

# 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: REENA CALM

*A nationally touring headliner living out of a converted minivan, Reena Calm (@reenacalm) is the only full-time female road comic in the country. Fascinated by her "drive," I sat down with the pun extraordinaire to discuss the reality of the road, advice for getting out there, sexual harassment clowns, and more.*

## What made you want to go on the road full time and actually do this?

Honestly, all of this is wild to me that it's happening. When I was younger I never even wanted to do stand up comedy, let alone what it's become for me. I've always loved the idea of traveling and romanticized the idea of a road trip. It feels like a calling, cause it doesn't feel like a decision I made. It very much feels like it just happened. There's a lot of highlights, but it's a lot of work. I did start out going to open mics and whatever I could get, just to introduce myself, get my foot in the door, and meet new people in new places. But when I really started being on the road and going on tour and stuff like that? It just happened.

## You told me you just had to do another interview. Is that a big component of the road, having to market all these shows?

I feel like the pressure for that has definitely increased because I'm asking to put myself into bigger paychecks, bigger rooms. I'm trying really hard to keep growing. I've built myself into this weird position in comedy. I'm still delighted to feature for anyone awesome, but I've also started headlining some rooms, so I'm in this weird in between place. I'm getting booked as a headliner at some venues big names do, but I don't really think of myself as a big name at all.

## You're doing it. You've got your own audience and everything.

We're humble, but we're mighty. I love being on the road. Some of the best shows you do are in places you've maybe never even heard of. I love that. But I have a lot of mixed emotions about doing this now. I feel like in 2019, when I left Chicago, it was this big bold dream and adventure, then COVID turned it into a situation. A lot's changed for me behind the scenes.



PHOTO BY NICK HOLMBY (@DUDEIDK)

## How was that, being on the road during the pandemic?

There was no comedy happening. It was a nightmare. I lost all my income. I couldn't get unemployment at all. Because I had earned income in so many states, I didn't qualify for benefits from anywhere. So, I truly was surviving on charity. I was at this house in St Louis for four months and ended up getting food stamps at this address, which I've never had before then. Then my car broke down and my engine died. It's hard for me to go there, to think about how much help I got from people, because I'm a very independent person. It's changed for me a lot.

## You're still doing it, so you must enjoy it, right?

That's two different things for me, how I've had to compartmentalize it. I do enjoy parts of it. I love traveling, but I'm really over moving around all the time. Packing I hate. Driving as much as I have has given me health problems. I literally need to stop doing this. I need a doctor for my legs; I need a specialist.

**It's gotten that bad?**

Yeah, during 2020 I had Medicaid for a minute, so I got some medications prescribed for that. Getting prescriptions filled on the road is a nightmare. There's a lot of reasons the charm of being on the road has worn off, but getting to perform is so different. That's something I really worked to keep sacred, in that no matter what I'm going through off stage, I have a chance to show people a good time and have a good time myself. I don't ever want to ruin that by being panicked about rushing to a show, or whatever happened that day. It's more than a show; this is these peoples' night out. It's all of our time, not just how much time I'm doing.

**I think that's a great mentality to have.**

I think the time I think about that the least is when I pop into [legendary Chicago open mic] Three Dead Moose to do a spot. "Oh, you guys don't even know who I am? Well, I'll take 15 minutes. Thanks. Oh, Joe, you're ready to go home? Hold on, I have one more thing!"

**That compartmentalizing you were talking about: setting aside your day and delivering your jokes even if you're feeling like shit. Did you always think that way?**

I think that's one thing the pandemic did help in a way. First of all, I come from a long line of deep trauma. So something about everyone having a hard time helped me to understand my role better in this whole thing, especially coming back on stage when people were rusty or haven't performed in a while. It's like, "Bitch nobody cares how you feel." They're coming out to be shown a good time and all you need to have up there is the reassuring comfort of, "Yeah, I wanna show you a good time." I had to give so many people pep talks before their sets backstage. At the end of the day, if you need a pep talk to get up there, you're starting from a deficit. It's your job to make people feel good.

**Has anything else changed for you comedy wise since going on the road? Is there anything you've learned that you wouldn't have gotten in Chicago?**

I feel like I'm not a crowd work comic, but I have very good instincts for being able to read the room and keep it in the moment. That's something I used to really admire, especially watching Marty DeRosa. He's got this incredibly skillful way of making his planned material seem spontaneous, conversational, and in the moment. He's incredible at crowd work, but even when he's doing prepared material, he makes it feel like it's for them, for the crowd: "Oh you guys made me think of this." He has

really good lead in questions that keep the crowd from being too chatty and derailing the show, but let the audience feel like it's about them. I mention Marty because I feel like that's something I learned specifically watching him do, but I feel like that's something I can claim for myself now: crowd control. Keeping the audience focused on where I'm taking them, but that we're all on this journey together.

**I love that.**

Also, one of the things I've been able to leave behind is the idea that my comedy is gonna make everybody laugh or that it's gonna be for everyone. I'd rather lean into the people that like what I'm doing than try to please in every city or every state. When I went on the road in 2016, there was politically so much BS you had to talk about politics back then. I felt like, "If I can make people in the same room laugh at the same thing, I'm healing the world." Now I just want to have fun. Let the Monster Energy crowd have their comics. They can go see Jim Breuer and I'll have my crowd. Probably hand in hand, I have so much more gratitude for the fact that I'm still standing and still doing this, and for how many people have helped me make this a reality. In Chicago, I felt like I got really burned out trying to produce as part of a group and work with other people. I decided to put that energy into producing myself and I don't regret that at all; I'm running myself like a business now. One thing that's different is I used to share a lot of the bad stuff and the bad days online. I still like to talk about mental health, but now that I'm this business, I can't be posting online, "Oh my brain doesn't really work so well today," cause I still need people to hire me. Another thing that's different is I can reserve my energy for the audience and I don't give a fuck about the local comedy scene drama in these cities. There's so much petty bullshit. It's usually white people,

so calling it white noise is appropriate. No matter what city you go to, people think, "Oh my god, so and so said this about me!" Nobody cares. Everybody's thinking about themselves.

### **Do you have any advice for people who want to get out of their scene and onto the road?**

If you want to do this, yes, have fun. If you're doing a one-nighter, sure, go get drunk in Wisconsin. But it's not going to feel good to be out partying when you have to drive seven hours the next day. The burnout comes a lot faster when you're not being hypervigilant about your health. There's a lot of life stuff I'd consider if you're actually going to get out on the road. Right now, I'm like a prize fighter at this, where I have to keep myself in top condition. I can't get sick. Where am I gonna get sick? All that stuff that goes into being mentally prepared for this. You have to be really good about your self-care. I feel like I've maintained a strong sense of stability, just on my two legs and presenting my best self to people. I'd say there isn't a short cut. It's really approachable and fun to leave town and try your material in new places, and you get that real fun treat of knowing they haven't heard any of your jokes yet, so you get to show off your polished stuff. But I didn't get to the place I am with this until I did a few laps getting myself out there as an unknown person and building a little bit of a name for myself.

### **As an unknown person, were you just submitting to different clubs? Looking up random venues?**

I started just doing little loops outside the city and back. A few shows in Rockford and Indiana. The loops I was making just kept getting a little bigger, and that's due to the fact that you meet one person in South Bend, Indiana, and maybe they know somebody in Indianapolis. I still don't consider myself good at networking, but there's a natural amount of that that happens when you're out doing this stuff. It's like leapfrog: meeting this guy got me to this guy. But my first trips out of town were definitely not lucrative. I was selling horse pussy buttons to make gas money from state to state. I left Chicago with like \$30 in my bank account. In 2016, I left on the road for a 17-day tour with literally \$30 to my name, and honestly, I don't know if I would have made it back if I didn't find \$60 in the middle of Illinois on the ground. The merch has saved my life for sure; you have to have something. I just left Wisconsin; shit got a little wild and I literally left with \$9 in my checking account and 30 cents in my savings. I'm doing fine, but that trust fall where you've just spent all your money on merch like, "Okay, people will support this. This is going to work!" The first two tours I set up



**PHOTO BY MARTY SHUTTER (@SHUTTERMARTY)**

were not even like, "Oh yeah, I'm gonna go on tour." I had to get to Texas for a family issue and I had to get to Massachusetts for a family issue, so I tried to set stuff up on the way to make it make sense. On the way down to Texas, I was doing 10 minutes closing out the open mic in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, or whatever. Then on the way back to Chicago, it was all headlining sets. I did my first 45 in Springfield, Missouri. I didn't know that was the plan. I was like, "Yeah, I'll do your show!" Then they're like, "Cool, you're doing 45." Then I just had to pretend I was ready for that.

### **What's the longest you had done?**

I had probably stretched past 30. Actually, before that 45 I had done an hour, but that was in a bachelorette party bus and I did not have an hour. They were on their way to see Belinda Carlisle and I was the surprise entertainment. The maid of honor booked me, and she didn't know that I couldn't do an hour. And I said yes. So bad. You know who didn't like comedy on the bus? The bride. She got motion sickness. It just turned into a weird group therapy chat of being like, "Are you gonna throw up? Are you guys having fun? Ha. Okay. One time I gave a blowjob! Oh, your mom's here? Okay. Well, I planned blowjob for the 10 minute portion of this hour."

### Have you read Doug Stanhope's book about all his road stories?

No. I've heard of it. I've also not read Sam Tallent's book, cause they're such dark gritty tales. I own it, I just haven't been able to read it because I feel like it'll fuck me up mentally while I'm still doing this. I also want to say there's a completely different world of being a road comic that's a gal trying to keep herself safe. That's a whole different aspect of this.

### Can you talk about that a little bit? I'm sure some people don't consider how difficult that must be.

I will say the reason I don't drink has to do with feeling good and the hangovers, but also because that's a great way to get assaulted. You think you're having fun, but it's a liability. I'm in charge of me. I've gotta be my bodyguard, too. I feel more comfortable than I would've ever imagined sleeping at a truck stop. I feel like nobody's really gonna get too crazy at a well rated Love's. But when I'm deciding where to sleep, I'm looking at the customer reviews. If there's a certain tone to them, I won't go there. I always have to have a backup plan, or I'll get ready in one location, but then once I park to sleep for the night, if I'm sleeping in the car, I've already gotten ready at a different place so I can just cover my windows immediately and crawl in the back. I try not to have too many identifiers on the outside of the car that say I'm a woman. And also, I got one of those tire sticks. It's like a wooden baton, but it's weighted. People always tell me I should get a gun, but could you imagine the blooper of how I shoot myself? Comedy wise, though, I just had press this morning and I'm so annoyed by how many men I talk to on the radio, like male hosts, that ask me about my relationship status. It always gives me a minute of like, "Okay, yeah, I didn't come here to talk about that."

### Yeah, "What does that have to do with anything?"

Guys never get asked that question. I get asked that question every time. These male radio hosts couldn't possibly imagine that I'm an untethered woman. And if it's a middle-aged guy with a lady sidekick, they have to know how I got here. Like, "What are you doing out?" Very annoying, especially because I don't have a relationship currently - that's just not a category of my life right now. I can't wait to try dating and exploring my sexuality more once I live somewhere, but it's a really unfair thing. So many guys at my shows, especially if I talk about sex, they'll think I'm interested or something. There's something really special about the male ego where even though I'm obviously the interesting one tonight, they need to be really fascinating to me. They wanna tell me about their divorce. It's crazy. It's really

weird and I'm so not interested at all. I've definitely had issues needing security at clubs before because people just didn't understand the context of our interactions. I got sexually assaulted by a clown last week on the morning news.

### What?

I did an interview in Louisville and they had clowns there. I posted a picture of me and these clowns backstage and one of them was sexually harassing me; he was trying to solicit me for prostitution. He was a dirty old man being a dirty old man, and I was shutting him down. Then the funniest thing was everybody at the TV station kept coming up to me, one at a time, like, "I'm so sorry about the clown." The guy on the radio today - him asking me about my relationship status is crazy, but then after we talked, he asked me, "Why are the most successful female comedians so dirty? Why do they talk so much about sex? You know, Amy Schumer, Nikki Glaser, you." I'm like, "Yeah, we're the same!" That's also a matter of perception. There's plenty of successful female comedians who don't talk about sex. Maria Bamford is one of my all-time favorites and she doesn't talk about sex that much. It's such a double standard. Guys talk about sex so much, but they're not considered filthy. I like showing up and talking about it for the ladies. Also, that question is so crazy. "Why are the most successful female comics talking about sex?" Um, because it made them successful. Are we smutty or smart? Did we figure out how to get your attention? Cause it works?



**How do you think in 10-20 years you'll look back on your experience on the road?**

Part of me needing to settle down is needing to catch up on this backlog of experience I've already had. There aren't enough hours in the day to share all the stories. I'd love to write a book about it, if anybody reads anymore. Ultimately, I just feel like I'm at a really weird crossroads with all of it. Like I said, I've hit this level of doing this where I'm booking these bigger venues, but the pressure to coordinate it has gotten bigger. I've been doing all the press myself. I'm coordinating interviews on radio, TV, newspapers, in all these cities. You know when you have a job it sucks to have to look for another job at the same time? That's this whole thing. It's never enough jobs. You're always booking, planning, submitting – I just came here to ruin the idea of doing comedy!

**Not at all; it's nice to hear the reality. I definitely see there's multiple sides to it. You're living this dream, entertaining people in all these different places, you're independent. But at the same time, it is very difficult.**

I think if I had a home base it would be better, or even had part-time remote work to keep some semblance of stability coming through. I can't afford to say yes to things that sound fun because I need to think about other things as well. There's a club I would love to do that's asked me to come out, but I can't book a weekend for that little money anymore. It sucks to have that pure love of what I'm doing, but have to create boundaries of, "I love your room, but I can't as a business person say yes to that."

*Say yes to Reena and catch her at the Orpheum Theatre in Galesburg, IL this Friday, March 4, as well as the Orpheum in Flagstaff, AZ March 11. Visit [reenacalm.com/tour](https://reenacalm.com/tour) for more dates!*



PHOTO BY RIKENNA LINES (@RIKENNAPHOTO)



# **BONUS: Reena Calm's Top 10 Chicago Comics**

**(IN NO ORDER)**

**1. BECKETT KENNY**

**2. MARTY DEROSA**

**3. JOE FERNANDEZ**

**4. ERICA CLARK**

**5. PATTI VASQUEZ**

**6. MS. MATT BROWN**

**7. JAMIE SHRINER**

**8. JIM FLANNIGAN**

**9. PAT MCGANN**

**10. KRISTEN TOOMEY**

**SHOUT OUT: PUTERBAUGH SISTERS, ALI CLAYTON**



## SHOW SPOTLIGHT: ROAST BATTLE CHAMPIONSHIP

*With Roast Battle Chicago's 2023 tournament kicking off this week, I sat down with producers Chris Grieco, Matt Banwart, and Kevin Kellam to discuss the tourney, new opportunities for comedians, the Roast Battle League and more.*

**Last year's tournament was a huge success. How are you feeling about year two?**

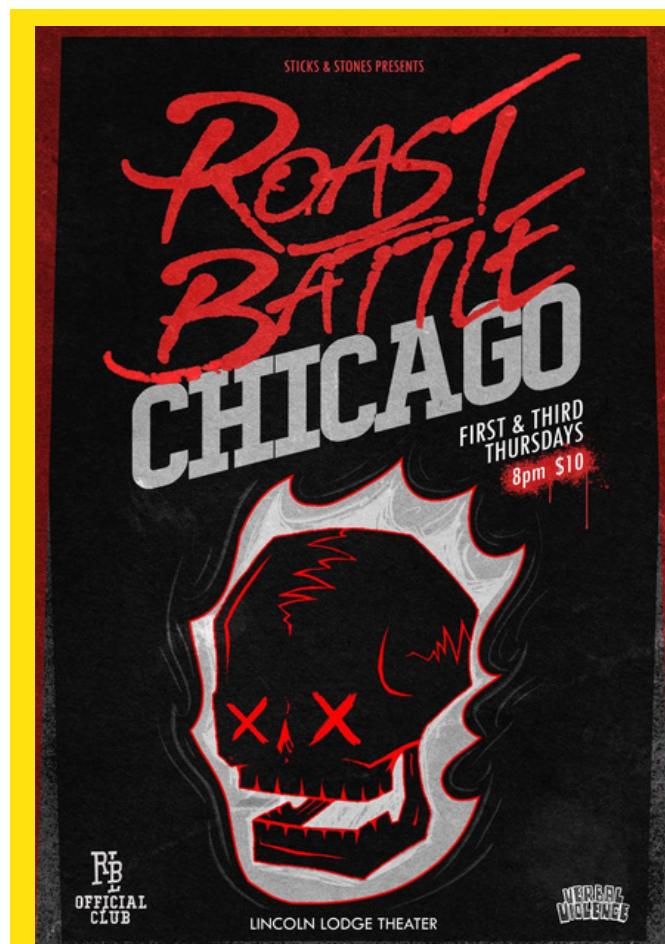
**CG:** We're very excited about it. Last year's tournament was the first time our show had any amount of success. It was the first time we were able to sell tickets, and it was the first time we felt people had a real interest in the show. I think when we did the tournament last year, that was the turning point of going from just another show at the Lincoln Lodge to one that we feel really proud of and people seem to have a lot of interest in. So we're doing it again this year and I think it's gonna be better than ever.

**What have you changed from the first year that you think is gonna make this more successful?**

**MB:** Last year, we did 64 comedians and we accepted almost anyone who applied. This year, we're only doing 32 comedians. Instead of taking seven weeks, which is too long to follow anything, it's now down to five weeks. Something else we're doing differently is we have a videographer, Justin Smith. He's the man behind the camera at all of our shows. This time, we're going to do a sports documentary/reality TV-esque behind the scenes of the show. We're going to interview people before and after their battles and capture all the behind the scenes moments and drama of it.

**Are you hand picking everyone that's in it? I know Grace [Leishman] won last year, but nobody really knew who she was, which was cool. What's the selection process like?**

**MB:** We had roughly 70 applicants and used a random number generator to pick. There's great comics who didn't make it, and there are some people who made it that I've never seen before. We picked the 32, and then had a few people drop, so then we hit up people we knew to fill those 4-5 spots.



**Is there another championship belt? What's this year's prize?**

**CG:** This year's different because we're part of the Roast Battle League. We're trying to think of it larger, like, "How is this gonna work with the league?" Right now, our current champion is Jessica Misra, who is a regular on the show and remains undefeated on our show, actually. She's our current champ, and this year, whoever wins the tournament gets a title shot. We didn't have a champ last year, and this year we do. So now you have a shot to face the champion. I think that's great because it means anyone can get a title shot, whereas usually you'd have to prove yourself a million times through the show. But the tournament gives you that opportunity. It's a really great way to not only introduce yourself to the show, but if you're really fucking good, you can go against the champ and get the belt.

**Can you talk a little bit about the Roast Battle League?**

**MB:** That's probably the biggest difference this year. We're going to be sending some people out to Roast Battle League events. Jessica Misra and Grace Leishman are doing the SXSW comedy festival in Austin, Texas in a few weeks. It's a full mini bracket where the best roasters from LA, New York, Austin, and all over are fighting it out. That's a really big deal for them. They get three days at this festival taken care of, they get to do a show, they get paid, and it's a good chance for them to get in front of industry, meet other roasters, and network with comedians from all over the world. Then, we're also doing one-off shows where we'll be sending people out to events, and we already have two of those lined up. So this is a great way to get your foot in the door for being sent out to stuff like that. I think that's the biggest difference this year; we can send you out to stuff.

**I know Grace did the Roast Battle at The Comedy Store in LA. Was that through the league?**

**CG:** Yeah, Misra did as well. They both went out to The Comedy Store on Halloween and did that show. That event was kind of kicking off the league, because the league is new too. Brian Moses has been amazing; he invented Roast Battle. He's been so supportive of us and is really the mastermind behind this whole thing. I always thought of Roast Battle as a genre of comedy, but then I realized that the format of comedians going joke for joke – that's a new thing that started like ten years ago in The Comedy Store with Brian's show. He did that and it got so big that it got this show on Comedy Central, then it just got bigger. For me, I think it's cool to be a part of this thing that's coming together for the first time. I'm really excited to be a part of it and I think our championship is gonna help shape the next phase of what Roast Battle looks like.

**If I'm not a comic and I've never been to Roast Battle, why should I check out the show?**

**MB:** What I tell people is that it's half sporting event, half comedy show. The crowd experience is very different from a regular comedy show. You'd never be chanting, booing or picking sides. The crowd erupts when you have a big line. It's like a sporting event: people pick sides and it's like, "Ohh my guy's winning the battle!" Very recently, we had a show where a guy came up and he said, "I heard Gabe [Alvizo] is gonna be on the show. I'm team Gabe." He wants to see Gabe compete, and that's cool to me. He has his sports team; he has his roast battler.

**KK:** People buy tickets to our show that watch comedy, but you get the sense they want to see more conflict. It's human nature to want to look at a car crash. It's like, "Alright, well, let's play on that." And also, you're not good at this if you're not a good comedian. Then there's people who are good at it who are like, "I didn't think I was gonna be good at this." You don't think they're mean, or this or that. And it plays on these characters. It really draws something out of people that you don't get from a normal set. I think the audience likes the pressure. They like a winner and a loser, and we give it to them.

**CG:** You're a comic; you know the deadness you feel when you watch standup now versus when you first got into it. You've been in so many comedy shows and you attend so much comedy every day that you don't really feel that excited a lot of times unless you see something new. There has to be some sort of weird circumstance –

**Right, you're desensitized. It's like watching too much porn.**

**CG:** And oh boy, do I watch a lot of porn, Jerry. And this show, Roast Battle Chicago, I swear to god, it's the show that I still get excited for because it is new every single time. The jokes have to be new. It's going to be exciting, the crowd's gonna be more involved, and you need to be on your game. Everybody's fair game. If you're on panel, yeah, there's safety behind the panel, but you're up for getting roasted too. I host the show and I'm getting roasted. Everyone's throwing punches and it's just a fucking event and I get really, really excited every show. So if you're a person that doesn't do comedy and are wondering why would I go to this show instead of another one, it's because it's not like any other show you're gonna see in the city and it's really, really exciting.

**Who's gonna be judging? Any surprise guests from the league?**

**CG:** I'm looking at our panel lineup right now, and it's the best sequential lineup of panelists we've ever had. They're really well thought through. It's hard to drop any name right now, but the panel's great. In terms of bringing in people from the league, anytime somebody that's a producer or big time roast battler comes through Chicago, they're welcome to come on the panel. We've had that before in the past and it's very exciting.

**Do you have any general advice for people who are trying to produce their own shows or take it to the next level? You guys have a great thing going and have built it from the ground up.**

**MB:** Get those emails. We send out an email once or twice a month for our show and that's been huge. We get a lot of return on the email. Also, seat people. You have to seat people. That's how you get to know people. We have regulars on our show, and I sit them every week. Seat people and get the emails of the people that've been at the show.

**KK:** I think it's that interpersonal stuff that people take for granted. Seating people is great, but asking what they enjoyed and what they thought of the show is also important when you're doing a show for 40-50 people. You're serving the audience. The audience is there to be entertained, and when you give them a little bit more than they expected for their \$5-10, they remember it and they ride with you.

**CG:** One thing I'll add is that if you're a comedian and you're trying to start a show, just know it's going to suck most of the time. It's a thankless job. It just sucks. I was a part of two shows that failed before I was a part of this one. The one thing I'll say, because I think it's important, is if you're a comedian and you feel like there's a role on the show that you're not quite as strong at as a performer, then you should do that as much as possible. It's a real opportunity to put yourself in a position that you're weak at in order to become strong. When we first started our show, my first few times hosting the shows – without any exaggeration – was a complete catastrophe. Now, Matt is taking on that baton. I will say, it was really rough hosting it, but I was like, "The next few shows I wanna host because of how bad that last one went." So if you're a comedian looking to start a show, use it as an opportunity to get better cause ultimately you're in it for comedy, you're not in it to be a producer. One of the things you can take away from your show, even if it doesn't work, is the knowledge you gained from doing it.

*Round 1 of the Roast Battle Championship begins Thurs March 2!*

*Tickets: [eventbrite.com/cc/chicago-roast-battle-championship-2023-1481199](https://eventbrite.com/cc/chicago-roast-battle-championship-2023-1481199)*



# ARTWORK: CHRIS GRIECO

DOORS...7:00PM  
SHOW.....7:30PM  
ENTRY.....\$20

*The*  
**DEN**  
THEATRE




FROM HBO

**GWEN  
LA ROKA**

HOSTED BY  
ERIC EMERSON

FEATURING  
MO GOOD, KRISTEN TOOMEY, KEN HAMLETT

MARCH 29



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STAND UP STAND UP

RED LOBSTER  
COMEDY PRESENTS

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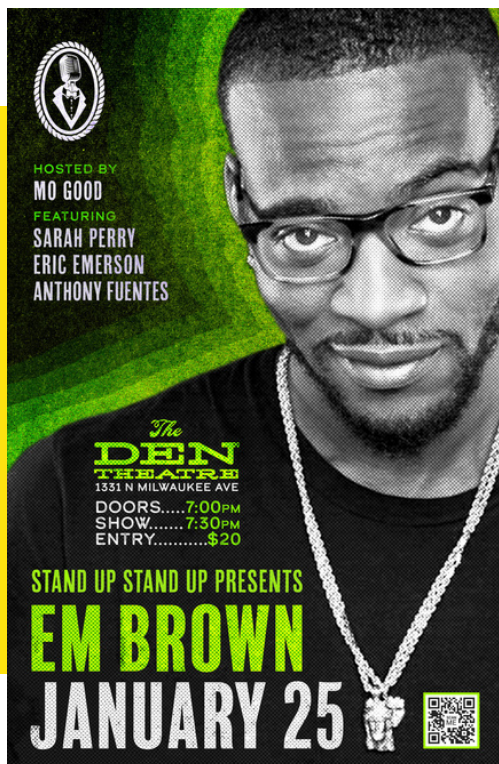
**JAMAL  
GUICHON**

**SOHRAB  
FOROUZESH**

**SASHA  
ROSSER**

MONDAY **JULY 11**  
8:00PM

**Laugh**  
FACTORY


HOSTED BY  
MO GOOD

FEATURING  
SARAH PERRY  
ERIC EMERSON  
ANTHONY FUENTES

*The*  
**DEN**  
THEATRE  
1331 N MILWAUKEE AVE

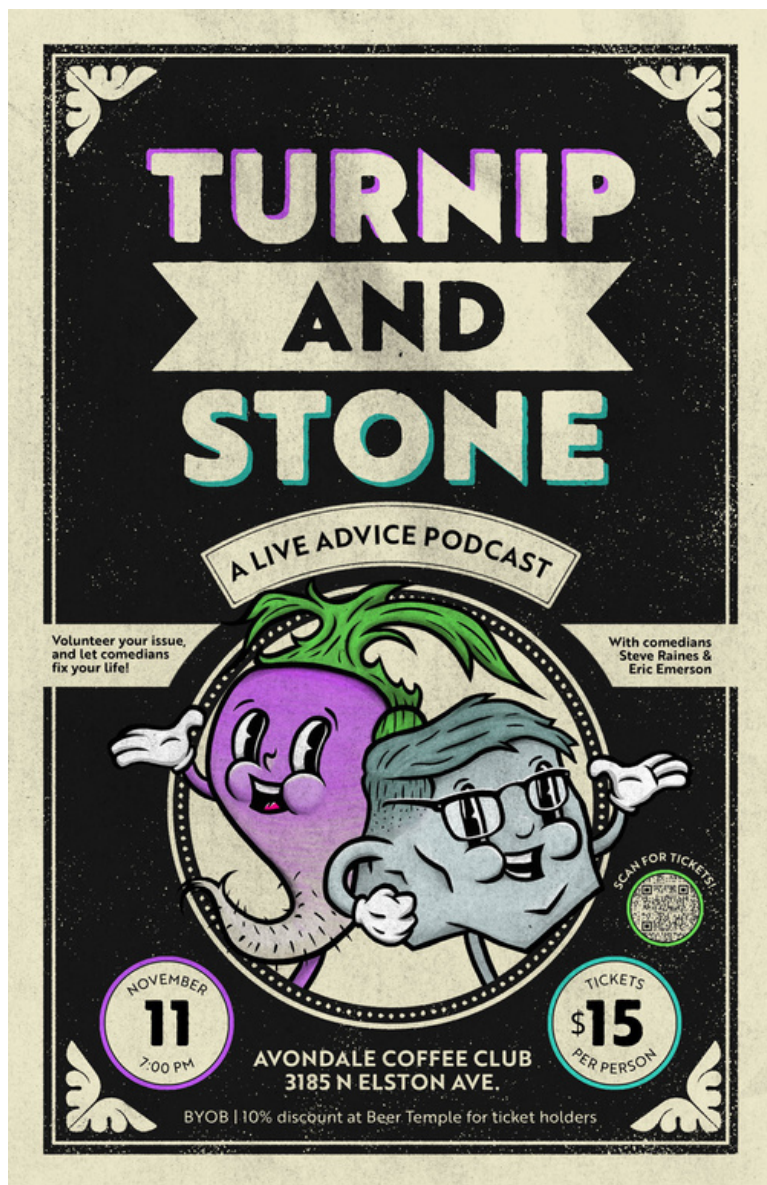
DOORS.....7:00PM  
SHOW.....7:30PM  
ENTRY.....\$20

STAND UP STAND UP PRESENTS  
**EM BROWN**  
JANUARY 25



**OUTSIDE OF RUNNING ROAST BATTLE CHICAGO, CHRIS (@CHRISGRIECO.JPG) IS ALSO A DESIGNER AND ILLUSTRATOR. HE DOES POSTERS FOR SHOWS ALL OVER THE CITY; REACH OUT TO HIM IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR ART!**

**WEBSITE AND PORTFOLIO: CHRISGRIECO.COM**



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

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?  
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

**DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE**

