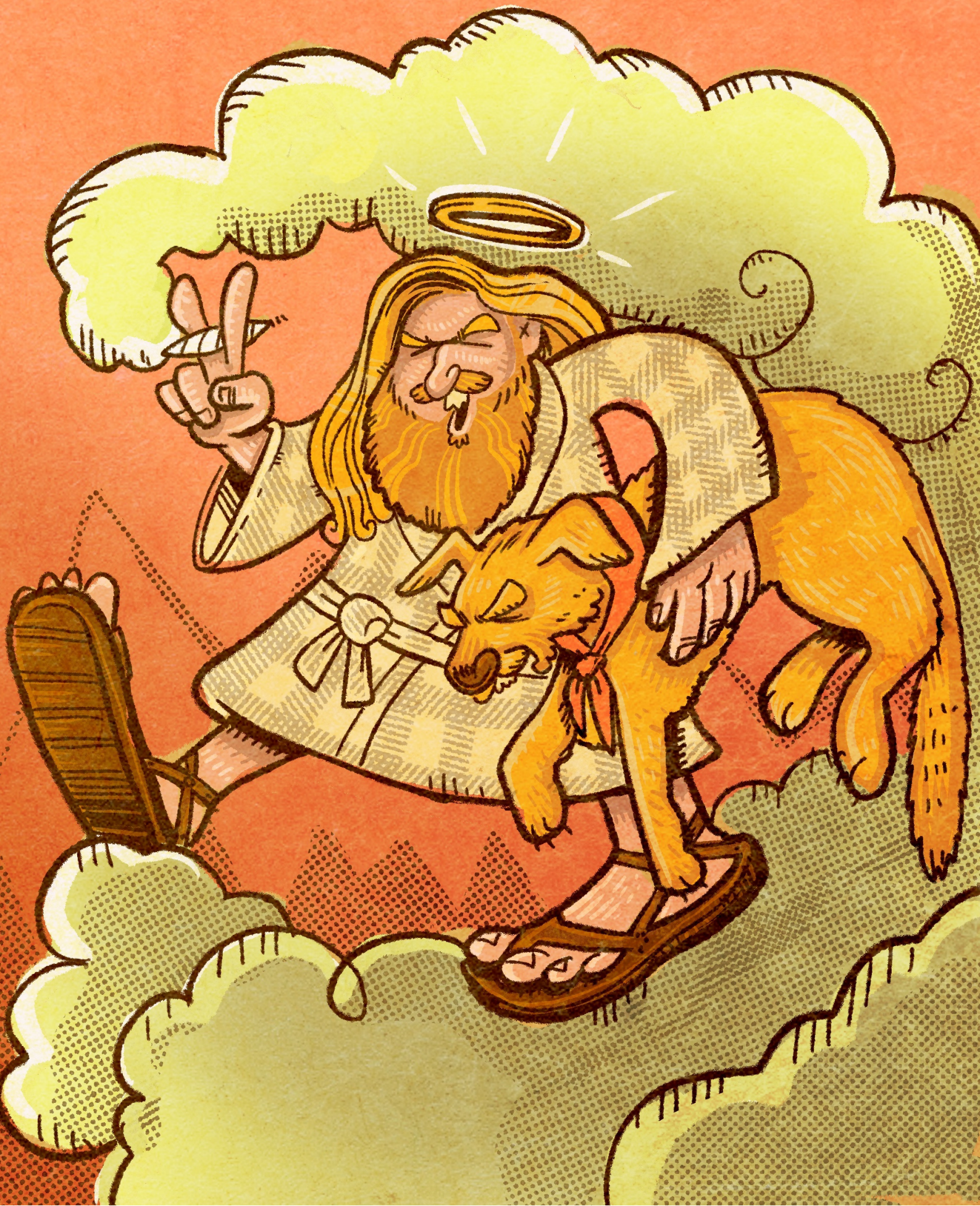


THE COMEDY GAZELLE



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 fuck else to do.

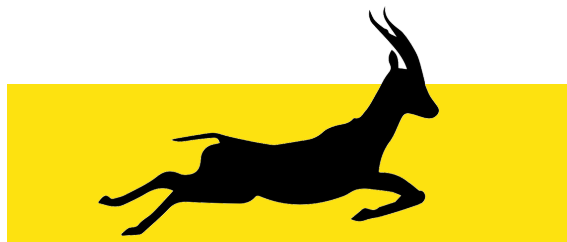
Thanks for your support.

– Jerry

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THAT'S IT.



INTERVIEW: CHRIS HIGGINS

Fresh off the release of his latest flick, Thor: Love and Thunder, I sat down with Chicago favorite Chris Higgins (@mybudchris) to talk process, having fun on stage, his new hour, and more.

I'm really curious about your writing process. Are you a smoke and sit on the couch kinda guy? I feel like for you there's more to it.

I do a free write most mornings. When I'm hanging with buddies or just going about life, I usually write shit down on my phone. Usually that's premises, and then I'll just free write about the premises. I just give it a go every day with no promise to myself that anything's going to happen. I think that's the biggest key to it: just not putting pressure on myself when I write. That's something I learned from my brother, who works in marketing. He's a professional writer and they just throw shitty ideas at the wall, almost as a way to get them out of their head, then hopefully something good will stick. I usually get a coffee, then when the coffee's finished, I'm usually finished. I just try to keep it light and not be too serious. Comedy's supposed to be fun, but also when you're doing pursuits like this, you kinda have to forgive yourself a lot I feel like.

You're free writing every morning?

Yeah, most mornings. There's plenty of times when I'm hungover or something. That's another aspect to it: if there's mornings where it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. I feel like comedy kind of has to come to you. I try to make it happen, but with the huge caveat of if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. Also, lately — this is going to sound so douchey — but I'm more comfortable on stage just riffing, and a lot of times those riffs end up turning into codified jokes. It's kind of like a little pressure cooker of being on stage and being like, "I don't know what I'm saying, but I have to make these people laugh." And sometimes that pressure cooker can make some good stuff. Other times, I try to repeat a riff as a more written, worked on joke and it absolutely bombs.

How do you feel like you developed the comfortability to allow yourself to riff?

I have a little bit of an improv background. I did it in college, then I did the whole iO training center and all that. So I have plenty of practice with that spontaneity and especially with crowd work. A lot of times when I'm doing crowd work with somebody, as corny as it sounds, I "yes and" the person I'm talking to. It just seems like a



better place to go than being like, "No, shut up" or trying to shut them down. It also fits with my act. My act is not a shut people down, "Look how edgy I am" kind of act. I also think there's definitely a fear side to it. If someone's yelling out at me, I'm like, "I don't wanna escalate this." I don't wanna get into any kind of conflict with anybody. So I'm usually like, "Hey, we'll joke about that" and try to diffuse the situation.

At the Gazelle show, that audience member was messing with the sound system and you handled that so well. You just turned it into a joke and kept going.

I had to kindly be like, "Don't touch the damn sound board again, guy." That was crazy to me, an audience member doing that. But you get more comfortable riffing the more you go up. If you go up a lot, then more shit like that happens and you get to practice riffing. If he had turned up my mic and I didn't say anything, that would be nuts. That shit just happens. Reps, reps, reps. Going to mics and doing shitty shows, then that muscle eventually just gets worked.

Do you ever perform... well — do you always perform high?

I like the way that was rephrased. "Do you ever perform high? Wait, hold on, I gotta go with the inverse! Do you always

perform high?" I would certainly prefer to be high, but there's definitely times when it doesn't happen and it's fine. I have no pre-show routine at all. My only routine is that there is no routine. I would prefer to be stoned, but I'd also prefer to be stoned in most social situations that I go into.

I think everyone just assumes you're always high.

It definitely just comes with the territory. I won't be stoned and people will be like, "How high were you up there?" I'm like, "Actually, not at all." It comes with the dressing like a treehugger all the time. It's my fault.

What would you be like if you didn't smoke weed?

I don't know. I'd probably be a little more anxious or high strung, for sure. Not to say I'm self medicating with marijuana, but aren't we all? I don't know how much different I'd be. I've been smoking pot for a good amount of my life, so it's hard to say. Maybe I'd be a better soccer player.

Do you feel like there's material you find funny that you can't do because it doesn't fit your act? I feel like you can't just throw in an abortion joke.

I'm like that way in real life too. I don't really have a darker sense of humor. A lot of times that stuff will fly right over my head, to be honest. I just won't get it or I'll be like, "Ah, man." I think that lends to me being a bad person to give advice to some of my friends who have darker senses of humor. I'm like, "Ah, c'mon man. They're people too." I joke about everything I want to joke about. If I ever decided to get political, or dark, or start talking about dirtier things... maybe I would. But for now, I just like goofy stupid stuff.

My favorite is that "Well, well, well" bit you did last night at CYSK. I love that joke.

Thank you, I appreciate it. That's a newer one and one of those that just came from something I had said sort of before and there was an opportunity to riff, and then a joke was born. That's my favorite joke too. I think if I did any kind of merch it would say, "Well, well, well."

There's a very specific, creative word choice and imagery to it. Is that something that pops into your head, or are you just trying stuff out to see what works?

I'd say a mixture of both. Just allowing myself to see where the joke goes. That joke certainly was riffed a lot on stage, a lot of stuff just added. There's a part where I flub over my words and say, "I have a naked cat — I mean a hairless cat." That was an actual mistake I made once,

and now I just make that mistake every time I say the joke. I don't think I wrote a word of the joke; it was just dumb idea after dumb idea puked upon the stage. Then other jokes are just written to death where my hand is sore. There's no one way about anything I don't think.

Something I'm curious about is that you're very much yourself on stage. Did that come naturally to you?

I'd say I've not always been myself on stage. When I first started, stage fright was definitely a thing. I would get nervous before shows. I had done a little bit of theater growing up and that was easier, and the improv too, but stand up you're so invested in what you're gonna say up there that it's so nerve-racking because it's such a soulbaring art form. "Hey this is what I think is funny" is such an insight into who you are. I had nerves like crazy, and I think that got in the way of me being myself up there. I think some of the early notes I got were, "Don't look at your feet the whole time," and "You've gotta move a little bit when you're on stage." Stuff like that. I think it's just been reps here in Chicago and I've been lucky enough to get put on stage a lot. Now that nervousness just isn't there and there's a reassurance that I'll go again sometime soon. When I first started, every show felt like it could be the last show I ever do. So I'd say to newer comics: just let go of that feeling. You'll be back. Don't be nervous.

I know some comics who are genuinely nice people, but come across as assholes on stage. Do you have any advice for being more likable? I feel like people really buy into you immediately.

Smile. I don't really know. I just really am having a lot of fun up there, and maybe being more likable is just — and it's tough sometimes because stand up is so hard, and you work on these jokes, and it's so stressful — but at the end of

the day, you have to enjoy yourself. The only person that really matters to make laugh is yourself. And I do laugh along with myself a lot when I do stand up, which some people think is a no-no, but I'm just trying to make myself laugh and have fun, and if other people do too, then that's great.

When I interviewed Tim Smith, he was saying how he kind of turned a corner when he realized, "Oh, stand up is supposed to be fun."

Yeah, exactly. Tim's a great example. Sometimes the audience will laugh and Tim does that little snicker to himself. He's clearly having a blast up there.

Do you feel like that was the same for you? You were talking about how you had nerves. Did you just start having more fun?

Yeah. When I turned the corner, it was like, "You just gotta get up there and truly just smile more." And then the rest changed. I used to get up there nervous, kinda staring at my feet. Like, "I'm cool." You know? I think that was also a big change for me. I think everyone, especially in stand up, cares what other people think. A lot. I certainly do off stage, but there became a certain point where I was like, "Alright, I have to stop trying to be cool up here." That's the death of comedy: someone who's like, "Listen, I want to be funny, but I also want you guys to think I'm tight!" I don't care. If you don't wanna hang out afterwards, if we don't vibe, I don't give a shit. I think when I stopped trying to come across as cool and just focused more on having a good time, that's when things changed.

We were talking about acting the other night. Is stand up the dream for you, or are you trying to get more into acting?

I think if stand up ended up being everything I did with

comedy, I wouldn't be disappointed at all. And I think I'll never stop. I love stand up. I never wanna not do stand up. But I would like to add acting to something I do more. I didn't really grow up a huge stand up nerd. But I certainly watched tons of comedy movies. I loved Superbad, Pineapple Express, everything Will Ferrell did, Eddie Murphy. I loved comedy movies; that would be the main reason I got into comedy. So to not want to try to make some of my own — God & Angel is a lot of acting and a lot of goofy stuff. I don't wanna ever stop doing stand up, but I'd like to add a lot more acting to the docket, certainly.

Yeah, isn't God & Angel over a million followers on TikTok?

Yeah, it's cool. To tell you I would've ever guessed that would be a complete lie. Just goofing around with my brother and some friends. That shit's nuts.

Anything to say to the TikTok naysayers?

I mean, I completely get it. I never go on that app ever; just to post and get the hell out of there. But if you're trying to do stand up comedy, the unfortunate reality of the situation is — and I do say unfortunate, and I do think it has changed stand up for the worse — a lot of people are doing it for clicks and likes and posting shit. But that's just the way it goes. I'd say get out there, do it, it's not going to hurt you, but also stand up should be done for its live enjoyment. It's not an artform for the internet; it's for the people seeing it in the room. Get on there, enjoy it, it's a great tool — but it is a tool. It's not the endgame.

It's funny when people see someone on the internet, then come to a live show and they're like, "Wait, this person isn't actually funny."

"This isn't as punchy. Where do I comment?" But those platforms have been great for stuff like God & Angel. Whether you realize it or not, you're logging onto TikTok to see sketch



comedy for the most part. That's like the biggest thing on there, at least for me. People are getting different algorithms, but it's people trying to be funny one way or another. I'm a hypocrite in saying it, but the stand up reels and all that is a tool. But for sketch it's amazing.

I wanted to ask about your album, *Good Boy*. Once you released that, what was it like to start from nothing again? Were you still doing material off the album? Were you just riffing? What was that process like?

A big reason I did the album was because it felt like a lot of those jokes needed to live somewhere because they were dying. I had already started to work on another set of jokes, some of the jokes I'm doing now, so I was like, "I need to do the album because if I don't, then a lot of the jokes are gonna die because I won't tell them much anymore." Certain jokes were definitely in the heavy rotation and I do sometimes do jokes off the album because they're a lot of fun to do. There's one that I closed on for years, and if I'm ever in a tight spot, my old trusty closer can get dusted off. Unfortunately, that closer has a really great call back with that new "Well, well, well" joke. I say to myself, "Oh, these jokes are gonna die," then I write this new joke that plugs really well into that closer and I'm like, "Shit." I don't regret a thing. After putting it out there, I was anxious as fuck. Anything you work hard on and is really solo like that, you try not to think the thoughts, "Oh, I hope they like it! What is everyone gonna think?" I tried to get rid of those any time they leaked into my head. It was really, "Let's put it out there. I'm stoked about it." It was freeing. It was freeing to not feel like I had to tell those old jokes anymore and could move on. Now I'm working on this new set of material.

How close are you to a full new hour?

I have one.

Oh shit.

There's a full new hour in there. I'd say it'll be about a month or so before I'd be willing to say people should come.

Are you planning to release it soon?

I'm gonna record an hour at the Lincoln Lodge on November 19. I haven't told anybody. I'm gonna record an hour there; I'm gonna film it. It's kind of a, "Fuck it, let's see what happens." I might release it on YouTube, I might just have a great hour filmed, I might make it into another album. We'll see.

And how much time was it between your first album and having this new hour? Didn't your album come out at the start of the year?

Yeah, it came out in February. But that first hour was all stuff I had worked on before the pandemic. Then I came back from the pandemic with another chunk, and that was what was getting in the way of the old chunk. It does seem really soon, but this has been twoish years. And I feel like you get a little quicker at writing the more you do it. I also teach at the Lincoln Lodge now. I know that sounds very pluggy, but I do the homework with the students. That's every six weeks they're writing five new minutes. I'm doing that and some of those new bits have hung around.

Can you talk about your class a little bit? How's that experience been?

It's cool. It's also given me a lot of empathy for my former educators in the past; now teaching and knowing on my side of things what a great student is and what a really frustrating student looks like. It's been cool. I'd say it would be a disservice to call me a teacher compared to people who actually teach. I think I'm like a facilitator. It's great; it's very workshoppy. The Stand Up Seminary is kind of our equivalent to Level 1 at Second City. It's really a crash course in the terms and ways to navigate the scene and ways to generate premises and stuff like that. For me, it took me my first six months to a year to really gain all the knowledge that I feel you get in the class. You just get someone who's more experienced telling you everything that they've learned, and then some. The syllabus was first developed by Cameron Esposito, then Alex Kumin has worked on it a lot. I've helped too, along with the rest of the great teachers there like Chelsea Hood and Deanna Ortiz, Mike Atcherson, and Sonal [Aggarwal]. There's a lot of great

comics that have really put their minds together on this. That's what I always tell students: "I'm not really the inventor of what I'm teaching you here." It's like oral history in a way. I really like it.

If I was brand new and had never performed before, what kind of advice would you give me?

I would say just go out there and do it. Stand up can't be done any other way than getting up in front of people, which is super scary, but as soon as you take that first leap, it becomes pretty addictive. My advice would be to go get your reps in and throw yourself into Chicago's open mic scene, because I have a lot of faith in it. Go and join the comedy scene; go to the mics and make friends. Get involved here, because this comedy scene churns out amazing comics. Don't be shy, throw yourself at it and see what happens. Have faith in the Chicago comedy scene, because it is a great one.

It is a great scene, but is there anything you'd wanna change about it if you could?

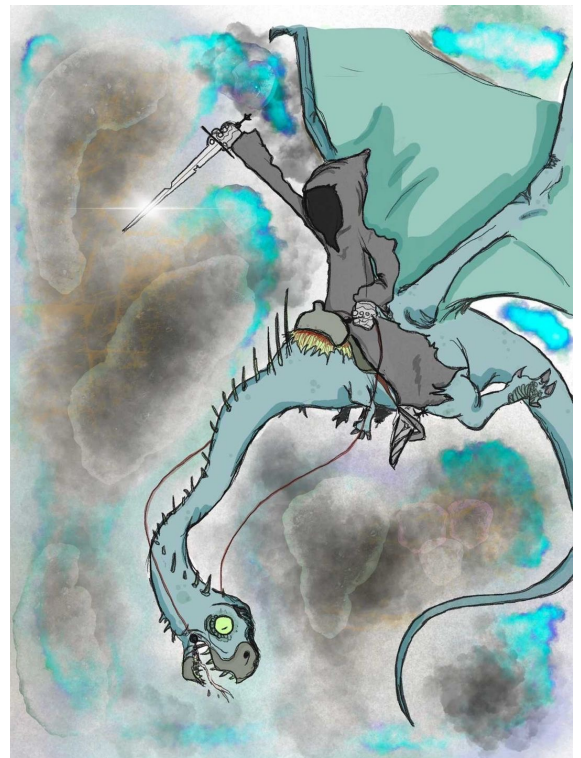
Oh man, that's a big question. Obviously there's things I'd like to change. I'd like everyone to be freaking nicer to each other, that would be a big one. But the only thing that I'd change that's different from pre-pandemic is that there used to be a lot of really great dive bar shows. Some were really shitty. Some were really great. Some were randomly amazing and other times horrible. I think that was a big part of Chicago's comedy scene. Now, a lot of these bars have closed down or changed their rules a little bit. It's hypocritical of me to say because I'm not running a show at a bar, but I would bring back some of the more dive bar based comedy that used to be really, really dominant in Chicago. The independent scene and the club scene used to be very, very even, and now things have just changed and gotten more club based. That might just be the way of the world and that people feel more comfortable seeing comedy at a comedy club these days. I'm not complaining, but if I did have to change anything, I'd say bring back dive bar comedy. I wanna get yelled at by a guy who just fell off a stool.



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