibly impressive to me.

Do you teach at all at Second City?

I'm not teaching any classes right now, but I have taught some improv classes and some sketch writing classes.

What's the number one takeaway you'd want to instill in your students?

My number one message is you gotta do this yourself and auto generate the desire to do it. I probably can't give them any of that, but what I think makes people really good is the desire to come back and to keep coming up with ideas, keep writing, and keep performing. So, make it fun for yourself. You have to have something that continually keeps you doing it, I think, to get really good at it. You've got to want to keep doing this, whether it's because you want to be really good and you're focused enough that you can channel that energy into working through all the pain and disappointment, or you have to really, really like it. To get good, you gotta do it a lot, so know for yourself: what is the engine that powers you through the disappointment and the hard work? And I probably never effectively communicated that to any student.



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"She's on a fuckin roll!! Co producing Reggie's, winning Roast Battle, Second City, Fresh Faces! Liz works really hard and she is incredibly funny and talented. I vouch for Liz!"

"Liz works very hard at improving at comedy and it's been working wonderfully. She is also a very solid producer and overall member of the comedy community. I've seen her kill in the toughest of rooms. If anyone deserves a shout out it's her."

CHRIS DAMEN

"He acts like a grumpy old man but he hosts a truly unique open mic every week. His material is smart without being out of reach for the average audience member and he's chalked full of historical knowledge."

BRANDON KIEFFER

"It's really cool to see a veteran of the scene befriending and helping out younger comics. Also did a great job hosting the Vouch audition at EZ Inn."

SAM ROSSI

"He is bringing a style of comedy that the scene desperately needs. Every single joke he tells feels like a breath of fresh air. He's the best joke writer I know and an even better performer. Truly an unforgettable comic."

TYLER BUCKINGHAM

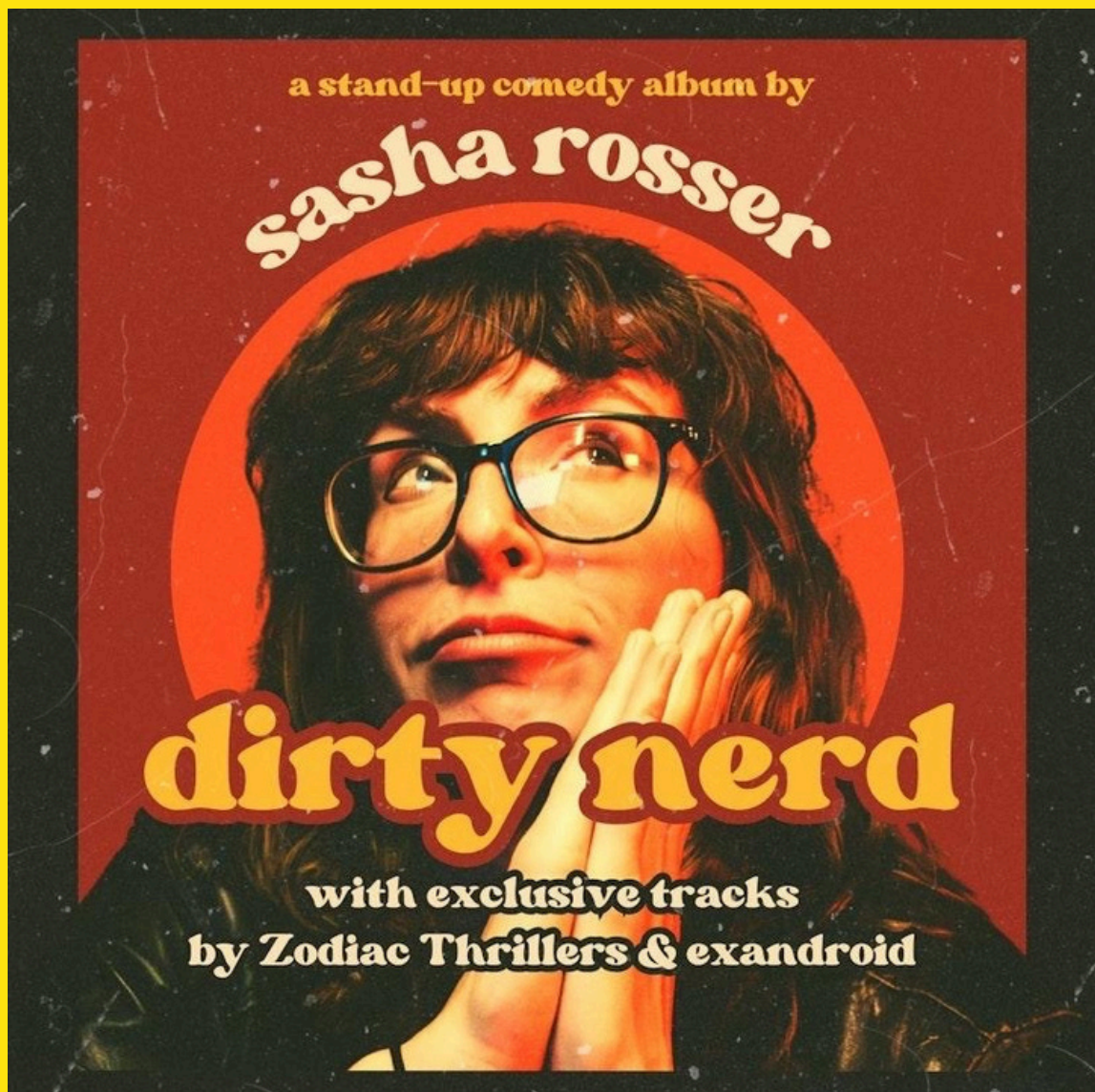
"Writes funny jokes and has a unique cadence + an above average Trump impersonation."

DINA LEWIS

"New to standup but has a really unique voice and perspective as a single mom. So fun to listen to and I can't wait to see what she does!"

ABBIGALE BLAZE

"Abbigale just started a few months ago but is already making an impact on the scene. Her dedication is admirable."



OUT AUG 30! PRESAVE @SASHA.ROSSER

Nothing is off limits in Sasha Rosser's blistering debut comedy album. Seasoning dark, dirty stand-up with her background as a synth producer and academic, Sasha's irreverent takes on everything from Pavlov's dog to Sapphic sex are bookended with original music made through her side project as exandroid. "Sasha Rosser possesses a unique, fearless voice that you come across very seldom. She's a complete maniac and undeniably hilarious." - J Tyler Menz, Voyager Comedy

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