

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: EDDIE PEPITONE

One of the best in the business, Eddie Pepitone (@eddiepep) has been doing standup for over 45 years. He has appeared on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, *It's Always Sunny in Paradise*, *Chappelle's Show*, *Bob's Burgers*, *Community*, *Rick and Morty (Testicle Monster #2)*, *Old School*, and the list goes on. Eddie and I spoke on the phone, where we discussed the evolution of his comedy, using anger on stage, navigating energy shifts, and more.



Hey Eddie, it's Jerry.

Hey, man. Jesus Christ. How are you? Can you hold on one second, Jerry? And a Diet Coke. Thank you! Dude. I'm so out of it after having flown from LA at 8:00 AM yesterday. I forgot about our call, but I'm ready. I'm ready.

It sounds like you're at a restaurant or something.

Hello little doggie. Oh my god. Yeah, man. I'm ready. I'm ready, Jerry. I'm ready. What's going on?

Just got off work. You know, slaving away for the corporation.

What is your work? It'd be funny if it just turns out to be an interview of you. You write the whole thing up about you: "Talking to Eddie, I just realized I need to get another life."

You know, I do all these interviews and no one ever asks about me.

Well, you see, I'm cut from a different jib. What is the company you work for? What do you do?

I basically build and manage websites.

Your day job doesn't sound as hellish as others. At least you're doing website stuff instead of working in a warehouse or whatever, you know? The only job I would take if comedy didn't come through for me is I would want to be a sniper protecting some public figure. On the roof of a building as a sniper. I would do that. I would do that because the labor isn't too intensive. Comedy is cathartic, the stage is cathartic, and I think sniping someone is cathartic, you know?

Have you given any thought to what public figure you'd want to protect?

For some reason I want to protect an ombudsman. Any

ombudsman anywhere. Just because I like that name, and I don't know if anybody knows what an ombudsman is.

Yeah, I was gonna say, what the fuck is that?

Have you never heard of that? Look it up. O-M-B-U-D-S-M-A-N. I don't know who steered me toward ombudsmen. Alright, why don't you give me some real questions.

Alright, I was watching your documentary, *The Bitter Buddha*, and at the beginning there's a quote that says, "The only things stopping me today are genetics, lack of will, income, brain chemistry and external events."

One of my best tweets ever.

My question is: which of those do you blame the most?

Good one. I'm gonna say it would be brain chemistry and external events, in a neck and neck horse race. And by external events, I mean who I was parented by, where I was born, that kind of thing. I had a fucked up upbringing, but it did make me into a comedian. People try to point that out to me, "Yeah, Eddie, you weren't loved as a child, but look, you're one of the funniest people on the planet." And I'm like, "You know, it's not a bad trade off." But it sounds whiny. It sounds whiny when I say I wasn't loved as a child. But fuck it, I say it anyway. It's true.

on the planet.” And I’m like, “You know, it’s not a bad trade off.” But it sounds whiny. It sounds whiny when I say I wasn’t loved as a child. But fuck it, I say it anyway. It’s true.

Do you feel like your childhood informed a lot of your comedy?

Yeah, man. I had to come out of this very kind of scary, dark upbringing, and my way to combat it was with humor. I started to be the “class clown” from an early age. I would say about nine or 10, I started holding court with my friends. I was just doing that organically. I was drawn to comedy at a very young age through watching Jackie Gleason on *The Honeymooners*, Tony Randall on *The Odd Couple*, and then I got into stand up: George Carlin, Richard Pryor was my favorite. I just kind of knew it early on and stuck with it. I always say to people that I’m 65 and I’m about to be launched.

Oh, like career wise, you mean?

Yeah, yeah. All it took was sticking with it for like 45 years. I have young comics coming up to me: “Hey Eddie, what do you recommend I do?” and I go, “Well, to make it, all you gotta do is be mentally ill and stick with it for about 45 years.”

How have you been able to stick with it? Don't you start having some doubts?

Yeah, I have doubts to this moment. I’m taping this special here Friday, and I’m fucking really nervous. The doubts are part of it, man. The intense anxiety, neurosis, all that stuff about performing is what separates the people who do it for a living and the people who are like, “Fuck it, I’m gonna go sell fabric,” or whatever the hell they do these days. Because it is really intense to go through all the demons that plague you in the pursuit of this. I mean, you must know that already?

Yeah, it's a nightmare. Some of the best advice I got was that the game of stand up is rigged against you, and you're either going to do it or you're not going to do it. But if you love it, you're going to do it.

I think that’s pretty good advice. I wish I would’ve heard that.

It's hard, because as a young comic you want more and you want to advance in your career, but then you look at somebody that's been doing it for 45 years, and they still have doubts and frustrations, and you're like, “Am I just signing up for a life of hell?”

Okay, I don’t want to be too negative because I am not the template for everybody. Because look at the guys who make it young, too. I kept with it because I had no choice. I always say I had no choice because it’s just in my DNA to do comedy and I couldn’t do anything else back then. But there are people who do make it relatively young and don’t have to go through the horror. But I think at some point you’re gonna come face to face with yourself and all that psychological stuff.

Did you ever come to certain points where you were thinking of quitting?

Yeah, of course. And everybody who does stand up has, many times. But it was never a realistic thing for me. Like I’d always go, “Okay, so what am I going to do?” Nothing was palatable to me. And I’m limited skill wise, you know?

In that documentary, Patton Oswalt said that you can talk very honestly about decades and decades of fear and failure. Do you actually feel like you failed for decades?

Well, you know, now I don’t. To use the word failure is a mind fuck. For me, looking back, it’s like perseverance. I don’t know if you’ve heard this phrase: within every failure is success. I never quit, so I don’t think I failed. Sure, I could say I didn’t do this thing or that thing. I always think if I were a more disciplined person and a more disciplined writer I would have gotten to a higher level, but

“TO MAKE IT, ALL YOU GOTTA DO IS BE MENTALLY ILL AND STICK WITH IT FOR ABOUT 45 YEARS.” – EDDIE PEPITONE

that's just not in the cards for me. I love to improvise on the stage. I use the stage as a catharsis for my emotions; it's always been more about self discovery than, "Oh, I'm gonna sit down and write some very witty material about cheese."

So, I take it that you do everything on stage? You're not sitting down and writing stuff?

I do do that somewhat, but it's mostly coming up with stuff on my feet or hanging out with people and making a note of it. But I have trouble sitting down at a computer and writing stuff down. To me, that's not the dynamic of standup and the live art form of standup. It's such a real thing. It's a dialogue with the audience. It's all that stuff, you know?

I'm curious about some of your early years. Looking back, how do you see your comedy having evolved since you were first starting?

Well, when I first started, I was so nervous that all I did was characters, like crazy characters. Which was basically an impersonation of my father, like my father's crazy Sicilian operatic anger, you know? And then I went from doing characters to just getting more and more honest and real about myself and where I'm at. That was the evolution.

And at what point did that shift happen for you years wise?

It was all so incremental, you know what I mean? But maybe around 10 years.

Were you experimenting with some of the anger that you're known for now?

Oh, yes. When I was younger, though, I didn't even know what I was doing. I would just get up there and I would yell. And I only had one level: a 10. And then as I evolved, I was able to modulate it, which was a boon to the audiences and my career. Because they would just be like, "What the fuck is this guy screaming about?" But now, I can scream and then come out of it and go, "Hey, thanks for coming everybody." I say things like, "I just wanna come out of this persona for a second and tell you thank you for coming."

Yeah, I love the fact that you can flip between so angry and so soft spoken on a dime. Are there any other little tricks you feel have helped make your anger more palatable for audiences?

No, except that I realized that the one thing you have to do is kind of let the audience know that you're angry at yourself. Like, you consider yourself a completely flawed



person. Then you can get angry at others. Because if you come from a high status place as a comic, I think people think, "Oh, he's an uppity fuck." But, I think I make it pretty clear that my life is absurd, and I am kind of a joke on stage, even though I go after all these different groups and people. The main thrust is that, "Man, what a fucked up life," and I think the anger is liberating to other people, especially these days when so many people are angry with just everything.

I mean, that's the other thing. I've been experimenting with getting angry on stage, but I don't wanna bum people out or be too negative or anything like that.

By the way, that is a big trap — not wanting to bum people out. You have to do whatever comes organically. Because comics are like, "Oh, I don't want to bum anyone out." They're already bummed out. I think one of the worst parts of standup is that standups just do all this bullshit, fluffy shit because they don't want to bum people out. I think people are more liberated when you're talking about reality and making that funny. It's a little tricky to make that dark stuff funny, but that's the job I think.

Well, for example, I have a bit where I get really angry about my older sister's shitty boyfriend, but sometimes people are just like, "Whoa, that's a lot."

You have to do what you think is right. If you feel like you're not disrespecting your sister, then do it, you know? My big

message to comics is that you can't let the audience dictate what you're going to do. Now, of course, the limits of that is talking about some really offensive things that aren't cool, but I think if you're smart, as a comic you know which is which. There are people who want to be like, "You shouldn't talk about that!" but unless it's a really, highly offensive thing, then I think it's their problem.

Do you have any advice for navigating a big energy shift? Say the audience is on your side, they're laughing, and then you hit 'em with something and they're like, "Oh, I don't know how to feel about this." How do you deal with something like that?

Oh, those are not easy, except to acknowledge it in the moment. Like, "Oh, did I cross a line there with you folks?" You know what I mean? And that usually makes them laugh. And it keeps you in the moment. I think one of the worst things comics do is that they don't get a laugh and it's a big energy shift, and then they don't acknowledge it. They plow ahead, and then they get in their fucking head. They have to acknowledge what the fuck happened. Like, "What you didn't like that? You motherfuckers!" I feel like audiences respect that a lot more when you are calling them out on something and addressing it, instead of ignoring it and allowing it to get in your head.

As you've gotten older, have you found it's been easier to discuss things like politics and the economy? I feel like as a young comic, people are like, "What the fuck does this guy know?"

Yeah, yeah. And I was always political by the way. So many comics are afraid to talk about politics, and I think that's because they really don't have a world view. I've always kind of had the world view. It's so insane, the military industrial complex and what is going on worldwide. I mean, dude, seriously, how old are you?

28.

Oh my god. What a bleak future you have.

I know. I'm fucked.

I mean, seriously, with all the fucking shit going on. Yeah, man. I just think the future's bleak. I actually tell audiences, "I timed my life right, folks. Between the rise of fascism and the climate breakdown, you guys are going to be fleeing things and I'll be peacefully dead."

Was stand up always the goal for you? Or was acting part of it as well?

You know, it was always stand up for me. And then I started getting work as an actor. I think the first really big thing for me was me being a plant in Conan O'Brien's

audience, where I would heckle him. I did that throughout the years, and then I got little roles on TV and film a bunch of times and that was great. I love acting. I've studied acting in New York City for years. So I was always into acting, but my big fucking dream was to be a stand up, because stand up was the most direct way to do what the fuck you want and also to say what you want to say. As an actor, unless you're doing your own screenplay, you're doing other people's visions and other people's lines. As a stand up, it's you. And I've always had something to say, or at least something to get out of my tortured soul.

I heard you say that at some point that you'd want to have a show of your own. Is that still a goal of yours?

I've been trying to. Me and Bobcat Goldthwait went around LA for a year trying to sell a show and that didn't happen. It's very difficult. Right now there's a show being developed, and we're writing it right now about me. So that's still something I aspire to, but I know how difficult that is.

Yeah, the game of Hollywood.

Oh god, I can't wait to get that fuck out of there.

I can't imagine living out there for years and years with this dream that never comes true.

Exactly. Well, that's where stand up has saved me. Because if you're an actor just waiting around to become famous, Hollywood will make you crazy. But I can get out all my shit on stage, and I travel all over the country, so I'm not there as much. But I'm thinking about moving back to New York soon, where I'm from. I've been in Hollywood for 23 years and I think I've paid my dues.

"WHAT A BLEAK FUTURE YOU HAVE." – EDDIE PEPITONE

Are you able to work out your material in LA or do you have to go on the road?

Both. But at this point, I get a lot of stage time in LA, so I can work out a lot of stuff.

I saw you had some dates already after your special in June. Is that going to be new material that you're working out or is it the same material?

No, it's a mix. I never start to work on the next hour. I just start to talk about shit. Like I may start those shows and start talking about how I lost six pounds in Chicago because of anxiety from taping a little special. I might come out screaming, "I just made my third special; I'm better than you!" It's all in the moment for me, and if stuff comes out of it, that's great.

Before we go, any last words to the people? Any pitch to come out to the special?

No, just that if you don't come, you're a piece of shit in my eyes.

Oh, I wanted to follow up on our Laugh Factory show tomorrow. Are you gonna be free to do a set? It starts at 7:00.

I just realized I'm not going to be able to. And dude, you're going to love the reason. Are you ready for this? I – and this is the truth, you can put this in the article – I am such a huge hockey fan. I'm such a huge Rangers fan. I don't know if you know anything about the Stanley Cup Playoffs, but they are in full tilt and it's the conference finals and they're playing tomorrow night starting at 7:00. So I'm gonna just be in my hotel room watching.

Goddamnit. That's so funny.

Sorry about that.

No, it's all good. I hope they lose and you regret your decision.

Bite your tongue.

**CATCH EDDIE'S SPECIAL RECORDING FRIDAY, MAY 31
AT 7:15PM AND 9:45PM AT LINCOLN HALL (SCHUBA'S)!**



Comedians Recognizing Comedians

SEAN NITSCHMAN

"Sean is one of the most supportive people in the scene. Always there for a meaningful conversation and when his time comes to go up on stage he makes the most of it with solid premises. He needs more recognition for all that he brings to the stage."

SAM SELBY

"Sam is a sharp and crisp writer with a unique point of view. She's a great writer and performer and she is a saint for putting up with everyone as one of the producer of Schubas Open Mic every week where she also shines as a host."

JOSH CAHN

"Josh knows every corner of this industry. He's not just a comic, but an encyclopedic resource who's willing to lend a hand to performers of all levels. Book him on your show AND to give you advice on your self-tapes! He also wears incredible shirts."

CHRISTI TURNER

"Christi has improved a ton in the past year and is always working on something new. Her show, Clever Comedy, is one of my absolute favorite rooms. She's created a space that's fun and supportive, and is constantly putting up new faces that deserve opportunities. Book her!"

REY TANG

"Rey has not only been hosting a really awesome and inclusive mic on Tuesdays at Pizzeria Serio, but has also seamlessly blended the worlds of energy, entertainment, and comedic snap. Why so many of us forget that we get on that stage to entertain is beyond me but Rey brings it with a masterful skill. The joy Rey brings to the room is palpable, and it sucks the audience in every time. They have amassed their amazing room and space as evidence of their skill. Go check it out with the army of regulars on Tuesdays and get them on your show to bring the fun!"

BENNETT BROWN

"Incredible, underrated writer that's surprisingly overlooked."

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

ANGIE MCMAHON

"She is working with ComedyPlex to create more spaces for woman in comedy. She started a woman's mic, a woman only intro to stand up class (almost sold out. Starts Tuesday) and she is in talks about creating a woman's comedy festival."

KB MARION

"Hands down, the best comedian working in the suburbs right now. Bold and hilarious onstage. All you want from a performer."

BRIGID BRODERICK

"I learn so much from Brigid's standup. If it weren't for her, I'd have no idea horses are lesbians, a fact that has forever changed my life. Brigid makes performing look easy. So much swag. It's honestly unfair she's doing standup."

MO BURNS

"Mo Burns is a damn hero. He's a strong joke writer with hysterical observations as well as playful absurdism sprinkled into his act. If you love comedy you love Mo."

"Mo Burns is special and everyone knows it. Mo, does regularly what few comedians (including myself) has been able to do, which is work in both improv and stand up while excelling at both. He is a killer, with a sharp mind, honest perspective and a frenetic stage presence. He's deeply affable, and it's such a joy to see him perform no matter the context. Mo is next up."

**DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE THAT DESERVES
MORE STAGE TIME?**

**FILL OUT THE FORM IN OUR BIO!
@COMEDYGAZELLE**

SHOW SPOTLIGHT: MY BEST FRIEND IS BLACK

My Best Friend is Black (@mybestfriendisblackshow) is an all-Black variety show focused on providing a platform for Black comedic performers. I sat down with one of the founding cast members, Mike Atcherson (@ogmikeatch), to discuss the show, their upcoming Juneteenth and Pride shows, advice for producers, and more!

You were named Best Comedy Show by the Chicago Reader. What do you think it is that makes your show so unique that all these people have latched onto it?

I guess what makes our show so special is that it's not just a black show, even though that's in the title. You will see a variety of different kinds of comedy, but also types of black people: people from the South Side, West Side, North Side, suburbs, from different countries. And we really work hard to make it a safe space, so that all people feel included. You don't have to be black to enjoy the show. We also really focus on the marginalized groups within the black community. In March, we had our woman's show, and in June, we're having our annual pride month show, along with our Juneteenth show. So it's really a good place to see stuff you won't see at a typical comedy show.

A lot of shows are just standup, but you guys are doing sketch, improv, and games too, right? Can you talk about the other components of it?

Yeah, when we first started the show, we didn't want to do a regular standup show. I was coming from another variety show called After Dark, and I liked the variety aspect because I could exercise multiple comedy muscles. I also like the element of not knowing what you're about to see next. When you watch stand ups back-to-back-to-back, after a while it will get a little draining. And they'll probably hit the same topics or premises, but with a variety show you're like, "Okay, now my brain can switch along with the show and I can see what they got up their sleeve next."

And what got this all started? What made you want to start the show?

What happened was me and Marcus Banks went to this popular open mic, and they kept bumping us, kept bumping us, to the point we didn't go up. One



dude who was also getting bumped tried to say something, and the host started snapping on his ass. They were about to fight, to the point where he got kicked out of the place. Then after the dude got kicked out, the host looked at us like, "What? What y'all finna do?" And to that, we was like, "Oh, this shit is toxic." And it's a shame that it's toxic because it's a mic where it's like all black folks, and as a black comic, especially from the North Side, you want to try your shit out and make sure it works in front of black people. It's kind of discouraging for a place like that to not give you the opportunity. So we were like, "Damn, man, I wish we had a space where we can get different types of people to feel comfortable being who they are and perform for a great, solid, black crowd."

I feel like that's a catalyst for a lot of great shows, like CYSK, where you're denied some opportunity, but instead of complaining about it, you create your own space and stage time.

Right, exactly. And that's the way it should be. If you don't get the stage time you want to, start your own show. I tell people all the time that that's the quickest way to get more stage time.

You're coming up on three years running. How do you think the show's evolved over time?

It was hard trying to implement the variety aspect of it. At first, we were strictly just stand up, even though we had a vision of making a variety show. We slowly started

playing games, and then we added Daryn, and that's when we really started kicking with the sketch and improv and music. Also, spreading word about the show has been amazing. It's been crazy how many people would just stop me on the street: "Hey, I remember you. You played so and so in this sketch," or "Hey, My Best Friend is Black, right?" So that's really cool.

Are the same people performing from show to show, or do you bring in guests and new performers?

Yeah, so we're not only a show, but also a cast/collective. So the cast right now is me, Marcus Banks, Chloe Mikala, Arlieta Hall and Daryn Robinson. And we had our former members, Justin Walker and Rho Hudson. So the way it works, maybe half of us would do stand up while the other half will be a part of the sketch or improv or maybe host a game and do music. We'll also bring on guest comics, typically three to four black comics, and we try to make them different. We make sure we have enough men, enough women, non-binary, LGBTQA. And we definitely book headliners too, like bigger names who don't come up to the North Side as much. It's heavy on stand up, but we're really trying to book more sketch and improv people. We're also trying to book solo acts, like people who do solo characters. We booked someone who did musical comedy not too long ago. We're really trying to dive into the comedy scene and see what different types of black comedy we can bring to our show.

Do you guys have submissions for people who are interested in joining the cast or doing a show?

In terms of the cast, we're currently booked up, but in terms of submitting to do the show, we do take submissions. We will look at your shit; I promise you. We love booking new people. We really look heavy on black women, because women in general don't get booked enough, and when it comes to black women comics, there really aren't a lot. But yeah, we always take submissions, and we have a link on our IG page.

What kind of advice would you give to somebody that's looking to start their own show or bring an idea of theirs to life?

The first thing I would say is to make sure you have a team. I can't stress this enough: you cannot produce as one person alone. Cause there's so many things you got to take care of, like tech, checking people in,

making sure the comics are there, so many things. Another thing is to make sure you're producing with people that have their business side down. It's cool to produce with your friends and all that, but some friends aren't good at producing shows. There are a lot of good comics out there that just don't know how to produce - see, you're laughing cause you know.

Right, right.

You're like, "Man, you're a killer, but you're trash behind the scenes." So, make sure they're on top of things. We always check on each other; accountability and discipline really helps us out in the long run. Another tip is to find a venue that really works with you. The venue is so important. I'm so grateful we have the Lodge. I've been with them almost since day one, so I have a good rapport with the staff. And I always say, stick to your vision, man. It's always good to have a mission statement, as corny as that sounds. When things get all confusing and you don't know what direction to go, or are arguing about stuff, you go back to the mission statement. Our mission statement is to provide a stage for black comedic performers to show their talent. And when we look at that, we're like, "Alright, we got it. Let's see who we can book now." Oh, and one last thing: pay performers on time. If people gotta hunt you down, it's gonna make the show look bad.

Any parting words for the people?

Yes! Please come out to both shows in June. The Juneteenth show is on Juneteenth. It's going to be a lot of special surprises and treats and games for y'all. It's going to be a fun show. And come out to the Pride show at the end of June. That rocks every year. Chloe Mikala is gonna be hosting it, she's leading the ship, and my straight ass is gonna be in the back working tech. And if you can't make it to those shows, y'all can come support the show in general. When I say we really work hard to put on a real good show, we really work hard, and we love to see y'all enjoy it even more.

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

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