

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.

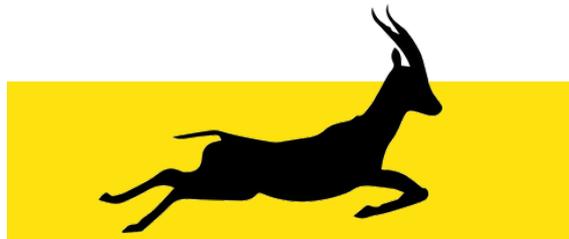
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– Jerry

INTERVIEW: JOE KILGALLON, 3

JOE'S TOP 10, 9

ART: KATIA SENTRY, 10



INTERVIEW: JOE KILGALLON

Joe Kilgallon (@joekilgallon) is a Chicago staple and one of the founding members of Comedians You Should Know. We talked about the history of the show, standing out in a talented scene, balancing comedy with being a dad, and more.

I ask a lot of people what they'd like to change about the Chicago scene, but you've been a part of it for so long, I'm especially curious. Is there anything you wish was completely different?

The mindset of the comedians here tied in with the local media. Whenever they even interview an up-and-coming comedian they go, "Hey what's your next plan? Are you gonna go to New York or LA?" I've heard them ask that and I think that narrative needs to change a little bit.

Better journalism.

Yeah, I want the journalism to change. I feel like standup doesn't get covered the same way as improv here. Every time Second City opens a new whatever-the-hell, they go crazy for it, and standup just does not get nearly that much attention. The only difference between [Chicago comedians] and the comedians I saw in LA and New York is that they're more famous. They're not better. They're just more known because they've gotten more opportunities because they live in cities that have bigger industry as far as standup goes, and I think some of that starts with media. I really feel like the local media and the local journalists in Chicago don't cover standup as well, and when they do cover it, it's usually after a standup has already moved away. Then they come back to town and it's like, "Oh, we're so happy you're back!" It's like, "I wouldn't have had to leave if you guys gave a fuck when I was here!" I grew up in the 90s, I was a big fan of Seattle grunge. I never saw a single interview with any of those bands where the journalist was like, "So when are you going to a real city? Why are you still in Seattle, Eddie Vedder?" There are different cities that have music scenes, and nobody expects the bands to get the fuck out of there. Chicago's a major city; we're #3 in population and we're known for breeding all these great comedians, but that's where it stops.



Do you think there's anything we can do to change that as comedians?

In a way, it's great that we have the freedom to try new things because there isn't industry here, but I feel like as Chicago comedians we need to wear that with pride: "This is Chicago they should come to me." There's a lot of young comics, and old comics too, that have figured out, "Hey, I've got a ton of technology right here in my pocket. I'm gonna film shit and put it out there and build up an audience." Chris Higgins has a million TikTok followers; Steven Haas is kicking ass there; I love what Joe Fernandez is doing with the solo sketches. There's a lot to like about what people are being more innovative about. The people who are complaining the most about a lack of opportunity in Chicago comedy are just complainers. I feel like sometimes people need to think to themselves, "Wait a minute, all the people who are complaining aren't doing anything, and all the people who are doing shit aren't complaining." So, I feel like if you find the urge to openly bitch, online at least, check yourself a little bit and ask yourself, "Am I doing all I can?"

Yeah, maybe redirect some of that energy to something productive. Is that not what you guys did when you started CYSK?

That's 100% what we did. It still cracks me up when I hear people upset with CYSK and our booking practices. It makes me laugh because you're mad that you're not getting booked on a show that was started by people who were mad that they weren't getting booked on shows. I think the thing I'm most proud of is that we did leave a legacy of people doing it themselves and starting their own shows. That's what's so cool about Chicago is people starting their own shit. Maybe it's that Chicago attitude of "fuck it I'll do it myself" that's going to bring more industry here.

Can you walk me through when you were first starting CYSK? I'd love to hear more about that story and where you were at mentally.

The history of CYSK starts with Danny Kallas. He is the godfather of the show.

The door guy?

Yeah, the door guy. I fuck with him about it. Danny Kallas, as we know, has been on a hiatus from standup comedy. Every now and then we'll be talking and he'll be part of the circle and I'll be like, "Sorry, comedians only! If I wanna know about Chicago pizza tours, I'll hit you up!" But he had read a blog that Doug Stanhope had written on his Myspace page — we're talking sometime in 2008 when we were no more than a year or two into comedy each.

Oh, wow you guys were new, new.

We were new, new. Which makes it even funnier that we were bitching about not getting booked: "You guys just started you fucking assholes!" And so the blog that Doug Stanhope wrote basically talked about how he was doing this club and he heard this feature bitching. The feature was like, "I'm killing it every time I go on stage, it's great; the club won't let me headline; I'm not getting noticed by industry." He's just like, "Alright, stop complaining. Here's what you do: you know that bar you go to to drown your sorrows after the show? What's that? They have a stage? Alright, go to the owner and say you wanna throw your own show there. Charge your friends or whoever \$10 a pop. You get 50 people in there, that's \$500 bucks; that's more than you were getting doing that club you can't stand and the bar owner will be happy to get people in there drinking." He did this whole thing where it was like, "Stop complaining and set up your own shows because at the end of the day all you care about is making people laugh."

What difference does it make if it's at a club that's disrespecting you or doing it on your own? Granted it's more work doing it on your own, which is why Danny was like, "I need to get my crew together." The originators were Danny Kallas, Junior Stopka, Mike Lebovitz, Drew Michael, Marty DeRosa, Mike Sheehan and Michael Sanchez. They all had a big role in helping create this.

What did you do to help get it going?

CYSK was originally at a bar called Fizz, weekly, but the owner was a dumbass. He would have six people on the first floor and even on bad nights CYSK would have 30 people upstairs and he'd be like, "You gotta work harder." It's like, "We're outdrawing you! What the fuck are you on about?" Then it was monthly at the Lakeshore Theatre. Lakeshore Theatre went under, then we couldn't deal with that guy at Fizz anymore, so I brought in Timothy O'Toole's. I had done some shows there with some other comics previously that were free, so I knew the management and I brought in Danny and Drew Michael to meet with them. They were like, "Let's go." And it was amazing to have a bar on board with it. I feel like so many great shows start in Chicago, they're kicking ass for six months, then they just kind of fade away. Nine times out of ten, they just couldn't deal with the bar management anymore; that's just the one thing that's completely out of your control. Then we started at O'Toole's in January of 2010, and we hit the ground running. But there were ups and downs; I think everyone sees the show as the mega success it is now, but what people don't see is those first couple years. I would stand on the corner of Michigan and Ohio and hand out fliers for 2.5 hours in February weather trying to get a couple people in. Danny was so crazy with numbers; he'd say for every 2,000 fliers you hand out you'll get three people and that's totally worth doing it.

We were doing press releases, every publication we could find. Danny had a great saying: "Treat every show like it's the only show you'll ever produce." That's a good way to look at it. It makes sure you're dotting every I and crossing every T so that everything runs smoothly. But it's gonna put stress on you. There are some nights where you're gonna be like, "I don't care if that chair's not in the right spot, just start the fucking show." Cause as you get older you realize it's really about the quality of the performance. But what makes for good quality? You gotta set the tone. I still think CYSK is the only show in the city that has someone seating people. The clubs do it, but I'll get booked on some shows, there's 4-5 producers and nobody's seating anybody, then the whole audience is in the back two thirds of the room.

Nowadays there's a lot more clubs and independent shows, some of which have been around for decades. Do you think you can still start your own successful show like you guys did?

Yes, I 100% believe you could still do that. Every time I think something has changed to the point where I wonder if you could still do that, I'm proven wrong by people. I really do believe if you get a smart group of people together and you're thoughtful and you put in the work, you could 100% start the next CYSK or the next big independent comedy show. You just have to put some thought into it and not be afraid to suck for a while. We had all failed at different spots before we landed at Timothy O'Toole's and because of that we were like, "Alright we have to be clear with this bar. Let's not make the mistakes we made with previous bars." We had to tell the bar management to give us a year. "Give us a year consistently, every Wednesday, at this time, and we're gonna build something great. Are you on board with that?" If you're working with a staff that seems like they hesitate, then fucking go somewhere else. And if you're gonna do it with a few other comedian friends, you need to make sure they're 100% as in it as you are. Make sure everyone has a role. We fought all the time in the beginning, and a lot of it was because not everyone had a clearly defined role. Set it up like a business. I think it's 100% possible to get that going cause I've seen a lot of shows that've started in the last year or two that have a bright future.



I watched the CYSK round table you did with Curtis [Shaw Flagg], Jonah [Jurkens] and Ed [Towns]. In it you said you think the Chicago scene might currently be the strongest you've ever seen talent wise. How do you think you can stand out in a scene that has so much talent? Say you're doing all the right things; you have a successful show, whatever. How do you take that next step?

That's a great question. You're basically asking if you're doing everything right and you're still not getting any kind of notoriety, how do you get that notoriety? As cliché as it sounds, keep being yourself. I think you need to try to be you as much as possible. People are gonna notice. If you're gonna keep kicking ass, if you're producing a show, producing content, if you're continually making people laugh and are being original and not giving a fuck about the money aspect and all that stuff, I think you'll break through. Now in the same regard, you're gonna get pissed off. You're gonna be like, "Why the fuck aren't I getting noticed sooner?"

I'm preaching patience right now... ask any comic that knows me well, they'll be like, "Oh, that motherfucker is preaching patience? Really? That guy? I've seen him lose his shit because he's felt slightly disrespected." I mean, yeah, it's frustrating. If you know you're doing great and you still feel like you're not getting noticed, don't be afraid to shake things up, either. Care about the audience. If the audience is laughing at everything you say and you're doing that consistently enough, it's gonna work out. It will work out.

What about you? You're doing great, but are you happy with where you are?

Yes, I'm happy, but a couple nights ago I got stressed out. I tell people, "You're gonna have your nights." You're gonna have bad days where you think you should be further along and all that. You're gonna be tired, exhausted, then you're like, "Oh fuck my checking account is overdrawn," and now you're angry. I'm very happy with where I am because I think my standup is the strongest it's been. I just feel like I'm in a really good zone with standup, especially over the last 6-7 months.

Oh wow, that's recent.

That's the crazy thing about standup comedy. I remember getting this advice from Hannibal Buress. He was like, "When you're starting out, the material you're doing six months in you're gonna look back on in a year and be like, 'This is terrible.' When you're 2-3 years in, you'll look back and be like, 'Horrible.' And if you're not continually doing that, you're not growing." I thought I was a really strong comedian, I've felt that way for the last 6-7 years, then over the last 6-7 months I felt like it's really jumped up a notch. I can't really talk about this without sounding conceited or cocky, but I feel it. I feel like you know those little moments where you're like, "I think I've leveled up a little bit here."

Do you think it's in terms of content or mindset? Are you getting at deeper stuff?

It's been both for me. When my dad passed about 10 months ago, I took a month and a half off comedy, and I just didn't wanna be funny because he was my comedic inspiration. Then when I was in New York, I remember I had a moment where I was like, "It's a Brooklyn hipster crowd. The material I've been working on lately really isn't that appealing to them." Then I'm like, "Or is it? I don't fucking know, maybe they'll love it. Who gives a shit; fuck these people." Then, I went up there and I killed. Then I did it again a couple nights later and that went great. So, I kind of came back with a hunger and I realized it was more mindset. I don't know if my material is so much better than it was.

I've definitely gotten into some deeper stuff with the passing of my father. It kind of makes you get a little more vulnerable on stage. I talked about how I'm in therapy now and some things like that, so maybe that makes me more accessible to an audience that might think, "Oh, look at this douche." I think so much of what's made my performance better has just been my mental health. I think I'm mentally healthier as a person, despite still grieving, and there's days where it still feels like there's a hole in my heart. But I am very happy with where I am in standup.

How did you feel when you started talking about your dad?

It was tough. I wanted to do it where it had to be about comedy. My dad always hated it when comedies would get dramatic, so I was like, "I gotta make this funny." It was hard at first. I tell these great stories about my dad and where I get my sense of humor and my own personal dealing with it. I was just like, "I have to keep it funny." But I also want the audience, people who have gone through grief, to know that it's okay to laugh again. I think that was the hardest part for me. That's why I gave up comedy for a good 5-6 weeks after he died; I wasn't ready to laugh again.

I've heard this thing where major life events just kind of change you as a comic. Did you have that when you got married or had kids?

Having children, definitely. My first son, who's five, was born in LA and we moved back a few months later; we wanted to raise our son with family around. When I came back from that I remember thinking, "I gotta work smarter rather than harder because I just don't have the time." It was disappointing to a lot of my friends. They were like, "Oh, Joe's back!" Then we'd finish doing CYSK and someone's like, "We're going to Galway Bay, you coming?" I'm like, "No, I'm going to bed."

Sorry man, I got a kid that's gonna wake me up in four hours." Then sometimes you don't even want to, because I'd rather have energy for my son when he wakes up so I can play with him. You get more joy out of that. That's where your mind just shifts. A lot of people are like, "You must miss 4:00 am bars!" Not really. I'd rather wake up with energy and play with my kids than watch my friends strike out at 4:00 am bars. When you have all the time in the world, I feel like there's no sense of urgency. I had to learn that I work better with a sense of urgency. Even now, my five-year-old son is in all day kindergarten, my three-year-old is in half day preschool, so when I drop my three-year-old off, I only have like two hours to myself before I have to go pick him up. My wife's at work, I'm a stay at home dad during the day, comedian at night — so those two hours I have to move and do shit and hit the ground running.

I'm curious because you have kids: what do you do when you're in a creative rut and feel stuck and can't generate new material? Do you feel that pressure where it's like, "I need to keep producing because I have a family?"

I used to feel the pressure of coming up with new material. I don't anymore because I've learned with my creative style that it comes in waves. Meaning that if I'm in a rut, I just accept it: "Alright the creative juices aren't flowing right now." I never force it. I feel like the audience knows when you're forcing it and I can always tell when another comedian is forcing it and it just never comes off as good. On the flip side, when I am in a creative flow and things are going great, I lean in even harder. Now I gotta get as much stage time as possible or I'll do more open mics. Some people do more open mics when they're not in a creative flow cause they're trying to spark something. Once it's sparked for me, I'm leaning in even harder. This last special I filmed, I set the date in like late July for October 1. I mention this because in the month of August, I wrote nine new minutes of new material and I think that's maybe nine of the strongest minutes on the thing. When you feel like you're in one of those creative zones, double down, triple down. Really lean into it. If you're in a rut, try new shit. Live a life worth talking about.

Yeah, live life and maybe something will happen.

You have to live a life worth talking about as a comedian. I've seen a huge mistake young comedians make — and part of it is they move here from somewhere else — but they only hang out with comedians. They're going to shows every night, going to open mics. On their off night they're consumed by comedy, and what they become is comedians that play

to the back of the room. They become comedians that only other comedians find funny because they don't have a life worth talking about. You've gotta be a real person because you're trying to connect with a real audience. If you're in a creative rut, do new shit that'll get you out of that creative rut. I can always tell when someone is forcing a joke. You can't force standup comedy. Jerry Seinfeld says write every day; I disagree with that shit. He's a megastar and a billionaire and all that, but I think maybe that works for his style because it's all observational. If you're a one liner type of writer, then yeah, jot down as much shit as possible and maybe you can connect the dots with it. But if you're bored and in a rut, don't force it. What're you gonna do, write a bunch of bullshit for an hour? You just go home, sit down at your desk, open up a piece of paper and go, "Hmm. What can I write about?"

I take it you don't write.

I don't. All my setlists look like the backs of albums. It's just one or two word titles to the joke. I'm from the Louis CK, Bill Burr style of writing. I came across interviews of both of them early on in my career that resonated with me. It wasn't a laziness thing, I was just like, "Oh yeah, that's how my brain works too." They come up with an idea, then they just kinda throw it out there. They write on stage. Instead of going from brain to paper, back to your brain, out of your mouth, they just go brain to mouth. And then tweak it on paper and all that kind of stuff. I can always tell when someone overwrites a joke. It's obvious. "Oh, you really wanted that word in that joke and you thought it was gonna kill but it didn't." But it depends on the comedian's style, though. Sam Morril's a guy where every word matters. To me, I'm more conveying the emotion and how I felt at the time, so I don't need every word to be perfect when I'm on stage. I can be a little inarticulate. I feel like if you're a comedian where the words have to be

perfect, you need to be more polished to sell your jokes. I think you just have to discover what style works best for you, and once you figure out that style — lean in.

Do you still feel like you have anything to improve upon 15 years in?

Yes. Comedians always have something to improve upon. I need to get better at announcing certain words, I talk too fast occasionally, I get too excited and have to remind myself to pause every now and then. But there's always new skills to learn. Bill Burr's a great example: he started doing act outs a couple specials ago. He would just stand still before. There's always different things to tweak. You can be yourself but also pick up little things along the way and keep pushing it.

And what's the best piece of advice you've gotten in those 15 years?

"You can't control some of this shit." I hate that the best advice is so cliché. But I remember I had a stretch in LA where I was working on a TV show, I was getting more regular spots at the Laugh Factory and the Improv, then I felt real flatlined after a few months and felt like I should be moving up a little quicker than I was. Then three different people gave me the same piece of advice in the same calendar week. I was telling Roy Wood Jr I was frustrated, and he was like, "Dude, just focus on what you can control. You can't focus on all this shit." Hannibal, same thing. I was talking with Hannibal about how when I do the "it" shows in LA, it feels like there are no managers or agents or TV executives there. It's a great crowd, but I was under the assumption that there were always people scouting at these shows. He's like, "You cannot control who's in the audience. Don't focus on that shit; that will drive you insane. Focus on what you can control. That's the shit you need to put your energy towards." Roy said it, Hannibal said it, then I was working as an extra on this one show, it was called The Great Indoors on CBS, it starred Joel McHale and Chris Williams, and I was with Chris like every scene, so we got to talk a lot. I remember telling him about how I had an interview with Bleacher Report cause they liked my writing packet. He was like, "Alright man, you gotta go into it with the mindset that you can only focus on what you can control." I was like, "That fucking phrase! That's three different people in the last five goddamn days!" All three of them are insanely successful, so there must be something to that. And I feel like I'm taking that to stage, where I can control my attitude before I go on stage. Lately I've been kinda thinking to myself, "I'm gonna kill; this is gonna be great." I know it's affirmations, which a lot of comedians roll their eyes at, and I used to as well, but someone put it to me this way:

if you go to a party and you think the party is gonna suck, it's probably gonna suck. If you go thinking it's gonna be amazing, it might not be, but you'll probably have a better time. Focusing on what you can control is such a big, big thing.

Any other parting advice?

Since the pandemic, this is the one that resonated with me the most: I try to treat standup comedy like it's my first year. I remember my first year of doing standup comedy and how much I enjoyed that first year because it was exciting and new. I call it a first-year mentality. It's just my way of reminding myself how fun it was back when there was no expectation. I remember having a conversation with a few comedians a while back, I said to them, "Hey, if you could go back in time and tell yourself after year one this is where you'll be in year ten, would year one you be excited?" They were like, "Fuck yeah year one me would be excited!" Then they had a moment like, "Fuck I'm not enjoying the present." I think you really need to enjoy the present as much as possible. Have an eye to the future, plan ahead, be prepared, work your ass off, but you really gotta enjoy the present. I know people who have half hour comedy central specials, who have been on HBO, who have gotten fat checks, and they are just as miserable as they were before they got all of that. Their dreams are coming true and they're still not happy, and I know it's because they're not present. As soon as they get a thing, they immediately think about what's next. I'm like, "Enjoy the thing you just got." You worked so hard for that and now you're just moving to the next thing? I just don't think that's a healthy way to enjoy life.



BONUS: Joe Kilgallon's Top 10 Chicago Comics

(In no particular order)

1. PAT BRICE

2. DAN RONAN

3. SAMANTHA BERKMAN

4. STEVE O. HARVEY

5. DAVE METZ

6. SHWAN YAWER

7. MICHAEL SHAPIRO

8. RYAN WALKER

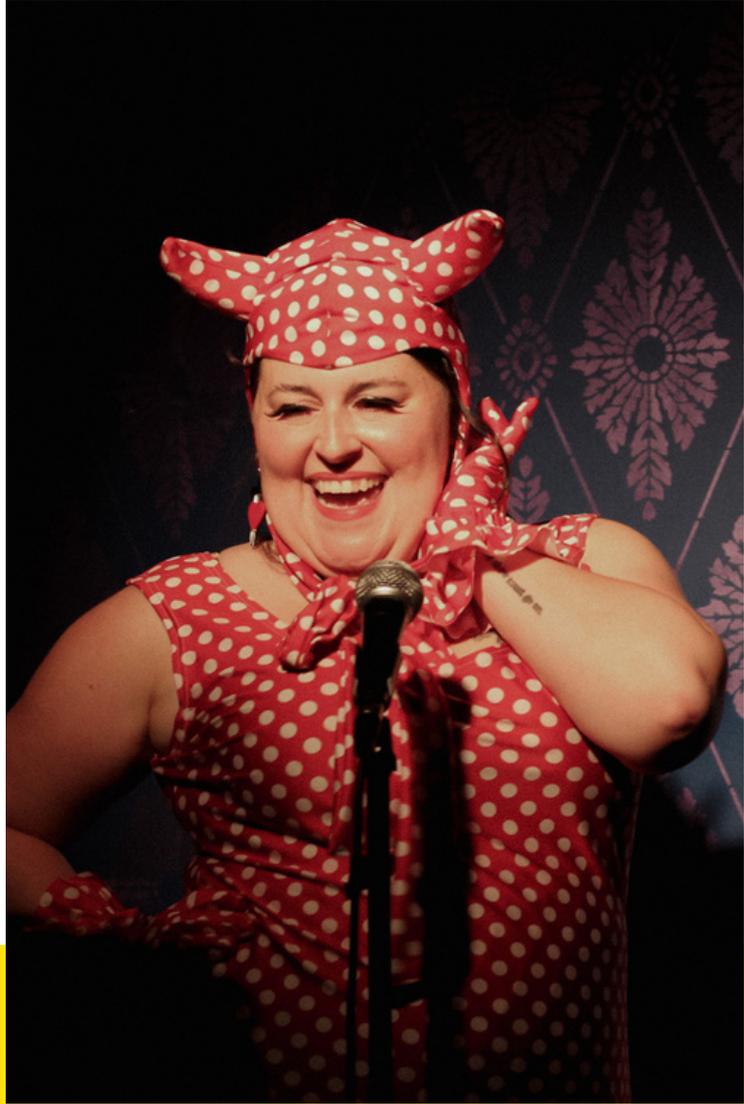
9. BERNIE MAC

10. DANNY KALLAS

ART: KATIA SENTRY PHOTOGRAPHY

KATIA JACKSON (@PHOTOSBYKATIAXSENTRY) IS A CHICAGO-BASED ARTIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER. A CHICAGO NATIVE, SHE FOCUSES ON CAPTURING LOCAL ARTISTS OF ALL KINDS. THE SELECTED IMAGES BELOW ARE FROM THE WITCHING HOUR HALLOWEEN SHOW ON OCTOBER 29TH, AND THE 1-YEAR ANNIVERSARY SHOW OF MY BEST FRIEND IS BLACK ON OCTOBER 27TH, BOTH OF WHICH TOOK PLACE AT THE LINCOLN LODGE.









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

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WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

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