

JULY 19, 2024 | ISSUE 46

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: DOUG STANHOPE

With over 34 years of standup under his belt, Doug Stanhope (@realstanhope) is one of the best comedians not working today. We talk sloth, having fun on stage, "the anger gangbang," Muslim prayer robes, developing a story, his upcoming special, Matt Rife and more!

Hey, Doug.

Alright, my alarm didn't go off to remind me about this. Can I call you back in five minutes? I'm just finishing eating.

Sure, no problem.

Alright, thanks... It's for The Comedy Gazelle website. He says, "I have a comedy website that loses money." He's only had three interviews on it, but one of them was Eddie Pepitone, so that's cool. Oh, I forgot I didn't hang up on you. Talk to my wife and tell her about your website that doesn't make money.

Hey Bingo, how's it going?

Alright, I've got my Bailey's and coffee. I got my edibles. Once I start going, "What was the question again?" That means the edible has kicked in and it's time to go.

I've heard you say you're not funny sober, is that true?

Yeah, I focus on things. Alcohol is like putting blinders on. If I'm sober, every different part of my brain that didn't get shut off is now noticing, "Okay, they have a cell phone out. Are they recording? I can't tell if they're recording. Oh, they're putting out tabs now? What time is it?" All that fucking cacophony goes on. At best, I'm on autopilot, or I'm stammering. Yeah, I suck sober. Let me ask you, how do you feel about crowd work? It's become a thing out there for big acts.

Yeah, I hate it. I personally don't care what random people do for a living.

I think a lot of guys do it because they're terrified of not working, like someone's going to take their place. If you're going to kick out a special every three months, well, yeah, your next tour is probably going to be crowd work because you can't write that much.



Right. I mean, there's this content machine a lot of comics feel the need to feed.

That doesn't go away. Don't worry, every day I'm not working I think, "I'm going to go back and no one's going to know who I am."

Do you feel the need to put more stuff out there?

I feel the need, but I don't heed the call. I feel like I should be doing something, and then I don't.

Does that stress you out at all? If I feel unproductive, I just feel gross about myself.

Yeah, half of any given day usually sucks, where no matter what you do, you feel like you should be doing something: "Why don't I spend more time on my podcast? Why am I not doing this?" And there's always some creative outlet that I see someone else doing and I go, "I'm not good at that. Why can't I be good at everything? Why don't I try harder?"

I wouldn't expect that. I always assumed you just do whatever the hell you want to do.

That's the other half of the day.

Do you ever get up in Bisbee, or do you only perform on the road?

No, unless it's when comics come to town that I know. If they're playing a local gig, I'll go down and host

occasionally. Just bring them up and throw around a few local references, get them all riled up. I think I hosted one, maybe two shows last year, so it's not even that regular. We occasionally do open mics here at the house. We have a standalone bar out there, the FunHouse where we podcast from, so we can put 25 people in there and it has a Murphy stage that folds out of the wall. [Junior] Stopka's coming at the end of the month to film a special in there.

Do you like having that separation where you can shut it off and just live your life?

Yeah, it's more the turning it back on that's the issue. When you take the starving out of the starving artist, there's a lot less motivation. And after 35 years, all this stuff that makes you angry enough that you go, "I want to be on stage right now, this is bullshit!" Well, most of those subjects have already been complained about in eight different ways over 14 different specials. It's hard. You can either hire writers to give you fake things to be angry at — and then you're Bill Maher — or you just find some fake anger for new material.

Where do you feel like a lot of your material's coming from now if you're not as angry?

Well, I haven't been on the road for over a year and at some point, I'm gonna have to force myself. I want to go out and do a bunch of stuff that I stopped doing because of the money. I wanna just go do fucking goofy little towns with my friends. You know, go out with Junior and Andy Andrist and Chad Shank and fuck off and do stuff that I wouldn't do before because, "Oh, there's not really any money in it." Well, you know what? There's less money in staying home and spending money. So why don't I go do all the fun shit that makes a little bit of money and go goof off.

I feel like you've always done it your own way and had fun with it. Was that the case when you were starting?

Well, there were so many fewer comedians back when I started. I don't know if I'd even try to do comedy in this fuckin over-saturated market. Everyone who's got a YouTube channel thinks they can do stand up. I'm sure there's just as many funny comedians per capita as there ever were, but the fucking line is around the block now. I think when I started in Vegas there were maybe eight to ten local regulars, so it was a paradise compared to what it must be like today.

Is it ever difficult for you to develop material knowing that your audiences are such diehard fans? Are there ever times when you question how authentic they are?

I stopped caring about the audience a long time ago. It became about playing to yourself. If I like it and I think it's fucking fun, I just do it and people usually go along with that. I mean, you never know how many people you lost along the way because you weren't this enough, or they didn't expect that. Especially when it's opinion-oriented, you can have someone that's right with you the whole way, but then you have an opinion that conflicts with theirs: "That's not funny, my dad just died of that disease." So, you play to yourself. I mean, I had to be making a living at this before I was ever in a place to go, "Ah, fuck them if they don't like it."

That's a good point. I feel like a lot of young comics are like, "I have to speak my truth!" But you need to know how to do this first.

Yeah, I was lucky enough that I started fairly young at 23. The material I was writing was just dumb enough. I didn't have any point of view at that age, so for the type of audience that would go to a comedy club on a free pass, I was the perfect comic cause I had really fucking dumb material for really dumb people that use a coupon on a Friday night.

One of my favorite jokes is an old one of yours about how you blew a speaker in your car.

Yeah, that was one of a few that I didn't write. That was my best friend in the open mic days, Matt Becker. But he basically gave up comedy and I said, "Oh, good. Can I have that joke?"

That's so funny. It wasn't even you.

I don't know if there's anyone else that

"I STOPPED CARING ABOUT THE AUDIENCE A LONG TIME AGO. IF I LIKE IT AND I THINK IT'S FUCKING FUN, I JUST DO IT."

I've taken a joke from. One of them I put on an album and then I read Al Franken's book, and in the book he talks about that specific joke being tossed out at Saturday Night Live. It was the joke about, "I'm a terrible gift giver. I would have bought Anne Frank a drum set." Matt Becker gave that to me and then, "Oh, so you fucking got that from Al Franken, you fuck." But he's that kind of guy. I definitely stopped taking bits from him after that.

And how long were you rocking the Santa hat for?

Maybe a year. I was a complete unknown at that time. But we've rocked several looks over the 34 years I've done this. I went through a football jersey era and a brief baseball jersey era. A long time in the trench coat and the fucking winter hat. And we'd rock goofy shit we found at the thrift store. I went up somewhere in Florida at an Improv wearing these light lycra, Daisy Duke shorts with one nut hanging out, not mentioning it at all. Muslim prayer robe.

That rules.

I'm kind of locked into this. I won't let myself go on stage anymore without a fucking vintage suit on. It feels like a uniform and it feels like the more I don't want to dress up, the more that means my mind isn't in the game. "Put on your fucking work uniform." I should go back and occasionally put on a Muslim prayer robe again. Silly kind of shit. I don't want to take everything so seriously and have to catch myself. That's what the suits used to do, like, "Okay, if I'm wearing a fucking ridiculous suit like a used car salesman, it takes the edge off me screaming and yelling like a Bill Maher." I know I've mentioned his name three times now, and now he's gonna fucking appear on my podcast. I hate that guy so much.

I dug up an old MySpace post of yours from 2007. You were talking about how if you're complaining about pay and bookings you need to get off your ass and create your own opportunities. How much do you think being a comedian is being a good business owner?

I know it's cliché to say, but it's clichéd for a reason: the better someone is at business, generally, the more they suck as a comic. The one who has this fucking electronic press kit and is pounding the fucking boards trying to get booked.

Do you consider yourself a bad businessperson? I feel like you've been able to build your own brand and audience.



Well, I didn't do that by myself. In the early days, it was just me and Greg Chaille who would put together the tours. We'd go on MySpace saying, "Hey, who has a bar in Pittsburgh? We're going to be playing Cleveland and it's on the way," and someone out there knows someone who has a bar and it was really hit or miss. A bar would say, "Oh yeah, we hold 150 people," and you go, "Oh, that's perfect for that market!" And you book it, but you didn't see the bar so you don't know that it doesn't have a stage and the 150 people are in two separate rooms, so half the crowd can't see you. But over the years we honed it. And now I do a lot of comedy clubs, but I do off nights, usually a Sunday through Wednesday. And now we're doing more nooners, the afternoon day drinking shows, which I fucking love. When I go back on the road, I'm gonna do a lot more of those. Nothing sucks more than waiting for showtime on the road, just sitting there all day and showtime's at 8:00. "Fuck, it's 4:30!"

Being 34 years in, what's the most enjoyable part of performing for you? Is it new crowds, new experiences, riffing? What gets you excited when you're on stage?

The only thing that's exciting anymore is when you surprise yourself, when you say something that you had no intention of coming out of your mouth and you go, "Oh, fuck. I just said that and it's gold and I can't wait to repeat it again." Without having something you can't wait to say, it's fucking drudgery. I filmed that last special last May and I've looked through it to give

the editor notes, but I was so tired of that material by the time I filmed it, I just keep putting it off and now it's about at its expiration date. That's why I'm titling it Discount Meat.

I'm curious how you approach dark subject material, like your bit about assisting your mother's suicide. What do you think are some common mistakes comics make when they try an ambitious bit like that?

Well, they try to write it as a joke too often. It's like a sucker punch seeing someone who has a really meaty, true story and they write it as though it's a joke. I remember a guy I knew who was an open micer in Seattle and someone had stolen his identity and started a pot farm. He got fucking busted by the feds and held in federal detention for several days before he could prove that he didn't have a pot farm in Montana, like, "I live here in Seattle; I work at a bar; I'm there every night." He tells me this and I ask if he's going to talk about it downstairs at the mic, and he said yes, so I went down and he goes, "Someone stole my identity. Who's stealing my identity? Now you have all my debt!" You just spent fucking six days in federal detention and you boiled it down to a one-liner about credit card debt? People don't deserve to have good experiences and do shitty comedy at the same time. The opposite of that was Tig Notaro, coming from a breast cancer diagnosis right after all these shitty things happened and just getting into the meat. Absolutely brilliant. No one ever thought, "Oh, you think she was kidding about the breast cancer?" And you're not going to be able to do that on your first open mic. You've honed shit over years. And it was years after my mother's suicide before I could get that right. I stabbed at it from a bunch of different angles, "Alright, that's too long a version; this is too short a version; I'm missing this." And I didn't want it to sound like, "Oh, poor me."

When you're developing long bits, how do you balance adding versus cutting detail? Sometimes I'll add stuff, but then feel like it's unnecessary and I should just get to it.

It's always guessing. If there was a way to do it, there'd be a comedy cookbook out there and you'd follow the recipe. You would have to ask each individual person in an audience, "Do you think the descriptive of her ass was too long before I get to the punchline?" You're mind fucking yourself is what I'm saying. Who is the joke for? That would be the answer.

Do you sit down and write, or do you mostly write on stage?

No, I sit down and write. I'm too brain-dead to count on

riffing. It's not that I don't riff, I just have a safety net of written material so I can throw some haymakers. And if it sucks and everyone's staring at me? Let's go back to that notebook.

So for that bit, you wrote it out and then you're improvising around it?

It took a lot of different iterations. I put it away for a while and then came back, like a crossword puzzle. I've been doing the New York Times crossword since the lockdown. That's exactly what putting a set together is like for me: "Alright, I have no idea what the answer is to that, but if I work on this, then that'll fit in there and I'll have enough." But then like six or eight of them you have to cheat on — you just steal someone else's bit; that would be a fun thing to do. Doug Stanhope goes out as Dave Attell. I could do Dave Attell jokes for a decade and never get sick of his jokes. I get sick of my jokes.

You should do a joke swap with Junior.

Yeah, have three or four of us go out that know each other's acts inside and out and just go like swingers, "Okay, I'm gonna fuck your wife tonight. You fuck Junior's wife," and just steal each other's acts on a regular basis. That's really what I want to do now; I want to have fun and be fun on stage. Everyone's so fucking angry now. Comedy's ruined. Twitter's ruined. They talk about how babies are like little drunk people and now you're a fuckin' expert on the Gaza Strip? You ruined Twitter, you ruined social media, and everyone's fuckin' angry about something and political. That kind of used to be what I did, but now I'm doing more edibles and trying to write more ridiculous fucking jokes because I don't need to pile on to the fucking anger gangbang.

Are you thinking of going sillier or how do you mean?

Bits like "60 Inches of AIDS on Any Given Sunday." It's a very drawn-out,

graphic bit about raping a running back on the field during an NFL game. That was one of those bits that when I got sick of doing it – as you do all bits – I would just add more unnecessary graphic detail and it just made me laugh. Buttfuck, shit, fart stuff is what I laugh at all the time. All this stuff I'm angry about on stage I don't think about at home. I did when I wrote the bit, but that's why I drink when I perform because that's sometimes the only way I can muster up that fucking anger that went away when I wrote the bit.

I wanted to ask you about Sean Rouse. What was he like? I just re-watched his tsunami bit today and that's one of my favorite bits of all time.

Yeah, it's one of the best bits ever written. He was in agony if it was during the day, and really fucked up if it was night. When he'd wake up, if you were sharing the condo with him – I couldn't shriek that loud in here without disturbing neighbors. His rheumatoid arthritis was so bad, just to get out of bed to try to walk to piss – agony. And then his meds would kick in at some point, and then the cocktails would kick in, and then the blow would kick in, and then all of a sudden, we're being thrown out of a bar because he bit a guy or a chick. That was his thing; he'd get drunk and bite you.

Was he funny off-stage?

He was not not funny; he just called his punches. He didn't just keep spitting words into the wind, hoping one of them would land. He'd just be quiet and looming and then hit you with the fucking punch line that kills the room and then retire as a king. He'd call me before shows and go, "I got this bit," and then he'd say it to me and I'd be like, "I don't get it," but then invariably he'd do it on stage and it would fucking kill. Just the small nuances – as physical as he was and wasn't at the same time. He had the countenance and that glowing head and then these giant cripple claws, but he barely moved and he hardly emoted and he held the audience in the palm of his hand, his fucking crippled, crunchy hands. I hate that he only has a CD out.

Was he just a guy you thought was flying under the radar, so you brought him out?

Yeah, I don't know what scenes are like anymore. Scenes get bifurcated and then, "Alright, this is a bunch of cunt comics, and this is a bunch of fucking rape joke comics. This genre of comedy is just about trans athletes, and this genre of comedy..." In my day, sure, you'd have a personal beef here and there, but it was the comics against the audience. It was always us against them; we're all in the same boat, we all have to go out in front of these judgmental fucking pricks in the chairs. Sean Rouse was the fucking funniest guy on the scene at that time and people rally around the funniest guy and promote them. I don't know how much that's still the case because I don't hang out with comics, but Sean Rouse was the funniest guy, and I wasn't the only one promoting him. His peers were, and the guy that owned his home club, Mark Babbitt at the Laff Stop in Houston, would fly him out to LA to get him showcases just because he wanted him to be known. Very fucking pure.

You've been doing it for so long. Is it still important for you to find unknown comics and help prop them up?

There's too many places to look and I don't have the comics where I live, so it's never a subject that I talk about. Just being a comedian, if you're working, you're going to hear someone say, "Oh, did you hear about so and so?" You can't not hear about Matt Rife if you're in comedy, but that's in the bad way. It's fun to see because when I grew up there was always a guy that everybody hated in comedy. When I started, Carrot Top was the president of bad comedy. Jeff Foxworthy wasn't really hated, but he was goofed on quite a bit. Then it was – I don't know the order – Dane Cook, hated. Larry the Cable Guy, hated. Carlos Mencia, hated. There's a lot of them now. There used to be just one. That Matt Rife would definitely take Dane Cook's fucking

crown of hatred. I could watch him on mute and hate him that much. I used to think Kill Tony had a punchable face till I saw that fucking Matt Rife and I go, "Oh God, I hate this guy." And he says he's good-looking? He looks like a wax figure in a fuck my face museum.

Do you think comedy is going down that crowd work route, or is that just a trend?

I have such peripheral knowledge. You know more about comedy than I do, and it's funny that you're asking me questions and I haven't been on a stage in — well, I did go to a Romanian Bucharest comedy festival in November just because it was funny to do. But other than that, I have not toured in over a year.

Any plans to tour soon?

I need to write an act, which is exactly what I was sitting down to do right over there. See all those papers? That's where I was when we started this interview. That's one of the reasons that I took this interview because it would get me out of having to write an act.

When you're writing your act, what does that look like? Are you sitting down for an hour every day, or —

I don't have any ritual or anything like that. After lockdown, I sat down maybe three days before my first gig after 18 months off with just yellow legal pad pages and I'd bring them on stage. When you have your hands full of fucking yellow legal paper that's unfolded and crinkled and crippled, people know that you're coming from scratch. You don't have to ask them to forgive you; it's within their nature. Especially when the honed version of my act is written and performed to sound like it's off the top of my head. My stammer is natural and it makes it sound like I'm just thinking this up, but no, I'm a bit of a stutterer and it's worked in my favor. I'm not working this out, this bit is done and I've said this bit for eight months.

Do you think comics should take more time to develop and release their material?

It's all in what you want out of this — see, I told you there'd be this time when the edibles kicked in. What was the question? Oh yeah, the real question is what do you want out of it? Sloth has always been in my bloodstream and it's something that I've embraced and it's never going to change. I hated going to Los Angeles. I still do. And when you go back to LA and you see people that are aging just the same as you are but still have that same desperate LA ambition that they did when we were 28, but now we're in our fifties, like, "That's the guy from Carsey-Werner!" I'm like, "Really?" I still want to go out and fuck off, but why are you still trying? What's the point? Why don't we take three months off and go to Belize just for the fuck of it? Why are all my friends playing arenas when they have enough money? We could just go fuck off somewhere and we wouldn't have to deal with the audience.

I feel like you just prioritize having fun and living your life.

Yeah, I grew up in Massachusetts where if you retired early that was something people bragged about. That was better than having an HBO special: "He retired at 51!" It's like saying he won the lottery. I love to work on my set, I love to present a product I'm proud of, I love when it works, and I also love to not fucking do it. I would love to go on a tour bus, like a Skankfest traveling show, and stop in cities and just don't do shows.

"I USED TO THINK KILL TONY HAD A PUNCHABLE FACE TILL I SAW THAT MATT RIFE... HE LOOKS LIKE A WAX FIGURE IN A FUCK MY FACE MUSEUM."

Before we go, is there any advice that still sticks with you over the years?

The best advice I ever got was as I was giving advice to some other open micer when I was an open micer and the bigger open micer told me, "Don't ever give people advice because all you're doing is telling them how to be more like you," which is true. Don't take advice if it's not what you want to hear and don't give it if it's unsolicited. Now that I'm old and cranky, all the staple advice you would give, like, "Hey, try to get all the stage time that you can!" No, don't. Most of these guys suck and it's fucking ruining the art form. You're telling everybody to keep plugging away? No, give it a few shots and if you stink at it, go to karaoke night. Do something else.

Yeah, "Quit comedy. Give up."

Yeah, "Don't even try." That's my advice. "Stay home at night; the roads are dangerous. There's a lot of drunk drivers out there!" Hey, you can't fail if you don't try.

Anything coming up you'd like to promote?

Yeah, we're gonna spring a bunch of shit that we've been working on. Get on the Patreon because when I put this special out, which I will guarantee will be in the next month and a half, we're gonna put that on Patreon and a whole bunch of other shit like old road tapes from 1993 of me and Hedberg with his fucking VHS camera when he is trying to be a fucking cameraman and a co-headliner at the same time. Old shows, like me on Dennis Miller Live when he had an afternoon news show. We're gonna drop it all at once – before September 1st, guaranteed. But little stuff is gonna start coming out shortly. So The Doug Stanhope Podcast on Patreon.

Thanks a lot, Doug, I appreciate you taking the time.

Here, let me give you a drop that you can put on your socials. What's the website again?

The Comedy Gazelle.

Alright... Hey, this is Doug Stanhope and I just finished doing an interview with this fucking... what's your name again?

Jerry.

Cut!



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