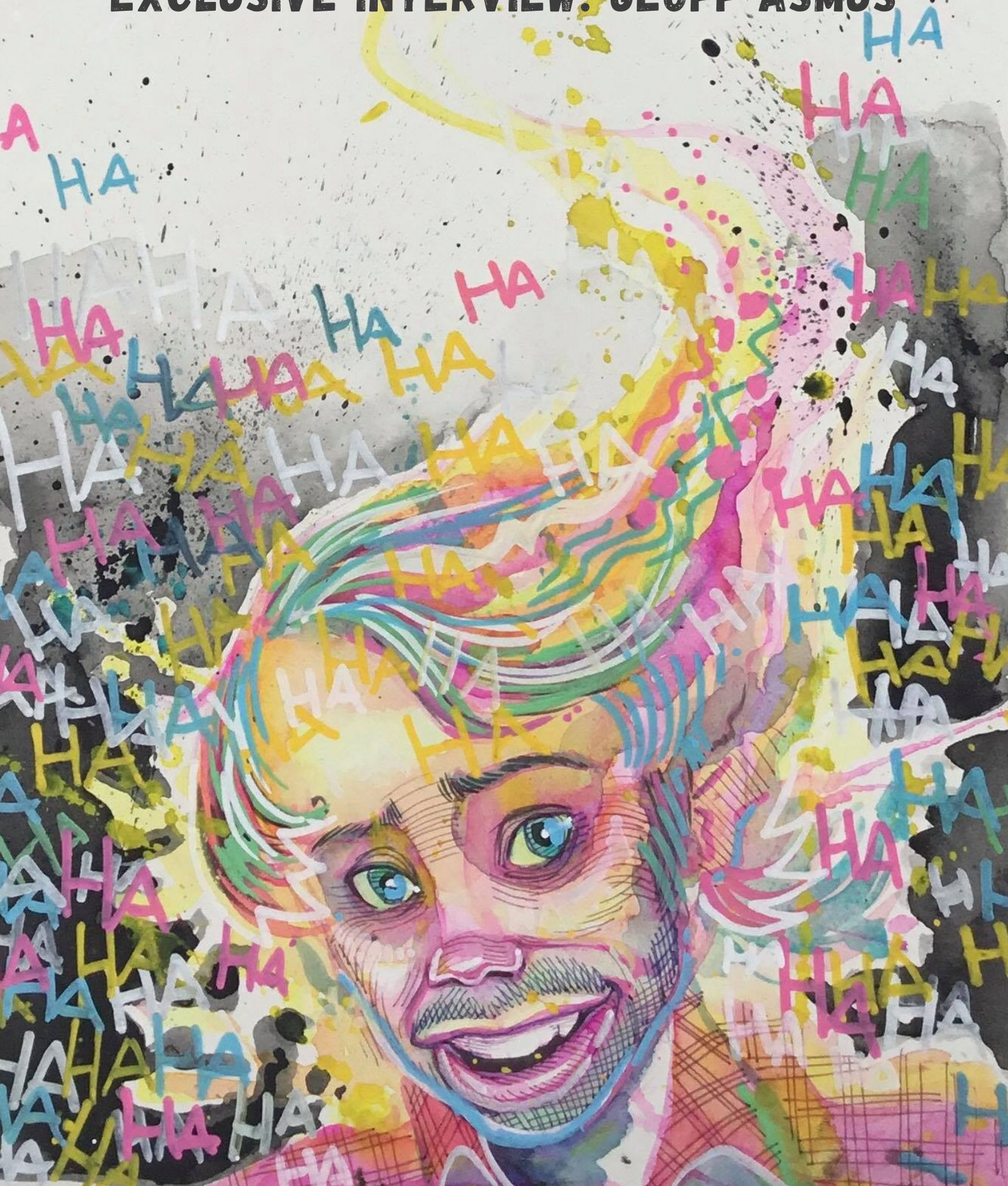


THE COMEDY GAZELLE

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: GEOFF ASMUS



ABOUT THE GAZELLE

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

Why haven't I heard of her before?

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

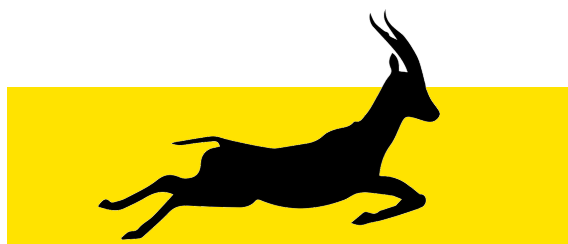
That's why I'm starting The Comedy Gazelle — to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to showcase this city's unrivaled talent. To keep everyone up-to-date on the scene, and to do it in a fun way. And not just in a one-off article, but all the time.

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

Hope you enjoy.

— Jerry

INTERVIEW: GEOFF ASMUS, 3
ART: JAMAR ETIENNE, 12
BOOK REVIEW: I AIN'T SCARED OF YOU:
BERNIE MAC ON HOW LIFE IS, 14



INTERVIEW: GEOFF ASMUS

Geoff Asmus (@geoffreyatm) is a white guy that loves comedy. He laughs at his own jokes and his debut album "The Prodigal Little Bitch" lost money. Ladies and gentlemen, Geoff Asmus:

So you do a lot of intellectual material and you go on the road a lot. How much do you have to change up your set?

There's a chunk that I don't do on the road. I was just in Fargo, North Dakota. It's actually a really fun comedy club, but they're not the smartest people. They're nice people, they laugh. But they don't want to hear your nuanced joke about polyamory or something like that. They're there to hear pussy is good and dicks are fun. I used to do a lot about religion and I'd never do that on the road cause they didn't get it.

Are you getting away from that now?

Yeah I recorded the hour and did the album and it's just not fun for me anymore. I know there's no reason for me to retire it because nobody bought the album, but I've decided to retire it. Maybe in like a year I'll enjoy it again, but I just got bored by it. Everyone was like, "Oh, Geoff's the bible guy" and I got annoyed by that.

Well, you majored in theology right?

Religion, yeah. And history. All worthless. I just tried so hard to write religious jokes for like three years, I just wanna do other shit now.

What're you moving on to?

I hate to say it, but more political, "society" humor. The world is so crazy right now, it feels weird not to even mention current events and stuff. I used to hate topical humor but now it's impossible not to talk about it. It's the elephant in the room. We're all thinking about it every day.

How do you navigate that line of trying to get people to buy into your beliefs without being too preachy?

Right. I don't remember who told me, but you gotta start with some softballs up top. Do a few minutes of "Sex is fun, I love my girlfriend, aren't dogs beautiful?" Then you hit them with the, "Woah, wasn't storming the Capitol a little weird?" You gotta get 'em on your side. You can't go right in with, "I think all politicians are pedophiles."



I feel like that's almost some people's style. Like Louis does that, but obviously that's Louis.

Yeah, isn't his thing your closer should be your opener? [*Louis suggests opening with your best bit so that your act naturally gets stronger*] That's not bad advice. I think that is something where it's like, yeah, he did that, but he was Louis. Once you get your fan base, sure, you can probably do that. But when you're just Random White Guy walking on stage, they don't want to hear that until they agree that you're funny. But people who say, "Don't mention Corona on stage or don't talk about the pandemic?" That's crazy.

Well, I bet on the road you see all the people that don't even believe in Coronavirus.

Oh, yeah. We were in Nashville, pretty big city, and you can't talk about quarantine. They don't know what you're talking about. They're like, "We stayed in for a week, maybe." You forget half the country is one way and half the country's the other way.

When you're in some of those places, does that ever make you question your material?

I just try to write different material for each type of audience. I think if you're a good comedian, you should be able to make anyone laugh. You should be able

to go into inner city Philadelphia or make farmers laugh. If you go up there with your "I'm gonna read from a teleprompter for 40 minutes and do the same thing regardless of context," I think that's lazy and bad comedy. What's the point? You're not trying to relate to people.

Speaking of bad comedy, I saw you were of the controversial opinion that comics should work hard.

Oh yeah, I get in trouble saying shit like that. I mean, that's Facebook. Facebook is for the dumbest people in the world. Social media is dumb, but if you're still on Facebook a lot... you know what I'm gonna say. But there's an idea you gotta have a good balance between work and life. It's like, maybe that's true if you're an accountant? But that's not how comedy works. It is your life. There's no disconnect between it. Why would I want to do something else? This is the most fun thing in the world. Why would I wanna do bar trivia with my friends from college? Why would I wanna take a night off for board games? This shit rocks. If you don't like it, don't do it. It's hard, but it's comedy. It's great. I don't get that. There's no comedian ever who's made it who's like, "Well, every Tuesday I don't think about comedy." That's never happened. They've never made it. And it's never funny comedians that say that, either. It's people who don't wanna try because then they'd have to give up their comfy lifestyle or whatever. You gotta try hard. It sucks, but whatever.

So what does an average day look like for you? What does your trying look like?

I have a lot of things I need to work on. I think I work hard, but I think I need to work smarter. But generally my goal every day is to sit down, set a timer, write half an hour of new jokes, then set a timer, go through old jokes, try to punch them up. Then I write half an hour of tweets. Then if I'm feeling really zesty, do a half hour of ideas for videos or little sketches. Those are my four main things, but I just love stand up so much I usually end up writing stand up more than I should. I should concentrate more on making videos and stuff. That's my problem.

Why do you think that?

Well, you can blow up from stand up, but stand up's a weird art form where people come to see you do it because of your success in something else. "Oh I love his podcast, I'll come watch him do stand up." Which makes no sense, cause they're not the same at all. But that's how it is. You've gotta have a podcast or something else to get the followers who will then see your stand up.

So you're trying to figure out that something else.

Yeah, that's my thing. I think I'm pretty good at stand up. That's one of the few things in life I'm confident about. But I don't understand what the other thing is quite yet. That's what I'm working on now. In the next couple of months I hope to figure it out.

I like that you're thinking big picture and actually thinking about it as a career.

I spent so long concentrating on the little things. Like, "Oh, how do I get this booker who books a show in Menomonee to like me?" I used to think, "Oh, if the person who books the Chuckle Hut in Louisville likes me I'm on the ticket to fame!" But I was thinking about it backwards. What you should do is try to get 20,000 followers so they reach out to you. I mean, yeah, you should email people every month, but it's gonna work out better if you get "big" and then they come to you. I wasted the first four years of comedy not doing it even remotely right. I'm trying to figure it out now. There's no path in comedy. There used to be a path, maybe. But now it's just a free for all.

What would be your dream scenario? How would you wanna make a living off comedy?

If I'm not thinking about how the world works, get like 40-50,000 followers so I can tour 20 weeks a year and write a new album every year and a half. But that's not realistic, so I've gotta find something I still enjoy where I don't feel like I'm giving up my soul to supplement the stand up part. I used to make most of my money from stand up before the pandemic, but that's a tiring lifestyle. You gotta do a lot of shows that aren't that good. You gotta take a lot of busses to Rockford that aren't very fun. I don't think I could've done that for much longer.

When you first started going on the road, do you remember how you got some of those gigs?

Yeah, back in the day I used to live in Madison, Wisconsin. That's where I started. I had a car. If I had a car right now, I'd use it a lot smarter. So many big people will have you open for them just because you own a car. They don't care if you're funny. They just don't want to rent a car or drive. They'll let you drive them and they won't even talk to you for four hours. I know people who do that all the time for headliners. I wish I would've done that. But what I did is I'd drive to a club like three hours away to do their open mic night and then hopefully do well. Then the booker's like, "Do you wanna come back and host for \$14?" And then I would do it. I'd just lose money on shows all the time. Just another example of working hard but not working smart. I drove 7 hours to Cincinnati to do the Funniest Person in Cincinnati contest. Like, what? Why? I went there three times. Some people make fun of hustling, that's what they're making fun of. What I used to do. That was a waste of my time.

What would you have done differently?

There's a great comedy club in Madison, Comedy on State. I should've just went there and hung out and gotten to know the headliners and stuff. When I'd work with headliners, I wouldn't network with them because I thought that was dirty. But it's not. You should just get to know them. People bring their friends on the road. They don't bring people on the road cause they think they're funny, really. They bring people they wanna hang out with all day. I always thought, "If I go on stage and crush they'll want me to open for them." But that's not how it works. Comedy is mostly learning about how it doesn't matter how funny you are. Being funny isn't really that important. I know that's crazy to say, but it really isn't that important. It's more important to be a good hang than to be funny on stage.

Does that upset you?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. But in the last year or two I've learned to stop fighting it. That's the way the world is. What's the point of bitching and moaning about it? You gotta network. You gotta comment on people's Instagram videos, "Fire video, dude!" or share it, "So and so is so funny!" or take a picture, "My friend, John, crushing!" it's stupid, but it works. It's a game and if you don't play it you can't expect to win. It's very discouraging. I don't get so down about it anymore. I used to get mad about it but I've come to terms with it now.



Revisiting something you said earlier about your daily process. You set the timer. Do you block that all in a row, or do you space it out throughout the day?

I generally try to do it in a block. I feel like when you're creative, you're creative. Otherwise you gotta wipe the grime off for like 10 minutes every time. I feel like the big thing is not looking at the phone. You can't write well if every minute you're looking at the phone. I put it on the other side of the room and don't look at it until the timer goes off. And I find I'm so much more creative when I don't look at my phone. I think phones really destroy our creativity. I try really hard to cut down every day on how much I look at my phone. I'll go on walks without my phone, go to the grocery store without my phone. It's a great feeling. Walking without your phone is one of the most freeing experiences. You'll come up with so many ideas when you're not looking at your phone or listening to music. Just let yourself think sometimes. My friend told me this and I thought it was brilliant. He's like, "The phone interrupts your thoughts." So nobody has a thought that goes all the way around anymore. We just have interrupted thoughts constantly all day. That's why there's all this moronic bullshit on social media.

So when you're putting together a set, do you ever write a good line and the bit kind of works, but then you just end up ditching the bit and keeping that one line?

Oh yeah. I feel like that's most of my act. I think that's what a lot of comedians do. They make it seem like it's all together in a chunk, but I think it's all Frankenstein stitched together from dead bits and stuff. That's every single joke I've ever written. At least I don't know how to make a coherent thought funny right away. I have to bomb seven times before it's funny.

It's especially hard when you're doing something controversial.

Yeah. Cause then it might be funny, but you might've just pissed them off. So you don't know if it's bad or if they just don't agree with you. You just gotta be confident in it. That's really the key to talking about "controversial" shit. If you look like you believe in it, they're probably more likely to believe in it too. It's fake it till you make it. That's really all stand up is. Just fake it. If you smile on stage they'll smile, cause we're all just monkeys. It's just a trick.

That's something I struggle with. When I'm trying a new bit, especially if it's controversial, I get nervous about it and don't deliver it the same way.

Yeah, you gotta take a few more reps for the abortion bit. The abortion bit doesn't come as easy as the hamburger bit. But it's better. If you get a good joke about abortion it will be remembered way more than the best bit about hamburgers. The manager at the club in Madison told us our first year, "Nobody cares if you write a good or bad joke about airline food. It doesn't matter. But if you write a joke about abortion it better be fucking good, cause they're going to remember either way." I thought that was good advice.

I remember you told me some of the best advice you got was, "If you can't remember it, you've written it wrong."

Yeah, that's the same guy. His name's Mike Schmidt. I think he's a door guy at the Comedy Store now or something. He always said that if you have trouble remembering a joke it's because you wrote it wrong. It shouldn't be hard to remember it. It should just logically flow. Obviously if it's a specially worded thing it might be hard, but you shouldn't be struggling to remember it.

Do you think that's a finding your voice type problem? Like, "Oh this isn't my voice, that's why it's hard to remember."

Yeah, definitely. That's something I don't struggle with that much anymore. I know how I talk generally. But the first 3 or 4 years I would definitely sit in front of a mirror and have to repeat every word because I had no idea who I was and my act really showed that.

What do you mean by that?

I just didn't know what type of comedy I should be doing. I was silly, I was self-deprecating. And that's not really who I am. I've realized I don't really like that. Other people like that, that's fine, but it's not for me. So I really struggled to remember those jokes for a long time because I didn't really believe in them all that much. He also said, "It's easier to write a new joke than fix an old joke." Some people will be like "This joke about my trip to Tahiti is the one!" and they'll spend nine months tinkering with every verb and every adverb when they should just write a new joke. Maybe in a year you'll have a hallelujah moment, but just staring at the grass isn't gonna make it grow.

I definitely have that. I zone in on a few key bits and just waste time.

That's the worst part of comedy, is that we have no idea. At least I don't. I don't know why anyone laughs or doesn't laugh at anything. If I think it's funny, I'm like, "Well, it must be funny then." But that's not how it works.

Well, I feel like that's when you start finding your voice and building an audience. When you're doing stuff you find funny and staying true to that.

People can tell. I don't know how. I don't even think they know how, but they can tell if you're being a phony or whatever.

But you laugh at all your shit, so —

Yeah I do. It's not conscious anymore, but it was at one time. I used to be the exact opposite. I used to be deadpan, never smiled, didn't move at all. And I don't remember who told me, but if you smile they'll smile. It's a trick. Dave Chappelle isn't smiling because he thinks everything he says is funny. It's because he's tricking people to laugh. It's, "I'm laughing so you should laugh too." I wish I didn't laugh as much as I do on stage. I actually don't know how to stop it anymore. But I do think it does make people laugh. It disarms them. Especially if you're doing dirty or harsh jokes. If you're not laughing or smiling, they're going to think you're a monster. That's another reason why I do it. Because when I do dark jokes they want me to realize I'm in on the joke too and don't actually want to kill all Armenians or whatever. People wanna have fun. When you have that blank face people are like, "Why is he even up there?"

Are there any other tricks you've learned or have been told?

The same guy, Mike, said it does matter what you wear on stage. It seems stupid, but you can't just go up there wearing your big Bob Marley drug rug or whatever, unless that's who you wanna be. I wear things that no one will remember, because I don't want them to concentrate on what I'm wearing. What you look like really does matter. Being hot is huge. It's good to be hot if you're a comic. Try to be hot. When I was in New York, everyone was hot and I was like, "Oh shit, I need to really worry about my skin and get a haircut and prepare an outfit." It sucks. Almost more important than the show is the after show photograph, where they take a picture of you and then you post, "Oh, look at this cool photo of me!" That was as big as the show, honestly. Which I didn't realize until too late.

Yeah, you gotta get proof that you performed.

Or even that you hung out. A lot of times they didn't even do the fucking show. Just, "Here I am, hanging out, not performing cause I don't write comedy. But I'm very hot!" And being hot does matter. We all like hot people more than ugly people. It's usually some of the worst art you've ever seen, but they've tricked 100,000 people that it's not.

I feel like you can't sustain a long term career like that.

In the end, talent does win out, but it's a long con. You can win big for five years. I'm not gonna name any names cause I'm trying not to do that anymore. I'm trying not to be the guy that attacks peers in a public sphere. That's another thing. You never know when you'll work with Ilana Glazer. You never know. She might just pop up at a show and then she'll be like, "You're the guy who said I recorded the worst stand up album ever recorded."

I heard you a while back on this podcast Let's Talk About Sets and you were talking a lot about Rodney Dangerfield. Is he your biggest influence?

I don't know if he's the biggest influence because my comedy's nothing like his. But I like his tongue and cheek manner. He's not taking it too seriously. He knows — and I hope it gets across that I know — that it's just a joke. I don't think Rodney Dangerfield was trying to change the world with his comedy. Even though I talk about society, I don't think my jokes have any power or anything. So I do like that about him. And he's very prolific too. That guy really pumped out jokes. He's a really good performer. His jokes are really well written, but also he's an absolutely amazing performer. That I think is the next level of comedy. Joke writing you can teach yourself, but there are a lot of great joke writers who are not that good at performing so they never make it. But if you can put both those together, that's how you really stand apart.

How are you trying to improve the performance aspect of your comedy?

Well, when I write a joke I don't just think of talking. I think, "Oh, what can I do with my hands? Can I change my voice for that word?" Or something like that.

So when you're writing, you're writing beyond the words.

I've been starting to. That's only in the last 6-8 months. I'll write little things in the joke like, "Make little motion with hand," or "Put gun to head." I've noticed you can get a laugh out of a joke and a gesture at the same time. So why waste the time talking? There's no reason not to get good at performing. I think that's something a lot of people leave on the table.

You said you were very stationary on stage. How did you start incorporating movement into your set, beyond just looks and glances? I feel weird walking on stage.

I do too. I used to stand up there and just sway back and forth. You wouldn't think it matters, but the audience is like, "Why is he swaying?" and that's all they're thinking about the entire time. I used to just stand up there with the mic in the stand and not move. But then I started leaning on the mic stand. I think that works for the style of comedy I'm trying to do. Make it conscious. "Oh, I'm gonna walk back and forth." As long as it doesn't look like a nervous tic. You should just be conscious of what you're doing.

I've noticed you put out a lot of clips. How comfortable are you releasing something that's still in progress? What's your philosophy when it comes to that?

If I have crowd work available I try to post that because obviously that's not gonna be used again. But I don't feel bad about posting a joke if it's not finished. If it's a funny snippet, I don't care. When it is finished, then I'll post that too. Online, people have the memory of a goldfish. They don't remember. I could post the same joke every Tuesday, nobody would notice. We're all little pigs. We forget everything. So I don't feel bad about reposting things if it's slightly different. I don't think that matters. Obviously I don't post if I don't think it's funny. But it's all about quantity now. The quality does matter, but quantity is more important now. It sucks, but that's just how it is.

If you ever released a new album would you ever use some of those old jokes that you did on your first one? Do you really think once it's out there it's done?

If I came up with some radical changes I would do an old joke. If I just thought of one new line, probably not. But if it was a 40 second bit and I came up with 20-30 more seconds I would do it. Obviously you don't want your entire album to be that, but I think that's one of those comedy things that doesn't matter. The audience doesn't care. A lot of people just do what they were told to do and don't really think about why. "You gotta retire your jokes?" Why? The audience doesn't notice. They don't know your old bit about filet mignon. They don't care. Just do the joke. They don't even remember your last name half the time. They're like, "Oh, white guy who talks about cum!"

That should be the title of your next album.

White Guy Who Talks About Cum. Actually, that's not bad.

"JUST DO THE JOKE. THEY DON'T EVEN REMEMBER YOUR LAST NAME HALF THE TIME. THEY'RE LIKE, 'OH, WHITE GUY WHO TALKS ABOUT CUM!'"

So earlier we were talking about Rodney Dangerfield. He gets to his punches very quickly. How do you do that without taking too much of yourself or too much of the heart out of the joke?

Well, his jokes don't have any heart. I mean, no, that's not true. They do. You can tell he's had a beat down life from his jokes. But they are "joke" jokes for sure. I think you can make the premise funny. I think every line can be funny. That's hard, but it just takes more writing, really. If it's a good premise you can figure out how to make every sentence funny. So much comedy I listen to I'm just like, "You didn't have to say those three sentences." I think a lot of people just talk between punchlines because they don't take the time to write enough. They waste 30 seconds because they couldn't fill it with punchlines. It's laziness. It's really just writing more, that's all it is. There's no trick to it. Every sentence should have a point.

Last couple questions. If there was anything you could change about the Chicago comedy scene, what would it be?

I have a lot of things I would change, but I don't wanna get in trouble. I think there's a thing in Chicago where a lot of people think the amount of time you've been doing comedy is important. Like, "Oh, he's been doing it for 18 years!" That's great, and there are people who have been doing it for 18 years who are very funny, but that doesn't really matter. I wish they cared more about how someone did on stage than how long they've been doing it. You could be hilarious in three years or terrible after 27 years. The old guard is resistant to letting new people in. This is me projecting a little bit. But they're resistant to being like, "Okay, well, maybe the new guys are trying harder." If he hasn't written a new joke in seven years, maybe we give someone else a try.

And why do you think someone should come to Chicago for comedy?

Well it's a more livable city than New York or LA. You'll be happier. Maybe there's no industry here, but that doesn't really matter anymore. Like, yeah, you could write or act for a TV show, but you're probably just going to get big from a little video you made in your bedroom. You don't need to live in New York to blow up on TikTok. That's just not how it works anymore. I hated New York. I think it's an absolutely terrible place. If you don't like it, why would you live there? It's expensive. It's loud. The crowds are generally kind of stupid, honestly. I think the Midwest has the best crowds in the country by far. They're more willing to laugh outside their belief systems. Chicago's a very diverse city which is cool. They're also very smart. Chicago has very smart college students and very smart 45 year olds coming to shows. It's not just dumb fuck farmers or whatever. It's a city and it's close to a lot of other littler cities. You can go to Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Cleveland, St Louis, Des Moines — which I know everyone on the coast makes fun of all those cities, but they're great and they have great crowds. I'd rather perform in Cleveland any day than in Brooklyn. Any day. They're way better crowds, it's not even close. But yeah, Chicago rocks.

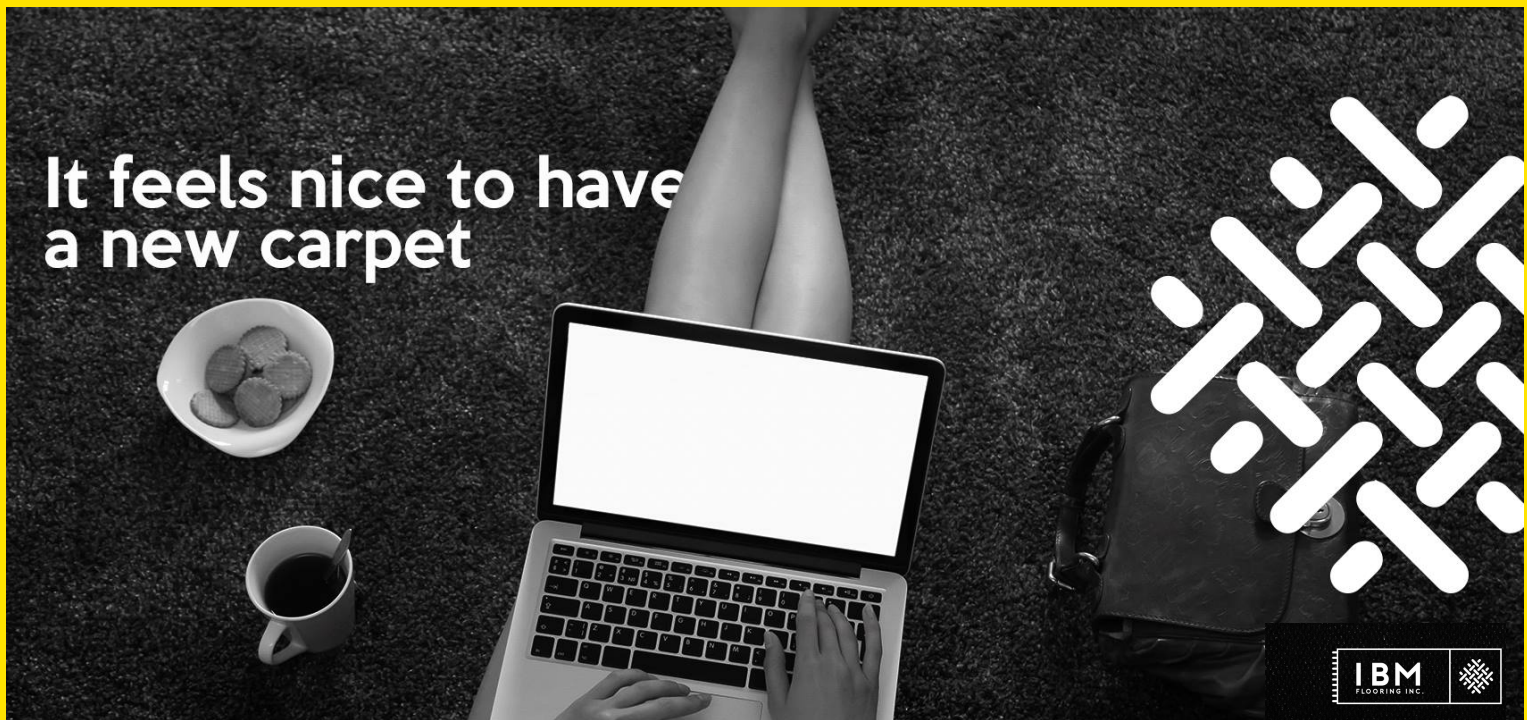


BONUS: The Only 10 Comics Geoff Thinks Shouldn't Quit 🤔🤔🤔

- 1. ALI DRAPOS**
- 2. ANTONIO KAREEM**
- 3. YONI HEISLER**
- 4. MARCUS BANKS**
- 5. JEFF BRUMFIELD**
- 6. MO GOOD**
- 7. MAKE SURE TO TAKE THIS
VERY SERIOUSLY**

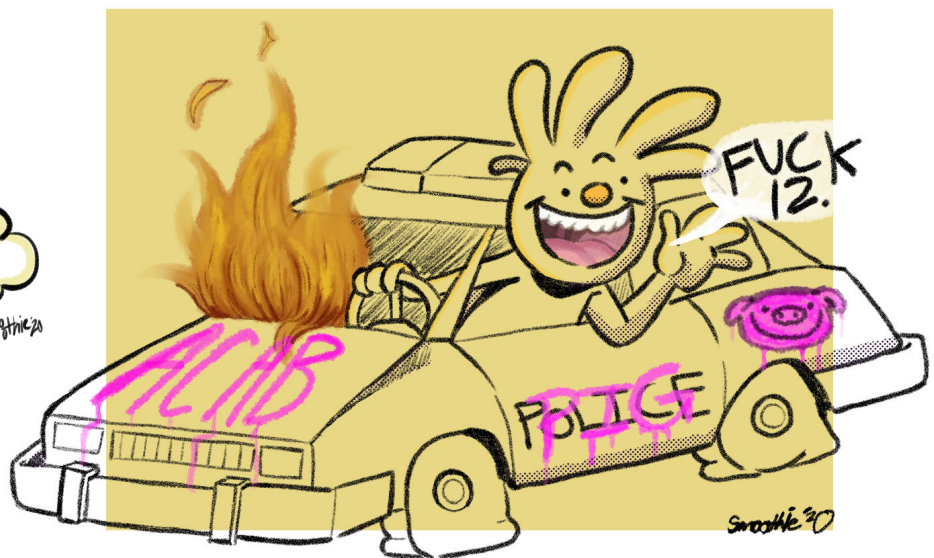
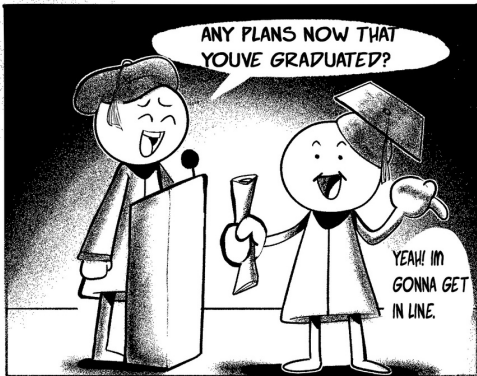
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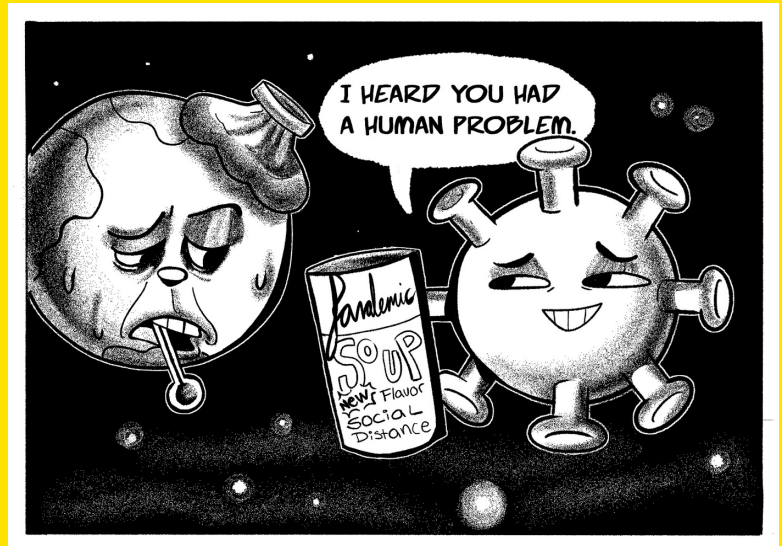
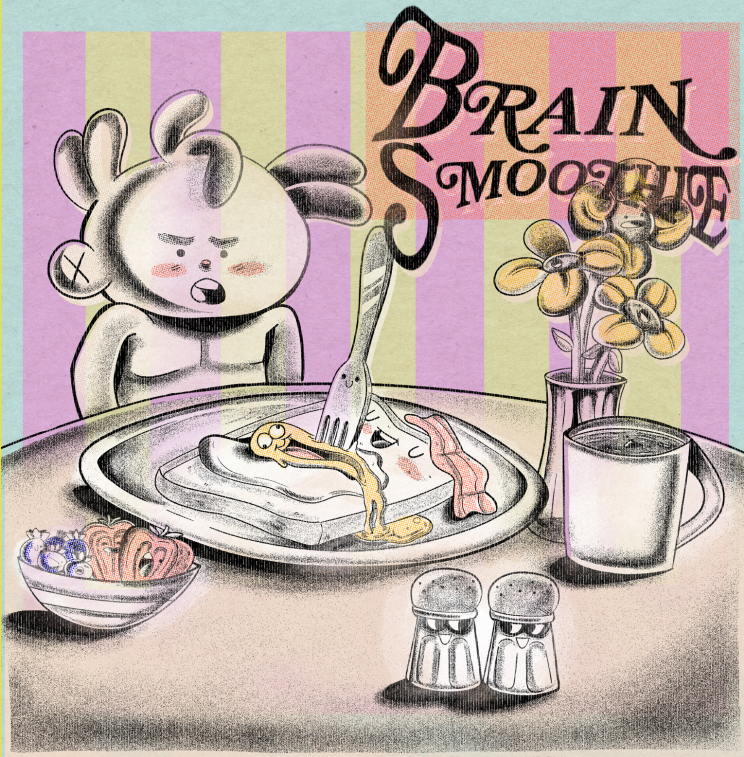


(773) 790-5029

ARTWORK: JAMAR ETIENNE



JAMAR ETIENNE IS A CHICAGO BASED CARTOONIST AND ILLUSTRATOR FROM THE WEST SUBURBS. HIS ART PRIMARILY FOCUSES ON BRIGHT COLORS AND FUNNY FACES. YOU CAN FIND HIM ON INSTAGRAM @BRAIN_SMOOTHIE



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BOOK REVIEW: I AIN'T SCARED OF YOU: BERNIE MAC ON HOW LIFE IS

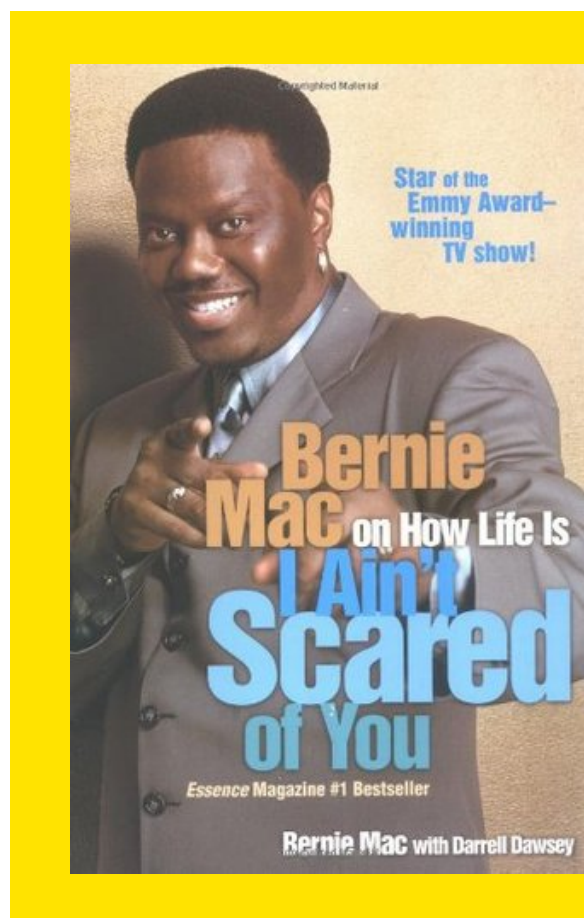
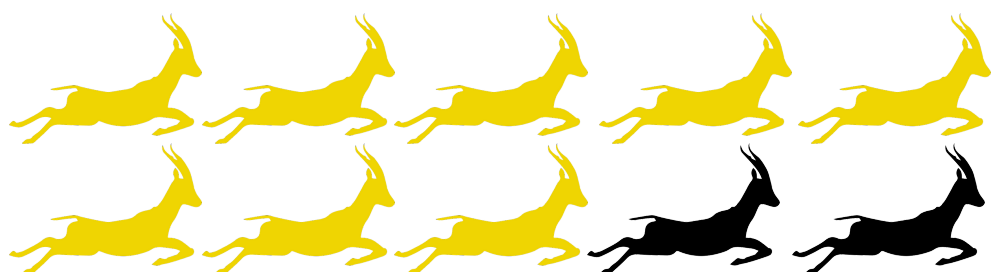
Review by Keay Crandall (@keaycrandall)

I learned a lot about Bernie Mac from this book. From growing up poor to the cultural complexities of being a black man in the entertainment industry, Bernie Mac lived through some shit. I was most taken back by the in depth descriptions of him and his wife fighting it out, biting, hitting, hammering- all over him going out with the boys one too many times. Despite their struggles, they were married for over 30 years and probably would have been longer if Bernie hadn't passed of pneumonia. At least he had a \$2 Million life insurance policy.

I expected there would be more discussion of his comedy career, but it relates mostly his relationships with family. Bernie explains the cultural nuances of being black versus being black and famous. Going from poor and sharing a soda cup between the family to him having money and everyone wanting a piece of his pie. He wanted to share his success, but didn't want people expecting from him or to stop making efforts to be successful in their own lives.

Bernie talked about how things weren't the way they used to be - in 2001!! Sounds like a dad reminiscing. I can only imagine what he would say about the world and comedy now. Actually I would love to hear Bernie's commentary on today's world. He is hilarious and a skilled writer. I would recommend *I Ain't Scared of You* as a funny and accessible read.

Overall rating: 8/10 Gazelles



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

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

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