

THE COMEDY GAZELLE

THE LATEST IN CHICAGO COMEDY

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:

BRIAN MORTON



ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I first moved to Chicago, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey supercharge herself with a firm slap of the puss.

Why haven't I heard of her before?

It's a question I come back to often, and a major problem here. The city's bursting with household-name-level talent, but unless you're in the midst of it, it's easy to miss.

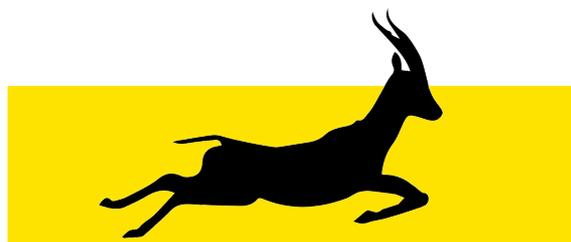
That's why I'm starting The Comedy Gazelle — to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to showcase this city's unrivaled talent. To keep everyone up-to-date on the scene, and to do it in a fun way. And not just in a one-off article, but all the time.

Each issue will include an exclusive interview, as well as whatever else I can pull together.

Hope you enjoy.

— Jerry

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INTERVIEW: BRIAN MORTON

Brian Morton is the GM of Zanies Old Town, and one of the biggest comedy fans you'll ever meet. We talked about his taste in comedy, Zanies' upcoming SXSW showcase, the business side of comedy, and more.

You're one of the biggest comedy nerds I know. How have your tastes changed over time as you've been exposed to more and more comedy?

You kinda see tricks easier. I see things that would've impressed me when I was first going to watch shows. A lot of different crowd work things that people do that are consistent, you're like, "Okay, I see what they do." Another thing that's changed for me is when I see — I watched a live stream show last night that Zako Ryan was on, and he had a bit about women that read biographies. He's like, "Why are you so nosy?" That's a joke that's been in the air that nobody's grabbed before. That kinda stuff I look for. It's like a different take on something that I've never heard that's just been there for the taking. I love that aspect of it, where you kinda hear something you haven't heard before. That makes me perk up. A lot of times too if I hear a newer comic that has one good joke — you could have 10 minutes of bullshit and then in that 10 minutes just one fuckin' joke that I'm like, "Oh, if they could figure this out, that's their lane."

What do you mean by that? Like a one liner, or an idea within a bit?

Anything. I just told you the biography thing. That's not like a joke, he has it in a joke structure, but the idea is like, "Oh, that's really fucking funny." I haven't heard anybody give their take on that. That's kinda what I look for. Something that's different than other people and it's unique, funny — something that just gives you a different train of thought.

So originality in ideas?

Yeah, but it could also be about a topic that 9,000 people could talk about. If you have a funny Uber joke that's just different than everybody else's Uber joke, I think that's awesome. It's harder to mine in something that's been mined before. But if you can find that gold in it, then that's great.

Have you seen anything else that really grabbed you?

Becky Robinson was here last year. I'm not a huge character person, but she did all her sets in a character. And I think it was so fucking hard. She did 45 minutes each night in a character. She has a few different



Brian and Craig Robinson

characters that she does. This specific one was this Olympic skier from the 80s. And her whole set was based around that, and I think that's kind of interesting. It's something you don't see so much anymore in stand-up. It used to be a lot more character based, but stand-up got very personal over the last 15 years. There's been less goofiness and more "tell your story," you know?

How do you think comedy's gonna evolve in the next 15 years?

I feel like absurdist comedy has to make a return. I just think that it doesn't exist right now. Everyone's kind of just talking about themselves but nobody's out there just being ridiculous. I think that will probably come around again.

Like a Steve Martin?

That's definitely a version of it, for sure. Ian Abramson was here and he did Conan once; he brought a dog shock collar and wore it and he gave the shocker to an audience member. Anytime he told a bad joke, he asked the audience to shock him. See, you just laughed at the premise, right? That's like an escape all. He could tell any joke and if it works, great, you get a laugh, and if it doesn't, great, you get a laugh. It's

like a foolproof system to do a late night set. I remember Steven Castillo did a show here and halfway through his set he was fighting ninjas. And it was just like things you don't see in normal stand-up.

Yeah, that dude's insane.

I look at stuff like that. There's a lane of absurdist comedy that doesn't really exist too much right now because everybody's very personal and the truth and all that. So I think eventually people are going to get very tired of the realness and just want some out there crazy shit.

I could see that.

You gotta think, when was Steve Martin getting popular? Vietnam war era. It was just a very, very serious time. I was talking to Katie [Regan] the other day and she was saying that after any sort of pandemic or great depression, anything like that, there's always an art renaissance. So that's what we're going to go into now. People are gonna want art.

Well, I feel like a lot of people are anticipating that it's going to be more difficult to get stage time. Do you think that's going to be the case?

Yeah, definitely. Cause there will be less stages and I think stages will continue to close. It depends where you are, too. If you go to Austin right now, I saw Cap City Comedy Club is opening back up and The Creek & The Cave is moving from New York to Austin, and I know Joe Rogan's opening a comedy club there. So you went from having one comedy club to now you're gonna have three.

What kind of advice would you give to a newer comic that can't get on stage at a club? How do you develop material as someone who's just starting out?

I think you just have to do it. It all depends on how bad you really want it. What do you want out of comedy is a huge question a lot of people don't really ask themselves. And that might evolve over time too, so I think it's good to constantly check back in with yourself: "What do I actually want out of this?" Nothing's fair, but you will get what you put into it. The hard work that you put in will pay off, but you have to keep doing it, and consistency is

key. Get up anywhere you can, take any gig you can, cause no matter what, you're gonna learn from it. Just constantly improve your craft. The more tools in your belt, the better off you'll be. It's not something that happens in one, two, five, or 10 years. If you wanna be here and you wanna do it, you'll do it forever. And you have to consistently keep doing it.

Can you talk a little a bit about the SXSW showcase that Zanies is doing?

Yeah, I'm pretty fucking excited about it. SXSW was looking for a comedy club in Chicago. The guy who runs it, his name's Charlie, he had a good rapport with Liza Treyger, so Liza set him up with me, we started talking, he was like, "Who do you think is good in Chicago?" I gave him a list of like 30 comedians and he went through, watched everybody and picked out five that he liked. So now on the 27th at 7pm at Rosemont, we're gonna have a live filmed show for SXSW. SXSW is one of the biggest music, movie and comedy festivals in the United States. It's in Austin, Texas every year, it's usually 10 days long. This year, they're doing it virtually and we're one of six comedy clubs that's gonna be run. We're filming it and producing it ourselves, and just showcasing local Chicago comedians. I'm super pumped for it.

That's awesome.

I contacted James Webb right away and I was like, "Hey, is this something you're interested in? I don't know any money, any details." He was like,

IT'S NOT SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS IN ONE, TWO, FIVE, OR 10 YEARS. IF YOU WANNA BE HERE AND YOU WANNA DO IT, YOU'LL DO IT FOREVER.

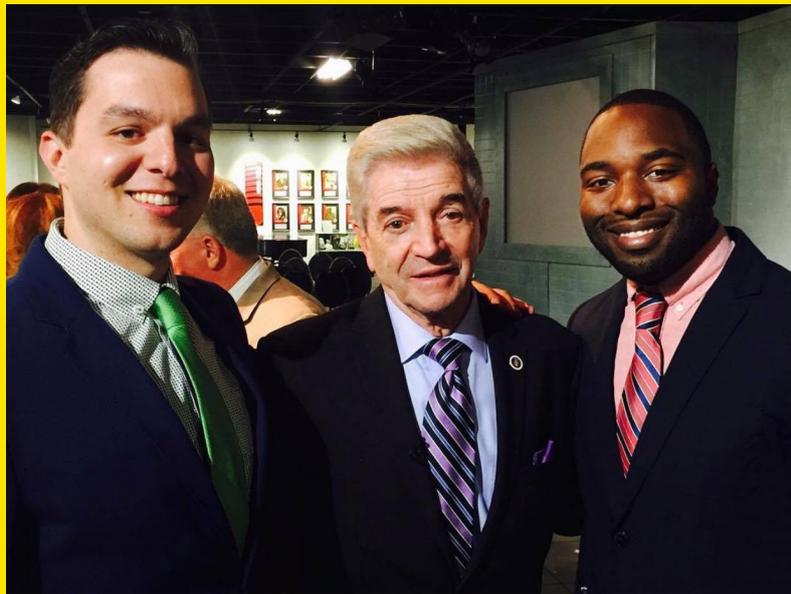
“Yeah, absolutely.” I just think it’s something very, very cool. I think a lot of people know SXSW, it gets a lot of eyes on it. If you go look at the speakers and the performers this year, the list is insane [Stacey Abrams, Bill Hader, Steve Aoki, James Cameron, Melinda Gates, 50 Cent, Method Man, etc.].

That’s a big deal, dude. Congrats.

It’s a huge deal. I don’t know if I’ll ever get to do anything like it again. With the pandemic, it’s been hard to get good things in comedy, but this is one of the good things. I get to showcase Chicago comics, which is like my passion. The other huge part about this is I don’t know who’s gonna watch this. There might be some big people that get to watch this that are like, “Man, I really like that person’s style. Let me hire them for this, let me hire them for that.”

With Bert retiring are you going to be taking over any additional responsibility at Zanies?

Yeah, I’m helping book now a bit, which is nice. I haven’t really told anybody that, so this will kinda be the first time that’s talked about. Chris Lange is the main booker, but she’s open to taking the people I think would do well, or would draw. I’m trying to change a little bit of what this club is. I wanna keep it always to the level of what Zanies is, but add in some new flavor, some new blood, you know.



Brian, Tom Dreesen and Curtis Shaw Flagg

One thing that makes Zanies so unique is that you guys bring in all these national headliners. What would you say separates a Chicago headliner from one of those national headliners?

Usually it’s just draw. They’ll usually bring their own fans. Sometimes the local headliners have that and I try to find those people and put them up. But I don’t necessarily think anything level-wise separates people. There are definitely some amazing comedians that live in Chicago that haven’t moved to a coast that are headliners. You could put Pat McGann and Kevin Bozeman and – there’s just so many people you could put against anybody pound for pound that are gonna be heavy hitters.

Do you think there's anything Chicago comics can do to increase their draw? How do you take that next step?

Everybody has the internet. If you’re not spending time creating things on the internet –

during the pandemic, that's all everybody had. So you saw these people who just used the internet and increased their following. I think you kind of need to figure out your lane and what it is, and use the internet.

What are some qualities you look for when working with someone?

I like people who are easy to work with. Being able to go with the flow, no matter what that means. It's a live show, so sometimes everything won't go right. I think just being nice, that's a huge part of it. Sometimes comics aren't approachable people, I totally get that. But be nice. Also, don't make decisions without running shit by the club. Sometimes I've had comics that are the headliner, they'll just decide "I'm putting this person on the show" and not say anything.

Do you have any favorite experiences at Zanies so far?

I got to work with Tony Woods. He's a fucking legend. I got to watch him work, that was really cool for me. He just did a one-nighter. I expected to work with the Tim Dillons and the Dan Soders and the Big Jay Oakersons and stuff like that. But Tony's just someone I didn't think of that I actually got to work with, so that was cool. I think getting some of the local comics in here that I think are good has been really cool for me. I got to have Correy Boyd-Bell headline. She was never working Zanies and she got to headline. I've got Abi Sanchez headlining next month for the first time for a weekend. I love having people like that.



So about the Chicago scene: why do you think a comic should come to Chicago?

I have a totally different answer post-pandemic than I did pre-pandemic. Pre-pandemic it was, to me, the best city for comedy because there's a lot of stage time, especially when you're a newer comic. You can get up at a major club in front of a real audience pretty quickly into your career. You're not gonna get that like you can here. I also think that there are so many like-minded people here that you will create some amazing bonds that you won't get in a lot of places. And there are so many people here that do comedy, whether it's improv or stand-up, so you get to experience that together. It's different than a lot of other scenes. People in other scenes will say, "I wish I had the confidence of a Chicago comic." I hear that quite a bit. And I think it's just because you do get a lot of different spots here. There are so many open mics, showcase shows. You're going up all the time. You don't have to pay to do it. If you go to LA, good luck. You might do two shows a week, versus here you're doing two shows a night. And then post-pandemic, I don't have an answer for that. Are you better off coming here right now? I don't know. But I think that in Chicago, you'll always be around creative people.



Is there anything you'd change about the scene if you could?

I always think I wish more industry was here, but that might change the scene itself. I do think industry is always a good thing and I'd love that aspect of it. But it might stop people from growing a little bit. I think it's still a necessity to go to a coast, but I think it's really good to get good here. Get good enough here where you're not jaded, though. A lot of times people get good then get jaded because they stop progressing. It's like, once you feel you're stagnant and not progressing, move. Don't move somewhere without a plan, but you need to always challenge yourself. I see a lot of comics become jaded, they don't wanna go for it anymore because they've reached whatever the pinnacle is here and it's scary as fuck for them to go start somewhere else. But you're not really starting somewhere else because you already have all your tools.

I know you're big on the business side of comedy. Why do you think that's so important for comics to learn?

I think a lot of people ignore the business side of it and then they get fucked in the ass for 12 years and they're like, "Why am I getting fucked in the ass?" It's like dude, you're not paying attention to the business side of it. And the business side doesn't just mean Comedy Central or HBO, it could be your own personal business. Go look up how much Tim Dillon makes on Patreon. He doesn't have a TV show, everything that he's gotten hasn't come his way. Yeah he's on Rogan now, but he built himself up to get there. 93K a month, just from his Patreon. There's things like this that are out there that you can build yourself. Study the business, because at the end of the day, you don't want a fucking job. Your goal is to live off of comedy, whatever that means. There's so many different lanes in comedy that people get caught up in the idea of "Okay, I'm a host, I'm a feature, I'm a headliner. I'm a headliner, then I'm a national headliner." That's their idea, but it doesn't work like that. There's all these different ways to make money. For some reason comics are like, "The art, the art, the art." I'm all about the art, but you need to be able to support yourself to do this art. You don't wanna be making shit on Etsy when you're 55. You wanna fund your actual career using your career. The business side is everything. Get great at your craft, but understand there are so many lanes where you can make money.

What do you think people can do if they're not as strong in the business aspect or don't have that mindset?

I think a lot of it is just look at what people do that you like. Find whoever it is that you like as a comic and study everything that they did. If you're a fan of Big Jay Oakerson, figure out what he did. He has four podcasts and a radio show. That's how he makes a lot of his money. Find somebody that you like and study their business side of it. Look at everybody. Read every book you can on comedy, the biographies, learn the pitfalls, read agents' books. You're getting into entertainment, you're getting into the industry, so learn it. You're going to be better off. You have to learn and I think a lot of people just skip that side.

Any books you'd recommend?

Figure out a biography of a comedian you like. Sebastian Maniscalco talked about one thing with Pat McGann. Pat wrote him a personal thank you letter. That's what endeared him to Pat and brought him on the road. Now in any other life would you think to do that? Probably not. But now that you read it in the book, that's in the back of your mind, so that might help you. You might get a gig just off writing a thank you letter.

I think that's really interesting. A thank you letter, people might not even consider that "the business side of comedy."

That was one thing that changed when I came to Zanies. I started getting thank you

letters from comedians and gifts and things like that. And of course I'm gonna remember it. And I'm not asking for gifts, it's just something that has happened. And I'm like that's really sweet. The idea that you took your time out and you got me something personalized that you know I'm going to enjoy, that's great. I think that part is important.

People are gonna read this and you're gonna start getting a million fucking gifts.

Yeah well, thank you. But I think the business side is huge. It's just about being personable. Treat everybody respectfully. I always say this, this is an old saying, but the toes you step on today might be connected to the ass you have to kiss tomorrow. Just be careful, man. I was a door guy, and now I'm running a club. There were a lot of people who were dickheads to me when I was a door guy and I don't forget that.

Right. I've had that too.

Yeah, you see what I'm saying. You never know who is who. And I think another thing with the business thing is just be inquisitive. Talk to other comics. I think a lot of times comics don't like to discuss pay, but that's a big thing in comedy. You should understand what your worth is, so then you know how much to ask for and what you can get from this and that. To talk about music really quick, ODB did a song with Mariah Carey and the big thing was that he got paid for his verse and they wanted him in the video. Before, everybody was shooting the video for free, because to be in the video you're gonna get more spins on your record. But ODB was like, "You gotta pay me \$15,000 a day to be in the video." And they were like, "Well, nobody's ever asked for that." And he was like, "Well, if you want me to be in the video that's what it's gotta be." Then other people started doing that after. They didn't even know you could do that. Obviously people like to keep it close to their chest and shit, but maybe think about that.

Think about what is possible.



BONUS: BRIAN MORTON'S TOP 10 UP-AND-COMING CHICAGO COMICS

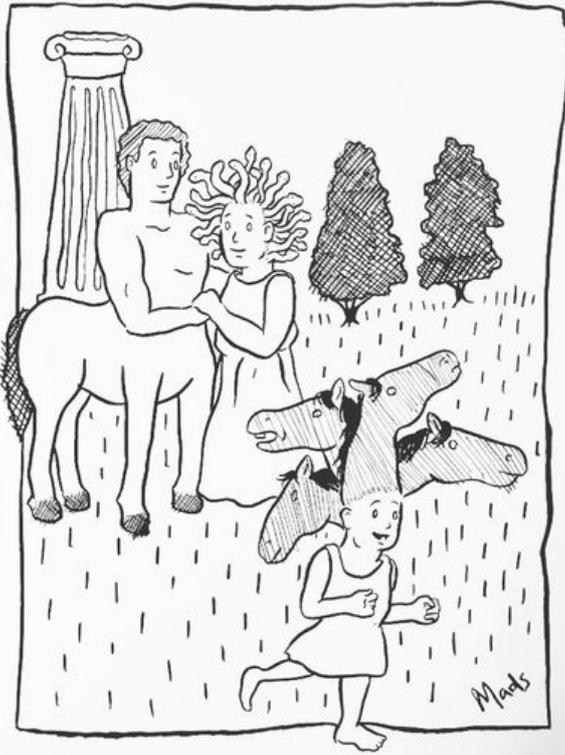
- 1. MARCUS BANKS**
- 2. ANTONIO KAREEM**
- 3. LEE SCHULDER**
- 4. JAMIE SHRINER**
- 5. BECKETT KENNY**
- 6. VICTORIA VINCENT**
- 7. MIKE FOUNTAIN**
- 8. TOM RYAN**
- 9. TINY THICKEMZ**
- 10. MATT BROWN**

ARTWORK

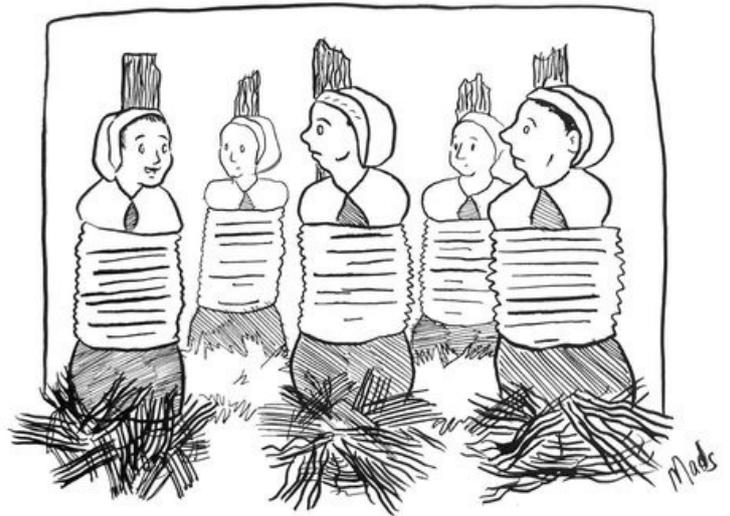
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VERY INSULAR AND TOXIC."



MADS HORWATH IS A CARTOONIST FOR THE NEW YORKER AND CHICAGO READER. ORIGINALLY COMING TO CHICAGO TO PURSUE A PERFORMANCE COMEDY CAREER, MADS EVENTUALLY REALIZED THAT THEY WERE BEST SUITED TO APPLY THEIR FINE ARTS EXPERIENCE TO HUMOR.  @MADELINEHORWATH



"Now that you are a woman, I want you to have this sweater that was given to me by my mom, who was always cold. It was given to her by her mom, who was always cold. She got it from her mom, who never knew warmth in her life."



"Wait, so everyone here is left handed?"

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BOOK REVIEW: BORN STANDING UP

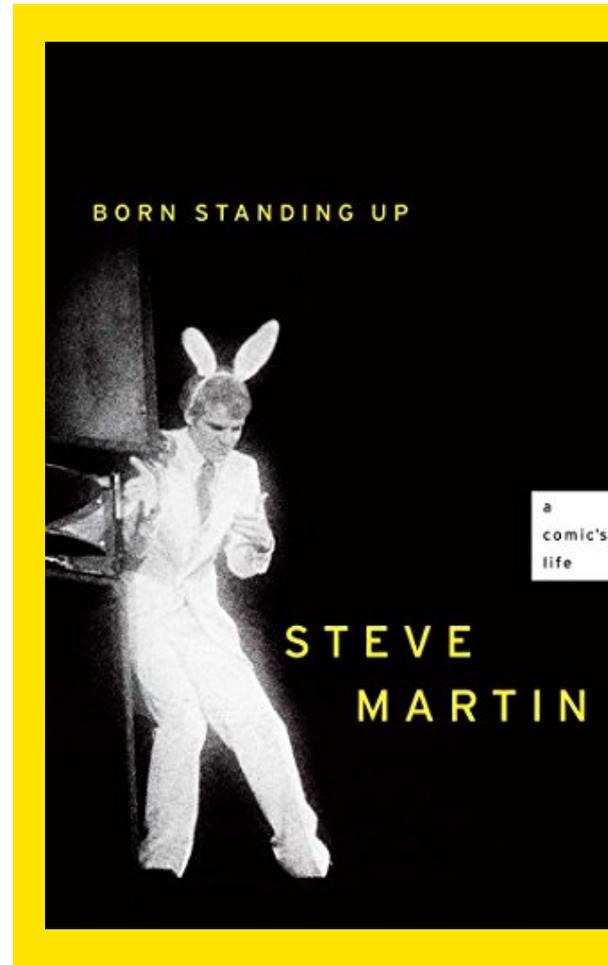
By Keay Crandall (@keaycrandall)

In *Born Standing Up*, Steve Martin recalls his comedy career and how he made it big. He has an excellent memory for someone who last did standup in 1981. I think this book was really an opportunity to reach out to all of his old girlfriends and relive his conquests.

I enjoyed reading about Steve's goofy past as a magician and working various jobs at Disney and Knott's Berry Farm, which I always thought was one word: Notsberryfarm. And I was relieved to find out it was once a berry farm.

Steve's story epitomizes the comedian's journey: obsession, progress, and more fame than one person can handle. Modern day comedian mythology. Steve walked away from what he had worked so hard for and, hell, he is still famous. Which leads me to believe that in "walking away" from his comedy career he was just saying yes to all the opportunities that weren't doing bits on stage.

3/5 Gazelles



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