

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: JAMES WEBB

Since our first interview in November 2020, James Webb (@thechicagopro) has gone on to direct countless comedy specials, including two for Netflix: Sam Morril's *Same Time Tomorrow* and Mark Normand's *Soup to Nuts*, as well as Gary Gulman's newly released *Born on Third Base*. We talked his journey to Netflix, his directing style, posting clips, the late Kenny DeForest, and more.

You're the clip expert so I wanted to ask you: what's your take on posting clips online?

I keep going back to this quote from Tim Dillon about gatekeepers. He's like, "There are no gatekeepers. The gatekeeper is your phone. If you're funny enough and you put it out there, people will see it. And it's on you to do that."

I think people are just concerned about looking bad.

I think that's just stuff for people to see when you blow up. They can go back and go, "Whoa, look where he started!" Or they can make fun of you or whatever, like, "Oh, he sucked." That's part of the fun. When you do make it, it'll be all that much more fun for your fans to be like, "Look where this guy was!" Real fans will go, "Oh, that's really cool!" And it's inspiring for other comedians too, because they can go back and go, "Oh, they sucked just like me. I can do this."

Do you think it's burning material?

Tyler Horvath gave me a great take on this at a Jonah Jurkens party —

Name drop?

Name drop! Jonah! But before this night, I was staunchly anti material posting. Then Tyler presented this argument, which I was stunned by. He was like, "Well, I got all these followers because I posted my material. These people are coming to see your shows because they like what you're saying; it's not like you're going to tell the joke they love and they're going to be upset. They get to see it live." And now I equate it to music. You hear a song you like, you're going to buy tickets to see that band play that song. It's the same thing with comedy; you're going to see the show.

So our first interview was in your basement podcast studio during COVID, and now you're directing Netflix specials. Can you walk us through how you got to where you are now?

The single word is luck. It truly was right place, right



time, and I had the luck to be first in Chicago because we don't have industry there. But during the pandemic, the studio wound down a little bit, so I tried to get out and shoot more comedy. Brian Morton booked me up at Zanies and I got the camera system installed there, and we figured out how to do live streams during the lockdown.

Yeah, I remember you did that South by Southwest taping.

Oh my god, I forgot I did that. For the readers, that was the first big show we did. It was a showcase of Chicago comedians that we filmed at Zanies Rosemont and submitted to the SXSW Comedy Festival. We scheduled this stupid thing 48 hours before the submission deadline. Normal production schedules are months. I know this now, but back then, I was like, "Oh, of course we can do this!" I filmed the intro on my way there, the outro on my way home, got all the footage, and stayed up for 32 straight hours. I got a full multicam special shot, edited, and delivered in 32 hours. And they loved it, so then Brian Morton was like, "Cool, I'm gonna let you film comics at Zanies when they come to town." So Ian Fidance comes to town and I film his set and I start cutting his clips for him. Toby McMullin gave me the sauce on how to format clips, so huge shout out to him. I really wouldn't be here without Toby.

Do you have any pointers on formatting and editing?

Keep the comic in focus. Use keyframes. Here's what I really hate about clips that I'm seeing now: there's a comic in frame for a second, and then he starts to go out of frame, and it'll jump to when he's in frame again. Don't do that. Look up on YouTube how to track motion with keyframes. Then with captions, use a font that is tall, sans serif, and thick. And last tip, do not give away the punchline until they say it. I don't want to read the punchline before they are saying the actual words.

Okay, so Ian Fidance.

So Ian and I worked together and he liked me. Then Rosebud [Baker] came to Zanies and I worked with her and all these other comics. I finally worked with Nimesh Patel at Zanies and he really liked me. Then Sam Morril posts that he needs someone to film him, and like 25 people from Chicago comedy DMed Sam, "Use James!" So thank you for that. Then Sam texted me and I admittedly had never seen his comedy until I filmed him.

That's so funny.

I didn't know who he was! I was just like, "Yeah, I'll go film this guy. Whatever." So I film him and he loved it. He did three nights and after the last show he was like, "I want you to co-direct my next special." And I was like, "What? Really?" And he was like, "Yeah, I wanna do it here at the Den." That was October of 2021. Zanies doesn't re-sign me because the times were tough. I was like, "Okay, well, the studio is kind of dead. I don't know what to do." So I bought a ticket to New York and I just went on a whim. I texted Ian, "If I come to town, can I film here or something?" And he was like, "Yeah, come hang at the Cellar." I'd still never been in the Comedy Cellar before, and the most New York thing ever happened to me when I got there. The door guy at the Cellar's name is Outside Steve. So Outside Steve is standing there and I walk up to him all bright eyed and bushy tailed: "Hey man, I'm filming Ian Fidance tonight. Do you know where he's at?" And he takes one look up and goes, "I don't know, fuck off." And I was just like, "Oh, alright, thanks man!" And then I just ran around the corner. Ian's outside smoking a cigarette, thank god. Pulls me in. I'm filming him all night. Then I see Sam just standing there waiting for his spot. I haven't talked to Sam since I saw him, so at this point I was like, "Oh, this guy was just being nice to me. Whatever." Then he sees me and goes, "James! How are you buddy? What are you doing here?" He's like, "Look, it turns out I want you to direct the special. Just you, no co-director. You're still good for June, right?" I was like, "Yeah, let's do it!"



Photo by @johnandhiscamera

He's like, "Cool, give me a price." And I was like, "Oh fuck. Five shows, I'll get like eight cameras. What about, like, \$3000?" And he laughed at me, audibly laughed at me. I was like, "Oh shit, is that too much?" And he's like, "Buddy, give me a real number. Just say a number that you really want to say and we'll see what we can do." So I said a number that I thought there's no way in hell anyone would ever pay. And he was like, "Okay, how about this?" And I was like, "Great. Done." Then we shook hands on it.

How was working with Netflix?

I had a meeting with them and they were like, "So, what are you going to use to shoot this?" I was like, "Oh, I'm going to use Blackmagic 6K Pros." And they were like, "No, what? You can't use those." I was like, "Look guys, these specials I've shot with these cameras are so beautiful, and I promise you, if it looks bad, I'll pay for anything you have to do to it in post. How's that sound?" And they were like, "You don't have to do all that, just make it look good." So we were the first crew ever that I know of to use all Blackmagic 6K Pros on a Netflix anything. And now that's my standard kit. Gary Gulman's special was Blackmagic 6k Pros and two Red Heliums. Mark's was Blackmagic 6K Pros.

As opposed to what? I don't know anything about cameras.

The Blackmagic 6K Pro costs \$2,500, which is a lot of money to most people. A lens I think is another \$2,000. So fully kitted with a nice lens, a cage, you're looking at about \$5,000 with tax. But most special cameras, the body of the camera alone costs \$100,000. The lenses cost between \$100,000 and \$200,000. So I'm shooting these with gear that is a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of the price.

It's that Chicago DIY spirit.

That's what it is! And when we did this, dude, it was the people. Steven Haas, Peter Bonello, Andrew Massih, Peter Stepanoski, Harry Jensen, Jesse Chieffo, Julia Stoyanova - and I'm sorry for anyone else I left out. Sam pitched this as five shows and we shot seven. We had never shot anything like this before. Except we had, because we've been doing this for years, we just didn't know it. That's one of the things that people never tell you in a business like this, where there isn't a structured rise to success: no one's telling you how to get there, you just have to believe that you can do it. So we're all just cobbled together at the Den going, "What the fuck are we doing?" Then we were like, "We've all been shooting comedy forever." That kind of dissipated the nerves and then we went and shot a fucking Netflix special. With no union crew, with no outside help. Literally every single person involved in the production was someone you have seen doing an open mic. Anyway, that was a long road to how I got my first Netflix special.

What was the response like?

So the night that it premiered, Sam texts me and he's like, "Yo, I just talked to Sandler and he said it was great; Neal Brennan just texted me and he wants your number." And I was like, "What? Give him my number right now." So not one minute later an unknown number calls my phone and he's like, "Hey James, it's Neal." The text he sent to Sam was basically like, "How the fuck did you shoot this for so cheap?" By the way, the number I gave Sam was still so astronomically low for anyone in the industry that Neal had to ask, "How did you do this special for this little money and it looks this good?" That was the ultimate compliment from one of the best. Neal's a great director. I mean, he created Chappelle's show, directed countless high-end commercials and other people's specials. So for him to say that meant the world. And then we just talked for like an hour and a half. Then for the next month, calls and emails just kept coming in. Matt Schuler, who

ended up producing Mark [Normand's] special with me. He hit me up a few months later and then I got to work with Mark. But yeah, once you do something and it goes well, people just start talking about it and you get work. I've been working nonstop ever since.

How would you describe your style of directing and filming?

Low and slow. I like to make the comedian feel powerful on camera. And a great way to accomplish that is filming up at them. So lower angles and just like slow, slow calculated movements. Dennis Villeneuve, who did *Dune*, is my favorite director right now. The way he shoots shit is just so beautiful and it forces you to engage with what's happening, rather than something that's a little jumpier or flashier. When something is jumpy and flashy, that thing is doing the work. It's chasing you. I think most people don't want to be chased, especially in an era where we're constantly scrolling our phones with all this flashy stuff. When we watch a stand up special or a movie, we're looking to escape from that kind of media. This all sounds so pretentious, but I want the viewer at home to feel like they are at the show. I don't want them to feel like this is a room with a bunch of cameras pointed at a comedian. I want them to go, "Hey, this is what being at this show was like." So I keep the cameras low, a little above head level, but I love heads in shots. If you ever see a special with my name as director and there is a crane in it, someone is holding me in their basement for ransom. That is not anything I would ever imagine doing: putting a fucking crane in a room for a comedy special. Spider-Man doesn't watch comedy and if he did I wouldn't want to see his perspective swinging around the room. I am a grown, human, regular man who sits in a seat, and I want to see it from the seat. I want to see it like a person in the room would see it, where the comedian looks more powerful and important than me, which means low.

And what's the dream goal for you? Are you trying to get into bigger things?

That's another thing that's weird about my career, my career path, whatever you want to call it. I guess I can stop doing that; it is a career now. This is the first full year of my life where I can say that this is my career. I think last year it was a job, and every year before that it was a hobby I so desperately wanted to turn into a job.

Dude, that fucking rules! I'm so happy for you.

It's so insane, dude. This past year has been crazy. But the weird thing about my career is that I've never done anything else. I've only ever shot stand up comedy. I'm like a one trick pony. I did shoot a couple sketches with the boys on the road, and it was fun to shoot those cause it gave me a chance to actually direct, like, "Do something this way, change the emotion this way, say this line this way." That was fun: giving guidance to a human being instead of a crew. My method of directing a comedian at a special is, "Hey, what do you need from me? Nothing? Great. Be funny and don't think about anything else." But, directing a show? Steven Haas is like the master of that. He puts out sketches all the time that are insanely good. He's gonna be one of the best traditional directors of all time, I guarantee it. It's just a matter of time. But yeah, we've got some stuff cooking that I can't talk about, but it's going to be a fun year next year, theoretically. I definitely think shows are the next step; I would love to be involved in the filming of a series or a movie.

Do you have any advice for people in Chicago who want to do what you're doing?

Keep your eyes on any room with a camera in it. Keep your eyes on Zanies, the Lincoln Lodge. Go to places where shows are being filmed and do not be afraid to ask to help someone. The people who asked to help me now have Netflix, HBO and Amazon credits and are building their careers farther and faster than I could've ever imagined because they asked to be part of something. And here's some general advice: never be afraid to look stupid when you're doing something. You're gonna make so many fucking mistakes. Everything I make, all I see are the mistakes that I made. In the Netflix specials, in anything I've edited. I see mistakes. Mistakes no one else would ever see, but I see them, and I've gotten to a point now where I'm over it. You're going to make them, and don't be afraid to make them because it's part of the process and you make less and less mistakes as time goes on. You can't beat yourself up, at least in a hyper negative way. Look at your failures and grow from them, but don't be afraid to

look stupid in front of other people or yourself. Because you'll never grow if your fear of being stupid is too great.

How has your view of Chicago comedy changed since you've gotten more involved in the industry?

Not very much. I guess I have a more mature view of it, but Chicago is still the best place to go to learn how to be funny before you go somewhere else to be who you're supposed to be. I will always have some level of resentment for the places I currently live, LA and New York, for being the only two destinations for any kind of industrial success in this business. I see the utility in Chicago remaining the same, but I just want to see Blake Burkhart on fucking Netflix. I feel guilty every single day of my life that I don't spend the majority of my time there. I would love to see Chicago become a place for all you guys to have careers and not have to work two jobs, then go to a mic, and then go to a show for drink tickets.

If you could change one thing about the Chicago scene, what would you want to change?

Stop talking shit! What are you doing? The real reason Chicago will never ever be an industry is because you fucking idiots keep talking shit. Shut up and work, dude. Do you want to be a comedian or do you want to be popular to people who suck? Take your fucking shit seriously and stop talking shit. There's no room for drama in the industry. You know why it works in New York? Because people shut the fuck up and do their job. That's all we do out here. We don't have time. Sure, bad stuff happens and we'll talk to each other about it, but we're not gonna go on Facebook. By the way, get off Facebook! Stop promoting your shows on Facebook or people who use Facebook will come to your shows, and do you really want people who use Facebook to be at your shows? No you don't! Stop using Facebook and stop

talking shit. And post your stuff. Don't be afraid to post your stuff. Post your jokes. Post jokes that are polished, but not perfect. If you wanna do the stuff I'm doing, just ask, "How can I help?" And do it for free. I didn't make any money, ever, off of comedy for 21 years. I know what it's like to be broke; I'm more familiar with being broke than I am with having any kind of money at all. And guess what? I'm still broke!

So before we go, I wanted to ask you about Kenny DeForest. I know you shot his special. Is there anything you want to say about him or that experience?

My experience with Kenny is interesting because I wasn't super close with him and he still affected me in such a profound way. Back when we started Stand Up Stand Up, we were the only show on Thursday nights and it was the best thing in town. About seven months in, Adam Burke, Matty Ryan and Kenny DeForest decided to start a showcase on Thursday nights called Parlour Car, and we were all terrified because, "Oh, the cool kids are starting a show on our night!" And you know, I've always been a pretty angry guy, and I take shit personally too much, so I was getting a little riled up about it. But without knowing that, during this entire process, Kenny called us and was like, "Hey, is this okay? We don't want to disrespect what you're doing. Please let us know if this is okay; if not, we'll do it on a different day." And we were all like, "No, of course not!" Then from that I would text Kenny or someone at Parlour Car, like, "Hey, here's who we have on the lineup tonight. Is this conflicting with anything?" And it all started because Kenny was like, "Yo, is this alright? How do we do this the right way?" That's a testament to who he was; he was always a good guy.

Then last year he hit me up out of nowhere, and I hadn't even shot Sam's special yet. It was before I was, like, anything, and he goes, "Hey man, I heard you're the guy now!" He was like, "Yeah, man, I want to do this thing in Brooklyn. It's going to be sick. I can't wait to work with you." He just immediately made me feel like I was one of his good friends. And he was such a dream to work with; he was just so positive constantly. We were missing takes and we were scrapping it out with the gear and stuff, and he was always just like, "No, this is cool!" There was never an ounce of bad energy with him. And then the hour, of course, speaks for itself. He was so funny and it's just... it was an honor to capture it. I'm very happy that I got to work with him. He was a wonderful person who just wanted to make people happy, and I wish more people were like him, because the world

would be a better place. And now it's a worse place without him. So call your parents and tell your friends you love them, and tell your friends who you think are funny that they are funny, and tell your friends who are not funny that they suck and need to be funnier, but you love them anyway. And get off Facebook and stop fighting! We're all more connected than you think and it sucks that it takes something like this to happen to make us all realize it. And I hope that people keep recycling his stuff for as long as possible because that's one of the beautiful things about social media: you can keep people that we lost around. And he's maybe the only one I can think of in recent memory that deserves to be with us still every day. So post your clips. And keyframe them! Keyframe those clips! YouTube!



THE COMEDY GAZELLE & THE DEN THEATRE PRESENT

2023 GAZELLIES

A COMEDY AWARDS SHOW



JANUARY 4TH | DOORS 7:00PM | SHOW 7:30PM
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James Webb's Top 10 Disclaimer

TOP 10 LISTS ARE INHERENTLY STUPID, BUT THE SHADOW PEOPLE AT COMEDY GAZELLE ARE FORCING ME TO DO ONE OF THESE. I HAVEN'T BEEN AN ACTIVE MEMBER OF THE SCENE IN A YEAR, SOMETHING I DEEPLY REGRET, SO HERE ARE 10 PEOPLE IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER (OR ARE THEY) WHO I HAVE ACTUALLY LOST MY BREATH LAUGHING AT. I LOVE ALL CHICAGO COMICS DEARLY AND HOPE THIS DOESN'T CAUSE MORE STUPID BEEF THAT WILL PREVENT THE SCENE FROM BECOMING WHAT IT COULD BE.

James Webb's Top 10 Chicago Comics

- 1. KRISTEN TOOMEY**
- 2. BILL GEVIRTZ**
- 3. MICHAEL MEYERS**
- 4. DALE MCPEEK**
- 5. CALVIN EVANS**
- 6. BLAKE BURKHART**
- 7. MIKE SAMPSON**
- 8. JOE KILGALLON**
- 9. JOE FERNANDEZ**
- 10. MO GOOD**

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

KRISTI DURKIN

"Arguably the coolest comic in the scene. Crushes, the show they produce, is a Chicago comedy institution. I'm embarrassed by how much their on stage vernacular has crept into my every day vocabulary."

JACKSON WHITE

"Jackson is a seriously underrated comic in Chicago. He works hard at open mics and I have seen him blow the roof off of rooms he is in. He's got a silly and playful sense of humor and a great stage presence that audiences are quick to welcome."

BEAU LERNER

"Beau has very well written jokes that perfectly match his likable, quasi-nerdy vibe on stage. He gets more confident every time I see him on stage and has been cranking out some really great jokes recently. He also kinda looks like Jesus depending on the picture of Jesus you have in your head."

SUZ BALLOUT

"Suz is a great host at Schubas. She has a great way of busting people's balls but in a way that keeps the audience on her side and doesn't feel mean. She's a big reason why I love that room so much and she's super nice off stage as well!"

KAYLEY HORTON

"She brings her best every time she's onstage whether it's a show or an open mic. She has great energy and does material that's challenging to pull off because it's dark but her personality and positive vibe make it work."

MICHAEL THOMAS REGAN

"Everyone in the scene knows about their art skills, but I gotta shout out my pal Michael for some much deserved stage time. Seriously, they have leveled up so much in their comedic skills, especially as a hype host for West of Cali. Plus, they are always supporting fellow comedians - a total team player."

MARLON HUE

"He is amazing at crowd work and is personable and likeable. He always helps his fellow comedians be successful and share the success. Great stage presence."

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

ST JAMES JACKSON

"Phenomenal comedian who brings a high level of energy on the stage while also producing funny content with his podcast and man on the street interviews."

KWAMIN MARSHALL

"Kwamin is a star. He is one of the few comedians who can do beautifully insightful work that is equal parts incisive as it is hilarious. One of the contemporaries I believe to be an influence on me as a comic. Above all, baddies like him."

MATHEW MITCHELL

"He's really fucking good at comedy. He's a prolific joke writer & great performer. He's deserves much more stage time than he gets, because he's not as good at putting himself out there (it may be the autism). He's the real deal."

TRISTAN A. SMITH

"Dark humor matched with a clever, dry wit. A unique voice in the comedy scene who can take personal tragedy and struggle and convert it into comedy gold."

DAVID SITKO

"One of the suburbs best kept secrets. When Dave is on, it can be like watching a tornado on a trampoline; a wonderful mix of chaos and excitement. And he is always on. I've seen him ask a physics professor what his favorite law of motion was and the crowd loved it. Through his jokes and crowd work, what stands out most is that Dave cares about the audience. Even when giving them a hard time, he still wants to make sure they're having a GOOD time."

CARTER DOCKERTY

"Carter is funny, kind, original, and has a cool Cosby sweater. He just moved to Chicago and he's underrated, but not for long. I quote his bits constantly."

LUKE NEUMANN

"This guy is so funny. His jokes are a great confection of playfully dumb and strikingly clever. Luke's joke assembly is buttressed by his consciously oblivious delivery and stage presence. Super fun to watch."

CHRIS DAMEN

"Truly one of the funniest comedians in this city and should be added to all of your shows."

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

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

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