

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: BRANDON KIEFFER

I caught up with Chicago's favorite racist, Brandon Kieffer (@brandonkieffer_), to discuss his writing process, his trans pussy joke, good vs bad hosting, the value of open mics, and more. Kieffer records his first special Friday, May 12 at the Lincoln Lodge. Don't miss it!

What's something you think people would be surprised to know about you?

That I'm probably nothing like what they think I am. Like, you'd never guess that I have a degree and I'm a writer. And all the things that I do not give off when you meet me or see me on stage.

I think everyone has this picture of you as some Southern racist.

I was always the most liberal person in the South. I move up here and I'm like, "I guess I'm a redneck." I went to art school. I did not grow up country, even though I'm probably the most Southern person in the city. But I love portraying it because it's where I'm from. My favorite thing to do at a bar is say something real stupid and then people are like, "Oh, you're racist!" Like, I have a degree. I'm not racist.

What's your degree?

Political science.

What?

Yeah, I'm the last person that talks about politics, even though I studied it for five years.

You wanted to get into politics?

I thought I was gonna go to law school, but I realized what I like is political history. I don't like current politics. All current politics is just emotions and opinions. The part I liked was what happened 20 years ago and why we're here now. The presidents were like the most interesting thing in the world.

What made you leave Georgia and come to Chicago?

I got ran out. They kicked me out of the Klan for being too woke. No, I graduated college. I'd always wanted to leave, but I just couldn't because I had too much going on. It just so happened me and this girl got back together and she's like, "You're moving, why don't you move to Chicago?" I knew nothing about Chicago. I just



Photo by Larry Bloom

knew it had a good comedy scene. I was like, "I don't want to go to Atlanta, so fuck it, I'll move to Chicago."

You mentioned you're a writer. What's the inside of your notebook look like?

Wieners. It's a bullet pointed sort of style with indents. I figured out a way early on to get a notebook about the same size and once I get to the third line, there better be a punchline or it's too long. It's an easy way while you're writing to be like, "Alright, what's my point?" I've hit the third line here; I need a fucking point. It's just a way to edit it in live time. That works for me with long form because if I'm talking about something for four or five minutes, it's nice to be able to see the whole joke written down. Then I can group it into, "This part's about my shoes, this part's about my socks, this part's about my pants," or whatever. And then being able to move those around modularly. That system works for stories, for me.

Do you have a schedule you hold yourself to?

I used to try to write every day. It's impossible because you also can't force it. But there's definitely times you just have to go, "I'm going to sit down and I'm going to fucking write." I'll do writing exercises sometimes, where I'll just take ten random topics or I'll have a friend send me ten random topics. I'll set a

timer and I'll give each topic like three minutes, and I just pen to paper, nonstop, free flow it. It's nonsense, but then I'm in this writing mode, my brain's turning, and then boom — I hit something. But also, there's a million times when I write five pages of trash and I just kill a tree for no reason.

You do a lot of difficult, offensive material. Some people like coming out swinging, others like building up to it. What's your approach?

I don't think I really do offensive jokes, personally. Maybe to other people. But I go harder in the beginning, then back it up the whole time. Cause it's like, "Alright, I already created a thing and now I can do what I wanna do and you'll roll with me for the whole thing." Cause if you fuck with me on the fucked up shit, then I can take my time with the other shit.

Are you gonna have the same approach when you record your special?

No, I'm gonna put it in the order I want to because I'm not worried about winning the crowd over as much. They're there for the recording, as opposed to an audience who's just meeting you for the first time and you have to establish yourself. I don't think everybody in the audience will know me, but the majority of the people there have gotta have seen me or know me in some way. That being said, I'll probably just come out in black face and yell the N word.

If you can get away with it, why not!

I don't look at it like trying to get away with stuff. I really don't. I don't have any goal of, "Let me try to get away with this." It's just the stuff that I think is funny. I think race shit is the funniest shit that exists. That's really what it is.

That's an interesting distinction: doing something because you think it's funny, versus thinking it's funny to say a fucked up thing.

I think when you first start comedy — and I was guilty of it, I think most people are guilty of it — you learn it's very easy to get a laugh when you say something fucked up on stage. People aren't used to hearing someone say, "My pussy" or "I fuck" or "I cum too early." Those aren't normal things you hear, so it's automatically funny when you're in a public setting and you hear someone saying that. But I think the job of the comedian is to take something that's not funny and then make it funny. Then you're talking about seatbelts. There's nothing funny about seatbelts, but then you got 10 minutes on seatbelts and it's hilarious. But the

seatbelts aren't doing the work; you're doing the work. Whereas "My pussy, I fuck, I have a small wiener," that's the words doing the work and you're just the conduit to say it out loud.

How do you get past that, where you're just trying to shock and do crazy shit?

I think it comes with time and just figuring out what you like to talk about. If you're Dave Attell, then you should be talking about those kinds of things cause he's the best at it and that's what he enjoys. But I realized this isn't actually what I like to talk about. It's funny and I think it's funny, but I'm more into talking about my own shit. A lot of my shit is race based because I grew up with lots of racial shit that I thought was hilarious. Race was always a funny thing, and always around, and there was always tension. So for me, it's something I feel very comfortable talking about because I spent my whole life dealing with it. I ditched all the sex jokes once I moved to Chicago.

Why's that?

Just grew as a comedian. Once I got here, I heard everybody talking about sex, everybody talking about jerking off, everybody talking about the same shit. I would also lose jokes in the beginning. I'd write about a very broad topic, then I'd lose the joke because someone else who was a bigger comedian would do it and I'm like, "Well, that joke's gone." I hated that. So I was like, "Oh wait, if I talk about stuff that's very specific to me, even if you did something about the same subject, I'm not ripping you off because it's legit mine." I have a joke about my dog dying, and I did it one time at an open mic and a guy comes up to me, "Hey man, I just wanna let you know I have a joke about my dog dying too." I'm like, "Okay? That doesn't mean my dog didn't die, dude."

How else have you changed since you first started?

Well, I used to just make up stuff. That's

the biggest difference. I'd take little bits of truth and then just make up my own narratives. That's where the sex stories were. It was just me stringing together things that I think are funny and then ultimately making a story out of it. My stories were just jokes forced into a fake story. Then later I realized, "Oh wait, I should just talk about what's really happening in my life and make it an actual story about myself." That's why the sex jokes went away; it's easy to make up fake sex jokes, but it's hard to make up jokes about your dog dying. So that became more fun to do because it's harder.

Did you have any early influences?

Dave Attell. I think my first two years of comedy were me ripping off Dave Attell in some way, like sex joke one-liners. Very bait and switch kind of things and misdirection. Big Jay Oakerson. All my favorite guys are like these dirty sex joke guys; that's why I started that way. But then as I got older, I was like, "Oh wait, no, I like the storyteller guys," like Nate Bargatze. Nate Bargatze is a clean comic, and you don't realize that until someone tells you. I am too. I just curse. I'm telling you, if you took away my curse words, I'm damn near squeaky clean material.

You saying you're a clean comic is insane to me. You have a joke about building your trans daughter's pussy.

It's not that I don't have those jokes, but if you took the whole of everything I have? Mostly clean. There's only a couple of them that are actually dirty. The trans one is the only joke I have that references genitalia or anything.

I imagine a lot of people find it offensive though.

That joke isn't meant to be offensive in any way. It really isn't. It's me honestly thinking, "How would I handle it if my kid was trans?" And that's what I came up with. I was like, "Yeah, I don't care, but if you're gonna do it, I wanna be involved." That's where that whole bit came from. There's a trans comic that I secondhand heard talk about it. They're like, "It's a great joke and it doesn't come from the wrong place, but it can cause people in the audience to laugh for the wrong reasons." That's the tricky part of it. Cause I want people to laugh, but I don't want them to think we're laughing at something. It's not meant to be laughing at anybody. I'm just saying, "If this was the scenario I was given, this is how I would think about it."



How do you make sure people aren't laughing for the wrong reasons?

If it's your honest perspective on it, you can't control how people feel. You can only control what you do. There might be parts of the joke I take out just because I'm like, "Well, that could lead you in the wrong direction a little bit and that's not what I'm going for." So then you drop a part of it, or soften the edges of how you say it so that you're not pushing it into "Let's laugh at trans people." That's not the goal of the joke in any way. It's more of a dad joke, in my opinion. I care about my kid, and then I'm making it funny in terms of like, "Well, you want a pussy? Let's get you a fucking pussy!" That's kind of the mentality of the whole thing. "If you're gonna do it, we're gonna do it right! Don't half-ass it." It just happens to be about trans people.

Does it make you want to do the material less knowing that you might piss people off? Sometimes I'm like, "I don't even want to deal with the fact that you think I'm an asshole."

There's definitely certain things where it's just not worth it. Or if you're not supposed to be the person talking about it, then you shouldn't be talking about it. But if you are coming at it from an angle that is your perspective, then it's your right to talk about it. And if you get pissed off about it, that's okay, because

that's your right to get pissed off. There are things that I would avoid just to not cause drama, but it mainly comes down to "Is the joke good enough to warrant talking about it?" If the joke was brilliant and perfect and awesome, then fuck it, do it. But if it's a whatever joke and it happened to be about a terrible thing that I might get in trouble with, why even bother?

You were just in the Roast Battle Finals. Do you enjoy that aspect of comedy?

I think if you're good at it, you should work on it. I never tried to force being a roaster. It just was something I was good at already. I was like, "Why wouldn't I take advantage of it?" It's a different muscle. It doesn't help me with my set, but it does help when you're on some shitty road gig in the middle of nowhere and some dude pops his mouth off at you and you've got just a repertoire of how this guy's a pervert and he sucks and he's fat and bald. You light his life up in two seconds because you did it already. It's a skill. Hosting is like that. People hate it, people are scared of it, but if you can host, it's gonna benefit you a ton. It would benefit me to get better at hosting, cause that's another route you can take to getting an opportunity.

Are you trying to get better at hosting?

Well, that's why I took on The Cave, that shit show when it was at Innjoy. I was like, "Fuck it, every Tuesday I can host this little bar room show and get my hosting skills honed." Hosting a show is 100% its own thing. Being successful as a host is the opposite of being successful as a comic. As a host, the goal is you murder, but have the worst set of the night.

That's interesting.

I think the perfect hosting set is you crush, but everybody after you does a little bit better and a little bit better and a little bit better. That's when you did the best job. Now, the worst job is when you crush as a host and then everybody bombs after you. Cause that means you've done something wrong. You're the buffer between the comedians and the audience. It should be like, "Audience, here I am. Trust me. You like me. Now here's what I want to show you." And then they go, "I like this guy. He wants to show me something cool." Okay, now here's the cool stuff. "Oh, this is why the show exists, for these people after him."

But sometimes you can't control that, right? If somebody goes up and just eats shit, what can you really do about that?

You can't help it, but it's okay as long as the person that

closes out the show does great. Then it's fine. Cause you built the night up to that last person. But bad hosting is the host does great and then it slowly gets worse all night. That's also bad booking. Good hosting is you could bomb as a host, complete bomb, but then everybody slowly does better and better throughout the whole show, and then the last person does amazing. That's still good hosting. That's better hosting than you crushing and everybody bombing.

Some people think the host needs to do crowd work, but when I interviewed Sam Morril, he said that by doing his jokes, he was setting the other comics up best to succeed. Where do you stand on that?

I think it's a mix. You're trying to have a good show, so if you're the guy that just has to go straight into material, do it. But sometimes that doesn't work. You have to read the room and be like, "The room is drunk. They don't want to hear me talk about therapy for 10 minutes."

You gave me some good advice on tagging versus milking a joke. Can you talk about that a little bit?

For me, it's not a good tag unless it's better than the thing before it. It needs to build or what's the point? You're milking the joke if you're throwing words out there that are about the same. A good tag is like, "He did this because of that. And then that, and then that, and then it grows." If at any moment it's not growing, then you're just wasting time and could be on to the next thing. Depends on your style, but for me, I was like, "Less is more with tags." Maybe the joke is great because you tag it, tag it, tag it, but sometimes it's just like, "We get what you're saying; we don't need 20 examples of it."

"AS A HOST, THE GOAL IS YOU MURDER, BUT HAVE THE WORST SET OF THE NIGHT."

I'm guilty of that, where I'm like, "Okay, this is a great joke. I want to make it longer." Cause in my mind, a longer bit is just better somehow.

Well, it's great because it's good. It's not good because it's long. It just happens to be longer and good. Longer and meh isn't good. I've got jokes that started out as 10 minutes, but are now one minute long, where I say like four things and move on. I just took the best of it and condensed the whole thing down to one minute of boom, boom, boom. There's no reason to say, "This joke has to be four minutes." No, the joke needs to be exactly how long it needs to be. If it's four minutes and it's boom, boom, boom – great, you got a four minute long joke, but sometimes it needs to be a minute.

So you believe in cutting versus adding?

I think cutting is more important than adding most of the time, because it gets funnier by cutting out the fat. If you have this little part where you're like, "I wish it was funnier here," well, if you can't think of it, just take it out, and then it is funnier there because it's not there. You didn't bog yourself down with that one line that you were dying on. You want laugh, laugh, laugh, laugh. You don't want laugh, then chuckle, then laugh and then chuckle. It's better to just cut those two parts out and have all laughs. Cutting is the hardest. Cutting and pausing are the two things that'll make you ten times better.

Cutting and pausing.

Yeah, just taking your time and only doing the good parts. You don't have to tell every detail just because it really happened. If there's a dead part of the story, I don't want to be like, "Well, fuck, I need to make it funnier; so now let's make it where this happens, even though it's not true." It's better to just get rid of it, in my opinion.

How strict are you with cutting? If it doesn't work once or twice, are you cutting it?

Yeah, a lot of my shit comes out four to six minutes long when I write it. That's why I like open mics, because then you give me a time constraint. If I go to open mic and they say, "You got four minutes," I'm gonna get to the fucking point. "Here's the best stuff for that four minutes." Now you give me more time, then I can make it six minutes and let it breathe. And that's when I get the tags and closers and stuff. Constraining those stories helps a lot. It teaches you "What's the fucking point? What are you trying to say?"

On the subject of open mics, I feel like a lot of people think they're above them and that there's no value anymore. What do you get out of doing mics?

They're valuable to me because I'm long form. I don't want to go do a show and try out a new five to six-minute-long bit that's going to eat up most of my set. It does a disservice to the show for me to use that much time to figure shit out. Hopefully there'll be a day where I'm so busy that my only way to try a new joke is to do it in front of an audience at a show. But at the end of the day, if I have Monday off, would I rather save the joke for the weekend or fuck around and learn? Maybe it's a shitty open mic, but at least I get to say it out loud. It's practicing. Now, if you're short form, it's a lot easier to go do a show, do a couple of new ones in the middle, then a bunch of great jokes at the end, and it doesn't affect anything. It doesn't change the show. You just missed a couple of jokes, whatever. If I start a five-minute-long bit at a show and it's just not working, either I got to commit to it and finish it, which is the most important thing to do, or just bail on it and then look silly. "Well, I'm wrong. I'm quitting."

I don't understand people who are like, "Oh, I'm going to wing this six minutes." Like, what? You don't need mics at all?

I think there's a stigma. There's some comics that never went to a fucking open mic, and they're at big clubs on the weekends. I'm like, "Okay, cool. You're really good at doing well in front of a

huge audience that paid a lot of money and will damn near laughing anything.” Cool. You're really good at doing that. So are most people that are comedians; that's the easiest thing to do. But then you take the person and you put them on a road gig in the middle of fucking nowhere, and they generally fall apart. Because they don't have that backbone of like, “Let me move with the punches.” Learn how to be good in front of different audiences. I also don't think you should be the guy that goes to a hundred mics a week. It doesn't help you. If you're going to go to a mic, have a purpose. I like to write a new joke, then find a mic and hammer that joke out, so that I can hopefully move it into my show set. But I do think there are very few comedians in the city that go to mics. I'm always like, “But where do you try your new jokes out? Do you really only do it in front of live audiences that are already paid and hot and laughing?” Cause that doesn't really teach you anything about your joke. If everybody's crushing and you do a new joke in a hot room, did you really learn anything about the joke?

Then you're in a dead room and you're like, “Oh, wait, this joke sucks.”

Yeah, I was about to say there's more value in being in a dead room, and then just one part of your set doing great. That's the magic part of it. Versus everything's doing well and maybe a couple parts don't do that great. You didn't really learn anything from that.

That's why I loved North Bar and Harrigan's.

Yeah, they're awful and people hate it, but then you get truly honest reads about whether the shit was funny or not. Let's say your first minute stinks, that second minute is great, and then your third and fourth minutes stink. You learned a lot in that one minute. I think there's value in it, and if you're a comic, you should take advantage of it. Open mics are free. There's no one in the city that's so busy they don't have a Tuesday to go fucking run some new jokes somewhere.

FRIDAY, MAY 12 AT THE LINCOLN LODGE. DON'T MISS IT!



**BRANDON
KIEFFER**

LIVE ALBUM RECORDING



THE PRICE IS MAYONNAISE

**BY: JORDAN WILSON (@JORDANFREAKINGWILSON)
AND LUKE IPSUM (@LUKEIPSUM)**

DREW CAREY

Welcome back to the Price is Right! The first item we have today is this market standard jar of Hellmann's Mayonnaise .

THORP CABLEAND

\$750,000 dollars Drew.

DREW CAREY

Just a regular jar of mayo.

THORP CABLEAND

Loud and clear Drew. \$750,000.

DREW CAREY

You can find this in any store in the world. There is truly nothing special about this jar of mayonnaise at all.

THORP CABLEAND

Roger that captain. \$750,000. Put it on the board.

DREW CAREY

I'm sorry that is not correct.

THORP CABLEAND

FUCK! FUCK ME! FUCK! I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT I FUCKING THOUGHT THAT! FUCK! FUCK...

DREW CAREY

Whoops! Sorry to the viewers about that colorful language. We'll be right back after this commercial break.

THORP CABLEAND

Ask me again Drew.

DREW CAREY

We got a lot more stuff to guess about right after this break!

THORP CABLEAND

Drew. Ask me again about the mayonnaise.



DREW CAREY

We can't ask you about the mayonnaise because you already guessed.

Thorp Cableand rips off his jacket revealing he's wearing a suicide jacket that's ready to explode.

THORP CABLEAND

Ask me again about the mayonnaise Drew! If you don't... I'll blow the studio sky high!

DREW CAREY

(into an earpiece)

Is this real? Is this real? Okay. Alright. I'll just ask you again. No one needs to get hurt here. Now, let's just relax and you can give it another try. Thorp Cableand how much do you think this regular jar of Hellman's Mayonnaise is worth?

THORP CABLEAND

Hey Drew! Happy to be here. Big fan of the show! I'm gonna guess that regular jar of mayonnaise is worth \$750,000!

DREW CAREY

You just guessed that last time?

THORP CABLEAND

Yes I did Drew. Big fan of the show! \$750,000 for that jar of mayonnaise. Put it on the board!

DREW CAREY

So sorry that was a great guess Thorp, but that's not correct. We can have you try again after this commercial break!

THORP CABLEAND

FUCK! FUCK ME! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! Ask me how much that jar of mayonnaise is worth.

DREW CAREY

Okay. What do you think that this jar of mayonnaise is worth?

THORP CABLEAND

\$750,000

DREW CAREY

No.

THORP CABLEAND

Damnit!

DREW CAREY

Can anyone do anything here? This is fucking crazy.

THORP CABLEAND

I bet you probably want to know why I keep guessing \$750,000 on accident don't you Drew.

DREW CAREY

(Into an earpiece)

Stop saying deescalate like it's a buzz word.

THORP CABLEAND

I was a young boy.. A young boy... with a childhood.

The soundtrack when Jack and Rosie fall in love on Titanic begins to play.

DREW CAREY

Really Mike?

MIKE

(From the tech booth)

Just trying to de-escalate!

THORP CABLEAND

Everything is so materialistic to you Drew. Everything has a price tag on it don't it Drew? In your perfect little *Hollyworld*. Everything's nose jobs and Tik Tok. Brazilian butt waxes and expensive toasters. Well let

me tell you about the real world Drew. Where the price ain't money. It's feelings. It's my feelings.

Mom's in the kitchen. Dad's doing the New York Times crossword puzzle. There's a gentle cold breeze. Mommy mommy I want a sandwich! I want to have a sandwich with two pieces of white bread, gently toasted. A bit of crispy lettuce, a bit of savory bacon and a thick juicy heirloom tomato.

Down by two. Half a second left to go in the game. Who's hitting the three point buzzer beater? I'll tell you who. It's mayonnaise. *Helmans mayonnaise*. And if that's not worth \$750,000 to you... Mr. Hollywood? Then I don't know what is...

Ding ding ding!

DREW CAREY

Mike!

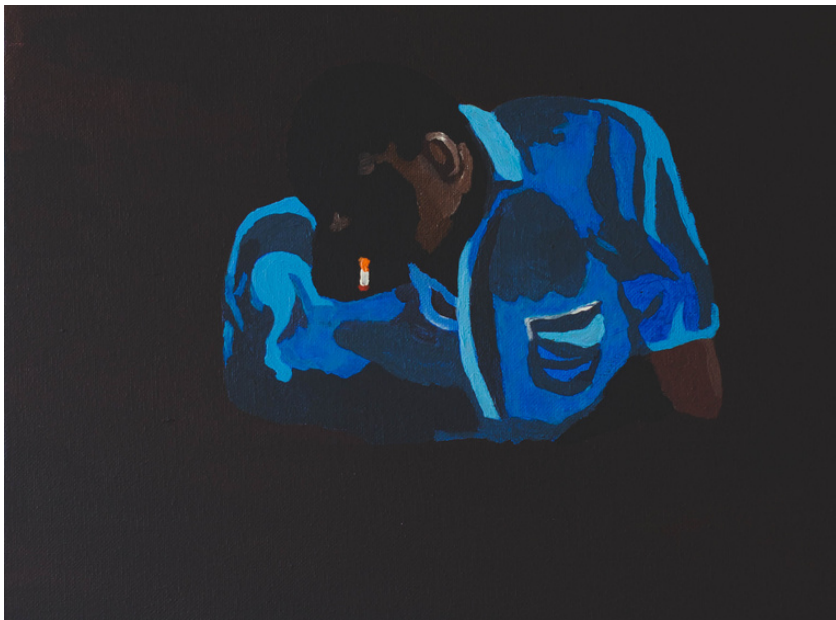
THORP CABLEAND

Yeah. I think that you see my...

Thorp Cableand trips on a stage cable and this detonates his suicide vest exploding the Price is Right studio, Drew Carey, and the jar of mayonase.

ARTWORK: JERMAINE NOLEN

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JERMAINE NOLEN IS A MULTIDISCIPLINARY CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ARTIST BASED IN CHICAGO, IL. BORN AND RAISED IN AUBURN GRESHAM, ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF CHICAGO. HIS VISUAL WORK DRAWS INSPIRATION FROM THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT OF THE 1970S, WHILE EXPLORING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST THEMES.

JERMAINE IS AN MFA CANDIDATE AT DEPAUL UNIVERSITY, WHERE HE STUDIES CREATIVE WRITING AND PUBLISHING. HE HAS EXPLORED STORYTELLING THROUGH JOURNALISM, SHORT STORIES, AND POETRY. JERMAINE IS A FORMER BREAKING NEWS REPORTER WITH THE CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, AND WAS RECENTLY A FINALIST IN THE 2022 BUTTON POETRY CHAPBOOK CONTEST.

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

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE

